

# Sousa MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADING THE MARCH

*In the District's public schools, where many have for years fallen short of expectations, the culture of failure is waning. Ward 7's Sousa Middle School (3650 Ely Place SE), one of 13 DC Catalyst Schools, is leading the path to performance with high expectations of students and quality faculty to help make it happen. The building is fresh, spacious and light, ready to receive students for a second year of success.*



ARTICLE BY HEATHER SCHOELL | PHOTOS COURTESY OF DCPS

## It's the Principal of It

Dwan Jordon came to Sousa Middle School at the start of the 2008-2009 school year, and what he inherited was a low-performing atmosphere of underachievement, where assaults occurred daily, and teachers were not up to par.

Those days are gone. Jordon brought a vision of excellence, which he wasted no time in conveying to students and staff, implementing color-coded uniforms by grade levels, creating a sixth grade academy, and keeping track of "Peace Days" – days where there are no fights. "I'm proud of our ability to provide a safe and orderly school," he said during an interview in early June 2009.

Kim Williams, a parent involved at Sousa for many years, sees a big change in the school. "It's much better than before," she said. "The way the kids act, the way Mr. Jordon has more control – I don't think I've seen a fight since he's been there. Before, the kids were disrespectful ... now they come in and say 'Good morning.'"

"I'm talking to them about character, honesty," said Jordon. Along the hallway are teachers' bulletin boards, filled with positive comment cards about students who were especially

helpful or deserving of praise. Sousa, home of the Cobras, awards "Cobra Bucks" to such students. "There is a different focus each month," Jordon explained. "This month is 'Integrity.'"

Kimberly Creasey is a parent at the school for the second time around – her older daughter, now majoring in economics at Notre Dame in Baltimore, graduated at the top of her class at Sousa in 2003. Her second daughter is now an eighth-grader at the school. "My daughter respects her teachers, and knows that good citizenship in school is a must," said Creasey.

## Break It Down, Build it Up

"From 8:10 to 8:40 a.m., teachers meet with instructional coaches," said Jordon in June. "This is a big piece of why we're going to see gains this year. We went in classrooms for the first few months, found out what their weaknesses were. Once we identified the staff weaknesses, we went into support-mode," he continued. "That's where we saw the biggest improvement in instructional strategy. That's where we turned the corner."

"When we started working to support the teaching staff, we saw some we thought were in-

Clockwise From TOP LEFT

1. Art studio, colorful and bright.
2. Respect Center Coordinator Kiah Campbell counsels Shanea Grooms.
3. Students Jerome Robinson and Anton White play some one on one.
4. Deja Hodge and Jordon Reaves practice their routine.

effective,” said Jordon. “We gave them extra support on a 90-day plan – there were 10 of them. Instructional coaches were in [classrooms] all day long.” As Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee has publicly stated, it is not about the adults, it is about the students. Jordon reshaped his teaching staff accordingly, letting go those who, after intensive assistance, were unable to rise to the level expected of his teachers.

Last school year, part of Jordon’s vision for the school was to increase their scores by 20 points. In this year’s DC CAS, a standard test in the District, Sousa’s reading scores rose from 22.84 percent proficient to 39.42 percent, an increase of 16.58 percent; and math scores soared to 41.83 percent from just 15.83 percent in 2008 – a whopping increase of 26 points! With an average gain of 21.29 percent, Sousa students exceeded Jordon’s goal.

### Like a Bear Hug

Like all middle schools in the District, Sousa provides wrap-around services. This means counselors, social services and a coordinator of a “respect center.” A respect center is a proactive alternative to suspension where kids go when they have acted inappropriately, where they address the problem and talk through the “why,” coming up with a better plan of action for future situations. This approach not only gives the student tools to self-correct, but also keeps kids from having a day without learning and supervision.

The student to mentor ratio is 5:1. Middle school students are at a tumultuous age, on top of which some children are dealing with loss of a family member, instability in the home, and other such challenges. Clinical psychologist Dr. Perette Arrington joined the school late in the term last school year, leaving a private practice to join Sousa. Last year, Arrington provided individual and group therapy with seven girls who had lost family members. “I identified the five stages of grief, seeing where they were.” Arrington ended their sessions on a happy note – with cupcakes, not wanting to delve too deeply before summer. She will work with parents and teachers as well as students to promote positive behavioral standards, including conflict resolution, anger management and life skills.

### All in a Name

The school is named after one of the most widely-known composers and conductors, John Philip Sousa,

who was born and buried in Southeast DC, so a school in his name should reflect a strong tie to music. Jordon applied at the end of last school year to become an Arts Catalyst school. The results are in. “We are extremely excited and pleased to announce Sousa Middle School was awarded the opportunity to develop a Performing Arts Program for the 2009-2010 school year,” said Jordon. “We have developed our curriculum in order to include arts integration into the core subjects as well as define the Performing Arts Program. ... All students will be able to participate in the arts program of their choice beginning the second week of school. It is our goal to develop their artistic talents in order for them to display self-confidence and overall self-worth.”

Ms. William’s seventh-grade daughter loves the dance program, and benefits academically from it. “She loves dance, and it helps her to learn to concentrate. I’ve seen a big difference in a year,” she said.

### Final Analysis

“I commend Mr. Jordon. In all my years in DCPS, he’s the first principal that has sat down with every parent,” said Creasey. “He’s doing a wonderful job ... really into his students, making sure they’re progressing. He’s on top of his game.”

Jordon shares his future goals. “Our vision for Sousa Middle School is to become a National School of Excellence. We can achieve this goal by continuing to educate the whole child through intensive instruction based on our student data; academic intervention programs before, during and after school; extra-curricular activities; and through our Performing Arts Program,” he said in a recent e-mail. “Our goal is to continue to develop character education in order to produce productive citizens. We expect our staff and the community to develop strong collaborative efforts that will ensure the overall well-being and success of our students. This will be done by making critical effort to have our families and communities understand they are valued partners with the school. We will bridge the gap to excellence by striving to close the achievement gap, one student at a time. We are Sousa, and we can achieve our goals!”

*Visit Sousa at 3650 Ely Place SE, or call them at 202-729-3260 to learn more about the school. ★*

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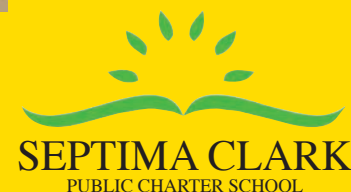
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