

TE ATATU INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

Te Atatu, Auckland

Intermediate

Decile: 4

Roll: 240

Ethnicity: Pakeha 32%; Maori 27%; Pacific Island 24%; Korean 5%.

Principal: Noelle Fletcher

History

The Principal of Te Atatu Intermediate School became interested in character education while teaching at West City Christian College which based its values programme on an American system. Later she attended a conference of the New Zealand Foundation for Character Education that provided her with resources and a network. As Deputy Principal and then Principal of Te Atatu Intermediate, she has found the ideas in the character education programme useful as a baseline from which to start a values programme at the school.

Te Atatu Intermediate serves a complex community that is quite diverse socially, culturally and socio-economically. Consultation with the community via a survey resulted in a list of qualities that parents wanted their children to learn. In summary they wanted their children to be honest, respectful, compassionate and kind. This positive and consistent response gave the Principal a strong mandate from which to introduce these ideas into the school. She began by appointing a new Deputy Principal – someone she knew had already had experience in character education. Together they developed the programme beginning with the two underlying strands: equipping children to be the best people they can be; and equipping children to succeed at the highest level.

Character education is now at the heart of the school, underlying everything that goes on. As the programme has evolved, and they have developed resources unique to their school, other ideas have been included, such as Art Costa's "Habits of Mind". The staff and the Board are fully supportive and accept that they must be role models - "It has to start with us."

Method and Systems

- Language is a key component in the system. The term "character" is used rather than "values" or "virtues" because character implies internal characteristics. According to the Principal "values" are "the wheels on the truck". She prefers to talk about developing "strength of character".

- Putting the concepts simply, having a consistent approach and consistent language and using “kids’ talk” and stories are all techniques that have been found to work at Te Atatu. “Chicken Soup for the Soul” has been a popular and useful source of appropriate stories for this age-group.
- While there are cases where the term “discipline” is thought to be appropriate, generally the school uses “behaviour management”. The emphasis, as with the Virtues Project, is on encouraging reflection and linking the inappropriate behaviour to the missing aspects of the Character Wheel, putting things right and taking into account the element of choice. Writing the reflections on a “Think Sheet” which must be signed by a parent gives the students’ thoughts extra weight.
- The culture of caring for one another is central to school life. This takes a while (two terms, according to the Principal) to inculcate in students who come from varied backgrounds and several other schools. The aim is to develop self-motivation and self-discipline rather than become known as a “strict school”.
- The Character Wheel is used as the basis for choosing one quality to focus on each term. Various activities revolve around this, centred on the weekly assembly called a “Learning Celebration”. Activities that are as practical as possible are considered to be most useful with the intermediate age-group. “...Running alongside our strong commitment to a full academic programme, is a hands-on active character education curriculum which does more than just talk about character. As a staff we strive to live, model, discuss and debate positive values.”
- The school environment is bright and attractive with many visual examples of the school’s values on display, posters, charts, art work and other materials many produced by students: “Tall poppies grown here”.
- The school has a part time chaplain who comes in half a day a week to offer student support, advice or “someone to talk to”.

Results

- While results are not easy to measure in terms of statistics, the Principal says, if a class is sitting listening and learning with respect how can the quality of the learning not be positively affected?
- A recent ERO report says “There is a focus on consistency and fairness, positive behaviour and building of character. These aspects of school culture are clearly reflected in the demeanour and bearing of the children, who are well-behaved, respectful, articulate and enthusiastic about learning.”

Key Features

- The Principal is vibrantly committed to the values programme in her school. She has developed a system that works for this school and its community. She has worked hard to develop its structures, documentation and procedures, and continues to bring fresh initiatives to its evolution.
- Consistency in every aspect, including staff commitment, community involvement and student management have ensured that the system is successful and underpins all aspects of school life.
- Care has been taken to tailor the programme to the needs of early adolescents. Examples are the provision of someone else to talk to (the chaplain), making use of language appropriate to the age-group and emphasising the importance of the students' power of choice.