

OUR ROOTS RUN DEEP

Erin Steinkamp

Valley Park Middle School, Valley Park, MO

Valley Park Middle School (VPMS) has the unique designation of being a not-so-secret gem in St. Louis County. The middle school shares its campus with the elementary and high school, creating opportunities to collaborate and work together to build a school district that not only shines academically, but also focuses on developing character in students at every level of schooling. Our parents, community, and school board members are proud of the fact that our students get the best of what a small private school has to offer—small class sizes, individualized attention and instruction, and a caring atmosphere—in a public school setting. New families moving into Valley Park comment repeatedly on our schools being the biggest factor in buying a home in our district. In 2003, VPMS was randomly selected to participate in a federal grant program (Missouri Show Me CharacterPlus Implementation Study) designed to develop strong character education programs in schools to help improve climate and academics. For the past 13 years, VPMS has lived up to the challenge and has become a model for other schools to emulate.

Even though VPMS had been named a National School of Character in 2008, that has

not meant we are resting on our laurels. Our parents, teachers, and students are always looking for new ideas and innovative ways to bring our school community together. We look to build relationships in everything we do, knowing how important it is to be able to have those connections in school. Our students continue to take ownership in their school and are thrilled to be able to talk with others about why their school is great. When we do have new teachers join our team, they are required to complete basic character education certification training, which involves understanding our core values, how to effectively integrate character into class lessons, being an adult role model and the importance of student voice and choice. So all our staff have the same basic background information and training to use in the classroom.

In 2015, the School Leadership Team (SLT) held its annual summer meeting. During this time, the SLT talks about areas of improvement for next year, future goals and the state of our character education program. Although character education has always been the plate on which all other pieces of our school program rests, the SLT knew it was

• Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Erin Steinkamp, esteinkamp@vp.k12.mo.us

Journal of Character Education, Volume 12(1), 2016, pp. 95–100
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ISSN 1543-1223
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time to refocus on what makes Valley Park so special. This began our push toward recertification as a National School of Character.

Our SLT was nervous as the process began, worried about whether or not we still have buy-in from the staff, parents and students. Looking forward, no matter what the obstacles were, the SLT believed we would find our weak areas and develop action plans to make improvements and recommit to our character education program. Amazingly enough, the SLT found that not only is VPMS still meeting the criteria as a School of Character, it's become so engrained in our school culture that we see it as a natural part of what makes for a great school. In areas where we thought we were lacking, we found those areas were truly outstanding in the way that teachers and staff have made it a natural practice through effective integration and language that we have taught our students and parents. This was the moment we knew something wonderful had happened: character education has roots in VPMS, and they run deep.

Needless to say, some things have changed since the beginning. New faces, new initiatives and new families make VPMS an amazing place to be. Some of the deliberate character education pieces that we emphasized daily with our teachers and students have now become a given in how we do business. The language has evolved to using our Hawk PRIDE acronym to encompass those core values we see as most important to our school family. Although some things have changed, much of what makes VPMS so special remains just as good, if not better than ever.

CONTINUING TO PROMOTE CHARACTER

Since being recognized in 2008 as a National School of Character, Valley Park Middle School has continued to emphasize character education as the basis of what drives all programs in our school. As a way to refocus and reenergize our character education program,

our school leadership team met over the summer of 2016 to develop a new theme that will not only rejuvenate the program, but bring a better sense of understanding to the students, staff and parents who had not been part of our family during the original application process. The term "Our House" had been adopted as our touchstone by the entire faculty, staff and students in the fall of 2015 and celebrated with a back to school assembly to kick off the year. The assembly required each advisory, or Hawk Time, to work together to complete activities while building a sense of community and teamwork.

In the first few weeks of school, students and staff discussed in multiple class meetings what each of our 12 original character traits were, what they mean, and then students voted on the five core values that we see as the pillars or the solid base of "Our House." By focusing on these five traits, students and staff can be more specific on the behaviors, thoughts, and actions we use as guidelines for classroom expectations. They are: responsibility, respect, compassion, determination, and integrity. After reviewing our values, students brainstormed and came up with the Hawk "PRIDE" acronym we use to describe our character traits (perseverance, respect, integrity, determination, and Responsibility). Hawk Time classes and teachers also make it a priority to work on modeling these traits and incorporating them into our Boys' Town Social Skills practice (our discipline model used at VPMS). Although our classroom lessons have always had our character traits imbedded in them, teachers began to reemphasize our Hawk PRIDE traits and get students used to the new language.

VPMS also puts importance on displaying character outside of the classroom by encouraging sportsmanship in athletics, compassion on service learning trips and respect and caring when preparing for our schoolwide talent show. Beginning this year, VPMS has switched to standards based grading, which is a way of demonstrating student proficiency based on standards or specific learning goals

and not on a number of points earned, and our Hawk PRIDE character traits have become a way for teachers to help students reflect on their learning and show parents where improvements can be made. The feedback is specific, relevant and allows our students to grow both academically and morally.

As mentioned, VPMS has added several new staff members and has a new principal. When interviewing new teachers, we ask multiple questions putting character education at the forefront of the hiring process. Questions such as “What role does character education play in school?” and “How do you integrate character education into your daily lesson plans?” help guide the interviews and give the hiring team an idea of background knowledge a teacher has in character. We are very fortunate to have a new principal who has attended the Leadership Academy in Character Education and is just as passionate about character education as we are.

INTENTIONAL AND COMPREHENSIVE

VPMS has taken deliberate steps to allow students a voice and choice in the events and implementation of activities at school. Students chose the acronym PRIDE to describe what our core values mean to us and how we behave in all aspects of our home and school life. The Peer Mediation program has shown students how to deal with their conflicts in a positive way, as well as helping students develop skills to work through conflicts and manage their anger. In addition, VPMS utilizes the Boys’ Town Social Skills program to incorporate core ethical values into everyday behavior and provide feedback and learning opportunities. Students are encouraged to role play scenarios that may arise in daily activities and discuss ways to appropriately monitor their feelings and behavior. VPMS has also begun using *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* (Covey, 1998) in teaching our Boys Town Skills, and we hear the proactive vocab-

ulary in the building more often. The two programs have tied together nicely and is used in pre-K through eighth grade.

Students have the opportunity to reflect and comment on issues related to core values in multiple classrooms activities. Our sixth grade science classes look at different ways to control the deer population. Students take various sides and have an ethical debate on how to control the population. Students use positive communication skills as they listen to other students’ points of view and share their own, thus fostering a safe atmosphere where students feel comfortable to take risks. Students also work on goal setting in various classrooms, and that allows time to reflect on their accomplishments and determine what their individual needs are in order to be successful. Our school counselor works with students both individually and in the classroom on academic and behavioral skills necessary to realize their full potential. Some examples include topics such as academic success, bullying, growth mindset and career exploration.

During the current school year, time is set aside each week during Hawk Time for all students and teachers to read a classroom novel. These novels allow students to explore and implement a deliberate approach to lessons in character education that fosters courageous conversations in the classroom. VPMS chooses a different character-themed book each school year like *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1997), and each grade-level team then continues with books geared specifically for their students. Our teachers create meaningful activities around these novels which integrate character education into the curriculum, while relating discussions back to real-world situations. During our advisory time, each class will read and discuss the content. When the school had finished the book, many advisories took the time to talk about diversity and how that relates to each student individually. A few classes grew their own “gardens” (a visual representation of what they thought it should look like), pointing out differences in each person’s small area and how being different makes the

whole garden more interesting and unique. Jordyn, an eighth-grade student, mentioned how she “loved that she could share some of her family’s traditions with her classmates. It makes you feel more like a family here at school.” Students also use CNN Student News to keep up with current events while having class meetings about topics that are important in the world around them.

In classrooms, teachers tie lesson objectives to the character traits and are challenged during post evaluation conversations to incorporate character into daily lessons. For example, students analyze the qualities of historical world leaders and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their leadership, looking for the character values (or lack of) that may have either contributed to the success of that leader’s efforts or to consider how character traits might have improved those efforts. During science classes, students discuss topics such as global warming and extinction and work to understand human responsibility in regards to those issues. Many students work with our sixth grade science teacher to put some good into practice by participating in our Stream Team to help clean up and protect water sources in Valley Park. These activities center on a reflection of our core traits.

Many students who struggle also receive additional support through the Teen Academic Assistance Group program, which is run with the help of a judge from Family Court of St. Louis County. The judge, who volunteers her time, meets with students on a weekly basis and develops attainable and individualized goals for student success. Teachers keep the judge informed with weekly progress reports on each student. The judge discusses goals and work ethic with students and challenges them to be successful now rather than end up in her courtroom later in life. Follow-up statistics show those high school students who participated in the Teen Academic Assistance Group while in middle school increased their GPA by an average of 10.3%.

Teachers guide students in setting up the classroom expectations for the school year.

VPMS has been recognized for a Promising Practice with Class Meetings in the Core Content Areas. These class meetings provide a way for students to see, understand and practice what each class believes are important classroom guidelines. The goal of class meetings is to demonstrate respect for each other and create an environment that fosters student autonomy and a sense of belonging. In ELA classes, our eighth grade teacher makes use of this practice in her version of Socratic seminars. Students work to prepare their personal points of view and how to respectfully argue their opinions. Once a month, students have an opportunity to take part in a grade level class meeting with the principal and school counselor to discuss concerns. During this time, students are asked to voice their concerns, but then the group helps brainstorm ways to make improvements. During the transition to standards based grading, these class meetings with the students at each grade level has allowed the school to address questions and concerns from students and guide them into a new way of measuring mastery in academics.

OUR SCHOOL FAMILY GETS INVOLVED

To encourage moral action in our school, all grade levels work on service-learning projects. Students have multiple opportunities to participate in activities throughout the school year. Sixth-grade projects include adopting a troop in Iraq, Character Fitness, Stream Team Service projects, and lending a helping hand at the fire department on a monthly basis. Our Character Fitness Team developed out of the middle school’s work with Fuel Up to Play 60, Play 60 Challenge, Hoops for Heart and other related activities that cultivate school climate. Five years ago, CharacterPlus and the St. Louis Rams partnered to create an award to recognize schools that incorporate character with fitness and health in the school climate. Valley Park Middle School was the model school for this award in addition to receiving a

Character.org Promising Practice for it in 2011. Students on the Character Fitness Team plan Fuel Up to Play 60 nutrition and physical activity plays for the school year and sponsor schoolwide activities to advocate for good health in the school and community. Activities sponsored by Character Fitness Team include Kick-Out Drugs and Kick-Off a Healthy Life for Red Ribbon Week, Holiday Mail for Heroes sponsored by the St. Louis Rams and the American Red Cross, Hoops for Heart in cooperation with the American Heart Association, Play 60 Challenge and a Heroes Breakfast for our local fire department.

Seventh and eighth graders work with Teen Outreach Program to determine needs in our community at large and create programs to address those needs. During class time, students work to develop a plan and work out how to meet the needs that they have assessed. Students in both seventh and eighth grade spend 1 day (twice a year) at their service learning sites before coming back to VPMS to reflect on projects and continue work toward helping others. Some examples of this year's projects include Ranken Jordan Children's Hospital, USO, Head Start, Toys 4 Tots, and a St. Louis City Food Bank. Students, teachers and parents are asked to go along, and they continue to find the experience of helping others a rewarding one. Megan, a seventh-grade student, believes this is not only beneficial to those she helps, but also prepares her in developing skills she needs when looking at her career path in the medical field. By providing our students opportunities to learn outside of the classroom, we make the core content much more meaningful, and students find value in their academics.

DOES IT WORK? DEFINITELY

VPMS has always used a variety of measurements to assess the effectiveness of character education initiatives and our school climate, including our annual surveys, geared toward our students and community, that we have

administered the last 5 years. These surveys take into account an understanding of where students feel they are in terms of belonging, expectations, autonomy and influence, altruism, competence, and parent involvement. In addition, teachers collect qualitative data in the form of rating scales and general class meetings to get student feedback in relation to how well certain aspects of character education is working.

Hawk PALS, one of our Promising Practice initiatives, is a highlight of what works at VPMS. Hawk PALS are eighth grade students who apply to mentor and program transition activities for incoming sixth graders. The Hawk PALS begin with training over the summer to plan the orientation day prior to the first day of school. They work our Open House night and assist the sixth grade students and parents in navigating the building and opening lockers (always a challenge). During the school year, our Hawk PALS work with the sixth-grade teachers in advisory to meet the needs of students who may be struggling or need a mentor/role model. Hawk PALS also teach lessons to their sixth-grade advisory, emphasizing our Hawk PRIDE and academic success. These students take on the role as mentor not only for the sixth grade, but the entire middle school. As a result, students at VPMS have a resource to go to that may be more comfortable for them than seeking out an adult. Students develop compassion in regards to helping those who struggle and seek to lend a hand where it's needed.

Another successful practice at VPMS is our Peer Mediation program. Started in 2006, this program and the training of our mediators have evolved to meet the needs of our students. Training for our mediators occurs outside of school, usually a day in the summer, so that students are prepared to start the year helping their classmates. Our Peer Mediation program encourages students who are having conflicts with their peers to work on solving the problem, not avoiding it or making matters worse. Students will sit down in a room with two mediators and discuss the problem and brain-

storm solutions. The mediators do not provide the solutions; they just help facilitate the discussion. Students who participate in peer mediation work on creating a win-win situation for both parties, solving the problem while avoiding consequences if the issue would have escalated. By using this instead of traditional discipline, students at VPMS learn the value of resolving conflicts in a peaceful and respectful manner which carries on throughout their lives. A former peer mediator remarked, “problems happen; it’s how we deal with them (like with peer mediation) that makes a difference.”

Each spring, VPMS sends out surveys via email and the website to students, parents and staff members to assess school climate. During our summer meeting, our SLT reviews this data to determine the goals for the upcoming school year and then develops action plans to meet student needs. In 2015, our SLT determined the need to look at our students’ sense of belonging and autonomy. These were two areas where we noticed trends that tended to be more unfavorable to the climate of VPMS. The SLT and all staff members will continually reexamine the ethical traits of the character education process and will reflect and self-assess each summer in order to provide the entire staff a common theme, continual training, support and reflection opportunities. Not only do the data indicators show there is success in building a foundation of character in students and where future resources should be focused, but also demonstrates that character education is always a work in progress.

LOOK TOWARD THE FUTURE

VPMS has a multitude of reasons to be proud of what has been achieved, but we are also aware there is much more we can accomplish. Each school year brings in new students and families with different and growing needs. We aspire to rise to the challenge and discover new ways to meet those needs while building the relationships we have determined are an essential part of being a successful and productive citizen. VPMS continues to look for ways to make improvements to the overall climate in its building. While it can be challenging at times, doing what’s best for our students and families is what keeps us moving forward.

As a National School of Character, it is our responsibility to provide information and resources to other educators and schools to help educate and support their character education journey. VPMS has the honor of hosting multiple guests every year. Our students have taken over this responsibility and enjoy spending time talking with other adults about character education and making it meaningful for the school community. VPMS sees character education as a constantly growing and evolving process, and sustaining our program’s success for the good of our students is our number one priority.

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