

# Schools Making a Difference

Excerpt is from *Character Under Attack and What You Can Do About It*

## Schools Making a Difference

But there are schools, principals, and teachers who believe in values, and they are making a difference. Trevor Armbrister, in “Principals of Success,” reports that *Reader’s Digest* visited four schools “where inspired leadership, innovative programs and old-fashioned values have resulted in small miracles of achievement.” Here’s one report:

The 1650 students at Bennett-Kew and Kelso elementary school in Inglewood, Calif., are predominantly Hispanic and African American. Most of them are poor, and about half speak English as a second language. Still, they performed almost as well as affluent counterparts....

It wasn’t always this way. When Ichinaga became principal of Bennett in 1974, the school, near Los Angeles International Airport, was in chaos. There were few textbooks and no defined curriculum. Students did their own thing—and scored at the third percentile on state reading tests. According to Ichinaga, teachers shrugged, as if to say, “What did you expect?” ....

Ichinaga, who grew up in Hawaii, found a kindred spirit in Marjorie Thompson, a transplanted Kentuckian and principal of nearby Kelso Elementary. Together they rebelled against low expectations and fashionable educational trends.

Resisting efforts to “dumb down” what they taught, both principals instituted a rigorous core curriculum centered on reading, writing and math. Convinced that reading was the critical skill for their kids, Ichinaga and Thompson began using a structured, phonics-based language-arts program called Open Court. The results have been impressive....

Ichinaga and Thompson also said no to social promotions, meaning they wouldn’t allow failing kids to move automatically to the next grade....

It took years, but many Californians have come to agree that Ichinaga and Thompson were right about a lot of things. That includes former state school superintendent Bill Honig, who was calling the shots when “whole language” was adopted. “Many kids never learned to read,” he says. “To the extent whole language stood in many teachers’ minds for not teaching [basic] skills, it caused a lot of harm.”<sup>6</sup>

Notice these two principals “rebelled against low expectations” to “dumb down” the curriculum and instituted the time-tested method of phonics to teach reading. They also rejected the easy route of social promotions and applied “old-fashioned values” with a belief that all kids can learn.

In *A Gift of Character: The Chattanooga Story*, Dr. Philip Fitch Vincent, Nancy Reed, and Dr. Jesse Register relate what happened when the Hamilton County School District, with 44 elementary schools, 15 middle schools, 10 high schools, and 9 special schools integrated character education into the school curriculum.

Before a character education program was implemented, they wanted to reject the failures of values clarification that morals are relative and the weaknesses of the self-esteem movement that promotes false hopes. The authors stated: "We must instill in students a knowledge and love of the good. We must develop rules and procedures to insure a good climate for learning. In short, a school must have standards, and values clarification provides none." Then the authors pointed out: "Next in training, we addressed the false promise of the self-esteem movement as a means to help students develop civic and virtuous traits. We recognized that *feeling* good is not the same as *being* good."<sup>7</sup> The school district established these principles:

1. Establishment of Rules and Procedures for behavior
2. Cooperative Learning where students work together
3. Teaching for Thinking so students use reasoning skills to develop character
4. Reading for Character where students read literature "that is worth reading and that provides strong examples of good character"
5. Service Learning where students are encouraged to help others both within and outside the school<sup>8</sup>

They enlisted the representatives of the community and businesses, and sent 800 letters to ministers and religious youth leaders of various faiths inviting them to a meeting to discuss the district's character initiative. They provided training for superintendents and their representatives, principals, guidance counselors, and teachers. Schools were encouraged to develop their own character education programs. The reports received from elementary, middle, and high schools showed some schools with a decrease in office referrals and suspensions up to 300%; less fighting, stealing, and other violent offenses; more lost items returned; and students eager to help teachers and others.

A school stated in its report: "Character education is not presented as a separate subject for our children to learn. The message of this curriculum is integrated throughout the day by all of the employees of the school, and our children are reminded of the character traits everywhere they go. Teachers include discussions and activities about character in every academic subject from reading to math to social studies."<sup>9</sup> This is an important point to those supporting character education. Character education should not be just an isolated lesson on a certain character trait; character education should be a program that infiltrates the entire curriculum.

Another school noted: "We integrated character education into every aspect of our school. This integration included curriculum, music, guidance, library, cafeteria, physical education, programs, discipline plans, newsletters, and PTO meetings. Guest speakers have come, and entire assemblies have been devoted to character."<sup>10</sup>

Character education works when proper values are stressed. Tim Stafford, in "Helping Johnny Be Good," reports that San Marcos Junior High won the California Distinguished School Award. Ten years ago the school had a crisis: more than one out of five girls were pregnant. To counter this, San Marcos Junior High began a comprehensive character education program, including one of the first abstinence-based sex education programs and the "How to Be Successful" program. These programs were successful. Pregnancies decreased dramatically even though the student population increased. Skeptical teachers were won over after they witnessed the fruits of success from these programs.<sup>11</sup>

*U.S. News & World Report* in "Morality goes to schools" states about character education: "There's no shortage of compelling testimonials. 'It's like night and day' at the 30 Dallas public schools that instituted Character Counts! five years ago, says Linda Jones, who oversees the project at the Dallas Independent School District. 'The whole emotional atmosphere of the building changes. It becomes a kinder, gentler place.' Other schools have seen fights and suspensions plummet."<sup>12</sup>

In "Character Education Is Back in Our Public Schools," Michael Josephson reported that "South Dakota State University surveyed 7,000 to 8,000 students and concluded" that Character Counts! "helped cut crime, drug use, drinking, and other socially harmful activities sharply."<sup>13</sup>

To read more, order *\*Character Under Attack and What You Can Do About It* by Carl Sommer.

*\*Character Under Attack and What You Can Do About It* by Carl Sommer, author of the award-winning Another Sommer-Time Story™ series, can be purchased from Advance Publishing.

<sup>6</sup> Trevor Armbrister, "Principals of Success," *Readers Digest*, February 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Philip Fitch Vincent, Nancy Reed, and Dr. Jesse Register, *A Gift of Character: The Chattanooga Story*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Character Development Publishing, 2001, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 10-12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 105.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> "Morality goes to school," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 4, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Josephson, "Character Education Is Back in Our Public Schools," *The State Education Standard*, Autumn, 2002.