

Spelling

LOCAL SCHOOLS USE CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAMS TO HELP STUDENTS DEFINE A MORAL COMPASS

BY JOSH WILSON

Olaf Jorgenson was at the airport when he first saw the news: A bevy of notable and well-to-do families were in legal peril after using their money and influence to get their children admitted into some of the most prestigious universities in the nation..

Bribery. Influence-peddling. Corruption. The scope of the scandal surprised and startled us—not just for its constellation of famous and powerful names, which includes Hollywood stars, socialites, industrialists and heirs to dazzling fortunes. It was also a gut-punch to millions of less-fortunate families who work hard and play by the rules in their quest for a high-quality education and the promise it holds for life beyond college.

But as the Head of School at Almaden Country Day School in San Jose, Jorgenson was not surprised by the scandal. Due to his position, he understood the forces at play; in fact, he lives with them on a daily basis. “Parents today are inundated by peer pressure that tells them they’re negligent if they’re not pushing their children to achieve,” he said. “This mindset is what encourages parents to become helicopters or

snowplows or tigers or whatever term we use. And taken to the next level among parents with adequate resources, why not plow the way into college too?”

The beating heart of the problem is what he describes as the “the college lie”—that there is only one college, or a small group of elite universities, worth getting into. At any price. While Jorgenson points out that in reality there are plenty of great schools out there, these laser-focused parents exhibit some behaviors that, even at their “least desperate,” border on pernicious. They push their kids to “cram more AP classes into their schedules, to pad their college resumes by launching nonprofits in third world countries and amass abundant service hours, to do and be more and better (and sleep less).”

In that intensely competitive culture, he said, achievement overrides wellness. There are uncomfortable correlations between the drive for constant high achievement and the toll it takes on personal health and well-being. Suicide attempts, Jorgenson notes, are twice as high at Harvard compared to the national average for college students.



it Out

LEARNING ETHICS IN THE SCHOOLYARD

Given the growing awareness of the potential damage caused by pressuring teenaged students to succeed, amplified by the lack of scruples most recently on display by some high-profile parents, it is not surprising that many college-prep schools are now embracing their roles as the first lines of defense against the larger ethical crisis that produced the admissions scandal in the first place.

One irony is that—at first glance—these same South Bay and Peninsula private day schools seem to bear out the region's stereotype as the elite, hard-driving heartland of a culture of competition. That culture shoulders at least part of the blame for unrealistic expectations around childhood academics and collegiate aspirations.

The schools vary in philosophy and practice, but all are looking past the basics of classroom learning, and the necessity of high test scores, to create learning environments that produce, in their words, *good people*.

The Harker School in San Jose, one of the leading college-prep schools in the region, includes charac-

SHUTTERSTOCK

ter and ethics in curriculum for all K-5 students, said Assistant Head of School Jennifer Gargan. They focus on “integrity, kindness, accountability and respect.”

The program expands in the upper grades, she said, with school assemblies and smaller group discussions serving as “major vehicles” for the school’s ethics agenda—which, notably, includes academic honesty.

Harker has also established a student-led honor council with a mission, Gargano said, to “ensure that the students continue to see ethical behavior as the foundation of all we do as a school.” The council organizes the assemblies and small-group discussions, in addition to sponsoring an ethics conference for student leaders and advisors. Participants tackle a broad range of issues such as plagiarism and problematic personal experiences. On the agenda, too, is changing the school’s culture for the better.

In Mountain View, Yew Chung International School views character development and ethics education through an “East meets West” philosophy in which

the seemingly divergent cultural traits of individualism and teamwork are seen as flip sides of the same coin.

It all starts in the very earliest grades, says third-grade teacher Heidi Wang,

When it comes to conflict resolution in the classroom, Eastern cultural values of humility and deference are brought to bear, alongside Western norms of self-assertion.

Yew Chung also employs a third party “social-emotional” curriculum called Second Step, integrated into school life through each student’s K-8 experience. It “covers areas such as empathy, skills for learning, emotion management and problem solving,” notes Yew Chung kindergarten teacher Stephanie Woodcox, who also leads the school’s Student Support Services. “We were looking for something to deepen our students’ social and emotional understanding and learning.” To encourage this, Second Step provides scenarios that prompt students to think through the consequences of their decisions.

In one such scenario, students are


presented with large cue cards depicting two children playing together without including a third, separate child. One of the two playmates refuses to reach out to the third. That rejection, says Woodcox, shocked her students. They were upset by the act of exclusion.

Woodcox also reads her students books that pose moral dilemmas and ask “open-ended questions... that lead them to broaden their perspective and thinking.”

At St. Matthew’s Episcopal Day School in San Mateo, morality and ethics start with daily chapel programs, and continue into the classroom.

“We emphasize that a good life is one of service to others, not only of personal achievement,” Head of School Julie Galas said in a statement. This means more than just social justice and “philosophical ethics” classes, but also “service learning projects” such as habitat restoration along the coast in Half Moon Bay, food delivery in San Francisco’s Bayview/Hunters Point neighborhoods, and an annual Halloween party at a senior center in Palo Alto.

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INVENTIVE PROGRAMS

Nationally, the nonprofit Character Education Partnership (character.org) is a network recognizing schools that provide a learning environment that supports building positive character traits, such as fostering respect, making moral choices, engaging parents and building accountability into the school community. Yew Chung's Second Step is not the only approach to character development and ethics education. And college-bound private school students are not the only participants in related programs.

The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University offers the Character Education Framework, a set of eight "themes" that define character virtues and moral standards for behavior. The themes are inherently based on action and personal commitment: Change requires effort, courage requires fortitude, kindness requires empathy, and so on. Reading plays an essential role in Markkula's program. It provides students with novels, poems, short stories and even folktales to put forth ethical dilemmas and moral choices. Santa Clara County's Office of Alternative Education also uses the program to engage with at-risk students, some of whom have spent time in Juvenile Hall.

In San Francisco, the Collaborative Life Skills program, which operates out of the UCSF Department of Psychiatry, provides schools with a research-driven pro-

gram that combines in-school classes for children and small working groups for parents. The nine-week program requires buy-in from each school's administration and guidance staff, and uses a series of classroom and home "challenges" that train students and parents to model and practice collaboration and cooperation. It stresses the importance of using positive language, rather than punishment, to reward effort and build positive behaviors among children with attention and behavior issues in class.

This mingling of teaching and behavioral workshopping appears to be on the rise throughout the region.

Sheri Glucoft Wong, a Berkeley-based family therapist who consults to schools across the Bay Area says that her clients are integrating social-emotional learning programs into the spectrum of academic life.

"It's not just reading, writing and arithmetic," she explains. "Schools are asking for more support with what happens on the playground," she says, "They are starting to think about playground staff as educators, and about free play as part of the educational experience. They want it to be constructive as part of developing character."

Wong says that kids need to know they're special and unique—and at the same time, that they're like everyone else. That may sound contradictory, but what she wants to encourage is empathy by stressing that feelings transcend age

and gender. She emphasizes the importance of involving the parents, who need to know "when to give each message, and to be sure your kids get both."

Jorgenson, the Almaden Country Day School Head, says that ethics and character education is "infused" into daily life, and that parental participation is not optional.

"Buy-in is critical," he says. "Teachers, parents, the administration, and the children need to understand and appreciate and abide by a school's norms for character and learning. Otherwise, in my experience, no program will be truly effective."

In practice, he notes, "the best character-education programs are so deeply assimilated in schools that they're virtually invisible. But the results are very visible—you visit a campus and encounter young people who clearly feel safe and at ease in their own skin, who are confident and poised, who accept and welcome differences among their peers, who are respectful and kind and caring."

Jorgenson also cites research-based curricula as foundational to his approach to ethics education. This includes the Character and Competence program developed by Utah-based psychologist A. Lynn Scoresby; and the "conscious discipline" methodology advanced by developmental psychologist Rebecca Bailey.

NAVIGATING PAST COLLAPSE

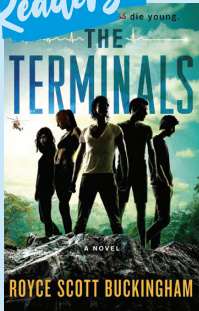
The larger question still demands a clear answer: How is it that amidst this bur-

10 Books That Matter

GREAT READS WITH THOUGHTFUL THEMES

These imaginative and age-appropriate tomes teach young readers literary lessons that set the foundation for a lifetime of ethical decision making.

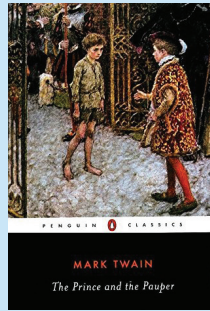
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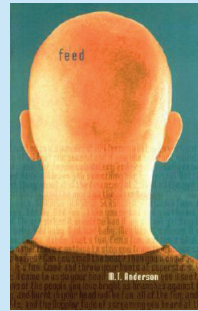
“The Terminals,” by Royce Scott Buckingham. Thomas Dunne/Macmillan. This thought-provoking tale addresses mortality, weaving an intriguing plot of teens with terminal illnesses who are recruited as superspies for an agency that may not be all that it seems.



“God Loves, Man Kills,” by Chris Claremont. Marvel Graphic Novel #5. The Uncanny X-Men are known worldwide as outcasts and misfits who fight evil—and persecution. This is a breakthrough graphic narrative for its depiction of the marvelous mutants’ struggle to do good amidst growing societal hatred.



“The Prince and the Pauper,” by Mark Twain. Penguin Classics. Twain’s classic story of switched identities puts a child of royalty in the position of one of the most destitute people in his society, and the pauper in lavish surroundings. Both children’s illusions are shattered as they are challenged to act with courage and conviction in a world of enormous cruelty and privilege.



“Feed,” by M.T. Anderson. Candlewick Press. Everyone in this world is living in a hyper-stimulated miasma of multimedia, product placement and customized shopping opportunities delivered via The Feed. Anderson explores what happens when the party-till-you-puke protagonist is given the opportunity to grow a conscience and engage with a different world.

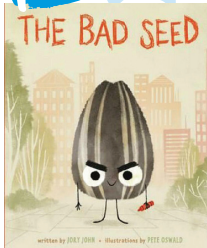


“Some Girls Are,” by Courtney Summers. St. Martin’s/Macmillan. A teenage mean girl is forced to reconsider her position at the top of the bullying food chain after experiencing relentless persecution following a rape attempt.

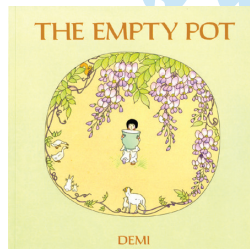


“Powers,” “Voices” and **“Gifts,”** by Ursula K. Le Guin. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. The YA trilogy from Le Guin, one of the great American writers, won the PEN/USA and Nebula awards. The books put young protagonists in the thick of life-changing confrontations with slavery, inheritance and military occupation, all set in the richly imagined fantasy landscape of the Western Shore. Like her beloved “A Wizard of Earthsea” novels, these books raise basic questions about living an ethical life and weave them into a vivid and compelling narrative.

Young Readers



“The Bad Seed,” by Jory John, art by Pete Oswald. HarperCollins Children. This charming and simple picture book paints a picture of a seed with bad manners and a bad attitude—and the potential to change.



“The Empty Pot,” by Demi. Macmillan/Square Fish. A young boy admits that he’s the only child who can’t grow a seed distributed by the Emperor of China, and is rewarded for his honesty.



“One,” “Two,” and **“Zero,”** by Kathryn Otoshi. Ko Kids Books. Not just a series of counting books—these classics also address bullying, cooperation and acceptance.



“What Should Danny Do?” and **“What Should Danny Do? School Day,”** by Ganit and Adir Levy. Elon Books. In the classic style of a choose-your-own-adventure book, the authors enable readers to decide how young Danny resolves the dilemmas he encounters. The element of autonomy opens up an opportunity to discuss the consequences of the choices we make.



“The Recess Queen,” by Alexis O’Neill. Scholastic. Mean Jean the Recess Queen is the reigning bully on the playground, until a newcomer who isn’t intimidated invites her to play.

geoning character-development and ethics-education movement, such extraordinary ethical collapse has taken hold across a wide swath of families at the top of the economic and social strata in the United States and around the world?

Yael Kidron, who runs the Character Education program at the Markkula Center suggests that there is a crisis of values at work. "What constitutes 'the good life,' and what constitutes success in life?" she asks. The parents at the heart of the scandal "got off track, they didn't have a clear and ethical image of what it is to live the good life, live with integrity and strive to be the best person you can be."

Kindness. Honesty. A sense of justice and responsibility: Kidron says these authentic values both require and foster "a true sense of your moral self."

The flip side of that, she says, is a "twisted view of what constitutes success," in which end goals and "externally dictated standards" guide decisions, rather than one's own moral compass.

"It's the right of those kids, whose parents lied on their behalf, to be accepted as who they are," Kidron says. "What the parents really violated is their obligation to help the children reach their full potential, and guide them as role models, as good and ethical people who accept the children for who they are and want to be."

Kidron notes the metaphors that made the ethical breaches easier to swallow—taking the "side door," using "the VIP entrance." Accepting such usages amounts to a violation a parent's duty—to acknowledge that there are real stresses in the world, that we don't always get to have the things we want, and that experiencing failure, both the potential of it and the reality, is part of building character and a lifetime of personal integrity.

For Sheri Glucoft Wong, the dilemma starts with "misguided but caring parents who are paying more attention to form than essence; to performance versus their kids' development.

These parents, she says, "misunderstand what's important to a child's or person's well-being, they're just looking at performance," rather than the real needs of a child to grow through experience, struggle—and failure.

"Short-term stress helps brains develop," she says, whereas research shows entitlement in childhood and high marks on an academic transcript are not necessarily predictors for happiness and success in school and life. This has borne out in her own experience as a consultant to schools where competitive academics were prioritized, but social and emotional learning lacked attention.

School administrators "could see the drawbacks," she said, including a "culture of meanness" and a "lack of compassion not just in the school culture, but in the culture of the families." Glucoft Wong says that a reasonably reliable predictor of a child's success in school and beyond has been the development of character qualities such as cooperation, collaboration, compassion and caring.

Jorgenson says that college-prep high schools, and the colleges themselves, are all too often "accomplices" in subverting values, putting performance before personal growth.

"When we condition children to believe that their self-worth is dependent on their next accomplishment," he says, "we condemn them to a lifetime of unfulfillment."

As a school administrator, part of his job is to temper the "unrealistic expectations that produce a toxic culture."

"I am working with parents," he said, "in support of their struggles with the stress they face from massive peer pressure surrounding 'achievement' in all of its forms."

At the Markkula Center, Yael Kidron said that those pressures continue to persist—and that succumbing to them comes with a high cost. "You will always be facing situations where you will be tempted to make bad choices. Those 'side door' parents crossed a line, and not just because they committed a deep social injustice. They took away their kids' freedom of choice."

"The parent's dream is imposed on them," continues Kidron. "It's a violation not just of the law, but also their children's basic right to be respected for who they are and who they want to be, and figure out their successes their own way. This is what leads to healthy and thriving society. You don't have to go to an Ivy League college to succeed." ■

"Schools are starting to think about playground staff as educators, and about free play as part of the educational experience"



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FROM THE EDITOR

Here's to South Bay Accent's 41st annual anniversary issue! In celebration of more than four decades publishing, we're delighted to invite you to step inside once again and sample the product leading to long-term success: a carefully crafted readers' trove designed to inform, inspire and entertain.

After so many years covering the region, it's no secret that the Bay Area holds a special place in our hearts. In spite of the locality's oft-documented problems, many residents agree it's still a great spot to live. Writer Carole Barrow makes that point in "Hurray for the Bay Area," a quick, light-hearted roundup of some of our favorite things about the place we call home. Where else can you find award-winning wines in some of the most scenic mountain terrains in the country, alongside mind-bending sights like Apple's spaceship headquarter building, a forest of giant redwoods, and the Golden Gate Bridge shining through a swirl of fog? Our list only touches the surface, so if you have your own reasons for being a Bay Area booster, feel free to add on.

In this valley, healthy eating is a popular topic, and ancient grains and seeds play an important role on restaurant menus and in personal diets. "Let it Grain" by Susan Hathaway describes the many uses and benefits of those versatile ingredients and offers insights on why food lovers, health experts and chefs expound on their virtues. The feature also includes a few recipes with grains and seeds to try at home.

As usual, more eating enjoyment can be found in our semiannual Dining Guide with 200 Dining Hot Spots. Whatever you're craving—from a casual bite to a four-star feast—there's plenty to choose from in this popular go-to resource. Also in this issue, check out Calendar, with two full months of fun activities and outings, and Spotlight, a visual parade of unique products.

The South Bay is full of intriguing personalities, and in "Dance Master" writer Julie Vallone introduces Tawnya Kuzia, owner, artistic director and choreographer of San Jose's Nor Cal Dance Arts studio. This profile traces the woman's life path from her early days as a talented, strong-willed dancer to her current success as a leader and mentor for girls—as she guides young dance teams to international prominence.

The recent college admissions scandal shocked many area parents and prompted questions about shaky morals in the face of enrollment pressures. Our feature, "Spelling it Out" by Josh Wilson, addresses the issue and asks what, if any, part schools play in promoting students' moral behavior. It's a fascinating read, discussing perceptions and advice from local educators and leading ethics experts. The feature follows our semiannual special section "Learning to Excel," a useful and well-regarded guide to the area's top-rated private schools.

We hope you enjoy this salute to our extraordinary Bay Area; we're grateful to be here and happy to have you—our loyal readers and advertisers—along for the ride!

Donna Krey
Senior Editor

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