



A Culture of Caring

> In a fourth-grade classroom at Garnett Elementary in Chestertown, Md., three-dozen children sit clustered on a rug, their eyes trained on two men with graying hair who stand before them.

"Anthony, how about sharing the message with us this morning?" begins Bill Hollingsworth, from Dixon.

Standing up, the little boy says in a big voice, "To be honest with yourself, and with others."

"That's right!" says Dick Goodall, Dixon CEO. "So what do you think it means?"

Hands fly up in the air, and one by one the children offer their personal interpretations. "You don't ever lie," says a skinny little boy. A girl with long braids says proudly, "I have been honest before." As the conversation unfolds, the group talks about the importance of recognizing both your good and bad qualities, and of never trying to be someone you're not.

Hollingsworth and Goodall are familiar figures to these fourth-graders;

the two men have been making weekly visits to classrooms for 13 years, coaching kids on the "Character Counts" curriculum and its "Six Pillars"—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.

They are among about 30 Dixon employees—and 130 men and women from across Kent County, Md.—who take time from their workday each week to visit classrooms in Pre-K through ninth grade to spread the word about the importance of making good decisions and living a life of integrity.

"We've always felt that a strong foundation in good values and character makes for successful individuals and organizations," says Goodall. "And in fact, we use the same Six Pillars as part of our mission/vision/values statement at Dixon."

Perhaps for that reason, it's never been a tough sell to get Dixon employees on board and involved with the Character Counts program. "If I walked into Dixon today and said, 'We don't

have time to do this,' we'd have a rebellion on our hands," he says, with a smile. "This has become a part of our culture now."

Dixon's Tom Parr, who serves on the advisory board for the Kent County chapter of Character Counts, is now in his eighth year volunteering with the program. "From a business perspective, it's so good to know that we work for a company that views itself as a part of the community and reaches back out to the community," he says. "And it's not just lip service; we are putting our people into the classroom every single week."

Parr has just returned from his first coaching session of the school year, where he worked with a ninth-grade class. He admits that he was a little nervous going in. He had previously dealt only with young students in elementary school. Could he get a group of teenagers excited about values like honesty and respect?

As it turned out, Parr needn't have worried. Wisely, he and his Dixon

partner kicked off the day's discussion by turning to the news: NASCAR driver Clint Bowyer had just been accused of intentionally spinning out in order to help his teammate, resulting in a \$300,000 fine against his racing team.

"This issue pretty much engaged all the students and everybody started talking," says Parr. Some students felt that the racer was justified and that he acted selflessly to help his teammate. Others argued that his actions violated the spirit of the sport.

"We didn't arrive at a right or wrong answer," Parr says. "But the discussion provided an excellent opportunity to get them all thinking, which is exactly what we want children to do."

Dixon's Jenna Leckrone, who coaches a class of seventh-graders, also refers to issues in the news that kids can relate to. "They get most fired up when we talk about handling situations where someone has 'done you wrong,' at least in your mind," she says. "That generates a huge discussion and sometimes it gets heated." As talk turns to retaliation, Leckrone guides them through the pros and cons of different personal responses.

Leckrone finds it most rewarding, she says, "when kids who initially want to retaliate change their mind and see that standing up for yourself and remaining true to your character is actually a stronger comeback than retaliation."

Both Leckrone and Parr say that the lessons they share each week—about



Some 30 Dixon employees volunteer each week to spend time in classrooms as coaches for the Character Counts curriculum.

setting goals and going after them, for instance, and about being honest with yourself when you've made a mistake—can't help but spill over into their own lives. "Sometimes I'll be doing something and I'll think twice, asking myself, 'Is this what I'd want one of my Character Counts students to do?'" says Leckrone. "It definitely makes us better people. We're giving ourselves a lesson at the same time we're teaching the children."

Longtime fourth-grade teacher Joanne Coveney, from Garnett Elementary, sees a significant benefit to the Character Counts program. She says her students always looked forward to their Monday visits from Goodall and Hollingsworth.

Like other Dixon coaches, the two men make it a point to attend school concerts, field days and classroom parties. "We want to let these children know that we care about them—because

we really do," says Goodall. He notes that some of the kids he encounters aren't fortunate to have positive male role models at home. "Bringing more men into the school has proven very positive, according to the teachers at Garnett Elementary, and the principal," he says.

Back in Coveney's classroom, the lesson is winding down and the fourth-graders have queued up in two lines to practice their handshakes with Hollingsworth and Goodall. Before they begin, Goodall makes a query:

"Who's a winner?" he asks with enthusiasm. In unison, a chorus of young voices shouts back, "I'm a winner!"

Suitably encouraged, the children begin filing up to greet the two Dixon visitors.

"Good morning, Mr. Hollingsworth! My name is Henry!" says one little boy, as he pumps the man's hand and offers a large smile.

The next young man looks to the floor when it's his turn. Hollingsworth gently reminds him, "Remember to look me in the eye."

Before they depart for the morning, Goodall and Hollingsworth end with a familiar refrain. "What kind of day are you going to have?" they ask. "Terrific!" the children shout back. And then from the Dixon men: "Who makes it that way?"

"I do!" the children recite, with grins. They pause a beat, then add, "If it's going to be, it's up to me!"

Goodall, left, and Hollingsworth, right, surrounded by their Garnett Elementary students.

