

Mark Twain: A Journey to a National School of Character

Marvin W. Berkowitz
Center for Character and Citizenship – University of Missouri-St. Louis
Karen Smith
Mark Twain Elementary School, Brentwood, MO

Mark Twain Elementary is a small neighborhood school with approximately 175 students from grades Kindergarten to Fifth (ages 5-11). Its core Character Education (CE) values can be summed up in one commitment statement—to care for your neighbor as you care for yourself. Our CE program has been refined to ensure that character is fully embedded in all aspects of daily school life. To our neighbors and to ourselves, we demonstrate **respect, responsibility, caring** and **service** as core ethical outcomes to show that we have nurtured in ourselves the perseverance, compassion, and self-discipline necessary to be good citizens.

We have implemented a CE Action Plan with four key objectives:

- create a safe and nurturing learning environment,
- develop strong character and good citizenship qualities among all students,
- develop healthy lifestyles,
- promote the development of social skills and peer leadership.

In 2002 we were not a stellar school: academic performance was low, student discipline referrals were high, and bullying was often tolerated. Back then, staff had little voice in decision making, and students had no voice at all. Much of what did exist was based on extrinsic motivators: awards assemblies, public recognition. Character education, such as it was, was done TO students. Parent involvement was viewed as intrusive, and community partnerships did not exist. But a book study had begun on this topic, and staff were starting to question the current practices.

Then in 2002 Karen Smith was hired as our new Principal. With her new leadership, we began a new journey. Karen had attended the Leadership Academy in CE (LACE), and had successfully led the implementation of the Caring School Community program in her previous school in collaboration with CHARACTER*plus*, a local professional development organization focused on character education. She introduced the A, B, Cs of character: autonomy, belonging and competence. Through her studies with Dr. Marvin Berkowitz, both in LACE and her doctoral studies, and through her training on the Caring School Community project, we began our journey.

Over the first two years we transformed, as a team, the climate and culture among our staff. The first steps were to invest in staff professional development and begin to assess the school culture. A team of staff was trained in the Caring School Community model that Karen had implemented in her prior school, and staff professional development continued in other areas as well. The school also completed the CHARACTER*plus* school climate surveys as a baseline measure to assess future growth.

The empowerment of stakeholder groups was an early (and continuing) emphasis. Beyond the empowerment of staff through professional development and leadership teams, student empowerment was also tackled. Where there was not a role for student voice before, a student Character Council was established. Students wrote a character pledge that is still repeated every morning at Mark Twain. Every classroom used class meetings to facilitate student establishment of classroom behavior norms at the beginning of the 2004 school year. Classes helped establish norms for other parts of the school as well, such as the playground. And a staff character education leadership team was established as well, something that is emphasized both by LACE and the Caring School Community. Where parent involvement was distrusted before, a Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) was established, and we began to rewrite the building philosophy and provide opportunities for parents to have voice.

Curriculum then became a focus, as the staff began to systematically examine the academic curriculum and integrate character concepts and methods proactively. And

hiring practices were revised to promote the selection of staff who resonated with a character education philosophy.

In 2005 we focused on three new emphases. First, we tackled reducing bullying, in part through a whole staff book study on the topic. Second, we emphasized service learning and promoted it throughout the school. And third, we realized that having common school-wide language around character and behavior would help make discipline and behavior management more effective and meaningful and developmental. So a behavior grid and a set of common procedures were developed.

In 2006, we turned a new corner when Karen Smith and our counselor, Myra Earls, brought the concept of “families” to Mark Twain. Families were constructed with 2 students from each grade paired with an adult. We believed that creating a sense of family across the age groups would increase the success of all of them. They created their own family names and identities and met to promote cross-age relationships. Fifth grade students escorted their kindergarten family members to meetings, and families focused on character and service activities. In 2007 Mark Twain was recognized by the Character Education Partnership for its Families program. As we looked at our annual climate data, we decided that we needed even more opportunities for student voice. And we recognized that we would benefit from more differentiated instruction and more collaborative learning. We continued the work of integrating character education content into our curriculum, but also began to bring more collaborative strategies to the curriculum as well. In 2010, we gave students even more responsibility by asking the 5th grade classes to teach the Family lessons. Students also revisited and rewrote the Community Pledge and the school norms.

The journey of the past 9 years has been based on the rewarding work of implementing initiatives that would transform our entire learning community. We all work hard--students, staff, parents and community partners--to create an environment where we continue to learn to be just and caring. And we emphasize empowerment of all. Every adult leads a family; that includes the cook and the secretaries as well as the

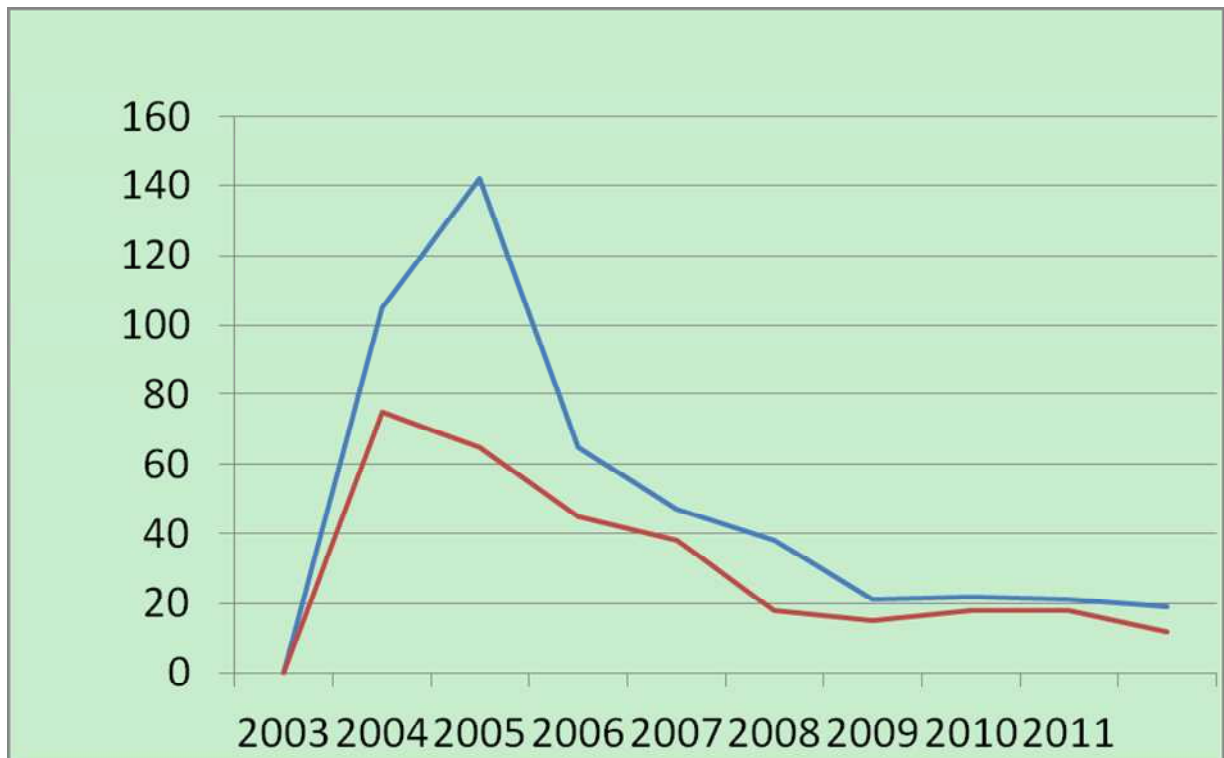
teachers. And they all have a Navigator Pal, a student who we feel could benefit from an added special relationship with a caring adult. And we fundamentally are a school where everyone cares...deeply. The leadership of Karen Smith is at the heart of Mark Twain Elementary and its core pillars of excellence. She cares about everyone, especially the children. She empowers everyone, including the children. And she is utterly dedicated to the success of all in a caring, value-driven environment. So that is what we have become.

We owe so much to those who have studied and shared their journeys; Tom Lickona, Eric Schaps, Marvin Berkowitz, Phil Vincent, and Sandy McDonnell. They have changed our lives and the lives of those we serve.

And the proof is in the data. As we started our journey, we were averaging over 120 office referrals and 70 bullying reports per year. Less than 1/3 of our students were meeting the state academic requirements. Over the past three years we have averaged 20 office referrals and 16 bully reports annually. And the latest state assessment shows that over 80% of our students are meeting the state academic requirements. For this we have been recognized as a Missouri School of Character (2008 and 2011), a Missouri Gold Star School (2009), a National Blue Ribbon School (2009), and a National School of Character (2011).

Transforming Behaviors

--- Office Referrals
--- Bully Reports



Transforming Academics (% Meeting Missouri State Academic Standards)

