

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
- A steadily increasing student population

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, however, 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. Recent increases in student population had resulted in new demographics and less physical space for students. This created new challenges in terms of how the students were relating to each other and their different cultural backgrounds. A search for how 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. Hinsdale administered externally developed surveys to give the administration a broader picture of the school climate (the Developmental Asset Survey – accessed from the Search Institute: <http://www.search-institute.org/assets/>) and developed in-house surveys to help understand specific problem areas facing the students (the High School Survey of Student Engagement and a School Culture Survey – see attached example).

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 favored establishing a character-education program to tackle the issues over imposing stiffer discipline or teaching conflict-management skills.

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 to upper-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

Three collaborative teams were set up 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 sit on the Student Life team and are involved in focus groups for the other teams. They 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.

When a character-education initiative was chosen, staff 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 teams set goals to effect those changes.

Student Life team (comprised of students). This team reshaped the activity and athletic codes to better reflect the Six Pillars of Character. It painted pillars in the student café in the school colors representing the Six Pillars of Character, 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.

The teams regrouped and shared written anecdotes at the end of the first year. Was the gap between what they wanted to see at the school and what they were seeing any smaller? The meetings not only offered the opportunity to verbalize their achievements in shifting the school culture, but also provided time to re-assess their plans and goals and to help focus the next steps into structured and well-prioritized plans.

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 being given a platform to participate in shaping the community. Students are now empowered to propose new clubs, focus groups, or changes in activities to impact change. 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 and in classrooms.

Resulting action: The P.E. department expanded its supervision; harassment virtually disappeared. Teachers were trained in recognizing harassment in classrooms that was previously undetected.

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.

By the end of their first month in Hinsdale, all freshmen have received conflict-resolution skills training facilitated by other students. Approximately 150 students are trained to go into classrooms and demonstrate how Hinsdale students manage conflict through skits they perform. Students acknowledge that they aren't always going to get along with each other and learn how to deal with conflicts through role-playing and peer mediation.

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 students 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.

Each ensuing year, the tradition is then passed down to the next generation of seniors and sophomores. During the first two years mandatory follow-up sessions allowed kids to examine their behavior lapses and personally committing to do better and take action. Now the students have greater ownership of the program and decide themselves how to conduct reflection exercises.

In 2006, "Break Down the Walls" was the concluding event at the Anti-Defamation League's Chicago conference.

Statistics prove that there has been an astounding cultural and paradigm shift in Hinsdale Central High since CC! was implemented:

- 93% of students believe that adults at HCHS want them to succeed.
- 85% report that some adult at school knows them well and cares about them.
- 91% feel supported by their teachers.
- 85% report that the school contributed to their personal growth.
- 70% say that students at HCHS treat each other with respect.
- 74% show pride in their school by volunteering.

In terms of harassment, a decade of change has taken place. In 1999, 66 cases of harassment were reported. That figure is now 9.

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. Hinsdale's work also earned it a place at the inaugural National Consortium on Character-Based Leadership in Washington, D.C., hosted by the Center for the Study of the Presidency. They truly exemplify how public schools can change the paradigm of school leadership and encourage other institutions to follow suit and develop increased student participation and satisfaction.

SCHOOL CULTURE SURVEY

Please identify yourself:

Male Female
 Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

1. ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS BY CHECKING THE APPROPRIATE BOX:

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| a. Students at HCHS treat each other with respect. | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| b. I can talk to my counselor when I have a problem. | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| c. Adults in this building treat the students with respect. | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| d. I feel safe in my school. | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| e. I have been a victim of a rumor. | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| f. I have been harassed by other students. | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| g. Student joking is often hurtful to others. | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| h. All students are treated fairly and equally by staff. | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |
| i. Cheating is a serious problem at this school. | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree |

2. PLEASE RESPOND TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS: *Check all that apply.*

- a. I have had property stolen or deliberately damaged at school this year or last year.
- b. I was in a physical fight in school this year or last year.
- c. I have missed at least one day of school because I have felt unsafe.
- d. I avoid certain areas in the school because I don't feel safe or comfortable there.
- e. I am glad we have a police officer in the building.
- f. I think a situation like the Columbine tragedy could happen here.
- g. I have witnessed students using or under the influence of drugs or alcohol at school.
- h. I have participated in drug or alcohol use at school.

3. THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF CONFLICTS BETWEEN PEOPLE ARE A PROBLEM AT HCHS:

Check all that apply.

- | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a. rumors | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| b. put-downs/insults/teasing | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| c. threats | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| d. intolerance of differences | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| e. loss of property/theft | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| f. verbal fighting | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| g. competition | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| h. poor communication | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| i. physical fights | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| j. schoolwork | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |

4. I HAVE WITNESSED STUDENTS TEASING OR MISTREATING OTHER STUDENTS FOR THE FOLLOWING REASONS:

- | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a. physical appearance (looks, size, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| b. grade level (Frosh, Soph, Jr, Sr) | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| c. religion | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| d. race or ethnicity | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| e. sex (males to females, females to males) | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| f. sexual orientation | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| g. cliques (athletes, skaters, preps) | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| h. socioeconomic status (money) | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| i. other, fill in blank _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Often | <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |

5. IF YOU HAVE SEEN STUDENT-TO-STUDENT MISTREATMENT, WHERE HAS IT OCCURRED?

Check all that apply.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a. at the bus stop | <input type="checkbox"/> e. in the classroom |
| <input type="checkbox"/> b. on the bus | <input type="checkbox"/> f. in the cafeteria |
| <input type="checkbox"/> c. in the hallway | <input type="checkbox"/> g. in the bathroom |
| <input type="checkbox"/> d. in the locker room | <input type="checkbox"/> h. other, fill in blank _____ |

6. IF YOU HAVE WITNESSED STUDENT-TO-STUDENT MISTREATMENT, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? *Check all that apply.*

- a. confronted the bully and told him/her to stop
- b. supported the victim after the bully left
- c. joined in the mistreatment
- d. informed a teacher
- e. informed a dean, counselor, or social worker
- f. informed a student supervisor, secretary, or other member of the support staff
- g. told your parent
- h. spoke to your friends about it
- i. other, explain please _____

7. IF I NEEDED HELP, I WOULD FEEL COMFORTABLE GOING TO THESE PEOPLE IN THE SCHOOL. *Check all that apply.*

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a. counselor | <input type="checkbox"/> g. dean |
| <input type="checkbox"/> b. teacher | <input type="checkbox"/> h. nurse |
| <input type="checkbox"/> c. principal/assistant principal | <input type="checkbox"/> i. police liaison officer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> d. support staff (secretary, cafeteria worker, custodial staff) | <input type="checkbox"/> j. security |
| <input type="checkbox"/> e. students trained to help solve conflicts | <input type="checkbox"/> k. student supervisor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> f. other, fill in blank _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> l. social worker |

8. WHEN I HAVE A CONFLICT, I USUALLY HANDLE IT BY: *Check all that apply.*

- a. ignoring the person I am in conflict with
- b. losing my temper and arguing with the person
- c. talking calmly with the person to resolve the problem
- d. getting my friends involved to help me work things out
- e. going to an adult for guidance or assistance
- f. threatening the person to get them to stop their behavior
- g. physically fighting with the person to settle the problem

9. PLEASE USE THE SPACE BELOW OR A SEPARATE PIECE OF PAPER TO COMMENT ON YOUR IMPRESSIONS OF HCHS AND WHAT IT'S LIKE TO ATTEND SCHOOL HERE: