

Birmingham Covington School

Positively Influencing Our Ever-Changing World

From its beginning, Birmingham Covington School set out with an ambitious mission in mind for its graduates: *to positively influence our ever-changing world*. Now, twelve years later, this science and technology magnet school, through its successful blending of academics with character, has teachers, parents, and community agreeing that it is achieving that goal.

Those brilliant science and technology whizzes that inhabit the world of television forensics always solve complex crimes but consistently lack one element: a human touch. The students at Birmingham Covington School (BCS), a magnet school for science and technology located in picturesque Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, clearly

disprove that stereotype. In fact, they have demonstrated extraordinary caring and compassion as they follow their school's moral compass and touchstone, the *Three E's: Valuing Education, Each Other, and the Environment*.

Principal Dale Truding, who has been at the school's helm since the beginning, is a visionary who wisely convened a committee of teachers, administrators, parents, and community members, even before the school opened, to define its mission. From the ensuing educational research, focus groups, and surveys, there emerged two core goals: *to treat each child with dignity and respect* and *to challenge all students*. These goals have shaped the education of BCS students for a dozen fruitful years, and the *Three E's* reinforce the Birmingham district's core values: positive attitude, honesty and integrity, respect and kindness, and responsibility and accountability.

“Peeling the Onion” of Character Education

Character education is not a *program* at Birmingham Covington; it is an *integral* part of the school's structure, culture, curriculum, and activities. Counselor Tamra Nast, who has worked at the school from its first days, compares character education to peeling an onion: “You have to peel the onion to see all the layers; it's not a separate curriculum—it's infused into all we do.”

A democratic and innovative spirit prevails in this open and inviting school in which students are selected by straight lottery from a long waiting list. Unlike traditional schools, BCS organizes its classes into two-year cycles: grades three and four, five and six, and seven and eight. Students remain with the same teachers for two years, allowing for personalized attention, consistency, and the opportunity to develop close relationships. This flexible academic cycle develops both empathy and leadership in students, two qualities that demonstrate what community organizer Sue Reepmeyer calls “the special ability of BCS to bring out the best in people.”



Inquiry and problem solving are integrated into the BCS curriculum.

As a school that draws students from all over the district, BCS has created structures that foster team building and caring. For example, fourth graders serve as mentors to the third graders, answering the newcomers' questions and easing their transition to a new school. "Bus families" also promote harmony and friendships. At first, parents were concerned that younger children would be riding the bus with middle school students, but the bus family concept has been successful, with the older students assuming responsibility for the little ones.

According to Robert Glass, director of instruction for Birmingham Public Schools, "BCS uses the *Three E's* as a basis for all of its initiatives. Its norms and core beliefs carry them through everything they do." In the main lobby and in every classroom, the touchstone appears as a tangible reminder of the school's goal for students and staff. Students can readily explain the significance of the design. Kendall, a fifth grader, is quick to point out that "the symbol for the *Three E's* shows a right angle that represents doing the right thing and a compass pointing north to signify going in the right direction." Agreeing that "doing the right thing" should extend to all aspects of life, fellow fifth grader Matthew adds that "the '*Three E's* are good to use in and outside school."

Faculty as Learners, Facilitators, and Role Models

"It is more challenging to teach at BCS than in most other schools," states Truding. "Teachers work in teams, and they must compromise and collaborate. They must also believe in the concept of 'customer service,' which is a paradigm shift in education." The warm and supportive culture at BCS more than balances the hard work involved for the teachers, who consistently acknowledge that their voices mean something here. Counselor Brian Flatter says, "When you make suggestions in other schools, the response is often, 'You can't.' The response here is, 'You can.'"

To help students value their education, the faculty sets high academic standards. Staff members are also learners in professional learning communities; they discuss ways to interact with students, model appropriate behaviors, and create a climate of respect and trust. Through numerous methods of

differentiating instruction (grouping, using different rubrics, employing challenge pacing, and facilitating individual goal-setting), staff members foster academic success. The school also uses its emphasis on science and technology as a basis for exploration of

The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Birmingham Covington School:

- The 2006 Annual Student Character Education Survey gives ratings of 91 to 95 percent on school safety, faculty caring and modeling of good character, and treating one another with respect.
- The 2006 Parent Exit Survey at the end of eighth grade gives education at BCS a rating of 10 on a scale of 1 to 10.
- 98 percent of our students return each year, indicating the positive effect of individualized attention.
- Consistently, our seventh- and eighth-grade Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) scores are the highest in the district.
- The number of students on the waiting list to attend BCS increases each year, usually in the 150–250 range.
- The number of students requiring peer help to solve problems decreased by 60 percent over the last five years, because of students' abilities to utilize multiple strategies to solve problems.
- Attendance rates are excellent, and disciplinary referrals are declining.

ethical dilemmas. All students must write public policy papers in which they take moral stands and defend their views, based on core democratic values.

Assignments are never hum-drum, according to Emily, a seventh grader. "Students have a chance to lead the lesson, and every day is different." Emily continues, "In math, for example, instead of a boring lesson on measurements and motion, we had a chance to build a miniature plane."

In addition to gaining a reputation for promoting academic excellence, Birmingham Covington teachers also model the character qualities they are trying to instill in their students. When BCS families

are in crisis, they often turn to staff members for assistance. Among the many acts performed by the staff are cleaning houses, preparing meals, purchasing groceries, donating food and clothing, and even painting a room. It is not surprising, then, that the students are also enthusiastic about helping others. Each summer the seventh and eighth graders research and design their own community-service projects, and every other year all BCS students vote on one of these projects to be adopted school wide.

Student Voice

Nast says, “The sky’s the limit at BCS. Kids are an important part of this wide-open process that encourages individual thinking and willingness to take risks.”

Many students interviewed indicate that the feeling of safety allows them to express opinions openly and to offer suggestions. For example, when Emily and some friends observed that teasing was occurring among sixth-grade girls, their proposal for a workshop to address the issue soon became a reality.

John Hoeffler, the retiring superintendent of Birmingham Public Schools, points out that Birmingham Covington is a school that has a “different climate, one that has been thought out very carefully.” Hoeffler continues, “Kids know what they’re doing and why they are doing it, and can articulate what they are experiencing in the learning process.” By encouraging critical thinking, problem solving, and open dialogue in the classroom, the teachers promote higher-order learning. Class meetings serve as an important vehicle for students to express views and settle differences. Student Ambassadors play welcoming roles in the annual Open House for prospective students, where they serve as guides for the potential students and their families and also answer questions.

The close bond that connects students with BCS is evident at the annual Senior Breakfast to which graduating high school seniors are invited. Reepmeyer says that “a special camaraderie exists among those who attended BCS, a close family connection.”

Meeting the Needs of All Students

The faculty works actively and collectively to address the needs of all students, paying close attention to those who are struggling. Nast and Flatter conduct Support Team meetings to consider the needs of all students, because “kids are at the center of everything we do.”

Birmingham Covington uses assessment effectively in determining new directions. It evaluates its programs through surveys, focus groups, and report-card/progress-report data; it also uses the *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* to determine areas where improvement is needed. For example, five years ago the school added a course—Organizational Strategies—in response to faculty input that some students needed additional coaching in responsibility and accountability. The course, which is still being offered, has proved to be quite successful, according to report-card data. Also, in the 2006–07 school year, when data collected from the progress reports and report cards of seventh and eighth graders revealed that a disproportionate number of them had not handed in assignments, the school set up the Success Center, a place where students are sent during lunch to work quietly and catch up. Assistant principal Hal Heard praises this

PRINCIPAL'S BEST PICKS: Dale Truding

TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL: *innovative and flexible*

CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD: the way in which character education is woven seamlessly into everything we do

BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE: responses of former students who visit us during their high school years and tell us what a difference BCS made in their lives

EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: the long waiting list of students who want to attend BCS; report-card grades; the fact that our seventh- and eighth-grade MEAP scores are the highest in the district

WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: *Wrap your arms around a philosophy that students, staff, and parents can accept, and implement professional learning communities to develop it.*

“non-negotiable lunch,” which is staffed by a teacher who provides academic help and encouragement. Last year, the number of students in the targeted grades who received help in the Success Center dwindled to fewer than 10 out of the original 45 who had a comment of “missing assignments” on their report cards.

Again and again, parents who are interviewed say that the individual attention given to each student and the policy of individual goal setting has fostered success. One mother of a sixth grader and two fourth graders says that her son was able to achieve success because of the positive and caring way in which the school handled his learning and behavioral issues. Also, having just completed chemotherapy for breast cancer, the mother gained spiritual strength from the outpouring of compassion shown by the school and the kindness extended by the staff to her children.

Empowering Parents

Parents feel greatly empowered by their relationships with the school. The principal meets with parents at monthly lunches to listen to their concerns and to engage in honest and open dialogue. Parent Rich Tropea, an original board member of the Proud Dads (a 2005 Promising Practice), an organization at the school that gets fathers involved in sports, academics, and music activities, observes that he is “deeply touched by the growth of his children” at the school. Lori Soifer, a parent who is currently an elected School Board member and a participant in the district’s Character Education Steering Committee, credits BCS with helping her develop the confidence to run for office. She remembers that when her children first enrolled in the school, she was very quiet; the school’s caring environment empowered her to speak out and to work to make a difference in the lives of children across the district.

“All eleven standing committees of the PTSA are filled, a testament to the close commitment the parents have to the school,” states PTSA president Susan Gwizdz, the mother of four children, all of whom attended BCS. Gwizdz also believes that the school has contributed greatly to her own children’s “development into people with strong moral character with an internal compass that has kept them on a healthy and positive track.”



BCS students work cooperatively.

New Directions

Since assessments always provide the impetus for making changes, Truding says the school will look at results of parent/student/staff climate surveys as well as report cards and progress reports to determine its next steps. Also, the administrators will take into account issues or suggestions from the Faculty Advisory Committee, the PTSA Management Team, and the Lunch with the Principal. The school does have plans for expanding service learning to the younger grades and for pursuing environmental causes in designing such projects. Since student voice is so important at BCS, the students naturally will have active roles in proposing, designing, and implementing the projects.

When asked to summarize character education at Birmingham Covington, Truding responds, “Character education does not happen on a bookmark, on a poster, or on letterhead. Character education is an integral part of the tapestry of BCS. It is interwoven into each and every encounter between students, staff, and parents, as well as in each decision they make.”

REFERENCE

Lickona, T., E. Schaps, and C. Lewis. *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education*. Washington, DC: CEP, 2006.

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