

Hinsdale Central High School

Grades 9–12, Public/Suburban • Hinsdale, Illinois • Hinsdale Township High School District 86

Traveling down the Right Path

Transferring from Uganda to an affluent suburban American high school is bound to be a daunting experience. Yet Killian, a current Hinsdale Central High School student who has made such a transition, declares that he suffered little apprehension in his new school, thanks to the help of his student ambassador: “Kevin introduced me to my teachers and where to sit during lunch. He introduced me to his friends, too. This school is fantastic.”

Killian’s experience is not accidental. Establishing Student Ambassadors to ease the transition for newcomers is just one aspect of Hinsdale Central’s comprehensive character education program, which grew out of a school goal *to improve school culture in an atmosphere of growth and change*. It was not always this way. In the spring of 2000, a post-Columbine faculty discussion about ways to detect and defuse stressful situations resulted in the decision to explore character education as a way to transform school culture. After an extensive, year-long research study, faculty, parents, and the community chose Character Counts and the six pillars (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship) as Central’s framework. Data-driven decisions guide Hinsdale’s approach to character education today, with surveys of school culture and student attitudes used as a tool to assess progress and determine new goals.

Posters, murals, and signs throughout the building serve as tangible reminders of the six pillars, but student behavior and service provide the real proof that the pillars are a way of life. In his address to the incoming students, the Student Council president pointed out, “What makes Central such a special place is the willingness of students to adhere to the six pillars of character If you stay true to yourself and your values and grow with pride at Central, you will travel down the right path.”

Central’s journey down the right path offers many exciting opportunities to put the pillars into action. The Character Counts Student Life Team provides a forum for students to examine current school climate and suggest ways to improve it. The Citizen Club, organized after the September 11 tragedy, concerns itself with projects that demonstrate responsible citizenship. Break Down the Walls is an innovative anti-bullying, anti-harassment program in which students perform original skits that address discrimination issues. In another humanitarian effort, more than 350 students belong to the very active Habitat for Humanity chapter that builds houses in impoverished areas.

This progressive school encourages its students to initiate programs that speak to real community needs. In one such program, Read to Lead, members read and tutor young children at a community

CHARACTER EDUCATION WORKS AT Hinsdale

- The 2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement reveals that 93 percent feel they are in a safe learning environment.
- Disciplinary data after five years of Character Counts show statistically significant decreases in undesirable behavior in 15 categories.
- Overall student achievement based on ACT results ranks the school second in the state among public, non-selective high schools.

Pam J. Bylsma, Assistant Principal

center. Teachers In Need, another student-created club, raises money to help teachers or anyone in a teacher’s family who needs financial assistance because of an illness or accident. Let’s Help Out works jointly with the Hinsdale Community House to sign up volunteers for various community projects. A visitor can easily see that Hinsdale Central students are traveling down the right path to exemplify the words of Mahatma Gandhi that adorn a school doorway: *Be the change you want to see in the world.*

REFERENCE

CHARACTER COUNTS! Los Angeles, CA: Josephson Institute of Ethics. Web site: www.charactercounts.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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