

I was hired as the Executive Director of Yellowstone Academy in July of 2001, and we opened our doors one year later in August 2002. That first year was spent researching similar schools, choosing a location, recruiting staff, students and volunteers, building the Board, seeking donors, and planning the school. That year of planning was vital to our success, and we recommend that to any group planning to start a school.

We are indebted to the countless staff members of similar schools who allowed me to observe in their classrooms and shared their best practices, recommendations for success, and pitfalls to avoid. The examples of handbooks, daily schedules, curriculum guides, and policies and procedures that were shared with us have been invaluable. Yellowstone would not have been established without this assistance, and we are committed to doing the same for others.

At Yellowstone, we are proud of the progress we have made but also recognize that there is much we want to do better. We are committed to continuous improvement. We in no way believe that we have all the answers, but our hope is that by opening our school for visits and by documenting the practices we have found to be most successful, we can be of some help to others desiring to start a Christian school for children in poverty.

This document is made up of information that other schools have asked us to share about the early years of Yellowstone. Please feel free to email or call me with any additional questions. Please also share with us practices that you have found to be successful!

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## **FOUNDING**

Yellowstone was founded by Kristi and David Lumpkins. God used specific people and events in their lives to lead them to start a Christian school for low-income children. They began to assemble a board before hiring Kim Hansen as the Founding Executive Director. The Lumpkins assembled an extremely committed and hands-on board that allowed one year for Kim to do research and plan the school, choose a location, and recruit staff, students, and volunteers. The board took the lead in fund raising, constantly introducing Yellowstone to individuals, churches, corporations, and foundations. While Kim was definitely involved in fund raising, her primary responsibilities were in planning the day-to-day of the school. Had she been fully responsible for both, we do not believe that Yellowstone would have been established.

## **SNAPSHOT**

Yellowstone Academy is a PK3-8<sup>th</sup> grade private Christian school exclusively serving children from low-income families. Every family pays tuition, scaled to what they can afford. Yellowstone is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Yellowstone opened its doors in August 2002 with four classes and a total of 64 three and four year old students. It added a grade a year until 8<sup>th</sup> grade. There are two classes at each grade level with an average of 16 students per class. In PK3-5<sup>th</sup> grade, there is a teacher and an instructional aide in each class. Yellowstone also employs a music teacher, art teacher, two PE teachers, and one PE aide. Two retired school librarians are volunteers who order, catalog, and check out books and run every aspect of the library. Aided by many volunteers, they also conduct the library classes once a week for each PK-5<sup>th</sup> grade class.

For the first two years, Yellowstone had mixed-age classrooms. At the end of the second school year, the staff evaluated the pros and cons of this approach, and the decision was made to change to same-grade classrooms. There are pros and cons to both approaches, and the research shows the academic achievement to be virtually the same. We believe that mixed-age classrooms were the right decision for our first two years because the vast majority of our students had not previously been to school. That meant that they were learning much of the same curriculum, enjoying the same field trips, and learning many of the same social and “school” skills. However, our retention rate was good, and we knew that as we added a grade a year, the curriculum required at each grade level would begin to vary more and more. The teachers felt that teaching one grade level only would enable them to concentrate more on curriculum development and lesson planning.

Yellowstone has self-contained classes through fourth grade. In fifth grade, students have a home room and change classes for Math/Science and Language Arts/Social Studies. In middle school, students change classes for each subject area and spend twice as long in Language Arts and Math classes.

Yellowstone students have a longer school day and attend school more days a year than required by the state. This not only gives us more time for academics but also allows us

to have extra-curricular activities and electives at every grade level.

Yellowstone contracts out for security, janitorial, and food services. For the school's first year and a half, we contracted with a bus company for our daily student transportation and field trips. Then a local church gave us a bus, and we began employing our own drivers. We also have two chaperones on each bus. For the first five years, our teachers and aides rotated duty serving as the bus chaperones. Beginning in 2007, we hired separate bus chaperones, freeing our teachers and aides to be available for before and after school duties, meetings, and parent conferences.

### **WHOM WE SERVE**

Yellowstone Academy exclusively serves children from families who are low-income as determined by the Census Bureau guidelines. Families whose income increases after they enroll in Yellowstone are not asked to leave. We applaud their success, and it is our hope that all students will remain through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Families in low-income Houston neighborhoods are, with very few exceptions, zoned to failing public schools. Yellowstone's initial plan was to recruit low-income students whose families were involved in their education and searching for options outside of the public schools. Before opening, we recruited from those neighborhoods and had very little success. Instead the families that responded were overwhelmingly those living in poverty or extreme poverty. We firmly believe that the Lord changed our mission to focus on recruiting and serving that segment of the low-income population. We have been told by many that we are one of the only schools deliberately seeking these children.

We have also been told that we are one of the schools with the highest rate of children in extreme poverty in the United States. "The Worst of Times: Children in Extreme Poverty in the South and Nation", a research and policy report by Southern Education Foundation, states that 34.7% of the students in the Warren School District in Ohio live in extreme poverty, the highest percentage of any school district in the United States. Yellowstone averages over 60% of its students living in extreme poverty.

Ironically, those very students that we seek to serve, those living in poverty and extreme poverty, are now the very hardest for us to recruit. As Yellowstone has served more and more students with success, its reputation has grown, and it now has a long waiting list. Parents who are involved in their children's education and are seeking alternatives to their failing neighborhood schools now seek Yellowstone for their family. They put themselves on our waiting list and check back often, making certain that we have current contact information. We could fill our open spots from these families with very little recruiting, and with time of an essence, this is tempting.

However, these families seeking Yellowstone are almost always low-income but living above the poverty line. Families living in poverty and extreme poverty, perhaps overwhelmed by difficult circumstances and focused on meeting the basic needs of their family, often are not focused on seeking educational opportunities for their children.

They tend to be more transient, and when we try to contact them for openings, we find that we have outdated contact information. These are the families we have to actively recruit, and it is time consuming and challenging.

To further the irony, these are also the children that the Department of Education tells us are the most challenging to educate. Schools that enroll a large number of children living below the poverty line report high rates of absenteeism, increased discipline problems, and lower academic achievement. To stay focused on recruiting these students requires strategic planning and determination, and once they enroll, the school must be willing to allocate more resources to serving these students who are most at risk.

In serving these children, the challenges are real, but the rewards are great, and it is not an overstatement to say that providing an excellent education changes the trajectory of their lives. It is very possible to create a school that allows all students, including those in poverty and extreme poverty, to succeed academically.

### **EDUCATING STAFF ABOUT THE POPULATION WE SERVE**

A key component of all we do is educating our staff about the population we serve. Few will deny that we face an educational crisis in our country. The large disparity in academic achievement between students of different socio-economic status has increased significantly over the last three decades. Low-income students start school behind, and the gap never lessens. In 2009, the drop-out rate of students living in low-income families was five times greater than those living in high-income families.

We must face reality. The curriculum, educational strategies, and methods of teaching that we have typically been using are clearly not successful with low-income children, and within a very few years, these children will make up the majority of our public school population. We firmly believe that the responsibility for solving this crisis lies squarely with the schools; there is simply no excuse for any segment of the population to fail. Proof of this is that throughout our nation, there are examples of schools successfully educating the same low-income students that are failing elsewhere.

In his 2009 book, *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, Eric Jensen cites over 200 high-quality research studies showing typical differences between low-SES and high SES students. Children raised in poverty are confronted with unique and often overwhelming challenges on a daily basis that their higher income counterparts do not face. These challenges affect every area of their lives. We believe that acknowledging that there are relevant differences among students is essential and shows respect for those we serve. Learning about the ramifications of poverty shows that we care enough to take the time and do the work to learn about our students; then and only then can we keep the academic standards high while tailoring the education we provide to meet their needs. Armed with this information, we can create classrooms where all of our students can be successful.

At the end of this document is a list of the resources our staff has found to be the most helpful and impactful to our program.

## **TUITION**

Every school family pays tuition scaled to what they can afford. Tuition accounts for less than 1% of the operating budget, and from a financial standpoint, it does not pay for Yellowstone to hire a person to collect tuition and keep these records. **However, having every family financially invest in their child's education is vital for the success of our mission.** Our school families are our partners in the education of their children – this is something we do *with* them, not *for* them. Everyone who is involved with Yellowstone gives sacrificially – staff members could work fewer hours and make more money working at another school, volunteers sacrifice their time, and donors sacrifice financially so that Yellowstone can exist. By paying tuition instead of sending their children to the free public schools, parents are also sacrificing. Because we give them the dignity of financially participating, they are able to take pride in making their children's well-being a financial priority and in giving them the priceless gift of a high-quality Christian education. What a wonderful example to set for their children! We also believe that this education is valued more when it is paid for it than it would be if it were free.

In collecting tuition, Yellowstone adheres to the procedure used by many private schools: Any and all costs for the school year are included in the tuition; school families are not asked to pay any additional money. This includes, but is not limited to meals, snacks, school supplies, uniforms (PE, sports, and school), field trips, membership in clubs, and participation in extra-curricular activities. Tuition is divided into 10 equal payments due monthly.

**This procedure simplifies accounting, but that is neither the main benefit nor the primary purpose of using this system.** Adults who lived in poverty as children often associate their school days with a feeling of embarrassment and isolation. They were self-conscious about shoes and clothing that were obviously bought used or were hand-me-downs. They either could not afford the school lunch or had to use a free lunch card that identified them as being “poor”. When there were competitions between classes to bring donations for a cause, participate in fund-raisers, or purchase tickets for school events, they were the ones that kept their class from winning. They missed field trips because they couldn't pay the fees, and on Field Day, they could not purchase food or tickets for rides and games. They could not participate in sports because they could not afford to purchase uniforms or obtain a physical. They would take an “F” on science projects rather than tell the teacher that they could not afford poster board and markers, and they would be “sick” or would cause behavior problems rather than admit to the other students in group assignments that they could not contribute their portion of supplies. Students who have repeated negative experiences feel like they do not fit in and do not feel connected to their school and its students and teachers. They are at a great risk of academic failure and of dropping out.

Yellowstone is determined that this will not be the experience of its students. By having parents pay for everything through tuition, all students are on equal footing when it comes to uniforms, meals, school supplies, and access to field trips, sports, clubs, and activities. School becomes a place where a lack of financial resources does not have to be a constant source of embarrassment or concern to students and is not a barrier to

academic success or to participation in all aspects of school. **Students can come to school each day confident that they belong and free to concentrate on learning.**

In order for this plan to be successful, three things must happen:

First, tuition must be scaled appropriately to each family's ability to pay with the goal of equal sacrifice, not equal payments.

Secondly, tuition must be consistently collected and families must be held accountable.

Thirdly, all staff and board members must use the correct language when talking about tuition and what it provides. Meals, uniforms, school supplies, etc are **NOT FREE** - they are paid for with tuition. To say that they are free, insults and cheapens the sacrifice that parents are making and negates the partnership between the school and its families.

We are up-front with our parents about our cost per child, and we believe that by doing this in a very matter-of-fact manner, we allow them to appreciate the tremendous blessing that God is giving through our donors and to also feel pride in their own sacrifice and participation.

Because tuition provides less than 1% of the operating costs, the remaining costs are raised through donations from individuals, corporations, foundations, and churches. We firmly believe that Yellowstone has succeeded financially because we never expected tuition to provide income. Our board has always accepted the responsibility of raising the full cost of operations, supported and assisted by the development department and executive director of the school.

## **KEY COMPONENTS AND PRACTICES**

### **ACCREDITATION**

Yellowstone was designed to be an accredited school for the following reasons:

Accreditation means that a nationally recognized accrediting agency conducted a rigorous review of the school and its programs and found that it met the established standards. These reviews are required every five years in order for accreditation to be maintained.

As an independent school, we believe that we need this accountability.

We are asking parents to trust us with the education of their children and donors to trust us with their financial investment. By earning accreditation, we are proving that we are worthy of that trust.

The years of teaching in a private school can only be recognized as creditable years of service by the state of Texas if the private school is accredited by an

agency recognized by the state.

The majority of corporations can only donate to schools that are accredited.

Yellowstone chose to seek accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), and we designed the school to meet their required standards. That informed everything from the policies and procedures we implemented to the choice of curriculum and the hiring of staff. Because of this preparation, Yellowstone was accepted as an applicant for accreditation in its first year of operation and earned accreditation in the spring semester of its second year. At that time, it was the youngest school to have received accreditation from SACS. (Note: In 2006, SACS merged with two other regional accrediting agencies to form AdvancEd.)

We highly recommend this approach to accreditation. It is much easier to design a school to earn accreditation than to have to make required changes to a program already in operation.

### **BIBLE AND CHAPEL**

Yellowstone is a Christian school not affiliated with any one church or denomination. Bible is taught as a subject every day in every class, and Chapel is once a week for 30 minutes. Chapel includes a time of praise and worship as well as a speaker. Speakers are deliberately chosen to represent Christians of all denominations, ages, races, and walks of life.

The pledges are recited in Chapel and are led by a different class each week (including PK3 & PK4 – probably the favorite ones!), and a student leads in prayer also. There are additional opportunities for students to participate by performing and/or helping to lead during praise and worship, reciting Bible verses, acting out Bible stories, etc. Parents are always welcome and are urged to attend. Teachers make certain to invite the families of students who have a part in the chapel service.

Using speakers from a variety of different churches not only makes Chapel interesting for our students, but it also introduces and connects Yellowstone to churches throughout the Houston area. This gives us opportunities to partner with these congregations to recruit volunteers and organize work days at Yellowstone, and it makes congregations aware of Yellowstone's need for financial support.

### **BULLETIN BOARDS**

Yellowstone is known for its creative bulletin boards! They bring delight to our students and their families and to all of our visitors. Our classrooms each have 3-4 bulletin boards, and we ask our teachers to keep them decorated at all times, reflecting the curriculum and classroom activities and displaying student work. Each classroom is also assigned a hallway bulletin board, and the teacher is responsible for keeping it decorated and changing it once a month.

Students and parents are proud to have work displayed, and this makes the school warm and inviting for our families. The bulletin boards also serve as some of our best donor development tools. When prospective donors and volunteers take a tour, the academic achievements of the students are clear to see, and the bulletin boards reflect the creativity of our teachers and the excitement and pride our students have in learning.

### **CELEBRATING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

Other than a relationship with Jesus Christ, educational achievement is the key to escaping poverty, and at Yellowstone, we continuously look for ways to celebrate this. The bulletin boards are decorated with the work of the students, and their work is displayed in their classrooms also.

Each grading period, students in first grade and older have the opportunity to earn their way onto the A Honor Roll (no grade lower than an A and no conduct grade lower than an S) or the Achievement Roll (no grade lower than a B and no conduct grade lower than an S). These students are recognized in a school assembly, and their names are displayed on a hallway bulletin board. Classroom teachers also send a note or a certificate home with these students.

At a school-wide awards ceremony at the end of the year, students who were on the A Honor Roll each grading period of the year receive a medal and a large trophy engraved with their name. Students who were on either the A Honor or the Achievement Roll each grading period receive a medal and a slightly smaller trophy engraved with their name.

Yellowstone also wants to recognize students who achieve academically but whose conduct grades prevent them from being on the A Honor Roll or the Achievement Roll. Therefore, students who make all A's or all A's and B's are also recognized each grading period in the school assembly, and the teachers also send home a note or a certificate with them. It is hoped that the recognition and praise will inspire these students to continue to excel academically and to also earn the conduct grades that will allow them to be on the A Honor Roll and/or Achievement Roll and to earn a trophy and recognition at the annual Awards Ceremony.

### **CHOICE/CONTROL**

Children growing up in poverty typically experience a large amount of stress and often feel that everything is out of their control. They may move frequently and often with little warning, meaning that schools and friends change often. Food may not always be available, electricity and water may be turned off, and the adults in their life may not be consistently present. Research shows that those living in poverty often have a negative view of the future, feeling that they are helpless to affect what happens.

At Yellowstone, we work to directly counteract that mindset. We intentionally talk with our students about their dreams and hopes for the future and about the ways that they can

make that future a reality. Our school Bible verse is Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” The most important thing we do is to constantly remind our students that the God who knows them individually and loves them unconditionally has a specific and wonderful plan for their lives. It is **their** responsibility to seek God so that He can reveal that plan to them.

Beginning in PK3, we talk with our students about what they want to be when they grow up and make certain that they know what is required for the career they choose. In PK3, those conversations are simple: “Firemen are strong and work hard. They need to lift heavy equipment so they eat healthy food and exercise a lot.”

As children grow older, we expose them to many different careers, often through visits to our corporate donors and through career days held at Yellowstone. They learn about the subjects in school and the majors in college that correlate with different careers. Beginning in the upper elementary grades, students are reminded that they must do their best in middle school, in academics and conduct, because that will affect their choices of high schools and then of college. Every class has a sign on their door reminding the students and their families of the year they will graduate from Yellowstone, then from high school, and then from college.

We use a common language to make certain that students are aware of the choices they make and of the circumstances that are in their control. This is especially true when discussing behavior. When a student has broken a rule, we tie the consequence back to that behavior choice. (Example: A teacher does not “take away” a student’s recess time; a student makes a behavior choice that causes them to lose recess privileges.) When students are experiencing a consequence (in time-out, loss of point, sitting in isolation at lunch, etc.) we remind them that they can choose to make things better from this point forward. When the time is appropriate, we also talk with students about how they can break patterns of wrong behavior.

When talking about academics, we tie grades and academic progress to the choices they make as students. If they choose to listen closely in school, to participate in lessons, to complete homework, and to study for tests, they will experience success. In all things, we emphasize to our students that they have the ability to make wise choices that positively affect their future, and we assure them that we know they can do this.

We also look for as many other opportunities as possible where we can give our students choices. There is a compelling body of research that consistently shows that providing students with choices increases their interest and engagement in learning and that students spend more time and effort on academic tasks if they are offered choices. Giving students choices is also shown to help build other important skills such as self-regulation.

Giving the students a choice does **not** mean that they have a choice about obeying the rules, completing their work, or following the routine! However, we intentionally look

for times that we can give them appropriate choices. For example, classes have assigned tables at lunch, but a teacher can allow his students to choose their specific seat at the tables. In kindergarten, the students rotate learning centers in a prescribed and orderly manner. However, the teacher can allow a different group each day to choose the center where their group begins the rotation. Rather than assigning class jobs, the teachers can allow the students to choose their new job each week, rotating who chooses first. If the second graders are writing a report on animals or fifth graders are doing a report on states, the students can choose their topic from an approved list. Middle school science students can vote on which experiment to conduct from a list the teacher gives. Recess is deliberately designed to be a time that is not teacher-directed, allowing students, within clear boundaries, to choose their own activities. Giving students these types of choices has the added benefit of causing them to feel respected and to be more confident

### **CLASS JOBS/CLASSROOM GREETER**

To teach responsibility and to encourage pride in a job well done, each PK3-5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher has classroom jobs that are assigned to students on a rotating basis. Beginning in first grade, one of these jobs is to be the “Classroom Greeter”. When visitors on a tour enter a classroom, the class routine should continue without interruption. However, the assigned Classroom Greeter should leave his seat to greet each person. The greeter shakes the hand of each visitor, makes eye contact, and introduces himself. He also tells the visitors the grade level and the subject that is currently being studied. For example, "Hello. My name is James, and we are in second grade. Right now we are in math centers."

Middle school classes are also asked to have an assigned Classroom Greeter, and some middle school teachers effectively assign class jobs, making certain to use different terminology that is more in line with middle school.

### **CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT**

#### **Classroom Environment**

Classrooms are to be kept neat, clean, and uncluttered. Materials and supplies are to be organized for quick and easy access and efficiency of use. There are to be clearly designated spaces for students’ backpacks, supplies, sweaters, etc. and an enforced routine for using these. Students are to be held accountable for keeping their desks organized, and teachers are to model this by keeping their desk neat and well organized.

Attention is to be paid to the set-up of the classroom and the arrangement of students’ desks, keeping in mind what is most effective for instruction and student engagement.

Student work, instructional displays, and decorative items are to be neatly hung on bulletin boards. Walls and cabinets can be used as well as long as the displays are neat and well organized.

Items in the PK and K classrooms are to be labeled on yellow paper or sentence strips. (Example: table, chair, door, shelf, light switch, cubbies, sink, etc.) Items are labeled to encourage students to make a connection between the spoken and written word and to also encourage vocabulary development. Yellow paper is used because the grammar curriculum used in the older grade levels color codes words according to the part of speech; nouns are colored yellow. (Neuhaus Color Coded Grammar)

Each classroom has its own library/reading area that is organized, accessible, and inviting to students.

All children thrive in a structured environment that is characterized by a predictable and consistent daily routine, but we have found that this is especially important for children in poverty. Teachers and aides are responsible for establishing this type of classroom environment.

Because planning ahead and following a schedule is known to be difficult for children in poverty, teachers at all grade levels are required to clearly post a written daily schedule. As the class moves from activity to activity, the current place in the schedule is to be specifically marked for the students. (Many teachers write the daily schedule on a chart and use a clothespin as a marker.)

The objective for each lesson is verbally stated by the teacher before the lesson begins and is also posted. It is then reviewed at the end of the lesson.

The following skills and strategies are directly taught in each classroom at Yellowstone in an age appropriate manner:

- Goal setting
- Systematically working through assignments - students are held accountable for starting at the beginning of an assignment and working until it is completed.
- Use of positive self-talk and procedural self-talk
- Systematic exploration of data
- Conflict resolution using words and negotiation
- Study skills
- Organizational skills
- Problem solving skills

In order to maximize instructional time and have an orderly and disciplined classroom, transition routines are deliberate, consistent, and efficient, never lasting longer than one minute. Once the routines are established, there is little talking required by the teacher, and students are silent unless the particular transition requires discussion, and they have been prepped for it. After the transition is complete, students are immediately on task.

At the end of each school day, there is a time when the teacher or aide reviews with the students highlights from the day and previews the schedule and special events for the next day.

### **General School Environment**

It is vital that the school operates in an environment of respect at all levels, not just student-to-teacher. Teachers must show respect to their class as a whole and to each individual student. They must also speak about and treat school parents, volunteers, and other staff members with respect. In turn, students must respect their teachers and other adults in charge and must respect each other.

Just like the classrooms, the rest of the school, including the outdoor areas, are to be kept neat, clean, and uncluttered, and that is the responsibility of the entire Yellowstone family – students, staff, volunteers, and school families. We teach the students that we are blessed to have our building and grounds and must be good stewards. Everyone is expected to pick up trash and clean up after themselves, and this only happens if it is modeled by the staff.

Out of respect for the learning that is taking place, all students are required to be silent as they walk in the hallways. PK-5<sup>th</sup> grade classes are to walk in a straight line with their hands behind their backs. As a fun way to help younger students remember to not talk, we ask them to “keep a bubble in their mouth” (puff out their cheeks with air) while in the hallway.

Each class has assigned tables in the cafeteria, and students are allowed to talk in a soft conversational voice while eating. Students are to stay seated throughout the meal unless they have the permission of their teacher or cafeteria monitor to be up. Teachers directly teach basic table manners and hold students accountable for these. Before leaving the cafeteria, each class is responsible for making sure that all trash has been thrown away and the tables and floor underneath are cleaner than when they arrived!

Students are to greet the cafeteria staff and are to say thank you for the service provided. (While feedback from the students about the meals is important, it must be given at the appropriate time. No student may make negative comments about the food as they are being served.)

We have found that attention to the landscaping around the school delights our students and our neighbors. We ask individuals, garden clubs, and church groups to donate their time and the materials needed to maintain the landscaping and to plant seasonal flowers. We also use our Yellowstone scout troop to help with this. (One time a first grade classroom was broken into through a window. The students were much more upset that whoever did this stepped on the flowers they had planted under the window than they were about anything taken from their room!)

### **CODE SWITCHING/ SPEAKING IN STANDARD ENGLISH**

There is a significant body of evidence showing that students who do not speak and write in Standard English do not perform as well on standardized tests, and, as adults, are more likely to be rejected in job interviews. Because of this, we directly teach our students to speak and write in Standard English. We do this by explaining to the students that we all

speak in a more casual manner when we are with our friends and our family than we do in school or at our job. With older students and with our parents, we refer to “informal” and “formal” language. In educational journals, this ability to use Standard English in school and in business is often referred to as “code switching”. **It is very important that this issue not be approached as a “right” or “wrong” way to speak;** we never use those words with our students. We are not judging the culture or speech of our school families. We daily teach students the educational skills they need in order to be most successful, and code switching is one of these skills. We have found that when we clearly operate in an atmosphere of respect and take the time to explain philosophy and practices, this issue does not create concern among school families.

Likewise, students need to be able to express themselves in complete sentences, and we require that of all of our students, especially when giving answers and engaging in discussions in class. Example: When a student gives a one or two word answer, the teacher will say, “That’s right. Now put that answer into a complete sentence.”

In order for the students to learn these skills, all staff members must model the use of Standard English and the practice of speaking in complete sentences while at school.

### **COLLEGE SIGNS/COLLEGE VISITS**

Research shows that children are most likely to attend college when they learn about it beginning at an early age, are taught the benefits of a college education, and are told that this is a rewarding and achievable goal. On the door of every Yellowstone classroom hangs a sign that identifies the class by their year of 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, their year of high school graduation, and their year of college graduation. For example, the sign for the class that started PK 3 in the 2010-2011 school year reads:

Yellowstone 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Graduating Class of 2021  
High School Graduating Class of 2025  
College Graduating Class of 2029

On each classroom and office door, we also have a sign with the name of the staff member and the college he or she attended.

The signs keep our staff and students focused on the ultimate educational goal, provide assurance to our school families that this is attainable, and reinforce to our donors that we are providing a high quality college preparatory education.

We do not limit our conversations about college to a bachelor’s degree at a four year university. College can also be a certification or degree from a community college or a technical school. We frame conversations about college around career goals and make certain that our students know that while college is hard work, it is also exciting, fun, and interesting. We take our students to visit a variety of local college campuses beginning in elementary school. By discussing college consistently from preschool forward, our goal is for our students to think of post-secondary education as an inevitable part of their

future.

### **CURRENT EVENTS AND POLITICS**

Yellowstone desires for its students to be knowledgeable about current events and the world around them. A short age appropriate discussion of current events is to take place in each self-contained classroom each day and otherwise in social studies class. Students are also to be taught basic facts about the world around them, including but not limited to: the name of our city, state, and country and the name of our president and mayor.

The political process is an important part of current events, and teachers and aides are asked to give their students age appropriate information about the political process, the major parties, any current elections, major candidates, issues, etc. **This must be done in a balanced and non-partisan manner** so teachers, aides, and other staff members are asked to not disclose to the students which candidate or political party they support. They are to emphasize respect for differing views and create a classroom atmosphere where students listen to each other, feel free to share their opinions, and where all discussions and debates are spirited and yet respectful and appropriate. The goal is to teach students to make informed decisions and to recognize the difference between fact and opinion in both spoken and written commentary.

We also teach the students about the privilege it is to live in a country where we choose our leaders, and we help them understand the responsibility that each adult in the United States has to vote. We teach the students that God requires us to respect and pray for our leaders whether we voted for them and agree with their stands or not. We model this truth by asking our classes to pray for our leaders on a regular basis.

The Yellowstone community is made up of students and school families, staff members, volunteers, and board members, and within these groups, there are many differing and strongly held political views. As an organization, Yellowstone never takes a political position and does not support any one candidate or party over another. It also does not join any community organizations that are politically connected or speak in support of specific parties or candidates. We ask our volunteers and board members to adhere to the same guidelines for discussing politics at school as we do our staff. We do not display any campaign materials unless it is in a teaching context, and then we display equal amounts of materials from each party and/or candidate.

### **CURRICULUM CHOICES**

Yellowstone is a Christian school, and that world view is incorporated throughout all parts of the school day. Our goal is to choose curriculum that is excellent, rigorous, meets state standards, and meets the needs of our students. If a curriculum that is from a Christian company meets these standards, then it will be considered; however, being a Christian curriculum is not a requirement, and we will not lower our standards because a curriculum is Christian. As is appropriate, our staff can add the Christian view to any curriculum.

## **DISCIPLINE PHILOSOPHY AND PROCEDURES**

Discipline is much more than punishment. We believe that by teaching students to respect authority, to follow established rules, and to treat all persons with respect and dignity, we are teaching them to honor God.

Yellowstone Academy has an established discipline system for each grade level, and all staff members are required to use this system. They receive training in this system and also receive written information and guidelines.

### **General Philosophy of the Discipline System**

The goal is that through the discipline system, students will be taught to respect authority, to think before they act, to control their impulses, and to accept responsibility for the choices they make. Through the incentive system, they will be taught to save, to budget, and to delay gratification, and they will be taught the concepts of goal setting and of working hard to earn a reward.

Teachers and aides are asked to adhere to the following general guidelines:

From the first day, establish an attitude of cooperation, respect, and excitement about the year ahead.

Carry yourself with confidence in such a way that it is clear that you are in charge, and students are expected to respect and obey your authority. At the same time, make certain that they know you respect them and consider it a great privilege to be their teacher.

Make it a point to quickly learn the name of every student and to also learn about them individually – their interests, strengths, and talents as well as their struggles and any challenges they are facing. Share things about yourself, as appropriate. Tell them about your family, your reasons for becoming a teacher, and your favorite things about the grade/subject you are teaching. This allows you to connect with your students, and that is the key to successful teaching.

Establish conduct rules with the class, and make your expectations clear. Make certain that each child has a thorough understanding of the rules and the consequences for not following them. Do not assume they know!

State rules in a positive manner. Example: Rather than “Do not run in the building” say “You must walk at all times when you are inside the building”. **Using positive speech does not lower the behavior requirements.** In fact, it has the added benefit of telling the students what to do, not just what not to do. It also sets an atmosphere of cooperation.

Be attentive to the behavior of the students at all times, and consistently enforce each rule. This takes time and effort but is the key to successful

classroom management. The very best classrooms have clarity of rules and consistent discipline but with a greater emphasis on recognizing correct behavior than on punishing wrong behavior.

Insist on polite, respectful, and correct behavior at all times, both with adults and other students. Make certain that this includes the cafeteria workers, bus drivers and monitors, janitorial staff, and security guards.

Directly teach students to resolve conflict in an appropriate and Godly manner.

Clearly communicate that each child is unique, important, and accepted. Make certain it is understood that no child will be allowed to make fun of, exclude, or mistreat anyone.

Never talk over the students, and do not discipline “across the room”. If at all possible, discipline a child quietly and away from other children. This allows the child to save face in front of classmates and also thwarts misbehavior that is designed to attract the attention of classmates.

When talking with a student about his misbehavior, use a calm adult voice and use few words. For example, “Jayla, you chose to disobey so you have lost 10 minutes of recess.” There is no need for discussion and no need for further explanation. Do not engage in a power struggle or verbal back-and-forth, and do not give any extra attention or energy to the situation. **Attention and energy should instead be given to behavior that is correct and follows the classroom rules.**

After you have disciplined a child, especially in a more serious situation, there will be an appropriate time to talk with him/her. That is the time to remind him that he chose to break a rule, and the punishment was a consequence of that bad choice. Emphasize that while you did not like the behavior, the child is no less special to you.

Initially, the Yellowstone teacher and aide deal with discipline problems. The teacher contacts the parents if there is a continuing problem, seeking their cooperation and any information that might be useful in working with their child.

When it is apparent that a discipline problem is not being corrected, the teacher then consults with the Social Worker.

In some Christian schools, students are asked to copy Bible verses or memorize Scripture as a form of punishment for misbehavior. We ask our teachers not to do this. While we certainly reference the Bible as our standard in defining appropriate conduct, we want our students to love God’s Word and to acquire the discipline and desire to read and memorize Scripture. We do not want Bible

verses to be associated with punishment.

### **Classroom Incentive Systems**

Within the discipline system at Yellowstone, each grade level establishes an incentive program for their classrooms. The details of that program, including the amount a student can “earn”, the items or privileges they can “purchase”, and the “cost” of these are decisions made by the instructional team at each grade level and approved by the social worker.

Following are the guidelines given to our teachers for establishing their specific incentive system:

Classroom incentive systems should be designed around the premise of earning. It should encourage students to work to earn, budget and save, delay gratification, think before they act, and control impulses.

Students should be given the opportunity to earn throughout the day by displaying appropriate behavior and should be clearly aware of how they earn/don't earn.

A teacher should choose a method for recording earnings of the students that works best for his/her classroom and that can be easily and consistently used. Yellowstone teachers have used various methods of recording earnings including conduct tally charts, stickers on a chart, or “conduct bucks”.

When ‘issuing’ earnings throughout the day, teachers should make certain that they recognize the students who earned/obeyed rather than inadvertently giving the attention to those who did not. Example: To remind themselves, teachers may want to make a list of those students who did not earn a conduct point during a particular period. If so, they should refrain from writing this list on the board or where the students can view it. This inadvertently draws attention to negative behavior, and some students will do anything to get their name on the board!

In PK-5<sup>th</sup> grade, a daily conduct report is to be sent home, and parents are to be required to initial this each day. Teachers choose the method/form for this that works best for their classroom.

Students must be given the opportunity to use their earnings toward the ‘purchase’ of something enjoyable (i.e.: grab bag, snacks, computer time, small toys, special school supplies, lunch with the teacher, choice of classroom job, etc.). How frequently those earnings can be redeemed will be dependent upon the age of the students. The younger the students, the more frequently that will need to happen. For example, this may need to occur daily in PK 3 and 4 but only once a week with 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students.

The “purchase” system should provide students first grade and older with the opportunity to save as well as spend because this teaches them to set goals, budget, and delay gratification.

Yellowstone has volunteers and volunteer groups that help collect items that can be used with the incentive system. Teachers provide the Social Worker with a list of the types of items they need. Some suggested items are: small toys and stuffed animals, school supplies, activity pads or coloring books, coin or change purses, decorative spiral notebooks or journals, colorful stationary, fun pencils and pens, hair accessories, children's inexpensive watches, socks, alarm clocks, art supplies, purses, wallets, sidewalk chalk, yo-yo's, small pieces of candy - excluding hard candy and gum, small dolls, toy trucks or cars, small balls, bubbles, etc. (No toy weapons of any kind, candy cigarettes, balloons, or fake tattoos) Students also love to purchase small items they can give to their parents, grandparents, or teachers as gifts.

Privileges are often the most popular purchases. Examples are: eating lunch with the teacher (or another staff member), taking shoes off while working at desk, being first in line in the cafeteria or at the water fountain, sitting at the teacher's desk, choosing the book that is read to the class, etc. Some favorite classroom jobs such as line leader or door holder can also be designated as privileges that are purchased.

Students third grade and up can be "charged" for issues relative to dress code. For example, a student who repeatedly does not keep his shirt tucked in may be fined 1 conduct point; a student without a belt may need to pay a "buck" to rent a belt for the day.

Students first grade and older should also be "charged" for school supplies if they are careless or waste supplies. For example, a child who draws on all the pages of his composition book instead of using it for assigned work, should use conduct points to "purchase" a new one; a child who daily loses his pencil, should "buy" replacement pencils. If a child breaks his crayons, he either uses the broken ones or "buys" new ones.

If the teachers choose, older students can be required to "purchase" additional school supplies as needed. This teaches responsibility and budgeting for necessities. However, teachers must make certain that the purchase of supplies does not require all of the students' earnings – that will eliminate the incentive factor.

Behavior in Specials (P.E., music, library, art, etc.) is not added to classroom behavior charts. Specials operate independently of the general classroom and have their own behavior system.

For PK students who do not yet recognize their name, it has proven effective to make a card of each child's picture. Appropriate behavior earns students a "picture move" on the classroom behavior chart. Picture moves are then redeemed for stickers, gold fish crackers, or other small items.

## **FIELD TRIPS**

Field trips, both in and outside of Houston, are an intentional and vitally important part of Yellowstone's academic curriculum. On field trips, students are able to experience things first-hand rather than just by text, video, or pictures, and spontaneous, student-centered learning takes place. There is a body of research that shows that experiences of travel and field trips increase reading comprehension and contribute to an increase in standardized test scores. This is because the background/ prior knowledge and experiences of the students significantly influence reading comprehension. The more accurate and detailed the knowledge a student has about the concepts, events, or objects described, the better they will understand the text. Field trips provide exactly that type of needed knowledge and experience.

In addition to supporting specific lessons in the classroom, research has shown that academic and cultural field trips provide the types of experiences and exposure that help students to more easily retain and analyze factual information and strengthen critical thinking skills.

Field trips also provide cultural enrichment and expose students to a diversity of ideas, people, places, and time periods. A 2012 study by Greene and Bowen found that this exposure helps students to develop tolerance for those different than themselves and to feel empathy for those who lived in other time periods. Developing a deeper understanding of our shared history is inspiring and makes students better able to learn from the achievements as well as the mistakes of those in previous generations.

These types of cultural experiences can be costly, and low-income families often do not have the resources to provide these for their children at the same rate as families with higher income. School field trips become the equalizer in terms of access to the arts and culture. In fact, the benefits of these trips are generally much larger for students from low income families – the less prior exposure, the greater the benefit.

Yellowstone students in PK3-8<sup>th</sup> grade take a wide variety of age-appropriate field trips each year. They visit museums of all types, zoos, farms, caves, historical sites, the rodeo, government entities, businesses in a variety of fields, and college campuses. They attend plays and concerts and get behind the scenes looks at what it takes to operate businesses like restaurants or department stores.

Beginning in fourth grade, students take overnight field trips to places like Camp Ozark, the state capitol, historical sites, college campuses, state parks, and museums. A nearby camp and conference center donates three day stays each year, allowing entire grade levels to experience overnight camping (in cabins) and outdoor science programs.

The experience of leaving Houston, spending the night in a hotel, and being away from family is one that moves students outside of their normal environment and outside of their comfort zone. In addition to the educational benefits, it builds confidence and develops independence. Members of our first graduating class have told us that they do not believe they would have been willing to attend high schools outside of their

neighborhood if Yellowstone had not given them the experiences of traveling.

### **FOOD SERVICES**

Yellowstone contracts with Healthy Lunch Box (HLB), a food service/catering company, to provide breakfast and lunch for all students. HLB rents Yellowstone's kitchen and is responsible for maintaining all health department licenses and following all rules and regulations. HLB then charges Yellowstone per child for each meal. It is an arrangement that has worked extremely well for Yellowstone.

Yellowstone does not currently participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) or School Breakfast Program (SBP). Accepting government funding would require Yellowstone to be in compliance with a number of regulations and requirements from which it is currently exempt. Also a minimum of 1.5 positions would have to be created in order to administer the program and insure compliance. After an extensive study in 2008 and again in 2013, Yellowstone's board determined that the net funds received were not worth being subjected to all of the new regulations. However, we will reassess the situation on an on-going basis and will take advantage of this funding source if we increase significantly in size and/or the regulations change.

### **GREETING EACH CHILD/KNOWING EACH CHILD BY NAME**

As each student enters their classroom in the morning, either the teacher or the aide is asked to be at the door to look each child in the eye and greet them by name. (Teachers may also teach the students to shake hands.) Bus monitors are also asked to greet students as they board the bus in the morning and afternoon and to greet parents also. Students are expected to respond in the same manner.

Looking a child in the eye shows that they are important enough to have your full attention; it communicates caring. Greeting a child by name shows that you know them as an individual, not just as one of the many students in your class, and that communicates respect.

An emphasis is put on all staff members making the effort to know each student and each parent by name. Similarly, students are expected to greet staff members by name. (This includes greeting and expressing gratitude to the cafeteria, janitorial, and security staff.)

### **IN-KIND DONATIONS**

We have been able to off-set a portion of our budget each year through in-kind donations, both of goods and of services. Almost all of our student school supplies and office furniture and the majority of our school snacks, recess equipment, conduct incentives, library books, Clorox wipes, baby wipes, laundry detergent, and hand sanitizer are donated. In addition, on a regular basis, we receive donations of uniforms, office supplies, copy paper, educational games, gas cards (for our buses), art supplies, and pizza lunches for the entire school. We also receive gift cards to local teacher's supply stores

or Target and Wal-Mart that we can use to buy whatever is needed. Once we were even given a brand new school bus with our name painted on the side by one of our local churches, and that same church provides us with every light bulb needed in our building.

We receive donated admission to field trips on a regular basis and free hotel accommodations on over-night trips. A nearby camp and conference center donates three day stays so that entire grade levels can experience their outdoor education science programs. We have had dental services and eye exams/glasses donated for our students, and various photographers have donated their services for everything from individual student and class pictures to pictures for our newsletters and fund raising events.

When we purchased our current building, one of our board members donated the services of his company as project managers for the needed renovations and for the construction of our gym, and our kitchen was renovated and the equipment provided, all free of charge, by a local restaurant chain.

Especially valuable, we contract with Texas Children's Hospital and CHRISTUS Health to staff our school clinic with a nurse practitioner for three and ½ days a week and to provide all needed clinic supplies. They also provide immunizations and all required health screenings and sports physicals for our students. These services are all donated to us – there is no cost whatsoever for Yellowstone. This not only saves us the money of operating our own clinic, but it saves us in insurance costs because they carry the liability.

In order to receive the type of in-kind donations that are needed and save money in the budget, time must be given to solicit these, and we have found it to be time well spent.

### **MISSION PROJECTS**

Luke 12:48 makes it clear: “.....Much will be required from everyone to whom much has been given...” God has blessed our Yellowstone students, and from our first year, we have taught them the truth of this verse. We emphasize the blessings they have been given, work to develop a school culture of an “attitude of gratitude”, and directly teach the responsibility we have individually and as a school family to give back to others.

There are many ways for students to give, and Yellowstone has adopted Living Water International (LWI) as our school-wide mission project. LWI is a Christian non-profit that mobilizes the Christian community in North America to bring clean water and the Gospel of Jesus to communities in developing countries. Each year, Yellowstone adopts a particular community in Africa and participates in raising money for the drilling of a water well. Throughout the year, our students learn about daily life, the weather, religion, customs, housing, and food, types of jobs, medical care, and educational system of our adopted community. They learn about the water crisis the people there face and how it affects their health and daily life. Each class prays daily for the people in this community to learn about Jesus and to receive a well so that they have a source of clean water. LWI employees or volunteers bring the students pictures from the community and updates on

the progress of raising money and then drilling the well.

Each class raises money by collecting pennies (and other coins) in a Living Water container in their classroom. (We chose pennies because every child is able to donate pennies.) Classes have also come up with other interesting and creative ways to raise money. They have solicited coins from visitors on tours of the schools, sold snacks donated by a classroom volunteer, and set up lemonade stands at local churches or businesses. One of the most impactful things we have done is to allow students to donate their conduct points to Living Water. Instead of spending or saving their conduct points, students are given the option of donating any or all points to Living Water; a volunteer agrees to donate a dime to Living Water for every conduct point donated.

**Mission Projects are not merely an activity we do. Requiring our students to give to others is a core value of our school and was established from our first year.**

### **PARENT/SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP**

For a variety of reasons, a significant percentage of low-income parents report being uncomfortable in a school environment and in communicating with teachers and administrators. Yet, for a school to be truly successful and for students to achieve their full potential, there must be a strong working relationship between home and school. At Yellowstone, we view it as the responsibility of our school staff to set the tone and to establish a relationship with our school families that is characterized by mutual respect, support, trust, and teamwork.

We also view it as our responsibility to help our families set high standards and expectations for their child's school and then hold us accountable for meeting those. In Houston, the majority of our low-income neighborhoods have failing schools. There are generations of families who have never had the opportunity to experience a high-quality education, either for themselves or their children. Without even realizing it, they may be satisfied with less than excellence – less than they deserve. We will not have achieved our goal to be an excellent school in every way unless we teach our school families what excellence looks like and then allow them to hold us accountable. This means that we must be open to criticism and feedback, and we must practice honest self-assessment and continuous improvement. This is easier said than done, but it is our constant goal.

### **Parent/School Communication**

To help alleviate any discomfort and to build the type of relationship we wish to have with our school families, we ask our teachers (and all staff members) to proactively seek opportunities for positive communication in person, by phone, and through notes with parents and guardians as often as possible. It is essential that this is done before any problems develop; when challenges arise, they can then be dealt with much more effectively because there is already a positive relationship built between the family and school.

In addition:

Teachers at every grade level take turns composing a newsletter that is sent home each Monday in the students' daily folder. The newsletter gives the parents information about the current school week. This is used as a format for praising students as a whole and giving a brief description of curriculum being covered and/or special events taking place. Every newsletter includes the Bible verse of the week and a short summary of the Bible lessons being covered. (What a privilege to be able to share about the Lord with our parents on a weekly basis!)

PK-5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers are asked to send home a note of praise with each child a minimum of once a month and middle school teachers once each grading period. These are not long notes, often being just one or two sentences: "I am impressed with how well Joshua listens in math class." "Wow! Desiree is becoming an excellent reader!" We have on average 16 students in each class so teachers are not required to write more than one note a day.

Because it is easy to inadvertently overlook a student or parent, teachers are asked to develop a way to document their praise notes and positive communication. (Most choose to use a written log that is kept with their lesson plans or grades.)

### **Parent Conferences**

It is Yellowstone's goal to have a minimum of two face-to-face conferences each year between parents/guardians and teachers. Additional conferences can be scheduled at the request of either the teacher or the parent, and teachers are to be available to return parent phone calls within one school day.

### **Parent Events**

**Fall Open House:** We have Open House at the start of each school year, and every year a minimum of 75% of our students have family members attend. All school staff members are required to be in attendance, and we enthusiastically promote Open House in weekly news notes and when we see parents in person or talk to them on the phone. We intentionally make this a student-centered event. Students make the invitations, serve as greeters, and work with their teachers to create special displays in the classroom. They are proud to show off all that they are learning and to introduce their family members to their teachers. This is not a time for parent conferences or for teachers to discuss concerns about students; this is a time to celebrate our students and their accomplishments and to foster relationships with our school families.

We always serve refreshments at this event, helping to make our families feel welcome and letting them know that it is an honor to have them there. (We get the refreshments, usually small sandwiches and desserts, donated from various church and community groups, and they are served by staff members and volunteers. This refreshment time also has the benefit of giving our school families a time to socialize and to get to know each other. (We do not serve the food until after the families have visited the classrooms.)

**Spring Game Night:** In the spring semester, we have school-wide Game Night. This is

extremely popular with our school families, and that is primarily due to the enthusiasm, creativity, and hard work of our staff. Staff members are divided into "teams" and assigned to a specific room in the school. Teams choose a theme, decorate the room, and wear costumes to match the theme. Also following the theme, they have a variety of educational games and activities for all ages in each room. (Church and community groups have also formed teams and been assigned rooms, increasing the number of games we can provide and alleviating over-crowding in the rooms.) Prizes are awarded, and the games are designed for parents and children to play together. Refreshments are served on a rotating basis in the cafeteria for all the same reasons that we serve them at Open House.

Once we added middle school, we created a dance-a-thon in our gym for middle school students that takes place at the same time as Game Night. This alleviated over-crowding of the games and gave our middle school students something that was different and age-appropriate. The dance-a-thon is used to raise funds for our school wide mission project, and volunteers are enlisted to make this a success. Staff members, volunteers, and parents of middle school students are invited to dance also; parents are not required to be present with their children. (Music is chosen by the staff, and rules for appropriate dancing are discussed and enforced.) Refreshments for the middle school students are served in the gym.

Everyone has a great time, and attendance is equal to that of Open House. This event has the goals of building community, having an activity for families to participate in together, and finding a unique and fun way to show parents how ways to teach their children through educational games.

Our Volunteer Coordinator and Development Team work together to seek donations for the food, prizes, and decorations for this event. The games are made by the teachers using classroom materials, and staff members provide their own costumes.

**Student Performances:** Throughout the year, we have performances by students at different grade levels and/or in different clubs or activities (dance team, step team, choir, etc.). We also have a school-wide program at Christmas and Easter and to celebrate Black History Month. We have two performances of each program, one during the school day and one that same evening. This allows as many family members as possible to attend and also allows our entire student body to participate and/or attend at least one of the performances.

**Chapel:** Parents are always welcome at Chapel, and classroom teachers make certain to especially invite parents of those students who are participating or leading in chapel in any given week.

**Field Trips/Volunteer Opportunities/Work Days:** Parents are also recruited to be volunteers at Yellowstone and/or to help chaperone field trips. As with all volunteers, they must undergo training and orientation and must complete a background check. When we have week-end workdays at Yellowstone, school families are always invited to

participate along with community volunteers. Any students and/or other children attending must come with their parent and be under their parents' supervision at all times. School family members and other volunteers may attend week-end work days without undergoing background checks or volunteer orientation.

### **Enforcement of Parent Responsibilities**

Enforcement of parent/guardian responsibilities is one of our most challenging areas. We have wonderful parents and grandparents who are fully supportive of Yellowstone and its rules and policies. We also have students who live in environments that are stressful and unstable, and this affects every area of home life, including parental involvement in school.

Yellowstone's mission is to serve only children from low-income families, with an emphasis on recruiting students living in poverty and extreme poverty. Reality is that the lower the income of the family, the greater the frequency and intensity of adverse situations that they may experience. There are times that, for a variety of reasons, parents do not participate in their child's education as we ask. There are times when the children in the family are parentified, taking care not only of siblings but also of their parent, and there are different causes of this. We respond to these situations individually and in a variety of ways, usually led by our social worker and parent liaison. We look for ways to support that family with the goal that the family will be healthy, and they will fully participate at Yellowstone.

### **PRAYER TEAM**

One of the first things we established was a volunteer Prayer Team for Yellowstone, and this is one of the most powerful programs we have. Each member receives a Prayer Guide giving a different list of Yellowstone's on-going needs to pray for on each day of the week. (Copy attached) They also receive a list of staff members and of board members and are asked to divide those lists so that they pray for each person at least once a week.

We also have prayer volunteers who each adopt a specific class to pray for on a daily basis. They are given a list of all students in the class (first names only) and the teacher and aide. They are asked to pray for the teachers and the class as a whole and to pray by name for each student and his/her family at least once a week.

A staff member updates the volunteer leader of the Prayer Team on a regular basis, sharing additional prayer requests and praises for answered prayers. The leader communicates with the Prayer Team almost exclusively by email although they do a Prayer Walk around the school one to two times a year.

We recommend that all communication to the Prayer Team go through one staff member. There is a need to protect confidentiality while communicating prayer needs, and there needs to be good judgment and discretion used in presenting the requests.

We make certain that our staff, students, and school families know that they are prayed for on a daily basis. Although we neglected to do this in the beginning, we also now invite parents to be a part of the Prayer Team.

## **RECESS**

Every class in K – 5<sup>th</sup> grade has a 30 minute recess once a day, and PK classes have a shorter morning and afternoon recess. Yellowstone considers recess equal in importance to all other parts of the school day because there is much research showing that daily physical activity leads to significant improvement in cognitive function and physical development. Specifically:

Physical activity engages almost every part of the brain and optimizes its performance. In study after study, physical activity of the type that occurs at recess is linked to better academic performance and higher test scores.

Optimal learning occurs when children are provided with short breaks between concentrated periods of academics. Recess has been proven to effectively provide that type of break, and children return to the classroom more focused, better able to stay on task, and less fidgety.

Recess is one of the only times during our school day that is unstructured and not teacher-directed. Research has shown that these types of time provide significant increases in social and emotional development and in communication skills. Students learn to cooperate, resolve conflict, negotiate, share, solve problems, and entertain themselves.

A growing body of research shows that the stress of growing up in poverty can have long-term negative effects on children's physical health and cognitive development. Unstructured physical play has been determined to be one of the most effective ways of relieving stress in children.

Many children in poverty live in areas where there is not a safe outdoor place for play, and a higher percentage of children in poverty suffer from obesity and the health challenges that brings. Recess provides healthy exercise through physical activity that burns calories and also enhances the development of gross motor skills.

Traditionally schools have used the loss of recess as the go-to punishment for misbehavior, and/or it is often the time used for students to complete unfinished homework or class work. However, because there are so many benefits to recess, Yellowstone looks for other ways to hold students accountable for following classroom rules and completing their work. We've found isolation or time-out during lunch to be effective for misbehavior, and we also have students complete missing assignments during lunch. Students who break the rules of a recess game or do not play well with the other children are removed from the game while still being allowed to run and play. If

there are students who must lose the privilege of recess (fighting on the playground, defiance to staff, breaking a safety rule, etc), we have them walk around the perimeter of the playground rather than just sit. We clearly explain to them that losing their play time is the punishment for their misbehavior. Walking is not a punishment – they are walking because it is healthy for their bodies and their brains.

## **RECRUITING STUDENTS**

We believe that the process and materials used to recruit students have an enormous impact on the school, far beyond filling empty seats. In recruiting students, we are creating our student body and the families that will make up our community. In our first interaction with that family, we are setting the tone and expectations for all future interactions.

In recruiting for Yellowstone’s first year, we had no building and no current teachers or students. Parents had to rely on the picture of the school that we created through our written materials, through our words as we spoke about the school, and through the process we used as we interacted with them. This forced us to focus on these elements of recruiting, and we believe that helped us develop a successful strategy.

### **Key Components for Successful Recruiting**

We have found that there are key components for successfully recruiting students:

**Know your mission:** In a private school, the mission drives the recruiting. To be at our best, we have to be clear on the vision and mission for Yellowstone, know the students we wish to serve, and recruit accordingly. Yellowstone exists to serve low-income students, with a commitment to recruit students in poverty and extreme poverty. It has become clear that reaching students at the lowest income levels requires specific and strategic recruiting techniques that must be an intentional part of Yellowstone’s overall plan for recruiting. If we do not do those things, we will not reach our target students.

Also Yellowstone’s mission does not include providing special education services, and we are clear about that with prospective families.

**Have a professional, clear and organized process of recruiting and enrollment:** Our desire is for Yellowstone to be a school that is organized and professional in all areas, and we believe this must begin with the recruiting and enrollment process. This is the first interaction with school families and sets the tone and expectations for all future interactions. We believe this means using recruiting materials that are well written, appealing, and professional in appearance and an enrollment process that is clearly defined and efficient. (Note that recruiting materials can be well written and professional without being costly.) We make certain that staff members involved in recruiting dress professionally and interact with prospective school families in the same manner as they do with current Yellowstone families, even when recruiting takes place outside of the normal school day or over school holidays.

We also work hard to make prospective families feel welcomed and valued. We make certain that our prospective families are able to contact a staff member by phone or in-person, realizing that not all families have access to and/or are comfortable with handling communication on-line. This is particularly true for families at the lowest levels of income, and we keep this in mind when creating a recruiting plan as well as when dealing with applications, scheduling, and enrollment.

**Set and Meet all Timelines:** We believe that it is important to set clear and reasonable timelines within the admission process and to then hold ourselves accountable to meet these. If we tell parents that we will schedule them for testing within a week of completing an application or that we will give them an admission decision within two weeks after testing, we feel it is vital that we do that. If we ask them to report for testing at 10:00 or for a meeting at noon, it is important that we have everything needed in place and begin on time.

Likewise, we feel it is very important to enforce deadlines we give parents for turning in requested paperwork, scheduling testing, etc.

**Emphasize the aspects of the school that you want to be most important to parents:** Yellowstone began with only PK3 and PK 4 and then added a grade a year through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. When we began recruiting students, we as yet had no school building and no teachers, and we were talking to parents who had no other real options for PK and little reliable daycare. We received much advice to recruit with the main emphasis on providing high quality child care/daycare for three and four year olds. However, to be successful in the long-term, we knew that Yellowstone would need a high retention rate with parents as committed to the school as we are. Therefore, we made the decision from the beginning to always recruit for students whose families are interested in committing to a PK3-8<sup>th</sup> grade school. That may seem to be a small distinction, but it is one that we feel is vital. It lets parents know that we have a long-term commitment to Yellowstone Academy and to the Third Ward area, and it lets them know that we expect the same commitment from them.

We also want our school families to know that we will provide a high quality Christian education; therefore that is our primary emphasis in recruiting. We explicitly stress such facts as we are an accredited school with certified teachers, small class sizes, and a rigorous college-prep curriculum. While we do not require school families to be Christians, we do make certain it is clearly understood that Yellowstone is a Christian school and all students participate in daily Bible lessons and a weekly Chapel service. It is also important for prospective families to know that tuition at Yellowstone will be scaled to their income level and that their tuition payments cover access to transportation, breakfast and lunch, school supplies, etc. Without knowing this, many will assume that a private school is not a true option for their family. **However, we also know that we must resist the temptation to recruit by putting the emphasis solely on what we provide for our students.** It is more important to us that prospective families know that they will be partners with us in their child's education, and as such, they will also be required to contribute to that education in several vital ways. In recruiting, we make

certain families know that:

They must commit to getting their children to and from school or to one of our buses on time each school day, dressed in the appropriate uniform.

They must hold their children accountable for completing homework and for following the rules of the school.

They must contribute financially to the cost of their child's education, and they do this by paying tuition on a monthly basis: equal sacrifice not equal amount.

They must attend a conference with their student's teacher(s) a minimum of twice a year and more often if requested.

**Accurately present both the advantages that our school provides and the requirements we have for school families:** We recognize that Yellowstone begins building trust with families from its very first interaction, and it is important for us to always be accurate in the information we present. It can be tempting to overpromise what we can provide or to downplay our expectations of school families in order to increase enrollment. However, in the long run this is destructive to the culture of our school. We do, however, share plans that we have for growth in the future; we just make certain that we give an accurate time-line for this growth. Our goal is to have new students and their families even more pleased with their Yellowstone experience than they expected. We never want a family to encounter unmet promises.

**Uniforms are excellent tools for recruiting:** Yellowstone has deliberately chosen to invest in uniforms (plaid pieces, dress uniforms, etc.) that are easily recognized as those typically worn at private, college preparatory schools. Because Yellowstone's uniforms are very different from the more simple uniforms worn in the local public schools, our students are readily identifiable in their neighborhoods, and other families ask them about their school. Our students are proud for others to know they attend a private, college preparatory school, and they become great recruiters! The uniforms reinforce that Yellowstone is a unique school, and it is a privilege for students to attend.

**Prioritize qualified siblings of current students:** We want families that are committed to Yellowstone and to an excellent education for their children. Because Yellowstone students have a longer school day and attend school more days each year, this works best when all school age children are attending Yellowstone. Therefore, in our admission decisions, we prioritize the **qualified** siblings of current students.

### **SECURITY/SAFETY**

The goal of all security and safety measures is to not only keep our students, staff, and volunteers safe but to also help them **feel** safe. We want to eliminate any distraction that a concern for safety can bring. Our staff is diligent at all times about safety and security while approaching it in a calm and matter-of-fact manner with students and volunteers.

### **Security of the Buildings**

Yellowstone has a main school building with an attached playground, and located within the surrounding block, it has playing fields and a gym. The main school building and the gym each have an attached parking lot, and there is also a church parking lot across the street from the main school building that is used during the week by Yellowstone staff, volunteers, and school families.

There is a wrought iron 8 foot security fence around both the gym and the school building, and the fences have both walk-in and drive-in gates. When there are not children in the buildings or on school grounds, the walk-in gates of the fence are locked and padlocked shut. When the school is open, the walk-in gates are kept closed and locked from the outside but are outfitted with panic bars so they can be easily opened from the inside. Classroom doors are kept locked at all times, and when the school is not open, all office and classroom doors are also kept locked. The drive-in gates at the main school building and the gym are able to be programmed to be open during appropriate school hours and closed at all other times.

All outside doors of Yellowstone's school building and gym remain locked at all times. The main entrance of the school has a camera and a buzzer that connects to an intercom system and allows someone in the school office to both see and communicate with the person ringing the doorbell and also buzz him/her into the building. There are also cameras throughout the main school building and in the parking lot.

The first floor windows of the main school building are pinned shut with removable metal pins that meet fire code but also make it difficult to "pop" the windows open from the outside. There is a monitored fire alarm and burglar alarm in the main building and in the gym.

All staff members have a key to their classroom/office and a key card that opens the main entrance of the school building. Staff members who work hours outside of school hours also have gate openers for the drive-in gates.

### **Security Guard**

Yellowstone contracts with a security company that provides an armed guard for 12 hours each day that school is in session and for evening and weekend events as deemed appropriate. As well as being armed, we also ask that any guard assigned to us be authorized to use handcuffs to restrain a person, if necessary.

Yellowstone contracts with a security company instead of hiring off-duty police officers for several reasons. First, if we used off-duty police officers, we would be responsible for the hiring and scheduling of these officers and for finding replacements when an officer called in sick. Also police officers are typically available only one or two days a week - meaning we could have up to 3-5 different officers a week. A security company makes certain there is always an officer there and gives us the same two officers week after week. They can also provide extra officers for special events like open house or sporting events, and they will send an officer to answer alarm calls at night.

Because we have a guard 12-plus hours each day, if one guard only was assigned to us, he/she would have to be paid a minimum of 20 hours a week in overtime. Instead, the company assigns two guards to Yellowstone who rotate days, allowing us to have consistency without paying overtime. These guards quickly learn the routine of the school and come to know the staff, students, and school families, making them very effective.

Yellowstone has chosen to use an armed rather than unarmed guard for several reasons. The primary reason is that we want to do everything possible to keep our students, staff, and volunteers safe, and we feel that an unarmed guard cannot provide the level of security they deserve. As well as being immediately available to respond to any situation that arises, we make certain that our guard is highly visible to anyone who comes to the school, and we believe that his/her obvious presence effectively serves as a deterrent to crime.

Also it is unfortunately not unusual for unarmed guards at places like shopping malls, sporting events, concerts, etc. to be treated with disrespect by older students or other uncooperative individuals. One of our goals is to instill in our students a respect for authority, and we do not want them to witness an unarmed guard at school being treated with that same level of disrespect.

We have been told many times by our school families, volunteers, and staff members that they appreciate having this guard. We have never found this to be frightening to our students. In fact, when our students list things that they appreciate about Yellowstone, having a guard who keeps them safe is often named.

For the majority of the time, the security guard is stationed in the parking lot of the main school building. By being stationed there, the guard can not only monitor who enters the main building, but can also see all three parking lots, the playing fields, and the playground. He/she can also monitor classes as they cross the street to the gym for PE and can see anyone approaching the front doors of the gym.

The guard is responsible for opening the building (including gates) in the morning and securing it in the evening and also assists with arrival and dismissal as assigned by school administration.

### **Radios**

All teachers, school administrators, and the security guard have a hand-held radio for effective communication and safety. Yellowstone's school buses are also each equipped with a radio. Teachers keep their radios tuned to Channel 1. If there is an emergency during the day or if the office needs to communicate with the teachers, announcements are made over Channel 1. Channel 1 is used by everyone at dismissal time.

If a teacher needs to communicate with an administrator about a discipline issue or a safety concern, the teacher turns his or her radio to Channel 2 to report the situation.

Administrators and the security guard keep their radios on Channel 2 throughout the day except for dismissal time.

It is essential that all communication on the radio is kept at a professional level.

### **Safety Drills**

Yellowstone conducts fire, severe weather, and other emergency drills as required by state and local codes and regulations. These drills are designed to assure the orderly movement of students and personnel to the safest areas available. Yellowstone has documented procedures for these, and employees are responsible for knowing these procedures and implementing them quickly, calmly, and with professionalism.

### **SPORTS PROGRAM**

A strong sports program is an asset to any school. All Yellowstone students have P.E. class, and there is a full sports program for middle school.

Sports teach perseverance and team work, require discipline, consistent practice, and hard work and demand obedience to the coach. Participation in sports also reinforces healthy habits of physical activity and exercise, and parents and guardians often volunteer to help and/or attend games, promoting family involvement.

Yellowstone strictly adheres to “No pass no play”. This provides students further incentive to do well in classes, reinforces that participation in sports is a privilege not a right, and reminds us all that the primary goal of school is an academic education.

By its very nature, a sports program has opportunities for recognition and awards: Teams compete in leagues and tournaments with winners declared, and there are trophies, medals, and ribbons along with designations such as “Most Valuable Player” or “High Scorer.” Yellowstone proudly recognizes the achievements of its athletes, but makes certain to give trophies, medals, and ribbons for academic achievement that are equal to those given for athletic achievement.

### **TRANSPORTATION**

Yellowstone operates five buses that each follows a different route, providing daily transportation to and from school. The routes are adjusted each year to provide transportation for as many of our students as is possible. The buses also provide transportation for field trips and games/events associated with our middle school sports program. We own our buses, hire our own bus drivers, and are responsible for maintaining the buses and following all laws and regulations regarding bus drivers and transportation of children. We have found this to be more cost effective and dependable than contracting with a transportation company.

For daily transportation, we have the driver and two adult chaperones on each bus. Each bus is equipped with a notebook that contains a list of all student riders by bus stop and a

copy of the enrollment papers that provide emergency contact information, consent for transportation, and consent for medical treatment in case of an emergency for each student rider. There is also a list of all adults authorized to pick up each student.

One chaperone is responsible for checking students on and off the bus and making certain that only authorized adults pick up the students. While this is happening, the other chaperone is maintaining order on the bus. While the bus is moving, one chaperone sits towards the front and one towards the back with their eyes on the students at all times, enforcing the safety rules and conduct requirements on the bus.

In the mornings, one bus chaperone checks off on a list each student who boards the bus while the other bus chaperone maintains discipline on the bus.

Coordinating the daily transportation home is one of our largest and most time-consuming tasks and also one of the areas of greatest exposure for liability. The bus that a student rides on may change depending upon the child care arrangements for that day, and the parent may not notify us of the change until the end of the day. The assigned staff member must make certain that not only does each student board the right bus, but that whichever bus he or she rides has a copy of their paperwork. We have found that this staff member must be free the last hour and half of the school day to focus on this.

Before the bus can leave the school, the chaperone responsible for checking students onto the bus is also responsible for making certain that the count of students on the bus matches the check-in sheet. Sheets used to check students on and off the bus are kept for a period of three years.

Drivers are required to search the bus at the end of each trip, looking on and under each seat to find any children who remain on the bus. Yellowstone has equipped each of its buses with a child safety alarm. The alarm sounds when the engine is turned off and requires the driver to walk to the back of the bus to deactivate it. This reminds the drivers to search the bus.

We also equip each of our buses with a two way radio and with a speed governor.

## **UNIFORMS**

All Yellowstone students wear uniforms, including several choices of a daily uniform and a dress uniform that is worn on Chapel days and other special occasions. We have chosen to have uniforms for several reasons:

Over the last ten years, more and more research has shown that uniforms have a positive effect in schools, especially those with low-income students. Incidents of school violence, fighting, and vandalism are down in schools with uniforms, gang members are less readily identifiable, and students are easily identified on field trips. Because all students are wearing the same clothing, peer pressure is decreased, and there is evidence that concentration on academics increases and bullying decreases.

Yellowstone has deliberately chosen to invest in uniforms (plaid pieces, dress uniforms, etc.) that are easily recognized as those typically worn at private, college preparatory schools. Yellowstone operates by donations, and the cost per student is closer to that of a private school rather than public, something that must be justified to donors. When potential donors enter Yellowstone, seeing the students in these uniforms reinforces the message that we are providing the same high quality education as is given at other private schools in the city. On our website and in newsletters and brochures, pictures of the students in these uniforms serve the same purpose. The uniforms have proven to make a powerful statement and are one of our best fundraising tools.

The uniforms have also proven to be an excellent tool for recruiting students and are a source of pride for our school families. Because Yellowstone's uniforms are very different from the more simple uniforms worn in the local public schools, our students are readily identifiable in their neighborhoods, and they are proud for others to know they attend a private, college preparatory school. The uniforms reinforce that Yellowstone is a unique school, and it is a privilege for students to attend.

On a practical basis, without uniforms, students have to be monitored daily for clothing that is inappropriate for school. That process is distracting and time consuming, and it unnecessarily creates an opportunity for conflict. It also results in loss of class time if a student has to be removed until a parent can be located and can bring a change of clothes. (However, please note that for uniforms to be effective, the uniform policy must be daily monitored and enforced. Yellowstone keeps extra uniform pieces on hand for use as needed, and there are consequences within the discipline system for not being in uniform.)

Yellowstone purchases all uniforms in bulk and distributes them to the students the week before school starts each year. At the end of the year, the uniforms are collected, and many, many volunteers wash and mend them. The ones that are no longer fit to be used are discarded; ones that are new or gently used are distributed to students, and ones that are clearly used but still in good condition are kept for use when a student arrives at school out of uniform or needs a change of clothing during the school day. Uniform collection and distribution could not happen without the volunteers.

Note: The process we use for uniforms worked well when we were smaller. The large number of uniforms we now need takes up quite a lot of space, and coordinating the collection, distribution, and cleaning/mending/sorting is a time consuming job. We are currently looking for ways to make this process more manageable.

### **VOCABULARY/30 MILLION WORD GAP**

A child's vocabulary upon entering school is one of the prime predictors of school success, and vocabulary differences between children of different socio-economic levels

are profound.

A landmark longitudinal study by Hart and Risley found staggering differences among socio-economic groups in both quantity and quality of children's early language experience and acquisition. By age 4, an average child in a professional family has accumulated experience with almost 45 million words, an average child in a working-class (low-income) family 26 million words, and an average child in a welfare family (poverty) 13 million words. This calculates to a difference of almost 300 words spoken per hour between professional parents and parents in poverty. Hart and Risley also discovered that the language of low-income and poverty families included fewer nouns, modifiers, verb tenses, and clauses.

As a result, at 36 months, the child exhibiting the smallest vocabulary of the children from professional families had a significantly larger vocabulary than any of the children living in poverty. In fact, the 36 month old children from professional families actually had a larger recorded vocabulary than the parents in poverty. Most sobering of all, the low-income children and children living in poverty not only had smaller vocabularies but were also adding new words more slowly. The rates of vocabulary growth indicated that this language gap was still getting larger every month.

The authors calculated that approximately 41 hours per week of language intervention and of social interaction would be needed to correct this gap. However, research by the Center of Educational Testing Services (ETS) has found that the traditional education currently being received by low-income students in kindergarten – 12<sup>th</sup> grade is having little to no effect on this language gap.

It is obvious that any school wishing to successfully educate low-income children must have a strong emphasis on vocabulary building. Yellowstone approaches this in a variety of ways:

First and foremost, we have full-day prekindergarten classes for three and four year olds with instruction that is academic in nature and developmentally appropriate.

Our teachers are aware of this language gap and its consequences, and all teachers directly teach vocabulary at every grade level using a variety of instructional strategies.

Items in the PK and K classrooms are labeled. (Example: table, chair, door, shelf, light switch, cubbies, sink, etc.) This is done to encourage students to make a connection between the spoken and written word and to also encourage vocabulary development.

Every classroom has a library, and students are encouraged to read on their own as often as possible. In addition, each teacher PK-5<sup>th</sup> reads aloud to their students daily. Reading has many benefits, not the least of which is increasing vocabulary.

In PK and Kindergarten classes, volunteers read to students one-on-one. The average child from a professional family has accumulated 1,500 hours of being read to one-on-one before the age of 5 compared to 25 hours accumulated by low-income children.

We require all of our students to speak in complete sentences, especially when giving answers and engaging in discussions in class. We also require them to use nouns when they speak. Example: If a student asks, “May I have that?”, the teacher will lead him to rephrase the question: “May I have that pencil?”

One of the most effective ways to increase children’s vocabulary is to engage them in conversations with individuals who have a larger vocabulary. They need to talk! Our teachers emphasize this in the classroom, and we use volunteers to supplement. We have volunteers who visit with children at lunch or play with them at recess and carry on conversations. In our PK and K classes, we use volunteers in the learning centers to encourage conversation.

### **Affirming Words**

One of the surprising results of the Hart and Risley study was the difference in the types of parent-child interactions found in each socio-economic group. The researchers determined how much of parents’ conversation with their children was considered “encouragements” (Ex: “that’s right; “good job”, or “I love you”) or “discouragements” (Ex: “that’s bad”, “stop it”, “shut up”). The authors found that during the first four years of life, all children heard both, but the amounts were different depending upon the socio-economic level of the family. Children of professional parents experienced the most encouragements and fewest discouragements at a ratio of 6:1. Children from low-income families also heard more encouragements than discouragements, but the ratio was 2:1. However, children living in poverty received **more discouragements** than encouragements at a ratio of 2:1. When extrapolated out, this means that by the age of four, children living in poverty have received 125,000 more discouragements than encouragements.

This also means that language for these children is used as a way to criticize or to punish twice as often as it is used to give positive reinforcement or praise. This has long-reaching consequences in the classroom. John Tulenko, a PBS correspondent who has won multiple awards from the Education Writer’s Association, cites research showing that children who receive more discouragements than encouragements are less curious, less exploratory, and have a more negative view of their capability to learn and succeed.

However, the good news is that encouraging teachers make a dramatic difference. A 2005 study by Fredrickson and Losada shows that teachers who give their students more positives than negatives (a minimum of 3:1 ratio) optimize learning and growth. The researchers found that students who are affirmed, challenged, and encouraged work harder, are engaged in lessons, and are more confident in their ability to learn.

In a groundbreaking experiment in 2006, Stanford professors Cohen and Garcia tested an

intervention designed to motivate underperforming seventh graders. All students received back an essay they had written with suggested corrections from their teacher and an opportunity to revise it for a higher grade. Half of the students also received a one sentence note on their paper from their teacher saying, “I’m giving you these comments because I have very high expectations, and I know that you can reach them”. The results were startling: 72% of the students receiving that note chose to revise their papers as compared to 17% of the students who did not. A parallel study required all students to revise their essays, and the students who received the “high expectations” note received higher grades on their revised essays than those who did not.

At Yellowstone, we capitalize on the positive difference made by affirming words in a variety of ways:

Rules are stated in a positive manner. Example: Rather than “Do not run in the building” we say, “You must walk at all times when you are inside the building”.

Classrooms have clear rules and consistent discipline but with a greater emphasis on recognizing correct behavior than on punishing wrong behavior.

Positive self-talk is directly taught.

PK-5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers are required to send home a note of praise with each child a minimum of once a month and middle school teachers once each grading period.

Good conduct, positive character traits, and academic achievement are consistently celebrated, and student work is proudly displayed.

Once a grading period, administrators do an observation in each classroom for the purpose of counting the number of positive vs. negative comments that are made by teachers and aides. Creating a positive environment is a requirement!

### **VOLUNTEERS/SHEPHERDS**

Yellowstone was designed to incorporate a virtual army of volunteers, and they are one of our greatest strengths. Volunteers come as individuals or as part of groups such as Bible Studies, corporations, scouting, church groups, or clubs and service organizations. They work in classrooms, supervise field trips, coach sports teams, distribute uniforms and school supplies, tutor, lead chapel, and participate in work days for the upkeep and beautification of the campus. Volunteers also serve on our prayer team, lead parent Bible Studies, and provide many hours of work for our fund-raising events.

We believe that the key to the success of our volunteer program is that it is structured and organized. We have a volunteer handbook and an application and orientation process. Background checks are conducted, references are checked, and guidelines and parameters are enforced. Volunteers are scheduled and assigned to specific duties, sign in and out of the office, and are accountable for following all policies.

It is time-consuming to recruit, train, schedule, and have assignments for the volunteers, but it is time well spent. Volunteers provide thousands of hours a year of much needed services. Just as our volunteers are held accountable for following policies and completing assignments, our staff is held accountable for welcoming volunteers and having assignments prepared and organized for them.

Beyond the actual services they provide, volunteers bring support, laughter, and fun! Our students cannot wait for them to arrive, and volunteers return year after year, many planning their weekly schedules and even their vacations around their time at Yellowstone. Our students express gratitude to our volunteers for their time and attention, and they will often verbalize that the volunteers make them feel special. Many of the favorite Yellowstone memories of our graduates revolve around time spent with volunteers and lessons they learned from them. Genuine relationships of love and respect have developed between generations and across racial, socio-economic, and cultural lines, and all involved benefit. Because Houston neighborhoods are extremely segregated economically, many of these are relationships that most likely would never have formed if not for Yellowstone.

Another very valuable benefit of our volunteer program is that these hundreds of volunteers are our ambassadors in Houston, sharing their Yellowstone experiences with their families, friends, and co-workers, recruiting not only new volunteers but also donors.

### **Shepherd a Child**

One of our most powerful and influential programs is Shepherd-A-Child. This allows individuals or families to serve as mentors and role models to a specific child at the school.

Author Ruby Payne suggests that when individuals are able to break the cycle of generational poverty, two factors are almost always present:

- 1) They are able to develop a vision for what they want outside their current situation
- 2) Someone emerges in their life, a sponsor or mentor, who guides and encourages them along the way

The Shepherd-A-Child Program is designed around these two factors. Students at Yellowstone Academy receive a high quality education, but that is not enough. They must also learn the habits and practices of a responsible citizen. They must learn about character, perseverance, and self-reliance. These habits and practices are best learned through observation of people who demonstrate them in their lives. These patterns of behavior are *caught* not just *taught*... That's where our Shepherds come in.

It is our goal that each child at Yellowstone Academy be matched with a Christian individual or family who will connect with that child in a substantive fashion and play a role, alongside his parents or guardians, in his educational and social enrichment.

Shepherds serve as mentors, encouragers, role models, and friends and become a part of the village that is needed to raise a child.

Shepherds agree to meet with their child a minimum of once a month. The visit may entail something as simple as going out for a meal or to the park or may include a trip to a museum or sporting event or a visit to one's place of business. The goal is to show that child a larger slice of the world he lives in and to introduce him to new experiences. This will best be accomplished by establishing a relationship of caring and trust so that the child will benefit from the Shepherd's interest in his life.

Individuals who are interested in becoming a shepherd are asked to complete a very thorough application, including driving checks and the appropriate forms for personal background and criminal history checks. Applicants are required to submit two names of non-family members and the name and contact information of a pastor of their church.

All shepherd-a-child applicants must go through a one-on-one interview process with the Volunteer Coordinator and also attend an orientation/training session. Yellowstone provides each shepherd with a copy of the shepherding handbook of the rules, regulations, guidelines, and expectations. They are also given a list of their responsibilities and suggested activities. The shepherd will be asked to complete an interest sheet, which will allow the Volunteer Coordinator to appropriately match the adult with a child with similar interests. Parents are involved in the process and have final approval on the assigned Shepherd.

Shepherds are asked to make a minimum of a one year commitment, and many remain with their student for multiple years. The relationships that develop are powerful and deeply meaningful to both the volunteer and the student and his family.

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