

The Fourth and Fifth Rs

Respect and Responsibility

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Building Character at Hilltop Elementary

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In 1999, Hilltop Elementary School in Lynnwood, Washington, was one of seven elementary schools named a National School of Character by the Character Education Partnership (www.character.org).

In the early 90s, Hilltop Elementary School faced a trend that schools across the country were seeing: growing student disrespect for both adults and peers.

Our initial attempt to address this concern was to “get tough” about discipline. This approach made no substantial difference. Then, in the fall of 1993, we decided to begin the work of character development with our students with a focus on teaching respect and responsibility. Here are 12 components we view as central to our work:

1. Strong parent involvement. Parents were involved in our initial decision to strive to become a “school of character.” We invite each family to volunteer in classrooms for two hours per week; about 75 percent of our families accept this invitation. Parents also receive weekly letters from the principal and classroom teachers, including suggestions as to how they might foster a particular virtue with their children at home.

I was opposed to doing character education at first. I said, “We have too much to teach already.” But then I saw the change in the kids. I saw the change in how staff related to each other. We’re a different school now. I look forward to coming to work.

—A Hilltop Teacher

2. Building a caring school community. Hilltop’s motto is: “We are here to learn, to love, to care, to share, and to grow—together.” We work on building commu-

nity in every classroom. We nurture cross-age relationships through “buddy” classes, which pair an older class with a younger one. During the year, buddies do projects together, share lunch, and perform service. We begin each academic year with what we call our “New Year’s Day Assembly.” We introduce new staff and new students. We celebrate being back together as a family. We review schoolwide rules regarding respect and responsibility and safety. We ask students to think about and write down the goals they will work on during the coming school year.

3. Class meetings. The class meeting is the backbone of our program. We use class meetings for paying compliments and discovering our similarities and differences. If there’s a problem with cliques on the playground, or if people are leaving a mess in the classroom after projects, those are issues for class meetings.

4. Reflection time. Our teachers typically do “reflection time” for the last few minutes of the school day and/or at other times through the school day. Most often, they use Hilltop’s *Levels of Responsibility* chart to engage students in assessing their own behavior during that day or work period (see box, p. 2). Kids are usually very honest. Often they help each other think of ways they can do better. Reflection has been transformational for both students and staff. It helps students internalize the virtues. It helps us, as staff, keep our work alive. We are continually asking, “What’s working? Where are the problem spots?”

(Cont. on p. 5)



(Cont. from p. 1.)

5. A social skills approach to discipline. Most of our work around discipline is now the proactive teaching of social skills. We emphasize manners—saying “please” and “thank you,” holding the door for someone coming behind you, etc. Visitors always comment on the good manners of our students. Problem-solving skills (*stop, think, and plan*) are taught throughout our school by all staff. We do a lot of mediation in all areas of our school—helping students listen to each other and work things out.

6. The Window Room. A unique part of Hilltop’s approach to discipline is its multi-purpose Window Room. This bright, sunny room (which in fact has an abundance of windows) is a counseling center, staffed by two educational assistants with involvement and supervision by the school counselor. Between 85-90% of the visits are for a positive reason (see box).

7. A monthly focus. For the first three years of our program we focused only on respect and responsibility. Later, to deepen our work, we decided to focus on one virtue a month. Our monthly virtues are: *perseverance/hard work, cooperation/sportsmanship, service/citizenship, kindness/caring, tolerance, fairness/justice, courage, trustworthiness/honesty, and self-discipline.*

Levels of Responsibility

Level 4: Respectful, Responsible, Helps Others

Characteristics: All the characteristics of Level 3, plus doing what is assigned and more, giving help when the opportunity arises.

Level 3: Respectful, Responsible

Characteristics: Hard work, doing what is expected, respecting the rights and work of others, cleaning up work carefully, using time well, using materials carefully and responsibly, productive conversation, persistence.

Level 2: Works When Reminded

Characteristics: Work accomplished with reminders or after questioning by adult present, not much work seen, conversation unproductive—may be silly, works sometimes but at other times not working.

Level 1: Not Working

Characteristics: No work or very little work accomplished at end of time, wandering, unfocused.

Level 0: Bothering Others

Characteristics: Loud talking, often silly or goofy, work accomplished is minimum or carelessly finished, actions interfere with another’s ability to concentrate, abuse of materials.

The Window Room

Quiet work space. Some students come to the Window Room to find a quiet place to work, away from all distractions. Some do academic work in pairs or small groups.

Alternative to recess. Rather than outdoor recess, many students choose to come to the Window Room to play games, read, do art work, or just talk to each other.

Positive reinforcement. Staff sometimes send students to the Window Room in appreciation of especially positive behavior or commendable performance in the classroom.

Cool-down time. When a staff member is upset with a student’s behavior, or when a student is upset about something, the Window Room can be a place for cooling off and getting back to appropriate choices and behavior. Depending on the circumstances, the supervising adult may ask the student to write about what occurred, sometimes offering an apology.

Interpersonal problem-solving. Students may come alone or with another person. Sometimes an adult guides the student(s) in working out a solution; at other times they work it out on their own.

Emotional support. Some students come to seek support from an adult regarding a problem they might be having at school or home. Some of our students are scheduled for weekly one-on-one time with an adult in the Window Room.

In-school suspension. Occasionally, misbehaving students are sent to the Window Room as a place to complete assigned work away from their classroom.

8. Curricular integration. We regularly integrate character education into reading, writing, social studies, and physical education. One approach is teaching virtues through discussing stories—both fictional and those found in the daily newspaper. (Sample assignment: “Look in the paper for examples of kindness or cruelty; bring those in to share with the class.”) Picture books such as *The Empty Pot* (about a boy who had the courage to appear before the emperor with the “empty truth”) have proved to be a good source of character lessons, but so have chapter books such as *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Many teachers also have students write about the qualities they admire in famous historical and contemporary figures and then write about their own talents and character strengths. Faculty say that integrating character education has made academic subject matter more meaningful and motivating for children. Simultaneously, we have seen a slow, steady rise in students’ standardized test scores.

9. Recognition. Many schools rely heavily on extrinsic rewards to motivate good behavior, but we stress social recognition rather than material rewards. For ex-

LIFELONG LEARNING SKILLS

4 = Consistently; 3 = Usually; 2 = Occasionally; 1 = Rarely (Graded by trimester in boxes below.)

<p>RESPECT</p> <p>Demonstrates empathy and kindness toward others; appreciates diversity; follows classroom and school rules; takes care of classroom and school environment.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>COOPERATION</p> <p>Listens actively to others; contributes to the group effort; shares material and responsibilities; helps others.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>RESPONSIBILITY</p> <p>Demonstrates self-control and self-management, handles frustration appropriately. Takes responsibility for personal actions; acts as a responsible citizen.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>PROBLEM SOLVING/ DECISION MAKING</p> <p>Resolves problems in a way that shows consideration for various points of view; can disagree thoughtfully; generates alternatives to personal and interpersonal problems.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>REFLECTION/ SELF-AWARENESS</p> <p>Shows awareness of own thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs and expresses these in appropriate ways. Reflects on and evaluates learning and behavior for the purpose of improvements; sets goals.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>INDEPENDENT WORK HABITS</p> <p>Plans and organizes time and materials; locates information and materials to complete tasks; follows directions; finishes projects and assignments on time; persists when challenged. Asks for help when needed.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

ample, when a student holds a door, an adult might say, “Thank you for holding the door. That was a very thoughtful thing to do.” We constantly try to help students see how their behavior affects others. We also have Celebration Assemblies. These recognize students by giving them the opportunity to perform—to do musical recitals, skits, plays, and readings of poems and stories, many of which highlight the virtue of the month. Student performances are then repeated at community events, other schools, nursing homes, etc.

10. Justice Committee. Our Justice Committee, like the class meetings, teaches students democratic process. The Committee meets weekly with our principal. Representatives of grades 4-6 serve for three meetings. This approximates the experience of jury duty. The students listen to concerns that are schoolwide and make suggestions for solving these problems.

For example, one year a group of students came to the Justice Committee and said they didn’t like the bad language some kids were using on the playground. The Justice Committee invited the offending students to appear before the Committee. These boys said sometimes they used bad language just to be cool, sometimes because they were angry. The Committee asked them to write out a contract promising to improve their language on the playground and come back in four weeks to report their progress. Language did in fact improve.

11. Nurturing transitions. In the past two years, Hilltop has experienced a turnover in approximately half its staff, primarily due to retirements and moves. This included bringing on our new principal, Penny Smith. In order to support new staff coming on board, we have held monthly meetings to discuss specific strategies and the foundational philosophies of character education. Our new staff have told us that they feel tremendously supported as they are welcomed into the flock and that the good teamwork and cooperation that goes on among all staff is obvious and visible to their fresh eyes.

12. Integrating character into the report card. The Edmonds School District (population 20,000 students) has incorporated Lifelong Learning Skills into its elementary-level reporting system (see box, above).

As an “old-timer” who has been at Hilltop for 15 years, I can see the tangible results of our efforts. The climate of our school has improved so significantly that almost anyone who visits our school comments on it. Not only have we seen the steady improvement in our students’ academic achievement, but it is now “cool” to be respectful and polite. Peer pressure is on our side. Students new to our school are often “educated” by their peers as to how we treat one another at Hilltop. ■

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