

## **BEING SENSITIVE TO THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS**

Being sensitive to differences is a means for educators and students to better understand each other. When we are sensitive we can avoid unnecessary conflict and even the playing field for all students. In the Baltimore County Public Schools' *Blueprint for Progress*, the first belief statement is, "We believe that all students will learn and achieve." This belief can only be realized when the necessary conditions for that learning are provided: a rigorous curriculum, highly qualified teachers, and proven strategies for learning. While student success ultimately depends on the individual, it is the relationship between and among teacher, child, and parents/guardians that will provide the supportive environment necessary for high achievement. The continuing commitment of the school system in support of this relationship has a significant effect on ensuring that all students succeed at high levels.

We know that all students are not the same. They are different in the ways they look, the ways they approach situations, the ways they learn, and the ways they behave. Our goal as educators is to welcome diversity by channeling all of those differences, including cultural differences, into a nurturing and caring school environment where teaching and learning is maximized for all students. To do this, we ask all members of the school community to incorporate the following within the school environment.

- Make learning and behavioral expectations clear to students and their families, through the publication of the school's mission statement in school newsletters, during morning announcements, and by posting the mission statement in prominent places in the building.
- Respect each student's ethnic and socioeconomic background by finding effective ways to communicate with them. Use the ESOL teacher, the guidance counselor, the school nurse, or any other person in the school that knows that family to assist you. Also use resource staff to assist you and your students who may have language barriers.
- Develop an understanding of the roles of language, race, culture, and gender in teaching all students by learning all that you can about each of the students in your classes. This research is available in books, educational publications and on-line.
- Be approachable to all students and their parents/guardians to promote good communication, to encourage students to ask questions, and to encourage input from parents/guardians designed to improve student achievement.
- Help parents/guardians clearly understand their roles as partners in the educational processes by sending written notes home with suggestions for helping their child. These notes may need to be translated into other languages as necessary.
- Get to know each student, his/her family, and culture by providing opportunities for all students and their parents/guardians to share information about themselves and their culture.
- Model expected classroom behaviors so that students can see and hear what is expected.

- Explicitly teach the school's code of conduct and classroom rules in the classroom or during grade level meetings.
- Demonstrate caring to all students, caring is the key to understanding. Remember that a child does not care how much you know until he/she knows how much you care. This can be done through one to one conferences, notes home, interim reports, etc.
- Set high expectations for students and strive to help them achieve at their highest possible levels. This can be achieved by setting the goal for each class, differentiating lessons and outcomes, as appropriate, for students with learning differences, and making learning relevant for students.
- Communicate high expectations, respect, and interest to all students.
- Teach students how to study until they develop study techniques that will result in maximized learning. This may be done by modeling note taking, providing visual organizers and notes, and pre-teaching some elements of the lesson before a new unit begins to provide a context for learning the new information.
- Plan and teach lessons that are designed to keep all students interested and engaged in all of the learning experiences. Connect the content to students' real life experiences and vary the delivery of the content.
- Use a variety of teaching strategies that employ verbal, visual, and written methodologies. Provide group learning activities as well as individual activities to address learning styles.
- Encourage every student to participate in each learning activity by capitalizing upon each student's strengths as you strive to meet the standards of the courses of studies.
- Give clear, constructive feedback to help students maximize achievement.
- Use a variety of methods to determine each student's understanding of instructional principles and the quality of completed assignments.
- Encourage all students to participate in pro-social roles in the classroom and in extra-curricular activities.
- Personalize learning experiences and extra-curricular activities to give all students opportunities to assume positions of leadership and responsibility.
- Enforce the school's code of conduct and rules in a fair and consistent manner. Do not tolerate bullying, teasing, and harassment of any kind.
- Encourage parent participation in the classroom and in all school activities or programs.
- Participate in professional development designed to improve teaching and learning for all students.
- Participate in professional development designed to teach you how to help parents/guardians envision a successful future for their children so that they may help their children with college and career preparations.
- Continue to examine critically your own values, beliefs, learning styles, and communication behavior to make sure that you model the behaviors that you expect all students to learn and model.
- Develop in-depth cultural and ethnic understanding of all students, so that they will be encouraged by you to conform to the school's learning and behavioral expectations.

## CHARACTER EDUCATION

Character education is a matter of national concern. All education is infused with values and character development. In the Baltimore County Public Schools, character education includes the study and practical application of ethics and conduct codes acceptable to society. It provides a variety of opportunities to develop skills necessary to determine right from wrong, to understand consequences, and to make appropriate choices. It recognizes that there are no simple answers to complex questions and respects each individual's right to privacy.

A common core of values and good character traits are taught directly through the curriculum and indirectly by practices throughout the school. Commitment to character education should permeate the entire school---content of the curriculum, classroom procedures, and the administration of the school. In every class and throughout the school, educators, support staff, and students demonstrate values and character through actions, procedures, and attitudes.

Because issues such as student achievement, student behavior, drug education and environment education have direct implications for character education, the Baltimore County Public Schools is committed to the integration of character education in its instructional program. Every subject in the curriculum, as well as all aspects of school life, contains infinite opportunities for helping students to develop positive values and good character.

It is at the local school level that the character education process can be established most effectively. A study of the student population should be coupled with an analysis of the larger school community. This study of the larger community should include a degree of interaction between adults and students, the impact of peer groups, the significance of family influence, and the role of religion and civic groups in instilling values and in developing good character.

Communication and involvement are key components of a successful character education program. Members of the school community including the Superintendent of Schools, the Parent Teacher Association, the school faculty, support staff, parents, and community leaders must accept and encourage the need for the program. Everyone in the education community should see character education as a key responsibility of the school and view it as an integral and supportive part of the existing curricular and extracurricular programs, and the positive behavior component of the school improvement plan. Key members of the school community must work together enthusiastically and thoughtfully to design and implement the character education program.

The *How to Establish a Character Education Program in Your School: A Handbook for School Administrations* guide should be used by the school's positive behavior committee so that character education may be included in the schoolwide positive behavior plan. The committee should use the following steps in the school's character building process:

- Appoint the positive behavior committee.
- Examine background materials.

- Invite community leaders to express their views.
- Reexamine the school's current philosophy and mission.
- Establish the significance of teachers and support staff members as role models.
- Identify the school's need for character education.
- Create strategies to implement character building processes.
- Implement the schoolwide positive behavior plan.
- Evaluate the plan for its effectiveness at the end of each semester.
- Revise the plan based upon the analysis of student behavior data.

Initially, much of the emphasis of the positive behavior committee may focus upon the identification or given priorities, both short- and long-range and the accompanying development of an action plan that includes the character education processes. Staff development should be a key and continuing component of the process with its nature varying according to the needs and priorities of the school faculty and support staff.

At the same time that concurrent activities of the committee are taking place, emphasis should be placed on classroom activities which support the overall thrust of the character education program. Development of a consistent and ongoing program of character education within the context of classroom instruction is an essential element of success for institutionalizing the character building process. Carefully designed classroom activities provide the most effective means for integrating character education directly into instruction.

It is essential to emphasize that a key element to a successful character education program is actual classroom instruction in character education that begins with the inclusion of values being modeled and taught in the school's curriculum.

Throughout all stages of the education building process, the work of the committee and the implementation of character building strategies should be highly visible, with ample opportunities for input from teachers, students, parents/guardians, support staff, and the community.

## PEER MEDIATION PROCESS

The Office of Guidance and Counseling Services has supported the development of Peer Mediation programs at both the elementary and secondary school levels through the coordination and leadership of school counselors. Peer Mediation is a program designed to deal with student-to-student conflict in school settings. Students are identified and trained to serve as trained peer mediators. Student training is designed to provide students with communication skills and problem-solving strategies that lead to the resolution of a conflict.

The counselor orients the school staff to the purpose of a peer mediation program and explains to stakeholders its process and expected outcomes. The targeted audience for peer mediations is students in conflict or disagreement with one another. Those referred to mediation must evidence a sincere desire to resolve this conflict without resorting to violence. Because there is often an imbalance in power, peer mediation is not recommended as a way to resolve bullying.

The role of the peer mediator is critical to the success of mediation. A Peer Mediator does not take sides, but serves as a listener to help students in conflict reach agreement. The purpose of any mediation is to have both sides really listen to one another and to understand the problem from two perspectives.

There are general rules that the disputants are to follow:

- Listen to one another without interrupting
- Be respectful to one another
- Tell the truth
- Keep whatever is said confidential
- Work together to solve the problem.

The mediators, there are usually two who work together, one listening and the other asking questions, follow the pattern below:

- They ask, *What happened?*
- They follow up with, *How did it make you feel?*
- They encourage the other person to restate what the other person just said.
- They work with both parties to brainstorm solutions
- They develop with the disputants an agreement for a plan of action, which the disputants sign.
- They share the results of the mediation with the counselor and encourage the disputants to share with their teachers.

The most effective use of peer mediation is when it is tied to a schoolwide program on conflict resolution in which teachers are trained to employ these principles and peer mediation services as part of their overall classroom management strategies.