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## A diverse school blossoms in Hazelwood



Senior kindergartners Michael Smith and Faven Neis concentrate on their worksheets during class at Blossom Wood Day School on Wednesday.

Tucked away on rolling 12 acre-campus in Hazelwood is a virtually unknown oasis of learning – unknown to the surrounding neighborhood, but familiar to bright-eyed children from middle-class, professional, two-parent families of African-American descent from all across the St. Louis metropolitan area.

Blossom Wood Day Schools is a culturally diverse, Christian school whose student population hails from 12 different local ZIP codes.

“Our children test one or two grades above the age level,” said proud parent Adde Sodipo. “When kids transfer to Blossom Wood from public school, they have to be sent down a grade in order to keep up.”

(Blossom Wood students take the same standardized test given in public schools once they reach the second grade. However, the school does not discuss test scores, because they want the Blossom Woods experience to be about more than just grades.)

Blossom Wood is the only private school in North County that is a member of the Independent Schools of St. Louis and the accrediting organization Independent Schools Association of the Central States. Like other independent schools, such as Crossroads School, New City School and Mary Institute-St. Louis Country Day, Blossom Wood offers an accelerated, advanced curriculum.

Tuition ranges from \$3,800 to \$4,000 per year. While the cost is not in expensive, it is far below other independent private schools in the area.

Blossom Wood is also unique, in that it is the only independent school in the area founded by an African American.

The school was founded in 1998, by Mikia Pollard, Pollard, a Virginia native, was an early childhood specialist for the St. Louis Community college system when she quit her job to become a mother. Since she intended to home-school her children, she started a small daycare center to gain experience.

The parents of her original 11 students encouraged Pollard to expand. They appreciated the individual attention their children received in Pollard's Florissant condo.

Pollard began borrowing space from a local church in Spanish Lake and enrollment grew to 36 children, ranging from preschool to first grade. The expansion became planned growth, with Pollard adding an additional grade each year.

That expansion led Blossom Wood to recently take over classrooms left vacant by St. Bartholomew Catholic Church in order to house nearly 80 students ranging from 3-year-old preschoolers to 10- and 11-year-old fifth graders.

"We strive to keep the school affordable by holding annual fundraiser and soliciting charitable donations," said Pollard.

The school has grown mostly through word of mouth. "We have lots of siblings and cousins. That allows us to serve families impact generations," Pollard said.

The faculty at Blossom Wood has grown as well and constitutes a virtual cornucopia of cultures. The diverse staff comes from far away as Russia, India and Panama.

Leondry Milton, the first grade teacher, participated in Blossom Wood's summer program. He said the experience gave the children the chance to speak publicly. "That experience, at such an early age, gives kids lots of confidence that a kid in the public schools system doesn't get. It helps them lose their shyness and promotes frank, open discussions."

Character is developed early on. Students are inspired to get involved in the community through their annual cookie bake. They brown bag their lunch for a week, so the kitchen can be used to bake 3,000 to 4,000 cookies that are distributed to homeless shelters by the children.

"It's fun to help people," said Nell, a fifth-grade student who took on the role of host during a tour of the school.

As the 4-year-old Junior Kindergartners recited numbers and colors in Spanish, the 4<sup>th</sup> grade class made its way to the science lab. When asked what they were learning, Ivory, a young male student, raised his hand excitedly.

“We’re learning about parts of the flower.” Another student chimed in, “Tell him about the pistil and the petal, Ivory.”

Blossom Wood Day School is true to its name. It really is a place where students blossom.