

Grades K–5
Beavercreek, Ohio
Public/Suburban
Enrollment 610
Beavercreek City
School District

Fairbrook Elementary School

A Great Place to Live and Learn

Some schools can boast that the quality of their educational program has merited them a state-wide or national reputation for excellence, but Fairbrook Elementary School can claim international distinction. When a Beavercreek realtor asked a young couple purchasing a home why they had selected that neighborhood, the response was immediate: “Oh, we wanted our children to go to Fairbrook School. We heard all about it in Germany.”

No one can dispute that a high rate of student mobility tends to lower a school’s academic performance, and yet the inventive Fairbrook School, located close to Wright–Patterson Air Force Base, regards its changing student population as an asset. With an annual mobility rate of 10–15 percent, the school takes deliberate steps to be a safe, caring, and welcoming home to newcomers and permanent residents. As a result, Air Force personnel stationed throughout the world often tell those going back home, “Just make sure your kids attend Fairbrook.”

Fairbrook has a knack for transforming what other schools deem as obstacles into pathways to success. For example, it promotes a “full inclusion” policy for its special needs population, which constitutes 16.4 percent of the student body. Highly regarded in the Beavercreek district for its inclusive model, the school has no self-contained classrooms, and students with special needs are fully integrated into all aspects of the school curriculum, daily activities, and extra-curricular life. Rated “excellent” for seven years in a row by the Ohio Department of Education for consistently high student performance on state standardized tests, Fairbrook fulfills its motto: *A Great Place to Live and Learn.*

First Steps

Fourth-grade teacher Barbara Rhea, a leader in the school’s character education program, traces its roots to 1992, when growing disciplinary incidents prompted the school to explore new ways of improving school culture. With Linda Beaver as its new motivating principal, Fairbrook adopted a conflict resolution and peer mediation program. The core team attended in-state conferences on character education as well as CEP’s annual National Forums on Character Education. The result: a home-grown program that focuses on six life skills (adapted from the six pillars of Character Counts): respect, citizenship, caring, fairness, trustworthiness, and responsibility. Principal Deron Schwieterman, who has headed the school for the last three years, points out that “the school takes deliberate and effective steps to help students acquire and develop these core values through the processes of class meetings, curricular connections, and Dens.”

Fairbrook’s character education program has evolved during its 15 years, affecting the way that students behave, learn, and perceive their roles in life. Fifth-grade teacher Ann Unverferth says, “In my 27 years of teaching at Fairbrook, I have witnessed an amazing transformation in the climate of the building.” Schwieterman adds, “Transforming



Fairbrook students collect food for the needy.

the climate of a school does not happen overnight. . . . An effective character education initiative is demonstrated through the little things we do in our school each day. It is the way we treat each other, the language we use to solve conflict, and the vision we share of working in a caring learning community.” Rhea sums up the spirit of Fairbrook: “I should have retired two years ago, but I’m still here because it’s such a pleasure to teach in this school.”

The faculty is not unaware of certain ironies that accompany the success of their program. The need for peer mediation, the original basis for character education, is practically non-existent these days, because the students have internalized and utilized the life skills. Also, the character education team that at one time blanketed conferences in its search for effective strategies now finds itself the recipient of requests to train staff in the nearby towns of Kettering, Dayton, and Trotwood.

The Character Education Program in Action

The school grounds, hallways, ceiling tiles, hall signs, and classroom bulletin boards—every available location serves as a place for publicizing the life skills. Where those skills are most apparent, however, is in the behavior of the students and staff, whose courteous and caring manner toward one another provides the real evidence of character. Parent Holly Farrell states, “From day one, kids check one another on the life skills. Kids coach each other on respect and responsible behaviors.”

Fairbrook has memorialized every student who has attended the school, from the past to the present, through Everlasting Peace projects that feature student artwork. Current and former students often guide parents through the school, pointing out their names on permanent Everlasting Peace displays. Kim Rosenbaum, parent of a former student and a current student, describes why these displays are special: “The Peace Quilt was created by my older son’s class. It means so much to me, to see my son’s name and work even though he is no longer here.” The courtyard, a peaceful place and learning space that features a fountain and pond designed by fifth graders, completes the peace motif.

The school’s character education program, while enhanced by these outward trappings, finds its center

in the Dens (a 2004 Promising Practice). These cross-grade-level communities discuss the life skills, address current concerns, and work together to find solutions. Every two weeks, small groups of students in grades one through four, guided by fifth-grade leaders who are in turn supervised by adults, gather together as a Den. Students remain in the same Den for four years, so these groups are like little families within the larger

The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Fairbrook Elementary School:

- Fairbrook was rated “excellent” for seven years in a row by the Ohio Department of Education.
- In a 2006 Parent Survey, 92 percent of respondents rated Fairbrook “excellent” or “good” as a caring community.
- In a 2006 Student Survey of Character Skills, 96 percent of respondents said adults care about them.
- The Beavercreek City School District received a Buckeye Association of School Administrators Award for its inclusion program, which Fairbrook helped design and implement.
- Student performance on the Ohio Achievement Tests has been consistently high.
- Attendance has improved, and disciplinary referrals have declined.

Fairbrook family. The student leaders undergo a full-day training, and the teachers work with them before each presentation. Fourth graders Chase and Jack look forward to assuming leadership roles in fifth grade and are already thinking of creative skits and games to enliven their meetings.

Teachers throughout the building actively use class meetings to develop class rules that embody the Fairbrook life skills. These rules, written on poster paper and displayed in the respective classrooms, bear the signatures of all students. Novel ideas for implementing the life skills often arise in these meetings. For example, during a fourth-grade class meeting, a student proposed sending funds to UNICEF by collecting money instead of candy on

Halloween. The suggestion received immediate peer support, and other class meetings soon joined the bandwagon. The school contributed \$1,500 because of that one suggestion, proof that student voice is a mighty power for good at Fairbrook.

Character Connections in the Classroom and Beyond

Fairbrook teachers, who receive extensive professional training in the practices of Harry and Rosemary Wong as well as those of Richard Villa and Jacqueline Thousand, infuse the life skills into both the content and the form of their lessons. A library of character education lessons, bibliographies, and activities is available to them in the media center. Accenting the life skills takes many forms at Fairbrook: from discussing traits such as fairness and caring in literature to exploring citizenship and responsibility in social studies or creating works of art and music that exemplify the life skills. To lessen the competitive edge in sports, the school offers many non-competitive games as part of physical education classes.

Teachers work hard to ensure that all children are included and valued for their special gifts. Classroom lessons are interactive, with teachers using responsive questioning techniques to engage students in perspective taking. Students work in



Students work together to serve others at Fairbrook.

cooperative learning groups, and buddy partnerships have been formed between fourth and fifth graders. Special needs students take part in all activities and may also serve as Den leaders; intervention specialist Amber Mayne often facilitates a discussion with them in preparation for their sessions.

Many community-service projects foster the development of caring, citizenship, and respect. For example, in an intergenerational program with Trinity, a local nursing home, 12 classes rotate visits throughout the week. Students learn about problems that tend to be associated with aging, such as impaired vision, hearing disabilities, and bodily dysfunctions. Kayla, a fourth-grade student, describes her experience at Trinity: “For the visit, I make stuff and play games with the elderly. The visit really makes me happy.”

Parents as Partners: *Four for Fairbrook*

Fairbrook Elementary School places a high priority on developing positive relationships on all levels and provides many opportunities for parents, staff, community members, and students to interact and develop a caring culture. Tina Snider, a former teacher and current Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) president, spent time searching for an ideal school before making her choice: “Fairbrook fits every category. It is safe, nurturing, and academically rigorous. It not only develops my children in terms of learning but also shows them how to become good citizens.”

The school practices its spirit of inclusion in making certain that all family members become part of the larger Fairbrook family; among the many events that the PTO sponsors are Family Fun Day, Field Day, Donuts with Dad, and Muffins with Mom. Parent and former student Steve Deaton fondly recalls the scene of 800 people—fathers, children, staff—gathered together in the cafeteria at 6:45 a.m. for the annual donut event. Deaton enjoys the camaraderie and the bonding experience: “It is neat to get a peek inside my child’s world.”

“If you don’t get the volunteer sign-up list early, there just might not be anything left,” continues Deaton as he explains the school’s active parent involvement. *Four for Fairbrook* is the PTO slogan, which challenges each parent to volunteer four

hours of service to the school, through work done either at school or from their home. In the 2006–07 school year, parents volunteered over 4,500 hours. Another novel venture sponsored by the PTO is the Masterworks Art Appreciation project, which comprises instruction about artists as well as training in a variety of art design techniques. Solely supported and delivered in the classroom by parent volunteers, Masterworks provides students with extraordinary enrichment opportunities.

Planning Ahead

Fairbrook's decisions are data driven. Schwieterman points out that the surveys given to staff, parents, and students each fall and spring indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the school climate. However, the school uses these surveys not just as evaluative tools but also as guides to mapping future moves. For example, when last fall's parental survey indicated a need to include parents in more activities, the school gave them a role in the Dens. Tracking of disciplinary referrals has also provided a guide to improvement. Realizing there was a disconnect between the school's handling of disciplinary referrals and its character education program, staff members redesigned disciplinary procedures so that they are consistent throughout the building and reflect the life skills.

Fairbrook effectively engages students in both evaluation and school improvement. Students complete reflection pieces in the Dens, take surveys, and evaluate their own data by recording their responses on bar graphs. When a survey indicated that the playground was the place in which most conflicts took place, the Dens brainstormed ways to improve it. Through an online poll, students voted for making additional playground equipment and active games available as a way to ease tensions. Always ready to help, the Fairbrook PTO provided equipment such as balls, soccer nets, and markings for blacktop games.

The teachers, parents, and students will continue to work together to make Fairbrook a full-inclusion school in every way. Second-grade teacher Pat Martin says, "Students have models and examples for positive ways to interact with one another, their teachers, and other adults. These traits are in contrast to the many examples they see on television,

PRINCIPAL'S BEST PICKS: Deron Schwieterman

TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL: *caring* and *safe*

CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD: the Den program in which fifth graders become the leaders of the other grades

BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE: Our children come to school happy each day.

EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: Our school was rated "excellent" for seven years in a row by the Ohio Department of Education.

WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: *Start now. Don't wait for a magical program to come. Character education is what you do in your daily interactions with students, not some shot-in-the-dark program.*

in movies, in video games, and in society. Our students know that what they do, think, and say defines the kind of character or person they are choosing to become."

Perhaps one of the most touching examples of the deeply held feelings toward Fairbrook was given expression at graduation last year. In the midst of the festivities and laughter, one mother was crying, not smiling. Although she was happy about her child's success, Diane Sefton, whose third and youngest child was now graduating from Fairbrook, declared, "I feel as if I've lost my best friend."

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