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CONTENTS

- 1 Born Again Teacher
- 4 The Power of a Touchstone
- 6 Stand for the Best
- 7 Integrating Moral and Performance Character
- 8 Raising Boys: 7 Tips

The Education Letter of the Smart & Good Schools Initiative



Photo by Jason Enneking

Mark Schumacker and students

Born Again Teacher: Transforming Math Class Through the Power of Character

by Mark Schumacker

I began teaching middle school math eleven years ago. Five years ago our school decided to focus on character education. We were building a community of respectful and caring kids who wanted a better school.

In my math classes, kids began treating each other in a more positive fashion and enjoyed class more. But even though my classes were developing a stronger sense of moral character, I knew something was

missing. I still bought into the idea that there will always be certain students who can't be reached, and that I would always have a certain number who fail math. And those students continued to live down to my expectations.

At a character education conference, I was introduced to the Smart & Good

and a positive attitude toward learning. Instantly it hit me; I saw my purpose as a teacher more clearly than ever before. Inspired by this concept, I have spent the past two school years working out a new approach to teaching. Here are my seven major strategies:

1. Teaching My Students About Performance Character

At the start of the new school year, I now introduce the idea of performance character to my students. I explain that performance character means setting high expectations for yourself and doing

Although my classes were developing a stronger sense of moral character, something was missing.

Schools idea of "performance character" — qualities such as best effort, setting goals,

everything in your power to meet them. I tell my students that I expect work of

the highest quality from them. I explain that quality means the best work they are capable of doing, and that I will provide the opportunities for them to do their very best. Their job will be to put forth the effort to make this happen.

To help my students recognize quality work, we look at various examples and ask, What is average? What is superb?

2. Classroom Policies That Promote Performance Character

Revisions. I explain that because most of us rarely do our best work the first time around, revisions will be necessary. My students may now revise completed assignments as often as needed. All revisions

work. I then consolidate each class's rules into a single poster, which all students sign as a reminder of why we come to class each day.

3. Partnering With Parents

Open House. At our school's Open House, I share my new approach with parents. Some are very happy to hear about my expectation that all students will do high-quality work. Others are skeptical and insist that their child is not an "A" student. By the end of our session, however, all the parents promise to work with me to help their child succeed. I ask them to do three things:

- *Raise their expectations of their kids.* Many

re-takes, homework revisions, etc.

- How to get the most out of the math textbook.
- How to use our textbook's website, especially for test preparation.

4. Teaching Goal-Setting

Sadly, many students aspire only to mediocrity. Therefore, we now begin the school year by focusing on our dreams and goals.

I ask all my kids to consider the most incredible goal they could set for themselves in my class. I tell them, "This should be your academic goal for the year. Nothing is impossible. You can achieve your dreams if you put forth the effort to make them happen." As a class, we then brainstorm possible goals for the year.

- Some of my students are now trying to go the whole year without having a single incomplete assignment.
- Some are trying to earn an "A" average for the entire year.
- Others want to revise every assignment until it is "A" quality work.

Quarterly and Bi-Weekly Goals. I ask my students to set goals for each quarter that support their yearly goals. For example, if a student says he wants to earn an "A" for the year, he might set a quarterly goal of earning "A's" on all of his assignments or revising all of his assignments until they are "A" quality.

We take this process a step further and set bi-weekly goals designed to help kids achieve their quarterly and yearly goals. The bi-weekly goals are ones we can monitor and adjust as needed.

Goals and Accomplishments Sheet. Students record their bi-weekly goals on a Goals and Accomplishments Sheet that is updated each week. They also display their grades and revisions from the two-week period and answers to a Self-Reflection Survey (where a rating of 5 means "strongly agree" and 1 means "strongly disagree"). Sample items:

I have worked to the fullest of my abilities over the last two weeks.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

I have been an asset to the class (behavior and attitude) the last 2 weeks.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

Developing Action Plans. After setting an academic goal, the next step is figuring out how to reach it. As a class,

I ask the kids to consider the most incredible goal they could set for themselves in my class.

are due at the conclusion of the chapter. I don't accept late work because I want my kids to learn the importance of a deadline and accountability.

Test Re-Takes. My students may now re-take all tests. I give them the better of the two grades. If students fail a re-take test, they lose the privilege of retaking a test for the rest of the quarter. My goal is that they learn how to prepare for a test and eventually no longer need re-takes.

Classroom Expectations. At the start of the year, I ask students to write down behaviors they would like to see in our classroom—behaviors that will help us develop our performance character and do our very best work. I also ask them to list behaviors they do *not* wish to see—ones that will interfere with doing our best

of the parents say that they themselves were not good at math and their kids would most likely struggle, too. I explain that kids look for us to set the bar.

- *Talk with their kids every day about their progress in math,* asking to see evidence to support their child's claims.

- *Stay in contact with me.* I say that they can never ask me too many questions; I enjoy the communication.

Math Night. Parents want to see their kids succeed in class, but many don't know how to help at home. So I now also host a Math Night for parents. Parents say they love it. Topics include:

- My plan for maximizing their children's success, including my teaching philosophy and policies regarding test

Welcome to the third issue of *Excellence & Ethics: The Education Letter of the Smart & Good Schools Initiative*. The Smart & Good Schools Initiative is a joint project of the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs and the Institute for Excellence & Ethics (IEE), with major grant funding from the **John Templeton Foundation** and the **Sanford N. McDonnell Foundation**.

Excellence & Ethics features K-12 practices that help all educational stakeholders do their best work (performance character) and do the right thing (moral character). To subscribe, go to www.cortland.edu/character. *Excellence & Ethics* is free, but your donations will help ensure its continuing publication. You may send a contribution to IEE at the address below. To submit an article for consideration, email the Center.

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SUCCESS POSTERS

GOALS FOR THE YEAR displays all my students' goals for the school year.

REVISIONS WALL OF FAME posts the revisions kids are most proud of.

REVISION +10 CLUB lists the students who did at least 10 revisions during the previous quarter.

"A" POSTER lists those students who currently have a grade of "A" (a goal they can all attain with enough time, effort, and support).

we take sample goals and develop steps and strategies needed to reach them. If a student's goal is to be a greater asset to the class, strategies would include asking good questions, working hard, helping others succeed, etc.

5. Goal Partners

Students now support each other as much as possible. At the start of the year, they each choose a goal partner. The purpose of the goal partner is to have another person who holds you accountable to your goals, offers suggestions on how to reach them, and praises you for progress. I explain to students, "Being a goal partner is a job that needs to be taken very seriously. If your partner fails, it's also *your* failure if you've done nothing to help remedy your partner's problem."

Goal partners meet every other week to review their Goals and Accomplishments Sheets and celebrate each other's accomplishments. Each signs off on the other's sheet to show that they agree with what is there.

The Goals and Accomplishments Sheet is then taken home for parents to sign so I know they have reviewed it with their child.

"My daughter now tells me she knows what 'A' work looks like and anything less is no longer acceptable to her."

6. Public Presentation

When I began teaching, I used candy as an extrinsic reward to try to motivate kids to do well. The effects were short-lived. I now foster students' intrinsic motivation through "public presentation": Success Posters that publicly display their positive behaviors and successes (see box above).

7. Individual Student Contracts

Even with all of my new strategies, a mix of excellence & ethics

nority of students, halfway into the current school year, were still having difficulty completing and revising their work. I therefore developed a contract for these kids and their parents to consider, sign, and put into practice during the coming quarter. I asked these students to: (1) Fill out their planners on a daily basis and bring them to me to check and sign; and (2) Take their planners home to be reviewed and signed by their parents.

As the new quarter progressed, many of the students under the new contract system began to improve. At the quarter mid-point, I offered them the chance to be released from their contract. To my surprise, most said they wanted to stay on their contract. They had the self-knowledge to realize that, at least for now, they needed this extra accountability.

However, a few of my underperforming students were *still* not fulfilling the obligations of their contracts. I decided that a personal call home was needed. Parents were very thankful; they said it helped them better understand how the contract was supposed to work. Within a week, I began seeing noticeable improvements with this group of kids, too. I now intend to make phone calls to all of my parents just before the start of the school year, to explain my philosophy and expectations.

Other Signs of Success

Many parents have shared how my new approach to teaching math has affected their children. One said:

Because my daughter has never liked math, I strongly disagreed with your high expectations when you first explained them. However, she has completely changed her attitude about math. She now tells me that she knows what "A" work looks like and anything less is no longer acceptable to her.

Other parents have shared similar stories. Moreover, my classes' test results were better last year than at any previous point in my career.

Over the past two years, I've learned that change is a process requiring patience, perseverance, and faith in your beliefs. This approach does take time before results are fully seen. It can also be a bit overwhelming at times. My biggest challenge has been the time it takes to

grade revisions, but I'm gradually becoming more efficient.

My advice: Make one change at a time. And stay focused on your ultimate purpose: to help every student succeed. ■

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POWER TO LEARN

by Matt Davidson



Mark Schumacker's case study is a compelling demonstration of two fundamental Smart & Good propositions: (1) Character is power; and (2) Character is both *needed for* and *developed from* teaching and learning.

Good math pedagogy wasn't enough to help Mark's students succeed in math. He needed the catalytic power that came from both moral character (students respecting and helping each other) and performance character (working hard, persevering, setting goals, and giving and receiving feedback).

His case study also demonstrates the Smart & Good principle, "We shape the culture, and the culture shapes the character." Look at the various culture-shaping practices that define how his classroom does business: goal-setting practices, revision practices, testing practices, parent practices. In his class, character education has gone from being something done parallel to academic teaching and learning, to something done **IN AND THROUGH** teaching and learning.

Some may look at this case study and say, "Wow—it must take a lot of time to do all these practices." We would reply, "If students need the ability to work hard, persist, revise, and give and receive constructive criticism in order to succeed at math, what practices would be faster or better?"

Over time, what is the character *developed from* this kind of teaching and learning? Commitment to continuous improvement, personal and collective responsibility, and strong social and emotional skills—the competencies that will prepare students to flourish in the 21st century. ■

Dr. Matt Davidson is president and director of education for the Institute for Excellence & Ethics and co-director of the Smart & Good Schools Initiative.

The Power of a Touchstone to Shape Culture and Character

by Tom Lickona and Rich Parisi



Culture shapes character. If we wish to build good character—in our schools, families, workplaces, and communities—we should be intentional about creating a culture of character.¹

One way to build a culture of character is the “touchstone.” Studies from the business and non-profit world show the power of a touchstone to promote shared purpose and identity. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins reports that companies making the leap from good to great performance had formed a corporate culture often expressed in a touchstone—a creed or “way” (e.g., “The Toyota Way,” “The IBM Way”).² This “way” expresses the core values of the organization, helps its members feel connected to each other through these values, and is the glue that holds the organization together and keeps it focused.

In *Building an Intentional School Culture*, Charles Elbot and David Fulton observe that many schools with deep, sustained character education initiatives have used a schoolwide touchstone.³ Students thrive, they point out, when they are immersed in an environment defined by shared values.

To ensure ownership by the whole school community, all stakeholders—staff, students, parents, and members of the wider community—have a chance to provide input on a series of drafts of the touchstone statement, which may take several months to finalize.

The Power of a School Touchstone

Below is the touchstone of Selah Junior High in Selah, Washington. Note its incorporation of both performance character values such as “aiming for excellence,” and moral character values such as “treating each other with respect.”

The touchstone can also be used to develop students’ critical thinking and ethical judgment. What does it mean, in any particular situation, to “challenge one another to be our best”?

The Roosevelt Way. Eleanor Roosevelt High School (Greenbelt, Maryland),

to it in the student handbook, student newspaper, and communications to parents. All freshman English teachers have students write about the Roosevelt Way. Each year there is also a schoolwide essay contest on the meaning of the Roosevelt Way. Here is an excerpt from one year’s winning entry:

To many students, the Roosevelt Way may seem like a vague concept that administrators use to keep us in line. But I think we all know the Roosevelt Way under different names. Those names are integrity and hard work. Our drive to succeed is what sets our school apart from others. We learn habits of diligence and integrity that we will carry with us for the rest of our lives. That is the true Roosevelt Way.

Seniors and juniors are asked to help

Students thrive when they are immersed in an environment defined by shared values.

a large multicultural school, used its “Roosevelt Way” touchstone in a deliberate manner to create a culture of excellence and ethics. A page in the school yearbook states that the “Roosevelt Way” is based on the core values of “respect, responsibility, integrity, honesty, and kindness,” but other than that, it is not written down. A student leader told us, “It means something personal to each student.”

A counselor at the school explained: “There is a way that students here are expected to act and a way that they are expected not to act. It’s defined by the Roosevelt Way.”

At freshmen orientation, seniors and juniors give a talk on what the Roosevelt Way means to them and how it’s a source of school pride. School administrators use the public address system to remind students to demonstrate the Roosevelt Way in a particular area of school life. There are references

younger students learn and follow the Roosevelt Way. This gets it into the peer culture. A senior girl said to us:

We look at the freshmen as the babies of the school. It’s up to us to teach them how to act and keep them on the right track. I can remember when I was a freshman, I was going to skip class, and a senior took me aside and said, “That’s not the Roosevelt Way.”

In all co-curricular activities, students and staff are expected to adhere to the Roosevelt Way. When we visited the school, its football team had just lost the state championship game to its archrival. Despite the victors’ trash-talk gloating, the Roosevelt players and coaches wrote them a letter of congratulations upon returning to campus. The athletic director said to us, “It’s easy to win with class. We teach our kids to lose with class, because that’s the Roosevelt Way.”

A School Motto/Logo as Touchstone

Some schools use a motto to complement—or even serve as—the school touchstone. Sometimes the motto is one line (e.g., “We take the high road”) taken from a longer touchstone statement.

THE SPARTAN WAY

At Selah Junior High School:

- ◆ We stand up for each other and challenge one another to be our best.
- ◆ We treat each other with respect.
- ◆ We work hard, develop our talents, and aim for excellence.
- ◆ We do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, even when no one is looking.
- ◆ We strive to make our school a safe and positive place for everyone.

We are Spartans, and this is the Spartan Way!

One high school's motto is "Purpose, Pride, and Performance." In classes, teachers regularly refer to the 3 P's. Students are asked to self-assess, using the 3 P's as the standard. Several times a year they fill out surveys recording how they spend their time each day and asking themselves: "How does my use of time contribute to purpose, pride, and performance?"

Other schools have used a logo as their touchstone. Morgan Road Elementary

School in Liverpool, New York, had a logo that expressed its vision ("A caring, cooperative community dedicated to learning"), its core values (the Six Pillars of Character from the Character Counts! Coalition), and its motto (the Golden Rule).

The logo provided a visual reference point for important conversations between adults and kids. For example, when a child was sent to the office for a discipline problem, Principal Parisi would ask, "Tommy, can you tell me which of the pillars you had trouble following in this situation?"

A Classroom Pledge as Touchstone

A touchstone can also be used to shape the culture of a classroom.

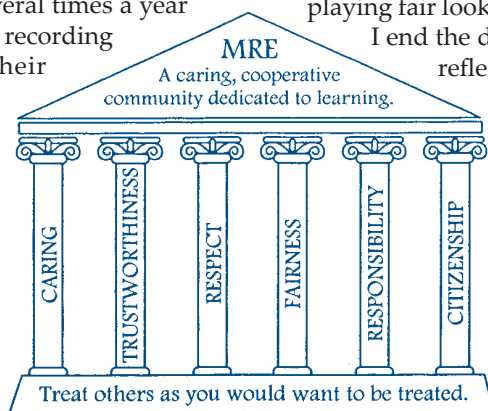
Third-grade teacher Jenna Smith explains how she and her students together develop their Class Pledge, which functions as their touchstone:

"At the beginning of the year, I provide sentence starters (e.g. 'In Room 16, we believe you should treat others . . .'), and the class adds to each sentence until we have the words we will live by." Below is the pledge that she and a recent class wrote:

- In Room 16, we believe you should treat others *how you want to be treated*.
- We show respect by *playing fairly, not bragging, helping each other, being understanding of each other's mistakes, listening, being honest, and using a kind tone of voice*.
- We are good friends to one another because we *share, play, and learn together*.

This is who we are, even when no one is watching.

Teacher Smith says that their pledge gives her a way "to remind us what it looks like to be a 3rd-grader in our room. I begin some mornings by asking, 'What will playing fair look like for us today?' Or I end the day by asking them to reflect, 'Who saw honesty today?'"⁴



We have it hanging in our kitchen. We occasionally read the entire thing, but mostly we look for particular parts that are relevant to a challenge we're facing or responding to. We'll highlight the pertinent part and discuss it. The kids, especially our 7-year-old and 5-year-old, are starting to retain and refer to the language, which is a good sign that they're beginning to grapple with the underlying ideas.

We think the real benefit will be long-term. Having it in place now before there are issues means that it won't seem like something we've thrown together on the spot to fix a problem. It's like the foundation of a home. It's just there. It's what you build on and from.

In any group—whether a school, a business, a family, or a community organization—a touchstone expresses a collective commitment to the core values we pledge to live by. That's why it is written in the "we" voice. These core values define our shared purpose and identity—what we strive for and who we are.

All of this goes a long way toward creating a culture of character, the kind of environment that challenges us to become the best persons we can be. ■

Notes

¹ For further discussion of touchstones and other ways to create an Ethical Learning Community, see T. Lickona & M. Davidson, *Smart & good high schools*, Ch. 3 (www.cortland.edu/character).

² J. Collins, *Good to great*. (New York: Harper Business, 2001).

³ C. Elbot and D. Fulton, *Building an intentional school culture: Excellence in academics and character*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2007).

⁴ J. Smith, "A class of character: This is who we are," *The Fourth and Fifth Rs* (fall, 2004). For the full article, see *The Fourth and Fifth Rs Archives* at www.cortland.edu/character.

⁵ Thanks to Matt and Suzanne Davidson for sharing their family touchstone.

⁶ Thanks to the great coach and character educator, John Wooden, for the maxim, "Discipline yourself so others won't have to," and to Scott Raecker for the wisdom, "Remember who you are."

Adapted from *Good Things to Do*, David Streight, Ed. (Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education, 2008), <http://www.csee.org/products/81>.

Tom Lickona is director of the Center for the 4th & 5th Rs and co-director of the Smart & Good Schools Initiative (www.cortland.edu/character). Rich Parisi is director of operations for the Institute for Excellence & Ethics (IEE) and former award-winning principal of Morgan Road Elementary, Liverpool, NY.

A Family Touchstone

THE DAVIDSON WAY⁵

- ★ We don't whine, complain or make excuses; instead, we work hard, focus on the positive, assume a can-do attitude, and hustle while we wait.
- ★ We commit to being honest and trustworthy, kind and fair. We don't lie, cheat, steal, or intentionally hurt others.
- ★ When we make a mistake, we own it, make up for it, learn from it, and move on.
- ★ We work to keep our minds, bodies, and souls healthy, strong, and pure; we discipline ourselves so that others don't have to.
- ★ We commit to learning and growing in our faith through consistent practice and an unwavering trust in God's goodness and His particular plan for our unique potential.
- ★ We are fun-loving, healthy risk-takers. We live deliberately with an attitude of gratitude and joy. We laugh often and love generously, wisely, and well.

Remember who you are—wherever you go, whatever you do.⁶

Stand for the Best

by Tom Bloch



In early 1995, quite deliberately, I stepped down as CEO of H&R Block. I had decided to follow a higher calling: teaching math to inner-city kids.

Nothing prepared me for the spirit-crushing realities of the inner city. There was the father who was arrested at the school's front door for possessing drugs. There were kids who went "home" to homeless shelters. There was the disgruntled former student who came back to school with a carload of friends and assaulted two staff members.

I have sometimes thought that what Americans expect of public education is unfair. We expect this system somehow to overcome the structural inequalities of American society. We expect it to compensate for the widening gap between rich and poor. We expect it to serve as a surrogate parent for children who often have only one or even none. We expect it, against all odds, to be an engine that lifts the poor and the underprivileged into the middle class. At times this seems an almost impossible challenge. But we must try to meet it.

Why Are You Teaching Us?

Soon after I welcomed my first class of 7th-grade math students, a girl named Rinetta asked, "Why are you teaching us when you could be making a lot more money at H&R Block?"

"To work with all of you, to help you succeed in school and in life," I replied. "What could be better than making tons of money?" a boy named Markis demanded. That was the beginning of a series of conversations we would have about happiness and the material world.

Raising the Bar

As the motivational speaker Les Brown puts it, "No one rises to low expectations." I wanted to raise the bar for these kids.

"How can you give us homework on the first day?" Chartisha complained. "There will be homework *every* day," I replied.

"Are you going to give homework over weekends, too? None of the other teachers

give homework every day and over weekends." I assured her that doing her work every day would pay great dividends. She rolled her eyes.

The first assignment I gave them was to write a one-page paper titled "Math and Me." I told them they were free to write anything they wanted on the topic, provided it came from the heart. Those papers gave me more insight into each

of my students, including their attitude toward math, school, and even life.

I eventually "graduated" from my makeshift classroom to co-found University Academy, a charter school in Kansas City, Missouri. It now enrolls 1,100 K-12 students, making it the largest charter school in the city. We've sent every one of our graduates to college (although because of our high academic standards, many students wash out before graduation).

Teaching Core Values

F— YOU, MR. BLOCH!" At least Antonio called me *Mr. Bloch*.

"I didn't say that," Antonio argued when I confronted him in front of the principal. Now he was lying to the principal and me.

Disrespect, lying, and cheating are just a few of the moral challenges a teacher faces. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that it's not enough for schools to simply teach core subjects; they must also teach core values.

I began to focus each week on one trait or skill—such as, empathy, teamwork, and self-respect. We would talk about how cheating undermines one's self-respect as well as respect for others. I emphasized that our classroom was a community and that each of us had a moral obligation to treat each other as a valued member of this community.

Learning to Care by Giving Care

I came to realize that the best way to teach students to care is not by lecturing them about caring. It is to give them real-world opportunities to show caring through their actions.

One powerful way to do that is community service. I discovered a web site for a program called the President's Student Service Challenge (<http://www.presidentialserviceawards.gov/tg/PSSA/>). The program awards a pin, a presidential certificate, and a letter from the President to youths ages five to 25 who contribute

The best way to teach students to care is to give them real-world opportunities to show caring.

50-100 hours of community service in a year. A second part of the program offers each high school an annual opportunity to select two students to receive \$1,000 scholarships for outstanding community service.

In addition, my wife, Mary, and I created a recognition component for schools. Any participating school in which 5% of the students earned the President's Student Service Award would receive our School of Service Award.

We held celebrations to recognize the award-winning Schools of Service. One high school senior spoke eloquently about how turning the focus away from himself and toward those less fortunate made him a happier and better person.

At age 54, I approach the future with much less of a road map than I had in the past. I do not regret my decision to leave the corporation for the classroom. The English novelist E. M. Forster put it well: "We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us." ■

Adapted from *Stand for the Best* (Jossey-Bass, 2008) (www.amazon.com). Thomas Bloch is currently a middle school math teacher and president of the Board at University Academy. Email: (blocht@universityacademy.org)

Ron Berger, author of *An Ethic of Excellence*, taught elementary school for 28 years and is now director of instruction for Expeditionary Learning Schools (rberger@elschools.org; website: www.elschools.org/). *Excellence & Ethics* interviewed him about “good work.”

Integrating Moral and Performance Character Through “Good Work”

An Interview with Ron Berger



In a recent talk at a character education conference you said, “We don’t have to choose between academic excellence and character.” What did you mean?

Ron Berger: Schools should be places where students do good work. Howard Gardner’s “Good Work Project” at Harvard has defined good work as having three qualities: (1) It is engaging and fulfilling; (2) It is done well, with quality and excellence; and (3) It does some good—it makes a contribution beyond yourself. When schools engage students in doing good work, they are fostering academic excellence and character development at the same time. We should therefore be asking, “Are we giving kids the opportunity to do good work—beautiful work, accurate work, work that makes a difference?”

What are some examples of “good work”?

RB: In several schools, students have created a field guide to the animal life outside their school. Kids developed a field guide in one school where 30% of the students were refugees from Somalia and

to do by having kids do these high-quality projects, produce multiple drafts as a way of getting to quality, present their projects to outside audiences, and so on. Simultaneously, we’re developing moral character by teaching kids to give each other helpful feedback during class critique sessions and to work together on service projects that benefit their school or community.

How do you get started with a school?

RB: We typically work with high-need, underperforming schools. We begin by asking the faculty to develop a Code of Character. They ask themselves, “Who do we want to be as a school?” The Code of Character is what you call a “touchstone” in your Smart & Good work (see pp. 4-5). After faculty draft the code, it goes to kids for their input, then to parents. When the code is finished, kids, staff, and parents are all asked to sign it. Then we talk about the Code of Character *every day*. That holds everyone accountable for their actions.

So the Character Code becomes a tool for creating an intentional school culture?

RB: Yes. We are currently working with a school that for years we refused to work with. There were gangs out front, drugs in

don’t even speak to them.” Two students in their school were homeless.

They decided to do a project on the homeless persons in their school’s neighborhood. They interviewed police and soup kitchen staff who work with the homeless. In small groups, accompanied by an adult, they interviewed homeless persons. “It was hard,” kids said. “Sometimes people were nice, sometimes not. Some were mentally ill.”

Based on their learnings, these students created an alphabet book for kindergartners called *An A to Z Book of Homelessness*. For each letter in the alphabet, there is a child’s watercolor painting of that letter and, on the facing page, a sentence stating something they learned about the homeless. Copies of their book were sent to more than 100 Washington, D.C. schools. When students were asked, “What’s changed for you as a result of doing this project?”, they answered, “We now say good morning to them. We see them as people.”

How do you respond when educators say, “We don’t have time to do all these projects—we have to teach basic skills and get kids ready for the state tests”?

RB: We point out that such projects typically include substantial reading, writing, and research. We explicitly teach reading and writing skills *during* the project work, all day long.

To prepare kids for the state tests, align your project choices with state standards. For example, if they need to know about the Civil War for the state test, do a project on the Civil War.

Many of the schools we work with, a few years after placing project-based learning at the center of what they do, end up leading their districts on the state tests. It’s not unusual for 80-90% of their students to be performing at or above proficiency levels. ■

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Schools that place project-based learning at the center of their work often lead their districts on state tests.

Sudan. The final product of their efforts, which went through many revisions, is truly beautiful and is sold in local book stores and distributed by the National Parks Service. In a middle school, the field guide project began by cleaning up the bog behind the school. Pride in the student-created field guide became the engine for a culture of pride in the whole school.

How do you see the relationship between “good work” and the Smart & Good Schools goal of developing performance character and moral character?

The Smart & Good Schools approach is reframing character education in a way that helps educators understand our message about work that matters. When you speak about developing performance character, that’s exactly what we’re trying excellence & ethics

the school, terrible relationships between administration and staff—not the conditions that would enable us to be effective. Then they got a new principal, a young African-American woman who wanted to turn the school around. We had the faculty draft a Character Code. By the end of our first session, some of the teachers were in tears. They realized that the code would have immediate consequences for how they treated each other as adults.

How do schools choose their projects?

RB: A school’s Code of Character can influence that choice. At the Capitol City Charter School in Washington, D.C., students walked by homeless people on their way to school. After they developed their Code of Character, kids said, “We don’t treat homeless people the way we say in our code that we should treat each other. We

Raising Boys

7 Tips for Getting It Right

by Meg Meeker, M.D.



There is no more noble work than shaping a boy into a man. In working with thousands of families, I have found that successful parents follow these principles:

1. Know that you can change his world.

His relationship with you sets the template for his world. Fifteen-year-old Lincoln and his father came into my office because Lincoln was mouthing off and dabbling with drugs. His grades were plummeting.

"I just don't get it," the father said. "I give him everything. He won't step up to the plate and work hard. He runs around with a bad group of kids and lies."

Then Lincoln spoke, hesitantly. "My dad—he just doesn't get it. He doesn't give me a chance. He never believes me."

"Why should I? All you do is lie!" the father interrupted. Lincoln shot back, "See what I mean? He hates me. He's on me all the time. Nothing I do is right."

I asked the father, "How did *your* father talk to you?" His eyes widened. The tone in the room softened.

"Pretty bad, actually. He criticized me constantly. He wanted me to be tough and strong. I guess he thought that by pointing out my faults that I would get better. It made me stop trying."

It became apparent to all of us that the father was doing to Lincoln what his own father had done to him. Was he responsible for Lincoln's dishonesty, drug use, or failing grades? No, not completely. But his constant criticism set Lincoln up for failure by leaving him vulnerable to finding other sources of affirmation.

Once the father realized what he was doing, he checked his anger and knee-jerk responses. He made a point of listening before he spoke. When he spoke, he offered thoughtful advice rather than simply criticizing. He also committed himself to spending more time with Lincoln. Lincoln stopped lying. He made efforts to improve.

2. Teach him to serve. As parents, we must help our children develop the tools

to love well. Boys who learn to serve others develop patience and compassion. They talk less about themselves; they look outward. Boys who learn to serve make better husbands and fathers.

3. Help him find purpose and passion.

Every boy needs to know that he exists to do something and to be someone unique. If he has this sense of a purpose, he is more apt to believe that some higher power is there to help him along the way. Passion follows purpose. It is a boy's passion, his sense of having a personal mission, that is his greatest motivator.

4. Foster a healthy sexuality. Nearly half of boys between 3rd- and 8th-grade have visited pornographic websites. Pornography warps the natural development of sexuality in boys. Their morality, their sense of what is acceptable, is shaped by it. I travel across the country speaking to teens about STDs and the emotional costs associated with unmarried sex. A healthy sexuality is not exercised too young and is not artificially aroused.

5. Encourage healthy competition. A boy learns important lessons about himself and life in general through competitive sports. Having others challenge his ability keeps him sharper, motivating him to push himself at practice, increase his speed, or lengthen his stride. Sports also offer a boy an excellent venue to gain control over his body; getting his body to perform the way he wants it to is a monumental task. The desire to master it should be encouraged.

6. Watch with the eyes of a hawk. Ever since Sam turned 13, his mother Maddie said he had become sarcastic and volatile. She and her husband were role models of polite behavior and had taught Sam to be polite. They couldn't imagine what had gotten into him. "What does Sam do with his downtime?" I asked. "Sometimes he and a buddy will go to his room," she said. "I guess they play games." "Have you asked Sam what he does?" I said. "No, no, we respect him and trust him."

I asked if I could talk to Sam, first alone and then with his mother. Sam admitted that he felt angry and agitated. When I

asked what he did in his room during the afternoon, he said, "Just guy stuff."

"Do you have a MySpace page?" I asked. "Sure, everybody does." "Who writes to you?" "Lots of people. Guys; a few girls." "How about you show your mother your page?" I asked. "No way, no way. That's guy stuff!" "Really, Dr. Meeker," his mother interjected. "I disagree. That's private."

All three of us realized at that moment that Sam wanted to keep his MySpace page a secret, and his mother didn't want to know what he was doing. If she knew, she would have to decide what to do about it. If she made him get rid of his MySpace page, she was afraid he would rebel—even run away.

When she overcame this fear, she handled the situation beautifully. When Sam showed her his MySpace page in my office, she went ballistic. She saw lewd, graphic sexual language he had exchanged with girls whom he claimed not to know. She rationally yet angrily informed Sam that he had violated these girls and that they had violated him sexually. As part of their family, she expected him to speak respectfully to others at all times. Furthermore, she said, he owed those girls apologies, and those who had spoken so vilely to him owed him an apology as well.

Sam broke down in tears. I'm sure he felt humiliated, but I'm certain he also felt relief that his secret was out.

Many parents make the terrible mistake of trivializing boys' mischief. Mischief that is sexual or violent violates the innocence that even teenage boys should have. As parents, we need to protect our sons' innocence if we care about their health and character. Watch your son like a hawk.

7. Teach him about your faith. If you don't have one, figure out what you believe and why. The evidence tells us that not only do our sons *want* detailed, well-reasoned answers about God—they need them. It makes their lives better. Research shows that religiously active kids are less likely to get into trouble. Fathers and mothers who take their sons to church, temple, or mosque have better relationships with them. God is good for kids. ■

Adapted from *Boys Should Be Boys: Seven Secrets to Raising Healthy Sons* (Regnery Pub., 2008). Dr. Meeker practices pediatric and adolescent medicine and counsels teens and parents. She can be reached at mjmeeker@juno.com.