

ACADEMIC HONORS

Educators Earn Praise for School Cultures

By Matt Ottinger

Educators at all levels have an important – and sometimes difficult – role. One of the strategies for achieving success is through a strong team environment. Three institutions illustrate that mindset with placement on the 2017 list of the Best Places to Work in Indiana:

- The online-based American College of Education (ACE)
- Sheridan Community Schools (public)
- University High School (independent) in Carmel (which boasts an appropriate nickname in the “Trailblazers”).

Striving for paradise

Sheridan has been on the Best Places list the past three years. Its initial application stemmed from a hunch from superintendent David Mundy, Ph.D.

“There’s always been this belief around here that the culture in our schools is one of the best in the state,” he relays. “So a few years ago, I decided to turn in an application because I truly felt it wasn’t just a feeling we



American College of Education staffers give back by preparing meals at the Ronald McDonald House in Indianapolis.

had here ... and we wanted to see where we stood and analyze our business practices.”

The honor means a great deal for his public school system, largely because he knows the district can’t offer the same awards and amenities as a thriving for-profit company.

“To me, the biggest honor of being a school on this list is that, as superintendent, I can’t fiscally offer a trip to Tahiti for my best

teacher,” Mundy points out. “We work on limited funds and what the state gives us, so one of the reasons we make the list is that our culture is so positive.”

Talking it out

Encouraging communication and transparency is a noble goal for any organization, but it’s an undoubtedly more difficult proposition when employees are housed in different buildings. Or in the case of ACE – different cities – as its instructors work remotely.

“We send out monthly newsletters and have virtual town halls,” explains Shawntel Landry, provost and interim president of the school, which moved its main office from Chicago to Indianapolis in 2011. “Whoever’s presenting will use video conference so everyone online can see us and hear us and read our body language.”

ACE also offers two leadership retreats each year in Indiana, building in a great deal of time to socialize.

“If you think about a traditional 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. institution, you may or may not socialize with co-workers outside of work because you go home to families,” Landry continues. “But when I bring in 40 or 50 people to Indianapolis, we’re socializing the whole time – going to breakfast and dinner together. So I think that has a lot to do with building the culture because you get to know people on a personal level.”

With several buildings throughout its



University High School teachers and staff have a direct impact on students through an intensive mentoring program.



Prize Day festivities at University High School (top) include no classes as all come together for an award ceremony, trivia and the annual Olympics competition. School unity is also a focus at Sheridan Elementary as principal Dean Welbaum makes it a point to connect with students.



district, Sheridan makes it a priority to bring staff together as well.

“(Since teachers are spread out), we have to make a concerted effort that the teachers spend time together,” Mundy says. “A lot of that occurs not just at meetings, but at outside activities. If there’s a fair or something goes on in the community, you’ll see a lot of our teachers there. Or if a high school choir performs, you’ll see teachers there that aren’t just in the high school.”

Chuck Webster, head of school at University High School, notes the importance of not only bringing teachers and administration together, but also incorporating students.

“Every day, everybody here walks to the other building, and we talk for 15 minutes a day – and an hour on Friday,” he quantifies. “They’re all connected to the kids. We have a mentoring program: as a student when you come in the ninth grade, you’re assigned a mentor (not just among teachers, but all staff) and meet at least every two weeks for four years.”

In fact, students at the school play a major role in the hiring and evaluation of teaching staff.

“When I interviewed for this position, there were two students on my hiring committee,” recalls Ashley Crockett-Lohr, director of

communications. “That spoke volumes about the type of place University is. . . . When you look around the lobby and see mentoring happening, when you overhear conversations between adults and students that sound as though they are peers and when you see students monitoring the culture just as much as the faculty does, it becomes clear that this is what high school is meant to be.”

Teachers’ pets

Secondary teachers not only have a class of children to educate and care for each day, but many also have their own offspring at home. With the challenge of schedules and various responsibilities, Sheridan strives to ease the burden by offering an on-site daycare, which has grown from one room to three since its inception.

“Our teachers can bring their kids to daycare, starting at six months old, then they progress through preschool and then start kindergarten here,” Mundy explains. “It always makes you happier when you know where your younger kids are. It’s been a wonderful situation and it helps in recruitment.”

He adds that the daycare doesn’t close up after the final bell rings.

“Our teachers still spend numerous hours after school, and it’s nice to have the daycare so their child is taken care of until they’re done with their club or athletic event (it’s open into the evening),” Mundy notes.

ACE and University also cater to staff’s offspring long after their early years by offering steep discounts on tuition (and ACE charges no tuition for staff themselves).

‘A’ for charitable effort

Giving back to their communities and beyond is also a consistent theme, but ACE has taken that to heart by becoming one of only four B-Lab certified B Corps in Indiana.

“We felt the B Corp status helps us show we use profits for social good,” Landry offers. “We want to keep their tuition low, serve students well and show transparency in how we serve the community.

“We’re a big supporter of Teachers’ Treasures (a charity that donates free supplies to teachers with students in need) and do hands-on volunteering with them,” she adds. “We sponsored their Donut Dash and Dream Big Gala, and we help teachers who are in high poverty areas (in different parts of the country). We look at where our students live, and we try to support organizations that support them. We feel like that’s delivering on our mission. We’ll also provide professional development for some teachers that need it.”

University High also emphasizes giving back, including students in efforts to aid seniors and refugees, among others.

Trust is a must

Organization-wide trust cements the foundation of an ideal culture, according to Webster.

“There have never been locks on lockers (at University High) and kids open doors for each other,” he remarks. “(Regarding the locks) we knew we had to get out in front of that and we had to trust each other, and we meant it.”

If employees are happy, students are not only happy, but empowered with a strong foundation to learn, according to Mundy.

“We take a lot of pride in that when we get outside visitors, we get a number of comments on how wonderful our kids are,” he concludes. “A lot of businesses reach out to us to hire our students from the high school because they’re well-mannered and hardworking. . . . There is an expectation of courtesy and effort here in the district and the community.”

RESOURCES: Ashley Crockett-Lohr and Chuck Webster, University High School, at www.universityhighschool.org | Shawntel Landry, American College of Education, at www.ace.edu | David Mundy, Sheridan Community Schools, at www.scs.k12.in.us