



Character Day Evaluation

Case Study: Branchburg Central Middle School

School Overview

Background

Branchburg Central Middle School (BCMS) is a public middle school located in Branchburg, NJ, which is a suburban area just over an hour west of New York City. The teachers in the school described Branchburg as a fairly affluent suburb. There are approximately 550 students in the entire school, the majority identifying as White.

[Branchburg's 2014-2015 School Performance Report](#) shows that there are approximately 566 students in the entire school. The student body is majority (82.2%) White and only 5.1% classified as “economically disadvantaged.” In terms of academic performance, Branchburg is the 84th percentile in the state for English Language Arts/Literacy Met or Exceeded Expectation. Branchburg’s high performance (i.e., does well in standardized testing) allows leadership to allocate some of their time to character development and to the overall mission of the district, to “inspire children to learn, think, grow and excel in life.”

Branchburg Middle School is a very welcoming environment. The school is situated across from a large park, which a teacher indicated was “town center” as there is no commercial downtown anywhere nearby. The building is inviting, and outside there a large bike rack where students store their bikes unlocked during the school day. Entering the school, it is clear that character education is a focus. Just outside of the front office, there are five large pillars that show the six character strength groups from the “Periodic Table of Character Strengths.” The mascot of school is the Falcon – and the halls of the school show the definition of “Falcon PRIDE” which spells out the five character strengths the school has chosen to instill in their students.

BCMS takes Falcon PRIDE very seriously and states that “All members of the BCMS Community are expected to follow Falcon PRIDE on the way to and from school, at school and at all school sponsored events.” Falcon PRIDE encompasses the behaviors and characteristics that exemplify proper BCMS behavior:

- ❖ **P: Preparedness** - be prepared for class by having all supplies and materials and by having assignments complete.
- ❖ **R: Responsibility** - be responsible for your actions, belongings and assignments, clean up after yourself, take credit for your successes and consequences for your mistakes.
- ❖ **I: Integrity** - do the right thing, even when nobody is watching.
- ❖ **D: Diligence** - always try your best, don't give up.
- ❖ **E: Exhibit Respect** (to self, others and school) - treat others the way you want to be treated, use school facility and equipment correctly follow directions from adults; treat your body well by not using tobacco, drugs, or alcohol.

Every month, several select students who exhibit Falcon PRIDE receive recognition in the form of an award. At the end of the year, all awardees are invited to a breakfast with their parents in order to celebrate their successes.

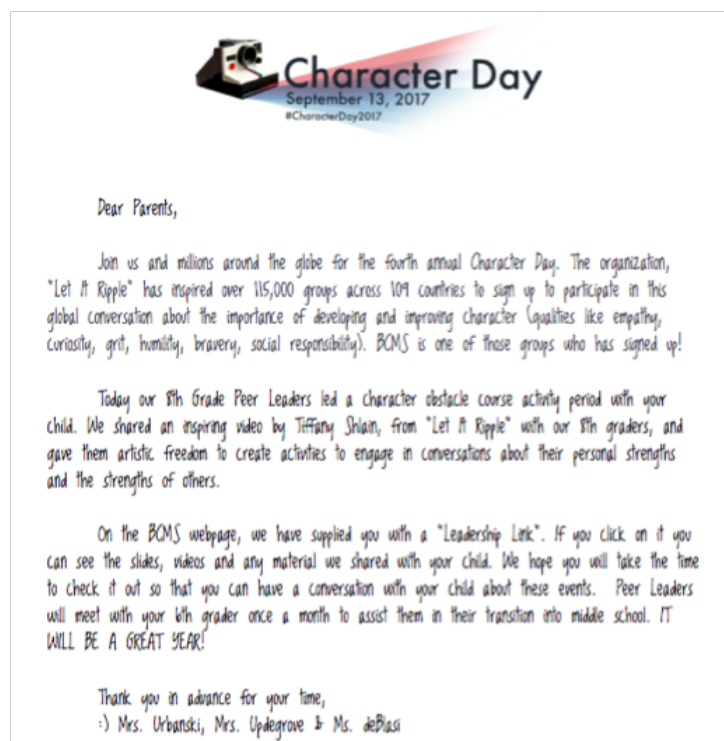
One educator leading the character charge at BCMS is Mrs. Beth Urbanski, a special education teacher and this year's Character Day host. She shared that she was first inspired to present character-building opportunities when she noticed the students in her special education class had very few friends. Her students lacked social opportunities because their class was separated from the rest of the student body. In effort to remedy this, she started a buddy program where eighth grade students could sign up to spend time in her classroom and participate in recreational activities with her students. She witnessed the students growing in their character. Specifically, she said the students exhibited a "strong desire to help her students" and "promoted inclusion."

As time went on, more and more students wanted to participate in the program and Mrs. Urbanski was forced to maintain a waitlist. Mrs. Urbanski said this waitlist "inspired her to do more." With this inspiration and support, Mrs. Urbanski and her fellow teachers launched character efforts in their school, one of which was Character Day.

Character Day Implementation

Prior to Character Day, Mrs. Urbanski sent a letter home to 6th grade parents explaining the planned events for the day. Character Day programming at Branchburg took place from 1:31 – 2:13 pm with the entire sixth grade class (approximately 160 students), and the eighth grade peer leaders (approximately 60 students). The eighth grade peer leaders were responsible for facilitating the event.

Mrs. Urbanski developed BCMS's Peer Leadership Program, which offers an opportunity for eighth grade students to serve as leaders and model upstanding character. Each year, students complete a survey identifying "students with influence" for the peer leadership program. Approximately 50 students are selected to become peer leaders for the school year. They are responsible for orchestrating events Character Day.



Above is a photo of the letter that was sent home to sixth grade parents like

They started the period by introducing Character Day to the sixth graders and by showing of the “Science of Character” video. All students in the room were completely captivated, with their jaws dropped in many cases.

Recognizing Character: Character Activities

Following the video, the sixth grade students were invited to participate in a number of character-related activities that the eighth grade peer leaders planned for them. These were all fun activities that required the sixth graders to identify their character strengths, work on teambuilding and exercise their creativity.

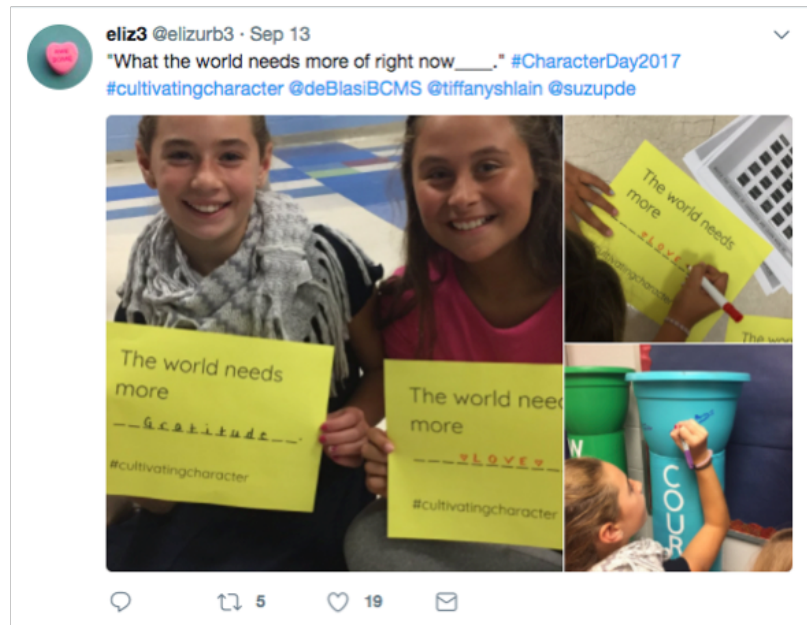
Many of these activities were completely original to the school:

- ❖ ***“Character Strength Selfie”***: Each student was provided a sheet of paper with five empty lines and a placeholder for a photo (i.e., selfie). The purpose of the “Character Strength Selfie” activity was for the student to identify his or her top five strengths. Students listed their strengths on each of the five lines and ran out of time before including a photo.
- ❖ ***“Escape the Room”***: A group of students were asked to step into room and were told to find a way out using strategically placed clues. If successfully cracked, these clues divulged a code that would “unlock” the door. This activity was a team building exercise promoting strengths like creativity, teamwork, curiosity, leadership.
- ❖ ***“The Floor is Lava”***: A large group of students were divided into teams of six. Each team was tasked with crossing the gym floor only using randomly placed mats and scooters. If a teammate touched the floor, they were officially out of the game. The goal was to get your team from one side of the gym to the other using teamwork and creativity.
- ❖ ***“The Five Pillars”***: There were five pillars that represent five of the core values of the school, namely xyz. The students signed the pillars of the character strengths that most resonated with them. This activity encouraged a greater focus on character and strength identification.
- ❖ ***“Pillar Run”***: Students chose one of the character traits in the 5 pillars (each associated with a color). Teachers had died flour to match each of the 5 colors. The activity was designed to take place outside, and when a trait was called, students would run and be covered in their character color. Students were unable to participate in this activity because it was raining but did run the activity at their meeting the following month.
- ❖ ***“What the World Needs More of is”***: Each student was provided a sheet of paper with the text “What the World Needs More of is.” Students were also handed a list of character strengths and asked to finish the sentence with the hashtag #cultivatingcharacter. This activity encouraged a greater focus on character and strength identification.

Fostering Student Ownership and Community: Peer Leaders

The teachers remained hands-off during the implementation of the activities. The peer leaders wasted no time taking charge. They did their best to organize the energetic sixth graders and shared clear instructions for their respective activities. When the students struggled to grasp instructions the first time around, it was an excellent opportunity for the peer leaders to exercise patience, empathy and to work as a team with their fellow leaders to rearticulate the instructions. One teacher shared, “For the 8th graders, it was a huge opportunity to really experience a leadership role and a planning role. And to have that opportunity to have it go well or have it fall down a little bit. I think we had a little bit of both.”

The activities also presented a great opportunity for some of the eighth graders to get to know the sixth graders. Some of the peer leaders took the initiative to strike up conversation with sixth graders who had been “knocked out” of “The Floor is Lava.” They made introductions, asked them about their favorite hobbies, and learned what they loved most about Character Day. One teacher shared, “The eighth graders really like that opportunity to connect, they sign up for these things in the hopes of making new friends and having these experiences. And they tell their friends about it and their friends come to us and say, ‘Can I join peer leadership?’”



The sixth grade students truly embraced these activities and were so engaged that they look disappointed when they had to return to class. All in all, the afternoon reflected the energy for and investment in character that was described by the many teachers and students we talked with throughout the day.

Year-round Character Education at BCMS

As a way to reinforce all that is learned on Character Day, BCMS makes strong efforts to maintain a culture of character throughout the year. They do so by:

- ✔ **Teaching the students that they have a choice in who they want to be.** One teacher shared, “I think the definition of character at BCMS goes hand in hand with what we call Falcon PRIDE, which is the code we expect students to live up to here. And it is everything that is not purely academic. We help students figure out how you learn to be a good person, do well in society, and be the person that you want to be?” This message that students have a choice in who they want to be was pronounced at BCMS. It was not only reflected in conversation with the staff but by the structure of most activities. Students could choose to nominate themselves for peer leadership, or not. Students could choose to participate in the buddy system, or not. Students have the choice to grow in character and BCMS makes it clear that they will provide the scaffolding to support them in their development.

- ✔ **Providing all students a standing opportunity to learn and discuss character, and to build community.** The school decided to add an advisory period to their schedule to make a time for character and community-building. Advisory period is held each Friday, and a handful of students from different grade-levels come together in an assigned classroom. The teachers facilitate character-related discussions amongst the students of varying grade-levels in the hopes that they will learn from one another and feel a sense of community.

- ✔ **Putting together a collaborative staff that is committed to character.** Without the support from her principal, Mrs. Urbanski shared that these efforts would not have been possible. She also shared that the only reason why this character endeavor has been successful is because she and her coworkers know how to capitalize on each other's character strengths. Mrs. Urbanski says, "To be a truly successful person, it isn't just about academics, you need to be able to collaborate and respect someone else's ideas and differences, and embrace their differences. I am awful with technology but Suzanne [coworker] is amazing, and there are things that I'm good at that she's not. So we draw on each other's strengths to make ourselves better and that is what we are trying to do and teach here."

"We are not just making kids who are good readers or scientists, we are making our future citizens. These are the people we want making good decisions."
-Teacher, BCMS

One teacher noted, while these activities help, it is really the everyday conversations that the teachers are willing to have with the students that solidify their learning. She shared said, "I think that character activities help to show the students the importance of character -- that is where they have opportunities to work with others students and do character-building and team-building activities. But it is also daily experiences and how they're handled in a classroom contribute. I've worked with some kids who have some behavior issues and we learned quickly that punishment is really not the way to go. But if you use it as a learning opportunity, 'You hurt somebody's feelings and that was wrong. Do you know why that was wrong? Let's talk about that. How are you going to do better next time? How are you going to avoid making this mistake in the future?' I think through those experiences, through teachers having those conversations, students learn character." Through these examples, we learned that staff is willing to go the extra mile if that means their middle-schoolers will have the opportunity to learn about character.

- ✔ **Equipping students with language for talking about character.** Students were able to quickly provide sophisticated definitions of character like, "It is who you are when no one else is watching." They shared that character was valuable because it has "the power to make you a better person," "influences your reputation," and "helps to make school an easier place to learn and develop friendships." We found that teachers had similar definitions at the forefronts of their minds, likely reinforcing the students' conceptualizations. One teacher shared, "Character is all of the stuff that isn't tested; it is not academics. It is how we want our students to treat each other. How we want our students to act when no one else is watching them."

Impact of Character Day at BCMS

Impact of Character Day on Individuals

- ✔ **Character Day encouraged the teachers to “walk the walk.”** BCMS teachers and leadership shared that Character Day made them more aware of their own character and to ask themselves if they were being the best possible role models for their students. One teacher shared, “I think knowing that we have Character Day today makes me think about the kind of character I want to model for my students. Am I going to walk the walk when I come into my classroom? As I’m gearing up my lessons are they going to be strictly academic or am I going to integrate a character focus?” It reminded teachers and held them accountable to modeling good character and to making it an equal partner to academics.

“Over the last couple of years working with these kids, I figured out that this was the part of middle school that I really, really love doing. It is not about, ‘Do you know medieval history or can you multiple fractions? It is about ‘Let’s be good people. Let’s enjoy each other, interact with each other, and build these relationships.’ And that is exactly what this is, so Character Day seemed like a great opportunity.”
-Teacher, BCMS

- ✔ **Character Day empowered teachers and students to identify and use their character strengths.** Several of the teachers discussed how Character Day helped them to identify their strengths. One teacher shared that in effort to avoid being perceived as someone who brags, she had been raised to not speak about her character strengths. Character Day helped her to think differently about this. She was encouraged by other teachers to label her strengths, take pride in them, and find ways to maximize on them. As a result of this encouragement and insight, the teacher reporting feeling more confident in who she is.

Not only did Character Day help individuals identify their strengths, but it gave students the opportunity to use them too. One teacher shared, “I think the students like the opportunity to build their own strengths or use their own strengths. A lot of these people who are wearing the peer leader shirts are insanely creative or great at working with a team. They are not afraid to get up in front of a group of 150 students and be the cheerleader and try to encourage their younger peers to do better, be better, try harder.”

Another teacher shared that her preparations for Character Day reminded her of own character and who she is. She shared, “I spent four days making the colored flour for the pillar run. And the activity got canceled. But knowing that the students were excited to get to throw colored flour in the air made it worth it. While I spent the entire weekend coloring flour and laying it out everywhere in my dining room – I was thinking, ‘This is what I’m doing. I am a teacher and I am spending my entire weekend rolling out flour with colors so that I can turn it into powder, so that they can throw it for three minutes.’ And it wasn’t like ‘I hate doing this,’ I was like ‘They are going to love this. This is going to

be so much fun.’ I was just thinking that that is going to be one of those memories that they have when they go to high school or college in twenty years when they are thinking of what they did in middle school. And they think, ‘Hey remember that time we got to throw colored powder at each other, what was that for? Oh yeah, Character Day.’ So it is just exciting to do something they’re excited about. Because they don’t get that excited over medieval history.” This story served as a true testament of this teacher’s value, awareness, and embrace of her own character. Because of Character Day, she was reminded of who she really is.

- ✔ **Student leadership opportunities offered through Character Day and the Keshet Krew build students’ efficacy.** Several eighth grade students reported that the leadership opportunities offered on Character Day helped them to recognize that their ability to change or improve their character is well within their control. Students shared that their Keshet Krew role requires them to call upon their organizational and planning abilities, to stretch out of their comfort zone and to exercise patience as they have a short runway to prepare for Character Day. This degree of responsibility comes with a corresponding degree of learning, failure, recalibration and perseverance. One teacher shared that *“the ownership piece, the self-awareness piece”* is what facilitates improvements in students’ self-efficacy, and the students certainly echoed this sentiment.
- ✔ **Character Day reinforced the idea of growth mindset and provided opportunities to practice it.** Throughout the day, we heard a strong and consistent message, particularly from leadership, that character is not static. BCMS greatly believes that character is malleable and can change over time in order to support students through school and in life. Students and teachers shared that watching the “Science of Character” reminded them how there are many character strengths on which they can improve upon. One teacher shared, “I was fascinated by all of the aspects of growth mindset and it made me think, ‘Wow, there are quite a few strengths here, and I do have strengths in this, this, and this, but yes I could work on this.’ With the way these materials are organized, it shows you which categories you are strong in. And then you can pick multiple to work on. Personally, I’m not a leadership type of person, I’m a ‘You want to take the lead, okay! Tell me what you would like me to do.’ And having to step into the role was an opportunity for me to grow. People looking at me like, ‘Okay, what are we doing now? It is 2:06pm.’ ‘Oh my gosh, I don’t know, let me figure that out right now.’ But I think that just makes it obvious that you can improve on all of these things.” Character Day both empowered the school to develop their character in the moment and in the future.

Impact of Character Day on Community

- ✔ **Character Day helps the school community to put character in its right place.** Without events like Character Day, teachers shared that it would be simple to move through curriculum without integrating character. One teacher shared that it not only provides a reminder to teachers, but also delivers a reminder about the importance of character to students. He talked about how adolescence comes with many pressures and shared, “I think on a gut level students understand the importance of character but I think especially at the middle school age, they are going through such a transitional time where they are trying to figure out who they are, what’s cool, and sometimes what is cool or what appears to be cool, isn’t always being nice to everybody, or including everybody. So when you’re

trying to set up your own identity for yourself sometimes. I think there are a lot of pressures about character. I think kids want to feel like they're the good guy but sometimes they don't know how to make that work when they're going through all of these changes." In the busy days and buzzing minds of both teachers and students, it is easy for character to fall out of its right place. Character Day helps to make reinstate character as a priority.

✔ **Character Day provided an opportunity for BCMS to build community across grades.**

Character Day gave sixth graders the opportunity to interact with the eighth grade students. One teacher shared, "Having worked with sixth graders, they come in and are afraid of these eighth graders who are two feet taller than they are. And when they can have one eighth grade buddy where they can say, 'I know this 8th grader and they're going to have my back in the halls – that makes a huge difference to them.'" Another teacher shared, "The eighth graders were excited to lead it and the sixth graders were willing to raise their hands and volunteer answers, instead of sitting there like 'Nope, not me. Not doing this.' I guess when it comes from your peers – having that positive attitude and energy – you can see the impact it has on the sixth graders and that is awesome." Character Day clearly contributed to creating the kind of community that makes school an inviting and safe place to learn. Because of the emphasis on character, students described BCMS as a place where students say hi to each other in the hallways and where the community cares about one another.

✔ **Character Day gave students and teachers the opportunity to learn critical skills, like how to collaborate effectively and to take initiative.** The peer leaders shared that, at times, organizing a large team, which included both teachers and peers, to work toward a common goal was difficult. Despite their challenges, they shared that they appreciated "hearing each other's ideas," "identifying the best ideas," and "working to come to an agreement." One student shared that the primary reason he wanted to participate in the peer leadership so he could co-host events like Character Day and "have an impact on the 6th grade students." He knew it was an opportunity to "rise to a challenge" and "build his leadership skill." In short, Character Day helped students and teachers to practice critical, lifelong skills.