

From the  
MIDDLE SCHOOL  
DIRECTOR

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## Habits of the Heart and Mind

If you've wandered into one of our Middle School classrooms in the past year, you may have noticed posters entitled "Habits of the Heart and Mind." New this year, the "Habits" are a shared set of values that have become the foundation for so much of what happens in Menlo's Middle School. As such, I thought you might like to know more about their origins and how they are incorporated into the Middle School program.

Having worked in independent schools for 30 years, I've found it's especially important to have a set of articulated shared values that schools exemplify to help students become good citizens. I find middle schoolers are more open to discussing topics relating to character, ethics, and values, and this is one of the things I love most in working with this age group. They are interested and willing to engage in conversations and activities that look at questions such as what does it mean to be a morally decent human being? And how can we better participate in community together?

A shared values system can also empower our teachers to teach to the whole child and approach curriculum from different perspectives. In bringing the Habits of the Heart and Mind to life at Menlo, it was important that the values came directly from our faculty for two reasons. First, teachers are the ones who model and embody the characteristics, and second, I hoped the values would be woven throughout the entire middle school experience—from athletics and arts to academics and student life.

Our Middle School faculty spent much of last school year discussing what these values should include. The initial list

was long, and after thoughtful consideration, we narrowed it down to these six:

- **Self-Awareness** – Consciously knowing one's strengths, emotions, and character
- **Ethical Behavior** – Acting with integrity and moral values
- **Empathy** – Understanding and honoring another's emotions and point of view
- **Curiosity** – Questioning, exploring, and understanding the world beyond ourselves
- **Collaboration** – Working with others toward a common goal by listening, sharing, and reflecting
- **Resilience** – Recovering and growing from challenges

After introducing the "Habits" to our students at an assembly in August, the Habits have touched every corner of the Middle School experience. Nearly everything we do in the classroom is designed to foster **curiosity** but many of the other Habits are being taught there as well. Our arts and athletic programs offer an ideal forum to teach **collaboration** and **resilience** among other Habits. We've also incorporated the Habits into Human Skills and Learning Seminar and made them the focal point of our advocacy and assembly curriculum, which provide safe forums for exploring **empathy**, **ethical behavior**, and **self-awareness**.

In one especially powerful assembly in February, the entire Middle School participated in the Hearts Project. This assembly aims to deepen **empathy** and build community through a look at identity and by allowing students to be seen and better understand the circumstances of others. Students and faculty completed a paper form—shaped like a heart—that had identifiers about self-esteem, stress, bullying, family structure, sexual identity, and body image. Each participant anonymously put a mark next to the statement they felt best described them. The heart forms were passed out randomly so everyone received someone else's "heart." Then, teachers read the statements from the hearts aloud, one at a time. Those holding hearts with the concurring statements stood for a moment of reflection, giving everyone the opportunity to focus on the number of those standing—rather than the person representing the author of the heart.

Students could really visualize and understand the diversity of feelings and backgrounds within our community.

Here's a look at a few other ways the Habits have been incorporated at each grade level:

### *Sixth Grade*

One of the largest projects in the sixth grade advocacy curriculum is the “I am” poem project, which focuses on the **self-awareness**, **curiosity**, and **collaboration** habits. Advocates used the “iceberg” metaphor for identity—there is a lot below the surface—to encourage students to share what makes them who they are: family traditions/sayings, memories, values, favorite foods/hobbies, and their hopes and worries about the future. After each student crafted their own poem and shared them with their advocacy, each advocacy created a mash-up “I am” poem video where they included a few lines from everyone’s poem. The entire class gathered to watch the videos together so students could learn about each other and find new ways to connect with one another.

Sixth graders are also encouraged to practice **resilience** in math as well as other classes. Following assessments, they dig into their mistakes, figure out how to correct them, and revise their answers. In science, students work in groups and **collaborate** on labs and projects, as the best science occurs when we share ideas and work towards common goals. In Mr. Virani’s history class, students examine issues from multiple perspectives, emphasizing **self-awareness** and **empathy**. For example, students watch a documentary about Iran during the Mesopotamia unit to give a view of the country that is different than what we generally see in our media.



### *Seventh Grade*

Seventh graders spent a couple of advocacies discussing case studies of ethical decision-making. Students read a case about a basketball team that made it to the playoffs, but its coach has a strict rule that if players don’t show up to a practice before a game, they don’t play. The team’s starting center missed the practice before the playoffs. Students were very thoughtful in their examination. Some gave thought as to why the player missed practice, others took the view of upholding the rule no matter what and said the player shouldn’t play, while others felt it was a championship game and they should give the player some slack. The discussions could have continued well past advocacy as the students each took turns talking about **ethical behavior**.

Through their DUDE projects, seventh graders practice many of the Habits. **Curiosity** is fostered as students are encouraged to explore a vast array of topics affecting the world today—from nuclear waste in the Marshall Islands to access to clean water in Kenya to the effects of social media on teens. They practice **resilience** by having to meet deadlines and incorporate feedback. There is **collaboration** as they help each other select titles, share ideas for presentation designs, and proofread each other’s work.

During Ms. Smith’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* lesson, seventh graders talk about **empathy** as they look at how Atticus is able to empathize even with the villain, Bob Ewell. Early in the novel, Atticus teaches Scout “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” Students think about this from various perspectives and may write about the development of Scout’s empathy in their projects.

## Eighth Grade

Eighth grade advocacies explored **self-awareness** by reflecting and journaling on this prompt: *“On many levels the transition from middle to high school allows for a Tabula Rasa (or clean slate), a chance to redefine yourself. Some students express a desire to grow beyond the roles they have played throughout middle school. Describe something you don’t want to carry with you into high school.”*

Our students’ responses included things like: “procrastination,” “my negativity,” “my tendency to not participate,” “I hope I will be open to new people and new ideas,” “I want to leave my bad attitude behind and not psych myself out,” “I want to be more positive,” and “I want to be trusted and seen as legitimate in this community.”

Additionally, eighth grade advocacies practiced resiliency by watching the documentary “Resilient Teens and Positive Mental Health,” and reflecting about the foundations of resilience that are solid in their own lives. Similarly, they delved into empathy by watching Maysoon Zayis’s TED Talk “I’ve got 99 problems...palsy is just one” and reflecting on their own lives as well as their peers.

In English, eighth graders reflected on their core beliefs and what’s truly important to them in life. Using the NPR “This I Believe” program as a model, students practiced **self-awareness** by writing personal essays about their beliefs and publishing them as sometimes serious, sometimes witty, but always thoughtful podcasts.

The design thinking process provides lots of opportunities to foster **curiosity, collaboration, and resilience**. In eighth grade science, for example, students collaborated to build a complex Rube Goldberg machine that could pop a balloon, and they constructed a bridge that could support 100+ lbs and was made of only popsicle sticks and Elmer’s glue. Both group projects required thinking outside of the box, designing and problem solving as a team, and sometimes going back to the drawing board to revisit ideas that didn’t pan out on the first try.

At the end of the day, we want our students to become good citizens who care about others and themselves. We want them to know their strengths and areas of growth. We want them to understand their emotions and how to build good character. We want them to be curious about the world. We want them to be resilient, whether it’s bouncing back from a failed test, a broken leg, or a broken heart. We want them to be able to collaborate on the stage, on the field, and in the lab. We want them to act with integrity, for that builds good character and sustains healthy relationships. And, we want them to show empathy to know what paths others take and to honor their journey. We believe the Habits of the Heart and Mind provide a strong foundation in fostering these traits in our students.



KnightLine is published in .pdf form on the Menlo School website each month, with an email alert including a link sent to all parents. For questions, please contact Alex Perez, Director of Communications, via email at [alex.perez@menloschool.org](mailto:alex.perez@menloschool.org) or by calling 650.330.2001 ext. 2330.

