

---

April 12, 2011

---

# Valhalla Community School

## Direct Instruction Works!

### A Testimonial on Success

Many in the DI world are familiar with City Springs School in Baltimore, MD. The highly-acclaimed documentary, "The Battle of City Springs" reached a wide audience of educators and non-educators alike when PBS first aired it over a decade ago. The film honestly documented the story of a hard-fought and emotionally uplifting turnaround at a high-poverty urban school through a whole school implementation of Direct Instruction. Under the leadership of a willful and visionary leader, and directly supported by talented and passionate specialists from the Baltimore Curriculum Project (BCP) and the National Institute for Direct Instruction (NIFDI), City Springs catapulted from one of the "worst" elementary schools in Baltimore City (112th out of 114 Baltimore City Schools in one infamous ranking) to one of the "best" over the relatively short period of seven years. As nearly all educators can attest, this dramatic change in academic status was achieved through extraordinarily focused and intense work, and yet the inspirational turnaround could not be sustained without the same level of urgency, diligence and fidelity of implementation.

My personal experience with this transformation was as a special education teacher who had been recruited to the school by the principal



quirky group of DI teachers who existed in Baltimore at the time, solely out of the respect I had for the principal. Having 12 years of experience as a "traditional" teacher, I was frankly skeptical of DI. This skepticism only grew after the first week of training (snapping, clapping, tapping, etc.), but, alas, it was too late for me to back out. Continued on page 3

## Badminton News

Badminton season continues on with great student participation! Practice is as usual Tuesday April 12<sup>th</sup>, Beaverlodge Tournament Wednesday, April 13<sup>th</sup> and no practice Thursday, April 14<sup>th</sup>.

Events as now scheduled are as follows:  
**April 13:** 3:15pm – 7pm Tournament at Beaverlodge High School. The school bus takes the students with consent forms. Parents pick the students up and take them home from the tournament.  
**April 20:** Badminton Districts at Harry Balfour and Peace Wapiti Academy in pm. (time TBA) **May 7:** Zone playoffs in Grimshaw if we win at District level.

### Inside this Issue

**1** Direct Instruction Testimonial

**1** Badminton

**2** Charter Bits

**2** Upcoming Events

**3** DI Testimonial continued

#### Attachments:

Hythe Minor Ball Information

Football Registration

## “Charter Bits”

### Yearbook Group

Mrs. Kerri Kjemhus is starting a yearbook group. The meetings will be held on Wednesdays at 3:45pm here at the school. Students from grade 5 through 8 are welcome to join. The first meeting has been changed to Wednesday April 20 @3:45pm due to conflict with the badminton schedule. Parent volunteers are welcome. Please contact Kerri for further information.

### Thanks!

I would like to thank the 7/8 students and parent volunteers who participated in the cleaning project last Friday after school.

Everyone did a wonderful job and the two classrooms looked great!

Your hard work is appreciated!

Thanks,

Mrs. White



### Field Learning Highlight

*Part of the VCS civic component will include at least one field trip per year where students will receive an in-class session of direct pre-teaching with their teacher, observe and/or participate in an authentic committee experience (community, municipal group etc.) and then take part in a focused, post-session classroom debriefing. The intent of this is to provide students with real-life, knowledge application while they become acclimatized to settings where decision making takes place.*

## Upcoming Events

**April 20, 2011**

**VCS**

**Kindergarten Registration and Information Night**

Come visit the teacher and find out about the Kindergarten program.

**April 21, 2011**

**1pm, VCS**

**Easter Celebration/Spring Fling**

Visitors welcome!

**April 29, 30, 2011**

**Fri. 4-8pm, Sat. 10am-2pm, VCS Gym  
Garage Sale Fund Raiser**

Help support next year's Gd 8/9 Field Trip!

**May 2, 2011**

**VCS Gym**

**Elections Canada Polling Stations**

Come to the school to cast your vote.

### Please Note!

With warmer weather, our schoolyard is a very wet place! All students need to have waterproof boots to wear outside until the yard dries.

Splash pants and a change of clothes in case of falling would also be a very good idea!

### Recess and Utensils

#### *Please note:*

At the March staff meeting it was decided to change the order of events at recess times.

Beginning March 14, students will have their recess snack times **at the end** of recess breaks rather than at the beginning. For morning and afternoon recesses students will go immediately out for recess. When they come inside they will get their 5 minute snack time before classes begin. Noon recess will remain unchanged.

Morning recess time: 10:00am - 10:15am, snack time: 10:15am - 10:20 am.

Afternoon recess time: 2:10pm - 2:25pm, snack time: 2:25pm - 2:30 pm.

The hope is this will make recess breaks work more smoothly and efficiently.

Also please note: students must bring their own eating utensils to school if they need them for lunch. The school does not supply these items. Please limit microwaveable lunches; students do not have enough time to heat and eat!

Thanks.

### Need Math Help??

*Mrs. Flint will be available to offer students extra help with Math on Tuesdays and Thursdays at lunch. This would be a great opportunity for some one-on-one instruction and help to get those corrections caught up and complete.*

Well, thank goodness for that, because my decision to stay at City Springs turned out to be a truly life-changing event for me, particularly changing how I viewed the best way to provide children with an education *for life*. Perhaps the most enlightening thing I learned was that throughout my previous years of teaching, when I thought my students' difficulties in learning were because of *their shortcomings*, I was wrong; it wasn't the students, it was *me*, and *my shortcomings*! I was quite simply not teaching them correctly. In the Direct Instruction programs, I found ways to teach skills that my students had always struggled to learn, and I learned to teach them to real *mastery* (what a concept!) with more ease than I had thought possible. I was seized with a desire to track down all of my former students and apologize to them for putting them through such avoidable strife. Turns out, the whole time I could have made it so much easier for them to learn and for me to teach if I had known about and had the tools of Direct Instruction!

And, what's more, I had become a contributing member of the "quirky DI team," and at a uniquely exciting time at City Springs. Test scores were up, students were engaged and on-task, parents were happy, and people were coming from all over the land to visit gritty ol' City Springs, including the wife of the Vice President of the United States.

It was with great sadness therefore when I left City Springs after several satisfying years to take a position out of the classroom at a high school across town. I longed to get back to City Springs, though, and even bragged to any who would listen about the exemplary school where I used to work. Finally,

one day, I got my wish: I was asked to return to City Springs, not as a teacher, but first as assistant principal and then, shortly thereafter, as principal. My long-imagined return to City Springs, however, was not at all what I had expected or wanted; it was not the same school I had known and loved.

I had been gone for four years. In this short time, the test scores had decreased, and morale had plummeted; students were off-task and fighting, parents were angry, and teachers were not teaching. I found myself shaking my head and wondering, "*What happened?*" I cannot say exactly how or why it unraveled because I was gone for four years, but I could certainly see that the all-important high degree of fidelity of implementation that was the engine of achievement and the source of pride of City Springs at its heyday, was gone, gone, gone.

The school's leadership was at odds with former staunch ally BCP and NIFDI had pulled out altogether. NIFDI would not accept sacrificing the fidelity of the DI implementation to the new "strategies" that were being implemented in the name of a better alignment with the Maryland high-stakes state test, so they left.

It was yet another case of how the pressure of high stakes testing can cause well-meaning educators to stop doing what is best for kids. Compromising the integrity of instruction by focusing on teaching to prepare our kids *for a test*, rather than teaching to prepare our kids *for their lives* -gradually wreaked havoc on City Springs and dismantled the hard-won gains in school culture and achievement that began in the days chronicled in *The Battle of City Springs*. As before in "the bad old days," City Springs children were once again not learning to read or do basic arithmetic, and no amount of targeted test preparation can help kids

be successful on a test they cannot read. As was predicted by many who resisted the changes, test scores declined and kids were no longer functioning on grade level. By 2007 classroom data had revealed that only twenty-six percent of the students at City Springs were functioning on grade level in reading, its signature subject. Only *four* percent of the sixth graders had scored proficient in math on the state test. Students were exhibiting more violent behavior, undoubtedly linked to increased academic frustration. The school was failing in its core mission, despite (or perhaps because of) the heavy emphasis on preparing students for the state test. City Springs was still nominally a DI school, but in many fundamental ways DI was being "phoned in" and City Springs no longer had the high fidelity implementation that had brought it to its hard-to-maintain heights of achievement.

When Muriel Berkeley came to me and asked if I wanted to bring NIFDI back to City Springs, I did not hesitate. I knew that only by bringing back a high-fidelity implementation of Direct Instruction could we turn City Springs back around again. By 2010, seventy-three percent of students were functioning on grade level, nearly triple the level of three years earlier! We had completely reversed the decline at City Springs. City Springs has also shown over those same three years strong and steady progress on the state exam. Most importantly, the children are no longer angry, frustrated and acting out, because they are meaningfully engaged in and finding joy in learning, because they are *learning*, not just "preparing" for a test.

It would be misleading to conclude this story with a happily-ever-after ending, because I have just shared the cold, hard truth: this takes incredibly hard, relentless work and focus. Working in a school where 99 percent of the students

are on free or reduced lunch and new students arrive and previous students depart in large numbers throughout the year, and from year to year, the challenges are both enormous and unrelenting.

It is, in other words, a never-ending battle. One thing I know from my up-and-down-and-currently-back-up-again experience at my beloved City Springs is that implementation fidelity is *everything*, and a high level of implementation certainly does not just happen on its own and, once achieved, a high level of implementation does not remain in place on its own. Teachers need ongoing support and training; keen analysis of student data must happen continuously and that analysis must guide all decisions; a strong atmosphere of genuine and meaningful encouragement for the students must be fostered, and academic gains must be acknowledged and celebrated.

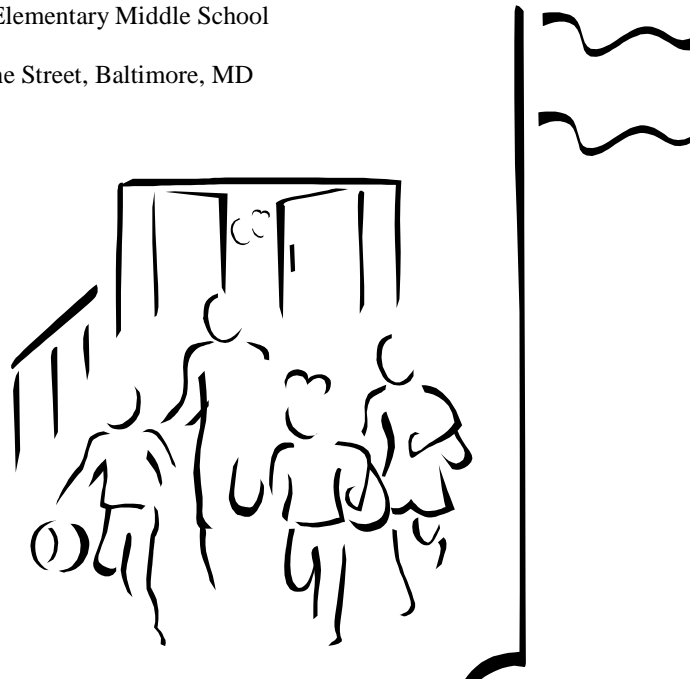
Implementing all of this simultaneously, in the face of all of the “other” challenges that running a school entails, and achieving academic and behavioral success requires a colossal amount of old-fashioned hard work by a lot of dedicated people. Maintaining such hard-won success is, quite literally, a never-ending battle. When I stand at the top of the stairs every morning, greeting 605 young and smiling children as they venture forward into the start of another day, I think with excitement about the possibilities that await them in their future because we are truly *educating* them.

My excitement for their future makes me don my armor and happily join the battle each and every day for the rest of my life.

Because some battles really are worth fighting.

Rhonda L. Richetta, Principal

City Springs Elementary Middle School  
100 S. Caroline Street, Baltimore, MD  
21231



### AISI Corner:

Remember what AISI stands for? Alberta Initiative for School Improvement! All students are now enrolled in the Raz-kids online home-reading program. Some have commented on how they're enjoying their reading. As soon as they register with their teachers to get a password, anyone can go to the [raz-kids.com](http://raz-kids.com) website and start reading to earn points in their own account. They can use their points to decorate their rockets, or teachers may have their own ideas for their points! Contact Mrs. Mumert for more info.

### *Community News*

#### **Valhalla Community Library:**

Library Hours: Tuesdays 11am-5pm, Wednesdays 10am-6pm, Thursdays 11am-5pm. New members always welcome; memberships are free! For any information please contact Gail Perry: 780.356.3834