

CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

These ingredients can bring success

Look around the country and it's not difficult to find large urban high schools that are floundering. Chicago, Kansas City, Cleveland, St. Louis, Philadelphia — the list goes on.

But aren't there some urban public schools that are showing the right way to go? Schools that through sound management and high standards achieve community respect?

Yes, and Omaha's Central High School is an example.

Central's reputation is such that Omaha Public Schools has decided to cap the enrollment. About 200 of the 890 students who picked Central as their No. 1 choice have received word that they will need to select another school.

Central, with nearly 2,400 students, has limited its incoming freshman class to 685 spots. It's the first time Nebraska's largest high school has imposed such a cap. The only other OPS high school that does so is Burke.

That Central needs to take this step is a tribute to the school's positive reputation — particularly impressive given that Central stands out for the wide income spectrum among its students, as well as the school's tremendous social diversity.

The many ingredients for Central's success can offer a blueprint for other high schools in Omaha and elsewhere: >> A school culture that encourages excellence in academics and sports and proclaims that message to the community.

>> Breadth of academic and extracurricular offerings.

>> A demonstrated ability to meet the academic needs of each level of students — those with belowaverage grades, those in the middle and those with above-average grades.

>> Strong leadership from the principal and faculty. Such a reputation attracts high-quality teachers who want to teach there.

>> Individual teachers recognized for excellence.

>> Positive team spirit among faculty and staff.

>> Impressive community support from parents, alumni and the school foundation.

>> Ambitious goals that raise standards to new levels. One example is Central's recent addition of the International Baccalaureate program.

>> Sensible handling of security procedures. A large urban high school needs to safeguard students and faculty without creating an intimidating prisonlike atmosphere.

There are many other Nebraska high schools that can point to their own examples of excellence and success. Of course, no school can rest on its laurels.

The responsibility to maintain high standards and adapt to changing conditions is never-ending.

And Central has an ample share of challenges.

Central is a downtown urban high school, and such schools must deal with difficulties of a size and complexity that many other schools don't face.

But when such a school shows it can make progress and earn the community's respect, that not only speaks well of the school. It also offers hope for public education.

