

Building Excitement at Your School

An excerpt from:

The Character Education Handbook: Establishing a Character Program in Your School

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Any character program will be more successful if it is fun and exciting. Beginning the year with a bang is a great way to announce the program to new students and to remind continuing students that good character is important at their school. By changing the media you use throughout the year, you can saturate the environment with your message without seeming redundant. Students and staff can become bored if the same approach is used over and over, so you need new ways to call attention to good character.

Start with a Kick-Off

Begin the character program each year with an exciting kick-off. Make it a day of fun and surprises. You want students to feel like this is going to be something interesting. Some ideas:

- Hire an entertaining guest speaker or musician for an assembly.
- Use the public address system to reinforce the program. Skits written by and starring students are great.
- Award prizes randomly throughout the day.
- Have someone dressed as the school mascot roaming the halls. Decorate the mascot with buttons of the character traits you will be teaching.
- Sponsor character-related contests.
- Send a letter to parents detailing how character traits will be taught.

Vary Your Media

When coming up with ways to build excitement around the character program, leave no stone unturned. Just as a steady stream of water can wear down the largest rock, so too steady efforts to incorporate character into your curriculum will slowly change the learning environment at your school. As much as possible, vary the media you use to

present the character message so kids are saturated with it. A dynamic program is key in maintaining the enthusiasm and interest of staff and students.

- Be seen everywhere. Visual reminders help students absorb the message of good character. Keep the visual stimuli shifting so you continue to catch students' attention.
- Use print for parents. Printed materials are helpful in reaching parents. If your school has a weekly parent bulletin, use it to provide ideas for reinforcing character traits at home. When you have program successes, be sure parents hear about them.
- Use audiovisual to your advantage. Today's kids are accustomed to multimedia, so use your AV resources often.
- Keep the special events coming. Special events throughout the year keep people interested in the program. Initiatives and events help remind everyone that your school is committed to character.

Encourage a Shared Vision

Your school's character program will be most effective if committee members (and teachers) have a shared vision for what it can accomplish. Positive changes in the school environment will help build excitement and a sense of possibility. Some ideas for cultivating vision among committee members:

- Relate another school's experience. There are many success stories of schools that have been transformed as a result of character education. Read an article that inspires "vision" at each meeting.
- Have a "what if" session. Ask committee members to complete the statement "What if ..." (For example, "What if ... none of our students swore in the halls?" or "What if ... parents thanked us for teaching their children?") This informal exercise helps cultivate a sense of possibility among the committee.
- Find new ideas by reading key books on character education or looking on the Internet. Ask each committee member to bring in one idea to the next meeting.
- Attend a character education conference. Conferences are great places to get "the big picture" on character education and gather useful ideas from other teachers.

- Provide information. Pass out copies of pertinent articles at every meeting so committee members will know what is going on in the field of character education.
- Give positive reinforcement. Always keep your eyes open for opportunities to thank your committee members. We all like to know that our efforts are noticed and appreciated.
- Celebrate your successes. Whenever possible, find reasons to celebrate even the smallest of victories. Try to share with the committee any and all positive comments you hear from students and parents.

Seeking recognition for your school is another way to help committee members remain enthusiastic. Many of our schools are maligned in their communities because of high-profile problems such as drug use and violence. Find ways to publicize the good things happening at your school through the local media and community organizations.

Include teachers and staff

As you think about how to build excitement in the school, don't forget about creating excitement for teachers and staff as well. For the character program to be a success, you need their help. As much as possible, make it easy for them. Teachers need resources for ideas on how to incorporate character into their subjects. Similarly, keep non-teaching staff members informed about upcoming programs and how they can help.

Administrative staff often interact with parents and are likely to work one-on-one with students. Support staff such as security guards, cafeteria workers, and maintenance personnel have many opportunities to reinforce the program.

Be Aware of Burn-Out

Finally, don't forget to take care of yourself. You'll be spending a lot of energy trying to get students, parents, and teachers excited about character education. In the process you may find yourself getting very tired, even burned out. When this happens, do something proactive that helps rebuild your enthusiasm.

Don't be discouraged if things don't happen fast. Keep at it, and believe that the message of good character is getting out. Character education is about changing the culture of a school, and that takes time. Developing good character in students results from consistent, creative effort over several years.

The Character Education Handbook is a useful tool for anyone in charge of a character program. The handbook contains many tips and strategies for involving students, teachers, staff members, the community, businesses, and parents. It provides practical advice on running productive meetings, measuring program effectiveness, and optimizing committee dynamics. It is available from Character Press: Fax purchase orders to 360.221.8172. For more information, go to: www.teachingcharacter.com.