

TOP STORIES

Long Island's most diverse school

Stewart Manor is almost equally composed of white, black, Hispanic and Asian students

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The hallways and classrooms in the Stewart Manor School in Nassau County are colorfully and imaginatively decorated for the season — recent holidays, science projects and historical figures all share space.

As they do at countless other elementary schools on Long Island, students seamlessly mix as they learn their ABCs, eat lunch and participate in myriad after-school activities.

Academically, Stewart Manor School consistently scores at or above state standards in English language arts and math.

But there is one thing that sets this school apart: It is the most racially diverse on Long Island.

According to the state Department of Education, the racial breakdown of students was 26% white, 22% black, 27% Hispanic and 20% Asian for 2017-18.

The students' evenly distributed population stood out after a team of Newsday reporters analyzed data gathered during a three-year investigation of Long Island's residential real estate brokering industry.

In tests, some real estate agents expressed perceptions about school districts that were in line with pointing potential buyers toward communities with substantial white populations and away from more integrated areas. Newsday visited Stewart Manor School and interviewed students in the spring of 2019.

Nirvana Moonsammy, then a sixth-grader, saw a different world each school day than most Long Island children. While the diversity around her was "pretty cool," she said, it



Kameron House and Ismael El Montadi work on a class assignment at Stewart Manor School in March.

was just a part of life.

"I don't think it's a big deal because we're all used to each other's cultures," Nirvana said. "I have some Hispanic friends, Asian friends, white friends, friends of all religions. I like some activities from Mexico and some food like churros."

The academic success of the Stewart Manor School speaks for itself.

'Learning is learning'

"Children are children, learning is learning," said Albert Harper, superintendent of the Elmont Union Free School District. "If you're working hard, and have a good curriculum, great administrators, great teachers, children will learn."

Harper pointed out that the

district has students who hail from more than 50 countries and speak about 60 languages. The district is the largest elementary school district in Nassau County, serving close to 4,000 children from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade in six schools.

Overall, district enrollment in 2017-18 was 6% white, 43% black, 30% Hispanic and 18% Asian, according to the state.

The average student makeup for Long Island schools was roughly 51% white, 10% black, 28% Hispanic and 9% Asian.

The Stewart Manor School, the northernmost in the district, educates about 350 students from Stewart Manor, New Hyde Park, Elmont and South Floral Park.

Principal Hope Kranidis

said she is proud of her school and its racial diversity — something she pointed out that has always existed — and touted the school's embrace of diversity in other ways, including in its programs and teaching strategies. But Kranidis and her staff were most proud of the education they impart along with the ancillary programs that go beyond the books.

"We have high expectations, and we set those expectations for every child," said Kranidis, who has been principal at Stewart Manor for 20 years. "Every child is entitled to an equal and free education, and we do our very best to provide children with that kind of education by setting high standards. And our children are reaching and meet-

ing those standards."

Stewart Manor School is an intimate building with generally two sections of each grade. This past year, however, there was a bump with a third section of kindergarten added.

It was Taco Tuesday during the visit to the kindergarten class of Jenna O' Leary and Tracey Theobald.

But before lunch, students received reading instruction. They all wore paper hats that read, "We are a box of crayons, each of us unique, but when we get together, the picture is complete."

They participated in a lively and interactive discussion, in English with a heavy dose of Spanish words mixed in, of "I Love Saturdays y Domingo," a book about a little girl whose heritage is both European American and Mexican American.

One of the central discussions in the book is what the protagonist has for breakfast. When polled about which they would choose if offered the same options — pancakes or huevos rancheros — the students enthusiastically responded.

It was close, but pancakes won.

Later in the morning, another instructional initiative encouraged critical thinking, creativity, innovation, inquiry, collaboration and communication.

Erin Guzman, who was in fourth grade, was paired with Arianna Moise, who was in kindergarten, as they investigated: What do animals need to survive?

"I really like helping her on the project," Erin said. "It's like teaching your younger siblings."

Arianna smiled shyly and nodded her head yes when

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Theresa Fisher teaches Arianna Moise, left, and Erin Guzman during a class at Stewart Manor School in the Elmont school district.

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asked if it was nice to work with Erin.

In 2006, Stewart Manor was designated a federal Blue Ribbon School. The program was launched in 1982 and each year recognizes schools with outstanding instruction, teacher training and student achievement.

"It actually motivated us all," Kranidis said. "Teachers challenged themselves to research, implement and share best practices." Kranidis also praised the many nonacademic programs that help enrich young lives.

Proud to Be Me

An annual event called Proud to Be Me that allows students to share something about their culture — or, this time, their talents and skills — was among the first orders of business that day.

The school was buzzing as students traveled the building, visiting each classroom and showcasing their talents in singing, sports, dancing, origami and even one student's

handiwork in solving a Rubik's Cube in a minute and 20 seconds.

"It's fun and it allows the children to share something about themselves their classmates may not know," Kranidis said. "It can also inspire those who didn't participate to try next year."

Vanessa Buchanan, a third-grade teacher, said Kranidis sets a happy, warm and trusting atmosphere in the building that makes meeting high expectations achievable.

Buchanan said the diversity allows the celebration of people coming from different ethnicities, religions, cultures and even learning styles — while also pointing out its other aspect.

"With diversity, you also want to highlight the fact that we're all the same, we're all human," she said.

Fifth-grade teacher Therese Irving said being able to use diversity as an educational tool was key in her selecting to teach in the district.

"One of the things that spoke

to me was . . . how much the students would get beyond the textbook when they are able to work together from different walks of life, and bringing in their own personal experiences," Irving said. "That's not something you can necessarily teach from a textbook. It's just authentic."

School board member Michael Cantara, whose two sons attend Stewart Manor School, points out that many communities and school districts on Long Island can be

grouped by race or religion. Some children end up being the only student in a class or school from a certain ethnic group, which can make the child feel "misunderstood or alienated," he said.

"I like this school that we have kids from everywhere," he said. "It's not just one child."

While it's just part of the environment in a Stewart Manor classroom to have such diverse students learning together, the mix likely will be a little different when they move on to their

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— Therese Irving, Stewart Manor teacher

next schools.

The school's students will move up to the Sewanhaka Central High School district, which comprises five high schools that cover grades 7-12: Sewanhaka High School, Elmont Memorial High School, New Hyde Park Memorial High School, Floral Park Memorial High School and H. Frank Carey Junior-Senior High School. Kranidis said the students from Stewart Manor are mostly zoned to go to Sewanhaka and Floral Park Memorial high schools.

Sewanhaka is 13% white, 31% black, 32% Hispanic and 23% Asian. Floral Park Memorial High is 53% white, 13% black, 15% Hispanic and 19% Asian, according to 2017-18 state figures.

Attending such a racially diverse elementary school prepares students for the world, administrators, teachers, parents and even students said.

“We're all the same”

"We're all the same," said Ava Kolenda, who was in third grade. "It's not like if you come from the UK you're smarter than if you came from India. People are not only from America."

Stewart Manor graduate Nicole Kolenda, Ava's mother, who also has a son in the school, said because her children are biracial she and her husband found it important to have them in a place where the students reflected them, so they could focus on education and friendships.

"I wanted my children to go somewhere where they would feel comfortable," she said. "They are not standing out from looking different."

While proud of Stewart Manor School's mix, she said it's a bit disappointing that diversity is still a story in 2019.

"I think it's important to talk about it and I don't think we do enough of that," she said. "Not act like it's nothing . . . this is still an issue."

NEWSDAY / YONG-UNG YANG

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NEWSDAY SUNDAY NOVEMBER 24, 2019