



KNOWLEDGE + Character



Driving student achievement and personal development
through character education | *Shelby Anderson*

In 2009, a relatively new, K-8 school in Milwaukee made a name for itself by receiving the first-ever Wisconsin School of Character Award from the Wisconsin Character Education Partnership. That same year, the school was also named a National School of Character by the Character Education Partnership. The good work continues at Milwaukee College Preparatory School as the school increases its enrollment and opens a new campus.

The start of the school day at Milwaukee College Preparatory School is a celebration of sorts. The school day kicks off with a short, yet

energizing morning assembly where elementary co-director Kari Whalen recognizes students and leads school cheers.

The school's younger students sit in rows on the gym floor while the older students are at tables. Throughout the approximately 20-minute assembly, Whalen recognizes students. There are the radiant readers who Whalen asks to stand. She asks one particular student who greatly improved his reading to share how much he had read the previous week. All students and staff express their support with a coordinated cheer. All the while, Elementary Dean

Tommie Myles backs up the cheers on the drum machine.

There are also shout-outs to students who did something especially positive the previous day. The morning assemblies end with student showcases. Students step forward in front of the entire school and perform a song or share other talents.

For Whalen, the morning assemblies help set a positive tone for the rest of the school day, "It's worth it to gather together and recognize students and be a school. It's a critical part of the day."

After the morning assembly, students go to their classrooms where



they recite the school's Declaration of Excellence, a long cheer filled with positive and reaffirming statements designed to focus students for the day and remind them of what they are working towards, which at the Milwaukee College Preparatory School, is a college degree.

■ School Culture

Milwaukee College Preparatory School is a public, K-8 charter school with three locations in north-central Milwaukee. The school's campuses, which serve elementary and middle school students, are so popular that the waiting list is well over 200 students.

According to the school's website, "A core belief at Milwaukee College Prep is that every child, no matter his or her circumstance, has a unique and individual genius. It is up to us to unlock that genius, no excuses." Teachers and administrators echo this

“ Entering the doors of Milwaukee College Preparatory School,

one moves from a troubled neighborhood setting into a warm and orderly environment established to support urban children as they strive to achieve academic excellence and acquire the tools necessary to make positive life choices. Students, parents, teachers, administrators and support staff understand the school's mission – an unrelenting focus on academic achievement and character development. The evidence suggests that the collaborative adult community effectively instills in students the disposition and confidence to realize the school's goals.

— *Schools That Can Evaluation*

sentiment, often expressing that if a child is struggling in school, it is because the teachers and school is failing, not the child.

At Milwaukee College Prep, Founding Principal Robert Rauh, says one of the keys to picking up struggling children and elevating those that are flourishing is establishing a school culture focused on the student.

"To me, that's the most important thing," says Rauh, who, during his teaching career, taught at schools in Los Angeles, Harlem and Milwaukee. "Sometimes we forget about the human side of education."

As a school leader, Rauh knows how hard it can be to focus on each individual student, but in his experience if school leaders and teachers don't focus on the child, the academic side of education won't progress.

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“We have high expectations and academics, but we also have love for our students,” Rauh said. “All that other stuff will be worthless if we don’t give them respect and care.”

■ Character Education

Milwaukee College Preparatory School started in the mid-90s when Ron and Micky Sadoff, a retired couple in Milwaukee, decided they wanted to give back to the city, but they weren’t sure how. As Rauh tells it, the couple saw an episode of *60 Minutes* on Marva Collins and decided that was what they wanted to do. Collins took her philosophy that all children can learn in a nurturing environment to inner-city Chicago and established a successful college preparatory academy.

With the Sadoffs’ support, the Marva Collins Preparatory School opened in 1997 with 76 students.

Since then, the school’s name has changed and more than 900 students now attend the school’s three different locations. But the Sadoffs’ vision is still very much intact.

Jill Omdahl, a 7-8th grade resource teacher at the 36th Street campus, which educates about 500 students in K-8, says character education was something teachers did from the very beginning.

It began with teachers developing their own character education exercises and lessons in their individual classrooms, but as the school grew, teachers and school leaders like Whalen knew they needed a more consistent approach.

The school took a first step by developing school-wide value words and came up with a theme to accompany each value word. One of the first value words the school picked was “Respect” and the theme was “I can do more by respecting more.”

While this may not seem like a big step, it began the process of unifying teachers’ individual character education activities. Next, the school adopted an acronym and theme that it held onto for about 3-4 years: “TREKking a road to college and beyond.” TREK stood for Trust, Respect, Experience, and Knowledge.

Today, the school’s mission statement is a little simpler, yet emphasizes the importance of character and life-long learning: “Knowledge plus character pave the road to college and beyond.”

■ In Action

Milwaukee College Preparatory School models character education each school day, which Omdahl says is the way it should be, “Character education really has to be a part of every single day, every single lesson.”

Character Education at Lake Bluff Elementary School

A quick look at an award-winning character education school

Character education at Lake Bluff Elementary School in the Shorewood School District started with the parents. Principal Kirk Juffer says a survey was sent out to parents who expressed some concerns over student behavior. Juffer took that information to his staff who voted in favor of starting a character education effort.

“The power is that it came from the staff,” Juffer says. “There were some really strong leaders and everyone else followed along.”

Establishing character education at Lake Bluff Elementary School was especially important given the diversity of its student population. Juffer says that among his students, 28 different languages are spoken. In addition, the school’s students come from a wide range of family incomes.

To get started with character education, a core group of teachers and school leaders attended the annual 2006 State Character Education Conference hosted by the Jefferson School District, which was named a National School District of Character and a Wisconsin School District of Character in 2010. At the conference, the teachers gained a deeper understanding of character education and learned that it is about establishing a common purpose in your school.

“Character education is you. It’s not some program you buy,” said Brenda Dell, guidance counselor.

At Lake Bluff Elementary School, character education is taught and reinforced through a number of activities. For starters, the school highlights one positive trait (respect, honesty, courage, citizenship) each month.

The monthly character trait is then the basis of a school-wide assembly where students act out skits, sing the school song, and hear from guest speakers, among other activities. It also gives Juffer and his teachers an opportunity to acknowledge students.

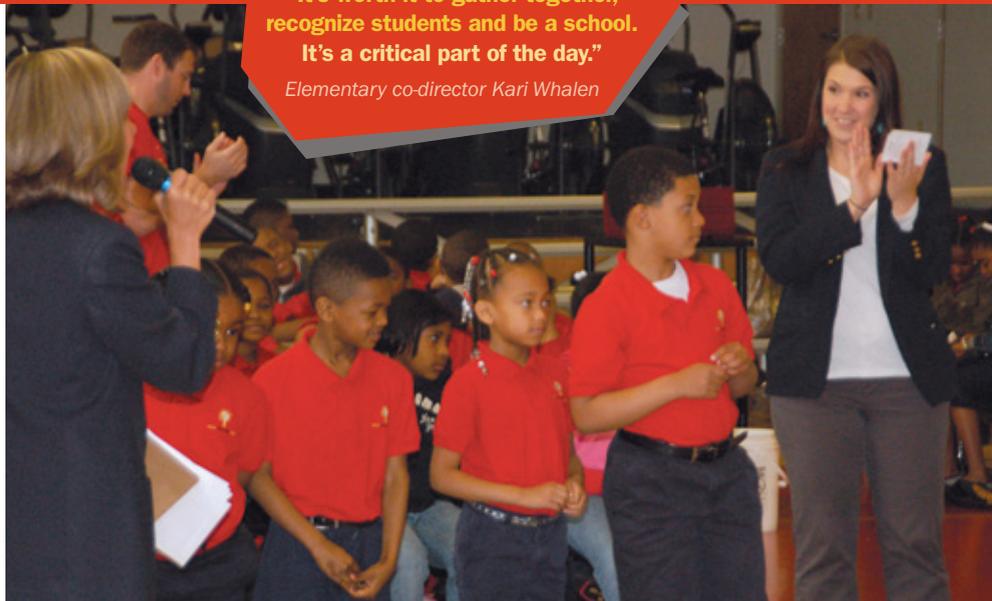
“It really gets students involved,” Juffer said.

Even the way the students are arranged at the assemblies reinforces the community aspect of the school. Dell says students are seated in a horseshoe shape, which allows students to more easily interact with one another and creates a communal feeling. “It’s those little things that really proclaim what we’re about,” Dell said.

Teachers also send family activities home that are designed to spark discussion at home about character education. “It extends it into the

In the middle-school classroom, teachers hold circle time and start conversations related to character education. It also gives students time to talk about any issues they may be having in the class. Similarly, at the middle-school level, the school has started restorative justice circles, where students talk out problems and determine consequences for negative actions.

Other activities amongst the schools middle-school students, such as virtuous dollars, help keep character at the top of students' minds every day. Virtuous dollars are awarded to students for an array of things for anything as simple as coming to school or doing something positive like helping another student. Virtuous dollars can also be taken away for missing assignments or negative behavior. The system helps determine who gets to go on field trips and who qualifies for



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Elementary co-director Kari Whalen

other benefits such as incentive time. "You can go to lots of schools and see posters on the wall, but it's that positive behavior in the classroom that you want to see and I think we have that here," Omdahl said.

Elementary Character Education

Tommie Myles serves as Milwaukee College Preparatory School's elementary dean. Before working at the

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family arena so parents know what's going on," said Maureen Creed, special education teacher.

The school has benefitted from working with two character education experts – Dr. Marvin Berkowitz, inaugural Sanford N. McDonnell Endowed Professor of Character Education and Co-Director of the Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and Hal Urban, a nationally respected character education teacher, author, and speaker.

One of the most important lessons teachers and school leaders learned when starting character education is that everyone needs to participate – including all staff.

"We need to model positive character education traits," Creed said. "It really starts with us."

In the classroom, character education takes many forms at Lake Bluff Elementary School. It can be as simple as teachers standing at their doorway and greeting each student as they

come into the classroom or it can be a class morning meeting where students discuss issues and teachers initiate talk about character education traits.

The school has also started a group called the Captain's Crew, a student leadership group that meets during lunch time over pizza and provides

"Character education is you. It's not some program you buy."

insight from the student body to Principal Juffer.

"They talk about things that should be improved from the student's perspective," Juffer says.

"Students view it as a privilege and a responsibility, they have to give up their recess," Dell said.

The school has a host of other programs that reiterate character education traits like the buddies program, which matches a younger student with an older student. The school also has a

Character Court, a restorative justice program, where students hold skits and talk about how to redress harm that's been done. Another activity, Mix It Up Lunches, is held every three months. Students are given a color and then form small groups with other students with the same color. The small groups are given discussion questions.

"It's a little thing that gets students to know each other and helps break down barriers," Juffer said.

For its work, Lake Bluff Elementary School was named a 2012 National School of Character (NSOC) by the Character Education Partnership. Lake Bluff Elementary School will be honored along with the other 2012 national Schools of Character at the National Forum on Character Education, to be held November 1-3 in Washington, D.C. At the ceremony, Lake Bluff will receive an NSOC award, banner, and a small grant to help with outreach efforts. □



elementary-school level, he had worked at a high school for six years. He thought of himself as a more “hard-core” type of school administrator, playing tough guy to students. At an elementary school, he quickly found out this approach wasn’t going to work.

“Now I’m the fun guy,” Myles says.

When students see him in the hallway, they know they can count on him for high-fives or some words of encouragement – that is unless students have been missing school, disrespecting classmates, or any other negative behavior.

“It’s really hard to disappoint the fun guy,” Myles said. “That has reduced a lot of our discipline problems.”

Myles also leads a number of fun activities. There are “Fresh Fridays” where students can wear street clothes instead of their school uniform. During the winter, the school holds hot chocolate days, and even offers elevator rides after the morning assembly for students who did well in class that week.

The school also offers incentive time to students, which is a block of about 15 minutes at the end of the day when

students can do a number of activities such as games, coloring, or talking with friends. But incentive time and all of the other fun activities are only for students who have maintained their grades and their virtuous dollars.

“They have something to work for every day,” Myles says.

Another successful program is something that Myles calls “Watch the Throne.” Myles noticed that the school had the highest number incidents of student misbehavior in March. To thwart this trend, Myles held “Watch the Throne,” a school-wide activity in which each classroom competed against one another to see who could have the least number of student referrals. The activity was easy to coordinate and the results were very positive.

“These very minor tweaks have reduced deferrals,” Myles said. “Suspensions decreased two-thirds.”

■ Off and Running

With the success that the Milwaukee College Preparatory School’s campuses have had, the school is continuing to grow. Another campus, the 38th Street School just opened this past school year. The school is located in an old Milwaukee Public

School building that sat vacant for many years. The school was abandoned by the school district and it took a lot of work by Milwaukee College Preparatory School to reclaim the building.

“We had to kick the drug dealers off of the back stoop,” Rauh said. “But now this school is not a blight anymore, it’s a beacon of hope.”

Rauh points out that only 40 percent of the nation’s African American students graduate from high school. However, alumni of Milwaukee College Preparatory School have a 90 percent high-school graduation rate. Perhaps even more impressive is the fact that 100 percent of black 8th graders at the 36th Street Campus were advanced or proficient in reading.

When asked what other districts or schools can do to emulate Milwaukee College Preparatory School’s work, Rauh said the bottom line comes down to teachers.

“It’s really about finding great people and giving them the autonomy to do what they need to do,” Rauh said. “Hiring good people and holding them accountable is the first step.” ■

Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.

2012 Wisconsin State Schools of Character

In addition to Milwaukee College Preparatory School, several Wisconsin schools have been recognized in recent years by the Character Education Partnership and the Wisconsin Character Education Partnership.

This year, Lake Bluff Elementary School (see “Character Education” sidebar, page 6) in the Shorewood School District and Prairie Elementary School in the Waunakee Community School District were named 2012 Wisconsin State Schools of Character by the Wisconsin Character Education Partnership. *For more information, visit wcharacter.org.*