

‘We are passionate’

A Q&A with Jean Hitchcock of Signature School in Evansville

Tuesday, September 19, 2023 09:45 AM EDT Updated: Tuesday, September 19, 2023 11:03 AM EDT

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EVANSVILLE, Ind. - In August, Evansville's Signature School topped several of U.S. News & World Report's Best High Schools rankings. The school was named the No. 2 high school in the nation, the No. 1 charter school in the nation, the No. 1 high school in Indiana and the No. 1 high school in the Evansville metro area.

The rankings used data from about 25,000 public high schools across 50 states and the District of Columbia. Around 18,000 schools were evaluated on performance on state assessments and preparation of students for college.



Jean Hitchcock has been the executive director of Signature School since 2012. She spoke with Inside INdiana Business about the rankings and how Indiana's first public charter high school helps students succeed.

How does it feel for Signature School to receive these accolades from U.S. News and World Report?

We're just delighted. We couldn't be happier. It was a nice surprise. You don't know where that's all going to land. Signature is a place where people are very passionate. Any success story probably starts with that, right? The teachers, staff and students work very hard. So how nice to have an outside external validation that you're doing something right.

What makes your school stand out from other high schools?

There are, of course, a lot of good high schools. To put us in perspective, we are a public school. There are a lot of misconceptions, but we are open admission. We are different in that we don't have a natural feeder school. Kids come from around 32 or 33 different middle schools. We're nine through twelve.

A lot of people think that we cherry pick kids, and we don't. We follow the state law, the lottery laws. We have an open window to apply, and then if we have more applicants than spaces, we have a lottery. We've had a lottery since 2008.

We are chartered for the motivated student. To be clear, not the straight-A student, but the motivated one, with the idea that you come in, and if you're willing to work, the teachers are here to push you to do your best, and the students push the teachers to do their best.

We're all on the same page from the students to the faculty to the staff to the board members about who we are. We're about scholarship; we're about academics. We are passionate about being here, passionate about teachers, passionate about students. Everybody's excited to learn. We are very respectful of being here. People feel lucky to be here.

From where I sit, going to work every day, I go in and really enjoy what I do. I'm not saying every day is perfect or great, but by and large, the kids are happy to be here. Three of my children graduated from here, and I know it made a difference to them.

We're always saying: "Okay, what are we doing? What can we do better?" You want to just keep pushing that forward. We try and combine excellence with innovation. This is a very teacher-driven school. As a charter, we don't have the layers of bureaucracy. We can sit together and say: "This isn't working or this is working, but we could do this better."

Sometimes we go in our corners and we disagree, but we come together and say: "Let's give it a try." We are nimble as a charter and able to do that.

How does Signature School help students succeed?

We really do look at each child in a very individual way. Every time I talk or interact with a child, I think if this were my child, if it's a discipline thing or otherwise, we really look at the whole child. This is a school where we put a lot of trust in the students. We help them succeed academically, certainly. The teachers are here before school, after school, at lunch, helping kids. The help is there if the kids want it, and they do.

We have a resource block when they're freshmen because they come in from all these different middle schools. That's every other day. We work with them on study skills. We've got kids who have never seen a planner before. They have no clue what that is. Then we have kids whose parents are on top of it, and they know exactly how to plan. We try to level the playing field.

For parents, even if you have a child going from middle school to high school, there's a learning curve. They're probably used to being the ones to say my child is going to be out today because he's sick. We want to help our kids so that when they're in college and beyond, they will have the skills just to take the lead.

We're first about academics, but they're teens. We have prom, we have dances. We promote and nurture a culture where we trust them to excel academically and as an individual. They go between buildings here. We don't have bathroom passes. We rely on these kids to do the right thing, or we can't exist. We have a respective place. We all want to protect it.

What are your criteria for accepting students?

The charter law allows us to take dependents of faculty and staff and then siblings of current students. They still have to put the application in, but by law, if they're on time, they're automatically admitted. Otherwise, we go to a lottery where the names are put in a box. We have a third party come in. We go to the Victory Theatre, and each name is written on the same size and weight of paper.

When you pull out a name, it's something to watch. Because, as a parent, I get it. Education is the one thing you give your child that can't ever be taken away. You'll have people holding hands and bursting

out crying if they get chosen, or their name comes out and then it's just kind of quiet tears. It's a very emotional experience.

The lottery is for people who get their applications in on time. Let's say we have 130 applicants and 100 spots. We draw a class of 100. The next 30 names go on the waitlist. Then anybody who applies after the end of the open application period goes to the bottom of the waitlist.

It's a little different process for transfer students because there's some evaluative work outside of their grades. Occasionally, we'll have somebody who applies where we just can't make their schedule work so that they'll have the credits to graduate. Then we're not the school for them.

What are your criteria for hiring faculty?

I look for somebody who's passionate about scholarship and excited about students and teaching high school. Because there is some variation. We have four PhDs on our faculty. They are obviously scholars, but they also love teaching high school. You want that mix.

I look for people who work well with others and autonomously at a brisk pace. That ongoing scrutiny of, what are we doing well, what can we do better? I never go to the teachers and say, hey, your AP scores are really low. Never once have I done it because I know those teachers will look at their scores and find a way to teach a bit differently and get better.

People are eager to defend those standards of excellence and appreciate what that means. The teachers here wouldn't teach any place else. They love the atmosphere. I look for people who are approachable. It's nice to have a little sense of humor with people you work with.

How did the pandemic change Signature School?

The first thing we did was make sure the students were set up with technology. We provided laptops. The teachers and faculty met on Zoom to address the issue, and we got through that year with a lot of flexibility with the kids. We didn't miss a day. We were one of the only places that held an in-person graduation. We did surveys with the families of the seniors; it was very important to them to have one. It was very delayed, but we did do one.

Over that summer, we invested about \$250,000 in more technology so that every classroom was set up to be a hybrid classroom. We gave kids the option to work from home. About 80% of them or so were in school. We stayed six feet apart, wore masks and worked our way through it. We're very proud of how we weathered it.

All of your students are expected to complete a minimum number of community service hours. What's the benefit of this requirement?

We are big believers in well-roundedness with the student, where we want the academics, but we also want leadership skills developed, and community service is another component of that.

We are an International Baccalaureate School, and we are also an AP Capstone school. IB requires that they do 150 hours of community service during their junior and senior years. We also require 25 hours during freshman and sophomore years. It's interesting because a lot of our grads tell me, at the time,

they knew they had to tick off the hours, but looking back, it was really one of the best things that they did.

We've had an ongoing group students we have worked with called the Amani Group in Africa, where they helped found a clinic there. That's been a long-term, legacy project. They also do lots of things locally. They work in tutoring, at the hospital, recycling, soup kitchens. We have a long list of groups we traditionally work with. If they want to go outside that, they just have to apply with our community service people to clear it.

What's new at your school this year?

We're putting out a new AP class: precalculus with algebra and trigonometry. We're in the second year of doing an IB sports medicine class, which is exciting. Otherwise, we're getting back into some of our old traditions post-COVID. We've got Spirit Week coming up and silly dressing and all that. It's nice to have everybody back.

What does the future look like for Signature School?

The future looks great. We toy with opening a middle school. But there's a lot that goes into that kind of decision. It's always a challenge to find teachers. That's one concern. You want it to be the right fit. But we've had great success, a pretty stable faculty right now.

Anything else you'd like to add?

I feel very lucky to be part of Signature School. I wouldn't want to be any place else. I feel lucky to see the kids and my colleagues, to have a very supportive board and see the impact on the community. We have a lot of first-generation families, and these kids are here. They will all go to college. We will fight for them to get scholarships. I see it generationally, how that's going to play out. It's a great place to be.