THE JOURNEY TO NATIONAL SCHOOL OF CHARACTER
Creating a Nationally Recognized Campus by Susan Campbell

When Harmony opened its doors in 2000, its founders knew they wanted to create a culture of character in the schools. Believing that the values a child demonstrates are just as important as the knowledge they possess, character classes were initiated a few times a week as its system of schools grew and strategic plans for the future were developed and implemented.

Fast-forward to 2020, when character education was taken to a new level by Harmony School of Innovation-Fort Worth. That year, the campus was named a National School of Character by Character.org, a nationwide education advocacy organization.

The rare honor, bestowed to fewer than 100 schools in the country every year, recognized HSI-Fort Worth for its multi-year effort to build a sustainable culture of character for its students, staff members and community members. Criteria for selection are based on Character.org’s “11 Principles Framework for Schools: A Guide to Cultivating a Culture of Character,” which includes providing students with opportunities for moral action, fostering shared leadership, and engaging families and communities as partners in the character-building effort.

It was a first for the Harmony Public Schools system – but not the last.

Since then, three other Harmony schools have been named National Schools of Character: Harmony Science Academy-Cedar Park, Harmony School of Science-Houston and Harmony School of Innovation-Houston. Nine other Harmony campuses also have been recognized as State Schools of Character – typically a precursor to national designation.

But how did HSI-Fort Worth achieve this first for Harmony?

“Having only one teacher teaching character education and moral values in the beginning was not so effective,” said Mehmel Basoglu, former principal of HSI-Fort Worth and current Assistant Superintendent of Programs for Harmony’s North Texas District. “We realized that character education should not be owned by the one or two teachers on campus who taught these classes.”

As a solution, HSI-Fort Worth added an advisory class to its schedule for the 2015-2016 school year with the specific goal of giving character lessons.

“It really needed to be everyone’s responsibility so that the entire campus was speaking the same language for character education and the expectations that came with it,” said Alan Burke, former HSI-Fort Worth Dean of Academics and current District Instructional Support and Testing Coordinator for the North Texas District.

Encouraged by then North Texas Superintendent Feth Ay – now CEO for Harmony Public Schools – the campus formed a committee and, in the summer of 2016, began drafting their campus values.

That’s when HSI-Fort Worth really dove into their character education work. “We discussed what we wanted our campus values to look like, and what we wanted our students to succeed in,” said Burke. And with the help of an Employability Rubric created by Burke, they decided on PRIDE.

PRIDE became an acronym for the habits and characteristics used to prepare students for success and excellence in middle school, high school and beyond.
Professionalism: Exhibits honesty, appropriate language and dress, and good manners.

Respect: Shows tolerance for different points of view and beliefs; shows regard for one’s surroundings, things and others.

Involvement: Effective use of student planner and class time, participates in school activities, events and school culture; seeks out opportunities for growth.

Determination: Stays committed to personal and academic goals; persistent work ethic and character; shows enthusiasm and self-motivation.

Excellence: Strives for high levels of achievement and merit; makes a strong effort to obtain personal honors and awards; exhibits focus and self-discipline.

Staff and students would model and reinforce these values in every facet of campus life, which serves as the basis of the campus’s collective success.

“Every time we talk to a student about something, even if it is for running in the hallway, we ask – ‘Do professionals run in the hallway?’ – and in doing so, we tie it back to a core value and have that practice reinforced every day,” said Burke. “It is emphasized in everything that we do.”

“It was a really unique experience where 25 teachers and 100 students—who we called ‘Change Champs’—came together from all different backgrounds to be in the same room for an entire day and strip down walls and barriers that still existed,” said Jaci Chasteen, former HSI-Fort Worth Dean of Students and current North Texas District Principal Resident.

This event was key in helping HSI-Fort Worth ultimately go from being a State School of Character to a National School of Character in 2020.

“Right after Challenge Day, I saw students step forward and take responsibility for their school environment,” said Basoglu. “The same students I would see in the discipline office were now at the front door entrance, greeting their peers as they came to school, high-fiving them.”

HSI-Fort Worth will hold the National School of Character Designation until 2025, when they will have to re-submit an application.

“This entire experience cemented for me that if we create systems like this, where students want to be successful, staff want to go to work and everyone is striving for the same goal – excellence and success – then we can have the school that we all want to have,” said Burke.

Many other Harmony schools now use similar models as they also work for their own School of Character recognition.

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When the school applied for character designation in 2017-18, it received Honorable Mention. A little more character work, plus an in-person training visit by Character.org the following year earned the school a State School of Character designation in 2018-19.

The advisory class, featuring Student Success Conferences, and the student body buy-in helped in that success, according to Burke.

“During student success conferences, teachers and students would review and set goals for character and academic improvement,” he said. “Through those slow steps, students are rating themselves, while seeing teachers in their corner, and students are buy-in as part of the regular practice.”

Students who belonged to the Principal's Cabinet also played a big role by preparing a presentation on the school's core values and benefits of character education and sharing it during advisory classes.

“Students heard from their peers on why character is important.” said Basoglu. “That changed students' perspectives.”

Later, HSI-Fort Worth implemented a House System, which helped instill their core values and ramp up enthusiasm. House events like “Challenge Day” exemplified that.

When asked what advice they would give other Harmony schools striving for national character designation, one word repeatedly came up.

“It has to be intentional,” said Burke. “You have to structure your school with the explicit purpose that you’re going to improve—always looking for areas to grow, and always doing it as a team,” he said.

Though the school has set the character standard for others to follow, it definitely has not finished its journey.

“Character school is the start of the journey, not the end,” said Burke. “Because from that moment on we are making a promise to the public that this is something we’re going to continue to build on. There’s always something additional to do. There’s always something to build on. Whether it’s new staff or other new challenges—there’s always something you’re going to have to incorporate into your day and continue with that vision.”