

## Bower Hill Elementary School

Grades K-3 • Venetia, Pennsylvania • Public/Suburban  
Enrollment 783 • Peters Township School District

### Getting Set for a Lifetime of Caring

The traditional expectations for students in the primary grades are to conquer the three Rs and to make strides in social adjustment. Students at Bower Hill Elementary School, a K-3 model school in Pennsylvania, easily master these tasks, but they also move on to another goal: cultivating a habit of caring that becomes a pattern for their lives.

Visitors to Bower Hill Elementary School, located in the winding hills of picturesque Venetia, Pennsylvania, some 17 miles south of Pittsburgh, often feel transported to a “utopia,” a perfect place to educate children in grades K-3. Examples of tenderness and caring are seen just about everywhere. In one hall, third graders Joe and Ryan are happily walking their friend Madison from her autism support room to join their class for a shared activity. Close by, third grader Ashlee chats with her kindergarten buddy, whom she will later accompany

Bower Hill students earn the opportunity to join with the custodian in the raising of the flag.



to the bus. Parent Claudia O’Connell, who says her family moved here just so her two children could attend Bower Hill, remarks that the school’s compassionate spirit makes her feel like “being part of Oprah’s *Big Give*,” where everything operates around the concepts of “love and dedication.”

“At early stages, kids develop caring attitudes that will be carried with them forever,” states Kelly Gustafson, the energetic principal of Bower Hill. Although the caring at Bower Hill is genuine, it is anything but accidental. Rather, it is the result of thoughtful planning; careful implementation; consistent modeling by staff, parents, and students; and meaningful service-learning opportunities. Assistant principal Mike Henaghan adds, “We know our students are good at their age, but we are always asking what are some things that we can do *now* to impact *later* behavior.” The story of Bower Hill is essentially the story of a dedicated faculty, joined by committed parents and community, finding out what is best for children and working together to guide them in becoming “smart and good” citizens.

#### Peters Township—A District of Caring

Gustafson readily admits that Bower Hill has many built-in advantages. First of all, the building is state-of-the-art, opened in 1999 with furnishings and materials designed specifically to be both “kid and teacher friendly.” Secondly, the district and the community of Peters Township have joined forces to support character building since 2000. Bower Hill was just one year old when the Peters Township Council passed a resolution urging the district “to establish an initiative to promote positive character traits throughout the community and schools.” The Peters Township Character Counts (PTCC)<sup>1</sup> program has been the catalyst for developing many innovative character initiatives. Eight years later, the district can be proud of its extraordinary record in character building: McMurray Elementary (4-6) became a National School of Character in 2004, Pleasant Valley Elementary (K-3) was a Finalist for the award in 2006, and four of the five district schools were named together as a Finalist

<sup>1</sup>There is no relationship between PTCC and the commercial *CHARACTER COUNTS!* program.

in 2007. Moreover, each of the district's five schools has garnered one or more Promising Practices awards. "We've bought into this as a whole community," reports parent Mary Ellen Bruce.

Bower Hill's Character Counts Committee, headed by teacher-leader chairperson Sandra Jackley, oversees the implementation of all character initiatives. Staff members, parents, administrators, and students may submit ideas. Every Thursday, grade-level teams meet in the morning before school to reflect and to plan the next steps. Other teams at Bower Hill, all schools in the district, and central office personnel receive copies of the team's minutes, helping to produce a genuine cross-fertilization of ideas in the community. Bower Hill parent Carol Planitzer has a high regard for "the district-wide focus on character," which has had a positive impact on her two daughters, one of whom now attends McMurray Elementary, where the emphasis on "building people of character" is a natural extension of that at Bower Hill.

### Making a Large School into a Caring Family

Henaghan, who originally taught on the secondary level, says, "For me, Bower Hill will always be the gold standard for all elementary schools." What amazes him is that this large school with nearly 800 students "functions as a family, as personal as a small neighborhood school." From the outset, the administration and faculty consciously strove to create that feeling through a many-layered approach.

Myra Oleynik, librarian and media specialist, says the new school chose the bee as a unifying theme to help children relate to character building: "It is a nice visual reminder, one that we had used in another school, and one that really works with the young children." The four main character traits—respect, responsibility, caring, and honesty—are *buzzwords*; the *Bee Patrol* is an intentional way for staff to "catch" students; and the monthly PTA newsletter is aptly called "What's the *Buzz*?"

If the bee motif keeps Bower Hill *buzzing* with character, it is a deep regard for one another that provides the real framework for character building. Frances Appel, a first-grade teacher who has been in the district for 19 years, calls "love and caring" the "cornerstone of Bower Hill." She relates how the staff, students, and parents rallied around her when her husband died of cancer last year, providing her with meals and emotional support. Paraprofessional

Sandy Dunkerley tells a similar tale of receiving dinner each night while she underwent 16 weeks of chemotherapy. "This is a very caring school," she reflects. School psychologist Julie Williams, who travels among the district's schools, observes that "the



## The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Bower Hill Elementary School:

- 96 percent of third graders scored advanced or proficient on the mathematics portion of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA).
- 91 percent of third graders scored advanced or proficient on the reading portion of the PSSA.
- Students had a 96 percent attendance rate, above the state average.
- The results of a Character Counts<sup>2</sup> student survey given in 2007 show:
  - ✓ 96 percent reported talking and hearing about honesty, respect, caring, or responsibility.
  - ✓ 98 percent were praised by their teachers, parents, and classmates for making their best effort.
  - ✓ 88 percent reported participating in a service project in their school or community.
  - ✓ 94 percent said that they are willing to share with others, even those who are not their friends.
- The results of a Character Counts<sup>2</sup> teacher survey given in 2007 show:
  - ✓ 100 percent reported teaching and speaking about honesty, respect, caring, and responsibility in their classrooms.
  - ✓ 92 percent read and discussed stories with their classes about honesty, respect, caring, or responsibility.
  - ✓ 100 percent stated that they encourage their students to do what they think is right, even if others disagree.

<sup>2</sup>Character Counts Surveys, designed by the Bower Hill Character Counts Committee, were done on *Survey Monkey* (Portland, OR. Web site: [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)).

welcome extended to her by everyone here" has always made her feel as if Bower Hill is her home.

The word *caring* emerges again and again, not just in conversations with students, teachers, and parents, but also in the classrooms. Genuine feelings of empathy abound at Morning Meetings. For example, as Beth Wardzinski's third graders share some troubling personal concerns with each other, their peers respond, "I see how sad you must feel," or "I felt just

## Bower Hill Elementary School Character Traits

respect

responsibility

caring

honesty

like that once.” Equally impressive is the way students treat those with special needs. Second-grade teacher David Karp reports that bringing the autism program to Bower Hill and mainstreaming the students with autism into some of the classes was “the best thing we ever did.” Teachers, apprehensive at first about the outcome, are amazed to witness the caring they observe in their students. Autism support teacher Dolores Miller explains how some of her students have made great strides “through the loving visits and interactions” with regular education students, adding that “both [groups] have grown in the process.” First-grade inclusion teacher Suzan O’Brien says, “Our kids are very tolerant of individual differences.”

### Reaching Different Learners through a Rigorous Curriculum

While Bower Hill reports outstanding results on state and national standardized assessments, what is most impressive is the school’s continued interest in finding strategies that are most appropriate for all levels of learners. Cooperative learning, teacher-directed instruction, small-group activities with parent volunteers, individualized instruction, and service learning serve to meet the needs of different learners. Guidance counselor Fred Traumuller says, “We make every effort to help students feel comfortable with the school, from [the] New Student Orientation to providing a host of different experiences to appeal to individual learning styles.”

Construction workers building additional classrooms were included in Bower Hill’s original televised morning program, *The Art of Listening*.



Monday Mixers, building on the theory of multiple intelligences, offer intriguing opportunities for in-depth study. Meeting once a week for six weeks on a rotational basis, third-grade students find delight in diverse topics, such as creating a living-history museum exhibit, writing a newspaper based on fairy tales, designing a sky model with new constellations, or producing a cookbook that incorporates math, literature, and cooking. In response to parent requests, the school implemented a Foreign Language for Elementary School program for first and second graders last year. The Enrichment Center program, facilitated by enrichment support teacher Joe Bratetch, is yet another offering. Designed to meet the needs of the academically strongest students, the program encourages them to “stretch” their thinking.” Third grader Justin says, “There’s something for everyone at Bower Hill.”

Oleynik points out that the school uses a number of strategies to turn all children into enthusiastic readers. Through the Grand Friends program (a 2005 Promising Practice), retirees work individually with students who are experiencing difficulties. One Grand Friend, Kathy Strunck, brings Inka, her registered therapy dog, to school once a week. Struggling readers love to sit with Inka on cushions on the floor and read to her. A Reading Support room offers individualized reading instruction for approximately 32 students who need additional help.

Teachers receive training in correlating curriculum with character building. For example, third-grade team leader Lora O’Brien explains how a core social studies unit on the early settlement of our nation correlates with the reading of novels that provide insight into the emotional experiences of immigrants. Jolene Hanig-Jones, another third-grade teacher, cites the importance of service projects in helping students understand the plight of others. Hanig-Jones points out that students who participated in a pajama-collecting project for a homeless shelter “learned a valuable lesson that not everyone has what they have.”

### Parents as Volunteers, both Inside and Outside the Classroom

“We have such a high level of parental support, it’s amazing,” states Henaghan, who believes that the school’s family partnerships are what sets the school apart. The extremely active PTA even has its own

workroom near the main office. “We want to channel that energy in positive ways,” adds Henaghan. As a result, parents wear many hats at Bower Hill. They can be found volunteering in the classroom, serving as tutors to students with difficulties, performing time-consuming clerical tasks, and functioning as guest speakers.

The parent voice is important in making decisions, and the Character Counts Committee listens to their suggestions. For example, parents expressed concern that when their children move on to McMurray Elementary (a school for grades 4–6), many of them do not yet know all their Bower Hill classmates. As a result, Bower Hill created a Monday Mixer activity that brought all the third graders together for academic study and social interaction. When a student/parent survey identified concerns about bullying in the upper grades, the school applied for and won a grant from the Center for Safe Schools/Pennsylvania CARES Initiative to implement the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. Parents have a warm relationship with the principal and know their views are valued. “Kelly listens to everyone,” notes parent Rochelle Saxon.

Many parents eat lunch with their children at school, and there are often more parents than needed to chaperone field trips. In a kindergarten class last year, parent volunteers met with small groups of students to create various art projects, freeing up the teacher and the paraprofessional to meet with individual students who had specific academic difficulties. The PTA also plays a role in scholarship efforts for the needy and in organizing service projects. As PTA president Beth Gamble points out, “It’s all about caring for one another.”

### Collaborating Above and Beyond

As Bower Hill moves on in its new role as a National School of Character, Gustafson hopes to strengthen the school’s partnerships in two diametrically different directions: university affiliation and pre-school collaboration. She would like to expand the partnerships that have already been formed with colleges and universities in the area, providing a site for interns and student teachers to explore character education in action. The Bower Hill staff, frequently asked to present at Pennsylvania teacher conferences and university programs, will continue its efforts.

Acutely aware of the way one level of education has an impact on the next level, the principal would also like to create strong vertical articulation between



### PRINCIPAL’S BEST PICKS:

Kelly Gustafson

**TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL:** *energized and family-oriented*

**CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD:** the Bower Hill Volunteer program that begins in kindergarten and continues through third grade

**BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE:** the frequency of parent involvement in programming, during the school day and after school hours

**EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT:** student performance on standardized tests, and student/parent responses on Character Counts surveys

**WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION:** *Practice the art of listening. This encourages everyone to have a voice. Communication is the key.*

the public elementary program and its feeder pre-schools. According to kindergarten inclusion teacher Maria Piatt, the annual afternoon tea that Bower Hill has held “has really opened communication with these pre-school programs.” Among the topics under discussion are the kindergarten curriculum, information about available township and state services for children, basal reading materials for the pre-school, and character-building strategies.

At the end of the school year, just as the principal was closing up shop, two girls who had once attended Bower Hill appeared in her doorway. “Need any volunteers? We’d like to help your kids.” Needless to say, the principal accepted their offer. Within a short time, those two brought another two, who brought still another two. It appears that caring is contagious at Bower Hill, coming into fashion as a lifelong habit.

### REFERENCES

*CARES (Creating an Atmosphere of Respect and Environment for Success)*. PA CARES Bullying Prevention Grant. Camp Hill, PA: Center for Schools and Communities. Web site: [www.safeschools.info/pacares](http://www.safeschools.info/pacares).

*Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*. Clemson, SC: Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life, Clemson University. Web site: [www.clemson.edu/olweus](http://www.clemson.edu/olweus).

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