

**THE KENNEDY MIDDLE SCHOOL STORY:
CHARACTER EDUCATION WITH A CURRICULUM**
Eugene, Oregon
1999 National School of Character

In 1999 Kennedy Middle School was only middle school in the country to receive a National School of Character Award. A substitute teacher says about Kennedy: "I've been in every school in the district. When you walk into Kennedy, there's a definite difference. It's a warm and caring place."

Just a few years ago, "warm" and "caring" were not words that described Kennedy Middle School. Finding parents to help supervise lunch was difficult. Parents felt uncomfortable and threatened around several groups of Kennedy's students. Here is the story of how all that changed.

1. *Tying character education to school improvement.* In fall of 1995, Kennedy teachers who were unhappy with disrespectful student behavior met with the school's Site Council, which included parents, community members, support staff, and students. Together they came up with three school improvement goals. Two dealt with strengthening academics. One dealt with school climate and character. They wanted the school to be a place where everyone valued learning and respected each other.

2. *Adopting a character education curriculum: Second Step.* Kennedy staff set out to find a published middle school character education curriculum that would help them achieve their goals. They chose Second Step (www.cfchildren.org), a curriculum that has research support (see *What Works in Character Education*, www.characterandcitizenship.org) and has been used in more than 20 countries worldwide. Kay Mehas, principal of Kennedy, explains:

Second Step is a schoolwide curriculum that teaches skills such as how to communicate, problem-solve, and work together in a community. It actually changes students' behavior. They learn the importance of responsibility and honesty, and it provides them tools for success in life. A large section at the beginning of each unit teaches empathy. The curriculum calls for a lot of role-playing, students choosing how they might react in certain situations.

3. *Training the staff.* Mehas and a Kennedy counselor attended a "train the trainer" institute to learn how to train the other staff to teach the Second Step curriculum. Before the new school year began, Kennedy held a training day for all staff as well as for many parents and district administrators. The faculty decided that every Tuesday from 9:45 to 10:25 am would be dedicated to teaching Second Step lessons.

4. *Involving support staff in teaching the curriculum.* Kennedy decided to invite every member of the staff—including secretaries, custodians, cafeteria workers, and playground aides—to take part in teaching the Second Step lessons. A secretary would be paired with an 8th-grade math teacher, a custodian with an 8th-grade science teacher, and so on. This would show students that the entire school was committed to character development.

5. A more concentrated use of the curriculum in Year 2. Kennedy saw some improvement in student behavior during the first year of using Second Step but still wasn't satisfied. Says Mehas:

Students still weren't coming to school with common expectations about classroom behavior. We wanted to say to them right at the start, "This is how we treat each other at Kennedy Middle School." So instead of spreading out the Second Step lessons—one a week over the whole year—Kennedy decided they would concentrate them: *a lesson a day for the first three weeks of school*. Then, for the rest of the year, students and teachers could refer to what they learned.

This initial sacrifice of teaching time, Mehas says, paid long-term dividends: "We're now able to spend more time teaching the academic curriculum because we have fewer behavior problems. In the end, more learning occurs."

6. Multiple opportunities for student leadership. Kennedy devised various ways to get its students involved in leadership roles:

Respect Committee. This student group, which meets every day, has the mission of trying to ensure that all students feel comfortable and respected at the school. The Respect Committee organizes assemblies at which students from different backgrounds share their cultural heritages. It created a giant school mural that displays every student's handprint. The committee also reaches out beyond the school. During one year a local family's garage was defaced with racist graffiti. The Respect Committee repainted it—and brought teddy bears to all of the family's children to "help replace bad memories with good ones."

Leadership Club. This club meets weekly to discuss ways to improve the school. One year club members worked with a landscape architect to create a design and then plant trees to enhance school grounds. Open to all three grades (6, 7, and 8), its membership is flexible; some students come only when a particular service project interests them. One of the club's regular projects is to cook breakfast for the faculty each year on the first day of school.

Teens and Tots. A service learning class, this program involves Kennedy students in working at Relief Nursery, a child care and support facility for abused children and their families.

Jump Start Tutors are Kennedy students who work with their at-risk peers, teaching them study skills and helping with assignments in the different subject areas.

Student Conveners are elected representatives from each grade-level block class who work continually improve the school climate.

7. Student recognition for positive behavior. Kennedy's Student Conveners created a schoolwide system—PRIDE (Personal Responsibility in Daily Efforts)—for recognizing students on a daily basis for "doing the right thing." Every six weeks, Kennedy students who have all their assignments in on time, no more than one absence, no more than one unexcused tardy, and no

behavioral referrals, become a member of PRIDE. For each PRIDE celebration, qualifying students participate in special activities such as ice skating, snow skiing, movies, and swimming. Every six weeks students have a fresh start, so they have many chances to make PRIDE.

8. Closer teacher-student relationships through “looping.” In 7th- and 8th-grade, Kennedy uses the practice of “looping,” whereby students remain with the same teachers for more than one year. The faculty feel that teaching the same students for more than one year allows them to develop closer relationships with both students and their parents—and this in turn supports students’ academic and personal growth. Mehas comments on the benefits of looping:

The research tells us that students do best with fewer transitions and changes in their lives. Staying with the same teachers provides stability and a richer learning environment. Character education is something that builds slowly. Looping provides continuity of expectations.

9. Increased parent involvement. Since initiating its character education program, Kennedy has had so many parent volunteers that one parent now serves almost full-time as the volunteer coordinator. Parent volunteers cover the office and other essential staff functions while the regular staff are teaching the Second Step lessons during the first three weeks of school. Parent volunteers also run the school library and help with the many clubs. Mehas says:

We make it clear that the school wants parents to be active in any way in the lives of the students. I have been an elementary and a middle school principal. I tell my parents during the first week of school, you need to be more involved in middle school than you were in elementary school. Students are figuring out where they fit in society. When they see you at school, it sends them a message about your priorities. Kennedy encourages parents to drop in and eat lunch with their students whenever they can. One father arranged his work schedule so he could eat lunch here every Thursday.

10. Evaluating impact. Kennedy has looked at academic and behavioral indicators to assess its character education efforts.

- In 1997, only 59% of Kennedy’s students met Oregon’s state academic standards, and discipline referrals averaged 100 a month.
- In 1998, 74% of Kennedy’s students met state academic standards, and discipline referrals were down to a 35 a month.

What were the secrets of Kennedy’s success?

Second Step program. A high-quality character education curriculum, *Second Step*, played a key role. Training all teachers in this social skills curriculum and involving support staff (secretaries, custodians, etc.) in helping to conduct *Second Step* lessons got everyone speaking the same language and sharing responsibility for the character education effort.

A lesson a day at the start of the year. Kennedy made a key change in Year 2: teaching *Second Step* lessons every day for the first three weeks of school, instead of spreading them out over the whole year. The concentration of the lessons during the opening school weeks maximized the curriculum's impact.

Especially in middle school, when students coming from several different elementary schools must be integrated into a new school community, a strong orientation during the first month is crucial for teaching students how to act, how to get along, and how to succeed in their classwork. Armed with these foundational skills, they are ready to make the most of the school year. Without these skills, large numbers of middle schoolers have trouble in their peer relationships and trouble in their academic learning.

Student leadership. Kennedy also placed a high priority on getting students into leadership roles. Leadership opportunities develop student responsibility and defuse adolescent resistance to adult initiatives. Particularly at this age, if character education seems like something that adults are "doing to kids," many students turn it off. But if character education is something the adults are doing *with* students—if students are coming up with ideas, carrying them out, and improving their school and community—then students become much more committed to the character effort.

Building a caring community. Finally, Kennedy took steps to strengthen its sense of community. It strengthened teacher-student relationships by having students stay with the same team of teachers for two years. Its Respect Committee had the important mission of helping all students feel welcomed and valued. And principal Mehas's impassioned appeal to parents—"You need to be more involved during middle school than ever before"—treated parents as essential partners in the learning community.