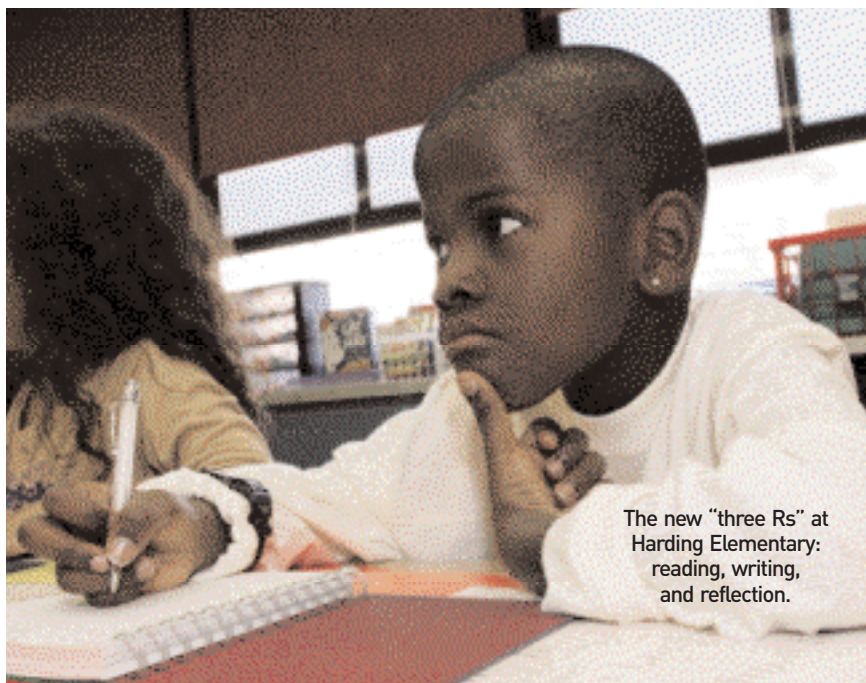


# LESSONS ON CHARACTER



Kids here used to get into fistfights. Now the school culture embraces learning. **By Caralee Adams**

In 1999, things were dismal at Lebanon, Pennsylvania's Harding Elementary School. Many kids in this former coal town started at a disadvantage and never seemed to catch up. They were bored with books about "frogs on logs," says then-new principal Cheryl Champion. And since they weren't engaged, they acted out.

Harding's classroom life—and its test scores—had to improve. So Champion and her teachers began to look for ways to turn their school around. They had two ambitious aims: to improve literacy and school culture. Those are huge

challenges on their own—how could Harding tackle both? Then the light bulb went off. Why not choose books that would teach kids about community—while teaching them how to read?

In 2001, Harding teachers began a unique journey, combining lessons on reading with character education. With the help of a grant, they were able to find a reading program that matched these goals. Every class focused on the same themes—friendship, democracy, and individual perspective—using multicultural books, activities, and community service projects. Students who'd never

left their hometown raised money for victims of Hurricane Katrina and wrote letters to soldiers overseas. And that was just the beginning.

The result? Reading scores have climbed, moving the school from a state warning list to above average. On writing tests, Harding is the second-ranked elementary school in the district. Discipline referrals have been slashed.

Champion credits her teachers first. "They go above and beyond," she says. For instance, teachers often come in early and stay late—without extra pay—to tutor students. Others volunteer to serve as mentors. Many have enrolled in professional development workshops.

What can we all learn from a school that's made such a dramatic turnaround? Here are some of the lessons Harding teachers have learned firsthand.

**1 RICH, MULTICULTURAL MATERIALS MATTER.** Harding is a diverse school, roughly 50 percent Hispanic and 50 percent Caucasian. The new curriculum, based on the Voices Reading program from Zaner-Bloser, features stories from a variety of cultures. "The kids read books with people that look and talk like them," says first-grade teacher Chris Hopman. While reading *Pablo's Tree*, for instance, Hopman's students chimed in that they too had a grandfather named Abuelito. Teachers say that their students are motivated by these connections.

**2 KIDS CAN TALK CONFLICT OUT.** Each classroom at Harding has a "peace table" where kids are encouraged to talk through disagreements. In one room, the table is adorned with a lava lamp; in another, it's shaded by a paper palm tree. The idea is to reduce the tension before it escalates into something physical. The approach has reduced referrals to the principal, and when it is showcased at the open house, parents gain confidence in the safety of the school.

**3 TEACHERS CAN TALK IT OUT, TOO.** (REALLY!) Champion formed a leadership team of teachers that meets regularly to discuss curriculum and policies. ➤➤

# best practice

Teachers say the concept has healed divisions among faculty and given them a venue for their opinions to be heard.

**4 TEAMWORK PAYS OFF.** Harding faculty see each other rarely, says fifth-grade teacher Debbie Granger, who has been on the job for 29 years. “We can’t do it alone anymore,” she says. This year her team is collaborating with lesson planning. One teacher will develop a dynamo lesson on similes, another on punctuation—and then take his or her hands-on ideas down the hallway. The variety of voices helps kids better understand concepts—and streamlines teacher work.

**5 HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOSTER HIGH-LEVEL THINKING.** Granger encourages her students to be “scholars” and have intelligent discussions about their books, which they do in small literary circles. But only after Granger has shared appropriate language and phrases. “I model how to have good conversations,” she says. As a result, students have developed courage in expressing themselves. “Every single day, one of my students says something amazing,” Granger says. “I just say, ‘Wow, I never thought of it that way. Thanks.’”

**6 DIFFERENCES CAN BE EMBRACED.** The reading curriculum puts special emphasis on being unique. “We talk about how what makes us different makes us special,” explains first-grade teacher Molly Kegerise. And the lessons rub off. Last year, Kegerise was in awe of her class, which accepted a special-needs student who had difficulty walking and talking. They also gave a hand to classmates whose first language wasn’t English.

**7 WHEN TEACHERS OPEN UP, STUDENTS DO TOO.** As part of the curriculum, Harding teachers frequently share experiences from their own lives—about a time when someone laughed at them as a child, for example. “In the beginning it was scary, but we jumped in,” says literacy coach Dawn Schrader. As a result, the students feel safe in opening up and the dialogue is richer. “Instead of teaching to

the students, we are actually asking relevant questions,” she says.

**8 ASSESSMENT ISN’T JUST FOR TEST DAY.** Rather than one-size-fits-all reading instruction, individual assessment has helped Harding’s students move ahead at their own pace. “It’s become specific to the child,” says Champion. In the past, a teacher would hold up her teacher’s guide and “track and tap” over each word as the class read the material in unison. Now, using small, flexible groups, teachers can see if students are truly comprehending.

**9 THE LUNCHROOM MAKES A GREAT PLACE TO READ!** At Harding, kids are allowed to bring books and activities to quietly engage in with friends as they eat. The lunchroom environment has changed dramatically from a loud gossip mill to a civil, pleasant place to dine.

**10 ALL KIDS CAN SUCCEED.** Teachers at Harding know their students face challenges, but are motivated to help them achieve. The improvement in the school’s state assessments is proof that every child can excel. Teachers are willing to go the extra mile because they get results. “The growth that we see—during reading lessons and in the hallways—is so rewarding,” says Molly Kegerise. □

## Can ABCs Teach “Please”?

Yes, say Harvard professors Catherine Snow and Robert Selman, who developed the character education and literacy program *Voices Reading*. Here are some of the books they recommend.

■ **TAKE A WALK IN SOMEONE ELSE’S SHOES.** Read *Corduroy*, by Don Freeman; *Butterfly Boy*, by Virginia Kroll; or *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*, by Mem Fox.

■ **IS ALL FAIR IN LOVE AND WAR?** Let kids battle it out after reading about conflict: *The Rainbow Fish*, by Marcus Pfister; *Matthew and Tilly*, by Rebecca C. Jones; or *La Mariposa*, by Francisco Jiménez.

■ **THE WORLD ISN’T FAIR.** Teach kids about social awareness with *Chrysanthemum*, by Kevin Henkes or *The Other Side*, by Jacqueline Woodson.

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