



LEFT: Fifth-grade teacher Rebeka Thompson leads a guided reading group.

MIDDLE: Sixth-graders Tarryn Durkin and Ernest Simmons work together on a class project.

RIGHT: Thea Bowman Prep has well-equipped science and computer labs.

'Be Somebody' Thea Bowman Prep School

BY HEATHER SCHOELL, PHOTOS COURTESY OF THEA BOWMAN PREP

No matter your position on charter schools, the fact is that the education of our children is of utmost importance, and our choices for successful middle schools are limited. Thea Bowman Preparatory Academy PCS has stepped up to make this intimate school an option for families with high standards and expectations who wish to remain in public school.

The Vision of Thea Bowman

Mark Cosenza, principal of Thea Bowman Prep, models the vision of his school on the vision of Thea Bowman. She was a sister of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration from Yazoo City, Mississippi, who came to DC to pursue higher education. Bowman attended Catholic University, earning a master's and doctorate in English. Her vision included bringing people together – people of all types and races and backgrounds – to communicate and learn from one another, and to never stop learning. It is tragic that she died of breast cancer in 1990 at merely 52 years of age, but her qualities and earnest expectations for breaking down racial barriers and coming together in learning live on.

"If anyone asks you who you are, tell them, I'm somebody!" is what Thea Bowman said, and "Be Somebody" is the school's motto. Each morning, students recite an affirmation, which is just one of the things that helps create an identity and belonging to something bigger than they are – the Thea Bowman Prep family.

The school, which just opened this year, is very small – only 44 total students in fifth and sixth grades. "We're trying to increase enrollment to 120 students in fifth, sixth and seventh grades next year," said Cosenza. "We like that it is a physically small school. Teachers like it because of the proximity to each other for collaborative teaching." They intend to cap enrollment at 200 students.

The school is located at 330 21st St. NE in what was the vacated space of St. Benedict the Moor Catholic School, which was closed. Cosenza laughed that the parishioners of the church who are there during the week asked when the school was going to open, to which he replied, "We've been open for three months!"

The former school was apparently not so quiet. Said Cosenza, "Parents are struck by how quiet the halls are." That is not to say that none of the children act up (they are in middle school, after all), but it is not cause for commotion. "Consistence and structure, that's what I stress to the teachers," said Cosenza.

A Familial Approach

One of the attributes of Thea Bowman Prep that Cosenza is so proud of is how it has become a family. "The teachers, when our initial enrollment was so low, had to take a pay cut – about half of what they were hired at ... I expected them to leave, but they didn't. They stayed, and they are committed to this school," he said. "When we had parent-teacher conferences, it wasn't just a day – it was a week. It was, 'Oh, is Saturday better for you? Okay, I'll come in on Saturday.' That's on their own time – it's not something you usually see." Some of the teachers live on the Hill and walk to work. "They get together for collaborative planning, have dinner together at one of their houses," he said.

The family-style approach could not be better illustrated than at mealtime. By design, there is

no teachers' lounge. Students, teachers and staff eat together at round-top tables, with table linens and washable utensils. Eating together is an additional opportunity to learn – table manners and polite conversation are part of a well-rounded and educated child. Additionally, it gives the teachers an opportunity to get to know the people they are teaching in a relaxed setting. "The kids know that eating time is not a loud, crazy time." One thing that surprised Cosenza – or "Mr. C." as he is called by students – is that the kids actually eat their lunch. "The food service is phenomenal," he said. "We actually have kids asking for seconds on broccoli!"

The family connectivity is important to Cosenza, as well as to parents. As a charter school, this is a school where parents have made a choice to send their children. "Parents have sent their kids here for different reasons. Some kids have potential but need structure and a challenge. Some kids need to be placed around positive role models," explained Cosenza. "We are representing 15 ZIP codes. Some take two buses from Southeast to get here. ... It is testimony to our level of care. Parents here are very much engaged."

A Day in School

Breakfast begins at 7:15 a.m., and some children arrive before 7. The morning assembly begins at 7:50 a.m., followed by eight class periods. The school day ends at 4 p.m. unless children stay for Discovery Classes, held three times per week, ending at 5:30 p.m. Additionally, there is homework help from 5:30 until 6:30 p.m. The old adage about idle hands is what drives this schedule. They have art twice per week – they just recreated Van Gogh's "Starry Night" – and P.E. thrice weekly. Uniforms are mandatory – it's part of belonging to something bigger than oneself, and there is pride in putting on



a uniform.

Cosenza teaches character education. "It's a literature-based curriculum. Right now we're reading 'The Lady in the Box,' a book about homelessness. We have discussions on the book and do an activity," Cosenza explained. Throughout the year the class will explore virtues of character, such as charity and caring as in "The Lady in the Box," humility, wisdom, patience and self-control. "I want our graduates to stand out, to be recognized as Thea Bowman students," said Cosenza. "I want them to be poised, well-rounded individuals."

Discovery Classes are arts, sports, creative writing, crafts – anything that engages students and affords them an opportunity to discover talents and develop interests while reinforcing the vision of staying connected and learning new things. Discovery Classes are an optional outlet for students, and their participation is encouraged, though not mandatory.

Neighborhood Connections

Volunteers are welcome at Thea Bowman Prep. There are tutoring opportunities, and crafty neighbors are encouraged to share their talents as a Discovery Class. "Like woodworking," said Cosenza, which a volunteer is teaching. "The kids are really receptive to that."

Cosenza noted, "We have a great location, right off of C Street, Metro-accessible. We have some open house dates coming up, and I hope that if there are parents interested in a middle school with a high-level of personal attention, they will come." Open houses will be held March 30 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and April 25 and May 30 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., or call for an appointment.

Thea Bowman Preparatory Academy PCS, 330 21st St. NE, Washington, DC 20002. www.theabowmanprep.org or 202-543-THEA(8432).

Heather Schoell is a regular contributor to the Hill Rag. She can be reached at hschoell@verizon.net. ★



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