

Hamilton Township Public Schools

Grades PreK–12 • Public/Suburban • Hamilton, New Jersey

Teaching and Living Character

“Begin with small steps,” says Neil Bencivengo, the superintendent of Hamilton Township Public Schools in Hamilton, New Jersey. This district, the sixth largest in the state, certainly knows what it preaches. Peacemaking, a grassroots initiative started in 1996 at Hamilton’s Kuser Elementary School, has evolved into a district-wide comprehensive character education program. When the other schools saw Kuser’s success in resolving conflicts, they yearned for a similar accomplishment. The district stepped in, providing support, and the Kuser staff spearheaded the movement, which gradually developed into a full-scale endeavor. Aptly called Teaching and Living Character (TLC), Hamilton Township’s program has transformed a district with more than 13,000 students and more than 1,200 school personnel into a caring family.

The apostolic spirit that fueled Kuser to lead a district in building character still thrives today. The energetic TLC Core Team, led by Bill Osman, the affable supervisor of professional development,

mentoring, and character education, actively spreads the word at presentations throughout the state and at CEP Forums. “Hamilton Township is an excellent example of the way that vision, commitment, support, and structure can sustain a character education program,” says Dr. Philip Brown, director of the Center for Social and Character Development at Rutgers University. Brown frequently calls on the district to showcase its initiatives and share its expertise with newcomers.

Hamilton Township’s approach to character education is a dynamic one, always eager for improvement. The six pillars of Character Counts—caring, fairness, trustworthiness, citizenship, responsibility, and respect—serve as the core values for all 23 schools. Last year the district added the performance values of hard work, positive attitude, self-discipline, perseverance, and commitment to excellence. Breathing new life into the character movement has been the adoption of the Fish Philosophy, which stresses the importance of a positive attitude. The district furnishes moral and financial support, provides training for all personnel and for parents, and demands a commitment to character of all new hires as well as administrators. As “partners in peace,” local businesses have joined its efforts, giving financial assistance and donating services.

Assistant Superintendent Lois Braender praises “the extraordinary commitment of the staff,” who have made TLC “a way of life.” Hamilton Township, honored as a 2008 New Jersey District of Character, can boast of many positive results that flow from its focus on character. Suspensions, expulsions, violence, and vandalism have decreased; standardized test scores have increased; and the majority of schools in the district have met Adequate Yearly Progress goals. Principals, teachers, and parents readily



attest to the positive effects of a sustained character program. Nancy Whalen, Sayen Elementary principal, who is also a parent, says, “Teachers see how character education works. Students now have strategies to use when they are on the playground. They work out the problems before they return to the classroom.” The students, however, remain the best spokespersons for the program. In fact, the students at Greenwood Elementary recorded so many acts of kindness and positive behavior in their PRIDE journals that Oprah honored them on her show in March 2006.

REFERENCES

- Center for Social and Character Development. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University. Web site: www.rucharacter.org.
- CHARACTER COUNTS! Los Angeles, CA: Josephson Institute of Ethics. Web site: www.charactercounts.org.
- The FISH! Philosophy. Burnsville, MN: ChartHouse Learning. Web site: www.charthouse.com.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Dr. Lois A. Braender, Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services
Hamilton Township Public Schools
90 Park Avenue
Hamilton, NJ 08690
Telephone: (609) 631-4100
E-mail: lbraender@hamilton.k12.nj.us
Web site: www.hamilton.k12.nj.us



THE SUPERINTENDENT'S CORNER:

Neil Bencivengo

ADVICE TO THOSE NEW TO CHARACTER EDUCATION:

Develop and implement the program you design in small steps. Choose a team that includes representation from the entire community, with people who have a passion for character development and those who are new to character education. Identify your needs and brainstorm solutions. Develop goals and activities based on CEP's Eleven Principles and your needs assessment findings.