

Character Education

by Sasha Clayton

It is not only the privilege of religious schools to provide their students with a solid foundation in integrity, respectfulness, and caring. Throughout the nation, public and private schools are dedicated to providing character education. They recognize the merits of such a program, and there are countless organizations devoted to supporting the installation of these programs—from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development to the National Character Education Center. I admire the dedication to character education; and yet, the problems of bullying, fighting, drug use, and sexual precociousness still persist. Where is the disconnect between education and action?

At Hilldale, we proudly boast a strong community which doesn't struggle with these insidious problems. Of course, we have unacceptable behavior occur, even here in our utopia! But it is not pervasive; our school climate does not thrive on fear, but rather on respect and caring.

We, too, have a strong character education program which takes the form of our "Ethics" curriculum. However, it is not this program which sets up apart from all schools. True, it helps that we take the program further by offering classes in Self-Awareness which focus on respecting and understanding oneself and others, nutrition, fitness, and achieving our goals; and Contemporary Issues where students are asked to identify and utilize their own power to enact change in the world. I think these are great assets to our curriculum; and yet, I don't believe they are what ultimately keeps our community running on caring.

When a student approaches a teacher or staff member with a problem, we do not brush it off and wait for the problem to engorge to the point that we cannot ignore it. We address all issues immediately and thoroughly. We look at the larger picture. What in the school environment is encouraging this behavior? What can be done to mend the problem now and prevent the problem in the future? Because of our dedicated and caring staff and our courageous and honest students, issues are not swept under the carpet. Children are not lined up outside my door waiting to be disciplined and sent on their way only to fall into the same behavior again. Teachers talk with their students, create insightful activities, and work with parents. I truly believe this thorough and meaningful approach makes the difference. Our students are heard; their safety—whether physical, mental, or emotional—is paramount.

After school, parents come into play. We are so fortunate to have a community of parents who reinforce these crucial lessons. It is the conversations at home which ultimately enforce in students the values we are striving to impart. It is this network of caring and dedication to true character education which brings about the kind of community we are so proud of at Hilldale.