**Whole School Character Development: Increased Understanding, Awareness & Sense of “We”**

**[](http://westernbuddhistuniversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/mision_vision.jpg)**

**HUD 611: Moral Adults/Moral Children**

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***The Fractal Bridge School is a mostly middle class, alternative, independent high school near a large city that is extremely diverse in terms of ethnicity and tends to be liberal/left politically. Its mission is related to fostering multi-dimensional bridges within the school to greater growth, understanding, awareness, relationship building and character development.***

Dear Board of the Fractal Bridge School,

It has long been the sentiment of the community that we need to implement a deeper and comprehensive character education program into our school, an exciting challenge that we believe will improve not only the lives of our students but the school staff and community as well. Character education is not a new idea, but rather an idea as old as education itself. It is, perhaps, the school’s most important mission of a school as it is part of the very fabric of effective education. Schools always have been, and always will be, in the business of moral education (Damon, 1992).

It is said that in our daily lives we “swim in” values, ethics and morals-related contexts. As a community we must strive to develop a deep understandings of the nature of character education programs; they can range from very good to very bad depending on their structure, their level of integrity, and how they are implemented in practice. Admittedly many character education programs around the country are overly rote, indoctrinal, overly political and even damaging to the development of students. Our committee has researched these programs deeply and based on our findings we are quite optimistic about the spirit of our program. We are not so presumptuous, however, to think it is perfect; therefore, we request that you help us in the process of linking our extensive research with how it can most optimally play out in practice at this school. We intend for this program to be deep, authentic, effective, holistic, interconnected and successful. Once we formalize this, we intend to support you with obstacles you may encounter in carrying it out and we intend to sustain this culture of mutual support over time.

Some of the moral capacities we believe are important for a comprehensive and effective character education program are caring, kindness, empathy, respect, truthfulness, trust, integrity, consistency, authenticity, perspective-taking, critical thinking, healthy skepticism, ending racism and sexism, and promoting social justice.

Our character education program will focus on four main themes for the school in its mission to develop these capacities. Each theme includes suggested development of teacher abilities and examples of support that will be offered as teachers encounter inevitable obstacles.

1. ***Moral development of teachers and the entire school community***

When teachers engage in processes that enhance their own moral and ethical reasoning it trickles down the rest of the community and deeply affects the students. The everyday actions of ways of thinking modeled by teachers are deeply observed and noticed by students. Part of this entails the ability of teacher and the school staff to self-examine and make necessary changes which can be separated into two main abilities:

1. Understanding and transforming negative stereotypes of students. The ability to be able to see hidden, sometimes subtle stereotypes we all have of kids such as overly pessimistic, “dark,” or negative perception or youth. Many of us unconsciously hold damaging viewpoints that kids are passive receptacles to be filled, objects to be manipulated and fixed, lumps of clay to be molded, and/or “pets to be trained.” Increase awareness of how teachers reflexively tighten and create more rules when students transgress rather than reflecting on teacher’s roles is key. We will have a special PD on how teachers often subconsciously impose their own moral frameworks on students.
2. Teachers understanding their own “immunity to change systems.” Psychologist and educators like Rick Weissbourd and Bob Kegan show that adults are still in the process of developing their *own* character, and yet many teachers are, in the words of Kegan “immune to change.” Some of the largest obstacles teachers have are related to their inability to make their own changes. We will have PD that will help teachers understand their own “hidden commitment” in their classrooms which often, unbeknownst to them, reinforce the status quo and thwart their own and student’s moral development. More specifically, we will have PD which aims to help create a safe space for teachers to explore their own frailties and faults so that they move from being hidden to them to being known.

2.  ***Build stronger bridges throughout the school community: A culture of “we”***

1. Make sure each student is anchored in one solid relationship with an adult in whom they trust and confide (Weissbourd). School communities should monitor and determine which students are lonely, disconnected and slipping through the cracks. Teachers will supported by those teachers who are successful in how to build a bridge to students who are so scared of a mentoring relationship that they deflect and block efforts to reach out.
2. Teachers can help students improve relationships with their parents. Including parents is essential for fostering a deeper sense of school community. Teachers will be supported in how to make this transfer. Obstacles may be larger around getting fathers included. The school will ask for more participation from fathers and provide guidance to teachers in how to frame this effectively. Paid teacher home visits will demonstrate deeper commitment to connecting to student and parent’s homes. Successful teachers can support other teachers in how to navigate boundaries and deal with discomfort that may arise.
3. We will hold more whole-school events that include families. Examples are “Family Heritage Week” and “Family Hobby Week.” This will allow school to utilize diverse backgrounds of students and their families as well as to honor and acknowledge families. Support will be provided for teachers by school counselors on how to skillfully discuss student fears and anxieties related to bringing together family and school community. Teachers may encounter obstacles of parents who are disconnected from their children or have viewpoints against being involved in schools. Support will also be provided for how to structure events like Heritage Week so as to truly represent family’s ethnic traditions.
4. Service learning will be encouraged both inside and outside school. Teaching students that service learning can occur outside the school (homelessness, etc) *and* inside the school (lonely fellow students who is being bullied and need supportive friends) sends an implicit message that the school really is part of a larger society, that we can operate from a “both/and” context rather than an “either/or” context. It also sends a message to students that they can make a difference in the world. Effective service learning curriculum will be provided to support teachers in implementing and integrating effectively in a way that does not compromise the rest of the curriculum. For those teachers who need support in talking about these issues, support will be provided in how to explore with the students the *causes* of homelessness and the socio-political means of addressing problem. A representative from mayors office in charge of reducing homelessness will help our staff in developing the ability to take the perspective of homeless people and to increase our (and our student’s) development of the moral capacity of empathy.
5. Using cooperative learning groups to explore moral capacities related to understanding differences in ethnicity, gender, religion and socioeconomics. Support will be provided teachers in how to effectively use roll playing, and perspective taking in cooperative groups. Specific strategies in how to regularly change groups so as to give students an *experience* of diversity in these classes will be provided. Studies show that *co-creating* moral understandings is effective, and PD will be provided in this process, especially as it relates to eliciting trust and vulnerability between teachers and students.

3. ***Reduce “competitive curricula,” social exclusion and cliques***

1. Some overly competitive curricula encourages a climate that divides students into winners and losers that thwarts moral capacities of inclusion but also slows down cognitive learning. Teachers often design lessons that are oriented around “beating the other team.” While this is effective to an extent, it’s important for teachers to find inventive ways to encourage more collaborative contexts which promote a deeper understanding of our inherent connectedness. Because collaborative curriculum is often more complex and present teachers with obstacles, support will be provided in how to design these lessons. Curriculum connected to current events will be provided such as a unit promoting team building efforts to prevent deeper damage resulting from Japanese tsunami nuclear plant accident.
2. Reducing unhealthy social exclusion and cliques which divide the school. Teachers can make a big difference in helping students understand the negative impact of their prejudices and understanding it’s root cause. Teachers will be supported through PD such as the film *Class Divided* and recent films about bullying. We will bring in an expert on the topic of social exclusion and students cliques. We ask and encourage teachers to make more observations of informal student settings like hallways, lunch areas and the gym so as to get to know the realities of student’s lives. Sometimes teachers encounter obstacles related to fear that they are invading student’s spaces, so PD will also be available about how to navigate the fine line between thoughtfully/kindly engaging in other aspects of student life and invading their privacy.

4. ***Improved teaching techniques that foster intrinsic motivation and deeper moral exploration***

1. Teachers will employ more strategies for developing student intrinsic motivation. Excellent stories and case studies related to moral reasoning will be provided for teachers. Essential to developing intrinsic motivation is building the ability of teachers to empower students to *want* to grow as moral beings followed by specific ways to help *equip* their students with the internal resources to *act effectively* on that want.
2. Teachers will develop the ability to facilitate deeper analysis of the complexity of understanding certain behaviours*.*  For example, instruction about why lying is bad should be coupled with deep inquiry as to *why* lying is bad, such as considering what hurt, pain or damage is done *to others* when lying takes place. Teachers will also foster the ability to help students empathize with the fears that are usually at the *core* of the initial decision lie and the nature of the “vicous cycle” that often ensues after that first lie. As a support for teachers we will bring in an expert on the topic of root of lying who will do a PD using a film and matching curriculm called “Reversing the Vicious Cycle of Lying.”
3. Teachers are asked to develop the ability to foster deeper inquiry amongst their students by asking questions that encourage the student to explore particular values and choices more fully and deeply. For example, teachers can ask questions like “What does that value mean to you?” “Have you thought of an alternative to that choice?” “How did you come to adopt that value?” and “How do you feel about the value?” Some teachers run into obstacles around asking these questions because they seem to contradict styles of teacher training. We will provide support with a remarkable expert who explains how to synthesize one’s own strengths and unique style while still using these effective modes of inquiry.
4. Teachers should develop the ability to help students widen context of their inquiry through, for example, sentence stems like “the person I want to be is…” “what really matters in life is…” “in my heart of hearts I believe that…” “if you really knew me you would know that…” and “if I were on my death bed I would want to share with the world…” Support will be provided in how to incorporate these wider questions effectively into other classroom narratives so as to enrich moral imagination and reasoning.

I’m honored to be on this journey with all of you. Thank you and let’s now enter into a collaborative question and answer period about how to collaboratively cultivate character growth in our community.

Director Scott Hannon