

FOSTERING CHARACTER EDUCATION IN AN URBAN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING

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Donald Stewart School No. 51, a dual language preschool serving 300 students, first opened its doors in 2004. Over the years we have been committed to laying the foundation of character development with our preschoolers. Our pillar, “Friends Care, Friends Share” though simply phrased, encompasses the significant core values necessary for developing responsible citizenship. For many of our students, School No. 51 is their first school experience. The staff, along with parents and families, has the opportunity to be part of our students’ character-building experience, cultivating a sense of community. With this goal in mind, we do face some challenges: low socioeconomic status of the majority of our families, diversity of languages, limited parent involvement, and budget changes. Although we have infused character education in our curriculum since 2004, we have added numerous activities over the years to encourage school and family partnerships including staff and parent workshops, volunteer opportunities in special school events and community outreaches.

Integrating character education in our school has proven successful and beneficial in

enhancing the students’ learning process. The programs being used reinforce the problem-solving skills needed to achieve academic excellence. The teachers facilitate the use of developmentally appropriate discipline techniques in order to foster socioemotional skills needed to preserve a conducive learning atmosphere. These programs assist in teaching the children how to identify their feelings, empathize with others, and use intrinsic motivation to conduct their daily lives and attain educational success.

OUR PROGRAM

The character education program in our school was developed to provide students with opportunities for positive moral actions in their community. We strive to develop a community atmosphere in which we all work together on creating a better future for our students with a solid foundation for moral action. The expectations of the students are summarized in the school’s pledge of ethics that encompasses guidelines to develop respect for the school

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community, respect for friends and staff and encouragement to do our best in school to become better future leaders with good character. These principles are modeled in the classroom by adults and reinforced daily around the school. Inside the classroom, teachers create a community environment in which children work collaboratively to execute different tasks. Teachers talk about the importance of sharing, caring and helping others. We also integrate the *Clifford* series (Bridwell, 1975, 1987), multicultural books/music and the Second Step Early Learning Program (Committee for Children, 2011), in which puppets and books are used to instill moral values and character in students. Teachers also use the Seven Steps to Conflict Resolution (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995) to appropriately guide students to solve problems in a peaceful way.

Our students assume leadership roles of their own which support the character education initiative. To help students develop character, we encourage them to be part of real life challenges/experiences. The students are responsible for taking care of our environment and classroom responsibilities. For instance, children help to recycle, take care of plants and pets, become line leaders, hold the door for friends, work as a team to solve problems, and collaborate on different projects. During Mrs. Rodriguez's physical education class, students take turns assuming the role of a leader during small-group exercise routines. While engaging in this leadership role, the students assist and encourage others that may need help. Children guide one another by use of positive communication. For instance, if a child is having difficulty performing a skill such as balancing on one foot, we encourage them to ask the leader for help. In turn, the leader proactively seeks those needing assistance and offers guidance to help them complete the task at hand.

PARENTS AS MODELS

Parents are involved by volunteering in school, serving as models for students and instilling a

sense of family-oriented environment. We have an active Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) that initiates a multitude of activities throughout the year to help students feel loved and special. Our PTO parents model the importance of devoting their time to make our school a warm and inviting environment creating a home-school connection that is imperative in our young learners' lives. This instills traits of empathy, sense of community, school pride, and overall sense of belonging. Students also get to see first-hand their parents dedicating time out of their day to focus on school-based activities. One of our monthly recurring events organized by the PTO and Parental Involvement Committee is the students' birthday celebrations. At this time, they create a plan and initiate a lunch-time gathering where birthday students and their parents enjoy pizza, cupcakes, music, and a special visit by our school mascot, Tian Tian, the Panda! Each birthday student is photographed with Tian Tian to provide them with a keepsake of their special day. Another way parents contribute their time is reading to the students during Books and Breakfast and Reading under the Stars for Read Across America Week to establish the importance of literacy in the home and school. On Professional Day, parents and other community members are invited to visit the classrooms and discuss their careers. In Mrs. Villar's class, for instance, Steven's father, who is an air traffic controller at Newark International Airport, visited her classroom to speak with students about his profession. He provided the class with visual props piquing the interest of all students. In Ms. Sader's class, Cheyenne's grandmother, a former librarian, spoke with students about her love of books. She read a variety of Caldecott Award books to students. She was incredibly animated, and her passion for books was contagious. Over the years we have had parent volunteers ranging from nurses, police officers, fire fighters, radio hosts, lawyers, teachers, and more. These parents and their participation in Professional Day spark interests in our students' future career aspirations.

Parents volunteer their time to organize other events and celebrations such as Fall Harvest where students can visit a pumpkin patch created by the PTO in our reading garden. The PTO is also involved in our school fundraisers which enable us to provide a multitude of educational experiences for our students. Our PTO is an instrumental part of our school-home connection.

CHARACTER IS ALL YEAR EMPHASIS

Around the school and throughout the year, the children participate in concerts, activities and assemblies planned to solidify students' character and moral action. Holiday song fests, multicultural fashion shows and end of the year celebrations honor the diverse cultures in our school and reflect what the children are learning while creating a home-school connection. These assemblies also focus on character development and the importance of friendships. Antibullying and Preschool of Rock are assemblies that focus on morals and values while encouraging student participation. Additionally, the students are involved in our food/coat drives, Christmas concerts for senior citizens, Pennies for Patients to help children with Leukemia and a special program honoring veterans. The Teddy Bear Clinic is a program sponsored by our local hospital. Student nurses visit our school to teach our students the significance of safety, making healthy choices and the importance of exercise. Students and staff demonstrate their school spirit by wearing school uniforms and spirit T-shirts during these events. Our annual Panda Pride Parade cultivates a positive school environment where children and all staff members march proudly. All participants march throughout the school to music and meet collectively in our multipurpose room to celebrate our accomplishments as a team. We involve parents in various workshops/newsletters/surveys/activities throughout the year to keep them informed, create an open communication with the home and estab-

lish a respectful rapport with the community as a whole. All schoolwide events are posted on our school website as well as our social media pages for all to enjoy. It is the influence of all these activities that is making such a difference in the students' behavior and early development of moral values and good character.

Our motto, "Friends Care, Friends Share" is evident throughout the school year. Activities and lesson plans are used by teachers and administrative personnel to promote a positive school environment while preventing negative behaviors. Upon reading books and conducting meaningful activities, the students learn about having a positive attitude and how to express kindness. Character-building books are used throughout the year to reinforce manners, good deeds and respect among children. Some of these books are: *When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry* (Bang, 1999); *Words Are not for Hurting* (Verdick, 2004), *Hands Are not for Hitting* (Agassi, 2006), and *Rainbow Fish* (Pfister, 1992). The school social worker and the principal go into the classrooms to read books that encourage good behavior and respect. They read and discuss books such as *Have You Filled a Bucket Today?* (McCloud, 2006) followed by activities that challenge each student to be a bucket filler. The 4-year-old students decorate a classroom bucket and are encouraged to make a "deposit" when an act of kindness is noted. At the end of each week, the students engage in discussion about their positive interactions. Teachers photograph 3-year-old students when they demonstrate an act of kindness or respect.

Annually, staff and students promote awareness of significant causes. In October, we celebrate Week of Respect and School Violence Awareness Week. Students and staff members wear orange, the official color for the theme of antiviolenence. As a school project, the children create an annual "Kindness Tree." Students work together by sharing ways that they have been respectful or kind to a friend or a family member on a leaf represented on the tree. During American Education Week, students acknowledge all faculty by writing cards

to the office staff, custodians, kitchen helpers, bus drivers, lunch aids, et. cetera. Our social committee is actively involved in acknowledging staff members by celebrating momentous occasions, establishing a positive work environment. Staff wears pink in observance of Breast Cancer Awareness Month while celebrating cancer survivors within our school. Throughout the year we have fundraisers and collections that promote charity and kindness. Participating in Pennies for Patients teaches students about caring, supporting a good cause and teamwork among other important core values. We schedule nursing home visits each year. During these visits, students bring joy to the elders by singing songs to them. This cultivates a caring relationship with the community. Our school utilizes the Second Step Character Education Program ensuring that our students are actively learning about values such as fairness, compassion, responsibility, respect and self-discipline. The program also promotes friendship and problem-solving skills.

CHARACTER IS TAUGHT

Our school fosters an intentional and comprehensive approach to character education. We follow a daily routine where students are reminded of the classroom rules. We incorporate a socioemotional component to our large group lessons through the Second Step program. We teach students skills and vocabulary to identify their feelings, manage their emotions, create friendships and engage in positive problem solving. These lessons use puppets to role play and teach the children empathy, positive ways to join into play, how to utilize their words and reasoning skills to participate in conflict resolution. Ultimately, our goal with this program is to provide a foundation for every child to interact positively and respectfully with their peers and teachers, while learning and expressing themselves independently. This in turn will assist in their transition to Kindergarten and their future success in learn-

ing. Classrooms are equipped with a “resolution box” that offers solutions to standard preschool conflicts. The box consists of picture/word cards that cue the students with simple solutions for problem solving, such as taking turns, saying sorry and sharing. Taking into consideration the developmental level of our students, the conflict resolution box is implemented differently in the 3- and 4-year-old classrooms. For instance, in Ms. Sader’s 3-year-old classroom, she introduces one concept card at a time based on her careful observations of student behaviors and interactions. Should she notice children having difficulty sharing, she will conduct a discussion during “morning message” time illustrating ways that students can problem solve. Providing students with examples of previous classroom conflicts offers a more meaningful lesson to students as they are better able to relate to the skill when problems arise. Ms. Sader takes this opportunity to revisit a situation observed from the previous day. For example, Abigail and Jocelyn were playing with a horse and the farm house. Jocelyn had the horse and Abigail snatched it from her. Jocelyn became upset. At the time of the event, Ms. Sader approached the two girls with the picture card from the resolution box inquiring what happened. After each child had an opportunity to share their version of the story, Ms. Sader showed each student the card and asked them to think of ways they could solve this conflict. She was able to open a dialogue on the topic of taking turns and sharing. At this time, Ms. Sader introduced students to proper terminology to help resolve the dilemma. She asked students how they would feel if they were in Jocelyn’s situation and other possible outcomes.

In the 4-year-old classrooms, a student is delegated the job of problem solver and takes on the role of facilitating simple solutions to everyday conflicts. That assumes the responsibility of monitoring classroom conflicts and providing assistance when necessary using the picture/cue cards in the resolution box. It is important to note that while we assign this job

to one student, all students have access to the resolution box throughout the day. In Mrs. Torres' 4-year-old classroom, Joshua and Jeremy were playing in the block area. Joshua built a tall structure, and Jeremy deliberately kicked it down. Joshua became upset and sought out the help of the problem solver. Kimberly walked over with the resolution cards and pulled out the card that read "please stop." She encouraged Joshua to use his words to express how Jeremy's actions made him feel and suggested that Jeremy help rebuild the structure. Joshua expressed that Jeremy's actions made him feel sad, and Jeremy said he was sorry. Both boys agreed to play nicely together and continued their play. It is noteworthy that these strategies can be applied to any age group. Ultimately our goal is for all students to resolve conflict independently with minimal teacher support. This promotes problem-solving skills among our young learners and affords them the tools needed to resolve problems that arise daily.

USING ASSESSMENT DATA

Our schoolwide assessments have a socioemotional component. All classrooms are assessed yearly by a master teacher on the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale. This assessment focuses on the classroom environment as well as student/teacher interaction. Classroom Assessment Scoring System, which focuses on character development and conduct, is an additional tool utilized to monitor our character development and education. We utilize the High Scope Approach which encourages the teacher to serve as a facilitator for students as they take on a leadership role. The children learn through play as well and actively interact in their environment. Our goal is to provide a nurturing classroom environment where every child succeeds academically and emotionally.

Our school provides all students with an academic curriculum that is child-centered and developmentally appropriate. Character building is the foundation of our teaching and learn-

ing practices. The students are actively engaged in a nurturing setting that provides differentiated instruction in self-contained and inclusive classrooms so that all students achieve success, with or without individualized education programs. Teachers and parents work collaboratively to identify the diverse cultures and individual needs of each student in the learning process. This is incorporated into our lesson plans to better differentiate instruction. In addition, we encourage parental involvement in extracurricular activities that enhance student learning and character development as a whole while closing the gap between home and school.

We at Donald Stewart School work collaboratively toward one common goal: the success of each individual student. We have established a caring culture that is reflected among staff and school community. Team teachers meet regularly to discuss students' progress. They meet with the social worker and learning consultant to develop educational and behavioral plans for those students requiring additional support. Lesson plans are modified weekly, based on the students' learning needs in order to reinforce what they've learned as well as concepts needing to be revisited. Additionally, lesson plans are carefully designed to differentiate instruction based on the individual needs of students. Leadership groups and structures such as committees and the PTO are integral pieces in our school's initiative. Our Parent Involvement Committee formulates and conducts yearly surveys while our School Improvement Panel meets monthly to evaluate and improve our methods. We form various committees and meet throughout the year to generate and implement instructional and character-building activities and events.

Donald Stewart School No. 51 regularly assesses its culture and climate, the role of its staff as character educators and how the students manifest good character. We collect data from surveys twice a year. Our parents and teachers contribute to the overall advancement of the school by providing their feedback through surveys, assessing the school climate

and culture. The results have been outstanding with 100% of parents saying they receive courteous attention at the school; that teachers care about students; the school is supportive when they have concerns, and the communication from school is good. Also, 95.65% of the teachers believe the administration is fair and supportive of the staff. The students and teachers are assessed throughout the school year. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System measures the effectiveness of classroom interactions among teachers and children. When the School Improvement Panel analyze data, we look for the teachers that have excelled in certain areas so they can provide professional development workshops to the rest of the teachers and share what has been successful for them. The school administrator meets with individual teachers to review their scores and brainstorm ways on how they can improve.

IN CONCLUSION

Our school prides itself on exhibiting a nurturing environment that is child centered and developmentally appropriate. Integrating character education in our school has proven successful and beneficial in enhancing the students' learning process. We encourage every child to interact positively with their peers and teachers while respecting the diverse

cultures and learning abilities of others. Our school motto, "Friends Care, Friends Share" instills a meaningful message that all young learners can embrace. Together with our community, we provide a learning experience where every child feels welcomed, loved and academically challenged in their educational experience.

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