St. Paul’s Lutheran School, Jackson, MO

“Rather than rescue kids, let’s help them grow the character they need to be resilient.”

If Tim Mirly could wave a wand and rid the world of bad behavior, he would. Dealing with behavioral issues in a school takes valuable time away from teaching and learning.

Not that the students at St. Paul’s in Jackson, Missouri are particularly ill-behaved. The 300+ K-8 students at the 125-year-old Lutheran school love Jesus and try hard. And they are not unlike other K-8 students – learning, growing and dealing with the fallout of bad decisions: other people’s and their own.

Sans magic wand, Principal Mirly began evaluating programs the school could use to develop a culture and shared language for teaching behaviors and helping students learn how to treat one another. The questions he sought to answer: How can we as a school guide the social-emotional conversations among growing children? How do we equip them to handle everything on the spectrum, from praise to snubbing to name calling, and everything in between?

Mirly found programs and curricula that teach kids what good behavior looks like, but he says most of these programs missed the crux of social-emotional issues: It is Christian character that produces good behavior. And true Christian character is not something that can be taught from the outside. It must be shaped internally.

“WE talk about behavior in schools, and it’s mostly about eliminating bad behavior,” Mirly observes. “I’m way more interested in trying to build people up and help them understand that you can’t always eliminate bad behavior. But you can be strong in your character and know how to deal with bad behavior, your own or someone else’s.”

Mirly wants to grow resilient students. The opposite of resiliency is anxiety, and its growing more prevalent in young people. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 31.9% of adolescents have any variety of anxiety disorder. Children with anxiety disorders are at higher risk to perform poorly in school, engage in substance abuse, or generally withdraw from the activities and interactions that help them discover who God created them to be.

Mirly believes a contributing factor to anxiety starts early in life: Parents and educators want to rescue kids from bad behavior instead of helping them grow the character that deals with it. “We as educators have told students, ‘If you have an issue with another student, let us help you with that because for whatever reason we’re not sure you can handle it on your own.’ And so I don’t think we as a society are equipping students well.”

So Mirly sought a program that would grow character and empower kids to handle life’s situations. And that’s when he came across the Christian Character Formation Project.
St. Paul’s implemented the program for grades 6-8 in the 2017-18 school year. Mirly really likes the framework CCFP provides, helping students connect **Identity**, **Purpose**, and **Actions** through the 3-step process of **Experience**, **Internalize** and **Activate**. “The stories really bring the concepts alive for the kids through senses and imagery,” Mirly says.

“The CFP team trained our teachers so they understood the underlying character formation process. With that basic understanding, teachers could work with the content more effectively. **All the lesson materials help teachers bring the content alive for the kids.**”

As St. Paul enters year two of the project, Mirly says an area of growth is for the school to send materials home to parents, so the character virtues are constantly being talked about within the school community. “The virtues give us a common language, so the stage is set to increase the partnership we have with parents to empower kids to deal with every situation they encounter.”

After all, that’s what Scripture says to do in all our dealings with people. “Jesus gives us power when he says, ‘Love your neighbor,’” Mirly says. “Whatever people’s actions, I have the power to love. So what does that look like? The **Christian Character Formation Project** provides us the structure and the framework to talk about what loving actions look like in any circumstance.”

Mirly says Christian character is an especially valuable tool for taking on one of the biggest behavioral issues in schools today: bullying.

“We have to teach our kids that they are not powerless,” Mirly says. “They are only victims if they allow themselves to be victims. There will always be bad behavior around us, because we live in a sinful world. Building up the individual as a faithful child of God, and providing the virtues that Scripture teaches, we are empowering them and encouraging them to handle the difficulties and stresses in a life-changing way, in a Christ-centered way. That will help them be stronger and deal with any person and any situation in a way that says, “How can I love you,” instead of “You’re beating me up and I am a victim because of your behavior.”

Mirly acknowledges how counter-cultural this sounds when it comes to bullying. “These conversations perpetuate peace, joy and reconciliation in our relationships, not the victim mentality. That’s the kind of school we are.”

Jesus’ life and ministry was counter-cultural, too. He was willing to have the tough conversations, and he modeled them for his disciples. Perhaps Mirly’s vision of a school that is willing to have the tough conversations – and has the framework to do so in place – is not unique; rather, it’s a **back-to-basics Christian education**, ready to meet today’s challenges.

“**Jesus already did the rescuing.**” Mirly says. “It’s our job as Christian educators to help kids develop the internal character that makes them stronger.”

**Contacts:**

John A. Crabtree, Jr., PhD  |  National Director of Training and Implementation
The Character Formation Project  |  317-440-6291  |  john.crabtree@mycharacterformation.org