

The Fourth and Fifth Rs

Respect and Responsibility

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Growing Character in the Elementary Classroom

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Teaching is a calling. In fact, I believe it is the highest calling. I believe it is the job of teachers to call their students to personal—as well as academic—excellence. Students will never know how high their potential in life is unless we call them to it.

We never know how high we are 'til we are called to rise.

—Emily Dickinson

Here are fourteen of my favorite practices for helping students achieve their full potential.

1. The Teacher Pledge

The very first week of school, I initiate a class discussion on "What makes a good teacher?" I record students' ideas on chart paper, take the chart home, and use it to make my pledge. I write down the teacher traits that I promise to use in the classroom in an effort to meet their expectations and to achieve my goal to be a good teacher.

TEACHER PLEDGE

Respect: I will listen to my students. I will speak in a soft, respectful voice.

Responsibility: I will grade and return papers in a timely manner.

Caring: I will help each student who asks for help.

Fairness: I will treat each student fairly, without prejudice.

Trustworthiness: I will honor student confidentiality.

Citizenship: I will be a good role model for my students.

I group my promises around six "pillars of character." (See box below.) Then the next day, in front of the students, I sign the pledge.

The pledge is posted in the classroom—and referred to often during the year. I use it as a measuring stick for how well I am doing. Students feel comfortable and safe because of my promise.



2. The Student Pledge

I follow up the Teacher Pledge activity with a discussion about what makes a good class. Using the same traits of good character as a guide, the students and I talk about their responsibility and behavior and their effect on classroom learning. Again, I take chart paper and record their ideas. From that brainstorming session, the Student Pledge is written, signed by each student,

STUDENT PLEDGE

Respect: I will listen when the teacher is talking and when a classmate is talking.

Responsibility: I will come prepared for class. I will complete and turn in assignments on time.

Caring: I will help my classmates.

Fairness: I will take turns. I will not leave anyone out.

Trustworthiness: I will not cheat, lie, or take things that do not belong to me.

Citizenship: I will be a good role model for younger students in our school.

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and posted next to the Teacher Pledge. Because the ideas are theirs, students have ownership of the pledge. It becomes a meaningful part of their quest for personal and academic excellence. Sometimes just a reminding glance at the pledge helps students get back on track with behavior and academic responsibility.

3. Basic Civilities

It's important to teach students about the basic civilities that make school a nicer place in which to work and learn. We start off making a chart at the beginning of the year and add ideas as we go along: saying *please* and *thank you*, saying *sir* and *ma'am* when speaking to adults, greeting people we see at school, opening the door for others, giving classmates space in line, being polite at every opportunity, and showing respect at all times.

4. School Quiet Times

Building a climate that is conducive to learning requires that some parts of the elementary school day be *quiet times*. Once students come to understand that being quiet at certain times is a sign of respect, they are more likely to comply. As a class, we brainstorm a list of times when we really need to remain quiet. With student buy-in, this list has helped our school maintain a more orderly learning environment. Quiet times include: during the intercom announcements, when a visitor enters the room, during a test, when the teacher is talking or teaching, in line, and in school hallways.

5. Take Five!

Five minutes doesn't seem like very much time, but if well used, it can help a child feel loved and valued. Find some time in your day to connect personally with your students. Go into the cafeteria and find a student who has finished eating breakfast or lunch, and invite that child to the classroom to chat or to work together on a task. I always make it a point to tell each child about something good I see in him or her. This practice helps kids develop the self-respect and confidence necessary for learning.

"Be in the right place at the right time, doing the right thing!"

6. Repeat After Me!

Several times throughout the day, I will say, "Repeat after me!" I then recite a character axiom such as, "*Be in the right place at the right time, doing the right thing!*" or "*Actions Speak Louder Than Words.*" You can squeeze

in this activity five or six times a day without taking any time away from your instructional day: at the start of the day; when lining up to go to the gym, library, or cafeteria; when changing classes; or when packing bookbags at the end of the day. By the end of the school year, students have learned 180 character messages to help them in their daily lives.

7. Parent-Teacher Thought-Sharing Notebooks

Each school year I select a parent or two and ask for their help with an ongoing project. I buy a notebook for each parent who commits to the task. In it I describe what I am doing to promote character development in my classroom. I send the notebooks home to the parents and they record their ideas, suggestions, and observations about the character growth of their own child, e.g., "*My son is now putting his dirty clothes in the hamper, rather than the usual place—under his bed. He is trying to be more responsible.*" The notebook is passed back and forth between parent and teacher over the course of the school year. At the end of the year, I have a wonderful documentation of our character efforts over the year.

8. Learning Equations

Take math equations a step further, and let students calculate the sum of each equation about good character. Here are a few: *Responsible Work Ethic + Effort = Good Grades*; *Friendship + Caring = A Happy Life*; *Honesty + Lots of Study Time = Good Test Scores*; *Responsibility + Hard Work = Skill Mastery*; *Self-Respect + Integrity = A Kid of Character*.

9. Honor Sentences

In an effort to promote integrity, I have students write an Honor Sentence on each test and special project paper. Students write sentences that explain their effort and the amount of study time given to the assignment. Here are some sample Honor Sentences from my students' papers:

This is my own work. I studied for 20 minutes each night for three nights.

I passed this test with an A+ because I studied long and hard. I went the extra mile!

I put things off this week and studied only 15 minutes last night. I know I failed the test—but at least I didn't cheat. It is my own work. I'll try harder next time.

Students come to understand that their grades are usually earned in direct proportion to the amount of time and effort put forth in study.

10. Interjections!

This strategy got its start in one of my math classes. We were working on a difficult math skill, and the students were really struggling. I could tell that they were on the verge of giving up. To keep them from becoming discouraged, I stopped the math lesson and interjected an inspirational story about Thomas Edison's effort to invent the light bulb. He failed over 10,000 times, but he looked at each failure as a step toward getting it right! Success was only a try away. This interjected story inspired them to look for their own talents and abilities and to keep trying.

11. The Homework Basket

This is a way to help students develop a good work ethic. Tell them what it means to put an assignment into this basket: *"I am finished with my homework. I have given this assignment my best effort. I have really worked hard. My paper is complete, neatly written, and well thought out. I am proud of my work, and I am now ready for you to read it!"* I have seen students come up and put an assignment in the Homework Basket, stop and think, then take the paper back out again. They have reflected on the assignment and realized that they could do better.

12. Spelling for Character

A simple way to weave character into the spelling curriculum is to select character words to add to the weekly spelling list. Words like *nice*, *kind*, *hope*, and *try* all fit well into a primary list. More difficult words, such as *environment*, *citizenship*, and *honesty* are obvious choices for the intermediate level. Consider adding these words as bonus words for the week.

13. Report Card Goal-Setting Sessions

On the day that report cards are to be handed out, I give each student a goal-setting worksheet. The first section of the worksheet is for predicting what grades the students think they have earned. Notice that I am careful to use the word *earned*, not the word *got*. Teachers do not give grades; students earn them!

The second section is for recording the grades that students earned during the previous grading period.

Then I pass out the report cards. Students open them and look them over—and then move on to the third section of the worksheet. There they record the grades that they just earned in each subject.

Section four asks: "Did your grades go up or down? Give the reasons for any changes in your grades." Stu-

dents now have to face the music. There is no room for excuses. This helps them develop accountability for their decisions over the last grading period.

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The next step is planning for the future. We take a few minutes to think about our habits—really think. Then we do some goal-setting for the next grading period. Students eventually come to see the correlation between their work habits and academic success—plus they get the added incentive of knowing that it is never too late to wipe the slate clean and change their ways.

Using this approach, I have seen students go from Ds to Bs . . . and stay there!

14. Family Character Night.

This idea came from one of my 6th-grade students, Wesley. He figured out early in the school year that the character message we teach at school was quite different from the message he was learning at home. He asked one day if I would teach a character class for the parents of our school.

Wesley and I went to our principal to discuss the matter. Our staff felt that this might be a good way to get the character message into our school community. And so, a Family Character Night was planned: a fun night of friendship and learning, lots of food, a keynote speaker, families rotating through three sessions in which teachers demonstrated character lessons and activities, and lots of give-away prizes.

We bought Dr. Helen LeGette's insightful book *Parents, Kids & Character* to give away to each family. The kids got tablets, pencils, books, and videos that highlighted good character traits to take home.

One aspect of Family Character Night is a must: Kids cannot come alone. To be admitted, students must be accompanied by at least one adult from their family. If you make the program attractive enough to the kids, they'll bring the adults. ■

Excerpted from Growing Character: 99 Successful Strategies for the Elementary Classroom by Deb Austin Brown. Available from the author