

Waterloo Middle School

Grades 6–8 • Waterloo, New York • Public/Rural
Enrollment 439 • Waterloo Central School District

Transforming School Culture the Waterloo Way

Just eight years ago, Waterloo Middle School, located in the heart of New York’s scenic Finger Lakes region, was anything but an educational beacon. The story of its transformation from an outcast riddled with disciplinary and academic problems into an award-winning model school is proof that committed teamwork can revolutionize school culture.

If affable Mike Ferrara, the principal of Waterloo Middle School, were to win national acclaim as Top Chef, his enthusiastic and supportive staff would not be surprised. After all, Ferrara has been demonstrating his culinary skills for the past eight years, at first by preparing a traditional Thanksgiving dinner for his staff, and in recent years by presenting them with an Italian feast, now the preferred specialty. “No one wants to leave Waterloo, because they’ll miss the good food,” exclaims foreign language teacher Karen Moretti, chair of the school’s lively character education team known as PRIDE.

There are plenty of other good reasons why no one wants to leave Waterloo. During Ferrara’s tenure, the school has undergone such a transformation that it is now regarded as an exceptionally fine middle school, the first recipient of the New York State School of Character award. Ferrara recalls his first impression eight years ago: “I knew immediately that the school I was now in charge of was in very serious condition. Staff morale was very low, student achievement was not a priority of the students or community, and school management was a serious problem.”

Fortunately for Ferrara and for Waterloo, Moretti had just attended the Summer Institute on Character Education at the Center for the



Students on Waterloo’s R.E.S.P.E.C.T. Leadership Team undergo training to help them combat bullying.

4th and 5th Rs in Cortland, New York. Energized by what she had learned, she shared the materials with the new principal, who was eager to try an advisement program. After the two drafted an advisement proposal, Moretti visited 25 veteran teachers individually to get their input and to implement their suggestions. From these meetings came the PRIDE team, the PRIDE student advisement program (a 2004 Promising Practice), and the new vision that saw a dual emphasis on academics and character as leading the way to recovery.

That vision, which has guided the team’s eight years of planning, implementing, assessing, and revising character-building practices, has indeed led the way to recovery. Moretti proudly points out that the school that was once considered “the black sheep of the district” is now “celebrated as a National School of Character.” Ferrara reports that academic achievement has increased on a yearly basis in both state tests and local assessments, and he cites the 97 percent daily student attendance rate, the low staff absence rate, and the decreasing disciplinary referral rate as proof that character education is working at Waterloo.

Taking Pride in PRIDE

Technology teacher Doug Barg, who has taught at Waterloo for 33 years, can readily testify to the amazing change in school culture. He says that the student advisement program has helped to create a “strong sense of family and build a culture of caring.”

In groups of 12–15, students of different grades meet daily for half an hour under the aegis of one or two advisers. Barg continues, “What began as a half-an-hour program has now really blossomed.

Character building is an experience that takes place throughout each day in our classrooms, our halls, our cafeteria, our assemblies, our clubs, and our interactions with one another.”

Designed to address the students’ needs, PRIDE is an acronym that describes the specific focus for each day: Monday—**p**lanning; Tuesday—**r**eading; Wednesday—**i**mproving grades; Thursday—**d**eveloping character; and Friday—**e**njoying the day. However, the effects of the program extend far beyond these immediate goals. Allison Panek, a social studies teacher, shares, “I had an advisement group a few years ago that was probably the meanest group of kids at the beginning. They would not speak to each other nicely.” Over the two years that she worked with the group, she saw “a sense of community build and a sense of teamwork develop.” Panek says the experience taught her how the nurturing of attachments can change lives and that “what could be done with 14 kids could be done with an entire school.”

Advisement groups choose their own way to make a positive difference in the school and community. For example, one group created the Welcome to the Middle School program (a 2005 Promising Practice) to aid the transition process for students who are new to the school. Another group, after conducting interviews and doing research, made presentations to the faculty and board of education that resulted in a district-wide recycling program.

Ferrara’s Source of Pride: A Committed Faculty

If establishing the PRIDE advisement program was the first step in the school’s character education efforts, Ferrara points to the buy-in and commitment of the faculty as the dynamic that ensured success: “I am most proud of our teachers incorporating character education strategies to enhance their classroom instruction and classroom management procedures. Teachers have become the cornerstone of our program by ‘walking the talk.’”

Waterloo teachers, in their quest to develop inquiring minds, became avid students themselves as they learned from the experts to design strategies that would work in their own school culture. Every

year since 2001, Waterloo has sent representatives to the annual Summer Institute at Cortland and to the CEP National Forum. Moretti says, “We learned from people all over the United States and brought their ideas back, and our committee would take the seeds and grow our own plants.” Barg’s very apt inquiry—“How do we do it the Waterloo way?”—was always at the forefront in adopting and adapting initiatives.

Waterloo’s approach to character places a strong emphasis on the way students learn. Staff development trainings in learning styles, differentiated instruction, understanding the plight of children who live in poverty, cooperative learning, anti-bullying strategies, and motivating the unmotivated learner have provided teachers with valuable tools to improve instruction. Students are quick to see that “teachers walk the talk.” Eighth grader Kaylie observes, “Teachers are helpful; you can easily express your feelings to them.” Casey, also in eighth grade, adds, “The teachers definitely motivate you to get ready for high school and to get good grades. They will let you do something over or give you an extended time if necessary so you can try and complete the work successfully.” On a large poster prominently displayed in the main hallway, teachers earn a high ranking in “What WE Like Best about Waterloo Middle School.”



The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Waterloo Middle School:

- Overall yearly attendance rate for 2006–07 was 97 percent.
- Passing scores on NY State Mathematics Assessments increased by 49 percent from 2002–03 (43 percent passing) to 2006–07 (64 percent passing).
- Serious offenses that are mandated to be reported under No Child Left Behind fell from 79 (2004–05) to 23 (2006–07), a 71 percent reduction.
- Other reportable offenses fell from 206 (2004–05) to 104 (2006–07), a 50 percent reduction.
- The number of student referrals to the Choices Planning Room has undergone a 73 percent reduction over the past two years.
- Adequate Yearly Progress goals were met in all areas.



Students take the Purple Hands Pledge in their advisement classes in September and then recite it each day after the Pledge of Allegiance.

Parents as Caring Partners

Each summer the PRIDE team wisely examines survey results, test and disciplinary data, and CEP recommendations to frame the next steps. For example, in 2007, when Waterloo was named an NSOC Finalist, CEP suggested that the school might strengthen parental involvement by bringing in a speaker to talk with the students during the day and conduct an evening program for parents. Heeding this advice, Waterloo ushered in last school year with Hal Urban as a motivational speaker for staff, students, and parents. Urban's message ("Why Not Your Best?") underlined

the school's explicit emphasis on performance character, which is reflected on the "Compact for Excellence—Moral and Performance Character Working Together" sign posted in each classroom.

The school courts parents to play a role in this compact for excellence. Janelle Bradshaw, a member of the Parent Liaison Committee, says, "We reach in as parents, but the school is always reaching out to us as parents." In addition to the school's sending monthly newsletters and event calendars, each Liaison Committee member "mentors" a group of parents, notifying them of upcoming

events and personally answering any concerns or questions that they might have about the school and its character initiatives. Patti Battley, whose two daughters attend the school, says she is very impressed with its "great lines of communication." Parents are asked to identify any special talents or stories they might like to share with the students and are also invited to assemblies.

Parents and other adults weren't particularly eager to attend school assemblies before Waterloo embraced character education. Vicki Bauder-Rivet, a board of education member for 12 years and a former kindergarten and first-grade teacher, says, "I used to come to assemblies and kids would be off the wall and so rude. It wasn't that the teachers did not care; the kids just did not care. I came to an assembly years later, and I was amazed at how the kids immediately listened and responded to the principal and the speaker. Speakers now come back to us and say how well-behaved [our] kids were."

Students Spreading the Goodness

Assistant principal Susan Burgess, who has introduced many initiatives, comments that the school's planned programs "bombard the students with goodness." The students, in turn, spread that goodness through their active involvement. One such program, Friends of Rachel, has had a powerful impact. A day-time student assembly highlighted the kind and compassionate acts of Rachel Scott, the first person killed at Columbine High School, and an evening follow-up session drew over 300 parents. Kaylie points out that Rachel's Challenge helped students to reflect on the serious consequences of bullying and to renew their own determination to include all students in their social circle. To promote an environment free of bullying, harassment, and intimidation, students lead an anti-bullying R.E.S.P.E.C.T. team that sponsors events held in connection with National Anti-Bullying Week and No Name-Calling Week. During morning announcements each day, students recite the *Purple Hands Pledge*: "I will not use my hands or my words for hurting myself or others."

Service projects abound at this school, and students display a strong commitment to helping others, particularly in the Seneca County Community Christmas project that provides needy families with holiday food and gift baskets. Waterloo Middle School students have raised close to \$24,000 since 2002 to help support this cause. A student reflection

PRINCIPAL'S BEST PICKS:

Michael Ferrara

TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL: *caring and resilient*

CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD: PRIDE advisement program, which serves as a bonding experience

BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE: Veteran teachers attest that the school is completely different from the way it was eight years ago.

EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: consistent improvement in state and local assessments

WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: *Be prepared for the long haul. It is an evolving process that takes time, dedication, patience, and hard work.*

Waterloo Middle School Character Traits

respect	positive attitude	citizenship	responsibility
tolerance	honesty	self-control	perseverance
effort	gratitude	caring	

upon completion of the project, “I learned that it’s not about you—it’s about others,” embodies the caring attitude of the student body. Whether partnering with the Rotary Club in a sneaker drive or sending care packages to our service men and women, the students take their obligations to their community quite seriously.

A Vision of Character-Building

Ferrara sees the school’s character-building efforts having a two-pronged focus next year. At home, the PRIDE team plans a continued emphasis on performance character, and teachers will receive training in classroom strategies that can be implemented on a regular basis. Also, he envisions “a seamless integration of character at all levels in the Waterloo Central School District.” With this goal in mind, the PRIDE team will devise ways to include the high school in its efforts.

Guidance counselor Mark Pitifer tells a poignant story of a sixth-grade boy named Ryan who epitomizes the Waterloo spirit of perseverance. One of the physical education requirements for sixth graders is to run the mile in gym. Although primarily confined to a wheelchair, Ryan wanted to attempt this goal while walking without his crutches. The youngster went a short distance and fell, but then he used his crutches to continue. After completing two laps, he fell once again. At this point, he actually began to crawl for a short distance. Pitifer and all the other students then began to walk with Ryan, encouraging him every step of the way. Ryan persevered and finished the race. At the next school assembly he received a trophy, and the entire student body rose spontaneously to give him a standing ovation. Linzi, an eighth-grade student, states, “I thought what Ryan did was awesome. I cried when he came up to get his trophy. It was amazing to me how he persevered.”

In many ways, Ryan’s story mirrors the story of Waterloo Middle School, an extraordinary place that does not recognize defeat as an option and regards a setback as an invitation to try harder.

When the school failed to win the coveted NSOC status last year, there was no sighing or lamenting. After applying for the last two years to NSOC, the PRIDE team decided to poll the entire staff and ask, *Should we reapply to be considered a National School of Character?* The result: a resounding 100 percent voted Yes! They went on to say that “the



Waterloo students clean up the quad during Beautify Our School Month, helping the custodial staff and improving the appearance of the school.

application process has been a learning experience, and it is both challenging and validating. We know where we were and how far we have come. We can say with PRIDE, “We are a school of character!” It is easy to see that Ryan has many role models.

REFERENCES

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Purple Hands Pledge. Salem, OR: Hands & Words Are Not for Hurting Project. Web site: www.handsproject.org.

Rachel’s Challenge. Littleton, CO: Rachel’s Challenge. Web site: www.rachelschallenge.com.

Why Not Your Best? Workshop. Redwood City, CA: Hal Urban. Web site: www.halurban.com.

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