

Swanton Elementary School

Grades K-6, Public/Rural • Swanton, Vermont

“The Four Ways”: Workable Tools for Life

Teachers often complain that kids forget everything the moment that they leave the classroom. Such is not the case at Swanton Elementary School—at least when it comes to “The Four Ways,” a code of conduct that has shaped student life for more than a decade. It is understandable that current students can recite “The Four Ways” (respecting each other’s feelings, respecting each other’s space, talking positively to resolve differences, and keeping the school safe and neat). What is amazing, however, is that the code is so embedded in the school’s culture that Swanton graduates, now in college, still know it by heart.



Swanton students demonstrate responsibility by working on a real world ecology projects and sharing them with their classmates.

The school’s current role as a model school for Vermont’s Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Project is a testament to its sustained effort over the years to make character education a priority in its philosophy, its curriculum, and its daily rituals. The school’s official project—Safe, Civil, Orderly, Positive Learning Environment (SCOPE)—is a new formalized initiative that basically reemphasizes the values that have been the soul of the Swanton learning experience since 1992.

Two different, but equally strong, forces fuel Swanton’s character education program: school data and faculty passion. When student performance on Vermont’s standardized assessments lagged in 2000, the faculty explored many character programs as a

way to reinvigorate the curriculum and improve the students’ academic performance. The school’s implementation of the *Supportive Classroom Curriculum* in conjunction with the University of Vermont has proven to be the catalyst for measurable improvement. Spearheaded by Associate Principal Julie Benay and SCOPE Coordinator Mary Wood, the program provides strategies for teaching core ethical concepts, implementing student collaborative skills, and addressing challenging behavior. “In Swanton, we practice the core values in other organized ways,” observes Content Specialist and Athletic Director Dena St. Amour, who ensures that sports programs reinforce these values just as academic programs do.

“What’s different here is that adults know if and when kids aren’t feeling connected, and they make an effort to make sure they are,” states a Swanton teacher. The strong power of belonging, the bond that connects students, teachers, parents, and community, is apparent from the first day of school when a parent, relative, or friend joins every child in walking to school. A second grader, deploring how she had missed her teacher during vacation, explains, “Last week on vacation, I didn’t get any *belonging*.” Swanton has actualized belonging in many ways: a welcoming program for new students, a cross-grade buddy program, morning class meetings, peaceful playground time, conflict resolution programs, and a strong anti-bullying campaign. In short, Swanton gives its students workable tools for life.

Extraordinary parental and community support has enriched the school. Sandy Kilburn, community service coordinator, captures Swanton’s spirit by noting that if a town’s wealth can be measured by its degree of caring, she is truly living in “a rich community.”

REFERENCE

Williams, W.; Fox, T.; Fox, W.; Roche, K.; Prue, J.; Farr, L.; Dillenbeck, A. *The Supportive Classroom: A Curriculum for Creating Safe and Supportive Classroom Environments*. Burlington: Center on Disability and Community Inclusion, 2001.

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