

Character at the heart of education

Our unique character education program entered a new phase in 2021 – being integrated into all areas of school life, including the curriculum. Melanie Collins reports on how the program is impacting students' lives.

In schools today, the development of strong character and a moral compass is seen as more important than ever. But it isn't new. In 1947, the great Martin Luther King Jr wrote about the purpose of education, stating: "Intelligence plus character – that is the true goal of education." He said, perhaps "the most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals".

At SACS, a major focus is to equip students with the positive Character Strengths required to navigate and flourish in an increasingly complex world. But how does a school approach such a challenging goal?

A select team of educators at the school spent years designing a unique character development program that incorporated the 10 existing IB Learner Attributes (that come with being an IB World School) with five that reflect the school's Christian foundations and values.

SACS Character Strengths

Caring, Grateful, Principled, Courageous, Servant-hearted, Knowledgeable, Thinking, Inquiring, Open-minded, Reflective, Hopeful, Balanced, Persistent, Self-controlled, Communicative.

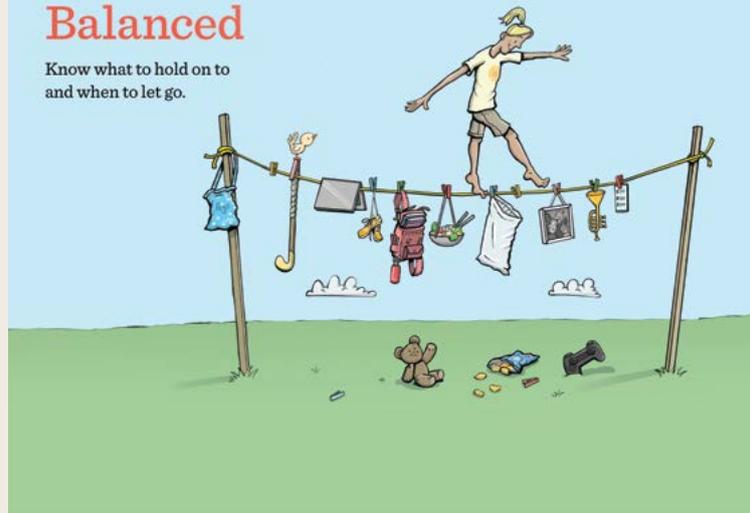
The IB Learner profile encourages students to be: Inquirers, Knowledgeable, Thinkers, Communicators, Principled, Open-minded, Caring, Risk-takers, Balanced and Reflective. These 10 attributes were adapted and five additional character attributes unique to the school were added: Grateful, Servant-hearted, Self-controlled, Hopeful and Persistent.

A key component of the program's rollout in 2021 was the production of unique, engaging illustrations for each of the 15 Character Strengths, which are presented as large colourful decals in stairwells and walls on every level of the campus. The images provide a visual narrative for teaching and learning and are replicated in teacher handbooks and classroom resources as part of the strategy to embed the Strengths into every class and subject in the school. Through both incidental and focussed classroom discussions, alongside tutorial (secondary) and wellbeing (primary) lessons, all students are given the opportunity to reflect on the meaning and application of each Character Strength, and any behaviours that accompany that Strength.

"The development of character is at the heart of our teaching and pastoral care, taught both explicitly and implicitly through habits and routines, role-modelling, service opportunities, leadership and relationships," says the Head of Wellbeing and Character

Balanced

Know what to hold on to and when to let go.



Derek Champion. "In a co-educational environment, character education equips boys and girls to grow in wisdom and hope, so they can use their developing knowledge and expertise in ways that positively impact those around them.

"The highly relatable visible presentation of the Character Strengths around the school this year boosted learning conversations and our program also saw students being recognised with stickers and merits for demonstrating those strengths, which we call 'Strength spotting'.

"We aim to embed strong values through our Junior and Middle School years so that in some of those more difficult years of adolescence, our students will be able to make better decisions that direct their lives."

The illustrations prompt students to engage with the concepts at a deeper level and also create great conversation starters for students and staff that can help them see a different perspective or way of approaching an activity, which ultimately leads to growth in character.

The Junior School Wellbeing Coordinator Bronwyn Wake says the illustrations have prompted some great conversations among students. "Students in the Junior School do particularly love the Grateful image," she says. "It is painted in the stairwell on the way up

to the rooftop playground and many students point to all the things in the picture that they are grateful for as they walk past it going off to play. The Persistent image is another one they love. They can relate to the idea of having lots and lots of unsuccessful attempts before they succeed and we work hard to make persistence a normal part of the learning process. We encourage students to not give up, but rather to have a growth mindset and enthusiastically strive for excellence in all that they do."

Year 5 student Titus says he found learning about Persistence particularly helpful in Term 3. "Even though remote learning is hard we have to keep going with it. I have learnt that sometimes you need to walk away and then come back and try again," he says.

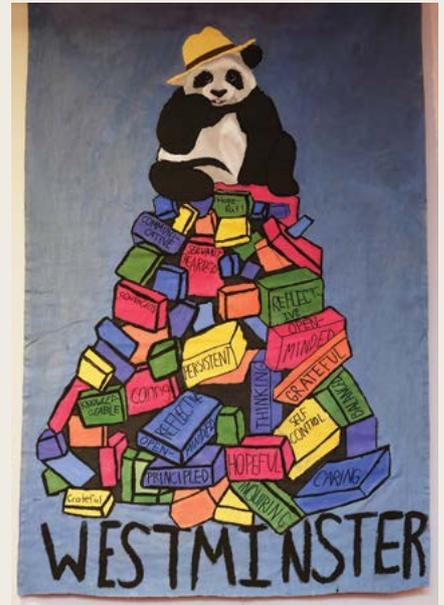
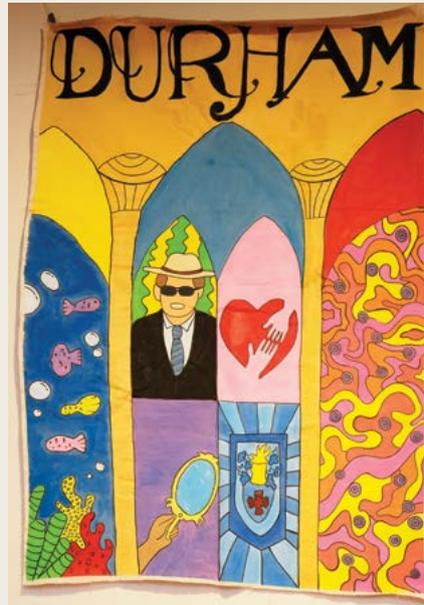
Year 6 student Aidan enjoyed learning how Balanced helps improve wellbeing: "I learnt that a balanced lifestyle is one where you do different things and diversify your activities. This is good because it means you never get bored and you get good at lots of different things."

Year 1 student Dashiell says he has learned how to apply Grateful, Persistent, Caring and Self-control: "I try to not give up while doing remote learning, [being Persistent] and I am grateful for the teachers who are impressed by my work."

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Clockwise from top left: the The Balanced Character Strength illustration shows the many facets of a student's life that may need to be addressed in order for them to have a healthy balance of activities; Derek Champion and Bronwyn Wake oversee the wellbeing and character development programs at the school; the Grateful illustration shows a child putting thank you stickers on all the things she appreciates in life; and the Persistent illustration, which covers a wall in St Andrew's House, demonstrates the joy that comes from achieving a goal after many unsuccessful attempts.



Students participating in the Gala Day's House banner competition were challenged to create an image that combined an element of the school's Character Strengths with something representing Dr Collier. There were some very creative posters produced, with Durham's Reflective and Servant-hearted illustration judged the winner, just ahead of Winchester and Westminster.

Year 4 student Clementine found that learning Self-control helped her stay focused: "Self-control showed me you should try to stay focused and do what you think is best... not just doing what you want but what is best for you."

The teacher handbook, used for classroom discussions in both the Junior and secondary school, explains in greater depth the meaning and values behind each character strength and how to guide open conversations with students about growing in character. The wall decals and replicated graphics in the classroom improve teaching practice as they provide a launchpad for further discussion.

The school's MYP Coordinator, Kate Layhe, says there are lots of interesting ways teachers are approaching and implementing character development in their classes.

"Just one example was in science, where a class was using toy 'slinkies' (precompressed helical spring toys) to demonstrate how waves work," Kate explains. "Prior to starting, the teacher explained that one of the learning intentions for the class was to demonstrate the Character Strength of 'self-controlled'. This really made a difference to the productiveness of the class, which then resisted the temptation to simply play around with the slinkies."

Other areas of school life that have incorporated character strengths include the MYP Service Records, which encourage Caring and Servant-hearted activities, and the 2021 Andean Writer, Composer and Artist of the Year competitions, where submissions needed to use one of four Character Strengths (Hopeful, Thinking, Persistent or Caring) as their theme. For Gala Day's House banner competition, the students were given the task of incorporating character strengths into an image representing Dr Collier, and the results were incredibly creative (see images above).

"Character growth can develop out of positive conversations that challenge students to re-evaluate their assumptions about themselves, others and the world," Mr Champion explains. "One area we openly discuss is the source of our Character Strengths, which is the Christian story that offers meaning, hope and life 'to the full'."

Watch the 2021 SACS Character Strengths roll-out video:

https://youtu.be/kSh7q_Caeb8

Spreading hope

In Term 3 of remote learning, the Junior School's weekly SEW (Social and Emotional Wellbeing) lessons invited students to come up with creative ways to secretly "smuggle" Hope into their homes, streets and local communities. The results were overwhelming. Students baked cookies and wrote cards for family members and neighbours, drew

pictures of hope for friends and neighbours and painted rocks with messages of hope and left them along nearby streets and parks. Kindergarten student Giorgio painted love hearts and wrote a message of hope on the back which he gave to café owners and left on park benches to spread hope in the community.



Giorgio (Kindergarten) and Allan (Year 3) distributed messages of hope to their community.