

**SITE OBSERVATION OF  
MAPLEWOOD-RICHMOND HEIGHTS  
HIGH SCHOOL**

Scott Jones  
Ed Pysch 6445  
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Imagine working at a high school that is the very definition of dysfunctional. Now, imagine being the principal of the said high school. Your wife, wanting to see the new high school where you work, drops by for a visit. However, during the visit a gang fight breaks out in the hallway. The only way you know you can guarantee your wife's safety is to lock her in your office as you now put your life on the line to break up another fight. This is the story of Maplewood-Richmond Heights High School when Pat McEvoy arrived as the assistant principal in the mid-1990s. The school was a mess. The school had to forfeit a Friday night football game because a knife fight broke out in the stands and the school could no longer guarantee the safety of the visiting school. This was not just an urban school with problems; this was an urban school that was an example of everything that could go wrong in public education.

In October 2005, I made my second visit to this high school to observe the character education program that McEvoy implemented for the dysfunctional school. Many, including McEvoy himself, credit the program for the school's turnaround. My first visit came in April 2004 and I came away from that site visit impressed with the school culture that had been created at the high school. This visit was no different. The school I visited on these two occasions is not the same school that appeared on an unofficial list at the University of Missouri-Columbia in the spring of 1995 recommending graduates not seek employment at the listed schools.

After attending the Sanford McDonnell Leadership Academy for Character Education, McEvoy realized that the implementation of the character education program was the key to turn around the school. What followed is a great story on the importance of leadership in developing a school-wide character education program. This, of course

is nothing new. Many leading experts on character education have theorized and documented the importance of leadership in developing a strong character education program (DeRoche, 2001; Williams, 2003; Nance, 2003). The triumphs and setbacks encountered during Maplewood-Richmond Heights' struggle to change the entire way the school functioned support these findings.

With the knowledge of the school's turnaround I had gained from my first visit, I approached my second visit to examine the inner workings of how the character education program works at the school and to look for ideas that could help put the school I work at on a better track for quality character education. I had initially planned to use the *Character Education Quality Standards* published by the Character Education Partnership (2003) to evaluate the program and then use this evaluation to compare practices done in my high school, and even to practices I use in my own classroom. However, as the visit progressed, the importance of great leadership became the dominant theme I kept coming back to in my notes. Pat McEvoy's commitment to developing character education as the cornerstone for creating a positive school climate at Maplewood-Richmond Heights High School is the reason that his school is a great character education model for the St. Louis area.

The first example of the importance of McEvoy's leadership can be found in the overall structure of the program created by the school. While the program used by MRH is the work of McEvoy, he allowed the program to develop beyond his control, which he credits for the overall success of the program. He created a leadership team of teachers and students to develop the overall program. Again, the leadership component comes into play at this point. The school district had no money and was essentially bankrupt,

which the team had no money to invest in the program. Using only professional development funds, McEvoy allowed the team to develop the program as lessons to be taught in advisory periods, which had been implemented by McEvoy in order to develop the program. The team developed a monthly theme and then created lessons around the theme. For example, the team would pick abstinence as a theme and then develop lessons around the topic as it concerned sex, friends that are bad for me, activities that hurt my goals and substances that hurt me. After an initial introductory phase, students then began to teach the lessons in their advisories. This development is what McEvoy credits for the major turning point in the development of the school culture he looked to create. Once students took ownership of the school's culture, they created an atmosphere at the school that they could be proud of having at their high school.

The development of the program is not the only way that McEvoy's leadership was essential for the creation of this program at MRH. He also hired staff that supported his character education ideas. After nine years as the principal of the school, he has now hired over 80 percent of the teachers at the school. In order to help train these teachers on how the school does character education, McEvoy would pair teachers with strong student advisory leaders so that the teachers only had to observe this program. Even more impressive than letting students train new teachers, McEvoy was not afraid to remove staff that hindered the program. In a move that is rare among principals at the high school level, he was able to remove or force out teachers, despite their tenured status, which is the obstacle most principals do not want to challenge. Even rarer, McEvoy was willing to take action against teachers that he hired and proved to not support character education. Without this strong leadership, those teachers who would

have been major obstacles to the program's success were not around to remain a problem. McEvoy created a professional culture that did not center on if they would support his program. Instead, the culture created by McEvoy demanded how much you would support this program.

The strongest example of how important leadership is to a strong character education initiative has nothing to do with McEvoy. After many successful years of changing MRH High School from a violent, dysfunctional school to one that became a local model of the qualities of character education, the district hired a new superintendent in 2000. Because she had not been around to the horrors of the mid-1990s, Linda Henke did not see the need to focus so heavily on character education. Instead, she allocated most district resources, especially professional development money, to raising standardized test scores in the district. This new mandate forced McEvoy to use money that had been going to develop character education expertise within his school to go to developing strategies to improve test scores. While character education did not go away, it was still done by students in the advisories, it could no longer be the priority of the high school.

Since it was not top priority anymore, teachers began to move away (i.e. not stressing the school wide themes in their classes) from the intentional development of positive character traits within the classroom. McEvoy admits that test scores needed more emphasis, but felt that since the new superintendent and most of his current staff, had not been in the district to experience the changes that had taken place, most felt there was no longer a need to have such a strong emphasis on something that was not a problem. However, discipline problems began to rise, and some of the same symptoms

that had been present when McEvoy first arrived began to develop again. While they were not anywhere near the level of the mid-1990s, McEvoy began to plead with Henke that there was still a need for character education. In an example of two leaders compromising in order to reach differing goals, McEvoy and Henke decided to participate in a program that promised to develop better test scores and good character traits. The new “Vision Management” program for MRH went into effect at the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year. While teachers currently teach the program at the high school, McEvoy expects students to take over very soon, which will allow, he believes, even greater character education to be done at MRH High School.

If you want to know how students really act, try to observe them when they think teachers and principals are not watching. During the school day, you can see this occur in the hallways during passing time and at lunch. Observing MRH High School during these two times, I can tell something different is happening everyday at this school. As I entered the building, a young student, probably a freshman, held the door open for me, and sensing that I was a visitor to his school, asked me if I needed help finding where I needed to go. During passing times, a level of respect for each other is very noticeable. The general atmosphere of the lunchroom, the bane of every high school principal, is one of respect and enjoyment. As I sat with McEvoy during a lunch period, he focused on the conversation at the table and was not worried about anything going on around him, which probably could not happen at most other high schools. Things are different at MRH High School and character education is the reason, and not just token character education. Instead, a deeply committed and ingrained character education program developed by students and teachers and overseen by a committed principal. Anything less would not

have worked in the dramatic change of school culture that occurred at MRH High School. In 1995, I graduated with my teaching degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia and applied to almost every St. Louis school, except those on that informal list that circulated around the College of Education. Today, I am willing to bet that MRH High School is no longer on that list. Instead, the school belongs on a new list. The list that congratulates schools for outstanding job they do at educating the whole child.

## REFERENCES

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