

Orinda Intermediate School

Grades 6–8, Public/Suburban • Orinda, California • Orinda Union School District

Putting Others First: A Lesson in Life

“Visiting Saint Anthony Foundation in San Francisco was a whirlwind experience for us. Before this day, we were scared of homeless people, because we didn’t want them to hurt us. . . . After talking to the homeless at lunch, we realized that many ended up at St. Anthony’s dining hall not because they made mistakes, but rather it was the result of life being mean to them.” This excerpt from a student reflection in leadership class at Orinda Intermediate School illustrates how community service changed the perspective of students living in the affluent East Bay neighborhood, just east of San Francisco.



Leadership class, moreover, is not the only place that these energetic youngsters are learning important lessons in life. The jewel in the crown of Orinda’s character initiative is the parent-run Others First community-service program. Based on the belief that a complete education includes a sense of community, this program, initiated by parents six years ago, provides numerous humanitarian activities for group or individual student participation. May, traditionally the time for students to relax, takes on a different spirit at Orinda as students work energetically on seven different opportunities to help others. Environmentally concerned students may opt to “save the Bay” at a wetland restoration project at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Shoreline, while those

interested in planning volunteer events with other teens may choose to join the Youth Action Council in nearby Walnut Creek. Parents track student hours, and all student volunteers are recognized and rewarded. Rewards, however, do not seem to be the motivation, for students report that the experiences are “actually fun.” About half the students in the school have participated in at least one community-service project, and parents hope to attain 100 percent participation in the future. “I think that they’ve learned through programs like this that they can make a difference,” states one parent.

Incoming students receive an introduction to character education even before August enrollment. Orientation to the Orinda School Pledge and the school’s core values begins in the spring, when the counselors and current sixth-grade students visit the feeder elementary schools. WEB Day (Where Everybody Belongs) is a special initiation day for incoming sixth graders just before the opening of school. Eighth-grade WEB leaders serve as the personal buddies for the newcomers, and a day-long program featuring interactive exercises and team activities serves to quell fears and build relationships. A six-week character education cycle for all sixth graders emphasizes Orinda’s core values: respect, responsibility, consideration, and honesty.

Training in character education does not end at sixth grade, but undergoes refinement and development for the next two years. In addition to WEB monthly activities, students experience and practice the traits in their classrooms and on the playing fields. For example, all physical education classes reinforce life skills, and the eighth-grade social studies unit, *Facing History and Ourselves*, integrates the core values into the curriculum. The school’s

CHARACTER EDUCATION WORKS AT Orinda

- Principles of the Orinda Intermediate School Pledge—respect, responsibility, consideration, and honesty—guide all program activities.
- Parents are highly involved in service projects.
- Yearly School Climate Surveys show a continued positive trend in students’ feelings of belonging and being treated respectfully by their peers.

Michael Randall, Principal

policy of allowing all interested students to play sports, including students with special needs, illustrates its strong commitment to good sportsmanship and equality.

Principal Michael Randall, in commenting on the importance of the school’s character education initiatives, states, “Our community expects our schools to develop not only good scholars but good citizens as well.” By putting others first through volunteering, Orinda students are learning lessons in life and citizenship.

REFERENCE

Facing History and Ourselves. Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves. Web site: www.facinghistory.org.

Justice Education Program. San Francisco, CA: St. Anthony Foundation. Web site: www.stanthonyssf.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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