

Leading in the Middle:  
A Tale of Pro-social Education Reform in Two Principals  
and Two Middle Schools

Marvin W. Berkowitz

Center for Character and Citizenship – University of Missouri-St. Louis

Amy Johnston

Francis Howell Middle School

Kristen Pelster

Ridgewood Middle School

There are no leader-proof schools. Great leaders will improve schools and lousy leaders will kill them. That is why we have offered the Sanford N. McDonnell Leadership Academy in Character Education (LACE) for the past 13 years. LACE evolved from the work of CHARACTER*plus* ([www.characterplus.org](http://www.characterplus.org)) as an advocacy and professional development resource in the St. Louis region. After about a decade of such work, its founder, Sandy McDonnell, and its Executive Director, Linda McKay, realized that their efforts would benefit from two additions: (1) a resident scholar with expertise in character development and education; and (2) a more direct and impactful focus on principals. So the Sanford N. McDonnell Professorship in Character Education was created at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and Marvin W. Berkowitz was hired to fill that slot. In parallel, LACE was created and was established as a core responsibility of the McDonnell Professor.

From its origins, LACE was designed as a year-long cohort experience for principals in a geographic region (in this case, St. Louis) to help them both understand and lead the implementation of quality, effective character education. Funding came from a variety of sources, including the McDonnell endowment and various corporate and foundation gifts. Each year one or two cohorts of approximately 30 school leaders come together in January for a full year of learning and planning around character education in general and as applied specifically to their schools and/or districts.

Throughout its history, LACE has used a once-a-month full day workshop format for the core of this endeavor. However, there has always been a written assignment component as well, although it has evolved markedly over time, and now constitutes a critical component as it has morphed into a collaborative leadership tool and vehicle for mentoring the participants in their professional growth.

The educational philosophy of LACE is that:

- The most powerful way to promote pro-social development in students is through whole school reform.
- This depends highly, but not exclusively, on the transformation of school culture (including mission, norms, practices, policies, governance structures, etc.)
- The leader of a school has the greatest leverage on school culture as a lead role model, social engineer, administrator, etc.
- Effective comprehensive character or pros-social education ultimately requires a particular kind of leader; i.e., a servant leader, a character education expert and advocate, an empowerer, and a moral role model.

The pedagogy of LACE relies on a few key strategies:

- **Quality professional development.** A series of full-day workshops by leading experts in character education (some of the more frequent workshop leaders are Marvin W. Berkowitz, Hal Urban, Phil Vincent, Avis Glaze, Tom Lickona, Clifton Taulbert, Ron Berger, Charles Elbot, and Maurice Elias).
- **Reflective curriculum.** A monthly curriculum of collaboratively written responses to structured reflection tasks.
- **Nurtured collaborative leadership.** We require each participant to form a stakeholder-representative leadership team for character education and to craft the monthly written reflections with that team.
- **Expert Critical feedback.** The Directors of LACE read each participant's monthly reflection and provide detailed customized written feedback. This feedback is intended to be (1) shared with the leadership team and (2) then collaboratively applied to revising the originally submitted assignment.

- **Site planning.** The curriculum of monthly assignments is designed to build the foundation for the final LACE requirement, a site-specific implementation plan which is submitted as a final report at graduation.
- **Peer modeling.** We have learned that educators want to hear from their peers who have been there and done it. We do this in two ways. First, we take the cohort to a full day of site visits to National Schools of Character. Second, we partner with CHARACTER*plus* to bring principals from other NSOCs around the country to St. Louis to present to LACE (and other educators).

Over the past 13 years, nearly 500 educators have gone through the LACE year. It is not easy and we routinely lose 20-25% of the participants during the LACE year, generally because they were unable to fulfill the LACE obligations, for a wide variety of reasons. When school leaders successfully complete LACE, there is no guarantee either that they “got it” or that they will successfully implement “it.” Leading comprehensive school reform is not easy, and even if one does it well, it takes more time than most would want. Enthused LACE graduates frequently move too fast and need to be encouraged to slow down before they burn out their staffs. Nevertheless, when they do it and do it right and do it long enough, the results can be transformative. When Amy Johnston, the principal of Francis Howell Middle School graduated from LACE in 2001, Berkowitz had to tell her to slow down and that it takes about 7 years to fully transform a school to excellence. She blanched at that long-range forecast, but listened, and seven years later (2008) was named a National School of Character, with impressive long-term upward trends in student behavior and academic achievement. In fact, if we start counting after LACE had been existence for 7 years and look at the following time span (i.e., 2005-2011), there have been 23 schools and 3 districts in the St. Louis region that have been named NSOC and are led by LACE graduates. That is approximately one quarter of all NSOC schools and districts in the entire country during that time span. Let’s take a quick look at just 2 examples.

## **Francis Howell Middle School (St. Charles, MO)**

Francis Howell Middle School is a large (850 students) traditional middle school (grades 6-8, with a homeroom/advisory-liked structure and academic teams) in a large suburban school district. It has a history of success and draws from a largely suburban, privileged, mostly Caucasian community. This led, as is common in such schools, to a sense of complacency and hence inertia. Amy Johnston, who has served as principal at FHMS since 1998 (after serving as counselor and assistant principal there for 5 years), felt as if she was treading water. At this point it was suggested she apply for LACE, something with which she was unfamiliar. In fact, character education was not on her radar at all. Serendipity led her to LACE in 2002 and inspiration took over her pedagogical and administrative soul. So, after a year of learning about leadership, comprehensive school reform, and character education, in 2003 she began a remarkable journey with her school and predominantly with her staff (to hear it from their mouths, see their video at <http://fhm.fhsd.k12.mo.us/> - "Video about us").

Amy, as is common for many principals, well.....went off like a rocket. It is not uncommon that a principal (or other educator) discovers a new vision and becomes so enthused that they shift into high gear without realizing that those around her do not share that fervor and will not simply start sprinting toward that vision alongside the new "prophet." Amy is a high energy person and started following this dead end path. One afternoon in June about a decade ago when Amy called Berkowitz, all excited because she had just been offered by a school district administrator \$20,000 of government funding that was about to expire. She wanted to apply this to her nascent character education initiative and had to spend the money in short order, so she had made a budget and faxed it to me. Berkowitz read it, called her back, and told her to tear it up. It was all about buying "things." Instead, he told her to spend every dime on her staff; invest in the staff. She did and it was turning point for the school. She brought 17 staff to Berkowitz's 5 day summer institute in character education (it remains the largest group from one school to ever attend the Institute). They spent 5 days immersing in character education, becoming a team, and planning for the upcoming school year.

Amy astutely and quickly realized that she needed to slow down, listen to her staff, and slowly build their interest and commitment. For example, she started by proposing to follow the experts. The Character Education Partnership ([www.character.org](http://www.character.org)) suggests starting by identifying a set of core ethical values around which to build the initiative. When Amy suggested that they adopt ethical values, the staff became very uncomfortable. She suggested they adopt the virtues that Tom Lickona (1991) had identified, but they remained skeptical. So she wisely dropped that and spent more than a year building staff relations, exploring their own values, and only then slowly building a school community consensus around values. In her words, “Before I could ask our students to respect one another, I had to point out to my staff that we too had work to do. We had to discuss things like gossip, cliques and disrespect among the adults before we could lead those conversations with our students, and this is tough stuff! All character education begins in the mirror which is why so many people reject it!” (Johnston, in press). As she describes it, she and they were daunted by the proposition of “teaching character” because that meant looking in the mirror at their own character. They painstakingly, as a staff and as individuals grappled with this challenge.

It wasn't until the third year of this journey, after having built an appropriate staff culture, studied character education, and committed to this vision, that they began to apply the Character Education Partnership's *11 Principles of Effective Character Education* framework. They adopted four core ethical values: respect, responsibility, compassion, honesty. Over many years these have been developed in a variety of ways. They are all over the school and website. They have collaboratively created a table of expectations applying each of the values to each of the domains of school life. For example, being responsible in the cafeteria means “bring your own money for lunch, clean up after yourself, sit in assigned seat, pay back charges in a timely manner” and being compassionate in the hallways means “say ‘excuse me’, pick up trash, honor personal space, engage in appropriate conversations.” They also have collaboratively created a rubric of levels of each of the four values.

Beyond, building a shared commitment and understanding, first among the staff and later among all school stakeholders, Amy focused strongly on building positive relationships across the school community. She reworked the normal staff meetings to allow smaller group time with her. She initiated a once per week 20 minute advisory-like class called Character Connection, designed after the innovative work at Halifax Middle School in Pennsylvania. Teachers were nervous about how to sit with a mixed age (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders) and simply have a conversation, so she brought me in to train teachers and her Character Council (approximately 60 students who would co-lead the advisories (called Character Connections). After doing it for a year, the staff and students asked for more and more of it and now it happens daily. FHMS then had each Character Connection (CC) “adopt” an adult who works in the building and does not have a CC class. I recall walking in a hallway one day at FHMS and seeing Don Potts, a long-standing and beloved custodian, pushing a cart laden with wrapped packages. He explained that his CC class had just thrown him a surprise birthday party.

Discipline at FHMS also went through a transformation. Students now describe it as TTD...talk to death. It is not uncommon for a student to eventually ask for a detention rather than have to continue dialoguing and reflecting about their behavior and character. These discussions and reflections are built upon two pillars: (1) positive relationships between staff and students; (2) commitment to the collaboratively generated four pillars of character. The latter are right on referral forms and students know the rubric as well. When Johnston received a call that the floor was flooded in a boys’ restroom (someone had intentionally clogged the sink), she quickly ascertained the most likely suspect and found out where he currently was. All she did was knock on the classroom door and say “follow me.” Two words. He followed her to the boys’ room and saw Don Potts (see above), who just had had two heart surgeries, working hard to mop up the mess. The student simply said, “I’m sorry. Mr. Potts, let me do that.” No punishment, no yelling. Because this student understood respect and responsibility, and because relationship had been built with Amy Johnston, the principal, and Don Potts, the custodian, discipline was easy. That student learned a powerful lesson about character and being pro-social.

Amy also prioritized professional development and parent involvement. She continually supported staff going to workshops, classes, lectures, conferences, etc. She has sent more staff to both the Berkowitz Summer Institute and to LACE than any other school leader. And she began book studies with both staff and parents. She leads a parent book study group in the evenings in which they read books about teenagers.

Finally, Amy understands that school and classroom climate are the context in which character and learning can flourish or perish. She instituted a procedure whereby the first two days of school were to be curriculum-free. When she first proposed this to the staff, they were highly resistant, but she understood how important the initial experience of a school was. Staff essentially argued that they could not cover the entire curriculum as it was and could not give up two instructional days. Amy insisted. When asked what they should do instead, she said “unity builders.” When they asked what that was, she handed them a sheet with suggestions (different ones for each period of the day so students would not repeat the same activities). The staff respect and love Amy so they begrudgingly went along with what they felt was an ill-advised policy. Part way through that year they began to request that they begin every year with two days of unity building activities. What they were witnessing were classrooms where students were better behaved and harder working, simply because they had invested in relationships and norms during those first two days of school.

Ultimately the proof is in the data. From 2004 to 2010, F grades dropped from 490 to 158. From 2003 to 2010, detentions dropped from 1153 to 203, in school suspensions from 110 to 37 and out of school suspensions from 45 to 27. There are five middle schools in their school district. When FHMS began this journey their data looked much like the others. However, they are now decidedly different; for example, over the past 5 years, total suspensions for FHMS are 373. The other four schools range from a low of 1141 to a high of 1666. These findings are not limited to behavior. The district average percentage of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students meeting the state standard on state achievement tests (MAP) is 66 in math; FHMS is 74. In communication arts, the

district is 64; FHMS is 68. Even one year in the school makes a difference: for 6<sup>th</sup> graders, the district math percentage is 67 and for FHMS it is 76. The district communication arts percentage for the district is 56; for FHMS it is 65. The same pattern holds for 7<sup>th</sup> graders.

FHMS is doing something right. According to Amy Johnston, it is character education. In her own words, “if students graduate from here with good character, then we are doing our job.”

### **Ridgewood Middle School (Arnold, MO)**

While sharing some key characteristics with Francis Howell Middle School (middle school, approximately the same number of students per grade, National School of Character, overlap in key implementation strategies, dynamic enlightened leadership), the Ridgewood Middle School story is quite different. Whereas FHMS went from good to great, RMS had to go from horrible to great. And FHMS has 850 students from grades 6-8 while RMS has 500 students in grades 7-8. FHMS serves a mostly suburban middle to upper middle class population and RMS serves a mostly rural low SES population (43%% eligible for free and reduced lunch and the remainder close to eligibility).

The beginning seems a good place to start the RMS story (c.f., Haynes & Berkowitz, 2007). RMS began its character education informed school transformation journey a few years before FHMS. When then Superintendent Diana Bourisaw came to the district, she discovered a serious mess at RMS. Over the years, her predecessors had allowed it to serve as the repository of bad teachers for the district. When a principal discovered a teacher, often tenured, who was a rotten apple, rather than fighting the system, they requested a reassignment to RMS. So a majority of the teachers (but certainly not all of them) did not like children and should not have been teaching. This led to a climate in which the students knew the staff and school did not care about them and no one cared about the school. In the words of current Principal

Kristen Pelster “The appearance of the school [in 2000] was deplorable; unkempt with every inch of the bathrooms, locker rooms and bleachers covered with graffiti, profanity and racial slurs. A police officer had to be stationed at the school because of the daily violence and drug use. No other school in the district, not even the high schools, had a police officer. Attendance was low and standardized test scores were even lower. Only 30% of the students met the NCLB standards in communication arts and only 7% did so in mathematics” (Pelster, 2011). In the first quarter of 2001, a school of 500 students saw 600 failing grades posted. Bourisaw promptly brought in a new leadership team to “clean up Dodge City”: Principal Tim Crutchley and Assistant Principal Kristen Pelster. Crutchley had been a middle school assistant principal in another district and Pelster elementary school assistant principal within the RMS district (Fox School District), and they did not know each other. (As a wonderful coda to this story, they eventually fell in love and later married when Crutchley was promoted to Assistant Superintendent and Pelster became the RMS Principal.)

First they diagnosed the problem: RMS and its staff did not care about the students and the students knew that. Despite the abysmal academic record, they decided not to focus on curriculum, pedagogical methods, or other areas of academics. Both of them were graduates of LACE and so they knew that the key was to improve the school climate. They (often personally) cleaned up the physical plant, which was in utter disrepair due to neglect and abuse. They articulated a vision of a staff that served student social and emotional needs, and invested in professional development to support that. They administered a needs assessment and tried to design initiatives tied to the results. However, given the nature of the staff, they experienced significant resistance. Loosely playing good cop (Pelster) and bad cop (Crutchley), they modeled good practice, implored staff to join the journey, and pressured them to change. However, many of these teachers were unable and/or unwilling to do so. In a critical staff meeting in the second semester of their administration, Crutchley frankly told the staff to get on board or get off the ship. He expected to be fired; but instead he discovered that about 1/3 of the staff were waiting for such strong leadership and vision and joined him enthusiastically. At the end of the year about 1/3 of the staff left, and

over the next two years another 1/3 left. This was not serendipitous, but rather a result of a strategic effort by Crutchley and Pelster to either win staff over or drive them out. The departers were similarly strategically replaced with teachers who shared the vision.

Both of them also poured their lives into RMS, engaging in what can only be called supererogatory leadership. They began to call every absent student, and routinely went to their homes to get them out of bed and to school. They did laundry for families at school. When they realized that teachers routinely failed students for unsubmitted assignments, they created a ZAP (Zeros Aren't Permitted) program during lunch...and they personally staffed it themselves for 90 minutes every day. (The original 600 F grades in their first quarter is currently down to 6.) They put in 70 or more hours a week, sometimes sleeping at the school. This was clearly above and beyond the call of duty, but it created near miraculous results.

Other key initiatives included an advisory program led by a leadership team of students (2 per advisory). This program has been manualized (Owens & Asher, 2008). They also created a year long orientation program for 6<sup>th</sup> graders who were to become RMS students, largely run by the current students. The school counselor created a truancy program in partnership with the county juvenile judge. Teen Leadership is a program designed by the Flippen Group that teaches basic social and leadership skills to a diverse group of students. When a relatively new language arts teacher (Kacie Heiken-Ploen) proposed a rather daring new course for at-risk girls, Pelster (then the Principal) did not balk and instead said "at RMS it is okay to fail. Let's try it and if it doesn't work we won't do it again." Out of Pelster's enlightened leadership and Heiken-Ploen's creativity and genuine heart for struggling girls was born Aftershock. A language arts course, its curriculum is focused on the real problems of these girls: eating disorders, suicide, abuse, cutting, etc. Each month a topic is studied through reading and discussion, and then the students write extensively (journaling, producing a newsletter that goes out to the community to teach them about the problem, etc.). They bring in guest speakers and engage in service learning. This course has literally saved girls' lives and clearly given them a new positive sense of self, which has led to re-

engagement and success in school and life. There is now a boys' version of the course, entitled ImpACT, led by a male teacher as well. As Pelster explains it "we routinely take the kids in danger of dropping out, or much worse, and turn them into caring, pro-social leaders who succeed academically" (Pelster, 2011).

A former music teacher and an eternally impassioned optimist, Pelster starts each school year with a theme for the year (this year it is "Stars of Character") and aligns the first day of school with it as a near carnival (e.g., one year, with a western theme, students were greeted by Pelster on horseback dressed in cowboy attire whooping it up). The philosophy is that students should go home the first day of school thinking "wow, this is a great place. I can't wait to come back."

Once again, the proof is in the data. From 2000 to 2010, discipline referrals steadily dropped from 3000 to approximately 300, and the school police officer is gone. Attendance increased from 89% to over 95%. The percentage of students meeting state standards on the Missouri state student achievement test (MAP) has risen from 30% to 68% in Communication Arts and under 7% to 71% in Mathematics. In a nutshell, Pelster concludes that "the clientele of Ridgewood has not changed these past 10 years. Our families still struggle with extreme poverty and a section of our attendance area is still one of the highest crime areas in our county..... The difference is these kids, that 10 years ago were destroying the building and each other, now know they are valued and cared about, and now take on the leadership responsibility to create a culture and climate where they value each other, their school, their character, and their academic success. Most importantly, all this was done without ever changing our academic curriculum or our textbooks....what we changed was how we met the social , emotional, and character development needs of our students" (Pelster, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

Schools and their leaders constantly struggle with how to engage in effective school improvement while both trying to serve the dual masters of academic achievement and pro-social student development and simultaneously being pulled in

different directions by the demands and constraints of educational policy, unenlightened leadership (at the federal, state and local levels), the monomaniacal focus of many teachers unions, dwindling material resources, and panicked and demanding parents. All of this occurs in a context of ignorance about effective practice. Therefore it is refreshing to mentor and witness the genius of leaders like Amy Johnston, Tim Crutchley and Kristen Pelster. The stories of Francis Howell Middle School, Ridgewood Middle School, and the Leadership Academy in Character Education bear witness to two key lessons. First, it can be done. Schools can be transformed to better serve both academic achievement and pro-social development. Second, good pro-social education is good education. Teaching harder to the test is not a path to robust sustained success. Creating a caring school climate that nurtures social, emotional and moral competencies and supports the motives and skills necessary for productive work (during and after schooling) instead is the true path to success in school and life.

## References

Berkowitz, M.W. (2011). Leading schools of character. In A.M. Blankstein & P.D. Houston (Eds.), *Leadership for social justice and democracy in our schools (The Soul of Educational Leadership Series)* (pp. 93-121). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Haynes, C., & Berkowitz, M.W. (2007). What can schools do? *USA Today*, February 20, p. 13a.

Johnston, A. (In press).

Owens, B., & Asher, A. (2008). *R Character Council: Empower students through character education and service learning*. St. Louis: Owens/Asher Publishing.

Pelster, K. (2011). *United States Senate Briefing on SEL – School Climate and Character Education*.

A Tale of Prosocial Education Reform in Two Principals and Two Middle Schools. 619. Articulating the Value of Service Learning in Teacher Education. 627. CHAPTER 18 Multicultural Education Isasin Prosocial Education.Â About the Authors: Philip M. Brown is former director of the Center for Social and Character Development and fellow at the Center for Applied Psychology at Rutgers University. He also serves as senior consultant for the National School Climate Center. Michael W. Corrigan is associate professor of educational psychology, human development, and research methods at Marshall University, where he also serves as director of research for the College of Educations.