

THE WEB

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WALKING OUR TALK: RMSEL GETS BACK TO CHARACTER

BY LESLIE RAYNOR AND WENDY WARD

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The Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning (RMSEL) in Denver was founded eight years ago with five character values—compassion, courage, discipline, integrity and responsibility—in place as its foundation. Yet, through the years, teachers'

By exploring value-laden content, expeditions challenged students to understand the importance of character in the world at large.

strategies for implementing character education differed from classroom to classroom and year to year. While one classroom teacher displayed our five character values and had students regularly write about them in crew journals, another teacher might only refer to these values occasionally. We were challenged with the charge of bringing con-



Central Alternative High School student Jeremy Kieffer drew this portrait of Latha Bonnewell for an expedition on the lives of women leaders in his hometown of Dubuque, Iowa.

sistency and staff commitment—across grade levels and learning expeditions—to our character education program.

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The Web welcomes articles, reviews, journal entries, and samples of student work. Please submit entries to cousins@elob.org.

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Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound® is a New American Schools design for comprehensive school improvement that challenges K-12 students to meet rigorous academic and character standards. Our model is based on 10 principles that grow out of the experience and philosophy of Outward Bound.®

Walking our Talk, continued from page 1

In the 1999-2000 school year, our school improvement goal was to reexamine and revitalize our character education commitment. Our goals included developing a written doctrine of RMSEL's philosophy that is consistent with and helps to shape practice (see page 10), increasing staff's knowledge and skills related to character development, and strengthening our current character development practices.

RESEARCH AND PLANNING

We were delighted to find that we did not have to go far to discover a great resource and inspiration for our work: Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound. While many of us thought that Outward Bound was his first educational endeavor, we quickly learned that Hahn began his career by starting academic schools whose underlying purpose was to instill character in his students. Hahn believed that the goal of education was, "To produce young people able to effect what they see to be right, despite hardships, despite dangers, despite inner skepticism, despite boredom, despite mockery from the world, despite emotion of the moment." Studying his schools—Salem in Germany and Gordonstoun in Scotland—gave us great examples of how to reach our goal.

FACULTY PREPARATION

We began the year with a faculty retreat in the foothills of the Rockies. This serene setting afforded us the opportunity to reflect on our roots and create a vision that would carry us through the year of character evaluation. In the context of the retreat, we modeled many activities that crew leaders could use with their students in the future, including initiatives, rituals, and discussion forums.

At the retreat, faculty chose between five action research groups on character: positive discipline, school culture, fieldwork, direct instruction, and academics. Throughout the

year, these groups met monthly during faculty meeting time to further their collective understanding of how to advance character education on each front. Our work culminated with the groups presenting their findings to the faculty.

The positive discipline group offered us tools to promote student reflection in teachable moments when their behavior did not meet with our school expectations. The direct instruction group developed collections of stories and activities based on each of our five character values for teachers to use with their crews. The academics group explored the use of Socratic Seminars to promote discussion about ethical issues in the context of learning expeditions. The action research groups also provided monthly forums for discussion, debate, and professional development toward our school improvement goal.

LEARNING EXPEDITIONS

As is often the case, many expeditions that year offered excellent fodder for discussions on ethics and character. In the expedition "Child Heroes," taught by the kindergarten through second-grade team, students focused on finding and developing heroic qualities in themselves and others. The traditional RMSEL Sailing Expedition in the third and fourth grades emphasized teamwork and studied the adventures of Ernest Shackleton, an exemplar of courage. The middle school World War II expedition explored oppression during that historical period, as well as studied the ethics of fission and atomic weapons. In the high school expedition on the San Juan Valley, students researched historic land conflicts in southern Colorado and interviewed local people on various sides of the issue.

By exploring value-laden content as well as using cooperative learning strategies, expeditions challenged students to understand the importance of character in the world at large. For example, throughout our World War II ex-

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“I WANT TO SEE THE STUDENT WORK”

CREATING A HIGH SCHOOL CULTURE OF ACHIEVEMENT

BY ROB STEIN

The following article was transcribed from a talk given by Rob Stein at the recent Expeditionary Learning National Leadership Conference in Dubuque, Iowa. Stein is the principal of the Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning (RMSEL) in Denver, Colorado.

When I came to RMSEL, we had a three-year-old high school that was preparing its first set of graduates. We had a problem because although students were engaging in a lot of fun activities, doing hands-on learning, and going in the field all the time, they weren't producing enough work. We had a researcher doing some work on assessment in our school at the time. She wanted to know how written and oral feedback from teachers would help students learn better. Her conclusion after six weeks in our school was, unless you do work, you can't get feedback. That was the state of our high school at that point.

We've been working now for four years to change the whole culture of the school. Educator Tom Sergiovanni says that the most important things in real estate are location, location, location, and the three most important things in schools are relationships, relationships, relationships. But the key is using those relationships to get students to produce good work.

IDENTIFYING ESSENTIAL LEARNING

We didn't know it at the time, but we followed four strategies that Sergiovanni says can make a significant difference in school culture. In his book, *The Lifeworld of Leadership*,

Sergiovanni refers to four points from the Breaking Ranks report. He says first, "Each high school community will identify a set of essential learnings, above all in literature, language, math, social studies, science, and the arts, in which students must demonstrate achievement in order to graduate."¹ We did that at RMSEL. We prescribed very clear portfolio requirements. Among them, students have to write a literary analysis; do a historical investigation; do a scientific critique; and do a scientific investigation. Students work on this short list of requirements over and over again, not only in the ninth grade, but from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. That has helped us a lot, because students know the performances that we require, and they know what they need to do in order to graduate.

These requirements can be adapted in many ways. For the historical investigation, last year the seventh graders did an expedition on World War II. To display their learning, students had to create a museum exhibit. They turned the whole middle school into a museum, but for each exhibit, teachers required

For an expedition on women leaders in Dubuque, Iowa, Central Alternative High School student Beckie Pline interviewed, wrote a biography, and drew this portrait of Ruth Nash.



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MAKING A CHANGE IN CULTURE: ONE SCHOOL'S STORY

BY BECKY SCHOU

"I'm not going in that class, and you can't make me! That teacher hates me and I don't want to do the work. It's stupid!"

-Third-Grade Student
Annapolis Elementary School, 1996

tionary Learning schools do have some tools that can help create schools where we would be proud to send our children.

BUILDING A FACULTY CULTURE

Creating a positive culture requires the involvement and support of all the stakeholders, but perhaps most importantly, the faculty. The teachers are the lifeblood of the school, and if the school's culture is positive, they will then create this same positive culture in every classroom. Our faculty spent a great deal of time thinking about the kind of culture we wanted.

We added reflection time at the end of the class day to look at not only what we did, but also how we worked with each other.

After much discussion, we identified a shared goal: to create a school culture with structures, a set of practices, and a series of safety nets that would enable everyone affiliated with our school to be supported so that they could contribute freely and do their best.

We started our work by building a culture and sense of community within the faculty itself. We began doing team-building initiatives at our leadership retreat and staff meetings. I must confess we started with great reluctance—even me. What if people shut down? Was I nuts to think that this could work?

A few years ago, when I was a first-year principal at Annapolis Elementary School in Annapolis Maryland, my staff and I faced the challenge of transforming our culture. We wanted our school's environment to support and challenge all students, but we were not sure how to make the change. We knew that a toxic culture could permeate every aspect of a school, diminishing good instruction and turning legitimate accomplishments into hollow victories. Since a toxic culture is a schoolwide problem, it deserves a schoolwide, sustained effort to change it, but where does a school start? How can a school create a culture that supports students, teachers, and parents; promotes the implementation of best instructional practices; leads children to continually strive to meet high standards; and establishes a collaborative, collegial environment? That is the million dollar question and while no one has a magic answer, Expedi-

Nick Steffen, a student at Central Alternative High School in Dubuque, Iowa, drew this portrait and wrote a biography of Donna Ginter for an expedition called "Women on the Move," a study of influential women leaders in Dubuque.



Climb a wall? I don't think so! Thanks to the initiatives, teachers who did not enjoy being together now had to learn to work together for the common good, and they soon discovered that they could. Soon teachers were seeking each other out to talk about the day, to solve problems, and even just to laugh.

Our next step was to create a full value contract. Developed by Project Adventure, the full value contract process helps groups agree upon norms for how group members will interact with one another. It amazed me to see how difficult it was for people to talk about what they needed from each other and what they hoped our school could be like. It was almost as though they were afraid that they were asking too much. Yet the exercise enabled people who previously did not seem to have anything in common to talk and work together. We began to talk, really talk, about school climate and classroom management. We devoted time to exploring schoolwide rules, common expectations, team norms, parental concerns, and the principal's role in bringing everything together.

WELCOMING PARENTS

In the spring of 1996, we learned that a re-districting plan would change one-third of our population. We decided this was a golden opportunity to start over, to create a school culture that would support people and the attainment of high academic achievement. In order for the new culture to succeed, we needed the support of parents, so we decided to start right away trying to make parents feel welcome in our school.

During the summer, each teacher sent every student in the class a postcard to welcome them. At the same time, each family received a letter inviting them to attend "First Day Is Family Day," an event we adapted from a model we saw at Lincoln Elementary School in Dubuque, Iowa. We made the first day of school a half-day for students, and split all the classes into halves so that one half went to school in the morning and the other in the afternoon. We

Annapolis Elementary School Culture Platform

Shared Belief System

Each child and their family are an integral part of our Annapolis Family and we commit to celebrating their successes and helping to guide them through the inevitable challenges they will face. We have established practices and programs to develop and sustain our students' ability to achieve high academic standards. These beliefs, structures and programs are informed by our work with Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound and the publications of The Northeast Foundation For Children.

invited a member of each child's family to come to school, and together the children and adults got to meet the teacher and students, participate in Morning Meeting, learn about the academic and behavioral expectations, and receive a summary of the year's learning expeditions. Once the morning session ended, the other half of the class and their family member came in for the afternoon and the activities were repeated for them.

The response to beginning the year like this was decidedly positive and far-reaching. Parents immediately felt connected and informed, and the children loved having a member of their family with them on the first day. The teachers built on this positive relationship by communicating with each parent on a monthly basis. The communication could take the form of a phone call, a note, or a home visit. By building this relationship over time, sharing the good and the bad news, parents and teachers really became partners.

A SCHOOLWIDE EXPEDITION

To show that our school was going to do things differently, we started the year off with a six-week schoolwide learning expedition called "We Are Family." The expedition was designed to create a sense of belonging and family among our diverse population. We kicked the expedition off with a schoolwide assembly entitled "Five Good Things about Being an An-

This is an excerpt of Annapolis Elementary School's description of its shared belief system.

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Making a Change, continued from page 5

napolis Alligator.” Through a series of activities, we introduced the children to our “Three R’s: Be respectful. Be responsible. Be reliable.” After the kick-off, the expedition continued with a week of self-exploration projects that students displayed in the building. Next we spent a week developing class charters, and students wrote biographies of a classmate. When the expedition shifted to a focus on families, students created family portraits and a Recipe For A Loving Family. A week of teambuilding and cooperative activities showed each class that they could function like a family. Finally, we talked about how the whole school could be a supportive, extended family. We established cross-grade level partnerships and held a schoolwide beautification day.

By all accounts, “We Are Family” was a resounding success. Over 200 parents and family members attended the final celebration, which included a schoolwide performance and a gallery walk celebrating student work. Students gleefully shared their projects with anyone who would stop for a moment and listen. Teachers reveled in the satisfaction of a job well done.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING

We knew we wanted our school to feel safe and supportive, but we also wanted it to chal-

lenge students. We realized that if we wanted all students to reach high standards, we had to create structures to support them. For instance, to increase the students’ ownership for their academic performance, Parent/Teacher conferences became student-led portfolio conferences. We designed a conference plan based on the models of Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning in Denver and King Middle School in Portland, Maine. Each conference was 20 minutes long with 10 minutes for the child to discuss their work, five minutes for parents to ask questions, and five minutes for the teacher to provide any additional input. Students assumed a high level of ownership by establishing standards for their portion of the conference and practicing prior to the conference. As one parent put it, “Morgan was so confident. When I tried to interrupt her and ask a question, she quickly said, ‘Mom, it’s not your turn yet!’ I’ve never seen her so proud of her work, and I’ve never been so proud of her.”


Throughout that year and in each subsequent year, we thoughtfully reviewed the elements of our culture and explored ways to improve it. We added reflection time at the end of the class day to look at not only what we did, but also how we worked with each other. Each class came together for 10 minutes to talk or write about the day by looking at three questions: “What did we do well today?” “What did we learn today?” “What do we need to work on tomorrow?” Sometimes teachers used a read-aloud book if they noticed a specific issue, or students would lead the reflection discussion. Classes soon extended this culture of reflection to fieldwork. Every child reflected on their experience in the field. Additionally, the teacher and the class developed rubrics for fieldwork experiences that enabled students to evaluate their class’s performance against a standard upon which they all had agreed.

The faculty continued to look for other ways to encourage students to tap into their potential and strive for high standards. We realized that by giving to others through acts of ongoing service, students would begin to see that

Michelle Grosso, an eighth-grade student at Winnequah Middle School in Winnequah, Wisconsin, created this illustration to celebrate the struggle for women’s suffrage for a student-produced book on Wisconsin History.



they had more to offer than they realized. We started our service focus by establishing schoolwide service committees, such as Peer Mediators, Beautification Team, Office Helpers, Birthday Buddies, Peer Tutors, and Media Aides. These committees were established through a “job fair” that all children attended. They applied to be a member of a committee of their choice, and two faculty members led each committee. They met monthly with the students to establish responsibilities and work schedules. While engaging 300 children in ongoing acts of service was a logistical challenge, to say the least, the sense of pride each child felt while they were doing their job showed us that it was well worth the effort.

The rewards of all our efforts to transform our school culture became evident much sooner than we ever thought possible. As we analyzed our student data at the end of the year, we discovered that our discipline referrals dropped by 67%, and our suspensions decreased by 78%. Student attendance increased by 2% and teacher attendance increased by 15%. Parent attendance at conferences increased from 62% to 87% and parents often came to the school to assist in fieldwork or celebrate their children’s successes. The once toxic culture was now so positive that my daily classroom visits became the highlight of the day and visitors immediately commented that the joy and energy in the building were palpable. One former student described the special feeling in the school when she told us this year, “The thing I miss the most is the way that everyone cared about what you thought and what was important to you. If you wanted to do something special or needed help with a project, the teachers always were willing to help. They never made you feel stupid or like a goody-goody.” 

Becky Schou, the former principal of Annapolis Elementary School in Annapolis, Maryland, is now the Mid Atlantic field director for Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound.

AN OUTLINE FOR TRANSFORMING THE ANNAPOLIS SCHOOL CULTURE

By Becky Schou

Establish a Shared Belief System

- ~ Visioning
- ~ Developing a platform

Establish and Maintain Structures and Practices Within the Faculty to Support the Shared Belief System

- ~ Demonstrating trust
- ~ Establishing a culture of shared leadership
- ~ Modeling desired actions
- ~ Developing a full value contract
- ~ Establishing classroom partners
- ~ Celebrating the large and small stuff

Establish and Maintain Schoolwide Practices to Support the Shared Belief System

- ~ Schoolwide expedition to start each year and re-establish the culture
- ~ Initiatives in all classrooms and in Physical Education
- ~ Morning Meeting/Community Circle
- ~ Service groups
- ~ Design Principles in Action

Establish and Maintain Classroom Practices to Support the Shared Belief System

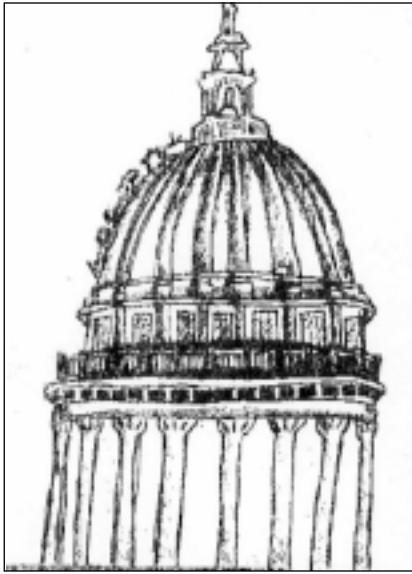
- ~ Class charter/full value contract
- ~ Meaningful, project-based instruction
- ~ Classroom jobs

Establish and Maintain Classroom Practices to Support the Shared Belief System

- ~ Mentoring
- ~ Support Groups
- ~ Special Education Inclusion Support Services
- ~ Peer tutoring

Establish Programs to Encourage Meaningful Parent and Community Involvement

- ~ “First Day is Family Day”
 - ~ Community visits
 - ~ Monthly parent communication
 - ~ Post cards to each child before school begins
-



Seventh grader Jennie Hinrichs contributed this drawing to a professional-quality children's book on state history produced by students at Winnequah Middle School in Winnequah Wisconsin. Districts across the state now use the students' book for teaching history.

Culture of Achievement, continued from page 3

the kinds of rigorous investigation that you would see in a term paper or a scientific experiment. The exhibit was fun, but we didn't do it instead of the learning—like when you do the sugar cube igloo instead of being able to articulate anything about Inuit culture.

The portfolio requirements we articulated are the kind of performances that we thought would ratchet up academic rigor. You have to be able to write an expository essay with a thesis and an argument that supports it with evidence. The essay can be about bugs

or Civil Rights or the Holocaust, but you still have to master that form. I have noticed that you can touch on a lot of different content standards in an expedition and not have any academic rigor; the students simply may not be producing good work.

I want to see the student work. That is the key. Before, when we weren't doing well, we had all the rubrics and product descriptors that addressed rigor, but we still weren't seeing students doing good work. What they needed was scaffolding. We had a lot of new teachers who did not know how to scaffold. Over time, they became more experienced at it. So, for example, in the World War II museum project, students went to different museums locally and nationally. They went to the Holocaust Museum in D.C., and other museums in D.C., and they designed their own rubric of what makes a good museum exhibit based on their field-testing a lot of different museums. It didn't stop there. They had to make their own displays, and use the rubric the class developed to assess the quality of their different displays. You can imagine the scaffolding process involved in that. It was so much deeper than just saying, "Design a display."

We do the same scaffolding with a scientific experiment. Students need to see a lot of examples of experiment. They need to take ownership over their own experiment and under-

stand why it is good or bad science, and whether it is definitive or not. We do the same process with breaking down tests and all other projects. Now, when you walk into our high school humanities classroom, you see written on the wall, "This is what makes a good literary analysis."

ENGAGING STUDENTS

The second point Sergiovanni refers to is, "The teacher will design work for students that is of high enough quality to engage them, cause them to persist, and when successfully completed will result in their satisfaction and the acquisition of skills and abilities valued by society." I saw a lot of that when I visited Central Alternative High School in Dubuque. For one expedi-

We had all the rubrics and product descriptors that addressed rigor, but we still weren't seeing students doing good work. What they needed was scaffolding.

tion, students produced a newsletter for a nursing home. It's authentic, because it is a medium of communication and celebration in that community. It isn't just a report. For another expedition on World War II, students actually wrote and published a book. It was high-quality student work written for an audience. At RMSEL, we have also focused on creating projects that have the same real-world dimension. Students will be their slovenly selves for their own teachers and parents, but when other people come in, they put on a whole different face.

Where we were erring in the past with student participation was accountability. As a school of choice, we can ask for conditional membership. We now have an academic ac-

countability policy, and if you don't measure up, you can't be in the community. What that has resulted in is a very low attrition rate, and a very high level of commitment on the part of students. Every year we lose one to three students from our high school.

This policy isn't just about the students we lose. It's about how much harder the rest of the students are working to continue to earn the privilege of being in the community. That gets back to the importance of relationships. We have to be a valuable enough place where students want to be, or it is not going to work to threaten to kick them out.

ASSESSING STUDENT WORK


The third thing Sergiovanni says is, "Assessment of student learning will align itself with the curriculum so that students progress, as measured by what is taught." I think that's been another success for us. Because we have such clear portfolio requirements, it is easy for us to assess how students are progressing according to the performances that we value. We might change our portfolio or our graduation requirements over time, but we're constantly assessing student achievement according to what they ultimately need to be able to do in order to graduate.

Another essential component is that our portfolios are assessed by members of the community. We do that because we believe that ultimately we're preparing students for membership in the community and the community should judge their work. Every portfolio review panel is comprised of a parent and a community member. We strive for high-stakes membership on those panels, like university professors. We take the feedback that they give us very seriously, and we always debrief it.

SETTING PERSONAL LEARNING GOALS

The fourth point Sergiovanni makes is, "Each student will have a personal plan for progress to ensure that the high school takes individual needs into consideration, and to allow students with reasonable parameters to de-

sign their own methods for learning in an effort to meet high standards." We have goal-setting conferences every year when the teacher sits down with the student and says, "This is the portfolio you have to date. This is what you need to work on." Everything is referenced back to the portfolio, but there is an individualized plan. It is as if every student has an Individualized Educational Plan, not just special needs students. It's written, it's negotiated, it's revised, it's referred to over time. In the winter and spring we have portfolio presentations where they review the goals, look at the portfolio, and measure how the students met their goals and how they're doing toward graduation.

All of these changes in our culture were made possible because of the culture of our teachers. They have worked very hard to preserve a positive culture amongst themselves. Teacher teams meet every Wednesday afternoon when students are doing service learning projects. That time is spent on building the team, not just building the systems. They have grown in their relationships over about the two years that we've been doing that, and it's really ratcheted up the quality of the work that they're doing together. 

¹All Sergiovanni quotations come from *Thomas Sergiovanni, The Lifeworld of Leadership*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 33-34.

Eighth grader Ryan Devenish drew these illustrations for a description of agriculture in a book called *Wisconsin for Kids by Kids*. The book, produced by students at Winnequah Middle School in Winnequah, Wisconsin, is now used in districts across the state to teach Wisconsin history.



CHARACTER EDUCATION

Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning

This is an excerpt from RMSEL's statement of purpose on character education.

The Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning integrates the teaching of five character values—compassion, courage, discipline, integrity and responsibility—throughout the life of the school. At RMSEL, students work in small, supportive groups, or crews, to complete learning expeditions that incorporate academic standards, fieldwork, service and adventure. Students publicly present evidence of academic achievement and character growth in portfolios of their work presented to panels made up of teachers, parents, and community members. Through both the culture and the curriculum of the school, our goal is to help each person discover and develop

what Kurt Hahn referred to as the “inherent strengths of selfhood.”

Culture

We strive to maintain a school culture that fosters character development through:

- 1) Positive Expectations: A shared faith that every individual, with necessary support and challenges, will discover their strengths and put those to use for the highest good.
- 2) Relationships: We are what we teach; our duty as adults is to be excellent role models. The fostering of long-term connections between adults and students builds trust and supports the risk-taking necessary for developing one's character.
- 3) Rituals: Shared practices including daily readings, community meetings, crew time, celebrations, and passages are structures which develop our positive community identity.
- 4) Positive Discipline: High expectations of safe and appropriate behavior are supported by affirmation and explanation; misdeeds result in explicit, appropriate educational consequences.
- 5) Parent Involvement: By working symbiotically with

parents in service of our students, we join together as partners in character education.

Curriculum

Through academic as well as crew curriculums, students are offered opportunities both to increase their understanding of what good character means and to develop the skills required to actualize good character in their own lives.

- 1) Moral Knowing: In the context of expeditions, discussions of current events, and conversations about school relationships, teachers guide students to develop their moral awareness, reasoning and decision-making abilities.
- 2) Moral Feeling: Through service, adventure and other challenges, students develop self-esteem, empathy, self-control and conscience.
- 3) Moral Action: Crew curriculum includes the development of the competencies (communication, mediation, decision-making, organization), as well as the will and habits, students require to operationalize our five character values in their lives.

Brenda Sue Sorenson, a seventh grader at Winnequah Middle School in Winnequah Wisconsin, made this drawing of Milton House, a stop on the Underground Railroad in Wisconsin. The drawing was included in the book, *Wisconsin for Kids by Kids*, a history book produced by Winnequah students.



Walking our Talk, continued from page 2

pedition, we repeatedly encountered opportunities to recognize the value of compassion. Whether discussing Japanese-American internment or the bombing of Hiroshima, students recognized the strife that conflict and mistrust can induce. Next, as groups of middle schoolers worked together to create museum exhibits about World War II, they had to demonstrate the qualities of compassion, cooperation, and trust which, when lacking, can lead to conflict—between students or nations. Many students found this project extremely challenging, but it was also the one in which the most students took the greatest pride. A sixth grader described working on an exhibit on nuclear fission by saying, “I experienced many difficulties during this expedition. The biggest one had to be during the museum project. Our group had a lot of trouble agreeing on how and what to put up in our exhibit. The project helped all of us to learn how to work together.”

RITUALS

The life of every community is maintained through rituals and common experiences. The RMSEL community has committed to several important rituals that have supported our work on character development. For instance, community meetings provide daily or weekly opportunities for the whole elementary, middle, or high school to meet together for reading and reflection. We use opening readings throughout the school—at faculty, crew, or community meetings—to start a gathering with a touchstone of inspiration. Debriefing a service project, a meeting, a day, an adventure trip, a week, or a year, is an essential opportunity to reflect as a group on shared experiences.

We have also developed some rituals specifically designed to recognize students’ strength of character. In our elementary school, students who demonstrate the school’s character values are inducted into the Charac-

ter Hall of Fame. They receive certificates and their picture is posted with a notice of their accomplishment. At the weekly community meeting of RMSEL’s middle school, teachers give character kudos to students who exhibit one of the character values. The presenter describes the specific behavior or work that earned the kudo, offering an example of what the character values look like in action. For example, we recently gave a student a kudo for discipline because she had been working very hard in math class. Another student received a kudo for compassion for helping a new student find his way around. Students also give kudos to each other, and sometimes even to teachers. Students save kudos for their portfolios, and they have become a valued currency over the past few years.

ADVENTURE

Giving students a chance to face exciting challenges outside of school has been an excellent way to focus on all of the school’s character values. For instance, the idea of teamwork comes alive on the biannual third- and fourth-grade crew sailing trip to Catalina Island. Using the name Endurance Crew, adopted from the journal of Ernest Shackleton, these students sailed to Catalina Island for a week. This once-in-a-lifetime fieldwork opportunity allowed students to feel, breathe, and live on the ocean, and to demonstrate the courage and strength of sailors. “I think I worked on all of the character values on the sailing trip,” explained one fourth-grade crew member. “We had bad weather—sometimes it was raining really hard. I think I showed courage a lot when our boat was tipping from side to side, and I was helping other kids not fall off.”

RMSEL offers similar fieldwork experiences in California, Washington, D.C., New Mexico, and Mexico. They involve a great deal of planning and expense, and require students, staff, and families to take a lot of risk. Yet they pro-

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RMSEL CHARACTER VALUES

- ~ Compassion
 - ~ Courage
 - ~ Discipline
 - ~ Integrity
 - ~ Responsibility
-



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vide some of our best opportunities to learn together about who we are and how we can share our best with one another.

SERVICE

Thanks to our focus on character, students at every grade level were engaged in regular service work throughout the year. We made a vast leap in participation from past years. Elementary students worked on recycling and other environmental projects. Middle schoolers made bimonthly visits to work with nursing home residents in cooperation with Rainbow Bridge, and high school students identified and completed their own individual service projects every Wednesday afternoon. Through this work, students could see themselves and their place in the wider world, giving a context to their education and goals.

In a reflection piece written for passage into high school, one eighth grader explained what service had meant to her: “Service at RMSEL has been a big part of my life, and I believe that it has helped me to become a better person... Throughout the past two years, I feel my compassion and knowledge of the world have improved greatly because of service.”

This is just one chapter in the ongoing story of RMSEL’s evolving character education program. As we look back, we realize that the key stepping stones to our progress were the faculty meetings that we dedicated to discussing and celebrating our own character education efforts throughout the year. It is a delight to work in a community dedicated not only to teaching strong academics, but also strength of character. 

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