

# *The Fourth and Fifth Rs*

## *Respect and Responsibility*

Volume 7, Issue 1

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### *Helping Kids to Handle Hardship*

**Marty Kaminsky, Teacher and Author**

**W**hen I landed my first teaching job in 1975, I would lie awake for hours, reflecting on my hopes and dreams for my 5- and 6-year-olds. Now, 25 teaching years later, I walk the downtown streets of Ithaca, New York, and occasionally meet one of my former students. Some of them are thriving: finishing medical school, exploring the mysteries of science in Cornell laboratories, or teaching multiplication to 3rd-graders. Some of my old charges are imprisoned for armed robbery, assaulting police officers or trafficking in drugs. I wonder, what else might I have done to guide them down a different path?

I now teach 4th-grade. Increasingly, I've observed that many kids have difficulty handling hardship. When Rachel's soccer team loses, she refuses to shake hands with opposing players. When Edward does not feel like doing his math on a Monday morning, he pretends to have a stomach ache, which buys a free pass to the nurse. Faced with life's inevitable stresses and disappointments, many kids sink into depression, develop eating disorders, or turn to drugs and alcohol. As parents and teachers, how can we do a better job of helping them learn to endure suffering and overcome obstacles?

#### *Athletes Who Battled Back*

Knowing that most kids identify with sports heroes, I wrote a book called *Uncommon Champions*. It profiles 15 star athletes who have encountered devastating adversity, hit rock bottom, and then learned important life lessons which allowed them to reconstruct their shattered dreams and careers. From blind mountaineer Erik Weihenmayer to tennis great Zina Garrison, who battled back from bulimia, stories like these provide hope and inspiration. Most children and young adults rarely hear of anyone who has faced real adversity and not only survived but triumphed.

**I**n my classroom, I have used these stories to stimulate lively discussion. Last fall, after many of my students watched the United State women's soccer team win the World Cup, I read my class "The Fire Within," a chapter on midfielder Michelle Akers. Akers, the first superstar in women's soccer, has endured 13 knee operations and a decade-long



struggle with chronic fatigue syndrome, a condition she describes as "a 24-hour flu that will not go away." On many occasions she was too weak to get out of bed. But she was also a dedicated athlete who would not let her teammates down, so she willed herself to practice and games.

**W**e all have days when we don't feel like lifting the covers off our heads. Like Michelle Akers, these sports figures have struggled with obstacles similar to those many young people face. Former NFL football player Chris Zorich was so poor as a boy that his mother lifted him into supermarket dumpsters to pull out potential dinner foods. Olympic gold medalist Gail Devers nearly lost her life to a rampaging infection. Role models like these can help provide the foundation young people need to make sense of their lives, develop fortitude, and keep going when the going gets tough. ■

*Marty Kaminsky has written for Sports Illustrated and Highlights for Children. He can be reached at: 505 Linn St., Ithaca, NY 14850; Phone (607) 273-6656. Uncommon Champions is published by Boyd's Mills Press, 815 Church St., Honesdale, PA 18431.*

Center for the 4th and 5th Rs ♦ Education Department ♦ SUNY Cortland ♦ P.O. Box 2000  
Cortland, NY 13045 ♦ Tel. (607) 753-2455 ♦ E-mail: [c4n5rs@cortland.edu](mailto:c4n5rs@cortland.edu)  
<http://www.cortland.edu/www/c4n5rs/> ♦ Newsletter Staff: Dr. Thomas Lickona, Marthe Seales



# *Developing Democratic Character*

**Tom Lickona, Director, Center for the 4th and 5th Rs**

A healthy democracy needs citizens who possess democratic virtues—respect for individual rights, concern for the common good, voluntary compliance with law, and participation in public life. Participatory student government can go a long way toward developing these virtues and giving students a chance to take responsibility for making their school a better place.

Unfortunately, student government as practiced in most schools tends to be an isolated elite with no real constituency and therefore no real power to address problems in the school environment. Students miss out on an opportunity to experience the democratic process firsthand.

Here are five structures for using student government as a vehicle for democratic participation, solving school problems, and developing the kind of character and citizenship that democracies need.

## ***Structure 1: Special-Focus Student Council with a Delegate System***

At an elementary school in Binghamton, New York, teacher JoAnn Tucker tackled the problem of the school cafeteria. She described the cafeteria as a "war zone" where teacher aides yelled at kids, students yelled at each other, food fights were common, and the place was a mess when students left.

Teacher Tucker set up a Cafeteria Council with two elected student delegates from each classroom. Delegates had to report their class's views to the Council.

At every grade level, classes held discussions: *What are the characteristics of an ideal cafeteria? What should be the rules for cafeteria manners?*

Delegates carried their class's views into the Cafeteria Council's weekly meetings, where they discussed these ideas under the guidance of teacher Tucker and the school's principal and shaped them into tentative action proposals. Delegates then took these proposals back to their respective classrooms for further discussion and refinement. This back-and-forth feedback loop continued for several weeks. The Council also conducted

a survey of all students, staff, and parents on how to improve the cafeteria and solicited ideas on an ongoing basis through a Suggestion Box. It published a monthly newsletter reporting progress.

The positive outcomes were many: Student cafeteria behavior improved greatly, students were enthusiastic about improvements in the cafeteria, parent feedback was very positive, and a recycling project was begun. Most importantly, the school decided to keep its new delegate system of democratic student government as a way to deal with other problems in the school environment such as fights on the playground or bad behavior on the school bus.

## ***Structure 2: Linked Primary Level and Intermediate Level Student Councils***

In this model, a Little SAC (Student Advisory Council) is formed from delegates elected from each classroom grades K-3 (or 1-3). Big SAC is made up of delegates elected from grades 4 through 6, plus officers (President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer) who are elected, after a campaign, by the entire student body. As an option, a third delegate from each classroom—usually a child not likely to be elected but who would benefit from the experience—may be selected by the principal and the classroom teacher.

The principal meets separately with Little SAC and Big SAC weekly for 30 minutes, usually over lunch. The Vice-President of Big SAC chairs Little SAC and serves as a link between the two groups. Big SAC and Little SAC can tackle problems separately or jointly. Besides problem-solving, they can also plan and carry out projects such as community service or school fund-raising.

For example: In Birch Meadow Elementary School north of Boston, 2nd-grade delegates to Little SAC complained in their weekly meeting that the big kids (intermediate grades) were "hogging the playground equipment at recess." The Chair of Little SAC, a 5th-grader who served as Vice-President of Big SAC, reported the 2nd-graders' problem at Big SAC's next meeting. Big SAC delegates then took the issue back to their respective classrooms, where the problem was discussed and suggestions elicited for the equitable use of playground equipment. Big SAC formulated rules for the

fair use of playground equipment, which were taken by its Vice-president back to Little SAC for their consent. The playground problem was thereby resolved.

### **Structure 3: *The Cross-Grade Community Meeting***

In Heath Elementary School, a K-8 school in Brookline, Massachusetts, principal Ethel Sadowsky instituted a weekly Community Meeting of all the 4th- and 5th-graders, who had just studied the American Constitution. Principal Sadowsky helped students see the parallel between the rules and regulations needed to govern a nation and the need for a fair and effective way of solving conflicts and other problems that arise in a school. She then invited students to place written suggestions for Community Meeting topics in a large manila envelope on her office door. Suggested topics included: saving seats in the lunchroom, cutting into lunch lines, unfair use of playground space, and lack of soap in the bathrooms.

When they held their first meeting, lack of soap in the bathrooms was chosen as the first problem to work on. The large group was divided into small groups, ten students to a group, each with an adult leader (a teacher, administrator, or student teacher). Possible solutions were examined in the light of four "guideposts": (1) *Is the solution fair to everyone?* (2) *Is it safe?* (3) *Is it necessary?* (4) *Is it workable?* The principal gave each adult leader a description of the problem:

*Students complain that there is no soap in the bathrooms. The custodians resist stocking bathrooms with soap because it disappears immediately. They are also unwilling to install soap dispensers because they are quickly broken. How can we, the Heath Community Meeting, help to make sure that if we install soap dispensers, they will be used for washing and not be broken? What problems are likely to arise, and what can we do about them? What are you willing to do?*

In the small-group discussions, the children's imaginations took flight. Proposed solutions included: employing a guard to watch the dispensers, installing television monitors, hiring fingerprinters, having the custodians check the dispensers every five minutes, putting alarms on the dispensers, and getting a watchdog to patrol the bathrooms. "Fortunately," principal Sadowsky says, "a student in each group emerged to point out the pitfalls of such solutions. In the group I led, one student argued persuasively against the fingerprinting idea on

both practical and libertarian grounds. She pointed out that it would be very expensive to do all that fingerprinting and that someone might be accused of breaking a dispenser whose fingerprints were on it but who had used it appropriately. The small size of the discussion groups, and using the guideposts to evaluate solutions, helped to elicit thoughtful criticism."

When the small groups came together at the next week's Community Meeting, the following consensus was reached: (1) The soap dispensers would be installed; and (2) Heath Community Meeting members would go in pairs to every classroom, explain the problem about the lack of soap, and describe how the Community Meeting had met to work out a solution. They would request cooperation from all their schoolmates by saying, "The soap dispensers are for everybody's use, and if they get broken, no one will have them."

The dispensers survived. Other problems addressed in a similar way through Heath's Community Meeting included being rushed at lunch, inequitable access to playground space and equipment, and a lack of a safe place to lock bikes.

### **Structure 4: *Multiple Student Councils***

At South School in Andover, MA, principal Jade Reitman set up three student councils.

***The School Issues Committee.*** Advised and trained by principal Reitman, this committee is responsible for fund-raising for special school projects, for conducting tours of the school for new or prospective students, and for the school's "Theme of the Year" bulletin board and the *South School Scrapbook*. It also seeks input from classrooms concerning desired school improvements (e.g., in the lunch menu).

***The School Spirit Committee.*** Advised by a parent, this committee has the job of organizing special school events, such as the school's participation in the Veteran's Day Float Parade and the annual School Variety Show.

***The Community Service Committee.*** Advised by a teacher, this committee has the task of getting all grades to help with service projects such as gathering a truckload of clothes for Romanian babies with AIDS, a river cleanup, a Walk for Hunger, and an elderly outreach program.

Comments principal Reitman: "When we teach students how to run a meeting, we train them in parliamentary procedure. We're giving them mini-lessons in leadership."  
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# *Making a Difference in High School*

**Charlie Abourjilie, Teacher**



*"The little things? The little moments? They aren't little."*  
—Jon Kabat-Zinn

**A**s a high school history teacher, I tell my students we have three goals: learn history, have fun, and become persons of character. Here are some practices that have helped me achieve those goals and that make a difference in the mood and manageability of my classroom.

## ***Handshake***

I shake the hand of all my students as they enter the classroom. In the half a second it takes to shake a hand, I make a direct, meaningful, personal connection with that student. The handshake has ended wars and created powerful alliances. Last year my economics class and I spent half of a period one day talking about the value of a good handshake in the business world, on job interviews, in meeting a date's father—what a positive human resource it can be.

## ***Saying "Thank You"***

I discovered the value of "thank you" in the classroom several years ago from a student named Stefanie. Stefanie was a bright young woman in my U.S. History class, an underachiever from a single-parent home. She was "tough" and a loner.

On an interim report midway through the second quarter, I marked Stefanie down for a B+ and in the comment section wrote "Thank you" with a smiley face next to it. At the end of class, after I handed out the interims, Stefanie came up to me and abruptly asked, "What's this?", pointing to the "Thank you."

I told her I had written it because I knew she was working hard, completing all her assignments in five other classes, working a job after school, taking care of her household all by herself, and still doing well in my class. I told her I appreciated what she was going through and accomplishing. Her face broke into a beautiful smile. She said that hardly anyone ever thanked her for anything. Ever since that day, Stefanie and I have had a close relationship.

## ***Coach's Corner***

This is simply a corner of my room, often where I have

my desk, where I put up things on the wall or shelves that are a reflection of me as an individual. That's where I have pictures of my family, team pictures, my children's artwork, Redskins stuff, awards and certificates. My students can see me as a father, husband, friend, fan, and professional. They love to ask me about the things in the coach's corner. It has led to some great discussions.

## ***Daily Assignment***

My daily assignments, given at the beginning of each class, take only five to ten minutes and introduce my students to that day's lesson. Having a daily assignment for my kids encourages responsibility. Never is there a question of "What are we supposed to do?" or "What are we going to talk about today?" They know.

## ***Celebrate a Classmate***

Last year I wrote on the board that I wanted them to celebrate a classmate—write something they appreciated or admired about someone in class but not necessarily their best friend. I gave a few examples. The comments written included, "Ian is smart and funny," "Steven makes me laugh," and "Crystal is here today. I have missed her." Crystal had been out sick for three or four days. When I read "Crystal is here today. I have missed her," her eyes lit up.

## ***Partner Tests***

This is a simple and effective form of cooperative learning. Partners get one test and one answer sheet and get the same grade. A few students prefer not to have a partner, so I let them work alone. We have a test review or study guide the day before the test. On test day everything runs as usual right up until I give the test out. Then I surprise them by telling them to get with a partner. They love the change from normal testing. ■

***Charlie Abourjilie currently teaches and coaches at High Point Central High School, High Point, NC. He has served as character education coordinator for his district and is author of Developing Character For Classroom Success (available from The Character Development Group; Phone: 919-967-2110). He can be reached at: ckabo@mindspring.com.***

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# Character and the Class Meeting

Renee Ames, Teacher



**B**efore the start of every September, I reread a chapter on class meetings.<sup>1</sup> The class meeting has been a staple in my 5th-grade classroom for teaching the fourth and fifth Rs (respect and responsibility) to my children. Rereading this chapter helps me to remember what it takes to establish this rewarding aspect of our day and to develop one of the most valuable community-building vehicles of the entire year.

For me, it's most manageable to introduce the class meeting in short time frames with activities or discussions that build trust and include everyone. As the comfort level increases, so does the length of the stay and the depth of the discussions. As the year develops, my students use the class meeting to touch base with classmates, work out dilemmas, discuss classroom events, plan activities, or reflect on our academic gains.

**F**or example, last year I had a child whose mother was very sick and in a rehabilitation home. He was acting out in class, disrupting group work, and engaging in other attention-getting behaviors. Halfway through the year he felt comfortable enough in the class meeting to tell his peers what he was going through—how, when he came home each day, his mom wasn't there for him and how he and his dad would visit her each night at the rehabilitation center. Once his classmates understood this, they were less angry with him and more supportive and would remind him of how he should act in class. His behavior improved significantly.

## *Keeping Confidences*

Probably what instills the strongest sense of commitment and camaraderie is our agreement that what we discuss at the meetings stays within the meeting. With the exception of talking with parents at home, I stress to the children that what we share in our meetings is not fair conversation for the bus, the lunchroom, or any place outside our circle. We also avoid the use of anyone's name during sensitive conversations and instead say "someone I know."

Toward the latter part of the year, our meetings typically take place once a week, usually on a Thursday or Friday morning. Parents have told me that their child made them reschedule an appointment or insisted on attending school even when feeling sick so as not to miss

our class meeting! The children feel left out or cheated if they miss this important community event.

**S**everal years ago I enjoyed a particularly dramatic class that insisted on giving a title to every aspect of our meetings. The meeting itself was called "*The Meeting of the Rectangular Rug People*" (since the carpet we assembled on was this shape), and our agenda was called "*The Secret Scroll*." It added a touch of formality and mystery that this class enjoyed.

## *We Nourish Before We Flourish*

The tone of these meetings is one of respect and trust. The children find themselves motivated by the pure sense of community spirit, personal significance, and just plain enjoyment they feel when a part of it. It's easy to forget that the skills acquired by the children at this point are the result of a carefully planned nurturing process. Each of the skills (such as listening, eye contact, raising your hand to speak) for a successful class meeting needs to be introduced, modeled, practiced, and continually revisited and refined.

During the last third of the school year, I marvel at how the children assume roles which help facilitate the meeting. It's satisfying to watch them provide polite verbal reminders of how one should conduct oneself during a meeting. They participate in the creation of the agenda, quickly assemble, and proceed to work in a cooperative and productive way that rivals, even exceeds, most adult meetings I've attended.

**T**rustworthiness, compassion, active listening, honesty, and respect are among the character qualities that are authentically developed through the class meeting. It gives my students a safe arena to practice the humanity skills that we might model or preach outside the circle. It's said that all good things take time; in my experience, the class meeting is one of the most rewarding investments a teacher and her students can make. ■

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<sup>1</sup> *Educating for Character*, Chapter 8.

*Renee Ames teaches fifth grade at Palmer Elementary School in Baldwinsville, NY. She can be reached at: [TrueAmes2@aol.com](mailto:TrueAmes2@aol.com).*

(Cont. from p. 3)

### Structure 5: *The High School Congress*

A high school in Croton-on-the-Hudson, New York, instituted a school government called the "Congress," consisting of elected student delegates from "seminars" (similar to homerooms). Students make up the majority of the Congress, but it also includes elected representatives of the faculty, administration, and parent body.

The Congress meets over lunch hour every Wednesday to discuss issues of concern raised by delegates. Then delegates carry concerns and recommendations into their respective seminars and solicit feedback, which they take back to Congress the following week.

When I attended a Congress meeting, I asked, "What have you accomplished in your two-year history that you feel good about?" The first two accomplishments students mentioned involved vandalism. The cafeteria phone installed for student use had been ripped out of the wall by someone. After this happened twice, administration refused to reinstall the phone. Students had also been vandalizing other students' art work hung in the hallways.

Both kinds of vandalism ended after they were discussed in Congress and in seminars. Presumably, these discussions altered the peer culture to bring about a new norm: It wasn't cool to rip out the phone intended for all students' use or to deface somebody else's art work.

Participatory student government mobilizes the peer culture on the side of virtue. It makes it possible for all students to play an active part in creating a positive moral culture in the school. It sends the message: "This is *our* school. If we've got a problem, we should fix it."

By giving students real responsibility for real problems, participatory student government also develops all three parts of character: *moral knowing* (because students are engaged in thinking about what's right and fair), *moral feeling* (because students are led to care about rights and responsibilities in their school), and *moral behavior* (because students are being given opportunities for action). Finally, this kind of hands-on problem solving develops democratic character—the skills and attitudes needed to participate actively as citizens of a democracy. ■

### ***"How to Begin or Strengthen a Character Education Program: A Seminar for School Leaders"***

**Friday, Dec. 1, 2000  
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**Co-sponsored by the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs and OCM BOCES**

#### ***"The 11 Principles of Effective Character Education as a Framework for Planning"***

—Tom Lickona, Director, Center for the 4th and 5th Rs

***"The Process"***—Robert Storrier, Asst. Superintendent, Fayetteville-Manlius Schools, Manlius, NY.

***"The Morgan Road Story"*** (A National School of Character)—Richard Parisi, Principal, Morgan Road Elementary School, Liverpool, NY.

***"The Responsive Classroom"***—Mary Fitzgibbons, OCM BOCES, Syracuse, NY.

**Registration Deadline: Nov. 15.  
Reg. fee: \$45 (includes lunch and materials).  
To register, call OCM BOCES: (315) 433-2662.**

## **2001 SUMMER CONFERENCES IN CHARACTER EDUCATION**

### **Pre-Institute Workshop:**

June 25, 2001, \$150 Early Bird Fee\*

***"Implementing the 11 Principles of Effective Character Education"***—Tom Lickona, Director, Center for the 4th and 5th Rs

### **3-Day Institute:** \$375 Early Bird Fee\*

June 26 (starts at 8:30 a.m.) - June 28 (ends at 4:00 p.m.)

- National keynoters, plus more than 20 workshops.
- Featuring *Middle School* and *Elementary School* Tracks

### **High School Conference:** \$150 Early Bird Fee\*

Tuesday, June 26, 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

### **1-Day Institute Option:** \$150 Early Bird Fee\*

Wednesday, June 27, 8:30 a.m. - 4:45 p.m.

**\*Early Bird Deadline: April 12, 2001  
Registration Deadline: June 8, 2001**

Registration forms will accompany the February 2001 newsletter. Questions? E-mail us: c4n5rs@cortland.edu, or check out our website ([www.cortland.edu/www/c4n5rs/](http://www.cortland.edu/www/c4n5rs/)), which we will be updating regularly with new information.

**The New York State S.A.V.E. law requires character education K-12 (effective 11/1/00; full compliance, 7/1/01).**