

# ***CHARACTER EDUCATION IN THE INNER CITY***

## ***Making It Real***

**Constance Bond**

*St. HOPE Leadership Academy, New York, NY*

The auditorium filled with middle school students is completely silent. On stage, three men describe what led them to commit serious crimes and what happened to their lives, and the lives of their families, when they went to prison. A seventh grader sitting near the back, a student who has struggled with the pressure to join a gang, sits forward in his seat, hands cupping his face, hanging on every word. A small smile begins to appear on the face of an eighth grade girl sitting near him. She travels for hours on public transportation to visit her father in prison once a month, despite her mother's protests. The speakers are having the desired impact—connecting in personal ways with their audience.

The men on stage that day were representatives from Refoundry, an organization that helps formerly incarcerated individuals build skills to repurpose and remake discarded furniture and other materials into something useful, even a work of art. Refoundry has managed to do what some think impossible: provide the building blocks essential to successfully reentering society after prison. If

you asked the students in the auditorium that afternoon to raise their hands if they knew someone who went to prison, nearly every young person would put their hand in the air. It is a painful piece of the fabric of urban poverty, one that makes a serious impact on nearly every family and every child in the inner city. As educators, we do our best to ameliorate the effects of poverty and all it drags with it, but the familial impacts of incarceration are often overlooked. Making sure children are fed and safe take precedence.

### ***RELEVANT, STUDENT-DRIVEN SERVICE LEARNING***

This example gets to the heart of why the St. HOPE (Helping Others Pursue Excellence) Leadership Academy community embraced the character education movement and worked tirelessly to become a National School of Character. There is a commitment to relevant, student-driven service learning that develops every facet of our scholars' burgeoning identi-

---

• Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Constance Bond, [cbond@sthopeharlem.org](mailto:cbond@sthopeharlem.org)

---

Journal of Character Education, Volume 12(1), 2016, pp. 89–93  
Copyright © 2016 Information Age Publishing, Inc.

ISSN 1543-1223  
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

ties, experiences that truly cultivate the whole child. The partnership with Refoundry marked a milestone in St. HOPE's journey—the moment we knew that we were making real progress toward this lofty goal. Students identified recidivism as a problem worth investigating; students created a curriculum where every advisory in the school explored the issue and possible solutions. Students researched local organizations that were active in combating recidivism, and students built the relationship with Refoundry that resulted in the powerful all-school assembly. The issues around incarceration and recidivism cut close for many of our scholars, but the student leaders who designed this project felt empowered by taking it on, focusing on solving the problem and educating others about what they can do to help instead of feeling like victims. This is not the touchy-feely type of program that can potentially undermine rigorous academics through what is known as the soft bigotry of low expectations, but instead a commitment to holding all scholars to high expectations as they develop their intellectual capacities, their social capacities and their emotional capacities.

Getting to this significant moment in our school's character education program came after many years of hard work by a committed group of St. HOPE staff. St. HOPE is a small, independent charter school that opened in 2008 in central Harlem serving Grades 6 through 8. It had the usual mission-driven focus of many charters when it opened: provide a highly structured, academically rigorous environment that prepares at-risk scholars for college. From our inception, our student population has been 100% minority, approximately 93% free/reduced lunch and about 25% students with identified special needs. When the school reached full enrollment 3 years into our charter, it became clear that we were not doing enough to help our scholars build the skills and habits of mind necessary to be successful, productive human beings. We had the framework for this on paper but had failed to make it come to life in our school.

## ***HARLEM VALUES***

This is when we took our HARLEM values—honor, absolute determination, responsibility, leadership, excellence, and Mission—and created a plan to infuse the language and the practices into all aspects of the school. Staff created a pledge that scholars say every morning during advisory to remind them of the values and why they are important.

As a member of the St. HOPE community I seek to manifest the values of HARLEM—in thought, in word and in deed. Today I set as my goals honor, absolute determination, responsibility, leadership, excellence and mission. May they guide me as I journey to experience the endless potential I have to transform myself, my community and my world.

Teachers put the school's mission and the pledge on large poster boards and placed them prominently in every classroom and every office. Staff built a scholar behavior system around the values, focusing additions and deductions on ways scholars exemplify or fail to demonstrate our HARLEM values. Additional elements to support the manifestation of the values such as HARLEM chats were then introduced. HARLEM chats are values-driven conversations between a scholar and a staff member to refocus a scholar who is struggling on a given day. These basic structures provided the foundation on which to build. As Ms. Persenaire, assistant principal, stated "It is important that these values are not just on a banner; we must live what we say."

By the second year of implementation, HARLEM values began to drive student orientation at the start of the year. Orientation was built around having our new scholars both understand and buy into what it means to be part of a values-driven community: that decisions made throughout the day reflect who you are and what you stand for. During orientation, students wear a white T-shirt to demonstrate that they are "in training." On the last day of orientation, students participate in our "shirt ceremony" where scholars are called to the

stage one by one to receive their first St. HOPE polo shirt. As they exit the stage they are officially welcomed into the community through cheers and high-fives by every adult in the school. At that moment, you can feel their pride and their excitement that they are now officially members of St. HOPE.

### **DEVELOPING A SCHOOL CULTURE**

Character education was further embedded in the daily culture through morning advisories. Beginning in 2011, advisories moved from being simply a safe space where small groups of scholars met with an adult to set a positive tone for the day to proactive groups focused on building the skills and habits of mind that help students successfully process and react to the challenges they face. Advisors role-played scenarios with students and led tough discussions on the consequences of various decisions. Students practiced peer coaching using the HARLEM values and talked through how victims and perpetrators felt. This advisory plan was further improved when the school adopted the Second Step program the following year, a program that strongly aligns with our mission and values.

That year, we also started to train scholars to lead HARLEM chats and peer mediations. It became quite common to hear scholars having conversations with each other on what they can do to take responsibility for their actions and make a difficult situation better. At first, it seemed like students were simply mimicking what they heard adults say, but it continued to evolve and eventually became more authentic. You not only heard the HARLEM language being used but also saw the caring and empathy the students had for each other. As Leul, a seventh grader, said “Teachers don’t just get onto us about doing wrong things; they help us figure out what went wrong with our decision because when we grow up, there isn’t going to be a teacher to tell us what is wrong. We want to be problem solvers.” The community was starting to see that the explicit teaching of

HARLEM values and the reinforcement of positive HARLEM behaviors were helping scholars recognize the natural benefits of acts of character.

When staff reflected again 3 years into implementation, we realized a key component of character education was missing—service learning. Service is one of the three pillars of St. HOPE, along with college and leadership, but we again had the problem that we talked more about service than we actually acted on it. As a result, advisories started to take on causes and raise money, holding bake sales for breast or pancreatic cancer research or collecting canned goods for delivery to the local food bank. Students were able to choose their advisory focus cause, which definitely impacted the pride and sense of accomplishment they felt when they reached a fundraising goal. This sense of impact grew exponentially when the students also had an opportunity to deliver the funds in person to an organization. They felt the intrinsic reward of a good deed.

But there was still something missing. The service work, while helping our scholars develop their character muscles, was still disjointed. The perfect solution presented itself 2 years ago when we built a partnership with Harlem Grown, a local nonprofit that creates community gardens in abandoned lots around the neighborhood. We had already started composting every day during breakfast and lunch, but the students were discouraged when they saw their hard work basically ruined when custodians comingled all of the waste to remove it. Our office manager reached out to Harlem Grown and created a partnership where they would assist our scholars with composting at every meal and would then take the compost to use in their gardens. The relationship continued to blossom with our Green Team of scholars going to Harlem Grown to plant and harvest vegetables and the birth of Foodie Fridays where the scholars learn how to cook healthy food using some of the produce. Mohamed, a seventh grader who is in his second year on the Green Team, said of his

work “I feel like I am doing something good for the planet. And that makes me feel good.”

Our service learning program then took off when our Student Government took the best of our advisory focus cause initiative and Harlem Grown partnership and built a comprehensive, schoolwide program. We now have a monthly umbrella issue that drives our service work, issues that are decided by students. Student Government then takes the lead and builds a curriculum around the issue that is shared in advisory every Wednesday. This includes the nature of the problem, the impact of the problem and ways the community can get involved to help solve the problem. This year, our monthly topics include Cancer awareness and prevention, hunger and homelessness awareness, HIV and Aids Awareness, slavery and human trafficking, issues of equality, reducing recidivism, endangered species awareness and teen self-confidence. As with the example detailed at the start of this piece, the students not only build and engage with the issue-driven curriculum each month, but also seek out local nonprofits and organizations that help solve this problem and partner with them. Sometimes this means raising money, sometimes creating larger awareness campaigns. Right now, our question is around whether we have too many topics to do this work consistently well, but we are aiming high and will see where it takes us.

### ***CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT***

We are very encouraged by the results to date. Our hallways proclaim HARLEM, our classrooms breathe HARLEM and our scholars live HARLEM. A little over 2 years ago we also began implementation of restorative justice at St. HOPE, as a pilot in year one to full scale this year. It is the perfect companion to our character education program, one that provides staff and scholars with additional strategies and tools to use as we actualize our HARLEM values. The combination of character education and restorative practices resulted in our

suspension numbers being more than cut in half from 2014–2015 to 2015–2016 while our numbers of scholars both committing and repeating serious offenses also declined dramatically. In addition, we have seen an increase over the last 4 years in our percentage of scholars and parents who perceive that our school is safe. In the 2016 annual survey compiled by the New York City Department of Education, we reached an all-time high of 98% of scholars indicating that they feel safe in our school, exceeding the citywide average. Last year, we also exceeded the city average in our number of graduates who were on track to graduate high school on time (88%). We attribute our students’ success, even for those who have left St. HOPE, to their wholehearted belief in the HARLEM values.

Last year, we also saw significant growth in our scores on the nationally recognized Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress exams. St. HOPE uses the Measures of Academic Progress exams to both measure individual scholar growth in English language arts and math and benchmark scholar progress against national growth averages. For sixth and seventh grade English language arts and math, our scholars exceeded national growth projections, sometimes dramatically, and increased the number of scholars at grade level (for example, percent at grade level in seventh grade English language arts grew from 24% to 32% and in seventh grade math from 15% to 23%). At a recent honor roll dinner that we host each quarter, a parent with a sixth grader and a seventh grader enrolled at the school proclaimed “St. HOPE is our second home. My sons are both loved for who they are and pushed to be better.”

While our community has much to be proud of, we are committed to continually improving our character education program by providing every scholar with multiple opportunities to make mistakes and grow. As this piece details, it takes considerable time, effort and coordination to build a character education program and weave it into all elements of the school. And it only comes to life when staff and schol-

ars own the program from its inception and believe, through difficult times, that it will have the desired impact. We can assure you, the hard work is worth it.