



# Just Imagine....

by Ellie Jones

*“They’re all in their places  
With bright, shiny faces...”*



Actually, they’re all lined up in the lobby. They are very quiet. They have to be. They’re at level 0. They’re dressed in crisp khaki pants and electric blue polo shirts. They are different sizes, different shapes, different ages and different colors. And they are very orderly as their lines move forward like well-trained soldiers marching cadence.

Can these truly be grade school children...in a *public* school...in the *city of St. Louis*? Where is the pushing and shoving? Where is the shouting and loud laughter? Where is the frazzled adult trying to create order out of a sure chaos? Not here. Not at this school. Not here where the columns of the school are painted like trees - where the lobby itself resembles a forest with the promise of a canopy of leaves covering the ceiling, where a bench in the sunflower garden beckons you to sit for a spell. Not at the Imagine Academy of Environmental Science and Math where students are taught that different levels of quiet are appropriate for different situations, where every student dresses in the school uniform, where the PBS system rules with an iron fist...or rather, a hearty pat on the back.

What, you ask, is the PBS system? According to Dr. Angele Burns, principal of this amazing school, it is the Positive Behavior Support system where students are encouraged to participate in, and rewarded for, good behavior.

PBS is evident everywhere in the school. It is evident on the various leaf learning trees that are sprouting leaves of good behavior all over the hallways as kids perform various acts to receive the honor of a leaf with their name placed on the tree. It is also evident in the “Blast Off Bucks” program where kids earn “Blast Off Bucks” for good behavior which, in turn, can be used to purchase pennants, T-shirts, mouse pads, and a variety of other treasures and trinkets from the school store. It is all about recognition for good behavior.

Part of the PBS initiative is setting norms for the school. “We have expectations for everything we do,” says Dr. Burns. “What the conversation level should be in the public areas - the shared common areas of the school - the hallways, and the fact that we should

have lines. It is not that we are so much into a military style of behavior but more a sense of organization.” With over 1,300 students in the school at any given time, this organization is evident everywhere. “We have over 130 employees—it is almost like a little city, and we are all on the same page.”

The Imagine Academy is located at 1008 South Spring Avenue in a building that was once Colonial Bakery. After the bakery closed, the building sat for years, derelict, neglected and forgotten. Imagine Schools invested \$23,000,000 into the facility and, in 2008, spit-shined it into a state-of-the-art, high-tech, cleverly-artistic facility bringing the best of the best to kids who, in many cases, have the worst of the worst.

“We are a free, public charter school,” says Dr. Burns, “not a magnet school, meaning that we are an option. We are another alternative to the traditional public school system which, in the city of St. Louis, is the St. Louis public schools.” Imagine Academy is also its own district. Parents can choose to send their children to any charter school they wish, with the only criteria being that they must live in the city of St. Louis.

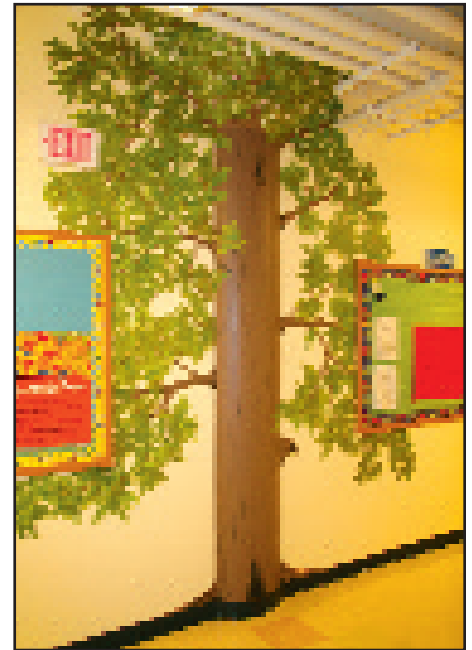
In the United States, there are 72 public charter schools in 12 states and the District of Columbia, serving 40,000 students. The mission of all of the Imagine Schools is to help parents and guardians

educate their children by creating learning communities of achievement and hope. There is no tuition. In Missouri, there are eight Imagine Academies, six of which are in St. Louis. In addition to the Imagine Academy of Environmental Science and Math, there is the IA of Academic Success, the IA of Careers Elementary, the IA of Careers Middle, the IA of Cultural Arts and the IA College Prep High School. The remaining two Missouri academies are the Imagine Renaissance Academies of Environmental Science and Math, both located in Kansas City.

“There is a lot of competition among charter schools,” notes Dr. Burns, “so we have a lot of ‘charter school hopping.’ Several have opened over the past couple years, and many times parents will move their children from school to school, believing that one might be better or have more to offer than the next. Many come back.

“We are really trying to market ourselves with the environmental science and math initiatives,” notes Burns, who hopes to create a unique niche where parents will want their children to come and stay. But with charter school facilities including a language emergence school, a cultural art school and gender based school, there is a lot of competition.

“We get a lot of the children back but we do lose some, and it’s frustrating,” says





Burns. "We have about a 95% return rate, but when you have over 1,300 students, and 5% don't come back, that is still a large number."

"We are in a much better condition than the St. Louis public schools," notes Tad Hartman, Federal Programs Coordinator. "I taught at St. Louis Public Schools for 12 years and the last year I taught, I started with 25 students and by the end of the year, I still had around 25, but only seven 7 of them were with me at the very beginning. The others had come and gone ... and here, we have about a 5% flux."

Hartman is responsible for making sure federal funds for the school are managed properly. "A lot of students are living in poverty," points out Burns, "and the only up side to this is that we qualify for a lot of additional federal funds."

We are looking for spending that will improve academic achievement and character development, but there are a lot of compliance issues that have to be handled properly, and Tad takes care of that," Burns points out.

Hartman, who has been with the school from day one, wears many hats. In addition to his duties with federal compliance, he assists with teaching, is the school photographer, the web guy, and the one who pushes for the latest and greatest equipment, especially in the science labs. With his strong history in science, he makes sure that the labs are up to date with state-of-the-art equipment and supplies, including lab coats for all the students.

Oh, and he is also the chief tree and leaf painter.

Say what??? When the Imagine Academy of Environmental Science and Math (or IAESM, as coined by Hartman) first opened its doors, it was obvious that the space had been a bakery, or at least a stark, functional space with little or no accoutrements. You'd never know that now. Every column in the school, and there are several on each floor, has been "turned into" a tree with branches that spread over the ceiling. Each floor has a theme. If you are on the ground floor, you will feel as though you are under ground, surrounded by wall paintings of creatures who live, you got it, underground. On



the second floor, you are surrounded by leaf and lower vegetation and animals who inhabit those regions. Floor three takes you into the deciduous forest with butterflies and birds and other forest creatures. There is a section on each floor with intricate displays of each theme including aquariums with live examples.

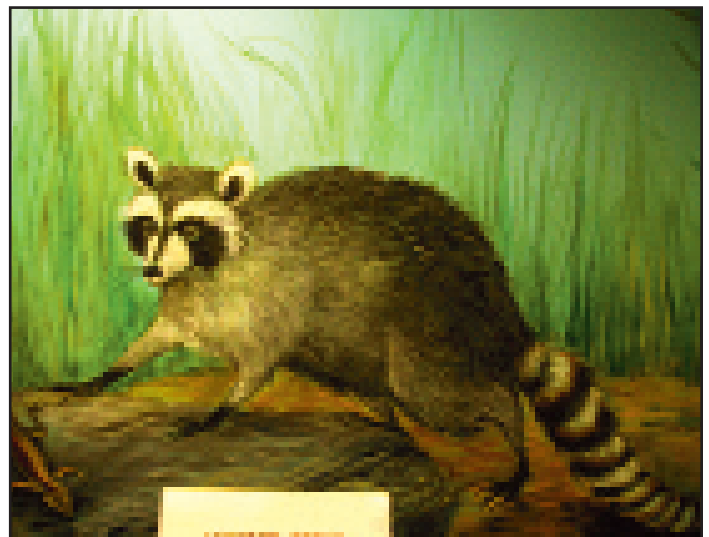
And here is the best part. There are gorgeous, vibrantly colorful paintings of all kinds of critters all over the walls – in the stairways, hallways, classrooms, cafeteria – everywhere. They are amazing. They are painted by the talented artist Susan Morris, whose work can be recognized at the Science Center. Climbing the stairs from the first floor, you are accompanied by huge leaf-cutter ants. One more flight takes you to a kaleidoscope of butterflies. Down a hallway you may be met by a comical raccoon peeking around a tree or a fox stalking prey. Imagine Academy is a magical land.

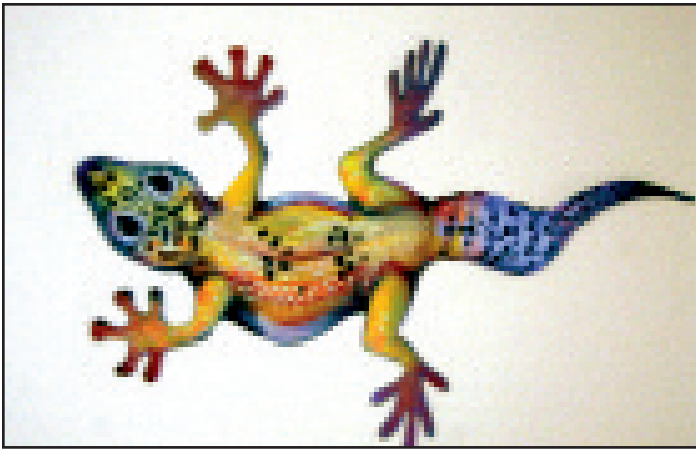
But it isn't all magic. There is a lot of hard work happening here. Instructors at the Academy are offered top of the line equipment, computers, and other learning tools. Curriculum includes the basics as well as art, music and PE. The art room is covered with

works of art that kids from all levels have produced, including stunning African masks, Medieval shields, paintings and other creations. The music room is chocked full of instruments. Although most of the kids want to learn to play the drums first, once they learn to read music, they become excited to learn other instruments as well.

Administration and counselors are available for kids who need them. There are also programs for students who struggle with learning. "A lot of our students come in below grade level," Burns points out. "Many of the children cannot read. We offer 'flexible grouping' rather than high or low reading groups," Burns notes. And like any other public school, children with physical or psychological disabilities are also accommodated.

"We feel we have died and gone to heaven because of our wonderful facilities," says Burns. "We have such an opportunity to change students' lives with our premiere facility. We have the federal funds to provide teachers with high quality materials and high quality





professional development. This is the kind of school that I would want either of my two children to attend,” she adds.

One program of which Burns is especially proud is the formation of data teams for the teachers. With the help of The Leadership and Learning Center, teams were formed to meet in collaborative sessions, at every grade level, with emphasis one week on discussing data such as where the students are, how they need to be moved academically and individually and so forth, and the following week they visit college classrooms to look at their practices. This program continues all year long and has been very successful.

The IAESM adheres to six measures of excellence: Parent choice and satisfaction, academic achievement, positive character development, new school development, new school growth through shared values, and economic sustainability. These standards of excellence are evident in every Imagine Academy throughout the country. IAESM has had the distinction of winning the National Parent Choice Award two years in a row because of its high re-enrollment record and the parent’s satisfaction survey.

“Parents ‘vote with their feet’ in charter-school-land,” says Dr. Burns. “If they are not happy, they are going to hopefully articulate that, but if they choose not to, the loudest way they will let you know is they will leave.”

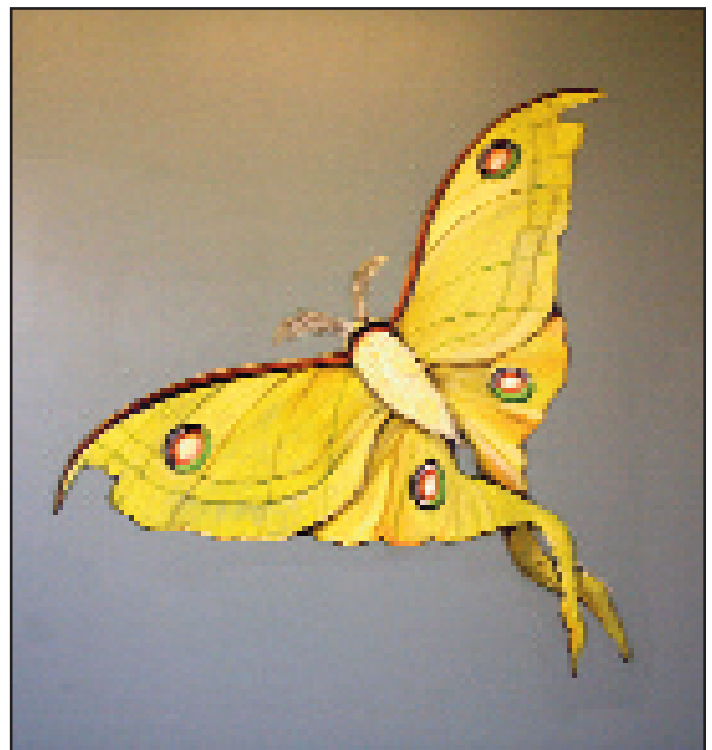
Because the IAESM is a school and district all in one, it is responsible for its own finances, giving the school a great deal of autonomy. Traditional school systems must adhere to a budget and cuts can be thrust against a particular school because of a district wide issue. The IAESM runs its own budget and makes its own class modifications for economic sustainability. The satisfaction rate runs high at all levels from teachers to students to parents to administration, and it is evident the moment you walk through the front doors.

Although the school is publically funded for the majority of curriculum and other activities, there are areas where donations are helpful to implement new programs. One such program in the works is the roof-top garden and green space currently in the planning stages. Implementation of the garden will allow students to plant and cultivate vegetables and flowers as well as teach them about the environment and the importance of a green planet.

“We are excited to show off ways that the kids can actually see the benefit of a green roof. This project will teach them how a roof-top garden will insulate the building, keeping the cool air out and the warm air in, whatever the season,” says Burns.

“It will allow us to teach about the future of clean energy,” adds Hartman. “We want it to actually be a meaningful, purposeful outdoor learning space. We want to be able to utilize the entire roof.”

The other program that has been especially beneficial for the Imagine Academy is the Gateway PGA Golf Program. This program,



available to IAESM students in grades 3, 4 and 5, has been very successful.

“The program offers an opportunity that some kids might not even be aware of,” says Burns. “Sometimes we fixate on basic sports like basketball, football and maybe baseball, but I think the PGA has brought a whole new level of opportunity where kids can learn to play golf. They realize that if they become proficient, it can even lead to a scholarship, and we are pretty excited about that. A lot of friendships have developed between the adults and the students, and I believe a lot of the pro golfers really enjoy and look forward to seeing the kids.”

Sometimes golf will make you slow down and think as opposed to some of the technologies today. In a lot of the games that students play today, the feedback is so quick, and the decisions have to be made so rapidly, you don’t even have time to process your options. Golf teaches life skills. Things in life don’t happen at lightning speed.”

That concept fits in well with the PBS,” notes Dr. Burns. “We are teaching [the students] to stop before they react to a situation, to slow down and stop and think and say, ‘Wait a minute. Maybe that person actually *accidentally* bumped into me. Maybe that wasn’t an overt aggressive action. Maybe it wasn’t someone really trying to hurt me.’ We have found, from talking to the kids, sometimes they just react so quickly and sometimes [the situation] was all an accident or misunderstanding.”

Many of the children come from poverty situations and they have often had to move quickly to defend themselves or protect something that they think is theirs. Dr. Burns added, “We are trying to get them to realize that this is a safe environment.”

Yes, the Imagine Academy of Environmental Science and Math is a safe environment indeed. It is also a state-of-the-art learning environment, a positive reinforcement environment, a quietly organized environment, a creative environment, a fun environment and a truly magical environment.

So pack my bookbag, mom. I’m goin’ back to school.

