



Elementary school students have
embraced lessons in character and
leadership as part of a pilot CAP program
at Creighton School in Philadelphia.

In the inner city of Philadelphia, where gangs are commonplace and student discipline in school is a major challenge, one school is beating the odds with the help of Civil Air Patrol.

By Lenore Vickrey

Creighton School has partnered with the Pennsylvania Wing to pilot a kindergarten through fifth grade pre-cadet school program. The brainchild of principal Capt. Katherine McKeller-Carter, the program started three years ago with 15 cadets. It now includes students in grades 6, 7 and 8, and this year was extended to the younger students in K-5.

Pilot CAP Program

Pennsylvania Wing's Inner City Partnership Blazes Trail for Future



Capt. Reginald McDonald, the Pennsylvania Wing's School Enrichment Program coordinator, explains the significance of his uniform decorations to Imeera Barton. McDonald said CAP gives students the courage to dream.

The program has become so popular that parents are moving into the area so their children can attend Creighton and participate, said Capt. Katherine Smith, deputy squadron commander and a teacher in the program.

"We teach character, leadership and responsibility. The students love the program. We hold them to very high standards to do what they've not been challenged to do in the past," she said.

A visitor to the CAP classrooms would easily notice there is something different about these Creighton students. When the principal is about to enter a classroom, the children in the younger grades are brought to attention by their student leader with a sharp "Captain on deck!" The pre-cadets stand up straight and tall in their CAP attire as they salute the principal (their "captain").

In class, K-5 students learn the four tenets of the CAP program: character, leadership, aerospace and fitness, which are fully integrated into the curriculum. They wear either a CAP pre-cadet crew shirt or a physical training sweat suit. While they do not progress in rank, as do regular cadets, they are nonetheless prepared to enter sixth grade with a strong background knowledge of CAP

customs because they are mentored by their CAP counterparts at the middle school level.

Older students serve as mentors

With the younger students, aerospace education starts early. One group might be working on building a model of the Hubble satellite, while another works on a model airport or paper airplanes. "I'll ask them to draw me an airplane, to use their imagination," said Capt. Reginald McDonald, Pennsylvania's middle school initiative coordinator and adviser to the Pennsylvania Wing's CAP School Program. "I tell them, 'Dare to dream, because if you stop dreaming, progress stops.'"

In grades 6, 7 and 8, the older students start their day with a morning inspection, and then lead the school and the local community in the raising of the flag and Pledge of Allegiance. They also take responsibility for teaching and working closely with the pre-cadets, teaching them cadences, and keeping them in line as they go to the school lunchroom and playground.

"Each of the younger pre-cadets has an Air Force or Army cadence they sing," said McDonald. "I taught it to the older cadets, and they taught the kids. I've told them what they do in uniform is going to affect what that little child sees and does."

The discipline and responsibility built into the program is working. CAP students are less likely to get into fights, they are more respectful of each other and more responsible at home.

"When they see their friends getting ready to get into a fight or conflict, they will stop them," he said, "and they are more willing to tell us what's going on. There is a general air about them; they take constructive criticism, and they are able to be corrected." It wasn't that way just three years ago.

When the CAP program started, principal McKeller-Carter remembers the first students who participated took ribbing from their classmates. "The other kids would tease those in CAP about their uniforms," she said. Not any more. The next year, more cadets were



Seventh-grader Gloria Santiago has gained the strength through CAP to rise above peer pressure.

brought into the program until it was taken into sixth, seventh and eighth grades. Then last year, the K-5 students joined in to make it a CAP Academy.

"Now everyone wants to be a part of it," she said. "It's that elitism they feel. The teachers have all joined CAP as senior members and even parents have joined."

"The students have to keep their grades up and their attendance up. We keep telling them they are the only pilot program like this in the nation. Failure is not an option," she said.

The "orderly, organized climate" of Creighton has caught the eye of higher-ups in the school system. Wendy Shapiro, regional superintendent for the North Region of Philadelphia schools, said the program's success has convinced officials to have CAP programs in at least two other schools. "And we are looking to move it into one of our high schools," she said.

The educators are "as excited as the cadets and junior cadets," said Pennsylvania Wing Commander Col. Al Applebaum. "The K-5 pilot program will allow CAP to reach more young people and engage them in positive, patriotic programs that will provide enrichment. Character development, leadership training and aviation: This combination cannot be beaten."

Parents, students sing program's praises

Parents like the changes they are seeing in their children who are involved. Brenda Tejire's children, ages 7 and 11, "are more responsible, they're energetic about projects, and it keeps them very interested," she said. "They get home, their homework gets



Students gather in an orderly manner in front of the school to participate in a morning program. CAP has instilled in the children a sense of self-control that has improved Creighton's educational environment.

done. I can't even explain it."

Nubia Santiago's daughter, Gloria, is a seventh grader who was shy and insecure before becoming part of the CAP program. Now she's developing leadership skills that have helped her in many ways.

"I've learned disci-

pline. I've flown in a plane. I've had a lot of opportunities you wouldn't normally have if you weren't in CAP," said Gloria. "If you were in a regular class, it would be crazy and hectic, but now everyone's on point and it's neat and everyone is cooperating together. Everyone knows what they're supposed to do and they do it."

Gloria, 12, has some older friends who are gang members, but she encourages them to leave that lifestyle. "I tell them: 'CAP will help you in the future; with gangs you will end up in jail. A CAP scholarship will get you through college. Life will be better. Gangs may seem cooler, but you're wasting your life.'

If principal McKeller-Carter had her way, her entire school of 900 students would be involved in CAP.

"Our kids are learning things they've never learned before. I wish you could see their faces when they come back from their orientation flights. That's something I could have never offered them," she said. She's also taken students camping at Fort Indiantown Gap, and most have never been camping before.

On days off, instead of taking a vacation, students want to do CAP activities and physical training at the nearby naval base. "You can't pay for that kind of responsibility from a child," she said. ▲



Creighton School's partnership with Civil Air Patrol has changed the lives of students from kindergarten through eighth grade.