

Why Brains Alone Are Not Enough (Cont'd from cover)

into caring and responsible adults – factors such as positive adult role models, parent involvement in school, strong family communication and regular, constructive activity, such as arts clubs or athletics.

The Board of Education adopted a long-range Strategic Plan, embedding much of the 40 Assets language into the district's mission statement and individual belief statements.

Meanwhile, school leaders sought out programs that had social, as well as academic, purpose.

At Timberlane, they split the student body into grade-level "teams" – a popular middle school concept – and organized school life around them. Each fall they packed off the 6th grade teams to Camp Speers-Eljabar, a YMCA camp in the Pocono Mountains, where, for three days, students learn team-building skills, along with environmental science. Camp activities are grounded in the Y's core values of Caring, Honesty, Respect, and Responsibility – a near-perfect match of the Six Pillars adopted by the school this year.

On campus, Timberlane also ramped up its attention to bullying and concentrated on cultivating a more caring environment. The annual school theme began mentioning subjects like social justice and personal responsibility. A spectacular, student-created mural in the school's front lobby bears numerous famous quotes on character and courage. Flags depicting the multinational heritage of Timberlane students hang from the cafeteria ceiling.

Last year, school leaders launched a program they call Advisory, in which small groups of students meet every other week with an adult staff member for 33 minutes of down time. Some might use the time to discuss how the Pillars tie into sports, some to continue a debate begun earlier in science class. **How** the time is used, however, is not as important as the fact the time **exists** – giving students an opportunity to connect with one more adult, one more chance for an emotional "check-in."

Advisory accompanied the Six Pillars of Character campaign, and vice principal Tony Suozzo, who is heading up the effort, is determined to make it effective.

He is out to make the Six Pillars part of the Timberlane lexicon, reasoning that students can't learn it until they hear it – over and over. Classroom teachers are helping in a variety of ways.

Rigel and others, for example, tacked Corinthian-styled, construction paper pillars on a bulletin board, labeled each one as a Pillar of Character, and assigned students to find examples of each of them in *October Sky*.

Science teacher Ron Schott's students demonstrated *Caring* when, in tribute to those who battle

breast cancer, they planted more than 100 pink tulip bulbs in the shape of a ribbon outside the cafeteria this fall.

Home economics students of Connie Olde display *Respect* and *Citizenship* when they serve senior citizens luncheons and prepare Thanksgiving dinners for the homeless.

Connections are drawn outside the classroom as well. Vice principal Darren Lewan sees manifestations of *Respect* and *Responsibility* when students care for the new shrubbery in the recently beautified courtyard inside the 6th grade wing.

Students singled out by other students for random acts of kindness – part of a new *Timberlane Says Thanks* campaign – are rewarded with a bracelet bearing the name of the appropriate pillar. And students joining the various and extensive community service projects underway at the school are congratulated in Six Pillar language.

Aligning student behavior with the pillars works the other way, too. Students running afoul of school rules will get a personal escort by Suozzo to the cafeteria, where colorful banners bearing the pillars hang from the rafters, and quizzed on which virtue their behavior has compromised.

"I found it melts them," says Suozzo. "They make the connection and they know what it means now. They **know** it. That's the key."

Lewan has similar aims in his new approach to Saturday detentions. The vice principal has begun assigning jobs to students serving the weekend punishment, doling out rakes and shovels for assorted landscaping work and repairs.

Bullying, the hottest buzzword in character education today, is a major focus of Timberlane's initiative. Suozzo and Lewan are intent on reducing the amount of time consumed by harassment issues, many of them stoked into full blaze by instant communication technologies that are on every teenaged hip.

"That's one of the biggest problems for us," admits Suozzo. "Stuff starts out of school and with IM-ing at home and what-have-you (it gets worse) and then it rolls right in here."

According to many experts, Timberlane's whole-school approach is ideal. Infusing the school culture with core values, in daily conversation and activities, is far more effective than an approach based solely on splashy banners and theme weeks.

"Kids need to hear this language over and over," says Rigel. "They need to see good character being practiced and they need to see the power of it all. Unless we live it, it's all just words. We want them to make these values part of their everyday lives." ❀

A message from Donna DeAngelis-White and Tony Suozzo



In a very real way, educating students about character, leadership, and service is a moral imperative. One of the things that makes Hopewell Valley distinct is our embodiment of our unofficial motto of being a "high performing, high achieving district with a soul."

Although no one has, as yet, figured out how to quantify the soulful component of our district, it remains a vital – perhaps the most vital – element in our schools. Long after students have for-

gotten the importance of symbolism in *The Catcher in the Rye*, they will, we hope, remember that human connection keeps us grounded in the present and hopeful for the future.



Far from being "one more thing to do," we're working on incorporating character, leadership, and service education *into* what we do. The firm foundation that K-5 students establish through Responsive Classroom becomes the basis for the work that students engage in at Timberlane and Central High School. From the discussion at Timberlane connecting the Six Pillars with the film *October Sky* to a high school literature lesson that examines Huck Finn's choices from a moral perspective, we continue to encourage students to think carefully about the impact that their actions have on others. These efforts extend outside the classroom as well. Courtyard beautification projects, ongoing at both secondary schools, are one of many ways students are learning to take responsibility for and build pride in their school environment.

Ultimately, it *does* take a village to raise a child. In our classrooms, our hallways, and in our common spaces, we work every day to encourage our students to create a world that will make them proud. At Timberlane, students pass a mural bearing Gandhi's challenge to "Be the change you want to see in the world." It is our fondest hope to continue to create an environment that makes that possible, and, ultimately, inevitable.



Donna DeAngelis-White is a leading advocate for character education in Hopewell Valley. Supervisor of language arts at Timberlane Middle School and Central High School, she was instrumental in the district's selection as a partner school to one of New Jersey's model schools for character education. Trained through the Princeton Center for Leadership Training, she is active in the Healthy Communities/Healthy Youth initiative. DeAngelis-White holds a master's degree in English/Creative Writing from Rutgers University and a bachelor's degree in English/Secondary Education from Rowan University.

A vice principal of Timberlane Middle School, Tony Suozzo is heading up the school's character education initiative. A former wellness instructor at Central High School and successful soccer and tennis coach, he also served as special assistant to the principal and, briefly, as the district supervisor for wellness. Suozzo holds a master's degree in educational administration from Rider University and a bachelor's degree from Elizabethtown College.

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Portraits of Excellence

Fall 2005

Spotlighting Innovation and Success in the Hopewell Valley Regional School District

Why Brains Alone Are Not Enough

Homer Hickam, the teenaged misfit of *October Sky*, has everything working against him. Family tradition has him destined for the West Virginia coal mines, but Homer, who is mesmerized by outer space and inspired by the recent launch of Sputnik, pursues his dream to launch rockets. A supportive teacher facilitates the book's happy ending, but not before the dream-chaser and his divided family experience much pain and conflict.

October Sky is the kind of story that teachers like Cheryl Rigel love – a stew of complicated emotions and desires guaranteed to inspire spirited classroom discussion. But this year the language arts teacher at Timberlane Middle School has another reason to assign the much-acclaimed memoir.

October Sky is richly themed in the so-called Six Pillars of Character, the core values of Timberlane's recently adopted character education initiative. The values – Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring and Citizenship – would no doubt please the Homer of ancient Greece, whose epic works, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, probed attitudes on honor and virtue.

But getting adolescents to think beyond themselves and find their moral compass in an ever-complicated and difficult world is one of the great challenges for all those preparing youngsters for adulthood. That notion – that teachers are duty-bound not just to fill young heads with algorithms and the Bill of Rights, but groom them to be good citizens and good people, too – has been around awhile. But it's gained strength in the wake of deadly tragedies at

Columbine and elsewhere and as surveys continue to turn up troubling student attitudes on destructive behaviors. And if our own sense of duty were not enough of a motivation, the courts, increasingly, are holding school leaders responsible for the emotional climate of their buildings.

Character education is now mandated in 14 states and encouraged in another 24. Mounds of studies are proving the logical: that children expected to conform to certain behavioral standards in a safe environment will do better in school.

Until the mid-90s, character education in Hopewell Valley consisted largely of honorable community service projects like holiday clothing drives and the occasional inspirational speaker. But a disturbing 1995 student survey on alcohol and tobacco use prompted school leaders to rethink their roles. The district became a full partner in the Healthy Communities/Healthy Youth

initiative of the Hopewell Valley Municipal Alliance, an umbrella group of municipal, civic and religious leaders, launching student empowering concepts like Peer Leaders in the middle and high schools and the anti-drug DARE program in the elementary schools. They promoted parent support groups such as the Parent Leadership Corps and helped pay for local appearances by nationally-known experts on effective parenting.

The district embraced one of the key tenets of Healthy Communities – the so-called 40 Assets model, which holds that there are 40 "building blocks" vital to the development of young people

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Michael Musso honors a classmate for displaying good character in Timberlane's new "Student Says Thanks" campaign.



Timberlane was one of the first schools in the state chosen to pilot the Middle School Peer Leadership initiative developed by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training.

Focusing on Reading, Writing . . . and Respect and Responsibility

On even the best of days, his students might stride up to Bear Tavern teacher David Friedrich, fingers in their ears, and grunt at him. They might just as likely throw a ball of twine at him or thrust their hands at him and sputter gibberish.

What might appear to be a classroom coming apart at the seams are really playful variations of the greeting portion of Morning Meeting, a component of the *Responsive Classroom* model in practice in Hopewell Valley elementary schools. Launched at Bear Tavern in 1995, Responsive Classroom is a highly acclaimed social curriculum designed to strengthen social skills and integrate commonly shared values into the classroom.

The logic behind *Responsive Classroom* is quite simple and research-proven: the more comfortable a child is, the more likely she is to learn. Put her in a classroom where she experiences commonly held values, such as fairness and respect, lay out clear expectations that she too model these values, ensure that her classroom is organized in a way that encourages active learning and she will grow – academically and holistically.

According to experts like Eric Schaps and Esther Schaeffer, *Responsive Classroom* gets it right by focusing on the environment of the classroom.

Schaps and Schaeffer, of the Character Education Partnership, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nonsectarian coalition of organizations based in Washington, D.C., contend that too many initiatives are about good manners and miss the core objective – developing students of strong, independent character.

Character education programs that consist of glossy posters and one-day, themed events might set the tone, but if they are not accompanied by the means for students to become active participants in their environment then they are simply window-dressing, they argue.

Students become participants, they say, in a variety of ways: through student-led class meetings during which they can set goals and solve problems; through “Buddies” programs, which pair whole classes of students of different ages for recreational and service activities, and through regular academic classes in which related ethics and moral issues are broached.

If that is the test, Hopewell Valley stacks up well. Across the district’s four elementary schools, a diverse array of efforts is pointing students toward responsible, compassionate and courageous behavior. Consider:

- **Camp Fire USA (Bear Tavern)** addresses peaceful conflict resolution, substance abuse, bullying/harassment, diversity and personal safety issues.
- **“Buddy classes” (all schools)** pair older and younger students for regularly scheduled activities.
- **Peer Mediators (Hopewell, Toll Gate)** are called **Peace Builders** at Hopewell and **Dino-Solvers** at Toll Gate. Hopewell outfits theirs with royal blue belts which identify them as older students trained to help younger students resolve playground conflicts. Their prime tool is the school’s **Peace Path**, which is painted in bright colors and winds around the playground, encouraging conflict resolution through I-messages and age-appropriate activities.
- **Student Government (all schools)** promotes good citizenship and offers a role for effecting change.
- The national anti-drug **DARE** curriculum (**all schools**) is taught to 5th graders by local police officers. In addition to encouraging safe choices, the classes strive to forge good youth-police relations.
- **Don’t Laugh at Me (Bear Tavern)**, a program designed by Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary, promotes respect and tolerance.
- **Constellations (Stony Brook)** foster a caring environment by matching staffers with small groups of students outside regular classes and adding one more student-adult connection.



Bear Tavern 3rd grader Julia Kolano shares the “Moose Greeting” with a classmate during Morning Meeting.

- **Safety patrols (all schools)** help maintain order at arrival and dismissal times. Responsible 5th graders are chosen for the duty.
- **Character-themed messages (Hopewell, Stony Brook)** are announced daily to the student body by the principal. The messages come from Project Wisdom, which maintains a library of inspirational quotes.
- **Child Assault Prevention (Bear Tavern, Hopewell)** teaches children how to exercise their right to be safe. It provides information about safety

needs and teaches skills for handling abusive situations.

• **Peace Pole (coming this year to Stony Brook)** will bear peaceful messages in four languages and inspire student reflection on their role in promoting peaceful communities.

• **Howe’s Habitat (Toll Gate)**, the school’s outdoor classroom, teaches environmental and social responsibility.

• **Student banking (Hopewell, Toll Gate)** permits students to open an account in a local commercial bank, teaching them fiscal responsibility.

- **Project Democracy (all schools)** carries life-long lessons about civic responsibility and good citizenship.

Experts say that when character-building activities are infused throughout school life – with a frequency and variety that comes close to making them

nearly unremarkable – they have far more impact than the occasional, splashy event with balloons and banners.

The best schools for character education, they say, are the ones that publicly name their values and then live them, from the superintendent on down. Several years ago, when district custodians were issued uniform shirts embroidered with their first names, it was primarily a safety consideration – the uniforms helped identify them as employees. But the personalized uniform also added a more “friendly” touch to the organization and, arguably, contributed to a more caring environment.

Chris Laquidara, principal of Hopewell Elementary, discovered a useful way to teach responsibility on three levels – personal, social and environmental – when she directed students to take turns wiping down their tables when they finished eating lunch. The prime message was personal responsibility, but she also hoped the environmentally green cleaning agent would get students thinking about social obligations too. She also expected behavioral dividends on the playground.

Community service projects tend to be huge and constant in Hopewell Valley elementary schools, due in large part to the deft organizational skills of energetic PTOs. But creative, whole-class efforts exist, too.

Working through Compassion International, the 3rd grade students of Friedrich “adopted” a 6-year-old Ecuadorian boy in 2000, bringing in 25 cents in earned money each week. In the last five years, Friedrich estimates he’s mailed off more than \$1,500 to the boy’s family, which has used it to buy clothing, school supplies and even two beds and a mattress.

“This is so concrete and tangible for them,” he says. “They drop off their quarter and they see the difference it makes in the letters we get and the pictures we see.”

Last year his class also “adopted” a U.S. soldier serving in Afghanistan. The students regularly corresponded with the serviceman and mailed care packages. They also held toy and clothing drives for Afghan children which their adopted soldier distributed.

Bruce Arcurio, Bear Tavern’s principal, is a big believer in making students understand the power of their behavior.

“Through our actions we affect all of those around us,” he said. “Developing good character in children is essential.” ♣

District Mission Statement

The mission of the Hopewell Valley Regional School District, in partnership with the community, is to provide a comprehensive, caring educational experience which:

- Nurtures the unique talents of each individual
- Creates a fulfilled, socially responsible, life-long learner
- Develops confidence and capabilities to face the challenges of a rapidly changing world
- Promotes a culture of respect which values diversity
- As partners, we will provide sufficient resources and a talented, committed staff that creates a safe environment where all individuals flourish.

District Belief Statements

We believe in the worth and dignity of each person.

We believe that all students are entitled to the opportunity to maximize their talents and abilities.

We believe that students thrive in a learning environment that facilitates self-discovery, exploration, and intellectual risk-taking.

We believe that a quality education is a life-long process that fosters academic and cultural understanding.

We believe that an effective education is a shared responsibility by all persons, groups, and organizations within our community.

We believe that we have the obligation to nurture a culture of respect that honors the uniqueness of the individual and fosters responsibility toward the community and the environment.

We believe that an effective educational system anticipates plans and acts in response to a changing world.

Harnessing the Power of Positive Peer Pressure

When Kaitlyn Gregory and her friends take their show on the road, they’re not looking for applause. They want their audience screaming “Gross!” and “Disgusting!” and burying their heads in their shirts. Fortunately, they always get that kind of reaction.

Kaitlyn, a Central High School junior, is a member of the school’s award-winning and popular Teens Against Tobacco Use (TATU) club. Each year since its formation in 1996 TATU has taken its anti-tobacco message to the district’s 4th graders, toting graphic photos of blackened lungs, inflamed gums and rotted teeth. Using props like bug spray and nail polish, they detail the long list of chemicals that lurk in nicotine and, in a dramatic presentation using an old soda bottle and a cigarette, simulate a lung filling with smoke.

TATU’s creative approach and dedication to the anti-tobacco crusade has earned it the 1998 Youth Advocate of the Year Award from the American Cancer Society’s Eastern Region and a 1999 Volunteer of the Year Award from the Governor’s Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse.

Perhaps more importantly, however, TATU is the embodiment of student empowerment, an important concept in character education, say the experts. Students taking charge of an issue of personal responsibility – and then actively trying to influence younger students – is a powerful form of character education at its best, experts agree.

In some respects, TATU serves as a natural extension of the school’s successful Peer Leadership program, also a student-to-student network, begun a decade earlier to help ease the transition from middle school to high school. Like TATU, Peer Leadership draws considerable student interest; this year, 48 students signed up for the training to provide positive peer pressure to younger students.

Strong character models can be found in a variety of student clubs at CHS – certainly through the dozen or so dedicated to community service, such as Operation Smile and Kids for Kids – and through several other efforts designed to divert student attention away from XBoxes and iPods and toward larger, social issues.

A new Model World Health Organization club, focusing on disease and poverty, is promoting global responsibility. It organized creative awareness activities for World AIDS Day this December, including a powerful demonstration on the transmission of infectious disease in a population.

International relations are probed in the Model United Nations Club. Tolerance is the theme of the school’s Gay Straight Alliance, and PANDA, an anti-drug and alcohol group, reflected school pride and responsibility when it used an awareness-raising activity – the planting of 100 red tulips – to beautify an interior courtyard at the school this fall.

In the classroom, an independent study course devoted to ethics is available. But character issues bob to the surface in all disciplines. Literature teachers toil in material rich with moral conflict, of course, but technological advances are propelling topics like genetics, organ transplant, infectious diseases and the environment into ethical waters on a continuing basis, notes biology teacher Karen Lucci. Meaningful study of history is impossible without reflection on the motives and behaviors of leaders. Even students taking classes in non-core areas, such as Child Development which includes a unit on the unique challenges facing single, adoptive and teen parents, can explore issues of character.

And in the gymnasium and on the ball fields, student athletes cannot avoid the character messages inherent in good sportsmanship, an imperative of athletic director Kiki Enderle. Even the student athletic code, with its clear set of expectations and consequences, is a means of effective character education, say experts.

Experts strongly endorse cross-age mentoring, like TATU’s anti-tobacco efforts. But TATU adviser Dana Young has learned that the benefits run both ways. The club’s diverse membership includes students who have trouble finding a niche elsewhere on campus. For others, TATU’s mission is touchingly personal.

“In their application, a lot of them write about their little brother and sister and they know they’re going to be facing some of this peer pressure and they want to help them. And some are motivated by family members who have had cancer. It’s sometimes very sad.” ♣



CHS junior Kaitlyn Gregory shares gruesome images of tobacco’s effects on the body with 4th graders at Toll Gate.