

Cherry Hill Alternative High School

Persistent Improvement Efforts Lead to Finding a School's Heart

James Riordan and Neil Burti

Our students have unlimited potential and are destined for success, yet many of them do not recognize it. We seek to empower our students, who have failed to thrive in our larger comprehensive high schools, to be respectful and responsible citizens.

-- James Riordan, Principal

Description of the School

At first glance the Cherry Hill New Jersey Alternative High School is a standard replacement program for at-risk students in grades 9 to 12. However, the story its principal and staff tell of their journey in changing the culture of the building over the past six years is a testament to their special understanding of their students, their persistence, as well as their selection of a variety of program supports they chose as a good match.

Student Data Profile:

Student Enrollment 44

Mobility Rate 60%

Student demographics

White 62%; Black/African American 20%; Hispanic/Latino 15%;

Asian/Pacific Islander 3%

Special Education 100%

Students eligible for free or reduced lunch 41%

Cherry Hill is considered an edge or bedroom community to Philadelphia and is one of the largest suburban school districts in New Jersey, with 19 schools serving about 12,000 students. The school district has a well-deserved reputation for embracing character education

as evidenced by the fact that many of its schools have achieved the status of State or National Schools of Character through a rigorous recognition program sponsored by the Character Education Partnership (now Character.org) nationally, and by the New Jersey Alliance for Social, Emotional and Character Development at the state level. Therefore, it was not incidental that the Alternative School found support for the changes to its culture it made among its professional colleagues.

History

During the spring of 2008 the school decided it was time for a top to bottom review of how it was doing. The entire staff participated in a visioning activity about its future, and through this collaborative work it became clear that the mission of the school should be to prepare their learners for the next phase of life by focusing on transition planning, academic rigor, character development, and career exploration. Over the course of the next few years staff began to work together closely as an interdisciplinary team to ensure that programming, curriculum, and character development were seamlessly aligned. Their goal was always to provide the academic and emotional support that would create a learning environment where all students are known, feel safe, have a voice, and feel empowered to be risk-takers.

They also embraced the school district's chosen core ethical values of respect, responsibility, and citizenship. Every year students create new ways to promote these values. For example, they use the core values daily in the morning announcements, using definitions and quotes, creating visual murals, bulletin boards and posters to bring fresh awareness to these values. The student leadership committee worked to get administration approval to design a first-ever emblem for the school that incorporates the core values.

Program Description

All staff, including teachers, administrators, aides, clinical and support staff, have volunteered to learn the Nurtured Heart Approach Model for Educators, (NHA) and are

actively using this model as a common lens and language in furthering their commitment to build the character of each student in a personal and individualized way. All classrooms have clearly-defined "looks like" character expectations that are visually displayed and reinforced through the NHA during class, and each student is given verbal and written feedback at the end of the class as their level-cards are evaluated.

There is a 30-minute daily Intervention and Enrichment (I&E) period which provides character-focused lessons and mentoring for all students. Students choose any staff member to be their mentor, and the staff offers individualized support for their moral character development. The mentors are available daily when students need a support mechanism, and during regularly scheduled weekly meetings. Mentors assist in providing student contracts to motivate students, collaborating with counseling staff, support their academic and behavioral goals, and celebrate student accomplishments.

The importance of helping students care for one another and to feel safe in their environment is a priority. Student ambassadors welcome and introduce new students to the school community. Ongoing student support is provided for students, by fellow students, in counseling groups. The staff firmly believes in fostering positive staff and student relationships through providing a family-like environment of assistance, acceptance, warmth and safety, connecting with one another every day.

Outreach to parents includes regular interaction through email with teachers, and teachers engaging in the "positive call home" in which a phone call is placed to students' parents that acknowledges "right choices" made by the student. Online student grade books, family therapy sessions, and monthly parenting education workshops and support groups are all used to enhance parent involvement in the development of their teens and to address problems at home that spill over into school. Parents are invited to join in special programs, such as the annual December Cultural Celebration luncheon, which concludes a month-long

“diversity and culture” awareness program.

Parents are also introduced to the NHA approach through the *Wraparound Program* in the NHA parenting application, which reinforces the positive affirmations the students receive throughout the day. Parents are all provided copies of the student handbook to reference the school's mission, vision, code of conduct, and core values.

Character Education Is Woven Throughout the Program

Students at the Alternative School are encouraged to think, reflect and make choices in ways that show good character. In order to ensure the understanding and implementation of the school's core values, staff members use a variety of tools, programs, and incentives. The school's wraparound program has worked with students to identify and nurture students' “Signature Strengths and Character Virtues,” using The University of Pennsylvania’s Virtues in Action Adolescent Signature Strengths Scale.

Teachers use auditory, visual, and hands on instruction to creatively explain how character and core values are meaningful for student's development. Teachers also create flexible lesson plans that allow time for teachable moments when student centered ethical discussions are raised during class. These moments help students realize how the core values are relevant in their personal lives and not just within the walls of the building.

Real life examples and scenarios are explored through a weekly rotating “character word of the week,” which is visually displayed, announced daily in the morning, and discussed in classroom instruction and in the I&E block. Staff use a “bucket filling” bulletin board to post written positive reflections of students’ character strengths in action. The Student Ambassador, Leadership Committee, and Student Government Programs provide students voluntary opportunities to further demonstrate the school's core values. For example, the word of the week, “resilience,” was highlighted in study of the novel, “Dear Marcus: A Letter to the Man Who Shot Me,” in English, as the class discussed examples and meanings

of resilience in the story. In mentoring and I&E, students discuss examples of resilience in their own lives and view a video of a human story of resilience. Resilience is explored in peer relationships through group therapy and verbally reflected to students by staff using the NHA model.

Core Values Applied: Opportunities for Social and Moral Action

During the I&E block, students participate in developing community service opportunities once every 6-day cycle. Students participate in environmental and school beautification/gardening clubs often, and bring their own ideas for service projects. Teachers encourage peer partnerships and collaborative groups to work on the selected projects. Students are encouraged to bring forward a community need and initiate a planning process to engage the school in responding to the identified need, empowering student voice. Recent service opportunities include: Working with residents at Spring Hills Nursing Home, upkeep at Mt. Peace Cemetery, assistance to Cherry Hill Food and Outreach Council, Sole Mates (shoe donation), Attitudes in Reverse (suicide awareness), Cases for Kids (suitcase collection for foster children), and cross-age teaching at local elementary schools. The fall 2013 visit to clean up Mt. Peace Cemetery is a good example of service learning. Prior to the trip, students were educated on the historical context of segregated civil war cemeteries in history and examined values relating to service and country.

Pre-service and post-service surveys and feedback/reflection time during I&E is consistently provided to reinforce learning that takes place during these activities. Upon return from a trip or completion of an activity, the students take a feedback survey and process their experience in small groups. For example, students and staff have adopted two 1st grade classes to teach about the sustainability of trees and how planting helps the environment. The students are creating hands on lessons to show how to grow an avocado tree, and will visit the classes this winter to introduce the lesson. They will return on Earth

Day to show how the roots and sprouts have grown, plant the seeds in the soil, and educate on healthy eating with an avocado dip cooking lesson.

Student Behavior Management and Discipline

The Alternative School uses a behavioral management system that provides a clear structure for actions and choices via a 'level card' that students take to each class, providing real-time feedback for how well they are exhibiting core values. Students are responsible for carrying and maintaining their level system cards; honesty and integrity are emphasized in course expectations as well. As they progress through the system, students acquire increasing autonomy to be self-directed with more options during their day.

The NHA model guides teachers in providing a steady stream of verbal snapshots throughout the class that reflect values being witnessed in action. Staff are also committed to regularly telephoning parents with “good news,” affirming student’s “everyday” small successes to his/her parents, fueling further right choices.

Students who violate the code of conduct are assigned a detention period (during club time) to reflect upon core values. They are expected to use that time to work on a guided assignment regarding the core value that was compromised by negative choices and identify alternatives. Once completed, the student is able to return to his/her chosen club. Most infractions are dealt directly within the management of the classroom by the teacher using consequence tools from NHA model. For serious violations the Principal, mentor and counselors may be included in restorative actions. This could include a family meeting, a session with his/her counselor to address coping skills, peer feedback through group counseling, an apology to the victim, fixing/cleaning up any property affected. All discipline is resolved as soon as possible to allow the student to “reset” and refocus on successful choices.

On-going and Annual Evaluation Paves the Way for Continued Program Improvement

The key when beginning a character development initiative is to build a shared vision. Determining values and beliefs first will allow for open lines of communication around goal development and program design. Moreover, it will build capacity and mobilize shareholders to have a vested interest in the success of the endeavor. Beginning with the end in mind, will allow for effective outcome evaluation and should drive all efforts especially those related to social and emotional well-being.

-- Dr. Neil Burti, former Principal

The school takes the pulse of their efforts by conducting climate surveys with parent/guardian and student twice a year. This feedback is integral to the continually evolving program. The school also gathers additional information through the staff-student mentoring program as well as staff-student shared lunches and service activities. This conversational feedback helps to generate topics for future agendas. Each June, the entire staff meets to reflect on the year and brainstorm improvements based on that year's data. In August, the staff begins implementing those agreed upon changes and engages in an open dialogue for measuring progress. Continuous discussion and planning occur throughout the year in the school climate, safety, and character team meetings, as well as monthly staff meetings and trainings.

The school climate and safety team currently has faculty, student and parent representation. They have partnered with the Anti-Defamation League of Philadelphia to become a No Place for Hate school. All students and staff have pledged to be respectful and civil to everyone in the school by signing the Resolution of Respect. The staff utilizes these inclusive leadership groups to assess needs, brainstorm ideas, evaluate their decisions, and enhance their practices and procedures. Finally, Student focus groups and student government ensure student voice is taken in to account in improvement the school's culture

and climate improvement efforts. The student leaders utilize these venues not only to be heard but to have an impact on the decisions being made in the school.

Using the Professional Learning Community (PLC) Model

Once each cycle, during the PLC meetings, teachers collaborate on developing lesson plans that integrate character education along with common core standards. The principal carves out PLC planning regularly in the school day for cross collaboration across core content area teachers and to integrate character lessons.

The staff utilizes the PLC model to foster shared leadership and long-range support of academics and the character education initiative. PLCs creates a shared mission, vision, values and goals. The PLC method is used to brainstorm, assess, evaluate and enhance achievement practices. The shared goal is to maximize student success, both short and long-term. The staff works as collaborative teams, through collective inquiry, action research, experimentation, continuous improvement, with a focus on results. In order to evaluate and enhance the school's programs on a regular basis, the staff meets formally monthly, and informally at the end of each school day. These meetings serve to assess how the day went and to gauge student progress. Student successes are noted and student difficulties are discussed.

Through the *Nurtured Heart Approach* (NHA) model, staff are encouraged to provide positive reflection to one another when they see their colleagues demonstrating core values. All teachers have clearly defined character rubrics alongside grading rubrics in each classroom. Individual effort toward demonstrating positive character is celebrated both verbally and visually as it happens using the NHA. Recurring themes are slated for review at formal meetings, as are any proposed changes in practice or procedure. There is a common sense that spending this amount of time together in evaluative review is crucial key for providing contextualized assessment and development of their program and critical to the

success of their students.

Evidence of Impact

The annual climate surveys taken by students, parents and staff members indicate that the climate of the Alternative School is friendly, caring and safe. The climate measure has shown an increase in parents' perception that they feel welcome at school, rated, now at 100% for those surveyed. Climate survey results from spring of 2012 suggested that students overwhelmingly feel safe (92%) at the school and parents (94%) feel welcome. Furthermore, 89% of the students reported that they are treated fairly by their teachers and 92% feel they are treated fairly by the administration. Students also reported that teachers expect them to do their best (92%), care about them (87%), and help them gain confidence in their ability to learn (89%). Parents support these notions and indicate that teachers show respect for students (94%).

The School Safety Committee, which has staff, student and parent representation, is active in building the school climate so bullying is reduced. The staff has been thoroughly trained in harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB), and HIB incidents have decreased from 11 substantiated incidents in 2011-2012 to only 2 in 2012-2013.

The Alternative High School's suspension rate has steadily gone down from 8% to 2.6% between the 2009/11 and 2012/13 school years. The percentage of students on 'no credit status' due to attendance issues after 1st marking period 2013 was less than 1%, down from 25% in 2012. In 2013, 75% of the school's students reached the proficient level in English Language Arts on the New Jersey state High School Proficiency Assessment. Perhaps the most important measure of the school's success is its 95% graduation rate.

Resources:

For more information on the Nurtured Heart Approach, see their website:

<http://www.childreussuccessfoundation.com/>

To access the “Signature Strengths and Character Virtues,” using The University of Pennsylvania’s Virtues in Action Adolescent Signature Strengths Scale, see their website at:
<http://www.viacharacter.org/www/#nav>

For more information about the National and State Schools of Character recognition program, see their website at <http://www.character.org/>