

Written Testimony of Rona C. Kaufmann

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Chairwoman McCarthy, Ranking Member Platts and members of the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities and the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am Rona Kaufmann, Principal of William Penn Senior High School in York, Pennsylvania.

Demographics and Research-Based Background Information

The School District of the City of York encompasses five square miles and is responsible for educating approximately 6,000 students in Kindergarten through grade 12. The district is comprised of six elementary buildings, two middle schools, an alternative school serving students in grades six through nine, and one high school. From 2003 until 2008, I served as the principal of Hannah Penn Middle School, the larger of the two district middle schools. Hannah Penn is a Title I school; 80% of the families are economically disadvantaged. The student population is 85% minority with a steadily growing Latino population.

Discipline referrals for the first two years of my tenure totaled in excess of 5,000 annually and included 1,200 external and internal suspensions. We buried three students, two

from gun shots. Staff turnover was historically high; however, there was a core group of strong, compassionate, dedicated teachers in the building. The School Leadership Team was formed.

We agreed on some basic beliefs. We believe that we are all character educators, that individually and collectively, we help shape the character of the students with whom we come in contact daily. We also believe, as Greer (2007) suggests, that character education is directly connected to the school climate and takes time to develop. Together, we began to promote some traditions, rituals, and ceremonies. In addition, we pursued implementation of new programs and initiatives – one of those initiatives being the introduction of character education.

We began to infuse character education into our daily routines slowly at Hannah Penn. Morning announcements included daily messages from *Project Wisdom* (2004), providing students with “something to think about...” as a start to their day. The school’s physical environment was carefully maintained by the custodial department and staff members were expected to model positive character traits, two indicators found to be common across schools with high levels of academic achievement and thoughtful character education programs (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006). Students were introduced to common character traits, and designed and displayed posters representing these same character traits in the school cafeteria.

From those basic beginnings, our character education initiative evolved and became more fully infused into the school curriculum. Students engaged in ethical decision making, were prompted and coached to exhibit proper manners, and received lessons on proper behavior and establishing community – keys to effective character education (Gilness, 2003). Students were also expected to contribute to the school in meaningful ways. A Hannah Penn News Desk, from which morning announcements were delivered via close circuit, and an organized Student

Security Team, a group of students who were responsible for patrolling the hallways and common areas for the safety of everyone, allowed students to gain ownership of their school. We celebrated our diversity with student-led programs in honor of National Hispanic Heritage Month and Black History Month. By design, the community played a significant role in our celebrations.

During the 2007-2008 school year, our in-school suspension room was converted to a Character Education Room, staffed by a certified teacher, in which students were actively engaged in developing strategies to manage their attitudes, values, anger, and interactions with others. The character education teacher also engaged students in activities designed to promote self-discovery. Storytelling, use of picture books, and the incorporation of moral dilemmas into the curriculum provided opportunities for students to practice ethical decision-making and problem-solving. Real urban neighborhood problems were analyzed and openly discussed, as students were encouraged to expand their repertoire of positive social and interpersonal skills. Citizenship and service learning were components of the Character Education Room curriculum as well, both serving not only to make school and education more relevant to students, but to deepen learning through a process that provides time for reflection (Berger-Kaye, 2006).

Universal values were introduced and integrated throughout the academic curriculum of the school, all connected back to the character hub of the school, the Character Education Room. The character education teacher initiated the discussion centered on the value for the month and shared ideas and strategies for its infusion across all content areas with the rest of the professional staff. For example, true historical stories in the Social Studies classroom were useful in engaging students to reflect upon values (Sanchez, 2006). Our character education teacher encouraged such storytelling and values-related discussions. In addition, school-wide behavior

supports, including student recognition and a variety of incentives, were implemented to encourage students to make positive behavior choices. Peer mediation and conflict resolution skills were incorporated into the school culture. We tried to insure that good choices consistently yielded students positive recognition and privileges.

Principal's Newsletters reserved space each month for character education topics and suggestions for follow-up activities or discussions at home. Parents were informed and expected to reinforce the desired behaviors and attitudes. This provided a more consistent, unified approach to the improvement of student behavior and school culture. We have engaged our surrounding community in supporting our efforts with regard to character education. For example, students worked in conjunction with the local food bank to deliver healthy food to needy families. Others participated in community-based service learning projects. By bridging social capital, we established shared responsibility for student character development and created links with social agencies so that student needs beyond the scope of the school community could be effectively addressed.

Evaluation and Additional Program Development

At Hannah Penn, there was a 60% reduction in the number of discipline referrals in the school during the 2007-2008 school year. This was a noticeable and welcomed change. There was a significant climate shift in the building, one that was obvious to the staff members who had been present during the five years of my tenure.

In end-of-the-year surveys, leadership team members described our students as more respectful, helpful, honest, and responsible. Vandalism in the school had virtually disappeared, students were quieter and calmer in the hallways, and there were fewer physical confrontations.

Students reported less incidents of perceived bullying. Other urban middle schools sent staff members to visit our school and used our Character Education Room as a model on which to base their own programs. In September, Angila Kirkessner, the Hannah Penn character education teacher, received the Pennsylvania Rising Stars of Teaching award from the U.S. Department of Education.

When I was reassigned to William Penn Senior High School at the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year due to the sudden resignation of the former principal, I was determined to take the character education initiative with me. I immediately began to infuse character education into the daily routine by delivering a *Project Wisdom* (2004) message using our WPTV news network each morning. The current central administration supported my request for the creation of a character education position for the high school and in January, our Character Education Room officially opened at William Penn. Staff feedback was very positive and the numbers of serious incidents and student fights significantly decreased during the school year.

Due to the positive results from both the Hannah Penn and William Penn programs, the character education initiative in our district will be expanded for the upcoming school year. A second position has been created at the high school, and positions have also been created for the second middle school, Edgar Fahs Smith, as well as our district-operated alternative school. Through collaborative work, the district character education teachers will be able to research, share, and implement best teaching practices aimed at our district's mission - to empower all learners to become responsible, productive citizens.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The core purpose of public education is to prepare students for citizenship in a democratic and diverse society. Academic achievement and character education are critical to this core purpose and must exist side by side. In addition to delivering strong academic content through effective instructional strategies, teachers must model professionalism and caring behaviors. They must ask students to demonstrate caring for others, and exhibit positive character traits in the school setting.

Effective programs build in structures for ongoing professional development. Character education is no exception. Cooperative learning, direct teaching of social-emotional skills, mentoring, and use of multiple strategies, along with integration into the academic curriculum, are all key components of character education programs. Of equal importance is a commitment to a multi-year process, as character education requires time and patience.

Effective character education in the future is likely to be designed holistically, with integration of character traits and ethical thinking into every aspect of school life. In the School District of the City of York, we will continue to work towards this full infusion of character education into every aspect of our school community. Relationship building forms the foundation of any school and building a caring community captures the essence of the character education movement. In such a community, values become part of everyday lessons and are instructed and practiced in and out of the classroom. Hypothetical questions are posed and lead to productive ethical discussions. Service learning affords opportunities for transforming experiences, in addition to connecting students to the community at large. These are the key components of character education, the common denominator that will help schools reach their goals now and in the future.

References

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