

NEW JERSEY LEADS THE NATION IN CHARACTER EDUCATION

BY WILLIAM TRUSHEIM AND EILEEN DACHNOWICZ

“What kind of magic is going on in New Jersey in character education?” Folks in the other states yearn to know our secret because the Garden State leads all the other states in producing the largest number of National Schools of Character for the fourth consecutive year. When Character.org, the national advocate for character education, announced the names of the 84 schools and seven districts to be so honored across the nation in 2020, New Jersey, with 31 schools and four districts, was clearly at the head of the class. (For a complete list of 2020 New Jersey and National Schools/Districts of Character visit njasecd.org/nj-schools-of-character/2020-soc.)

TEACHERS REVEAL THE SECRET

“It’s not magic,” says Elizabeth McLaughlin, an English teacher at Elizabeth’s Juan Pablo Duarte

Dr. William H. Trusheim is the president of the New Jersey Alliance for Social, Emotional, and Character Development (NJASECD) and is a former educator with 42 years of service in New Jersey schools. He has served as a teacher, administrator, principal and superintendent. Since his retirement in 2012 as superintendent of the Pequannock Township Public Schools, he has worked with a variety of state and national organizations to promote character education, social-emotional learning, and a positive school culture and climate in schools in New Jersey and across the country.

Eileen Dachnowicz, a former Honors English teacher and administrator in Cranford, has been involved in the Character Education Movement since 2004 when Cranford High School was the first public school in New Jersey to be named a National School of Character. She has served as a writer, trainer, evaluator, and national site visitor for Character.org. She is also a trustee of NJASECD and has served as New Jersey’s Schools of Character Coordinator. Her work with schools around New Jersey is a significant reason for New Jersey’s leadership in the Schools of Character Program.

– José Julian Marti School 28, a school that is being recognized as a National School of Character for the second time. “It’s the result of teamwork, a dedication to our students’ well-being, and a consistent need to create a culture of caring that enables students and staff to do their best.”

And McLaughlin should know, because she has witnessed the transformation of School 28 over seven years. Character education has been the key to its remarkable change. Once a school beset with fights and a negative climate and a reputation for low achievement, School 28 is now a happy place where students have made great progress academically, personally and socially.

“Just look at our low teacher turnover rate to see how much we enjoy teaching here,” McLaughlin says. “It went from ‘What did you do to be assigned there?’ to ‘How can we work there?’”

Teachers and educational support professionals (ESPs) in other Schools of Character attest that the emphasis on social-emotional and character education has made them better teachers.

“This school challenges me to be the best quality teacher that I can be,” Patty Swick, a teacher at Elizabeth’s William F. Halloran, reports. “I am not only able to be an educator but a role model for my students and create positive relations with them.”

SUCCESS AT ALL LEVELS

Mary Reinhold and Laurie Anne Coletti, the coordinators for the New Jersey Schools of Character, agree that there is no set pattern for this year’s honorees. Reinhold points out they represent a cross-section of all grade levels, demographics, school types and geographical locations. Coletti adds that this year’s roster includes four districts, seven high schools, three middle schools, 17 elementary schools, one kindergarten, one preschool, one charter school, and one Catholic school. “We call that a perfectly diverse group of schools.”

What is it that makes for a school of character? Across this year’s awardees, and true of every school named in the past, you can see:

- A sense of family that includes all staff, students, and parents in a common bond.

- Core values that signify what is important to that family.
- Intentional use of the 11 Principles of Effective Character Education as the framework for the school’s culture.
- A “whole child” approach that emphasizes social-emotional learning.
- A pursuit of excellence in character, in learning, and in service to the community.

Not surprisingly, these schools have registered significant academic improvement and a decrease in disciplinary and harassment, intimidation and bullying (HIB) incidents.

Leslie Finke, a parent at Macopin Middle School in West Milford, another school that has been recertified as a National School of Character, sums up the school’s special flavor: “As a parent, the best part of Macopin is the way that all staff encourage a ‘family’ atmosphere. I always knew that my kids were in an environment where they were not only physically safe, but ‘safe’ to be themselves, express differences, accept challenges, make mistakes.”

INCLUSION OF ALL IN ALL

No one is marginalized in these Schools of Character. Character education is not a “top down” frill, but a true way of life that embraces all—administrators; teaching and support staff; custodial and cafeteria workers; bus drivers, students of all races, ethnicities, and abilities; parents; and community members.

“The entire staff at Grice thrives to support character education by being a consistent positive presence in the lives of our students,” Melissa Hooper, an ESP at Grice Middle School in Hamilton, notes. “We recognize every child has a story, and we utilize resources throughout our generous community to provide various supports to our students. As a school family, we lead our students by example.”

Old Bridge Township Public Schools, a highly diverse district that was first recognized as a National District of Character in 2015, can well serve as a model of effective character education because all 15 of its schools have been named

both State and National Schools of Character. Kim Castagne, its Conservation and Revenue coordinator, praises the district's unified vision: "I work with all departments on various projects. There's one clear vision in our district: work as a team for students."

Brianna, a 2020 graduate of Old Bridge High School, in reflecting on her four years at such a diverse high school, comments, "I have always felt loved, I have always felt protected, and I have always felt like my voice matters." She concludes that her school's emphasis on including all should be a model for all schools, all nations: "Old Bridge is my hope for the rest of the world."

NEED HELP ON YOUR CHARACTER JOURNEY?

The core organization in the state that guides schools and districts on their character journey is the New Jersey Alliance for Social, Emotional, and Character Development (NJASECD), often referred to as the Alliance. As the state sponsor for the New Jersey Schools of Character, it administers the program, scores all applications, provides feedback to all applicants and designates and honors the New Jersey Schools of Character.

The highlight of its work occurs every May at its annual Recognition Ceremony and Conference at Rider University, a character education love fest that celebrates its Schools of Character and provides a host of breakout sessions to help educators learn new practices and refine old ones. (This year's conference was canceled due to the COVID-19 Pandemic).

"The Rider conference is amazing," says Suli Jimenez, the principal of Elizabeth's John E. Dwyer Technology Academy and past principal of School 28. "There's something for everyone here." Jimenez draws attention to the other services of the alliance, particularly the help with the application given at its three Regional Networking Centers (RNC) that enable schools to work with representatives of National Schools of Character closer to home. Last year, the John Dwyer Academy participated in an ASCENT grant from the Porticus Foundation under the auspices of NJASECD. With North Plainfield High School as a mentor, the Dwyer team improved its own character program and developed a much-needed student mentoring program.

TIPS ON BECOMING A SCHOOL OF CHARACTER

The first step in becoming a School of Character is understanding and implementing the 11 Principles of Character Education.

"Based on decades of research on effective schools, the 11 Principles serve as guideposts for schools to plan, implement, assess and sustain their comprehensive character development initiative," according to *Character.org*. Not only does it serve as a **guide** in your journey, but also it serves as the

criterion in judging the application. The Character.org website provides details on the process as well as the application itself. (Visit character.org/schools-of-character.)

A school/district must first become a State School/District of Character; once it has attained that status, it then has the option of applying for national certification for an additional fee. As part of the national process, a site visit by a trained national evaluator comes next. The evaluator's job is to see how the school/district has successfully addressed the 11 Principles in its culture, classes, school policies, curriculum, service learning, parent-community relationships and assessments. The application consists mainly of 11 narratives, one for each principle with accompanying evidence. Additional information on demographics, assessments, stakeholders' testimonials rounds out the application.

If the application process seems overwhelming, help is readily available. NJASECD's Rider conference features a "Tips on Applying" session, and each of the Regional Networking Centers holds a technical assistance session where you can talk with a past National School of Character educator. Teachers can email the coordinator of the RNC nearest them. The RNCs are:

- Northern Region: Hanover Park Regional High School District and West Milford Township Schools
- Central Region: Old Bridge Township Public Schools and Hamilton Township Schools
- Southern Region: Cherry Hill Public Schools, Pemberton Public Schools and Vineland Public Schools).

Contact Information is available on the NJASECD website at njasecd.org/regional-networking-centers. Schools that don't make the cut the first time are designated as "Emerging Schools" or "Honorable Mention" and can use their feedback and uncover ways to address their areas of growth. The Schools of Character program is meant to be a continuous improvement process and schools receive support from NJASECD throughout their character journey.

GETTING TO THE HEART OF CHARACTER

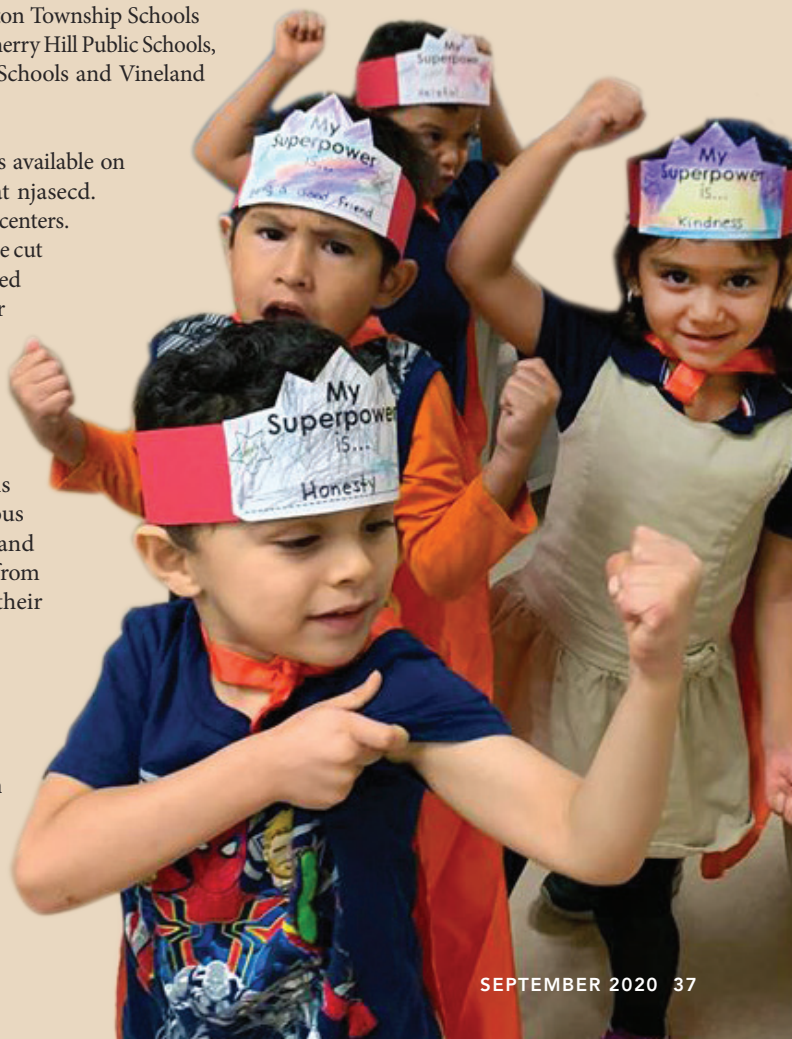
Certainly, 2020 has been a year of great national turmoil and unrest. It's important to help young people cope with this

changing world and to develop values that will sustain them. Araceli, a fifth grader at Catherine A. Dwyer School, expresses the meaning of Rockaway Township's core values—H.E.A.R.T.: Honesty, Empathy, Acceptance, Respect, Trust—that the district adopted in response to a tragedy.

"Sometimes heart is a word we breeze over," Araceli says. "But it is much more to me and the Dwyer family than just a motto. H.E.A.R.T reminds us of what really matters in this world, and it helps us understand how we treat others. The Dwyer family is the heart at our school. Whether it is a friend helping another in need to having the courage to speak up for what we think is right. We don't tell people what heart is, we show them what heart is."

YOUR FIRST STEPS

For ways to improve character-building, check out njasecd.org for resources. Also, if you're not ready to apply for a School of Character yet, applying for a Promising Practice may be the way to go. Go to character.org/promising-practices for more information. More SECD lesson plans such as the one found in the sidebar are available on njasecd.org. 📖



The ASCENT Project

The ASCENT Project brought together nine pairs of schools from New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. One member of each pair was a National School of Character and their partner school was aspiring to become a National School of Character. The project was funded by the Porticus Foundation allowing for the schools to meet regularly and participate in an opening Orientation Session and a Final Showcase.

Schools jointly developed SMART goals that guided their work. SMART is an acronym for goals that are specific, measurable,

achievable, relevant and time-bound. This yearlong program resulted in two partner schools being named Schools of Character and one being named an Honorable Mention School. In 2020, John Dwyer, the 2019 Honorable Mention School, became a State and National School of Character. Another school, Joseph H. Brensing School 17 in Jersey City, became a 2020 New Jersey School of Character. Seven National Promising Practices were recognized from the schools participating in the project.

Read more about the ASCENT Project at njasecd.org/ascent.



A character ed lesson plan

Title: “Bullied, A Case that Made History”

- Grade Levels: Middle School
Length: 880 Minutes
- Connections to Core Values – Respect
- Lesson created at Juan Pablo Duarte-Jose Julian Marti, School 28, Elizabeth

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Consider the role students, teachers and administrators play in ensuring that schools are safe for all students.
- Relate to the main character in the story by thinking about their own thoughts, words, and actions on a daily basis in relation to bullying and how they treat others.
- Think about how bullying affects their school and what they do to help prevent or add to it.

Lesson Materials

- Video – Bullied: A Student, a School and a Case That Made History (a documentary film that portrays the account of one student’s nightmare with anti-gay bullies and how he chose to handle the harassment).
- Teachers guide to video—specifically pages 4-6—“Bullied by Numbers”, and “Facts vs. Myths” about bullying

Lesson Procedures

1. Students will first take a Facts v. Myth quiz on bullying.
2. The teacher will display the Bullied by Numbers poster on the smart board for students to review and assess.
3. Teacher will then review the quiz with the students. Teacher will discuss why they selected the response they did. Did any of the statistics from Bullied by the Numbers surprise them?

4. Students will then watch the video, “Bullied: A Student, a School and a Case That Made History.”

Lesson Assessment

Small Group Discussion (15-20 mins):

Students will be placed into three small groups—each group will be given a category and questions to discuss about the video:

1. **Courage and Empathy:** What did Jamie hope to accomplish by filing a lawsuit? What do you think Jamie felt on a typical day?
2. **The Impact of Bullying,** Dealing with Discrimination: What role did bystanders play in Jamie’s bullying?
3. **Making History:** Standing Up for Justice: What is the constitutional basis of Jamie’s case? What are Jamie’s key messages when he speaks at the assembly?

After discussion, students come back together and share with the whole class. Other groups can share their ideas and views on the different topics after hearing that original group discussion.

Extensions/Adaptations

You could turn the discussion portion into a gallery walk.

The video kit for this lesson plan is available for purchase from Teaching Tolerance at bit.ly/ttbullylesson.

Please note: All photos and quotes have been taken from the School of Character applications submitted to Character.org. Permission was granted for use of this material.

