

SHAPING CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

The world's values were making inroads with their children.
So Lutheran educators and parents in Seward, Neb.,
came up with a program for changing that.

by Lisa A. Bennett

Reprinted with permission from the May, 2001 issue of The Lutheran Witness

At many American dinner tables, this is a too-familiar scenario: One or more chairs is empty, a carried-out, ordered-in or heated-up meal is consumed at a pace dangerous to digestion, and whatever hurried conversation does take place is through mouths full of food.

"Parents are in a rush, kids are going off in different directions," said Dottie Huebschman, a second-grade teacher at St. John Lutheran School in Seward, Neb. "There's not enough time together at the dinner table to talk about the day and reinforce our Christian values."

But that's not the only troublesome trend Huebschman and her fellow teachers combat.

Music, movies, fashion and advertising flood our lives. Lurid images and worse are just a mouse-click away. Television programs promote characters like Bart Simpson who, in the name of humor, continually demeans his dad, teachers, and principal.

"People think it's funny and kids model after that," said Jan Yung, formerly a fifth-grade teacher at St. John and now principal at Lutheran South Academy in Houston, Texas. "I've been teaching for 32 years, and I see more casualness toward adults today."

Liz Obermueller, a seventh-and-eighth grade teacher at St. John, added, "We are a very visual society. That's how it's all promoted. The world's values are not our values. We are constantly faced with the dilemma of being in the world but not of the world."

A nurturing approach

In 1997, Huebschman, Obermueller and Yung participated in a project titled "Shaping Christian Character" with the mission to equip families for the ongoing battle with the world for the hearts and minds of their children.

St. John School has a "whole-child philosophy," which addresses six parts to every human being: spiritual, intellectual, social, emotional, physical and creative.

"Our responsibility is to nurture all parts," said David Mannigel, principal at St. John. "Children are gifted differently by God, and we don't want to shortchange any student."

In evaluating the "whole-child philosophy" several years ago, St. John School surveyed the parents of its 350-plus students.

The parents who responded supported most of the school's programs, but voiced concern over the "social" child. In response, the St. John faculty began to develop a program to improve student social skills.

That effort received a boost when several faculty members attended a workshop—"Character Development/Values Education"—sponsored by the Nebraska Network for Educational Renewal, a consortium of private and state universities.

"It provided stimulating discussion and ideas," said Janell Uffelman, assistant professor of education at Concordia University, Seward, who also attended the two-day session. "We selectively chose elements from it and added to them to create a unique program."

After Uffelman agreed to collaborate on the project, St. John formed its Character Development Education committee of Mannigel, four faculty members, two students and two parents.

"We stressed parent-student involvement in order that the program reflect this community and culture," Uffelman said.

In August 1997, the committee sponsored the first of several Parent-Teacher League meetings. More than 100 parents turned out to tackle the job of identifying five character traits they would like to see more often displayed by their children.

Yung recalled the parents brainstorming like crazy, with flip-chart paper flying as fast as the ideas.

"It was obvious the same values were being mentioned over and over again," she said.

After ironing out the semantics, five core character traits were identified: respect, responsibility, compassion, integrity and reverence.

With this parent-written framework in hand, faculty members plunged into their portion of the project. The teachers analyzed what each trait looked like at the various grade levels, established goals and selected activities to help students reach their goals.

"We were able to finish the book in a two-week blitz," Yung said.

Through a grant from the LCMS School Ministry Department, "Shaping Christian Character" was printed the summer of 1998 and distributed to LCMS schools.

Launching the lessons

St. John School introduced "Shaping Christian Character" in the fall of 1998 by shooting off five rockets for each core trait—in a kickoff held at Concordia University's football stadium.

The “launch” year stressed a common-language emphasis by teaching the terms within the context of daily life. Students learned to think of each character trait beyond merely an abstract term.

Using Noah and Jonah, Yung’s class performed a play contrasting how these Old Testament characters handled responsibility. While Jonah fled, Noah dutifully followed God’s commands, hammering away at the task of ark-building.

Obermueller’s class adopted two small children from Third-World countries through Compassion International, a program that provides needy children with food, clothing, education, shelter, health care and Christian training in the name of Jesus. “As the little ones grow up and the relationship becomes extended, the issue of compassion will have been brought home.” Obermueller said.

In a school-wide effort, upper-grade students became “chapel buddies” with lower-grade students to serve as models of reverence in chapel services.

It didn’t take long for one of Laura Asplin’s first graders to catch on. While observing another student in chapel, Asplin said, the student “nudged me and whispered in my ear, ‘He’s not showing reverence.’ I thought to myself, these kids are getting it.”

Starting at home

Asplin also spearheaded “The Heart of the Home,” a monthly newsletter highlighting practical ideas to help parents teach the five character traits at home.

“I received good feedback from the parents,” she said. “Schools can do a lot, but if it is not being modeled at home, it’s not as effective.”

Uffelman said she envisions increasing parental involvement in the program by providing parents with additional resources and fellowship opportunities. Many parents are seeking guidance, she said. “If parents want help in parenting and developing discipleship skills, we should address that need as part of our ministry.”

“We acknowledge the current condition of society. Parents recognize the responsibility exists primarily in the home, but want to work as a partner with the school, she added.

Laura Jostes, mother of three St. John boys, agreed and spoke with passion about her responsibility as a parent.

“Kids learn about life and God primarily from watching their parents, she said. “Whatever the school does, what comes out loud and clear is what kids hear and see at home. As parents, we can’t forsake what God has called us to do.

“Jesus Christ is the One we’re accountable to, and by His grace and mercy we become His likeness in the world. Apart from Him we can do nothing. The school and parents have to be grounded in that.”

Curriculum integration

During the 1999-2000 school year, St. John faculty members began integrating the “Shaping Christian Character” program into the overall curriculum.

“It’s not just one more thing to teach,” Uffelman stressed. “The teachers are more deliberately teaching, modeling and practicing the traits on a daily basis within the existing curriculum.”

Obermueller thinks the fruit of “Shaping Christian Character” may take some time to ripen.

“For some kids, we may never know the results unless we see what their life is like ten years from now,” she said. “Actually, that often happens. Our relationships with students extend beyond when they leave us.”

But, for now, she said, “it’s fun to see kids making good choices.”

For more information: To receive a copy of “Shaping Christian Character” on disk, contact Concordia University, Seward, Assistant Professor of Education Janell Uffelman, (800) 535-5494, Ext. 7318; e-mail: juffelman@seward.cune.edu —Ed.

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