

Pinellas County Schools

Grades PreK–Adult
Largo, Florida
Public/Urban
Enrollment 152,000

Commitment to Character

Beginning a character education program in one school can be a formidable task; initiating and sustaining one in a district with 145 schools seems unattainable. Long before the state of Florida mandated character education, Pinellas County Schools had made a strong commitment to developing character, a commitment that can serve as a model for other large districts hesitant about taking the first step.

Summer is traditionally the time when boys and girls bid farewell to school responsibilities and jaunt merrily to camp. In an unusual role reversal, more than 300 teachers in Pinellas County find themselves flocking to summer camp each year. Character Camp, which the venture is called, is an innovative professional development activity that provides an opportunity for administrators, teachers, support staff, and community members to learn about the best practices in character education.

This two-day immersion in character education is a highly popular draw, one of the many innovative practices of Pinellas County Schools. This sprawling urban district, situated in the middle of Florida's west coast between Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, has been at the forefront of character education in the Sunshine State since 1995. Home to more than 150,000 students, the district has earned kudos for implementing and sustaining Commitment to Character (C2C), the framework of its comprehensive character education program for a dozen years now.

When not attending talks by current researchers and practitioners of character education, such as Marvin Berkowitz, Hal

Urban, Phil Vincent, and Adolph Brown, who are popular speakers at Character Camp, participants have the chance to take part in workshops where they can exchange ideas and develop skills. Instituted in 2001, Character Camp continues to be a popular attraction that consistently elicits responses such as “motivational,” “awesome,” and “not to be missed.”

Starting Small

“Great movements start small,” says Dr. Clayton Wilcox, superintendent of Pinellas County Schools. The district has always prided itself on addressing student problems, no matter how small. In 1995 Pinellas faced a delicate situation: how to handle cases of dishonesty when fifth graders involved in the Enterprise Village economic education project were caught stealing. Other districts might have zeroed in on assigning the appropriate punishment, such as detention or suspension, but not Pinellas County Schools. A group of educators and community leaders, led by Dr. Gus Stavros, a local citizen involved in school affairs, got together to brainstorm a proactive approach and wound up designing a system for the teaching of character qualities. From this meeting was born the C2C program.

Pinellas County Schools has always known the importance of listening to many voices when making a decision. Before identifying the qualities of respect, responsibility, honesty, and self-motivation as the district's key traits, the committee surveyed over a thousand stakeholders. The effort to include people from all interested groups has paid dividends: Twelve years later, the four qualities still frame the district's character education logo and continue to shape the focus of its 145 schools. When the Florida State Legislature first mandated in the late '90s that character development be taught at the elementary level, Pinellas County Schools was in the vanguard. It incorporated the state qualities of patriotism, responsibility, citizenship, kindness, respect, honesty, self-control, tolerance, and cooperation into its list, and chose to focus on a specific trait each month.

Pinellas teachers consider ways to integrate character into lessons.





Pinellas Peer Mediators

Accent on Autonomy

School Board member Carol Cook attributes the “credibility” of the district’s character education program to its accent on autonomy. The C2C model does set forth a common goal for all schools: *to create a school culture that is saturated with such character qualities as respect, responsibility, honesty, and self-motivation to promote higher student achievement in a safe environment.* However, the district does not dictate the specifics of how each school is to achieve that goal. Instead, the Safe and Drug Free Schools office, which coordinates character education, offers “a menu of strategies” that schools may embrace according to their needs and provides ample professional development opportunities to schools so that they can attain success. Cook adds that this freedom has enriched the quality of the different programs and the extent of teacher buy-in: “Character education wasn’t crammed down the throat of the teachers and principals. Rather, they saw the value in it, and it grew from there.”

Apparently, autonomy has fostered invention and success, demonstrated by the many awards that the district has garnered in developing character. In 2006, Cross Bayou Elementary School in Pinellas Park was named a National School of Character. In previous years, Pinellas County Schools won three Promising Practices awards from CEP for innovative programs: Moving with Character (2003), Peer Connections (2004), and Bobcat Buddies (2005). In this ethnically diverse district, all schools are required to have a multicultural committee that acts as an advisory group to the principal. In recognition of its commitment to diversity, the district received the 2006 Rose Duhon-Sells Multicultural Program Award from the National Association for Multicultural Education.

Pinellas County Schools realizes that “one size does not fit all.” Commitment to Character utilizes a common language, teachable moments, service learning, and modeling to infuse character education into all areas of the curriculum. However, depending on the grade level and local needs, different schools gravitate to different approaches. For example, many elementary schools rely more heavily on monthly themes, assemblies, literature lessons, posters, and school-wide initiatives; middle schools find success with programs such as Life Skills and Love and Logic; all high schools use peer programs, and more than two-thirds are engaged in service learning. School Board chair Mary L. Tyus Brown is proud that the district “embraces character education wholeheartedly,” and points out that Board members consciously try to model the character traits in their interactions with one another.

The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Pinellas County Schools:

- Disciplinary referrals and suspensions have decreased each year.
- Volunteerism has increased: Nearly 30,000 volunteers donated more than 1.1 million hours to Pinellas County Schools in 2006–07.
- Community involvement has increased: There were 6,352 school-based partnerships with businesses in 2006–07.
- Responses on the My Voice Aspirations Survey of high school students (2006) indicate that 77.4 percent feel accepted at school.
- Students outperform the state and most other large districts on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).
- Tarpon Springs Elementary School was named a 2006 Blue Ribbon School of Excellence, the only school in the Tampa Bay area so recognized.
- Two of the district’s high schools made the *Newsweek* list of the top 100 high schools in the United States.
- The Principal’s Multicultural Advisory Committee program won the 2006 Rose Duhon-Sells Multicultural Program Award.

SUPERINTENDENT'S BEST PICKS: Clayton M. Wilcox

TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR DISTRICT: *committed and responsible*

CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD: Character Camp, a two-day conference on character education for the staff that brings keynote speakers and offers breakout sessions

BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE: improvement in disciplinary statistics; a happier staff; the fact that schools with stronger character education programs experience a lower rate of voluntary transfers

EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: improvement in reading and math scores on FCAT; improved student grades

WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: *Start small. Search for the program that fits your school district, and embrace what you believe in.*

Providing Professional Development

Professional development does not end in the summer, with Character Camp. Throughout the year, opportunities abound for teachers and support staff to attend workshops organized by the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools. Topics run the gamut from training in the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education to more specialized offerings focusing on substance abuse prevention, gang awareness, conflict resolution, and cyber bullying. Prevention specialists and instructional staff developers follow up by assisting school communities in applying the wide variety of strategies learned in these workshops.

Pinellas County Schools contends with problems not usually encountered by smaller districts. Realizing that student behavior on the 713 buses that are used daily could easily constitute a major problem, the district wisely included training in character education for all bus drivers. Brenda Lewis, the director of transportation, is happy to report that this practice has resulted in “a remarkable decrease in bus behavior referrals, by 64 percent.”

School Board member Janet Clark points out that Pinellas County’s character education program has a “good backbone, [a] foundation” that enables it to thrive in different settings. In fact, a visitor to just a handful of its many schools would find character education manifested in different ways, but would observe that each school is a caring community that treats students as “persons, not pupils.”

Different Programs, Different Settings

Most elementary schools teach character directly; to assist them, the district provides a host of structured literature and character lessons. For example, at elementary schools such as Mount Vernon, Pasadena, Seminole, and Walsingham, an observer might see students actively engaged in describing what responsibility looks like in action or how a character in a story might have made a wiser choice. Teachers comment favorably on the carryover from the classroom to other aspects of life. Carol Dinsdale, a second/third-grade teacher at Mount Vernon, says, “If a student lives his or her life by the Commitment to Character theme, a better and well-rounded individual will be presented to society.”

Service learning, one of the components of the C2C protocol, has added zest to character training by introducing students to new worlds. For example, fifth graders at Pasadena Fundamental Elementary School delight in their “hands-on” training in the care of a guide dog that their teacher Kim Thomson trains to help the blind. Equally enthusiastic about giving service to others are the students in the school’s gifted program, who design their own projects to help the community. Service learning at the middle school level reinvigorates the curriculum and enhances learning. Beth Anderson, eighth-grade teacher at Lealman Intermediate School, instituted a cross-grade tutoring program that pairs her students with sixth graders. Holly Atkins, a teacher at Southside Fundamental, has created a class in which students, taking themes of local interest, write scripts for plays to be hosted and performed by the American Stage Theatre Company. Last year, this collaboration entailed having students interview members of the local African-American community to capture stories of their personal lives and gain a sense of their history as a people. The reflections that take place after completion of the projects indicate

a high level of student interest and a desire to continue being of service to others.

Val Gallina, a long-time member of the C2C Resource Team and current character education grant specialist, observes that character education has gone from “door decorating” to “moral dilemma” discussions. This growth is evident at Dixie Hollins High School, where students are afforded the opportunity to have their voices heard on a variety of issues. Principal Michael Bohnet, who meets monthly with leaders of the Student Government Association and the School Advisory Council (SAC), often “steps back” and lets the students figure out solutions to a problem. “The results are quite amazing,” states Bohnet.

Community Connections in Astounding Numbers

From the outset of its character education program, Pinellas County Schools has recognized the necessity of bonding with parents and the community. The intervening years have solidified that relationship: last year, nearly 30,000 volunteers donated more than 1.1 million hours in schools and offices, and businesses and organizations were involved in over 6,000 school-based partnerships. These organizations range from the district’s PTA to colleges and large corporations. As a result of strong support from these organizations, the Pinellas Education Foundation was able to establish the Gus A. Stavros Institute, which provides an elementary and secondary school facility where students can experience the operations of local businesses. The Institute, a fitting tribute to a committed citizen who was at the helm of Pinellas’s character education movement, hosts the quarterly character education professional development workshops.

Kim Richardson, the varying exceptionalities liaison of Tyrone Middle School, observes that character education helps to “bridge the gaps in society,” particularly for kids who “aren’t getting these messages at home.” The district works intentionally to help parents “get that message” by providing them with strategies for success. Monthly Dinner Dilemmas; workshops on Internet safety, bullying, and parenting; guidelines for good behavior on the bus; and tips on dealing with substance abuse—these are among the many offerings that the district extends to parents to include them in the character education journey. Wilcox, who believes that the

Pinellas community really understands the need to develop students of character, stresses that the future of character education “needs to rest with the people” rather than “to be tied to a superintendent.”

Taking Character Education to Another Level

Character education at Pinellas County Schools will be taking new and exciting steps with the help of a four-year, \$1.9 million federal Partnerships in Character Education grant from the United States Department of Education. With Cross Bayou (a 2006 National School of Character) as the standard, all elementary schools will develop character education programs that aim to replicate its level of excellence. Writing cadres in secondary schools will infuse character education into the existing curriculum. Students will demonstrate problem-solving and critical-thinking skills in ethical debates that show a deep understanding of moral dilemmas. Parents and the community also are important links in the far-sighted plan, with the addition of more parenting workshops and community conferences on ethical matters.

The “small step” that Pinellas County Schools took 12 years ago to shape students of character has already brought about unimaginable results. As it moves forward, the district envisions that the commitment to character will extend beyond its walls and become the animating spirit of the government, the organizations, and the businesses of Pinellas County. Ask Wilcox, the recipient of a 2007 Florida Department of Education Superintendent’s Award for Volunteer/Community Involvement, to describe the district’s ultimate vision, and his response is to create a “county of character.” The track record shows that visions have a way of becoming reality in Pinellas.

REFERENCES

Fay, J., and D. Funk. *Teaching with Love and Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom*. Golden, CO: Love and Logic Press, Inc., 1995.

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

Life Skills. Largo, FL: Phillip Roy, Inc. Web site: www.philliproy.com.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Jan Urbanski, Supervisor
Safe and Drug Free Schools
Pinellas County Schools
310 4th Street SW
P.O. Box 2942
Largo, FL 33779

Telephone: (727) 588-6130
E-mail: URBANSKI@pcsb.org
Web site: www.pinellas.k12.fl.us