

Francis Howell Middle School's Character Education Journey

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Francis Howell Middle School was honored with the distinction of being named a National School of Character in 2008 by the Character Education Partnership. The year before, it earned the honor of being named a Missouri School of Character. When FHMS began its character education journey in 2001, they were not even aware there was such an award! To be honest, no one at FHMS was even aware of the term character education until Principal Amy Johnston met Dr. Marvin Berkowitz in 2001. While certainly a school of character in name and action, FHMS does not have a character education “program.” According to Principal Amy Johnston, “We have a culture that sustains and nurtures a philosophy, not a program. We have high character expectations for our students and staff. The primary reason for our success is we have a staff that never says no nor will they ever settle for status quo. They are always reaching inside for more to give and reaching out to give it. Because the staff continually models and expects good character, the students are willing, responsive participants in these life lessons. People behave the way they are expected to behave, and we expect both students and staff to demonstrate respect, responsibility, honesty and compassion. Character education is deeply embedded in everything we do and it is impossible to separate it from any facet of our school.”

Character education may be embedded in FHMS's climate, but less than ten years ago it was a foreign concept. In 2001, after working in the field of education for 21 years, Principal Amy Johnston entered the Leadership Academy in Character Education (LACE) under the direction of Dr. Marvin W. Berkowitz. Little did she know that this experience would change her philosophy as an educator, and more importantly change the course of Francis Howell Middle School. When she signed on for LACE, she had no real awareness of character education. This year long academy enlightened her as to what character education is and the impact it can have on schools. She, like many others, believed that only schools with very high discipline referrals and/or low grades need character education. LACE taught her that all schools need to focus on

developing good character in students and staff. She came away from LACE believing that that character is the foundation of true success and lasting happiness. “Too much of our time as educators is spent on academics and test scores. If students are taught the importance of being respectful, honest, responsible and compassionate, they will be good students and more importantly, good people.” This philosophy has been foundational to the growth and success of Francis Howell Middle School.

While attending monthly LACE workshops with Dr. Berkowitz, who brought in many experts in the field of character education, Johnston left each meeting full of enthusiasm and hope for what character education could bring to FHMS. Her first big challenge was to convince her staff to take the character education journey with her. In LACE she learned that the principal must lead the character education initiative, but equally important is a staff who will initially follow and eventually co-lead. When she began sharing her excitement for character education with her staff, their reaction was typical in that they saw it as one more thing on a very full plate, but she saw that as a typical “knee jerk reaction.” According to Johnston, “Before I could ask our students to respect one another, I had to point out to my staff that we too had work to do. We had to discuss things like gossip, cliques and disrespect among the adults before we could lead those conversations with our students, and this is tough stuff! All character education begins in the mirror which is why so many people reject it!” Another knee jerk response was, “FHMS has always been a good school so why do we need it?” The answer was “because we can be better!” Thanks to the wisdom and direction of Dr. Berkowitz, she spent a full year focusing on staff development, rather than on teaching character to students. They discussed books and articles she received in LACE. Some of the books studied were, *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer, *Eight Habits of the Heart* by Clifton Taulbert, *Life’s Greatest Lessons* by Hal Urban, and *Character Matters* by Tom Lickona. Johnston wrote newsletter articles to parents and the staff. A committee of teachers and parents who were interested in investigating possibilities for how to best reach students with important character education lessons met monthly. “The more we learned, the more we realized that it was a journey we wanted to take.” This first leg of the journey was the most important because good character in schools begins with the staff. As the staff learned more about character education, they learned more about themselves and the importance of being real and vulnerable with one another and with their students.

After a year of LACE followed by a year of professional development, the FHMS staff finally felt ready to develop and implement a class devoted to character education. A

committee of teachers and the administrative team created the concept for Character Connection Class (CCC). Three minutes were carved from each of the seven periods to create a 20 minute class to kick off each day. The goals of the class were simple, create connections (relationships) and build character. Filling the 20 minutes was challenging because there was no curriculum. The committee believed that relationships can't be taught from a book; rather they must develop slowly over time. They feared that a mandated curriculum would make the class feel more academic and less relational. What they learned was that while a curriculum is not necessary some element of structure was. Borrowing on the successes of Halifax Middle School (Halifax, PA; a 2001 National School of Character), it was decided that each CC class would be a blend of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders and that they would loop with the same teacher for three years. This concept would give teachers three years with their CCC students and give the students extended opportunities to build relationships, both with each other and with their CCC teacher. Like anything new it was a struggle in the beginning because expectations were unclear and there was no curriculum, but as the teachers became comfortable with their CCC and as the students became comfortable with one another, it blossomed. It began meeting only one morning a week, but within a few months both students and teachers were asking for more time. The second year of its implementation it met three times a week and by year three every morning at FHMS began with CCC. When guests visit, the one component of character education that students describe as critical is the Character Connection Class.

After eight years, CCC still has no structured curriculum. Staff, students and parents at FHMS believe it accomplishes the goals of character building and developing personal relationships with people in different grades with different interests. And it gives each student a sustained and valued relationship with at least one adult at the school. CCC has evolved and changed over the past eight years because as students and teachers develop stronger core values and better relationships, they seek ways to stretch and serve others. CCC is a class where the development of character in our students extends beyond "the head" and into their hearts and hands. During the past eight years, CCCs have raised money for various organizations, local families, soldiers and victims of natural disasters. By discussing their core values of respect, responsibility, honesty and compassion and working hard to understand the importance of positive relationships, many at FHMS have learned the reward and value of serving others. The 50 Character Connection Classes frequently work together to sponsor fun school-wide activities that ultimately benefit others. For example, one CCC sponsored and organized a school-wide CCC Dodge Ball Tournament. The entry fees were used to

buy the materials for bat boxes that the students made and distributed to the community. Another CCC sells bagels each Thursday morning and the money raised is used to support a family in need. Yet another makes 'Chair-acters' for our school as well as others to use as very visible, comfortable, and decorative reminders of our core ethical values. Sometimes the service is as simple as helping our building custodians sweep steps and sometimes it is a building-wide effort to help someone in need across the globe. In addition to service projects, CCC students have learned to write personal learning and character goals, tutored their fellow students, and developed character journals. It is not uncommon to see our students cleaning bus windows, sweeping steps or delivering cookies to the secretaries. These are not lessons from a book; they are students showing unsung heroes that they are appreciated. And this in turn transforms the social climate at FHMS, which is a critical ingredient in character education success. As a school, FHMS walks the talk.

In its third year of implementation, FHMS also began to focus on the *11 Principles of Character Education* from the Character Education Partnership. In doing so, they were able to ensure that the implementation was deep and through. They assessed how effective character education was by taking a self-assessment regarding the 11 Principles. After this assessment, they focused on how to shore up the Principles that were weak and move ahead in the areas where they felt confident.

According to CEP, the First Principle of effective character education is identifying and promoting core ethical values. The school staff, students and parent community agreed on our four core values after two years of surveys and rich debates. The values are: respect, responsibility, honesty, compassion. Students and staff then defined the core values more comprehensively in terms of behaviors that could be observed in the school, family and community. Class discussions were formed around how respect, responsibility, honesty and compassion looked and sounded and the school made deliberate effort to make the core values known throughout the community. Principle Two says that schools should define character comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior. An understanding of the core values can be seen in the way students react to "real life." When tragedies like earthquakes and tsunamis devastate communities and lives, teaching students the importance of compassion that guides their desire to be responsible human beings is a lesson that has relevance and power. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, one of our teacher's families was virtually wiped out by this disaster. Our students and staff rallied behind this teacher and donated money and threw a shower for her 84 year old mother when she came to visit.

Character development should be manifested in student behavior. Hence character education must eventually impact the school's discipline policies and practices, and the results should be seen in data on student misbehavior. Instead of assigning ineffective discipline, teachers spend a great deal of time talking to students about their behaviors and asking them for alternatives to poor choices. Principle three states that schools should have a comprehensive, intentional, proactive and effective approach to character education. Character Connection Classes, were created for this very purpose.

Principle Four states that effective character education creates a caring school community. Visitors to FHMS often comment that the school "feels" different or that it "feels comfortable." Those feelings are difficult to assess and almost impossible to put into a graph or quantify, but they are a reality and an indication that FHMS is providing a caring school community. Students know that the staff cares about them due to the number of teachers that attend school events, participate in assemblies, and in their personal time tutor and bond with students.

Principle 5 states that effective CE provides students with opportunities for moral action. Students have volunteered their time to come to school on Saturdays to help plant flowers, lay mulch and create a nice courtyard as part of a campus beautification project. Students in CCC also go out of their way to show various groups their appreciation throughout the year. Bus drivers often get their busses swept, custodians get the windows washed, and secretaries have been treated to special breakfasts. And, as noted above, a core aspect of CCC is community service. Principle six indicates that effective CE includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them succeed. If this is done well, principle seven, developing students' self-motivation, will be realized. Character education cannot be separate from an academic education and when the two are blended successfully, students will learn what it feels like to be truly proud of their academic success. Schools that value the curriculum and test scores more than they value the students themselves cannot teach the value of intrinsic motivation. Students at FHMS are given voice and choice in many of their assignments and are encouraged to learn both with and from one another. Teachers care about their students and they realize that learning is the constant and time is the variable. They teach, re-teach, grade and re-grade until they are satisfied that each student knows what they are expected to know. Teachers at FHMS believe that the "re-do" philosophy improves the overall culture of the building. When students who formerly struggled with school success begin to take pride in themselves they develop an intrinsic motivation to

continue to do their best. As students come to see and appreciate their academic success, teachers see them becoming more self-motivated. Students are thanked for what they may view as small acts of kindness. Respectful behavior is not rewarded with things, but it is recognized with phone calls home, a mention of it in the daily bulletin, and a personal thank you for doing the right thing. Discipline situations offer opportunities for moral action as well as development in self-motivation, but discipline must be handled on a case by case basis for these opportunities to be realized. For example, instead of suspending students out of school for fighting, we have offered opportunities for them to work together on a project that will give them an opportunity to build a relationship. When students feel that something is unfair, they often ask for a meeting with a teacher or a class meeting to find a solution. This empowers students which is another way to build the capacity for self-motivation.

Principle eight indicates that successful character building efforts must include the entire staff, and they require positive leadership from both staff and students. The Building Improvement Group is the decision-making body that creates building goals. While many of our support staff cannot attend CCC daily, each person in our support staff has been adopted by a CCC. The staff modeling of the core values is evident in the discipline data. Many teachers no longer send students to the office, instead they talk with students about their behavior and how that behavior violated one of the core values.

Principle nine, states that effective character education fosters shared moral leadership and long-range support for the initiative. Principal Amy Johnston and three staff members have graduated from LACE and a climate committee continues to meet regularly to discuss ways to assess, sustain and improve building culture. Students are also asked to lead CCC throughout the year. They are encouraged to teach their peers about the importance of good character, work on building positive relationships and find ways to show others appreciation. Principle ten points out that parent and community involvement are central to all character building efforts because the first and most important character educators are parents. Parents have been invited to Character Connection Classes to discuss how respect, responsibility, honesty and compassion impact their places of work and their home. Principle eleven stresses the importance of assessing how effective the CE initiative is. Part of our site improvement plan is to continually assess where we are in our character building efforts. We take a climate survey twice a year and analyze grade and discipline data each quarter.

Character education has changed more than just the attitudes of the students, teachers at FHMS understand the difference between teaching and learning. Prior to character education, the philosophy of many teachers was “I taught it. They didn’t learn it. Not my problem.” The relationships between teachers and students make it almost impossible to continue that philosophy. Teachers know it is their responsibility to ensure that their students learn. One of the best ways to help students who aren’t learning is to help them realize that they are an important part of the school and CCC does that. The CCC teachers have the opportunity to get to know their students well. All progress reports and grade cards and disciplinary data are distributed to students in their CCCs so that that teacher can help those students achieve their goals. It is their hope that CCC will continue to give opportunities to not only know what the core values are, but to live them. We desire to help our students to be other-centered and grounded in good character.

Character education has not only changed student attitudes, it has changed faculty attitudes as well. One of the most significant changes our staff agreed to was allowing students to re-do failed tests and assignments. When we asked ourselves, what we were doing for the students who weren’t leaning we realized that many failing grades were the result of incomplete homework and failed tests. We realized that our true goal is to see students learn, not learn in our timeframe. This philosophical shift has had an enormous impact on the school culture. Grades are up, discipline is down, and students are beginning to see that we will not give up on them. As a result, FHMS has improved academic and behavioral data.

	<u>Detentions</u>	<u>ISS Days</u>	<u>OSS Days</u>	<u>Total F's</u>
2002-03	1153	321	206	409
2003-04	1025	309	228	490
2004-05	544	167	188	267
2005 -06	505	190	136	168
2006-07	412	169	145	66

Perhaps even more important than the data are personal stories telling of a school that is comfortable and caring, a satisfied staff and happy students. It is difficult to explain the climate of the school, but words that others have used are comfortable, different, and warm. The teachers really like the students and it shows. There is a warmth and rapport that does not characterize all schools. Students new to the building have told the staff that they feel safe at FHMS, and students who have unsuccessful behavioral and/or academic records at other schools have very few problems at FHMS. The staff at FHMS is exceptional. Their desire to see students succeed academically is matched by their desire to see them develop into caring young adults. The building is laced with conversations regarding respectful, responsible behavior, honesty and the importance of compassion.

To assess continued growth each year staff, students and parents are surveyed regarding the climate of the building. Site improvement climate goals are based on this survey data. In addition to this formal, annual survey, our students complete goal sheets each quarter. They set both academic and behavioral goals during their Character Connection Class. Our core ethical values of respect, responsibility, honesty and compassion are woven into our vision, mission and core commitments and we believe these values and our commitment to them help us achieve our goals of academic improvement and an improved climate.

FHMS will continue to formally and informally assess progress by monitoring our data, looking for achievement in personal goals and listening to student voice. They understand and believe that there is no end to the character education journey. Principal Sound Off is used as an informal assessment of our climate. Monthly we have representatives from each of our 52 character connection classes come to a meeting with a principal and counselor and let us know the concerns of their class. The first Sound Off resulted in the students wanting to be allowed to have water bottles throughout the day and be allowed to listen to IPODS. The staff agreed to both requests. Our next steps will be to continue to give students more voice and responsibility in their school.

If you knew me, you would laugh at but the fact that my advice to someone starting this journey would be to proceed with caution. (Caution is not in my nature.) Many seem to want character education to be the answer to all of their problems, and they want quick fixes. Character education isn't a quick fix and you have to take it slowly! Learn all you can about what character education is before you attempt to "do" it in your school. Read books, visit schools, take classes, get excited about character education and all it

has to offer your school. Once you are grounded in the philosophy, share your knowledge and excitement with your staff and continue to learn together. That process builds trust and strengthens professional relationships which lay the foundation for a rich school of character. Once the staff is truly on board, discuss your goals. What do you want character education to change? How will you know if it is working? What will you do if it doesn't? Be specific, set time lines, know the results you are seeking, and then create a plan. Introduce the staff to the 11 Principles of Character and use them as your checkpoints. Slowly roll it out to the students and involve them as much as possible in planning and implementing things that will help them learn about and demonstrate good character. Make character education a priority in your school. You will never regret it.