

Kittredge School: A Warm and Nurturing Environment

Yes, those words are innately comforting, but they are certainly open to interpretation. Warm as in a tropical climate? Warm as in snuggled in bed? Nurturing as in loving, or as in encouraging? What is a warm and nurturing environment?

At Kittredge School the meaning of those words is in many ways the essence of the school. Kittredge is deeply committed to the notion that learning is based upon the reality of *personal meaning*. This is identified as what each child takes from a particular situation. It is her/his individual, unique interpretation of that event. Facts can be presented and memorized. Pieces of data can be and should be taught and practiced so they may be applied toward deepening one's understanding of the world. The more a student uses experience, knowledge and skills to explain, describe or create new understanding, the more her/his personal meaning is enhanced by any task.

Kittredge recognizes that every human being, child or adult, learns best in an environment that allows and encourages them to become consciously aware of the various tools and skills necessary to function as a competent citizen in our society. In the case of Kittredge School, the warm and nurturing environment purposely seeks to set the students at ease, freeing them to seek personal meaning with little fear of recrimination.

As we built our program it was this reading of the school's mission statement, "*Challenging academics in a warm and nurturing environment*," that led us over time to recognize four important goals in the decision making process: The Four Cs. We have identified the Four Cs as the basis for our teaching of the Three Rs.

As highly as we value our role in fostering academic excellence, we are positive that there is a need for schools to provide more. We want to help develop thinking, responsible, autonomous students who will hear others and work together to build a more constructive and affective society. As much as society needs leaders, we also need thoughtful, insightful followers who aren't afraid to contribute to the needs of society. We need entrepreneurs along with diligent and dependable independent workers. We increasingly need inventors but also responsible, skilled workers who can move inventions to the marketplace. We need a population with character, and that is the first of our Four Cs, *character*.

Along with the citizens of character we seek to produce, our society will require people who can think independently. The ability to think, regardless of one's position in life, is critical to making the world a better place. Without the presence of critical thinking it is difficult to form a long term, well-functioning society. Thinking when making decisions and choices brings about the possibility of both effective and affective behavior. *Cognition*, or the process we use to recognize and understand things, is the second C we consider at Kittredge. We recognize cognition as the circular process of collecting data, organizing that data, developing theories, using theories and evaluating theories as we become increasingly more competent, productive and constructive. Cognition is how we create new solutions, develop new ideas and make sense out of an ever-changing world.

Most people would agree that it is through communication that change can take place and therefore our third C is *communication*. Communication includes both the taking in and the expressing of information. It is at minimum a two way street. It is not merely listening but *hearing*. It is made up of words, gestures, tone of voice, body language and eye contact. Effective communication reflects the user's recognition that different words may convey different meanings

when used among different people. While “words can never hurt me,” they certainly can make it difficult or next to impossible for a solution to be found. People who communicate well recognize the need for precision and clarification and are willing to take time to seek understanding. Effective communication is confident, strong and at the same time open for elaboration and possible change. Communication can easily make the difference between respect and disrespect, acceptance or rejection. We have found that careful and thoughtful communication between all members of our community helps pave the way for learning and growth.

At Kittredge we believe that the learner is responsible for his or her learning in both the academic and affective spheres. Desirable character traits can be taught and discussed; yet it is the student who decides to what degree these traits will be internalized. Thinking or cognition can be reviewed and strategies taught, but until the learner chooses to think on his/her own these lessons are probably of little or no value. Knowing the rules of communication and ignoring them is not likely to produce positive results. We label the process of taking responsibility for one’s own learning, whether in character, cognition or communication, *consciousness*, the fourth C. Saying something, solving a problem or deciding a moral issue by pure chance is a risky proposition. It is desirable for people to have a solid basis for making decisions.

Part of that basis is the recognition of where that person stands on the continuum of growth. At Kittredge we use self-assessment as a tool to help students make this determination. Self-assessment is a skill or process any learner can use to not only ascertain where he presently is in his development but where he eventually wants to get to, as well. That process should be helpful in determining what to do to reach a recognized goal. Consciousness is a mind-set, and one that any learner can profitably use to reach new goals.

From Theory to Practice

The Four Cs are those big learning goals we have identified as basic qualities we want to engender in all the members of the Kittredge community. But translating them to actual programs can be a more challenging process than identifying them. The process of implementing the Four Cs is, like personal meaning, unique to the situation. Fortunately, there exist many resources that can help in this difficult task. Kittredge did not have to reinvent the wheel but we are always looking for new spokes to further strengthen it. Our program has changed, is changing and will continue to change over time. Historically, the change has occurred through adapting established programs to our particular environment.

The first change occurred when we recognized that, beyond academics, we wanted to do more to help our students and ourselves become the best citizens possible. To do that we decided to use the well-tested *Character Counts* program, developed by the Los Angeles Josephson Institute. The mission statement for this program reads, “Working to create a world where decisions and behavior are guided by ethics.” That statement, as we interpret it, entirely meets our goals of teaching the first C, Character. *Character Counts* offers us a framework and a large body of suggestions to help our focus on developing one’s character. It concentrates on six pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. We receive, for example, suggestions for lessons at all grade levels, ideas for programs and class activities, and lists of particular readings appropriate to explore a given pillar. The Los Angeles office sends ideas for discussion, games to encourage thought and decision making activities. It reminds all of us that character is a learned activity that can and does occur in the classroom, the playground and in the home. The heart of the program is in developing students’ personal meaning for each of those pillars. Character isn’t taught as much as it is learned. The *Character Counts* framework helps the students and all the adults at Kittredge consistently take advantage of the opportunities to direct the students’ attention to the “a-ha” moment for learning and personal meaning.

Consciousness was the second goal we worked with to help us make *Character Counts* more viable. Consciousness is internal and spotlights the core of each student's behavior. A group of educators in Marin County had been working successfully in developing a series of self-assessment rubrics for use by K-12 students within the *Character Counts* framework. They called their organization *Critical Links*. Their mission statement reads, "Critical Links is formed to provide urgently needed support services to educational communities committed to creating a school culture focused on learning, character development and growth through the process of self assessment and self evaluation."

Critical Links expressed interest in working with Kittredge School because it was felt that Kittredge could provide the supportive environment to use *Critical Links'* efforts to the fullest. Kittredge was small enough and cohesive enough to carry the self-assessment procedure through for an extended period of time. In fact, Kittredge conducts at least two self-evaluation activities for each student every year, and keeps the results of these assessments in a folder. Students add their most recent self-assessment to the folder twice a year, allowing the students to easily review their progress over a span of years. In that way students have a tangible record of their deepening understanding of their own growth toward a life of character. The notion of rubrics for self-assessment is important. The chief function, however, is the process itself, which can be conducted over and over by thoughtful teachers as they listen to the students.

Teachers use questions such as, "How does that make you feel?" "When did you know you were trustworthy?" "How does it help when you care?" "How are you different today?" "Do you ever feel responsible?" These and an arsenal of many other questions and comments are used by teachers and aids who firmly believe it is the responsibility of each learner to mold her/his character. *Critical Links* has not only demonstrated its belief in the power of self-assessment to Kittredge through *Character Counts*, it is currently working with the staff and the upper grades students in creating new self-assessment instruments to be used by the school to measure progress toward the third C, cognition.

"To transfer schools into learning communities where thinking and Habits of Mind are taught, practiced, valued and infused into the culture," reads the mission statement for *Habits of Mind*, a fascinating list of intelligent behaviors developed by Art Costa and Bena Kallick. Their work has produced a list of 16 human attributes they consider behavioral indicators of what intelligent people do to create new solutions, and function successfully in an ever-changing world. The more we worked with our students on their character growth the more we saw the need for help in translating thoughtful behavior into personal meaning and action.

Costa and Kallick's program made immediate sense, especially since our principal, Peter Lavaroni, had known Art for over 50 years and Art was willing to give his time to us to assist in making *Habits of Mind* come alive at Kittredge. Art's frequent meetings with the staff coupled with the development and use of rubrics designed by the consultants from *Critical Links* in concert with our staff and students has made a difference. *Habits of Mind* offers us many ideas, strategies, activities and suggestions to emphasize the 16 attributes for enhancing personal meaning, and critical thinking skills in all areas of the curriculum. Now that our students are creating rubrics for each of the Habits, we are working towards becoming a Habits of Mind School and we have established a common vocabulary that can assist us in continuously reflecting, evaluating and improving all our programs.

Habits of Mind, like *Character Counts* and *Critical Links* is not a program or a curriculum as such. None of these tell us when we "do something" to affect personal meaning. Instead they give

us a range of skills, questions to ask or suggestions to make when working with students as they seek their own personal meaning through some task.

As mentioned, previously, the last C stands for communication. Because of its size and the closeness of the staff, most of who have worked together for 8 years or more, Kittredge has a history of open, honest and positive communication between and amongst themselves, the students and the parents. In fact, we take great pride in this aspect of our community. We also know that there is always room for growth and improvement as we are confident that personal meaning changes through experiences. Because of our interest in continuing our focus on personal meaning, this year we are introducing another fascinating program to our school. *Kimochi Dolls* is a relatively new but well researched and practiced program to help schools work to ensure thoughtful, confident, positive and respectful communication. It helps both teachers and students become increasingly aware of the subtleties of facial expressions, eye contact and body language. The stated goal for this Marin County institution is, "to provide helpful information and communication tools to parents, teachers and children to enable them to learn how to be better communicators, and to express their feelings." That is certainly consistent with Kittredge School's outlook and desires. We feel the ideas, activities and suggestions Kimochi offers open new communication tools to our students and will help us to realize our own mission.

Together the Four Cs give us a framework to ensure that each member of our community can truly recognize the importance and power of personal meaning. With that said, we come to a fifth and possibly most important C, *community*. The Kittredge community is made of students, teachers, parents, staff, administration and even grandparents. It's a wonderful thing to observe. A sense of pride, responsibility, hope, joy and respect is almost tangible. It can be seen in the smiles of the students and the teachers as well as the parents when they visit the school. It can be heard in the voices of the students as they participate in classroom activities leading to enhanced personal meaning. It becomes obvious when former students return, as they regularly do, "just to say hello." You see the ambiance of the Kittredge community when a young child, maybe a first grader, by chance meets another student off campus, say, an eighth grader. It's like bumping into a brother or sister. You can actually see the admiration in the young one's eyes, and also see how seriously the older student takes his/her role as a model for the youngster.

The Kittredge community reflects the school's commitment to the individual learner. It is the result of a conscious effort by all involved to build upon inherent and positive belief in the strength and power of being human.