

## Weaving Character Education into Language Arts

Betsy Stecker, middle school English teacher

If you are passionate about bringing character into your classroom, you'll want to find ways to integrate it into everyday academic instruction. I pursue that integration through my subject area, language arts (grades 5-8).

### 1. Establish Language Taboos

The first thing I address in my classroom in September is the use of language itself. For instance, I do not accept the use of "Hey" before my name, and I post a list of offensive taboo words on my blackboard. These are all-too-common among middle-schoolers: *suck*, *shut up*, *idiot*, *stupid*, and *retard*. Today's television unfortunately supports the idea that these insults are acceptable, but all

would agree—including our students, if we ask them—that these words are counterproductive to an environment that encourages kindness and respect.

### 2. Use Character Questions for Journal Writing

Having students write in journals, using character qualities as the prompt, is an easy way to integrate character into your classroom. For instance, during our study of industry (hard work), I have students write on this quote by Thomas Edison: "*Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed up in overalls and looks like hard work.*" When studying justice, I ask students: "Does 'fair' mean 'equal'?" The book *Character Quotations*, (available from [www.KaganOnline.com](http://www.KaganOnline.com)) is chock-full of quotations and follow-up questions that can stimulate journal entries.



I've also used journaling to get kids to reflect on the music they listen to. Sample questions:

- ◆ What are some of your favorite songs? What do you like about them?
- ◆ What messages do they send?
- ◆ Why is some music considered "objectionable"? What messages do those songs send?
- ◆ What about the language used in some songs—is it appropriate? Why or why not?
- ◆ If you woke up in the morning and were a popular music artist, what kind of music would you sing? Why? What would be your message?

### SPORTSMANSHIP ESSAY

**THINK:** HOW IS GOOD SPORTSMANSHIP RELATED TO GOOD CHARACTER?

- ✓ **FIRST PARAGRAPH:** What is good sportsmanship? Why is it important? What character qualities do people with good sportsmanship have?
- ✓ **SECOND PARAGRAPH:** Describe a professional athlete who demonstrates good sportsmanship. What is this person's sport? How does this person show good sportsmanship? Give a specific example.
- ✓ **THIRD PARAGRAPH:** Now describe a professional athlete who does *not* show good sportsmanship. What is this person's sport? How has this person demonstrated poor sportsmanship? Give a specific example.
- ✓ **CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH:** What can you learn from *both* of these persons?

### 3. Assign Character-Centered Essays

The essay is my favorite tool for teaching writing and simultaneously getting my students to think about character. I assign a character-centered essay once a month. The writing skills I focus on include outlining, compare and contrast, self-reflection, using topic and concluding sentences, persuasive writing, simile, metaphor, and clearly defending an original idea. I teach these skills using character as the subject.

One of my favorite essay assignments focuses on sportsmanship. (See box on page 1.) Because so many of today's youth are involved in sports, good sportsmanship has considerable importance. The writing skills I teach through the sportsmanship essay include: (1) doing research on sports figures and (2) critical thinking, as students evaluate the actions of athletes and consider what lessons can be learned and applied to their own lives.

Another of my favorite essays has students write about a character quotation related to one of our school's focus virtues. At Japhet we study 18 qualities that rotate on a two-year cycle: *gratitude, judgment, peace, initiative, joy, personal habits, respect for self, courage, self-control, thrift, patriotism, justice, humility, obedience, punctuality, industry, reliability, and respect for others.*

The accompanying box shows one of my essay assignments on the virtue of judgment. Students choose a quote and write two paragraphs: one explaining the meaning of this quote and offering evidence of its truth, and another applying the quote to their own lives.

### 4. Literature: Rich in Character

From *King Lear* to *Anne Frank*, literary figures with good or bad character abound. Whether you pose questions simply for discussion or require written responses, students' replies will be richer when the judging of values comes into play. Because I teach the same students for four years, I teach four years' worth of novels. Here is a smattering of questions I have posed:

- **King Lear:** What are the most important qualities for a good king to possess? Did Lear demonstrate them?
- **Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl:** What character qualities did the Jewish families need in order to endure their forbidden stay in the Secret Annexe?
- **To Kill a Mockingbird:** How does Atticus define courage?
- **Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry:** How is Cassie a true hero?

## WRITING ABOUT QUOTATIONS: FOCUS ON JUDGMENT/CHOICES

Read the quotations below about judgment/choices. Think about what each means. Circle the one that you really like, understand, and can best write about.

Decisions determine destiny.

—FREDERICK SPEAKMAN

We must make the choices that enable us to fulfill the deepest capacities of our real selves.

—THOMAS MERTON

The last of human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any set of circumstances.

—VIKTOR FRANKL

**ASSIGNMENT:** Write two paragraphs, a minimum of 5 sentences each. Begin your writing assignment by restating the quotation in *bold face* and *centered* at the top of your essay.

✓ **FIRST PARAGRAPH:** (1) What does the quotation mean? What point is the speaker trying to make? (2) How does this quote relate to judgment/choices? (3) What proof do you see in the world that the quote is true?

✓ **SECOND PARAGRAPH:** (1) Do you do what the quote recommends? (2) How can you do better? What specific actions can you take to improve? (3) What do you think would be the result?

- **The Taming of the Shrew:** How does Katherine finally learn the true meaning of humility?
- **My Brother Sam Is Dead:** At the end of the novel, Tim asks the reader whether war is needed to achieve freedom. What do you think?

Recently we read a short story about a Jewish boy stuck in a snowstorm with his goat. Students immediately recognized how his qualities of courage, initiative, self-control, and judgment enabled him to survive. Without my prompting, they began to discuss whether they would apply these same qualities if they were in a similar situation. I just sat back and listened . . . . ▲

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# *St. Leonard Elementary: A National School of Character*

**Allyson Sigler, elementary school counselor**



**F**or the past eight years, I have been the counselor at St. Leonard Elementary School (800 students, pre-K-5) in St. Leonard, Maryland. When we opened our doors in 1996, we knew that we wanted to create a school environment centered on the character development of the children. The following are six strategies we think have worked for us.

## ***1. Kids' Character Committee***

Even in the youngest grades, students can play a role in leading a school's character education program. To enable our kids to take leadership, I created a Kids' Character Committee for each of our grade levels. Every month, 3-4 students from each classroom rotate onto their grade's committee. Over the school year, every student has a turn to serve.

At the start of the month, the Kids' Character Committee for each grade has two working lunches with me. In our meetings, with my guidance, the children:

1. Discuss what the monthly character trait *looks like*, *sounds like*, and what it *feels like* to show that trait.
2. Develop a presentation and poster that will teach their classmates what the trait looks like, sounds like, and feels like.
3. Plan additional ways to involve their class in learning about and practicing the trait.

**W**hen they go back to their classrooms, kids share what they developed and work with the teacher to promote the focus trait with the whole class. Strategies for teaching the monthly trait have included role-playing, creating a poem or song about the trait, playing a game that highlights the trait, and asking the class what they would do in certain situations to show the trait. Students on the Kids' Character Committee are also in charge of activities such as the school's morning announcements; delivering "LEOgrams" recognizing students for acts of good character; distributing the flyer reminding everyone about the monthly food pantry drive; and delivering a special treat to the bus drivers.

The children take a lot of pride in being experts on and role models for the monthly character trait. They

receive a trait pin to wear for the month so they can be identified as members of the Committee. Many students acquire quite a collection of pins from their years of service on the Kids' Character Committee.

## ***2. Upside-Down Character***

In order to create a common character language, we want all students to develop a shared understanding of the word *character*. I made a CHARACTER sign that I show to each class at the beginning of my weekly guidance lesson. I ask, "What is character?" The students respond, "It is the kind of person you are," and "It is what you say and do."

As we continue to talk about "good character" as doing what is right, I am holding the character sign the "right way." We then discuss the concept of *not* showing good character—and because I didn't want to use the words "bad character"—we talk about having "upside-down" character. (I turn the sign upside down.) Upside-

***"You are showing  
upside-down character!"***

down character is when people "just don't have it 'right'" (right-side-up character), and we have to help them do what is "right" by being good role models. As I explain this, the sign is trying to turn back the "right way."

Even the primary students understand this concept and begin to use it in their personal language: "You are showing upside-down character, and you need to turn it the right way!"

## ***3. Pride Inside Backpack***

We use this idea to kick off the new school year at our opening day grade-level assemblies. We explain to students that each of us wears an "invisible" backpack, and if we open it up each day and use the items inside, we can be successful in life. For each grade-level assembly, a student is selected to come forward and put on an actual Pride Inside Backpack I have made. The backpack is then unzipped, and different traits that show "Pride in

Character” and “Pride in Academics” are pulled out and explained with everyday examples:

**PRIDE IN CHARACTER:** *The 3 R’s*—Respect, Responsibility and the Right to Learn (our school motto) and *The Eight Great Traits*—Respect, Responsibility, Caring, Fairness, Trustworthiness, Self-Discipline, Integrity, and Cooperation.

**PRIDE IN ACADEMICS:** BIG Effort, Hard Work, Work Ethic, Perseverance, Endurance, Positive Attitude, and Confidence.

After the assembly, students return to class and reflect on their current use of their invisible backpack contents, and set goals for improvement in needed areas. The idea of the Pride Inside Backpack that we each wear has become another part of our common language of character in our school. The backpack contents are constantly being referred to by students and teachers alike in daily activities. For example, “I showed BIG Effort when I looked for mistakes in my work.”

#### 4. Climate Action Team

At least one teacher from each grade serves on the Climate Action Team. Each month this team brainstorms activities that teachers can do in their classrooms related to the focus character trait. We copy pages from resource books and gather quotes about the trait. Each teacher then receives a packet of ideas. The following examples are from October’s packet of tips on responsibility.

- ◆ Web the different ways students can be responsible at school, at home, and in the community. Write the different ideas on slips of paper and have the students randomly pick one to illustrate.
- ◆ Have students apply for classroom jobs by filling out an application form on which they explain why they would be good at taking attendance or taking care of plants, etc. Students should keep their jobs for a month and then evaluate their performance.

*Kids that nobody thought would get the citizenship award receive it.*

#### 5. Citizen of the Month

Citizens of the Month are chosen by their teacher and classmates. (A given student can receive the citizenship award only once every two years.) Classmates are asked to give examples of why a particular student

### PARENT-CHILD CHARACTER HOMEWORK!

#### Character Trait for March:

#### Self-Discipline and Self-Control

Everybody feels angry sometimes. What we do with our angry feelings is what is important. Together with your child, *circle* the things in the list below that you *should* do when you are feeling angry. *Cross out* the things you *shouldn't* do when you are angry. Then create a “Chill Out” plan your family can use at home.

- ▲ Talk about how you feel
- ▲ Hit someone
- ▲ Count to ten
- ▲ Call someone names
- ▲ Go to another room
- ▲ Write down your feelings
- ▲ Throw things
- ▲ Take a bath

#### Parent's "CHILL OUT" Plan:

When I get angry I will . . .

#### Student's "CHILL OUT" Plan:

When I get angry I will . . .

Parent's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Student's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

should be honored. The Citizen of the Month ceremony is open only to honorees and their parents. It begins with a short speech by our principal about the school’s mission to educate for character. One by one, kids are brought up on stage, and we read what others have written about them. I cry; the parents cry. We have kids that nobody thought would get this award receive it because they set a goal regarding who they wanted to become.

#### 6. Parent-Child Character Homework

One of the many ways we’ve involved parents is through Parent-Child Character Homework. (See box above.) This reflects our belief that parents are the primary character educators of their children. ▲

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# Creating School “Families”

Ellen Semel, elementary principal

Last year I found a 1st-grade boy crying in the boys’ bathroom. He had gone there with a buddy, as all our children are instructed to do. However, some older boys had entered and locked him in a stall. Although Nick’s buddy had run for help, by the time he returned, the older boys were gone. I took Nick from room to room, but he could not identify his tormentors.

As principal of a 600-student elementary school on Long Island, I was most disturbed by this incident. Although known acts of bullying and fighting at our school were small in number, I suspected that they occurred far more than were reported. Students were grouped by grade level, with four classes per grade. Students of the same grade ate together, played together, and worked together. There were no structured opportunities for positive interaction among children of varying grades. And so, the big kids sometimes picked on the little kids.

I had heard of a project undertaken by the Long Beach School District and contacted a former assistant principal in one of the schools there. They had instituted something called Family Day. I thought I would try my own version of this idea. Fortunately, an administrative intern, Sal Calderone, shared my enthusiasm for this project and was willing to help me set it up.

We divided our school into 43 “families.” Each contained at least one student from every grade except kindergarten since we did not have a full-day kindergarten. A teacher or other staff member headed each family.

## Setting Up Our “Family Day”

We looked at the school calendar and noted that each month had been assigned a pillar of good character by our site-based team. September and October were RESPECT and RESPONSIBILITY. Sal and I began to put together relevant activities that could be engaging for students grades one through six. This was challenging. We looked at our resources, borrowed from other school districts, and went on the Internet. We found some excellent picture books that had good moral messages and several role-playing scenes that led to discussion. (For sources of children’s books that teach virtues, see

Mary Beth Klee’s *Core Virtues*, Michele Borba’s *Building Moral Intelligence*, *Character Education Through Story* by Patty Smith *et al.*, and the *Heartwood Ethics Curriculum*.) We made a packet of all our activities and had copies of the books available in the library. We gave out a packet to each staff member who headed a family.

Family Day, we quickly realized, needed a specific time. We decided to do it as a 40-minute event at the beginning of each month to help establish the focus on the monthly character education pillar. We scheduled it on rotating days so that students would not miss the same normally scheduled activity on every Family Day. We talked to the faculty about the program, and they seemed very willing to try it.

Each 6th-grade student was given a master list of all the students in the school, which family they were assigned to, and the room numbers. We told them that they would be the student leaders of each family. As leaders, they had to pick up their 5th-graders, then the 4th-graders, then the 3rd-graders, and so on, and bring them to their meeting.

Our first Family Day was a bit scary for me. Everyone was on the move. I also had a family and I was not sure how the students would react to each other. I suspected things were going to be okay, however, when I watched the students all enter my room holding hands.

*“That’s Billy. He’s in my family.”*

It is January now, and we have been through five Family Days. The feedback from the program has been overwhelmingly positive. I know that there are still some instances of peer cruelty in our building. But last week I walked past the boys’ bathroom. There was a 6th-grade boy coming out while a 2nd-grade boy was entering. They raised their hands up and gave each other a high five. “Who’s that kid?” asked another 6th-grader. The first 6th-grader answered, “That’s Billy. He’s in my family.” I think the program is working. ▲

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# 8 STRENGTHS OF CHARACTER FOR SUCCESS IN SCHOOL, WORK, AND BEYOND

**S**mart & Good High Schools, the just-released national report based on our Center's two-year study of 24 high schools and adolescent character development, is now available for downloading from our new high school web site ([www.cortland.edu/character/highschool](http://www.cortland.edu/character/highschool)). The report describes a wide range of promising practices for developing "8 strengths of character that help youth lead productive, ethical, and fulfilling lives." These 8 strengths are:

## 1. LIFELONG LEARNER AND CRITICAL THINKER

- ▲ Strives to acquire the knowledge that characterizes an educated person
- ▲ Approaches learning as a lifelong process
- ▲ Demonstrates skills of critical analysis
- ▲ Takes seriously the perspectives of others
- ▲ Seeks expert opinion and credible evidence
- ▲ Sees connections and integrates knowledge
- ▲ Generates alternative solutions
- ▲ Demonstrates willingness to admit error.

## 2. DILIGENT AND CAPABLE PERFORMER

- ▲ Strives for excellence; gives best effort
- ▲ Demonstrates initiative and self-discipline
- ▲ Knows standards of quality and creates high-quality products; takes pride in work
- ▲ Sets personal goals and assesses progress
- ▲ Perseveres in the face of difficulty.

## 3. SOCIALLY AND EMOTIONALLY SKILLED PERSON

- ▲ Has positive interpersonal relationships
- ▲ Communicates effectively
- ▲ Is able to work well with others
- ▲ Is able to resolve conflicts
- ▲ Demonstrates emotional intelligence
- ▲ Responds to the feelings and needs of others.

## 4. ETHICAL THINKER

- ▲ Possesses a well-formed conscience based on universal ethical values such as justice and caring
- ▲ Knows and appreciates the "wisdom of the ages"
- ▲ Is sensitive to the ethical dimensions of situations
- ▲ Seeks the knowledge needed to make an informed moral judgment
- ▲ Can articulate a personal value system
- ▲ Is committed to integrity as a core value.

## 5. RESPECTFUL AND RESPONSIBLE MORAL AGENT

- ▲ Respects the rights and dignity of all persons
- ▲ Understands that respect includes the right of conscience to disagree respectfully with others' beliefs or behaviors
- ▲ Uses a thoughtful decision-making process that considers choices and consequences and applies ethical standards/principles
- ▲ Possesses a strong sense of personal efficacy and responsibility to do what's right
- ▲ Takes responsibility for mistakes
- ▲ Accepts responsibility for setting a good example and being a positive influence
- ▲ Develops and exercises capacity for intellectual and ethical leadership.

## 6. SELF-DISCIPLINED PERSON WHO PURSUES A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

- ▲ Demonstrates self-control
- ▲ Pursues physical, emotional, and mental health
- ▲ Makes responsible personal choices that contribute to continuous self-development, a healthy lifestyle, and a positive future.

## 7. CONTRIBUTING COMMUNITY MEMBER AND DEMOCRATIC CITIZEN

- ▲ Contributes to classroom, school, and community
- ▲ Demonstrates civic virtues and skills needed for participation in democratic processes
- ▲ Appreciates the nation's democratic heritage and democratic values
- ▲ Demonstrates awareness of interdependence and a sense of responsibility to humanity.

## 8. SPIRITUAL PERSON ENGAGED IN CRAFTING A LIFE OF NOBLE PURPOSE

- ▲ Considers existential questions ("What is the meaning of life?", "What is happiness?", "What is the purpose of my life?")
- ▲ Cultivates an appreciation of transcendent values such as truth, beauty, and goodness
- ▲ Pursues authentic happiness
- ▲ Possesses a rich inner life
- ▲ Pursues deep, meaningful connections—to others, nature, a higher power, and so on
- ▲ Seeks a life of noble purpose
- ▲ Formulates life goals and ways to pursue them. ▲

Contact the report's authors, Tom Lickona ([lickona@cortland.edu](mailto:lickona@cortland.edu)) and Matt Davidson ([davidsonm@cortland.edu](mailto:davidsonm@cortland.edu)) to schedule a Regional Institute on the *Smart & Good High Schools* report.