

Mill Pond School

Grades 4–6 • Public/Suburban • Westborough, Massachusetts • Westborough Public Schools

Providing the Keys to Success

Bill Gates, Bono, Catherine the Great, the Dalai Lama, Mao Tse-Tung, Hugo Chavez, and Confucius—quite an unusual assemblage, but just the right mix to spur a lively discussion on world hunger or global warming. Each year, sixth-grade students at Mill Pond School in historic Westborough, Massachusetts, assume the identities of these disparate personalities in a mock U.N. summit in which the delegates have to arrive at a consensus before drafting resolutions on the best ways to address world problems.

Coming to a consensus and making decisions despite differences is a process that is very familiar to Mill Pond School. Principal Reene Hatherley faced both problems and differences when the



school opened in 2002. To handle the overcrowding of the Westborough elementary schools as well as an overflow in the middle school, the new school was carved out of the existing grades four through six. Mill Pond's task: to create a unified community in a school of 850 children with a very diverse mix of teachers coming from both the elementary and

middle school levels. Add to this mix some teachers transferring from the primary grades and a few new hires, and, according to Hatherley, "The scenario can best be described as a version of 'yours, mine and ours.'"

Mill Pond School has demonstrated great success transforming "yours and mine" into a very positive "ours." The vehicle for uniting the staff, the students, and the parents turned out to be character education. In order to create a Mill Pond identity and to develop an atmosphere that promoted optimal learning, a core Character Education Committee, consisting of volunteer staff members, met regularly, researched many programs, did a great deal of reading, and created the school's homegrown Keys to Success program. The "keys" are 10 ethical values, each of which becomes a monthly focus. These core ethical values are prominent in the school's culture and community. Classrooms, character "street signs," monthly letters from the principal, the school handbook, the discipline code, and the yearly school improvement plan all reinforce the importance of character education. Daily announcements that include Words of Wisdom messages, lessons by the guidance counselors, and curricular integration regularly imbed these values, providing the keys to social-emotional learning and responsible citizenship. Strategies from the Responsive Classroom model, such as the class meeting, student creation of rules, guided social interactions, and conflict resolution, promote strong student autonomy. Key compliments, which are little "thank-you" notes given to individuals for the special ways they have positively impacted the school community, foster a sense of caring and mutual appreciation. Rounding out the Keys to Success program are grade-level service-learning projects as well as a multitude of service



THE PRINCIPAL'S CORNER:

Irene Hatherley

ADVICE TO THOSE NEW TO CHARACTER EDUCATION:

You must have a leader who is **absolutely committed** to the development of a strong program. You also need to involve all stakeholders: staff members, students, parents, and the larger community. Do a good deal of research by speaking with others who have already developed programs, by visiting schools where character education is practiced, and by reading literature about the work being done in the area of character education.

projects initiated by the students.

A large banner, located by the school's central staircase, carries Mill Pond's overriding theme: *Learning and Caring—It's what we do here*. Parents, teachers, and students all agree that the slogan truly describes the spirit and character of Mill Pond. Parent Carla Shultz emphasizes that there is a "positive relationship between the students and the teachers" that is evident both in school and elsewhere. Parent Christine Farmer joins in Shultz's praise and adds that the school is "educating the children in life's principles."

REFERENCES

Responsive Classroom. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children. Web site: www.responsiveclassroom.org.

Words of Wisdom. Bellaire, TX: Project Wisdom, Inc. Web site: www.projectwisdom.com.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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