

This Month's Best Practice

Each Month the Maryland Center for Character Education at Stevenson University (MCCE@SU) picks one of the Best Practices from a Character Education award winning school to share with you.

SEPTEMBER 2018

School: Piney Ridge Elementary School

County: Carroll County

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Primary Principles Emphasized:

TITLE of BEST PRACTICE: Character Education Initiatives at Piney Ridge Elementary School

PRIMARY PRINCIPLES EMPHASIZED: 3, 4, and 11

Objective(s): Utilizing PBIS, PAW character behaviors, ETM focus on school culture, and Mindfulness and Growth Mindset practices, Piney Ridge students will decrease behavior referrals in the top three areas of concern by 10% each. The areas of concern are: physical conduct, classroom disruption, and unsafe behaviors.

Piney Ridge Elementary (PRE) in Sykesville, Maryland was recently named a **2018 National School of Character** by Character.org! PRE continues to promote a culture of positive behaviors and character development throughout the school. As a previous Maryland Center for Character Education winner (2008-2009), a "Maryland School of the Year" (2015, 2016, 2017) and State School of Character (2010, 2017), PRE continues to show growth and ensures consistency in promoting core ethical values as the basis of good character. The newly formed Equity Committee combines initiatives of the ETM (Education that is Multicultural Committee) and the PBIS Committee (Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports) combine efforts to ensure that the school is focused and aligned.

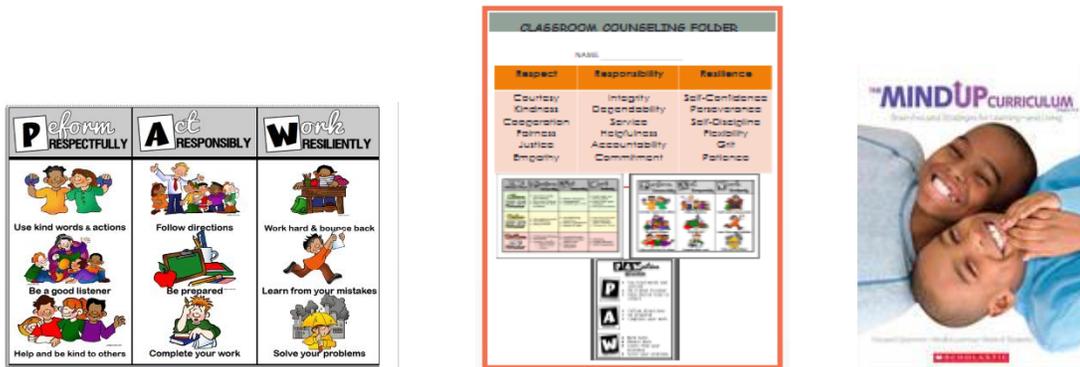
Overall Piney Ridge Elementary, in conjunction with all Carroll County Public Schools, is striving for a community of cultural proficiency by building and maintaining mutual respect for cultural diversity across all subgroups.

Our School Improvement Plan focuses on how we can impact student behavior in regards to this long term goal by reducing student referrals by 10% in all grade levels annually and by improving student's ability to be self-aware and self-monitor their behavior as well as utilize coping strategies.

Carroll County Vision 2018



Principle #3: Uses a comprehensive, intentional, proactive, and effective approach to character development.



Our staff welcomed the MindUp curriculum as a way to teach metacognition and promote positive learning behaviors that we had seen a decline in over the recent years. Some staff members graciously piloted the program and shared successes, struggles, and suggestions with our Kid Talking team. From there the school decided to give it a try. Each teaching staff member was provided with a teacher’s guide book at the end of the 2014/2015 school year, and at the start of the 2015/2016 school year a staff development presentation was provided. This continued during the 2017-2018 school year and will be re-introduced and formulated for the 2018-2019 school year. Teachers are increasingly interested in learning more “trauma-sensitive” strategies to support their students in the classroom.

The SIT team discussed the time it required to teach the lessons as a concern, and a need to repeat lessons throughout the year to keep student interest. Keeping this in mind, once again all classroom teachers used the MindUp lessons to begin the school year in 2017-2018. The resources created the previous year were utilized and additional resources that staff found were shared at the opening faculty meeting in August. Anchor charts were created and displayed in classrooms as an ongoing reminder of why Mindfulness is helpful as well as what it looks like in school. In January, the school counselor revisited strategies for staying focused in her classroom lessons for each grade level. This helped to keep the strategies fresh and targeted areas certain grades struggled with after winter break.

Principle #4: Creates a caring school community.

In 2015/2016 and in 2016/2017 **Diversity Club** was introduced as a student club that would help build and maintain a positive school climate. In 2017/2018, efforts were broadened to *combine* the Student Council and the Diversity Club to create the **Diversity Council**.

Students have completed community service activities and came up with ideas for promoting kindness and equality throughout the school. This year the membership exceeded expectations and we had 58 students participating in grades 3-5. They acted as Student Ambassadors to share and present Diversity Council initiatives throughout the school. Service Projects of the Committee included: Harvest for the Hungry, Used Toy Drive for local homeless shelters, and Holiday Adoption through a new toy drive for the Salvation Army. We are hopeful that the enthusiasm for being a part of this club continues and that the members can begin to make a bigger, more noticeable impact on maintaining a positive school climate. The Council also learned about (and then shared with assigned classrooms as ambassadors) lessons on kindness, equality, social filtering and respect.

Piney Ridge raised over \$8,000 for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society through the Pennies for Patients program. The Diversity Council members also wrote, illustrated, and published a book about expectations at our school.

Principle #11: Evaluates the character of the school, the school staff's functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students' manifest good character.

As mentioned previously, Piney Ridge Elementary School underwent a very thorough and rigorous Character Education evaluation process with Character.org and was awarded the rank of **"National School of Character"** in May 2018. This lengthy application as well as artifacts and then site evaluation (twice) led to the school achieving this status.

Areas recommended for improvement for the 2017 National application level were Principles 3, 5, and 7: **Create a comprehensive plan to include a focus on service learning and intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation.**

To **rectify** those areas and to better align our focus, we merged the staff committees of ETM (Education that is Multicultural) and PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports) to create the Equity Committee (also mentioned previously). In doing so, it allowed staff to combine efforts. For students, we merged the Student Council and the Diversity Club and created the Diversity Council. The Council is made up of Student Ambassadors (grades 3-5, 58 students), who go around to visit each classroom to share school information about our core character values of: Respect, Responsibility, and Resilience along with service-learning initiatives throughout the community as well as school-based climate projects. At our last meeting, students wrote, illustrated, and published a book that highlighted expectations of

good character and behavior in our school. Students also participated in various clubs including the Media Festival, Piney Reads (a type of “One Book” activity – 113 students, Battle of the Books (80 students), Guys Read (30 Males), Scalawags of Science (30 students), and Girls on the Run (35 Females).

Additionally, the school began a focus on Morning Meetings. While the entire school did not engage in this, many classrooms did and utilized the Virtues Language in addition to journaling and reflection of the Character Traits. Traits that were focused on were: Respect, Caring, Kindness, Responsibility, Integrity, and Perseverance (resilience). Some classes also initiated “Restorative Circles” for conflict resolution.

Part of the process of evaluating the character of the school was to send out a staff survey in July 2017 and then again in June of 2018 to assess the climate of the school. From the July evaluation, changes were made. In July 2017, a new principal was assigned to Piney Ridge. The July 2017 survey reflects an uncertainty about the new administration. Areas of concern reflected in that survey were: motivation of students and time needed to address social and emotional issues of students. These two areas have continued to be a concern for staff. Additionally, teachers reported an increase in their autonomy, working well with each other, and parents being aware of what is expected of their child.

Parents were very positive about the school. It was reported that 95% of the students like coming to school, 95% felt the teachers were fair, 99% felt that the school was positive and safe, and 82% knew about the Character Education and PBIS initiatives. This survey was used by the SIT team to align changes and inform parents more of the initiatives throughout the school.