

THINKING CRITICALLY AND TAKING MORAL ACTION

Sheridan School

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About a year ago, Sally called me upset. Her kindergarten daughter Annika was getting bossed around by a classmate, Olivia. “She’s forcing her to hand over her Oreos, and not letting her play with her other friends. How can I get her to stick up for herself?” Sally asked me. “I don’t want her to be a pushover!” At Sheridan School, we prioritize respect for others *and* self-advocacy. We know that kids who learn to voice their needs and opinions at a young age will be more likely to take moral action and work for social justice throughout their lives.

From the beginning, Sheridan, an independent K–8 progressive school founded in Washington, DC, in 1927, has had a fierce commitment to both equity and diversity. Of our 225 students, 35% are students of color and more than 25% receive financial aid. So, in keeping with Principle 7 of the *The 11 Principles of Character Framework* (Character.org, 2018), which relates to fostering students’ self-motivation, Sheridan educators

take an intentional approach to educating students who will not only be able to think critically and solve problems, but who will feel compelled to use those skills to effect positive change. While this list is far from exhaustive, here are seven ways we keep the focus on graduating decent, ethical, contributing members of society.

TEACH CONFLICT-RESOLUTION SKILLS BOTH FORMALLY AND INFORMALLY

From the moment our students enter kindergarten, they are taught to resolve conflicts using the “Peace Rug.” One kindergartener recently described the process to her teacher. “When you have a problem, you say, ‘I didn’t like that you did ... blah, blah, blah,’” she explained. “Then *they* say, ‘You said ... blah, blah, blah.’ Then you shake hands and agree

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not to do it again. And if you do, you go to the principal's office."

Annika invited Olivia to the Peace Rug, but that did not entirely solve the problem, so we worked on Olivia's empathy and Annika's courage. We role played different scenarios and talked about being kind but honest and brave. Several months later, I was supervising recess when Olivia came running over to me. "Annika won't play with me, and I don't know why!" she said angrily. As we walked over to Annika, I encouraged Olivia to reflect on how she might have offended her friend. "She'll be more likely to forgive you if you own your part," I said. Olivia wouldn't budge. Her first words were, "You *have* to play with me! Why do you keep running away?" Annika calmly answered, "You smacked me, pulled my hair and sat on my face. What part of that is confusing to you?" Annika had learned to use her voice, a skill we hope she'll continue to use. Meanwhile, Olivia was discovering that insensitivity comes at a cost, and she's been working on her flexibility. As this anecdote illustrates, children navigate social drama throughout the school day, and educators can give them tools to manage that conflict constructively and kindly.

GIVE KIDS OPPORTUNITIES TO LEAD AND TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Leadership starts with taking responsibility for yourself, so we give students ample opportunity for self-directed, unstructured play. We know that kids learn critical socioemotional and interpersonal skills at recess and other times when adults get out of their way. Beyond the playground, even the youngest students clear their plates and rinse their silverware at lunch, and children with allergies are taught to self-advocate.

In the classroom, students have jobs and work as a class to write contracts that address core ethical values such as respect, responsibility, empathy, advocacy and teamwork. Starting in first grade, they also lead their own

parent-teacher conferences, highlighting the projects they want their parents to see, setting realistic goals and creating an action plan. Teachers help them reflect on their work and progress.

All students at Sheridan School have a cross-grade buddy. The eighth graders teach fourth graders how to be an older buddy. As Sheridan Head of School Jessica Donovan notes, "they pass the torch to the next generation of Sheridan leaders." To create leaders, teachers need to be role models. To that end, staff members take advantage of opportunities to learn and to lead, whether they're teaching colleagues Spanish, running the social justice group or guiding equity and diversity training sessions.

INCORPORATE SERVICE LEARNING AND ENCOURAGE MORAL ACTION

Students are involved in service learning activities at each grade level, working closely with non-profit organizations. Students act as stewards of the environment, and work toward equity and justice locally and abroad. They participate in neighborhood trash walks, launch education campaigns to raise awareness of the global need for clean water and the problem of human trafficking, paint portraits and learn the stories of senior citizens at So Others May Eat, prepare sandwiches for Martha's Table, participate in community walks for the homeless, and make soup and muffins for local community kitchens.

The first-grade teachers present a unit called #Black Lives Matter: A Lesson on Justice, Empathy and Love. Along with other schools across the country, Sheridan is launching a shared set of lessons that examine schools' policies in pursuit of social and educational equity for black students. They are looking at the topic through a developmentally appropriate lens to help students understand inequities based on race. The teachers explain that prejudice is "an idea you have about some-

one before you get to know them.” Students are then asked, “What is something someone might say about you before they get to know you?” One boy recently shared that people might assume he’s a girl because he has long hair. Another said, “I don’t like Barbies, but people think I do because I’m a girl.”

Students often initiate their own projects. One seventh-grade student wrote a persuasive essay about hunger problems in besieged areas of Syria. He donated some of his allowance to the World Food Program and wrote the World Food Program a letter. Officials from the organization then came and filmed Sheridan students. As an eighth-grade teacher notes, “Instead of just asking students to write or talk about identity or social justice, we ask them to do something. Action, solution-oriented projects educate people about important topics.” Our sixth graders take a tour of different Wards in Washington, DC, examining power, change, leadership, and people. Seventh grade studies slavery and oppression, and eighth grade looks at the United Nations and global power.

PROVIDE A CHALLENGING CURRICULUM

Sheridan’s academic curriculum is concept-based, which means it preserves the integrity of each subject area while encouraging cross-discipline connections. We want kids to understand ideas, not memorize facts. Our curriculum is rigorous *and* it incorporates social and emotional learning whenever possible. Here are some examples: Kindergarteners create a post office and write inquisitive, appreciative letters to members of our community, including police officers and teachers. In Spanish class, the first word they are taught is “respect.” In first grade, teachers hold weekly problem-solving meetings and ask students to share stories about the origin of their name. In second grade, teachers discuss conflict de-escalation and lead discussions on inclusive recess behavior.

In fourth grade, students do targeted identity work in areas such as race, gender and religion, and pose reflective questions about celebrating differences. In fifth grade, students write essays about core values that they turn into “This I believe” podcasts. In sixth grade, children are placed in charge of creating their class contract, and in science they make kits to decrease infant mortality. In seventh grade, students present Tiny TED talks about identity and the danger of a single story. In eighth grade, kids write “This I believe” essays, participate in the school’s Leadership Day, plan assemblies, write personal exit interviews and develop self-awareness through spoken poetry.

At every grade level, we are committed to hands-on maker learning. We believe that when students create, design and build projects through hands-on tinkering, they develop self-efficacy and learn to collaborate. We also believe the maker philosophy reaches many different types of students.

Teachers have the leeway to differentiate, providing hands-on, stimulating work and showing students how to notice patterns and test theories. Students are given opportunities to self-advocate, seek help and retake assessments. Homework is designed to reinforce classroom learning and help students reflect on content and develop good study and learning habits. Children are encouraged to choose their own recreational reading. The report card is standards-based, so students’ achievement is not measured against their peers. Along with assessing mastery of concepts, narratives evaluate students’ ability to cooperate, resolve conflict, take responsibility, and use materials and space respectfully.

TRAIN TEACHERS IN RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM AND USE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

At Sheridan, students often engage in cooperative learning projects. They are encouraged to pursue individual interests as well. For example, sixth-graders choose a specific passion,

working with instructors on everything from stop-action cinematography to service learning. All classroom teachers receive formal training in Responsive Classroom, the instructional method we use to make sure our practices create a positive community and align with kids' developmental stages. Donovan, our head of school, gives a few examples:

We know that third graders can get very excited about their work, but can be impatient and sloppy. Consequently, we design activities to build their stamina around revising, and introduce other activities that allow them to let their enthusiasm run free and not worry about neatness or revision. We also know that sixth graders like to argue and debate, so we make sure there is room for this within the curriculum.

Donovan adds that Responsive Classroom practices look different in different grades, but the basic tenets are the same—cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy and self-control all lead to academic competence. “If the classroom environment is designed with these beliefs in mind, students are ready and able to learn,” she explains. “So instead of calling out one student for misbehaving, we share our expectations for the class and expect the whole class to meet the expectation.” Discipline is taught as explicitly as math or reading. We use restorative justice, incorporating mindfulness and a formal written reflection. Students are never shamed, and consequences are logical rather than punitive.

HELP KIDS EXPLORE THEIR OWN IDENTITIES AND DEVELOP RESPECT FOR OTHERS' STORIES

We know that kids are more likely to respect others' identities if they feel positive about their own. To that end, kids start learning about cultural identifiers and different family structures in kindergarten. We have a variety of affinity groups and provide teachers with professional development, so they can properly support these groups. Our current groups

include ones for adopted children, students of color, LGBTQ+ kids, and boys and girls interested in societal issues around gender. Recently, to celebrate Black History Month, kids in the Students of Color group designed a special lunch menu to honor different traditions and cultures. When the younger students arrived in the cafeteria, the eighth graders explained the food choices.

We also talk about self-respect and respect for others in our formal health and wellness curriculum, which starts in fourth grade, and the counselor meets regularly with seventh and eighth-grade students to discuss social and ethical dilemmas. The students choose the scenarios and pose guiding questions.

FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS

Donovan greets every child with a handshake when they enter the building in the morning. All staff have duties in the lunchroom and at recess, which gives them an opportunity to deepen their relationships with students. Staff also attend morning meetings, where everyone connects and revisits their obligations to the community. At Sheridan, teachers take the time to greet kids by name because we know that relationships are foundational. Students who feel loved and valued are not only kinder classmates, they are also more engaged learners.

IN SUMMARY

There is no one prescribed way for schools to adhere to Principle 7, but we believe that schools achieve good results when they teach students conflict-resolution skills; provide a challenging curriculum that fosters their ability to solve problems; leverage their desire to make a difference; provide safe spaces for exploring identity issues; and lead with empathy and connection, especially as they learn how to recover from their inevitable mistakes.

AUTHOR NOTE

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REFERENCE

Character.org. (2018). *The 11 principles of character framework*.