

Charles Boehm Middle School

From Good to Great: Creating a National School of Character

Theresa Ricci

The following profile tells the story of how a high-functioning middle school in a suburban school district identified one particular issue to create a framework that molded a new prosocial school culture.

Description of the School

Charles Boehm Middle School serves grades 6 through 8 and is located in Yardley, PA. It is one of three middle schools in the Pennsbury School District serving two boroughs and two townships in the suburbs of Philadelphia, PA. Student enrollment in 2014 was approximately 730 with the majority of students (82%) reporting that they are Caucasian, .2% ELL, 22% socio-economically disadvantaged and 20% receiving special education services.

Students in Charles Boehm Middle School enjoy high levels of academic success, with an average of 65% of students making honor roll (grades B and above) each marking period. The school received the Governor's Award of Excellence in 2012 for its success in making academic progress, including performance on state assessments. In 2014, the school was recognized by Pennsylvania as the sole State School of Character and then as a National School of Character by the Character Education Partnership based in Washington, D.C. Additionally, the school has successfully been recognized as a "No Place for Hate" school by the Anti-Defamation League for two consecutive years. The school has among the lowest suspension rates in the state, below 1% of its population.

History of the School Improvement Process

The school's journey began with a mandate to incorporate a school-wide positive behavior support program that would better serve the special education population district-wide in the 2009-2010 school year. The staff was already implementing a program focusing on inclusion of special education students in general education classes and knew they needed to a shift from a reactive form of student discipline to a more proactive approach.

Under the leadership of the principal, Theresa Ricci, the school reached out to a neighboring district to learn about their successful implementation of their school wide positive behavior support program. First, two representatives presented at a faculty meeting, and then a team of Pennsbury teachers and administrators went for a site visit in April of 2010. It was at the visit that the school leadership began to see a vision for a program that could work in our building. At the May in-service program in 2010, all teachers in attendance were surveyed about which areas of need in the building required attention. From those survey results, the school identified the end-of-the-day resource period and hallway behavior as areas of need. After this in-service, the staff began to build their program slowly by presenting these ideas to the faculty as activities and bonding experiences that laid the groundwork for success.

The initial implementation of the school wide positive behavior support program became the foundation of the character education program, PRIDE. Teachers, support staff, and administrators collaborated to created common language encompassing the most desirable student behaviors. The simple acronym, PRIDE, was developed so that students would demonstrate and remember to be prepared, respectful, involved, determined and excellent, the core ethical and performance values we selected to define our school culture. Students and many staff immediately responded. Positive changes in student interaction began to be noticeable, which caused other staff members to become involved. Staff relationships improved as well, but

there were staff members who did not support the notion of PRIDE, insisting that recognizing everyday behaviors would not change students whose behavior was unacceptable.

In order to create greater staff involvement and make the emerging program more robust, the building principal, along with two teacher leaders, created a core PRIDE team and invited a counselor as well as the school disciplinarian to join. This team offered a workshop in the summer of 2010, in which teachers and para-professionals could participate. This summer workshop was very popular among the staff as they saw this as a relatively simple way to meet their summer professional development requirements. During this three-day workshop, the PRIDE program was shaped. Staff members contributed ideas and perspectives, then created a solution to a building-wide problem they had identified at the end of the day.

In the coming months, the team created a variety of tools and strategies to empower teachers with simple measures such as organizational folders, posters, and building passes. The PRIDE reward slips were also distributed. These tools were expected to be used during all periods of the day, throughout the entire building, and were supported by the administration. It was decided that all staff members would receive a “Boehm PRIDE” shirt when the school year opened in order to make this program highly visible. These two factors were instrumental in getting the necessary buy-in from the majority of the staff, which made the program a success. Since then, the building PRIDE team has remained stable and has worked cohesively to make adjustments and improvements to address concerns of students, parents and staff.

In the 2012-2013 school year, the school was named as a “No Place for Hate School” by the Anti-Defamation League. This designation is awarded to schools who fulfill three separate projects that put into practice their mission: “No Place for Hate aims to reduce bias and bullying, increase appreciation for diversity, and build communities of respect.” Two of these projects

were further recognized by the national Character Education Partnership (CEP, now Character.org) as Promising Practices.

As the school began the 2013-2014 school year, the leadership team realized that there were many facets to our program. For example, we were incorporating our home grown PRIDE character education program within our curriculum, sports, activities, and daily events. In October of 2013, the leadership team, reached out to Gregg Amore, CEP's State Schools of Character program coordinator at DeSales University. He conducted a site visit in early November and provided the team with guidance, recommendations, and advice because he felt they had the potential to strive for the state award. At that meeting, the school team established that they would apply for the state as well as the National School of Character awards. Following completion of the application, which was evaluated at both the state and national levels, the Charles Boehm received both the state and national recognition in 2014. Since then, the school has been honored with citations from state government leaders.

Detailed Program Description

Students and parents have been avid supporters of the program, and it has been instrumental in providing the school community with common language and expectations for behavior that are clear and recognizable. All students participate in a PRIDE Student Conduct assembly to begin the school year. The entire student code of conduct is reviewed with students with a focus that showing PRIDE at all times can avoid many discipline issues. Also, there is an additional PRIDE assembly at the beginning of the year, which is delivered like a pep rally, where the ideas are presented, reviewed, and reinforced to the entire student population. It is designed to be a fun, proactive way to avoid discipline issues. Staff and students are active participants in the assemblies. On another level, the school also has a CAPS leadership team;

CAPS is an acronym for Creating a Positive School. This group of 8th grade students is nominated by staff members as well as previous CAPS members. Applicants submit a paper application that is reviewed blindly by faculty members. These students are models for their peers and provide leadership to members of the school community. There is interest in being a representative CAPS member from at least 25% of the students each year.

From Extrinsic to Intrinsic Motivation

The Boehm PRIDE program is set up as a system to increase intrinsic motivation in students throughout middle school. Students have the opportunity to earn recognition for demonstrating PRIDE behaviors each day. In doing so, they receive what we call PRIDE Points, which are nothing more than slips of paper with their names on them and which PRIDE element they displayed. When the student is presented the PRIDE Point, it is done somewhat publicly in order to reinforce the prosocial behavior to others nearby. Students can either use their points to participate in bi-weekly raffles or trade them for PRIDE “swag” offered at a booth on Wednesday mornings. The raffled prizes include certificates to be at the front of the lunch line or lunch with the principal. The “swag” includes pens, pencils, and buttons, with a top prize of a Boehm PRIDE tee-shirt. These items are pre-printed with the PRIDE logo in order to further reinforce each of the 5 PRIDE principles and promote the program in the community. PRIDE is popular among our 6th graders; however, by the time the students are in 8th grade, they typically refuse the prize and are more interested in intrinsic rewards.

Using the PRIDE Program as an Organizing Framework for Continuous Improvement

The Charles Boehm community is very motivated by the PRIDE program. It is used as a framework to support a large number of building programs, including a building writing initiative, which resulted in a 15% increase in standardized writing performance in one school

year. The school went from the lowest-level performance to the highest in the school district. Students participated in a Stop, Drop, and Write program, which included the Boehm PRIDE prizes that students cherish. They write character-based essays throughout the year. Once complete, exemplars are posted around the building and winners read theirs on morning TV announcements. Additionally, lesson plans across content areas and grade levels were developed with a character education focus so that they incorporated the PRIDE ideals. All students participated in these programs, as did all staff.

These same principles with continuous reinforcement were integral in maintaining the small number of discipline referrals building-wide. Safe Schools documentation from the state supports the impact of the school's work. These records indicate that during the 2013-14 school year, their discipline incident rate was .07%, compared to a district wide incident rate of 5% and a county rate of 2%. Suspensions were reduced from 25 in 2011-12 to 19 in 2013-2014; disciplinary referrals from 379 to 226 in the same period.

Now that the new structure is firmly in place, new academic initiatives are introduced and instituted under the PRIDE structure, and the PRIDE team is empowered to present new ideas for further improvement. For example, in the 2014-2015 school year, a 6th grade teacher will present an idea from her grade level to the entire building at a PRIDE assembly. This idea called, "Give Me 5" is being shared as a way to gain students' attention in a silent, respectful, and quick way. Now the entire staff will be challenged to incorporate this strategy into their daily routine. This further promotes consistency and PRIDE ideals into the culture of the building.

Community partnerships are strengthened through some of the programs that were already in place well before character education was instituted. Some of our community

outreach programs, like service learning with senior citizens and partnerships with local organizations, have been enhanced. Local organizations are invited to the school to expand our PRIDE community outside of the building. This past school year, students and staff created a documentary for local veterans and hosted a luncheon in their honor. Students voluntarily baked hundreds of cookies and hosted a spring fling for local senior citizens. These are just a few examples of the type of outreach possible when a school has a firm structure and a group of dedicated professionals who are willing to volunteer.

Recognition

The programs described above led to recognition at the national level with two Promising Practices awards from the CEP, followed by State and National Schools of Character awards. Once recognition was received at both the state and national levels, other schools within the Pennsbury School District became interested in our program, igniting their own efforts to incorporate similar changes, with the result that by 2015 the entire district received national recognition. The lessons learned from focusing on character education in a successful public school are centered on utilizing a program such as PRIDE to provide a framework or a background to make other things possible.

Once the character education team is in place and includes representation from a variety of faculty and staff, discipline within the entire school community functions better. Students report that they are pleased with the culture. One student wrote a letter to the principal stating, “I love Boehm so much! I am always happy at Boehm. All of my teachers are totally perfect.” Another student wrote an article. His thesis was, “There are two main things that I love about Boehm; the teachers who work there and the school-wide programs and activities.”

Teachers share similar sentiments. One teacher wrote, “Boehm’s not simply a place where kids care to learn, but more importantly, is a place where kids come to care.” When we were recognized as a state School of Character, one staff member explained, “...what solidifies the effect of these character education activities that proclaim on paper that Charles Boehm is a School of Character truly is the spirit of the staff.”