



Transforming the Path to Student Achievement

Character-building leadership programs can change cultures, inspire achievement

By Susie Dahlmann, Executive Director of Reaching Higher, Inc.

As educators, we have sincere passion for youth and a strong drive to give all children the opportunities they need to succeed in life. Franklin D. Roosevelt once said: “We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.” That need was true in his generation, and may be even more pressing now.

Our schools are full of students who have lost hope and are facing depression and apathy. Their life stories are full of tragedy and disappointment. Suicides are rising, drugs and alcohol are at an all time high, and bullying and negativity plague our hallways. It must STOP. As adults we must model right actions, and create a desire for our youth to live healthy, intentional lives. Often times, the best example our youth will see will come from school.

So how do we change the culture within our schools? Many schools have found one solution to be providing character education or leadership programs for their youth. If your school is considering this approach, here are four things to consider as you evaluate potential programs:

Personal, individualized approach.

Students thrive when they feel that someone truly believes in them. Look for a program that offers a very personal and individualized approach to character building. In today’s world, it

is easy to get lost in the crowd. The strongest programs are those that allow each student to be genuinely heard without filtering or judgment, and to be reflected and valued. Taking a sincere interest in EACH student allows for tremendous growth, and builds HOPE in a tough world.

Example: Orlando

was a sixth grade student from northeast Detroit who had had a rough start in life. Like so many children, he was dynamic and brilliant, yet was lacking a strong support network at home. After being coached and mentored through a 9-session leadership program, Orlando started to bloom, and was equipped with new tools to handle his challenging personal situation. This year, he proudly graduated from Eastern Michigan University and is now working as an intern for Fox 2 News Detroit. Orlando has told us that seeing empathy modeled and reflected was a key motivator to his long term success!

Mentorship Components. People don’t care how much you know until



Recent Graduates of Reaching Higher at Howell High School

they know how much you care! When selecting a leadership program for your school, make sure it includes a strong mentorship component. In our “technology-based” world, people are missing the human connection. We often don’t take the time to really “care” for one another. Your leadership program should create a safe space for students to share their hearts, to be heard, and to thrive in communication with others.

Example: Kelsey, a junior at Brighton High School, was left feeling hopeless after her parents had divorced. Formerly a good student, her grades started falling drastically, she disconnected from her

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Nine Weeks To Success! The Reaching Higher Curriculum

1. You Are A Miracle

Explore our miraculous and unique nature and create a positive community among peers.

2. Remembering

Identify negative messages that we have 'learned' over time and re-discover the precious parts of who we are.

3. Purpose In Life-Setting Goals

Look at our unique gifts. Explore how to set and attain realistic goals in school, relationships, and other pursuits.

4. Managing Stress

Learn techniques for impulse intervention and healthy methods to relieve stress.

5. Changing Limiting Beliefs

Identify our negative self-beliefs and replace these falsities with positive and productive images.

6. Fear to Freedom

Explore the impact of fear in our lives & learn productive methods to release it.

7. Positive Life Choices

Hear personal testimony of poor life choices and learn the process and discipline of making good choices.

8. Happiness Through Giving and Loving

Learn, give to, and empower one another through kind action and communication.

9. Graduation

A community celebration of student accomplishments featuring stories of struggle, hope, and victory.

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friends, and became severely depressed. After nine weeks of participating in a strong leadership program, she discovered a reason to "care" about her own future. She invested in her studies, improved her grades, reconnected with her friends, and made intentional choices for her future. Today Kelsey is thriving, having just completed her first year at Curry College in Massachusetts where she made the Dean's list all terms. Kelsey attributes a large part of her success to the relationships she developed with caring mentors; people who believed strongly in her until she could believe in herself.

Positive Culture and Core Values. I've heard it said that "you are who you hang around with." Creating a positive culture in your school starts at the top. Look for programs that reference and enhance your school's core values; programs that model integrity, honesty, truth, kindness and compassion. Human beings thrive when they are given love, attention, and appreciation. Mother Teresa was known to have said, "There are no great deeds, only small deeds done with great love."

Example: Last week I received a call from a student named Annisa from Royal Oak High School. When she came to us, all the odds were against her. Her father was in prison, her mother a drug addict, and she had little family structure to speak of. Through participating in our programs over time, she learned how to take control over her circumstances. She improved her grades, focused on making good choices, and developed a deep sense of inner belief. Her call this week was to let me know that she's been accepted to Oakland University where she will pursue a medical degree this fall. Receiving calls like this are the BEST events in my week!

Sustainability. There are no "quick fixes" for our youth. Look for a program that can offer a sustainable mechanism to support and strengthen students over time.

Example: Stephani took our leadership training course in her sophomore year of high school. She came back to mentor in a class in both her junior and senior years, continuing to learn, apply, and reinforce key concepts. She also volunteered to help middle school students understand healthy lifestyle choices.




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We walked by her side for many years, and being a positive example for others has strengthened her to make healthier choices.

In summary, make sure that your program motivates through individualization, allows for personal mentoring, models positive core values, and is sustainable over time. Following this recipe, your program is sure to succeed! Remember these sage words of Margaret Mead: “Never believe that a few caring people can’t change the world, for indeed, its all that ever has.” Working together—administrators, teachers, counselors, parents and students—we can make a difference!

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