

## Radix Elementary School

Grades PreK–4  
Williamstown, New Jersey  
Public/Rural  
Enrollment 725  
Monroe Township  
Public Schools

### A Big Vision and a Big Heart

Although its oldest students are just in fourth grade, Radix Elementary School in Williamstown, New Jersey, has gained a reputation for a big vision and a big heart. Not only has Radix spurred other schools to get on board for character education, but its focus on intrinsic motivation has inspired its young crusaders to embrace many humanitarian projects.



Radix students beautify their community by planting trees.

What with any student, staff member, or parent about the special quality that defines Radix Elementary School, and the word *family* invariably comes up. Considering that the enrollment (725) is large for an elementary school and that 16 buses are needed to transport its students from the many sections of Monroe Township which it serves, it is amazing that Radix can engender such close bonds.

But then again, Radix does amazing things as a family. Never afraid to try the unorthodox, particularly if it means fun, students, teachers, and parents joined together to create a giant aquarium float to showcase the school's successful character education program. Designed by the PTA, the surrealistic-looking float, amusingly entitled "A Fin-tastic School of Character," won honors at Williamstown's annual Halloween Parade and enjoyed rave reviews in Philadelphia's 2007 Mummers Day Parade. Arrayed as jellyfish, big bass, dolphins, and mermaids, the Radix team merrily strutted with style. Nestled inside the huge aquarium was the Hidden Treasure: the children, who are indeed regarded as the treasure of Radix. The Mummers Day announcer's comments on the production, "Great school, great kids, great teachers, and a great performance," may well serve as an apt description of this lively school that seems to have found a magic formula for blending school and community into one happy family.

### A Character Education Journey with Twists and Turns

If the Mummers Day float served as external proof of Radix's commitment to character, the daily caring behavior of staff and students shows how the values have been internalized. Principal Ray Dinovi and lead teacher Christine Gehringer, who have guided the program since its inception in 2001, are both inspirational and indefatigable. "We can't sit stagnant," says Dinovi, and the twists and turns that have occurred during Radix's journey prove that this school grows by making needed changes along the way. Gehringer, who serves as coordinator of character education, adds, "What we are doing is promoting a way of life. That's why we listen to our focus groups of teachers and parents to add new ideas to enrich that life." Parent Judi Kibelstis, who has a son and a daughter attending the school, observes, "It's not a program. It's what they do on a daily basis."

Radix already had a character education program intact when, as the recipient of a federally sponsored grant in conjunction with the New Jersey Department of Education, the school was required to select a character education program approved by the No Child Left Behind legislation. Instead of regarding this as a chore, parents, teachers, and administrators enthusiastically explored different programs until they found the one that was a perfect fit. The ideology of Community

of Caring, with its emphasis on respect, responsibility, caring, trust, and family, reflected the very values that Radix deemed essential for child development. In October 2004 the official Community of Caring training of staff began, and Radix readied itself for a boost to its focus on character.

Two other major “twists” have enriched the program in novel ways. When the teachers met to assess progress, they agreed that character education must be closely tied to the curriculum as well as to social and emotional processes. As a result, teachers representing each grade level created a grade-specific character manual that contains engaging lessons that integrate character into all curricular areas, replete with cross-referencing to the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. Media specialist Marianne Gibson states, “There is a wealth of great resources in our media center in the area of character education. The handbook with lessons is wonderful, a real bonus for a new teacher or one who is moving to another grade level.” Teachers have gone far beyond the original lessons, creating new ones as they have progressed.

In another twist, Radix has worked conscientiously to replace extrinsic incentives with intrinsic motivation. Schools serving a student body in the lower grades frequently rely on material rewards, such as stars, coupons, pencils, or candies, to spur the children to practice the values. A teacher focus group agreed that “extrinsic rewards just don’t work”; the new philosophy stresses the positive feeling, the intrinsic reward that comes from exhibiting good character. The principal’s Character Chats with the students as well as the teachers’ emphasis on “doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do” have specifically addressed intrinsic motivation. Kelly Dillich, a new third-grade teacher, observes, “The students have a sense of pride to do their best. I think they have a sense of doing it intrinsically.”

### A Caring School Community

Proof that the students at this school are doing things intrinsically is plentiful: from their courteous and respectful behavior in daily interactions to their demonstrations of empathy in service projects. The school proves that it is indeed a “community of caring” in many ways. From making pillows to comfort patients undergoing chemotherapy to collecting new Halloween costumes, decorations, and treats for the

children of families displaced by Hurricane Katrina, Radix students participate actively in a host of service projects. Student Council member Max, a fourth grader, after observing that many children at Radix lacked the funds to buy presents for their families, is hard at work in increasing the stock of the school’s Holiday Shop to enable the less fortunate students to procure gifts free or at a nominal cost. Parent Judi Viviani, whose four children have attended Radix, observes their growth over the years: “I could see a difference in how respectful they were becoming of one another and more mannerly. All these qualities they carried home.”

Parent Kristin McCoy, who has both a son and a daughter attending Radix, says that the core values are “instilled not just taught,” resulting in an atmosphere in which students genuinely care for one another. A staple of the program is the daily class meetings (a 2005 Promising Practice) in which children engage in meaningful conversations about the core values. Topics for the class meetings range from

## The Proof Is in the Data

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

- Decreases of 56 percent in disciplinary referrals and 70 percent in suspensions over the past three years
- Adequate Yearly Progress goals met for the past three years, with scores of 91 percent or better on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (ASK) test
- Change in school culture, marked by a 40 percent increase in student and family involvement in educational decision-making, as indicated by a 5-year longitudinal study by Rowan University
- Recognition by other schools, as evidenced by Radix presentations at 12 state and national character education conferences in the last three years
- Selection by Raritan College and New Jersey Center for Character Education as a Best Practice Model School (2005) to mentor three other schools
- Recognition as a New Jersey School of Character in 2006 and 2007
- Recognition by the Character Education Partnership: NSOC Finalist (2006), Promising Practices awards (2005 and 2007)

the character education quote of the day to issues arising from concerns in the children's own lives. Last year, the school's site-based management team collaborated on adding topics that would also demand critical thinking. Dinovi says, "They are taking class meetings to a new level by developing scenarios and questions to prompt discussion." A buddy system in which older classes are paired with younger classes helps students at both levels to develop confidence, improve reading and writing skills, and work on service projects together.

Newcomers quickly become part of the Radix family. Ambassadors from the Welcome Committee greet them and their parents, letting them know that this school is a family. Not only do ambassadors take the newcomers on a tour of the building, but they also "adopt" the new students as friends. Fourth-grade welcome ambassador John likes the arrangement, because it provides him with a great opportunity "to meet new friends." On the receiving side, Erin, a new student last year, enjoyed her celebrity status as a newcomer, proud of her picture and article on the school's welcome board located in front of the main office.

### Caring in the Curriculum

Just as reading stories and studying history provide inspirational ways to integrate character into the classroom, writing also serves as a vehicle to foster the core values. Teachers assert that student behavior on the playground, in the cafeteria, and on the buses has improved since the school initiated writing assignments in which students are asked to describe

respect, responsibility, and caring in various settings. Thoughtful reflections conclude each service project. Parent Cathy Coffman observes, "Character is a natural way of life here. It is part of the teaching, and it is totally integrated."

In response to a suggestion by a focus group, a committee of teachers created a four-point rubric for evaluating student understanding of character through writing prompts. The committee defined observable, measurable behaviors for each character trait. By their responses to carefully structured writing prompts, students are now assessed on their understanding of the character trait, the relationship of the character trait to oneself, the application of the character trait to others, the association of one character trait to another, and the evaluation of the character trait. Gehringer, who points out that "Radix's program is unique because it combines a school-developed ideology with the tenets of Community of Caring," says that this rubric is "another example of the use of focus groups to improve the program."

Another crucial factor in Radix's success is its espousal of professional training in character education for all of its staff, an approach that Dinovi recommends to schools attempting to create and sustain effective programs. In addition to the Community of Caring training, the faculty has studied Michael Fullan's strategies and explored the ideas of motivational speaker Dr. Philip Vincent. The school has also enriched its own program as well as the educational training of Rowan University by establishing a partnership with that institution. Student teachers from Rowan play important roles in Radix's character education program, serving in the classroom and assisting in the planning and implementation of service projects. "If we can get teacher candidates to see the importance of character education," states Dinovi, "we ensure that it will continue to flourish in the next generation." Not surprisingly, other educators often refer to Radix as a "school with a big vision."

### A Vision That Spurs Others

A committed missionary for the character education cause, Dinovi believes "a school has a duty to tell its story and to help other schools change school culture through character education." His first step in the mission was to garner district support; he helped create a District Character Education Advisory



Touched by the tragedy at Virginia Tech, Radix students create a memorial.

Committee (DCEAC) for Monroe Township that has made character education a priority for the entire district. But the district is not the only one to profit from the expertise of Dinovi and his staff. In a presentation at the CEP 2005 Forum, Radix staff members joined Dr. Philip Brown, director of the New Jersey Center for Character Education (NJCCE), in sharing strategies for “taking your character education district-wide.”

Dinovi and his dedicated staff are familiar figures on the presentation circuit, having made 12 presentations at state-wide and national conferences during the past three years. Locally, in a 2005 joint venture of the NJCCE and Rowan University called Building Teams to Sustain Best Practice, Radix served as a mentor to three New Jersey schools with diverse demographics.

### Parents as Staunch Supporters

“The parents deserve kudos for all they do,” states Gehringer. From the outset, parents have been active participants in the character education program, sitting on the site-based management team, serving in focus groups, sponsoring a host of activities, and organizing a strong volunteer program. Currently, Deborah Hamilton and Tina Doran coordinate the volunteer group of over 80 parents who help the teachers on a daily basis in response to their requests. Parents often assume teacher roles themselves, training other parents on confidentiality, the use of equipment, and school procedures. In the classroom, parents (and grandparents too!) help students with reading and the learning of math facts. To attract participation, volunteers are allowed to bring their preschool-age children to school with them. Doran feels that “this helps our preschool-age children begin to build relationships with staff even before they begin school.”

Attendance at PTA meetings is a high priority with the administration, so Radix is quick to resolve problems that interfere with attendance. For example, high school students provide baby-sitting services for parents with little ones. The activities sponsored by the PTA—such as Family Fun Night; Math, Science, and Reading Nights; Halloween Night; the Ice Cream Social; and Candy Bar Bingo—have served as wonderful catalysts to unite the school. Upon request, parents and grandparents may even have lunch with a student and two friends. Parent Jen Carlson sums up

## PRINCIPAL'S BEST PICKS: Raymond C. Dinovi, Jr.

**TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL:** *inspiring and family*

**CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD:** student-initiated projects, such as planting a tree to commemorate the victims of Virginia Tech

**BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE:** children's behavior; comments by teachers and visitors on how respectfully and responsibly our students act

**EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT:** consistently good scores on New Jersey ASK; continued success of our students in middle school

**WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION:**  
*It's one of the best ventures on which you'll ever embark.*

the Radix attitude toward parents: “This is your school as well as the school of your child. The school deserves a lot of credit for this. They keep parents coming in, and you never feel like an outsider.”

It is hard to imagine that Radix will ever be at a standstill in its character education journey, for its history in the field indicates it is always ready and eager to embrace change. In spite of the changes that may occur, one goal that will persist is the fulfillment of the school's far-sighted mission: *to develop productive, moral citizens*. As a National School of Character, the Radix team will continue to do what it has done best: caring for its children as the finest treasure, listening to many voices to find out what works, and taking its show on the road to inspire others.

### REFERENCES

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