

5

Character Education at Scale The Positivity Project Raleigh, North Carolina

Great teachers...have not lifted human quality primarily by thundering against sin; they have lifted it by heightening the positive conception of life's dignity and value.

~ **Harry Emerson Fosdick**

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

~ **Martin Luther King Jr.**

Think of the last time you were in an environment where people truly knew one another, and felt known. Then imagine an entire middle school in a socioeconomically mixed urban neighborhood marked by this atmosphere of mutual understanding and intimacy, where you were known first by the content of your character. Such is the blooming reality at Carroll Magnet Middle School in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Five years ago, Carroll was chaotic. Students wandered the halls with no direction or zeal, seriously underperforming and getting into fights. Parents were yanking kids out in droves, and only those with no other choice—children from refugee families, the 50 percent who qualified for free and reduced lunch—were sticking around.

Then Elizabeth MacWilliams became principal in 2014. The driven, bounce-in-her-step go-getter began visiting homes, riding school buses, and inviting families to become involved with the school. She built trust, and an awareness that a new regime was in place at the middle school. “Beyond the instructional leadership and managerial responsibilities,” says MacWilliams, “principals are charged with being hustlers, advocates, and mentors.”

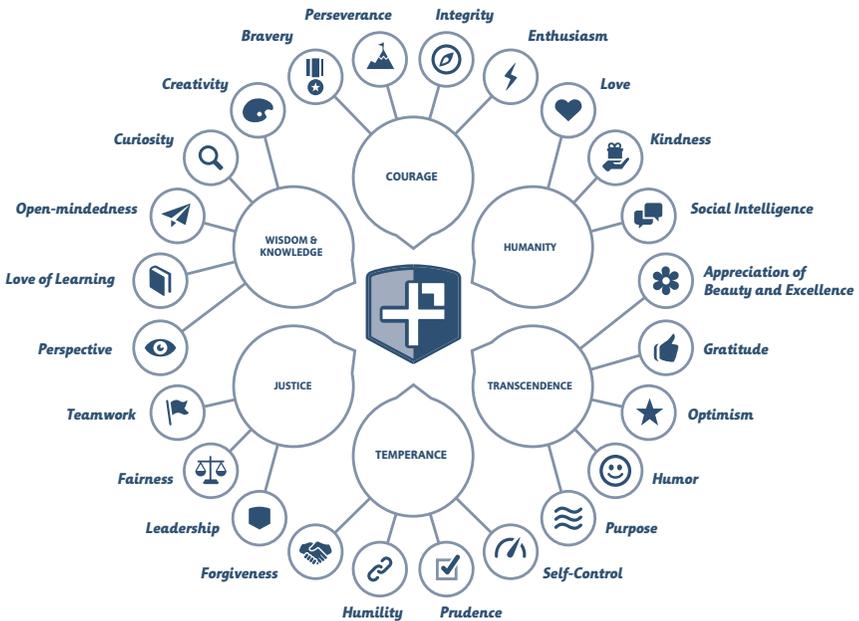
And the new leader did more than just inject energy. The most visible new element at Carroll Middle School is the emphasis on character-building. Encouragement of constructive behavior is enshrined on stairwells, classroom doors, and teacher nametags—and reflected in the daily manners of students.

These lessons and exhortations come from The Positivity Project, a program founded in 2015 by Mike Erwin. He is a retired military officer and trained expert in the field of positive psychology that was developed by Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman in the 1990s. Erwin’s Positivity Project is an easy-to-use, cost-effective character-building tool now being tried in 494 schools around the country, Carroll being one.

It begins by establishing a shared vocabulary of moral sentiments. After studying all the major religions and philosophical traditions, then conducting many surveys and behavioral experiments, Peterson and Seligman distilled out six virtues that have been shared in practically all cultures across three millennia. Under each of these major virtues, the researchers further specified three to five “character strengths,” of similarly proven value across time and place, that feed that outcome. Here are the six virtues, and related character strengths, as codified by The Positivity Project:

CHARACTER EDUCATION AT SCALE

- Wisdom (perspective, love of learning, open-mindedness, curiosity, creativity)
- Courage (bravery, perseverance, integrity, enthusiasm)
- Humanity (love, kindness, social intelligence)
- Justice (fairness, teamwork, leadership)
- Temperance (self-control, prudence, humility, forgiveness)
- Transcendence (purpose, gratitude, optimism, humor, appreciation of beauty & excellence)



(Peterson and Seligman, 2004)

The 24 Character Strengths that Positivity Project schools invite each student, teacher, custodial staffer, and administrator to consider within themselves and in others.

Erwin had lots of firsthand experience as a leader. He was a high-level athlete, trained as a West Point cadet, deployed as an intelligence officer for special forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and later founded one of today's best new charities for veterans—Team Red,

White & Blue. When he attended graduate school at the University of Michigan and studied with Chris Peterson (whose favorite saying was “other people matter”), Erwin became fascinated with the six virtues and 24 strengths identified under positive psychology, and immersed himself in the field.

For Erwin, character is more than exemplary actions or individual achievement. “It’s a broad and complex family of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are recognized and encouraged across cultures for the values they bring to people and society.” The Positivity Project teaches that character is the aggregate of traits, carried around to different degrees inside each of us, that allow a society to prosper. No single trait should overwhelm the others; to flourish, people need to keep balance among the two dozen valuable qualities.

Erwin has created a set of tools that make it simple for principals and teachers to bring this knowledge into schools. Once a school’s principal decides it will become “a Positivity Project school,” everyone in the building—students, teachers, and all staff—takes a 15-minute test called the Values In Action Character Strengths Survey. The VIA survey was developed by Peterson and Seligman with funding from the Mayerson Family Foundation. It asks you to agree or disagree with statements like, “I never quit a task before it is done,” “I like to think of new ways to do things,” “I rarely hold a grudge,” and “Even when candy or cookies are under my nose, I never overeat.” There are separate versions for youth and for adults. After you’ve finished, you get a ranked list of your 24 character strengths.

It’s genuinely fun, yet grounded in social science. “When I took the survey and it showed my top strengths, I was like, ‘Wow, that’s definitely me,’” says Victoria Cooke, an eighth-grader. “And when other students tell me their results, I often think, ‘Yes, I see that.’”

Character training in action

At Carroll, time is spent during the first week of each new school year taking the test and discussing results in a way that encourages collective reflection. Students are asked, Who are you? What do you bring to the table? Why are we all here? After that school-wide launch, all students participate in a daily, full-year 30-minute class, where they learn how to develop personal strengths (and blunt weaknesses). Then they are encouraged to have discussions in their lunch group, which carries the lessons over to middle-school social life.

“What’s hard for you to control?” asks Ms. Geter in a pre-lunch session with seventh graders. “Anger,” says Josiah. “Anger and laughter,” offers Adonis. “Irritability,” answers Lauren. As the kids take turns admitting their struggles, the other kids steal glances at one another with nods and knowing chuckles, enjoying the act of recognizing a gift or flaw in their classmates.

“Irritability, that’s a good one,” says Geter, a corrections officer turned teacher. “Do we all know what it means to be irritable?” In this fashion, the Carroll students zero in on each of the 24 character strengths for two weeks each.

“Why is it important for us to have self-control?” Geter asks her classroom. “Well, without self-control the majority of the human race might be dead by now,” replies Gretchen.

“True,” responds the teacher with a chuckle. “When I was a corrections officer, that prison was filled with a whole lot of emotional people. And they’d just explode. They didn’t think. They went from zero to one hundred.”

The Positivity Project gives students new ways of understanding their emotions. And there seems to be little shame among them in acknowledging what they need to work on. Without some mechanism like this, “kids aren’t able to really articulate what it is that’s driving their discomfort or impulsivity,” suggests MacWilliams. She believes the program gives troubled students in particular a language for making sense of frustrations.

At the end of her session, Geter asks the students why they are working on these traits. “Because other people matter!” the class shouts in unison. The kids clearly enjoy the process of growing in self-awareness.

A few years after becoming a Positivity Project school, Carroll middle school is almost unrecognizable. From a dwindling population of 600 students its headcount is now up to 1,003 and counting. MacWilliams has created new mentoring opportunities that allow students to spend time with local professionals. And while qualitative gains are being made in student character, quantitative academic gains have rocketed alongside, with a 35-point leap in the proficiency rate in math and double-digit spikes in other subjects.

Value and use

The Positivity Project can help students overcome divisions centered on things like race and class, putting the focus instead on a person’s character. When Mike Erwin asked Carroll students during a recent tour of the

school to talk about the gifts and challenges of their diversity as a student body, kids answered, “We’re super diverse—my strengths are appreciation for beauty and excellence, humility, and spirituality. His top strengths are bravery, teamwork, and perseverance.”

“At my old school,” says eighth-grader Victoria Cooke, “we were all racially divided. You stayed in your spot. That’s how I grew up. That’s how most schools work. When I came to Carroll everyone was nice to each other. Before, most of my friends were black and I hadn’t really dealt with different races. Now, I have whole types of different friends.”

When I asked some Carroll students, “What do you find to be the most important aspect of a person?” they unanimously answered: “The personality.”

“My old school was nothing like this,” says sixth-grader Henry Foster. “Here people talk, relate. If you see someone with the same strengths you have, it comes out.”



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“At my old school the teachers and students were never in real relationships,” says Henry. “One of my teachers had a kid, and because she didn’t wear a ring, when I finally found out I was like, ‘Huh? You have a kid?’ It was just, ‘I’m the teacher, you’re the student. That’s how it is.’ There was no learning anything personal about each other.”

A big question is, does deepening self-knowledge, and knowledge of others, actually lead to better education? To win over today’s educators who have been trained to protect self-esteem and individual expression, and to avoid dwelling on students’ weaknesses, The Positivity Project uses the language of “strength” rather than flaw. The strengths scorecard allows every student to be “exceptional.”

But talking about personal strengths all the time doesn’t necessarily mend personal weaknesses, which is one essential role of education. How much accountability and expectation of difficult self-reform is built into this process? “We’re supposed to be not just focusing on our top five,

but also on our bottom five,” acknowledges MacWilliams. But she argues that “our greatest faults often link to our strengths,” and “just knowing these things about ourselves can help us approach adversity or challenge.”

One justification for The Positivity Project’s heavy investment of time and classroom energy in emotional exploration is the expectation that this will then make other priorities—academic learning, social peace, etc.—more attainable. “My first year here,” recalls MacWilliams, “fights would break out and kids would circle around and be interested, instead of trying to help. Now, I see kids really sticking up for each other, trying to protect one another.”

MacWilliams acknowledges that Carroll Middle School hasn’t solved all of its problems. But she’s satisfied that “The Positivity Project has become part of the kids’ language, part of their coping mechanism. It helps them think, ‘Wait a minute, this is who I am, and I can always reach into that toolbox when I need it.’”

Positivity Project founder Mike Erwin thinks the program can be useful in thousands of schools. Already it is operating in 494 schools and touching 340,000 students. But his venture is still young, and small—a full-time staff of three, plus Erwin and his co-founder Jeff Bryan. And before they will put funds behind it, many philanthropists want more data on results than this four-year-old venture is so far capable of providing.

A couple of foundation representatives described to me why they took a chance on Erwin, and would encourage others to do the same. “Part of the appeal of The Positivity Project is Mike himself,” explains Meg O’Connell of the Allyn Family Foundation in Syracuse, New York. Allyn invested \$60,000 into general operations for the nonprofit over two years. “He has such a solid reputation as a motivational coach and leader, and what he’s brought from his military experience to these concepts is impressive. He’s done his homework, and can articulate a vision for how this program can change schools.”

What attracted O’Connell, and the schools that have so far experimented with The Positivity Project, “was that it wasn’t going to cost a lot of money to implement. Schools need the staff to commit, and they need to sign an agreement. But beyond that, it’s quick.” The “character-in-a-box” design of the project, with user-friendly curriculum modules and training for teachers, were designed specifically to make it easy to expand the program nationally.

The Heinz Endowments in Pittsburgh has also been a funder, putting up the money to bring the effort to eight schools in Pittsburgh.

“Too often, foundations like ours have evaluated school reform solely by looking at student achievement and academic performance, ignoring things like social-emotional learning,” says Stanley Thompson of the Endowments. He says Heinz sees the value of programs that help students think of others before themselves, that help them become better citizens. “When you bring those things into the school, it can spill out into the larger community. That what was exciting to me about The Positivity Project.”

The consulting firm McKinsey & Co heard about The Positivity Project and started talking with leaders at the partner schools about its formula. The firm assessed the organization's mission, vision and operations. McKinsey is sufficiently enthused that it's offering these contributions to The Positivity Project on a pro-bono basis.

McKinsey, Thompson, and O'Connell are anxious to see how wide a range of schools Erwin can succeed in. “The effort has been successful in our central New York region,” O'Connell says, “but in more of the suburban school districts. I know he's also done well in North Carolina. I'd love to test it in some of our urban school districts where the need is greater. It's hard because the teachers are so busy, and the urban challenges so stiff.”

“The challenge for Mike is to convince school leaders with data that when you start with the social-emotional learning needs of kids, then you're going to have successes in the academic realm which can't be won otherwise. He needs to persuade them that this is a foundational piece.”

That's a crucial issue that must be addressed not only by this effort but by any character-building effort that demands school time. Nonetheless, The Positivity Project is betting on their own theory winning. It's up to donors to figure out how to assess the relational foundations such that these become the starting point for the academic success and whole-person development everyone wants to see.