

The Fourth and Fifth Rs

Respect and Responsibility

Volume 9, Issue 3

Spring 2003

Growing Character in the Elementary Classroom

Deb Austin Brown, Teacher

Teaching is a calling. In fact, I believe it is the highest calling. I believe it is the job of teachers to call their students to personal—as well as academic—excellence. Students will never know how high their potential in life is unless we call them to it.

*We never know how high we are
'til we are called to rise.*

—Emily Dickinson

Here are fourteen of my favorite practices for helping students achieve their full potential.

1. The Teacher Pledge

The very first week of school, I initiate a class discussion on "What makes a good teacher?" I record students' ideas on chart paper, take the chart home, and use it to make my pledge. I write down the teacher traits that I promise to use in the classroom in an effort to meet their expectations and to achieve my goal to be a good teacher.

TEACHER PLEDGE

Respect: I will listen to my students. I will speak in a soft, respectful voice.

Responsibility: I will grade and return papers in a timely manner.

Caring: I will help each student who asks for help.

Fairness: I will treat each student fairly, without prejudice.

Trustworthiness: I will honor student confidentiality.

Citizenship: I will be a good role model for my students.

I group my promises around six "pillars of character." (See box below.) Then the next day, in front of the students, I sign the pledge.

The pledge is posted in the classroom—and referred to often during the year. I use it as a measuring stick for how well I am doing. Students feel comfortable and safe because of my promise.

2. The Student Pledge

I follow up the Teacher Pledge activity with a discussion about what makes a good class. Using the same traits of good character as a guide, the students and I talk about their responsibility and behavior and their effect on classroom learning. Again, I take chart paper and record their ideas. From that brainstorming session, the Student Pledge is written, signed by each student,



STUDENT PLEDGE

Respect: I will listen when the teacher is talking and when a classmate is talking.

Responsibility: I will come prepared for class. I will complete and turn in assignments on time.

Caring: I will help my classmates.

Fairness: I will take turns. I will not leave anyone out.

Trustworthiness: I will not cheat, lie, or take things that do not belong to me.

Citizenship: I will be a good role model for younger students in our school.

and posted next to the Teacher Pledge. Because the ideas are theirs, students have ownership of the pledge. It becomes a meaningful part of their quest for personal and academic excellence. Sometimes just a reminding glance at the pledge helps students get back on track with behavior and academic responsibility.

3. Basic Civilities

It's important to teach students about the basic civilities that make school a nicer place in which to work and learn. We start off making a chart at the beginning of the year and add ideas as we go along: saying *please* and *thank you*, saying *sir* and *ma'am* when speaking to adults, greeting people we see at school, opening the door for others, giving classmates space in line, being polite at every opportunity, and showing respect at all times.

4. School Quiet Times

Building a climate that is conducive to learning requires that some parts of the elementary school day be *quiet times*. Once students come to understand that being quiet at certain times is a sign of respect, they are more likely to comply. As a class, we brainstorm a list of times when we really need to remain quiet. With student buy-in, this list has helped our school maintain a more orderly learning environment. Quiet times include: during the intercom announcements, when a visitor enters the room, during a test, when the teacher is talking or teaching, in line, and in school hallways.

5. Take Five!

Five minutes doesn't seem like very much time, but if well used, it can help a child feel loved and valued. Find some time in your day to connect personally with your students. Go into the cafeteria and find a student who has finished eating breakfast or lunch, and invite that child to the classroom to chat or to work together on a task. I always make it a point to tell each child about something good I see in him or her. This practice helps kids develop the self-respect and confidence necessary for learning.

"Be in the right place at the right time, doing the right thing!"

6. Repeat After Me!

Several times throughout the day, I will say, "Repeat after me!" I then recite a character axiom such as, "*Be in the right place at the right time, doing the right thing!*" or "*Actions Speak Louder Than Words.*" You can squeeze

in this activity five or six times a day without taking any time away from your instructional day: at the start of the day; when lining up to go to the gym, library, or cafeteria; when changing classes; or when packing bookbags at the end of the day. By the end of the school year, students have learned 180 character messages to help them in their daily lives.

7. Parent-Teacher Thought-Sharing Notebooks

Each school year I select a parent or two and ask for their help with an ongoing project. I buy a notebook for each parent who commits to the task. In it I describe what I am doing to promote character development in my classroom. I send the notebooks home to the parents and they record their ideas, suggestions, and observations about the character growth of their own child, e.g., "*My son is now putting his dirty clothes in the hamper, rather than the usual place—under his bed. He is trying to be more responsible.*" The notebook is passed back and forth between parent and teacher over the course of the school year. At the end of the year, I have a wonderful documentation of our character efforts over the year.

8. Learning Equations

Take math equations a step further, and let students calculate the sum of each equation about good character. Here are a few: *Responsible Work Ethic + Effort = Good Grades*; *Friendship + Caring = A Happy Life*; *Honesty + Lots of Study Time = Good Test Scores*; *Responsibility + Hard Work = Skill Mastery*; *Self-Respect + Integrity = A Kid of Character*.

9. Honor Sentences

In an effort to promote integrity, I have students write an Honor Sentence on each test and special project paper. Students write sentences that explain their effort and the amount of study time given to the assignment. Here are some sample Honor Sentences from my students' papers:

This is my own work. I studied for 20 minutes each night for three nights.

I passed this test with an A+ because I studied long and hard. I went the extra mile!

I put things off this week and studied only 15 minutes last night. I know I failed the test—but at least I didn't cheat. It is my own work. I'll try harder next time.

Students come to understand that their grades are usually earned in direct proportion to the amount of time and effort put forth in study.

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10. Interjections!

This strategy got its start in one of my math classes. We were working on a difficult math skill, and the students were really struggling. I could tell that they were on the verge of giving up. To keep them from becoming discouraged, I stopped the math lesson and interjected an inspirational story about Thomas Edison's effort to invent the light bulb. He failed over 10,000 times, but he looked at each failure as a step toward getting it right! Success was only a try away. This interjected story inspired them to look for their own talents and abilities and to keep trying.

11. The Homework Basket

This is a way to help students develop a good work ethic. Tell them what it means to put an assignment into this basket: *"I am finished with my homework. I have given this assignment my best effort. I have really worked hard. My paper is complete, neatly written, and well thought out. I am proud of my work, and I am now ready for you to read it!"* I have seen students come up and put an assignment in the Homework Basket, stop and think, then take the paper back out again. They have reflected on the assignment and realized that they could do better.

12. Spelling for Character

A simple way to weave character into the spelling curriculum is to select character words to add to the weekly spelling list. Words like *nice*, *kind*, *hope*, and *try* all fit well into a primary list. More difficult words, such as *environment*, *citizenship*, and *honesty* are obvious choices for the intermediate level. Consider adding these words as bonus words for the week.

13. Report Card Goal-Setting Sessions

On the day that report cards are to be handed out, I give each student a goal-setting worksheet. The first section of the worksheet is for predicting what grades the students think they have earned. Notice that I am careful to use the word *earned*, not the word *got*. Teachers do not give grades; students earn them!

The second section is for recording the grades that students earned during the previous grading period.

Then I pass out the report cards. Students open them and look them over—and then move on to the third section of the worksheet. There they record the grades that they just earned in each subject.

Section four asks: "Did your grades go up or down? Give the reasons for any changes in your grades." Stu-

dents now have to face the music. There is no room for excuses. This helps them develop accountability for their decisions over the last grading period.

I have seen students go from Ds to Bs and stay there.

The next step is planning for the future. We take a few minutes to think about our habits—really think. Then we do some goal-setting for the next grading period. Students eventually come to see the correlation between their work habits and academic success—plus they get the added incentive of knowing that it is never too late to wipe the slate clean and change their ways.

Using this approach, I have seen students go from Ds to Bs . . . and stay there!

14. Family Character Night.

This idea came from one of my 6th-grade students, Wesley. He figured out early in the school year that the character message we teach at school was quite different from the message he was learning at home. He asked one day if I would teach a character class for the parents of our school.

Wesley and I went to our principal to discuss the matter. Our staff felt that this might be a good way to get the character message into our school community. And so, a Family Character Night was planned: a fun night of friendship and learning, lots of food, a keynote speaker, families rotating through three sessions in which teachers demonstrated character lessons and activities, and lots of give-away prizes.

We bought Dr. Helen LeGette's insightful book *Parents, Kids & Character* to give away to each family. The kids got tablets, pencils, books, and videos that highlighted good character traits to take home.

One aspect of Family Character Night is a must: Kids cannot come alone. To be admitted, students must be accompanied by at least one adult from their family. If you make the program attractive enough to the kids, they'll bring the adults. ■

Excerpted from Growing Character: 99 Successful Strategies for the Elementary Classroom by Deb Austin Brown. Available from the author; www.debaustinbrown@mindspring.com or Ph. (304)727-7899.



Integrating Academics and Character: The "Laws of Life" Essay Contest

Dave Schmidt, Special Education Teacher

"Write an essay in which you discuss Friar Lawrence's motivations in Romeo and Juliet."

Given this typical high school English assignment, students could explore the limits of one man's ability to alter a generations-long situation that affects an entire city. Or they could write about cowardice and self-preservation and how these traits can worsen an already tragic situation.

Such an assignment usually has one of the following consequences:

1. The experience could cause students to reflect meaningfully on the assignment and apply the lessons learned to their own lives.
2. The writing process needed to complete the essay might teach students about how an author uses literary techniques and how the students can improve their own writing.
3. Students could write the essay, invest minimal thought in it, and hope only to earn a decent grade.
4. Students could start the essay, realize it's an overwhelming task, and never complete it.
5. Students could blow off the assignment from the start.

My experience as a special educator has included students with the most severe disabilities and those with the most academic gifts. The teachers I work most closely with, and consult with on a regular basis, have many decades of combined experience in the classroom. I sadly report that the vast majority of our students fall into categories 3, 4, and 5 on the list above. Each year only a handful of students achieve category 2 status, and an even smaller sprinkling of students strive to reach the first level—meaningful personal reflection.

I don't blame the students for this. We condition students to believe that grades and test scores—not reflection on life—are the goals. Students are educated in a culture of numbers, and teachers are assessed on their students' numbers.

What suffers as a result of this? The explicit casualties are students' desire and ability to reach categories 1 and 2. As the emphasis on numbers increases, the weight allotted to character education diminishes. The imbalance becomes greater as students near commencement, leaving many secondary-level teachers believing they cannot possibly incorporate character education into their curricula.

Academics and Character: Bridging the Gap

We think we've found a way to bridge the gap. The *Laws of Life Essay Contest*, created by the Templeton Foundation, asks students to write essays illustrating their "laws of life." These laws are character traits or principles that students believe to be crucial to a successful life. Qualities such as perseverance, honesty, loyalty, and respect are topics commonly chosen.

Each student chooses one law of life, then illustrates that law with personal or historical examples. All essays are judged on the emotional impact and universality of the message, with technical skill holding less significance. For many students, this removes the intimidation they often feel when facing a writing task and frees them to

LAWS OF LIFE ESSAY CONTEST

- Choose one "law of life" (a character trait, value, or principle that you think is essential to a successful life).
- Write an essay of any length based on that law. Many of the most successful essays focus on one of the following:
 - one clear personal example, or
 - several historical examples.
- Your entry will be judged based on its ability to move the reader. Choose examples, phrases, and words that best communicate the importance of your law in a successful life.

write from the heart about something they consider to be important.

In fact, some of the very best writing comes from students who have never before been recognized for their writing ability. I think the main reason for this is that students are so invested in their Laws of Life Essay that they gladly spend hours editing their work until it says exactly what they mean it to say. Students who normally fall into the previously mentioned categories of 3, 4, and 5 suddenly leapfrog into the first category.

The Awards Ceremony

Another incentive for students is the awards and recognition ceremony that caps off the contest. At the ceremony, winning authors read their essays to an audience of parents, community members, peers, and school representatives.

For many students, this will be the only time they are publicly recognized for an academic achievement. For almost all essayists, this will be the only time they present their written work to a live, applauding audience comprised of people other than their classmates. The authentic feedback students receive at the ceremony is far more enduring than a grade on a class assignment.

Aside from recognition, students can receive awards for their work. Those essays judged to be most outstanding can win savings bonds, gift certificates, and other prizes for their authors; one contest has awarded a college tuition scholarship to its top winner. Although the Templeton Foundation provides materials and guidance for local contests, they grant no financial support. All funds for the contest are locally generated, which shows our students that the *community* cares about their character development. This arrangement gives local civic groups and businesses the joy of seeing their resources used to promote our students' reflection and personal growth.

How to Bring "Laws of Life" to Your School

Any school can begin its own contest. Contests run the gamut from school-wide to district-wide to county-wide to state-wide. It's up to each contest's organizers to decide how big to make it and from where the funding will come. For more information on the contest, visit www.lawsoflife.org. For anyone looking for a way to develop students' written expression, reflective abilities, and character, the *Laws of Life Essay Contest* can help you accomplish those goals. ■

Students and Teachers Say:

Girl: For my essay, I wrote about courage—how you don't have it unless you have to overcome fear. I wrote about how I had to have courage to overcome my fear when I tried out for the soccer team, and when I broke my nose and had to have surgery.

Boy: The laws of life are what you should go by. Sometimes you don't know which way to go in life. My mom says, "Life is like a mountain. It can be rocky, but you have to keep climbing." When I fall apart, I try to pick myself up again. Everybody makes mistakes. I try to learn from mine.

Teacher: I think the Laws of Life essay is similar to a process recommended by a book titled *Authentic Happiness*. It says, "Inventory your strengths so that in times of adversity, you can say to yourself, 'I have these strengths and support systems in place to draw on—my faith, my family. I've drawn on them before in tough times, and I can draw on them now.'"

Teacher: Some kids are nervous about having to write about themselves and their lives. They could talk about it, but having to write about it is hard for them. We need to help them be more introspective, to think about who they are.

Girl: Writing this essay makes you stop and think about what is important in your life. I wrote about faith. People define faith differently. Some define it not in a religious way; some define it religiously. For me, it's religious. Our house burned to the ground last year. My mom said, "We have to have faith." She said we have to stick together. She has this noodle theory: One noodle is easy to break, but if you put a whole bunch of them together, you can't break them. Writing the essay gave me a chance to share this in public.

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Peers Teaching Abstinence

by Eve Jackson, PEERS Project Director

Teenagers Eric Byers and Marsha Hawes are in love, and they are proving it by *not* getting sexually involved.

They are also helping their peers make healthy choices regarding sexual behavior. They serve as peer educators for a preventive health model—the PEERS Project—initiated in 1994 by St. Vincent Hospital and Health Services in Indianapolis, Indiana. PEERS mentors help younger teens avoid the painful consequences of premature sex: single parenthood, STDs, the end of their education, poverty, a broken heart, and guilt.

To empower positive role models like Eric and Marsha, St. Vincent provided a grant to design a peer-facilitated abstinence education intervention. Research finds that promoting youth development through active engagement enables adolescents to internalize positive values, make good choices, and build healthy relationships.

Adults wrote the curriculum, but students teach it. They make it a credible lifestyle.

Adults wrote the PEERS curriculum, but students teach it. They make it a credible lifestyle, showing that cool and popular people have made the choice to remain abstinent.

The Grade-By-Grade Curriculum

In the PEERS program, each grade learns a different concept related to sexuality. *Sixth-graders* are taught about the meaning of friendship and how to guard themselves against the messages expressed in song lyrics and television shows. *Seventh-graders* learn about the dangers of STDs and the emotional repercussions of premarital sex. *Eighth-graders* focus on the difference between love and infatuation, the responsibilities of parenthood, and why a father is so important in a child's life. *Freshmen* and *sophomores* learn *what love really is*, as well as how to recommit to chastity if they've made mistakes in the past.

Says 18-year-old Savannah Smith, "A lot of girls think they won't have a good chance with guys if they don't have sex. So it really helped to hear it [the abstinence message] from the high school students. They were close

to our own age and were encouraging role models."

There are two versions of the program: *Peers Educating Peers* (secular) and *A Promise to Keep* (faith-based). PEERS mentors must be recommended by teachers, youth ministers, or youth leaders. They use scripted interactive lessons and share their personal testimonies about why they have chosen to abstain from premarital sex. Video vignettes supplement the lessons.



PEERS Spreads to Six States

School districts in Indiana, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kansas, New York, and Washington have implemented PEERS. In Indiana, more than 6,000 high school-age mentors have presented PEERS lessons to 50,000 adolescents. The project has reached inner-city youth through youth organizations that provide after-school and summer programs. Spanish-speaking teens deliver the community-based sessions to Latino adolescents.

Youth Trends in Sexual Behavior

Is it realistic to expect young people to abstain from sexual activity until marriage? The October 7, 2002, issue of *Time* reported a resurgence in virginity among youth, and a consequent increase in medical and educational professionals' respect for abstinence education. The December 9, 2002, issue of *Newsweek* featured a cover story, "The New Virginity," with interviews of teens who had decided to save sex for marriage. The CDC's 2001 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System reported that among high school students, virgins are now in the majority for the first time in 25 years.

One possible reason for this shift in adolescent sexual behavior is the growth of abstinence programs that teach the age-old concept of saving sex for marriage.

Mathematica Policy Research has contracted with the Department of Health and Human Services to evaluate federally funded abstinence programs and will release reports next year and in 2005. The PEERS Project received a three-year grant which will include an evaluation of its school- and community-based programs. ■

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