

## Francis Howell Middle School

Grades 6–8 • St. Charles, Missouri • Public/Suburban  
Enrollment 856 • Francis Howell School District

### Exploring New Frontiers to Enhance Character

Francis Howell Middle School in St. Charles, Missouri, is not a school that rests proudly on its laurels. Just ask any staff member to describe its award-winning approach to character education, and the word “evolving” is bound to pop up. Never satisfied with the status quo, the school is always searching for new ways to build character.

St. Charles, Missouri, a bustling city just northwest of St. Louis, has played a prominent role in the history of our nation. Lewis and Clark used this post on the Missouri River as the starting point for their famed expedition of the Northwest. Now, over 200 years later, the spirit of exploration still thrives at Francis Howell. One of five middle schools in the Francis Howell School District, the school is both a trailblazer and explorer when it comes to developing character.



Amy Johnston, the school's vibrant principal, who has also served in many other roles in her 15 years at Howell Middle School, insists that “character building is a *process*, not a *program*.” Since the process is constantly evolving, the school is always looking for the next piece of the puzzle that will enhance its journey. Professional development sessions; annual surveys of parents, staff, and students; and faculty analyses of the previous year's data—all serve as guides to taking the next steps. Nothing is piecemeal here. For example, assistant principal Ted Huff, having recently attended a training session on the Capturing Kids' Hearts program, hopes to use some of the NSOC award to introduce that program to Howell next year: “It will be a great way to invigorate what we already have and to move us to the next level.”

#### First Steps and Challenges

In fact, it is the desire to move to the next level that has guided character building at Howell Middle School since its inception in 2002. “We had a good school, but we were looking for the right route for improving relationships,” states Johnston, who graduated from the Leadership Academy in Character Education (LACE) under the direction of Dr. Marvin Berkowitz. When school opened that year, the enthusiastic principal introduced her staff to the idea of training for good character.

“Fear was our greatest obstacle,” recalls Johnston. “Fear of the teachers that it would be another thing to do, fear of the parents that academics would suffer, my



Students from a Character Connection class at Francis Howell prepare to treat office staff and administrators to breakfast bagels.

own fear that it just might not work.” The principal attributes the success of the endeavor to “an exceptionally receptive faculty that went way beyond their comfort zone” to participate in professional learning sessions and to work hard to shape the process.

Writing specialist and communication arts department chair Patrice Feldmann states, “We spent a long time in discussions with the faculty, the students, and the parents before we decided on the four core values of respect, responsibility, honesty, and compassion.”

Feldmann observes, “Another factor adding to success was that Professional Learning Communities (PLC’s) were developing simultaneously so that academics and character training went hand in hand.” Parent Laurie Holder, the mother of a seventh grader, adds, “Character education has a ripple effect. It leads to high-caliber education because of the nurturing the students receive.” Rise DeCrescenzo, the parent of an eighth grader, agrees: “Grades aren’t as important as nurturing. Grades fall into place because the children learn in a caring environment and feel safe.”

### Student Voice and Choice

When cross sections of sixth- through eighth-grade students are asked to describe their school, adjectives such as friendly, indescribable, caring, spectacular, unique, phenomenal, special, amazing, and life changing easily roll off their tongues. Students who have transferred to Howell from other communities point out how the nurturing environment of their new school has contributed to an easy adjustment and greater social and academic success. Sixth grader Emily, a new student of just two weeks, says, “Before I came here, I was really nervous. But FHMS has a different atmosphere; people are nice. What a big change from my other school.” Vickie, a seventh grader who transferred to Howell from Washington and previously had poor attendance and academic records, comments, “I really like it here and want to do well.” Proof of Vickie’s success: her writing has been published twice in the school’s literary magazine.

Through deliberate planning and restructuring of the day, the school has successfully embedded strategies that foster student autonomy and relationship building. Chief among these is the incorporation of Character Connection advisement classes (a 2006 Promising Practice) that meet daily and follow the protocol of a class meeting. Since each Character Connection group is comprised of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, students from different levels have the opportunity to bond with one another and

exchange ideas. Kayla, a seventh grader, observes, “It gave me the chance to feel comfortable with both the sixth and eighth graders and to reach out to them.”

Nick, an eighth grader, states, “We’re like family. The whole Character Connection class will call on the phone after you’ve been absent three or more days to tell you they miss you.” McKenzie, a seventh grader who was diagnosed with type I diabetes last year, recalls, “So many people called and asked me how I was. It really helped me.”

Character Connection meetings usually start with a dilemma being read over the public address system to the whole school; students comment and share perspectives about the choices and solutions to the dilemma. The meeting concludes with students forming a circle and joining hands to send a pulse around the group. Student reflection on the experience shows its strong correlation with core values. Seventh grader Katie says, “It is like an act of kindness that goes around and comes back to you.” Morgan, another seventh grader, states, “It is a part of me that I am giving to others.”



## The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Francis Howell Middle School:

- A five-year study reveals a 51 percent decrease in the number of out-of-school suspension days, from a high of 228 in 2003–04 to a low of 112 in 2007–08.
- The number of in-school suspension days decreased 55 percent, from a high of 309 in 2003–04 to a low of 138 in 2007–08.
- Detentions decreased 75 percent, from a high of 1025 in 2003–04 to a low of 252 in 2007–08.
- Total failing grades decreased 82 percent, from a high of 490 in 2003–04 to a low of 89 in 2007–08.
- Scores in the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) continue to improve in both mathematics and communication arts.
- Sixth-grade mathematics achievement placed Howell on the MAP Top Ten list of highest-performing schools (in the percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient).
- CHARACTERplus annual surveys of parents, staff, and students indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the school.

## Francis Howell Middle School Core Ethical Values

respect

responsibility

compassion

honesty

**Challenge Leadership and a Challenge to the Existing Order**

A framed rectangular needlepoint that hangs in the main foyer announces the mission of Francis Howell Middle School: *Crusading for a community that allows choices, creativity, and change.* One program that exemplifies this three-fold goal is Challenge Leadership, which has revolutionized the school's approach to student leadership and forged an effective anti-bullying effort. Over 200 seventh- and eighth-grade students and 50 adults participated in an all-day Saturday workshop in which students and adults wrestled with problems such as self-esteem, bullying, and transforming plans into actions.

Howell is alert to the need for change. The Challenge Leadership workshop led to changes that dismantled the Student Council and created a Be the Change Team that has moved the school in an exciting new direction. Karen Zuber, a science teacher, points out that the training was "one of my most

meaningful experiences as a teacher." The Be the Change Team is open to all students and provides a forum for students to voice concerns to one another and initiate school reform. Also, Johnston is available for Sound Offs, in which students can voice concerns personally to the administration.

**Character Connection to the Curriculum**

Character building is not limited to Character Connection class or Be the Change activities. Eighth-grade student leader Nick points out, "Character is connected to all we do, both in our classes and outside." Classroom management strategies reveal the core values in action, as students are actively engaged, learn to respect one another's opinions, use character-scoring rubrics, and give feedback to help their peers evaluate their completed projects. For example, a visitor to Dr. Cara Gibson's sixth-grade math classroom will find students forming cooperative groups, with teams working at different stations on sets of problems for a specific period of time. Ethical concerns and environmental issues prompt students to probe questions such as: How many trees are used to make all the copies of the Sunday *New York Times* each week? How much trash in pounds does the average American throw away each day? How many years would it take a Styrofoam package left on the side of the road to decompose? Although students solve problems individually, they are encouraged to "talk it out" with a partner in the group. During a student interview, seventh grader Cameron sums up the Howell approach to character building: "The core ethical values are taught no matter what subject you have. They help you think about what you do."

"This is a school that embraces all learners, whether they have abilities or disabilities," states assistant principal Huff, who was so impressed with the caliber of education here that he received permission for his oldest son to attend Howell despite residence in another district. Students with special needs are seamlessly integrated into most core and exploratory classes. Mainstream and special education teachers collaborate and meet daily to meet the needs of all students. Special education teacher Anna Lee Corpora explains, "Yes, we make modifications

**PRINCIPAL'S BEST PICKS:**

Amy E. Johnston

**TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL:** *warm and evolving*

**CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD:** Character Connection class

**BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE:**

The "building"—the conversations among students, between students and adults, and among adults. These are conversations, not power struggles. (There are ample data on academic achievement and student discipline, for those who need tangible proof!)

**EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT:**

decline in the total number of failing grades, from 490 in 2003–04 to 89 in 2007–08

**WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION:**

*Know what you want to change in your building; set specific, measurable goals; spend at least a year in professional development with the staff, ensuring that they "get" character education deeply; and enjoy a slow but wonderful journey that will last the rest of your career.*



for students with special needs, but there are high academic expectations for all students.” Sheri Brinkman, another special education teacher, states, “I skip the fluff. I am usually three weeks behind the general ed teachers, but at the end of the year, I have covered the same material as the general ed teachers.” The Building Improvement Committee (BIG) feels strongly that all students are capable of grade-level material and makes certain that intensive activities are used to fill in any learning gaps. Caitlin McGinley, still another special education teacher, states, “We have raised the bar and they [special education students] are meeting the goals.”

### Parents as Partners and Innovators

Strong parental involvement has helped to advance the character education goals in new directions. “Howell of Fame” award winner and parent volunteer DeCrescenzo points out that a district mandate a few years ago to improve parental involvement opened the welcoming doors even more, and they “just ran with it since Mrs. Johnston was so supportive.” In addition to wooing parents through traditional events and newsletters, Howell Middle School offers parenting workshops on topics such as cyber bullying, parenting skills, teenage pregnancy, stress management, and improving communication. Parents gave the school a rating of 88 percent in the School Expectations category of the Characterplus annual survey.

Parents, like the Howell staff and students, are also innovators. Holder mentions that parental discussions revealed that, to facilitate students’ transition from elementary to middle school, there was a real need to include parents of fifth graders from Howell’s feeder schools in the school’s character education program. As a result, these parents receive all newsletters, can volunteer for school activities, and are invited to participate in parenting forums.

### New Data, New Directions, and New Vigor

A school that prides itself on “always evolving” looks forward to the next stages in character building. Since the faculty annually analyzes the data on academic achievement and student discipline, as well as the results of parent, teacher, and student responses on the Characterplus surveys, they will continue to use this material as the framework for their new initiatives. Johnston would like to see the Challenge Leadership training extended to the sixth graders, so that the entire school will be on board with it.



Francis Howell students honor U.S. veterans.

Guidance counselor Ginny Lester says that Howell has been effective in showing boys and girls that “they should think about the other person instead of always worrying about themselves.” She maintains that “breaking the shackles of a self-obsessed culture is the first step in shaping individuals who can change the world.” Johnston says, “Francis Howell Middle School has been on a character education journey for five years, and we see a difference in our students and in ourselves. Focusing on character has changed the culture of our school... the results are [fewer] discipline [problems], higher academic achievement, and improved attendance.” As this dynamic school moves on to another stage, it looks forward to its role in guiding others to success.

### REFERENCES

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