

Waterloo Middle School

Grades 6–8, Public/Rural • Waterloo, New York • Waterloo Central Schools

Striving for Excellence

Every teacher who has taught in a middle school can recall that twinge of anxiety before an assembly as well as that overarching fear: *How will they behave today?* Gone are those fears at Waterloo Middle School, located in the heart of New York's scenic Finger Lakes

CHARACTER EDUCATION WORKS AT Waterloo

- Academic achievement has improved on both state tests and local assessments.
- Disciplinary referrals during the first three months of 2006 represent a 51 percent decrease from the same period in 2005.
- The number of No Child Left Behind reports of serious offenses fell from 79 in 2004–05 to 41 in 2005–06, a reduction of 48 percent.

Michael Ferrara, Principal

region. Teachers are amazed at the respect shown by the students, and speakers write letters of praise about student behavior. To administrators, teachers, parents, and board members who remember what behavior was like six years ago, the transformation is indeed magical—and the magic ingredient is character education.

Waterloo's odyssey began seven years ago, when foreign-language teacher Karen Moretti attended the Summer Institute at the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs in Cortland, New York. Since the new principal, Michael Ferrara, was eager to establish "some sort of advisement program" to improve school climate, he joined Moretti in using the materials from the Summer Institute to create a game plan for such a program. Twenty-five veteran teachers added their input. The advisement program was launched that fall, and the PRIDE planning

committee came into being.

Today, that advisement program known as PRIDE (a 2004 Promising Practice) has become the cornerstone of the school's character efforts. Groups of 12–15 students, under the aegis of one or two advisers, meet daily for half an hour, with a different focus every day of the week: Monday—planning; Tuesday—reading; Wednesday—improving grades; Thursday—developing character; and Friday—enjoying the day. PRIDE is more than an acronym; it is a road map for the week, with Thursday reserved for exploring character development in a variety of ways, from small-group discussion to whole-school assemblies on character-related issues.

Advisement groups also contribute to school improvement. For example, one group created the Welcome to the Middle School program (a 2005 Promising Practice) in which each new student receives a welcome bag of supplies and a personal buddy for the first two days of school.

The PRIDE committee, open to all teachers and students, plans and assesses the school's character initiatives; a parent liaison group and building-level meetings add parental input. The school year begins with a welcoming assembly, *How We Do Things Around Here*, that highlights the PRIDE Guide to Procedures at Waterloo Middle School, with a focus on three major categories: assemblies, advisement time, and hallways. Many other initiatives address specific student needs. RESPECT is an anti-bullying leadership group of students dedicated to promoting "an environment free of bullying, harassment, and intimidation." The Educational Enrichment Club (EEC)

fosters high academic and character standards as well as community service. Students give back to the community in the form of drives for humanitarian causes and "hands-on" local participation.

"Six years ago it would have been hard to say what the school stood for," Moretti comments, "and now students and staff all know what we stand for—excellence in academics and character." Doug Barg, a technology teacher with 32 years of experience at Waterloo, agrees that the change is "truly incredible." Consistently, the staff praises the strong leadership and example of Ferrara and assistant principal Susan Burgess, whose nurturing support has made a difference



to staff and students. Through hard work and teamwork, Waterloo Middle School has transformed itself into a school that exemplifies its chosen theme for this year: *Striving for Excellence*.

REFERENCE

Center for the 4th and 5th Rs. Cortland, NY: SUNY Cortland School of Education. Web site: www.cortland.edu/character.

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