



# Update

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## ***Spotlight on Plainfield, NJ***

In 2004, Steve Missal, the new director of character education in the Plainfield, New Jersey public schools, was entrusted to establish a viable character education program for all the schools in his district. Four years earlier, the State of New Jersey had passed the New Jersey Character Education Partnership Initiative (NJCEP), a statewide mandate for character education. However, legislators allocated only \$2.63 per child per year. That translated into \$20,000 to administer to the district's 9,000 students.

Armed with just a directory from which to select programs that could become his district's core character education content, Missal happened upon Overcoming Obstacles. According to Missal, Overcoming Obstacles' curricula seemed as though it would provide Plainfield Public Schools with a common language for character education, helping to maintain an educational focus across grade levels and providing the community with reasons to keep their children in his schools throughout their K-12 experience.



Although Overcoming Obstacles seemed a good fit for his district, Missal was nevertheless apprehensive about meeting executive director Tom Kelly and director of professional development Matt Damm. "Most things of this nature are sort of drive-by. 'It's terrific!' they convince you, and then they disappear," Missal says. "Fortunately that wasn't the case with Matt and Tom. They've been with us every step of the way."

With Matt and Tom's help, Missal began a three-year roll-out of Plainfield's Overcoming Obstacles-based character education program. During the first year, it was part of the sixth- and ninth-grade courses of study. The second year, it was expanded to include grades seven and 10. The upcoming school year it will broaden to include eighth- and 11th-graders as well. Missal says, "Character changes curriculum, and curriculum changes grades." (*read more at [www.overcomingobstacles.org](http://www.overcomingobstacles.org)*)

## **Jersey City Celebration**

On April 11, Overcoming Obstacles hosted a "fifteen together" Student-Parent Dinner at Casino-in-the-Park in Jersey City, New Jersey. This event celebrated student achievement and the positive influence of parental involvement. Students in Jersey City's drop-out prevention program, "fifteen together," addressed an audience of over 400 people and described how the lessons in Overcoming Obstacles have helped them learn the skills they need to achieve success in high school. Alla Abdelmonem, a freshman at Dickinson High School said, "The lessons I learned prepared me for the challenges I faced in high school. They made me feel more confident as the school year started. I learned how to deal with teachers, classmates, and how to study better. Most importantly, I learned how to deal with peer pressure." (*read more at [www.overcomingobstacles.org](http://www.overcomingobstacles.org)*)

# Overcoming Obstacles Goes to College

Dr. Margo Governo, an associate professor of nursing at Staten Island's Wagner College and a clinical nurse practitioner, knows all too well the hazards children and adolescents confront as they ascend from the elementary to the high-school years. For the last 17 years, she has managed an outreach program through Brooklyn's Coney Island Hospital for students attending Lincoln High School, just across the street from the hospital. Through this program, Dr. Governo has learned firsthand that adolescents struggling in high school are overwhelmed by problems that usually started way before the ninth grade. "These kids were pushed around, frightened, bullied, developed a school attendance phobia, and suffer from depression. Now they're 19 and still in the 10th grade," Dr. Governo says.

Mindful of these issues, Dr. Governo designed her upper-level nursing class, "Holistic Dimensions of Mental Health Nursing in the Community," to teach her undergraduate nursing students—all of whom were in their final year and by this time had ample experience performing common nursing tasks as giving injections and taking blood pressure—leadership skills needed to promote a holistic view of health and to anticipate rather than simply react to whatever medical and administrative challenges they may face. To develop these skills, Dr. Governo's students would lead a series of small semester-long health workshops for the 150 fifth grade students attending PS 45, a public elementary school not far from Wagner College.

Why fifth graders? Explains Dr. Governo, "These kids will be going into intermediate school in the fall. There, they'll be sixth-graders, the little kids, lowest in the pecking order," and subject to the same difficulties that still bedevil the high-school students she counsels, such as bullying, using drugs to self-medicate stress, and low self-esteem.

After learning about Overcoming Obstacles through a guidance counselor at Lincoln High School, Dr. Governo purchased the middle-school edition of the Overcoming Obstacles curricula using a grant from Sigma Theta Tau International, an influential group of nurse scholars that advocates nurses reaching out into their communities to identify healthcare needs. Dr. Governo surmised that Overcoming Obstacles' curriculum, with its emphasis on self-determination and anti-bullying intervention, would help the PS 45 students develop the strength of character necessary to negotiate the myriad pressures they might come up against both in intermediate and high school. Matt Damm, director of professional development at Overcoming Obstacles, helped Dr. Governo tailor the program for these fifth-graders.



Dr. Margo Governo (third from left) with her nursing students

Dr. Governo plans to continue offering this course for at least the next two years and is conducting a research project that looks into the variables brought about by the innovative pairing of her students with PS 45's fifth-graders. She is especially interested in demonstrating the impact nurses can have when they concentrate on wellness and problem prevention rather than only diseases and intervention, and syllabi like that provided by Overcoming Obstacles can play a critical role in promoting proactive strategies for whole-body health. "A program like Overcoming Obstacles can reach each child's ears, brain, heart, and soul," Dr. Governo says. (read more at [www.overcomingobstacles.org](http://www.overcomingobstacles.org))



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