

Grades 6–8  
Fair Lawn, New Jersey  
Public/Suburban  
Enrollment 458  
Fair Lawn Public Schools

## Memorial Middle School

### Celebrating Character Every Day

Beginning as a small class project to teach compassion, the character education initiative of Memorial Middle School in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, has blossomed into a full-fledged program that has flourished for ten years and garnered many state and national awards. The story of its journey is proof that “the little guy or gal” can be a powerful voice in transforming an entire school.

“I always make certain that I listen to my people. After all, look what happened here,” says John Immerman, the affable principal of Memorial Middle School in Fair Lawn, a middle-class suburb located in the northeast corner of New Jersey. Immerman, who took over the reins of the school in 2006, is referring to Memorial’s school-wide character program—Celebrate Character—which has revolutionized school culture, curricula, and community relationships.

The “new teacher” who touched off the revolution at Memorial—though quite by accident—is the effervescent Laurianne Brunetti, language arts teacher and the current character educator coordinator. As a brand-new teacher in 1997, Brunetti was faced with a highly diverse class of students who ranged from “significantly gifted to considerably challenged.” In search of personal survival and a way to help her students develop much-needed compassion, she created an instructional unit—Walk in My Shoes (a 2006 Promising Practice)—in which students experienced various disabilities (blindness, multiple handicaps, deafness/muteness, visual impairment, fine-motor handicaps, and gross-motor handicaps) through simulated situations at six disability stations set up in the classroom. Each “challenged student,” feigning



Memorial students show their compassion by participating in Hoops for Humanity.

some physical limitation, was accompanied by a guide student while attempting a timed task; students recorded their experiences, thoughts, feelings, and questions in a response journal at each station. In a reflective discussion at the end of the unit, the students showed they were actually becoming sensitive to the plight of others.

When the superintendent and the administrator who had observed her teach the lesson summoned her for a meeting, Brunetti thought she was in trouble. The very opposite was true: Fair Lawn was interested in launching a character education program and requested the help of the novice teacher who had managed to change class climate by transforming unfeeling students into sympathetic souls. Along with the request came a strong suggestion to write up the lesson as an entry in the New Jersey Department of Education’s Best Practice competition.

#### The Celebrate Character Team

Brunetti won a prestigious 1998–99 Best Practice Award, the first of many awards that Memorial has earned for its innovative strategies in character education. Twice named a New Jersey School of Character, the middle school has also won six CEP Promising Practices awards. She reflects, “What is exciting to me is that Promising Practice recognitions have not been one-hit wonders for us, that it just hasn’t stopped there.” An examination of

Memorial's rich character education program shows it is anything but a "one-hit wonder."

The power behind the dynamic character education program is the hardworking and inventive Celebrating Character Core Team (CCCT). Led by Brunetti and guidance counselor Greg Pepe, the core team began as a small group of committed teachers from a variety of disciplines: math teacher Leslie Scheinzeit, science teacher Andrew Miller, social studies teacher Peter Arts, and physical education teacher Tom Hochkeppel. The team now represents the entire school community (students, teachers, parents) as well as the wider community (government agencies and businesses). With the adoption of the six Character Counts pillars—respect, trustworthiness, fairness, responsibility, caring, and citizenship—the school developed a stronger foundation. The turnover of four principals in the last five years has not deterred the CCCT; each new administrator has enthusiastically joined the bandwagon.

Eighth-grade student Brianna captures the essence of Memorial's spirit: "No matter how different you might be, there is always a place for you here." The school, once characterized as isolated and uncaring, has become friendly and compassionate; in fact, the Bridges program, in which two cognitively impaired classes of students are mainstreamed into the fabric of the school, has met with such student acceptance that the district has decided to move an autism program into Memorial next year. Given the school's diversity—30.7 percent of Memorial students come from non-English-speaking homes, and 19.7 percent of the student body is classified as having special needs—the high level of tolerance at the school is the glue that holds it together. Veteran teacher Judi Boyce observes a correlation between character education and the positive development of the special needs students: "As a special education teacher with over thirty years of classroom experience, this is the most authentic form of inclusion that I have ever seen. It allows my students to actually measure up in ways that are not often possible for them. Character education allows the students to participate in a competition of character rather than a competition of the mind—this approach to teaching middle school students really levels the playing field and reminds them that there really is a place for everyone."

## Opportunities Galore

"I remember seeing a poster that read, 'Caring is thinking with your heart.' I never really understood how that worked until I became a part of this school. Now I can't imagine not understanding that," says Ryan, a seventh-grade student. The CCCT seems to have thought of everything that would make character building a school priority and "thinking with your heart" its daily focus. Externally, all the reminders are there: the welcoming *Character Lives Here* sign; student artwork and posters in every classroom; windows decorated by the parents with character virtue words; and a Hope and Healing Garden for reflection, created jointly by the Guidance Department, parent and technical adviser Emil De Luccia, and students from the Environmental Club. However, what strikes the visitor is the degree to which the staff and students have internalized the pillars and put them into action through service.

Emily, an eighth-grade student says, "Everywhere you look, character is happening," and the Core Team makes certain that students have an opportunity for their character to shine from

## The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Memorial Middle School:

- Steadily decreasing rate of student absenteeism, with a 10 percent decrease from 1999–2000 (the base year) to 2005–06, as indicated by a 7-year longitudinal study
- 50 percent decrease in tardiness, and 62 percent decrease in suspensions, during the same period, as revealed by the same study
- Recognition as a New Jersey School of Character (2006, 2007) for the school's comprehensive, intentional, and proactive character education program
- Recognition by the Character Education Partnership: NSOC Finalist (2006), six Promising Practices awards (2004–2007)
- Adequate Yearly Progress goals met in all categories
- Student retention rate of zero (2004, 2005, 2006, 2007)

## PRINCIPAL'S BEST PICKS: John Immerman

**TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL:** *affirming* and *nurturing*

**CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD:** Points of Light/Stars of Character, which celebrates the school's vision of character

**BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE:** improved attendance; decrease in disciplinary incidents

**EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT:** student retention rate of zero; Adequate Yearly Progress goals met in all categories

**WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION:** *Believe in the process, and trust the people you are working with to carry the ball.*

September through June. Even before they begin at Memorial, fifth graders from the feeder schools embark on their “journey of character” through the structured Common Ground program (a 2007 Promising Practice), which provides an initiation into many school programs by Memorial’s student leaders, including collaboration in a service project.

A rollicking team-building activity for the entire school, Character Cavalcade (a 2005 Promising Practice) kicks off Memorial’s celebration of National Character Education Week every October. Bringing the six pillars to life, the day-long Olympics of Character delivers a cogent message: *Work together, help one another, and experience the joy when cooperation, not competition, is the prevailing spirit.* If the Cavalcade serves as the traditional rite that begins the year, the Points of Light—Stars of Character assemblies (a 2004 Promising Practice) are the formal quarterly recognition ceremonies that celebrate student achievement. The students recognized at these events—called Points of Light and Stars of Character, because they have demonstrated service, citizenship, and character—function as role models for others, conduct the Common Ground initiation, and take on independent service initiatives. Memorial’s

programs not only build character; they are also fun. Clarissa, a seventh-grade student, observes, “These programs are examples of how our school is just the friendliest and safest place to be. Friends on opposite teams (in Character Cavalcade) were giving high fives, children were smiling from ear to ear, the atmosphere was so wonderful. These are the ways that we learn that character really counts.”

## Curriculum, Service, and Student Leadership

The grass-roots nature of Memorial’s character education efforts is responsible for the creative infusion of character into the curriculum; as Pepe points out, the literacy/humanities course offerings come “from the teachers ‘up,’ not [from the] administration ‘down.’” Under the umbrella theme of *Finding the Write Way*, three interrelated courses emphasize character development: Lifetime Readers, Curriculum Connections, and Fair Lawn Researcher. The courses build literacy and critical thinking skills for grades six, seven, and eight, respectively. In the Fair Lawn Researcher course, for example, students develop a “community connections” outreach service-learning project as part of the Hometown Heroes unit. Students complete an action plan proposal, compose a persuasive letter to the mayor and borough manager, and design some form of visual aid, such as a brochure, a flyer, or a graphic blueprint. Eighth grader Betsy says, “The Fair Lawn Researcher course has helped me to develop my voice and my ability to speak up and speak out about something I believe is important.”

Since the roots of Memorial’s character education program lie in the need to develop empathy, the school’s continuing emphasis on service is understandable. The Starfish project, begun in 1997 by teaching duo Brunetti and Scheinzeit and based on the concept of helping one another one small act at a time, has become an integral part of school life. The school’s Helping Hands organization, for example, records astounding statistics for 2006: more than 30 students donated hair to Locks of Love; 50 students participated in some form of tutoring; more than 70 students participated in community or school clean-up projects; 40 volunteered at senior citizen centers; 150 volunteered in after-school programs; and 80 students participated in various local and national charitable endeavors.

Students feel the responsibility of becoming “servant leaders,” a commitment that the school has stressed following the 9/11 tragedy by establishing a Celebrate America—Celebrate Character program. Eighth-grade student Eric states, “Leadership is about service. It’s about finding ways to help others and figuring out how to make things better.” Peer mentors in the P.A.L.S. (Peer Assistance Leader Service) program take the group’s motto (*Kids Helping Kids*) seriously by pledging in a signed contract to mentor a peer through modeling of positive behaviors and character traits. Parent and PTO president Lisa Carlone has high praise for the program: “It takes away the boundary between sixth and eighth graders. Being introduced to someone who is not like them is very helpful. The kids will come home and talk about their experiences.”

### Reinforcing Family and Community Values

A common thread in interviews with Memorial parents and Fair Lawn community groups is satisfaction with the school’s “reinforcing the values that they themselves believe in.” Mary Beth Milas, PTO liaison, says, “What they are doing with character education is really incorporating our family values. It has positively impacted the lives of my three daughters in sixth, eighth, and now eleventh grades.” Milas’s oldest child, Kira, holds the distinction of being the student artist who designed and created the Memorial school seal. Collectively, parents remark that the wider community is grateful to the school for “teaching compassion, tolerance, and the six pillars of character.”

District superintendent Bruce Watson comments that Memorial’s character education initiatives have created a “partnership with the municipality and surrounding towns.” With Memorial leading the way for the district, Watson adds that “the Board of Education now gives the teaching of character education its full support.” Fair Lawn mayor Marty Etlar, who has witnessed the ways in which Memorial students have enhanced community projects, presented the school with a 2006 borough proclamation that read in part: “We recognize and celebrate with Memorial Middle School its efforts to reinforce the notion that the development of strong character is recognized, appreciated, valued and necessary, not only within the school community but also within the Borough of

Fair Lawn.” “Good citizenship is spreading,” says the mayor. “If children learn about citizenship now, it is something that will last a lifetime.”

### A Time for Celebration and Collaboration

Memorial had better order a huge cake for its triple celebration this year: the fiftieth anniversary of the school, the tenth anniversary of its character education program, and its formal recognition as a National School of Character.

The festivities for the school’s golden anniversary began in March, with an original musical and dramatic extravaganza, “Follow That Star,” written by Brunetti and directed by Brunetti, Scheinzeit, and Pepe, that used a character theme as its message: a call to students to reflect, realize, and recognize the power and potential they have in this world to make a difference. Clearly, the story of the school is inextricably linked to its character journey.

Immerman stresses that the faithful Celebrating Character Core Team will continue to forge ahead, this time with an eye on improving the environment in its service-learning projects. Seasoned performers, having presented at the CEP Forum and the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the team members will throw themselves into the role of becoming missionaries of character to other districts. In the meantime, Immerman relishes his role of guiding Memorial: “Imagine being in charge of a school where everybody regards one another as family and celebrates character every day.”

### REFERENCE

*CHARACTER COUNTS!* Los Angeles, CA: Josephson Institute of Ethics. Web site: [www.charactercounts.org](http://www.charactercounts.org).



Memorial students find “common ground” during fifth-grade orientation.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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