

ETHICAL LITERACY® PERSPECTIVE

August 2007 - by Don Proffit

Equipped with the newly acquired skills and practices gained from an intensive Ethical Fitness® Train-the-Trainer program, I presented an Ethical Fitness® Seminar (EFS) to district- and building-level administrators in late August 2000, prior to the start of the new school year. Twenty-nine school leaders representing the district's seven schools and central office administrators participated in the day-long event. This professional development training provided a unique opportunity to share the EFS framework with colleagues, coordinate and better define the various character education initiatives at each of the schools (pre-K to 12), and gain the experience and confidence I would need to launch Ethical Fitness® as the underlying grid for sustaining healthy relationships between students and adults at the high school. Improved relationships based on shared values would, I believed, aid in improving the school's overall climate and culture, and therefore, improve academic achievement for all students.

The administrators' training was a success and the critical feedback from colleagues offered suggestions for strengthening my delivery to my next audience – new staff hires at the high school – to be offered during a half-day session as part of a three-day orientation program. Representing both experienced and first-year teachers, fourteen individuals began to consider the place of values in a public school setting, identify the group's shared values, and explore the EFS framework for resolving right versus right dilemmas. This session also allowed me to share my vision for how we might identify a school's shared values and hopefully improve our learning community.

As my understanding of shared values and ethical decision-making grew with each delivery of the EFS model, my intention for establishing and sustaining a healthy school environment became an obsession. In preparing for the first day of school for staff, I invited assistant principals and supervisors to handle the logistic issues facing staff for the start of the school year; I would provide teachers and support staff an introductory presentation on ethical decision making and shared values. This would not be a large-scale delivery of EFS to an assembled staff of 150, but rather a guided conversation on why our values influence the decisions we make.

I knew that an artificial, forced, top-down directive on implementing a new ethics program for the school would not be the approach best suited for my staff. I also firmly believed in a distributed leadership model that both involved and valued the input from staff. Instead, I read two poems referenced in Rush Kidder's book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. So, with the formalities of introducing new staff to returning faculty and brief remarks on the excitement and expectations for the new school year, I settled down to read Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*. I read in a slow, deliberate manner. The staff settled back in the auditorium's padded seats, sensing each word as familiar and something known. The English teachers smiled and nodded to one another. I felt connected with those in the hall, and as I continued, I remembered when Robert Frost read this very piece to students at my Greenwich, Connecticut, junior high school in 1962.

After a period of reflection, I posed the question to staff: What does this poem have to do with making choices for both adults and students in this school? Quick conversation followed. Then I read another poem, *Traveling Through The Dark*, by William Stafford, an emotionally charged piece detailing an encounter between Stafford and a road-killed deer on a narrow mountain road late one night. In his words, Stafford struggles with a decision that would impact not only him, but others as well. My questions to staff followed: What would you do in this situation? Based on Stafford's final choice, what values did he call upon? Where did his sense of doing the right thing come from? The seed had been planted, and with patience I would nurture the growth of this initiative with my staff.

I had one more audience to serve during September – the already established 50-member Principal's Advisory Council (PAC) comprised of 50 young people sincerely concerned for their school and its future. I convened the meeting with the PAC and shared my vision for an ethically literate school based on shared values and healthy student-adult relationships. I asked them if they would be willing to participate in an Ethical Fitness® Seminar and then consider strategies for infusing EFS concepts throughout the school. The students were in agreement and I moved forward in setting a time and place for a two-day EFS student retreat.

The day arrived for our two-day, off-campus retreat, students boarded the bus, and off we went. Students were enthusiastic and thoughtful in their work. They had completed selected readings for the sessions and considered ethical dilemmas to share with each other. The students easily grasped the EFS concepts and decision-making framework. Our first day together was meaningful and productive. Students identified and agreed on five shared values – respect, responsibility, fairness, honesty and compassion. They deepened their understanding of each other through sharing dilemmas and incorporating the right versus right paradigms and resolution principles. The dilemmas they shared were compelling and given from the heart.

Our second day focused on a review of the material covered during the previous day and then moved to developing a strategic plan for delivering the information to the entire student body and staff. The final result was a simple, straightforward approach centered on sharing information and processes with the existing network of peer relationships as well as conversations and presentations with staff, and informing parents and the community through newsletters and local media.

In the next issue, I will share a few of the tools used in communicating this initiative to the parents and community, as well as evidence that the school's culture was beginning to change for the better.