



Character Day Evaluation

Case Study: Diablo Vista Middle School

School Overview

Background

Diablo Vista (DV) Middle School is located in the Bay Area and has historically served a predominantly affluent population; however, in recent years there has been an influx of students with different cultural backgrounds. The school has grown from approximately 300 students in 2000 to over 1,000 students today.

The school's mission statement makes it clear that academics are not the only priority:

“We are here as a united community to support and encourage each other to become positive, well-rounded, lifelong learners and successful leaders of the future.”

DV's changes in diversity and size motivated a change in their emphasis on character education. Stephen Anderson, DV's Character Day host and Assistant Principal (AP), shared that the school was struggling with disciplinary issues when he was hired. He shared, “We are a high-performing school. This school has always had fantastic teachers. These things weren't the problem. If we rewind nine years, what we saw was a history of disrespect from students. In my first year or two, I wrote over 900 discipline referrals. It was constant. I started reflecting on how in those first two years I was only dealing with the symptoms and not the cause. So I started to see what we could do.”

From there, Stephen did more research on the character development program that was in place. Its prescriptive qualities unintentionally produced the reverse effect, causing students to act out. After a year had passed and nothing had changed, Stephen and DV's principal at the time decided that they needed to do something differently. They began the next year with “Words of Wisdom” implementing – and iterating on – new strategies for developing character. Three or four years into integrating new activities, they started to see the culture change. Students began to embrace character because “they knew that this is just what we do at DV.”

Character education also began to influence school outcomes at DV. The discipline rate dropped dramatically – from 639 discipline referrals in 2007 to 149 in 2011. This dramatic decrease in discipline issues was the product of a robust approach to character education.

When Stephen learned about Let It Ripple's Character Day, he was excited by how the event aligned with DV's vision of character and the potential synergy with their approach. While he had many ideas about how to teach character, Stephen shared that Let it Ripple has the technical and artistic expertise to help him bring his ideas to life.

*“Let It Ripple takes my thoughts about character and finds a way to make them engaging through video and other means. Character Day brings all that we are doing together – and brought a rationale for a dedicated amount of time for character.”
With this mindset, the DV community truly maximizes all that Character Day has to offer.”*

–Stephen Anderson, Character Day Host & AP

Character Day Implementation

Providing Perspective: 30,000 Days Video

DV kicked off Character Day by showing all 1,120 students the 30,000 Days video at the same time, creating a unifying experience across the school. Students and staff found the video captivating. One teacher shared, “Not one student was distracted” and indeed, students were glued to the screen across classrooms.

“The video made me think that we have a short time to make a change and we should start doing it. Your character can help you reach your goals.”

—Diablo Vista Student

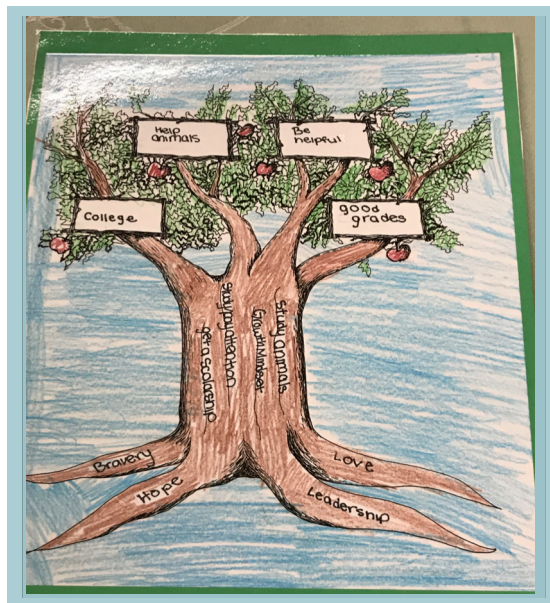
The DV community appreciated the history, empirical roots, and video length, among other aspects. Teachers shared that Let It Ripple “understood their audience,” and “were conscious of diversity.” The principal reported that “The video connects our students to individuals who are different from them – young, old, tattoos, different ethnicities. It was so inclusive. The transitions were beautiful. The kids paid attention.” Students shared that the video put things in perspective for them, increasing a sense of urgency for improving their character.

Sparkling Action: Tree Activity

Following the video, Diablo Vista translated the content of the 30,000 Days into action through a video that Stephen Anderson created. He wanted to ensure that the inspiration of the 30,000 Day video was paired with strategies for action and that the students understood what was necessary to attain their goals.

His video used the metaphor of a tree for connecting goals to actions to character strengths. It walked through these three parts, which he narrated in the video while teachers served as facilitators:

- ✓ **Step 1:** Students were instructed to think of a short- or long-term goal and write it down. The branches represented the students’ goals.
- ✓ **Step 2:** Students then identified actions they needed to take to achieve those goals. The trunks represented students’ actions.
- ✓ **Step 3:** Students then identified the character strengths using the Periodic Table of Character Strengths needed to execute their actions. The roots of the tree represented students’ chosen character traits.



Students set a variety of goals and identified corresponding actions and character strengths:

- ✓ “It helped us see what our goals were and what we need to achieve this year. Mine was to get into college and make an impact on someone’s life. I put to be determined and helpful.”
- ✓ “I wrote I want to be a singer and that I have to practice until I get there. I put determination. I put bravery and a bunch of other things.”
- ✓ “Mine was to play on the starting line-up for the high school football team. I wrote to practice sprinting. For character, I wrote determined. I can’t give up. I have to keep going.”
- ✓ “My goal was to jump 3’6” as a horseback rider. I said I have to be determined and responsible, and to have a positive attitude.”

“My class was engaged and everyone participated. The kids put the trees in their planners. It was clear for them how to achieve their goals.”

- Diablo Vista Teacher

The goal-setting activity taught students to think about what would be required to achieve their goals and why.

Stephen shared an example of why this type of thinking was critical: “We tell kids ‘No bullying.’ Ok, that’s great but if you just say that, you have to explain how to do that – with respect, empathy, the why. I really believe all of the things we ask, want and hope for our students really flow from core values. I believe that about myself as well. Our actions are a reflection of our values.”

Building Staff Investment: Thoughtful Preparation

Staff was intentionally involved in the preparation for – and execution of – Character Day. Prior to Character Day, Stephen met with the staff to present his initial idea for the activity and solicit candid feedback. He then used the feedback to develop the video that would guide teachers through the activity on Character Day. This level of intentionality cultivated staff investment. Not surprisingly, teachers reported that they found the activity “extremely effective.” Not only did it achieve its goals, but it also avoided putting added stress on DV’s teachers to plan their own character lessons. Stephen provided the lesson plan and corresponding materials, reducing teachers’ workload and ensuring consistency across classrooms.

Keeping Character in Sight: Visual Cues

Beyond the lesson, DV’s approach to character on Character Day utilized visual cues. Students decorated the school’s sidewalks with chalk drawings. They hung banners in the hallways and on the walls of classrooms. They even added messages to the school’s marquee and in their announcements.

If DV’s high valuation of character was not clear through their activities, it was certainly evident through the visuals displayed on their campus.



Year-Round Character Education at DV

In effort to sustain the energy from Character Day throughout the year, DV makes sure that they:

- ✔ **Speak a common language to ensure clear expectations about what character means at DV.**

Students shared insightful definitions of character like: “It is what you stand up for,” “It is what you can do right and wrong on a daily basis. You can do whatever you want. But your character shows if you’re doing the right or wrong thing,” and “Character determines who you are.” It was evident that these students had clarity around what was expected of them and all spoke similarly about these expectations. One teacher shared, “We define it in the behaviors you carry yourself in. I think the reason it works so well is that we all do it. We have common vocabulary and expectations. We all talk about it.” Another teacher replied, “Character is defined by all of our traits. It is the choices that you make that define who you are. We don’t just mold students’ choices do it by telling them ‘you should do this,’ we show it and live it.”

- ✔ **Maintain strong leadership, whose authenticity and commitment anchors the school in character.**

The leadership’s enthusiasm for integrating character development into the culture at DV was not just clear through their words but also through their actions. Their authenticity, thoughtfulness, and voices have inspired DV to take character education and make it their own. In addition to strong faculty leadership, DV also provides structure for their eighth grade students to develop their leadership abilities. Eighth grade students are selected to participate in a leadership class called “Where Everyone Belongs,” where they learn about character, and are expected to serve as role models for the younger students.

“I teach 6th-8th and this is my 3rd year teaching all three. It has been amazing to watch the 6th graders grow as we teach the vocabulary. By the end of October, they’ve got it down. All you have to do is ask, “Is that who you are? Is that who we are?” And then they think and understand their behavior within the context of integrity. They start with not knowing the language and how to behave -- not because they are 6th grade but because they are new to DV. By the end of 6th grade, they are correcting each other and say, “That is not who we are.”

-Teacher, DV

- ✔ **Foster a culture of character, not a character**

program. What started as a “Words of Wisdom” exercise grew into a culture of character. Character is prominently featured – literally and figuratively – on the walls in every classroom, on the sidewalk outside, on banners in the gym, in daily interactions among staff, students, leadership, and parents, featured during morning announcements, and even on the marquee when you enter the school. Over time, the school’s motto became, “We are DV. We are a campus of character.” But it is much more than a motto. As multiple stakeholders shared, DV does not have a character “program;” they have a culture, which integrates character into everything they do. As one teacher shared, “it is who we are.”

Impact of Character Day at DV

Impact of Character Day on Individuals

- ✔ **Character Day gave students time to consider how to make character actionable.** Students shared that the Character Day activity gave them the time necessary to think about which traits would support their goals and to create plans to put character into action in the service of their goals. As one student said, “You set small steps. Like today I want to help someone, and the next day I want to pick up trash.” This ensured that students did not forge ahead without recognizing the traits that could be leveraged in pursuit of their goals.
- ✔ **Character Day helped students gain perspective by opening their eyes to the importance of character.** Following the showing of the video, many of the students talked about how it shifted their perspective. The video reestablished the importance of character and spurred a sense of urgency in many of the students. One student shared, “A student came up to me and said it put it in perspective and he wanted to change all of his character traits.”

Not only did it help some students see the importance of character in reaching their future goals, it also helped them reflect on how far they have come since last Character Day. One student shared, “This year I looked back and saw a difference between last Character Day and this year. My goal was positive attitude and it has gotten a lot better. Now I have a new goal.” The 30,000 Days video encouraged students to be reflective and to step outside of themselves to see a bigger picture.

“When you have Character Day, it is like a new awakening. Like when you have New Years, you have a resolution. I feel like Character Day is like that - you assess yourself. What traits do you have that are very prominent in your life or that you can work on and use when you set a goal?”

-Student, DV

- ✔ **Character Day increased staff investment in character education.** Stephen shared that he prioritizes building staff ownership and that “part of choosing to participate in Character Day was to move my staff to something new.” He has tasked the staff with implementing DV’s Character Day over the past two years, and they have far exceeded expectations. When asked what a school without a character culture would need to establish to get started, the staff replied, “Staff ownership. Our administration trusts us. They take our suggestions. We own it.” Indeed Character Day has built trust between leaders and teachers, which impacts the culture in the school year-round.

Impact of Character Day on Community

- ✓ **Character Day holds the school community accountable to their collective values and inspires them to stay accountable as the year moves forward.** Leadership and teachers

highlighted the value of setting aside a day to focus on character. As one teacher shared, “It shows kids that it is important. And we broadcast to others that we are doing it and this is who we are.” This accountability to their kids, themselves, and the global character community reinforces the standard the DV community plans to uphold throughout the year. In the words of the principal, “We make it a priority.” As a result, it’s not surprising that DV students share that Character Day is core to the school’s mission.

“Character is the purpose of this school. Character Day builds us up and builds this school up.”

-Student, DV

- ✓ **Character Day – and character education more broadly – is particularly important for middle-schoolers.** Leadership talked about the importance of character education for middle schoolers. The principal shared, “For middle schoolers, fitting in is so important and they struggle to get beyond themselves. I think how kids struggle to become who they are brought me to education. The demands and challenges they place on social media. Parents want a lot for their children. Kids who are struggling and are able to make changes in their poor decision-making, those are the kids who are touched by this.” Adolescence can be a difficult time for young people, and the messages delivered on Character Day can be particularly influential at this critical developmental stage.
- ✓ **Character Day brought growth mindset to the forefront of the DV community.** Multiple stakeholders talked about the power of growth mindset. The principal of DV studied Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck’s work as part of a reading group and used growth mindset as an underlying philosophy in her approach to leadership. The DV staff shared that Character Day helps them remember that their ability to change their character is within their power.

“We want kids to get good grades but they need to be determined, to have a growth mindset, and to understand failure.”

-Teacher, DV

As one teacher reported, “We want kids to get good grades but they need to be determined, to have a growth mindset, and to understand failure.” When asked how they are teaching their students that they have the ability to change their character, one teacher shared, “It aligns exactly with the idea of growth mindset. We encourage failure and risk-taking. Failure is an attempt at learning.” It is easy to fall out of this mindset when caught up in the buzz of the school year; as a result, Character Day serves an important role in refocusing the community on their key values and approach to learning.