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Character Counts! - Character Education in our Schools

By Jean Follmer

"We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education." -Martin Luther King, Jr.

"To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society." -Theodore Roosevelt

The idea of Character Education in schools is hardly a novel concept. It's actually required in the California Education Code. Section 233.5 (a) reads: "Each teacher shall endeavor to impress upon the minds of the pupils the principles of morality, truth, justice, patriotism, and a true comprehension of the rights, duties, and dignity of American citizenship, and the meaning of equality and human dignity, including the promotion of harmonious relations, kindness toward domestic pets and the humane treatment of living creatures, to teach them to avoid idleness, profanity, and falsehood, and to instruct them in manners and morals and the principles of a free government. (b) Each teacher is also encouraged to create and foster an environment that encourages pupils to realize their full potential and that is free from discriminatory attitudes, practices, events, or activities, in order to prevent acts of hate violence, as defined in subdivision (e) of Section 233."

"Character is ethics in action," says John Forenti of the Center for Youth Ethics at the Josephson Institute in Los Angeles. Essentially, it's distinguishing right from wrong and acting accordingly - a seemingly simple concept. However, it seems many kids are choosing to ignore some of these "givens".

Let's take cheating for example. The Josephson Institute recently released the results of a survey conducted with high school students. The self-reporting survey found that 64% of high school students had cheated on a test within the past year. This is up from 60% in the 2004 survey. Of those who admitted to cheating, 38% had cheated more than once on a test within the past year.

It's important to remember it was a self-reporting survey so the results only reflect the kids that actually admitted to cheating. We don't know how high the number really is. We've all heard the saying "You're only cheating yourselves." Forenti says that's not the case. "You're not only cheating yourself. You're cheating everyone who took the test fairly," said Forenti. Forenti said kids cheat because they don't think they'll be caught and they're likely to benefit from it.

By comparison, 30% of the teens responded they have stolen from a store within the past year, 42% admitted that they sometimes lie to save money and 83% admitted they'd lied to a parent about something significant. Forenti said it's not a case of bad kids so much as the result of kids receiving inconsistent messages. He offered the example of using a radar detector and showing your kids to only follow the rules when you think you may get caught. Forenti noted that Ken Lay of Enron was a bright person who got caught in the "legal versus ethical" debate in the board room.

The Josephson Institute has aided many school districts and communities in their quests for character development through its program Character Counts. The Lafayette School District is piloting the program this year at Springhill Elementary. The program is based on six pillars: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.

Last summer, 4 parents and 4 staff members (including the principal) attended an intensive 4-day Character Counts session in San Francisco. The school

is implementing the program in a multi-faceted way. The idea is TEAM: Teach children that their character counts, Enforce the six pillars of character, Advocate character and Model good behavior. The language of Character Counts is moving through the school and the children are experiencing behavior reinforcement based on the six pillars. All staff members have been educated on the pillars and a parent education night was recently offered.

The plan is for the Character Counts program to expand to Burton Valley Elementary, Happy Valley Elementary, Lafayette Elementary, Stanley Middle School and the greater community, but the process needs to progress naturally so it takes root. Principals from all Lafayette schools have been introduced to the program. "It's a gradual process. The kids are embracing it. They're using the terminology. We want to make it natural; whether we're teaching math or physical education. It takes many, many years for it to take hold in the community," said Springhill Principal Bruce Wodhams.

For more information about the program, visit www.josephsoninstitute.org or www.charactercounts.org.

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