

CHARACTER COUNTS! Case Study

Hinsdale Central High School Hinsdale, Illinois

In 1999, the Columbine massacre triggered a nationwide debate over “How could such a thing happen, and how can we prevent it from happening again?”

Hinsdale Central High School in Hinsdale, Illinois, serves a suburban residential area of approximately 35,000 people. Enrollment is roughly 2,700 students and faculty numbers just over 200. Shortly after the shootings, the school decided it needed to take action to prevent a similar tragedy. Because warning signs were everywhere:

- Increased incidents of disrespectful behavior between students and teachers
- Heightened confrontations
- Escalated risk-taking behavior
- Rampant profanity
- A sense of “them” and “us” in the community

The stress factors coincided with the results of an FBI summit and a CIA national report on school shootings, which found that:

- Targeted violence at schools is rarely a sudden, impulsive act.
- Others often take part in the scheme or know of it beforehand.
- Most attackers engage in prior behavior that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
- Many attackers were bullied or persecuted by others prior to the incident.

The knee-jerk reaction by many schools across the country was to institute zero-tolerance policies and beefed-up security (metal detectors, security guards, see-through backpacks, computer-generated student IDs). But a Secret Service study found that such measures were nothing more than false hope and “unlikely to be helpful.” The key, the study concluded, is to pay more attention to student behavior.

Rock singer Marilyn Manson, whose dark lyrics and music, along with that of other bands, was alleged to have inspired similar shootings, was asked in a VH1 interview what he would have said to such assailants. “Nothing,” he replied. “I would have listened. Because no one else did.”

Hinsdale Central did.

Before it could proceed, the administration realized it needed to know more about its student population, how they feel about their environment, and how to give them a greater voice to air their concerns. A search for a way to do that began.

How They Did It

Using the Professional Learning Community (PLC) framework already in place at the school, Hinsdale Central’s faculty formed two committees: Climate Assessment and Character-Education Research.

Climate Assessment. Although not all students were disrespectful, used foul language, mistreated others, or cheated, the number who did was high enough to affect the school climate. As a result, the committee administered surveys to staff, students, and parents to assess the motivation behind the bad behaviors, to gauge the level of discomfort among stakeholders, and to see if students’ disenfranchisement was approaching the level of the Columbine assailants.

The initial student surveys were not encouraging:

- 51% didn’t treat each other with respect.
- 73% didn’t feel staff treated them equally.
- 45% didn’t care for the school.
- 50% reported low self-esteem.
- 73% reported a lack of positive, responsible adult behavior.
- 83% didn’t feel valued by adults.

The teacher and parent surveys were equally alarming:

- 90% of teachers and 64% of parents were moderately or extremely concerned about profane language among students.
- 87% of teachers and 67% of parents were moderately or extremely concerned about lack of respect.
- 83% of teachers and 62% of parents were moderately or extremely concerned about student attitudes.

In addition:

- 71% of teachers and 54% of parents said the best way to respond to student misbehavior is by establishing a character-education program, *not* by imposing stiffer discipline or teaching conflict-management skills.

[See attached sample of the School Culture Survey]

Character-Education Research. This team’s mandate was to visit high schools with established character-education frameworks and to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of their implementation process.

Site visits revealed that unsuccessful programs shared all or some of the following:

- Top-down only communication
- Teachers excluded from initial trainings or development
- Too juvenile (elementary look, feel, or concept)
- Too limited (word-of-the-day or homeroom-only strategies)

They Chose CHARACTER COUNTS!

After a year of researching character-education programs and administering climate-assessment surveys, Hinsdale Central chose CHARACTER COUNTS! above all others. The faculty felt it was the ideal framework to address the needs of each stakeholder and to reduce stress-factors in both the school and community.

The values that were important to the stakeholders were most compatible with CC!’s Six Pillars of Character (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship), which, when combined with its three-day train-the-trainer Character Development Seminar (CDS), led the committees to conclude that the program’s umbrella philosophy most closely matched the needs of Hinsdale Central.

Although they recognized that the framework wasn’t the answer to all their problems, they determined it would best help them inspire change by asking such questions as “What should caring look like in our school?”

Families in Hinsdale are mostly middle class, with parents predominantly professional, executive, or managerial level. Ninety-nine percent of Hinsdale Central’s students complete high school, and 88 percent pursue a four-year college education.

The school enacted a vision statement that pledged it would:

- Provide a safe and secure school environment conducive to learning
- Recognize that all relationships are based on respect and an understanding of each person’s responsibility for his or her behavior
- Understand that school rules and policies exist to support the organization and are consistently applied by all staff
- Recognize the achievement of all members
- Encourage and model behaviors appropriate to character development

Implementation Begins

The students helped develop three collaborative teams to integrate the Six Pillars of Character into the school fabric: the Student Life team, the Curriculum team, and the Community Connections team. The students were involved in two of the committees and served an integral role in shaping the way CC! was implemented. The chair for each group, plus the assistant athletic director, the dean of students, and two teacher leaders,

attended a CHARACTER COUNTS! train-the-trainer CDS. In addition, one of CC!'s national faculty members came onsite to train service personnel and community representatives.

Student Life team (comprised of students). This team reshaped the activity and athletic codes to better reflect the Six Pillars of Character. It built pillars in the student café, distributed posters, hosted informational lunch-time pizza events, and provided information and handouts to teachers.

Curriculum team (comprised of teachers and students). This team created assignments and a model lesson, established goals for curricular integration, and developed resources to help teachers implement the values. The overriding emphasis was that character education is the lens through which everything in the community is viewed.

In addition, the principal asked the faculty to reinforce and strengthen the message of the school's values by creating lessons for every class that tied one or more of the Six Pillars into their teaching.

Community Connections team (comprised of parents, faculty, and community members). This team organized local events to involve the community more with the school. It also publicized student achievements and activities in the local press to educate the community in the Six Pillar values and to spotlight students as exemplary representatives of Hinsdale.

At the beginning of the second year, all team members met to develop a five-year vision. The question was posed: "Assume we're a school of character five years from now. What changes will we see?"

The responses were organized into relationship categories (teacher to teacher, parent to teacher, student to parent, and student to student). Members of the CC! teams, including students, and parents, participated in focus groups that helped create questions on the survey and developed, with Dr. Matt Davidson, Research Director at the Center for the 4 R's, a survey called "A Global Portrait of Social and Moral Health for Youth/Adults."

Results

Survey finding: Students said they're aware of cheating, but don't care about it.

Resulting action: The Curriculum team created a school-wide curriculum on academic integrity and produced a video.

Survey finding: A discrepancy exists between the quality of character education that teachers perceive they're teaching and what students say they're actually being taught.

Resulting action: Focus teams of faculty created sample lessons for use across the curriculum that accurately reflected the high quality of the CC! values and program.

Survey finding: Students said they aren't perceived as resources and need more opportunities to provide input.

Resulting action: Students were urged and supported to engage in moral action by forming a volunteer group. Sports and activity groups were assigned one service project a year. The administration improved attendance policies that were causing students to be less responsible or honest.

Survey finding: High levels of harassment occurred in locker rooms.

Resulting action: The P.E. department expanded its supervision; harassment virtually disappeared.

Survey finding: Students reported high levels of *non*-drug use prior to the survey.

Resulting action: A social-norming campaign was launched, focusing on staying healthy and realizing that students aren't outsiders if they don't use drugs, alcohol, and/or tobacco.

Hinsdale Central Today

Incoming students to Hinsdale Central are now asked to assess their learning strengths and weaknesses and to set goals for their academic and personal development. Teachers review the data and determine how best to support their needs.

At the end of freshman year, students are asked to reflect on their progress and set new character goals for their sophomore year. Peer leaders and teachers serve as role models on how to behave as civil members of an extended community.

Teachers are encouraged to attend professional-development workshops to keep abreast of best practices and actively spearhead the work of the school as a school of character.

Parents and staff receive annual reports detailing students' progress. Community members and service providers are invited to meetings and forums and asked to partner with the school in its character-education campaign.

Brochures update parents on the school's initiatives and encourage them to help out with fundraising and event-planning. Parents are surveyed during conferences, and a PTO member is assigned to the Community Connections team each year.

But perhaps Hinsdale Central's most impressive CC! initiative has been "Break Down the Walls." As a way to address increased bullying and harassment at school, a group of CC! committee students in 2000 decided to interview bullying victims and document their stories. The result was a stage performance that seniors annually perform for the sophomore class and at area middle schools, where bullying often starts. Because real victims and school incidents are spotlighted and audience participation is encouraged, the presentation often leaves both performers and audiences moved, shaken, and teary-eyed.

During the mandatory follow-up sessions, kids admit their behavior lapses and personally commit to do better and take action. Each ensuing year, the tradition is then passed down to the next generation of seniors and sophomores.

In 2006, “Break Down the Walls” was the concluding event at the Anti-Defamation League’s Chicago conference.

In 2007, Hinsdale Central was shortlisted as a finalist for a Character Education Partnership National Schools of Character award for generating such a high level of student involvement and for turning the school into a beacon of exemplary values and accomplishments.