

## Hinsdale Central High School

Grades 9–12 • Hinsdale, Illinois • Public/Suburban  
Enrollment 2,652 • Hinsdale Township High School District 86

### Being Cool by Showing Character

Studies show that “being cool” seems to be the ultimate dream of every high school student. Hinsdale Central High School students experience this dream in a different way. They do excel in academics and athletics, but the real way to “be cool” is to give service to others and to show character in action.

Something different is happening at Hinsdale Central High School, located in picturesque Hinsdale, an affluent suburb some 20 miles west of Chicago. On the outside, the streamlined building with its spacious fields and manicured grounds could easily be the setting for a typical teen movie. But a visitor soon senses that a revolutionary movement is afloat here. The jocks and the brains are united, freshmen feel as valued as seniors, and

“mean girls” have given way to meaningful-service gals. What is that revolutionary movement that threatens to wipe out the usual high school hierarchies? It is called character education.

Dean of students William Walsh says that “character education has come a long way at Hinsdale Central since it was first introduced some eight years ago.” He compares the homecoming weeks of recent years with those before the advent of character education, when the lowly freshmen were subject to ridicule. No such marginalization occurs today. Walsh sees the display of solidarity as “a sign of acceptance of our character education program.”

An active leader in the school’s Character Counts (CC) program, senior Faith points out, “We make character cool.” From innovative efforts such as Break Down the Walls to poetry slams accenting tolerance, Central students play active roles in shaping, supporting, and sustaining character building. Senior Matt adds, “A standard has developed at Hinsdale Central. It just isn’t ‘cool’ to bully or be mean to people.”

#### Learning a Lesson from Columbine

Central’s journey began in the spring of 2000. It was post Columbine, and, according to assistant principal Pam Bylsma, who serves as the CC administrator, the faculty observed “many indicators of stress”: an increase of profanity in the halls, more disenfranchised youth, heightened confrontations, and a rising number of risk-taking behaviors. Bylsma relates that a committee convened to explore the possibility of a character education program as an effective means to “improve school culture in an atmosphere of growth and change.” A year later, the school made the official commitment to character education, and, with the input of parents and faculty, adopted Character Counts as its framework, embracing the six pillars of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

From the outset, shared vision, school-wide collaboration, and data-driven decision-making became the hallmarks of Central’s efforts. The Character Counts Steering Committee decided to establish three collaborative teams: Student Life, Curriculum, and Community Connections, joined by a web of



Parent organizers of an annual event to help “Teachers in Need” relax in the food festival area.

supportive student clubs. To gain faculty support, the committee structured the program on the Professional Learning Communities model of Rick DuFour and Bob Eaker. The Columbine tragedy had taught the committee three important lessons: it should encourage student autonomy; it must include *all* students; and it must foster a strong sense of empathy and tolerance. All three characteristics mark Hinsdale Central's character education program today, a tribute to the vision of the founding members.

Social studies teacher Chris Freiler, who was part of that original committee, comments on the role students have played in ensuring success: "What has impressed me most is the talent and energy of students not only in meeting the challenges of service but also in creating new opportunities to help others and make our school a continually evolving model of character education." Principal Kevin Pobst, who has been at the helm since March 2007, says, "We have attempted to brand the school." He stresses the need to inculcate strong ethical values in these students, who will be the "future business leaders," by building "a school of caring, compassion, and character."

### Encouraging Student Autonomy

"Valuing students and promoting a sense of self-worth and accountability will continue to be at the forefront of our character education program," says Dr. Lisa Bucciarelli, Spanish teacher, CC assistant coordinator, and Student Life team leader. In their 2006 commencement address, seniors Eliot and Paxton reinforced this theme: "Because of Hinsdale Central's insistence that we 'break down the walls' that artificially alienated us from one another, because of the leadership opportunities offered us as a class, and because of the personal freedoms we enjoyed, we assumed the responsibility of turning each other into something finer than the freshman version of ourselves."

Developing students into "something finer than the freshman version" is a result of planned strategies that call for the combined energies of staff, students, and parents. A carefully orchestrated first-day experience grounds students in character education from the start. Each incoming freshman has an upper-classman as a peer leader, and transfer students are guided by the 38 Ambassadors. A highlight of opening day is the original play or musical that is written and performed by leaders from CC and other clubs, a much-awaited treat that illustrates the six pillars in action. Thoughtful reflection is the culmination of



## The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Hinsdale Central High School:

- Comparison of 1999 data to 2007 data on Search Institute's Developmental Assets surveys shows the impact of the *CHARACTER COUNTS!* program, with a substantial improvement (of 11–17 percentage points) in student perceptions in several key areas: a caring school climate, high expectations, family boundaries, and youth as resources.
- 85 percent of students report that the school contributed to their personal growth. On the Developmental Assets surveys, growth of 5–9 percentage points was seen in the following areas related to personal identity: personal power, self-esteem, sense of purpose, and positive view of personal future.
- 93 percent of students reported in 2007 that the adults in their school wanted them to succeed; 85% reported that an adult in the school knows them well and cares about them.
- Fighting, which had increased from 1999 to 2002, decreased by 4 percent from 2002 to 2006.
- Prior to the program, the school averaged 50 to 60 serious incidents of bullying and harassment a year. In the 2007–08 school year, after an increase in enrollment of 600 students over a six-year period, only 10 incidents of harassment resulted in disciplinary action.
- Comparison of discipline data from 2006, the fifth year of the program, with data averaged over the five years prior to the program shows dramatic improvement, despite an enrollment increase of over 26 percent from 2001–02 to 2006–07: 64 percent decrease in tobacco violations, 77 percent reduction in bus referrals, and 92 percent decrease in vandalism.
- The improvement in attendance was impressive as the school worked to increase student responsibility. For the year in which new procedures were adopted, Hinsdale posted the highest attendance rate in 13 years.
- ACT scores have improved since the inception of the character education program. In 2001, juniors had an average composite ACT score of 24.5; in 2007, juniors had an average ACT score of 25.4.
- 843 students took a total of 1,597 Advanced Placement exams in 2008, with 89 percent earning a 3, 4, or 5; in 2001, 435 students took a total of 769 AP exams.
- Adequate Yearly Progress goals were met in all areas.

social-emotional learning activities, and each student periodically analyzes his or her growth in character building. Bucciarelli says, “All students have a voice in the school,” and mentions that student reflections after participating in Autism Week were “amazing” and showed “a high degree of empathy and understanding.”

Opportunities abound for students to grow. Among these programs, the majority of which have been student created, are Break Down the Walls, Conflict Resolution Skills, CC Student Life, Let’s Help Out, Citizen Club, Read to Lead, Gay–Straight Alliance, Tolerance Month, Teens Against Violence, Freshman Welcome Skit, Black History Month, Peer Buddies, Activities Fair, CC annual school-wide assemblies, Peer Tutoring, and sports team volunteerism. Membership in clubs and activities continues to flourish. For example, the Habitat for Humanity Club currently has over 300 members, and Athletes Committed to Excellence boasts over 280 role models.

Senior Faye, vice-president of the Student Council and president of the Key Club, says, “What’s great is that any student can propose a new club or program, and many of these reach far beyond our school.” In Read to Lead, which is a student-created initiative, students travel to inner-city Chicago libraries and read to young children. Another example of student ingenuity, Break Down the Walls, is an innovative anti-bullying, anti-harassment program

in which students perform original skits that address discrimination issues before audiences in their own school and in other districts. Esha, a senior who has been active in both clubs, says that the extraordinary service experiences at Central have opened her mind to endless possibilities for helping others. She plans to graduate from Georgetown University and then pursue a medical degree, hoping to eventually serve as one of the “Doctors without Borders.” Pam Kalafut, the student activities director, photography teacher, and CC coordinator, who expects to be retired by that time, laughingly adds, “I might just join you as a ‘Teacher without Borders.’”

## Including Everybody and Fostering Acceptance

Hinsdale Central wisely uses data in shaping its next steps. Discovering that some students were experiencing feelings of disenfranchisement, key support personnel have met several times to brainstorm ways of including the at-risk population. The school has varied structures in place that specifically address identified needs. For students experiencing academic difficulties, teachers devote 25 minutes a day to providing academic resource tutoring to any student in need. By sponsoring CC committees and wooing students to participate in activities, teachers consciously work to include everyone. When Bucciarelli recognized the potential isolation of being a minority at Central, she sought out African-American students (who represent less than 2.8 percent of the school’s population) and set up voluntary weekly lunch gatherings to listen to their issues and include their voice.

Modeling tolerance is not just a teacher’s role; students are the real catalysts for acceptance. Every new transfer student has a student Ambassador who serves as a guide for one year and checks in periodically to see if the student is okay. Maisha, an African-American transfer student, shares that she “didn’t think she was going to make it” when she came to Central. She credits her success and subsequent involvement in leadership to her mentor, Parker (who happens to be Caucasian). Ben, a senior, sums up the unified spirit of the school: “We take care of each other, especially those that need help.” Senior Kate adds, “What’s so special about our Character Counts program is its openness. . . . I was encouraged to join the Welcoming Club, and I think it has enriched my experience. Even the way students are recruited for the club shows our character.” Student surveys substantiate what is observed in conversations. According to the latest surveys, 91 percent of the students feel supported by their teachers, and 89 percent report support by other students.

## Empowering Parents as Partners in Service and Character

Just getting parents to attend meetings requires a monumental effort at some high schools, but not at Hinsdale Central, where parents have actually become strong partners in the school’s character



Hinsdale students worked with a noted local poet over the summer in order to present a poetry slam assembly for their peers with the theme of tolerance.

## Hinsdale Central High School Six Pillars of Character

trustworthiness

responsibility

caring

respect

fairness

citizenship

crusade. Bucciarelli calls the parents' involvement "the basis for a strong coalition." Mary Buddig, Parent Teacher Organization president and parent of two Hinsdale Central graduates, two current students, and one incoming freshman, certainly knows the turf. She attributes parental support of programs to the "students themselves, who have taken the initiative in informing their parents of service projects and enlisting their help when needed."

Kalafut relates the background of one special event: "The Taste of Hinsdale Central." When a group of students conceived the idea of a fund raiser to help teachers and school staff who suffered a catastrophic illness or emergency situation, they appealed to the PTO. As a result, a giant carnival and food-tasting event evolved, thanks to the combined support of students, faculty, parents, and community organizations. Amazingly, this venture has raised over \$50,000 in a two-year period.

Parents Empowering Parents, started by parent Annette McClain, is another pioneering endeavor. Through the support of District 86's school superintendent Nicholas Wahl, lively workshops on pertinent issues, such as Helping Children Thrive in a Socially Challenging Environment and Living Life on Purpose, help parents navigate the complex waters of the adolescent world. The workshops reinforce precisely what the school strives to do on a daily basis: enhance communication with the students and recognize their voice in making decisions. Pobst concludes, "It's all about the kids and their initiative.... We ask ourselves, *What can we do to watch out for each other?*"

### Moving beyond 2008

Achieving the status of a National School of Character is an affirmation of everything Hinsdale Central has been doing in the past eight years. As for its improvement plans, it intends to intensify its efforts to increase student reflection in service activities and to connect projects more closely with the curriculum. In its emphasis on reaching its disenfranchised students, Hinsdale Central will seek student input as a key ingredient in formulating new plans.

Esha points out the extraordinary success that Break Down the Walls has had at Central and wants it to go "national" as an effective way of combating intolerance. Its members have already racked up more than 20 performances at student assemblies and faculty meetings throughout the state. Esha says, "How neat it would be to have an organization that



### PRINCIPAL'S BEST PICKS:

Kevin Pobst

**TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL:** *service and intensity*

**CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE**

**MOST PROUD:** the concept of "shared leadership" (the character education programs at Hinsdale Central are student initiated and student led)

**BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL**

**CLIMATE:** Student-to-student interactions have become more respectful and caring.

**EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC**

**ACHIEVEMENT:** consistent improvement in ACT scores and Advanced Placement scores, as well as performance of at-risk students

**WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION:**

*To start out, find a group of courageous students and passionate staff and move ahead. The delivery of the message is important, so be thoughtful and work with the students on how to package it for your student body. Don't do it **to** them; build it **with** them.*

we students started here be recognized throughout the United States!"

The faculty CC members, not to be overshadowed by their energetic students on the presentation circuit, also are in demand and have received many requests to make state-wide and national presentations. Bylsma, who has spearheaded the school's character education movement from its infancy, is delighted that it "has gained national attention." Pobst adds with a smile, "We're fortunate here because the cool kids and the cool teachers are the leaders of character education."

### REFERENCES

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION

**Pam J. Bylsma**, Assistant Principal  
Hinsdale Central High School  
55th and Grant Streets  
Hinsdale, IL 60521

Telephone: (630) 570-8215  
E-mail: [pbylsma@hinsdale86.org](mailto:pbylsma@hinsdale86.org)  
Web site: [central.hinsdale86.org](http://central.hinsdale86.org)