



# Building Moral Intelligence Once Piece at a Time

Queen Elizabeth School Staff, Saskatoon

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In 1999 the staff of an urban elementary school engaged in action research on an anti-bullying strategy for their school. While the initiative resulted in positive changes in student behaviour, staff noted that the students did not seem to understand completely why they should treat others well. They did not yet seem able to “do the right thing” on their own with no adult watching. As a result, the staff searched for a program that would help students extend their moral understanding. They came to focus on Dr. Michele Borba’s book, “Building Moral Intelligence: The Seven Essential Virtues That Teach Children to Do the Right Thing”.

## Classroom and School Activities

The staff began to teach the seven essential virtues identified by Borba: empathy, conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance and fairness. Staff retreats and discussions in staff pod groupings assisted in planning learning opportunities, integrating them into the curriculum, and identifying indicators of progress. A virtue a month approach was used to organize many activities related to building moral intelligence (BMI). Eventually a BMI committee was formed to spearhead and coordinate various pieces of the project, which eventually expanded beyond the walls of the school to include the community. Another committee took responsibility for professional development, while a third committee worked to expand teacher knowledge of strategies, compiling and sharing

strategies within the school and with other schools. One staff member oversaw the development and updating of BMI information on the school website at <http://schools.spsd.sk.ca/queen/BMI/BMI.html>.

Numerous activities were undertaken over the three-year life of the project. They included:

- Presentation of certificates to students exhibiting virtues,
- A section called “BMI Blossoms” in the school newsletter to celebrate the good things happening in the school,
- Monthly school assemblies highlighting the virtues that were opened and closed by two BMI-related songs,
- Stickers identifying resources related to the virtues in the school resources centre,
- A bulletin board facing the school’s front door on which one class each month created a display on virtue-related words,
- Development of a virtues booklet with age-appropriate work from different classes,
- A display case for students to showcase what they were learning about BMI, and
- Fundraising and communications with a partner school in Teshie, Ghana.

Parents were actively encouraged to become part of the BMI initiative. A parenting day was held at the school to support parental involvement in teaching the virtues at home. A library for parents was developed in the school's learning resources centre and some resources for parents were kept on display in a cabinet in the front hallway. The Parent Council provided funding for a new school sign on the front lawn that promoted project-related activities. Information about BMI was provided regularly in school newsletters and on the school website in order to build more parental acknowledgment, understanding and support for virtues instruction in the school.

Innovative ways were found to celebrate the BMI project within the school and community. At the end of the first year, a committee was formed that crafted six quilts for display in the school. The quilts consisted of 180 squares, each one bearing a student-created design related to a



virtue. The second year of the project opened with the creation by each staff and student of T-shirts on the virtues that they could wear to assemblies and other school activities. The year ended with the creation of four giant jigsaw puzzles to be hung on the walls in the school. Each puzzle consisted of

pieces designed by students to represent the virtues. At the end of 2004-05, BMI and celebrations of Saskatchewan's centennial were combined in the creation of a patio by the main entrance to the school. Embedded in the concrete base of the patio were stepping stones about virtues, each one designed and created by a student or staff member.



## Data Analysis, Reflection and Conclusions

To assist in analyzing the impact of BMI, data were gathered from staff, parents and students. Staff looked for evidence of its effects in their pod meetings and reflected at key points in the project on what was working and what was not working among the strategies and activities being implemented. Parents who participated in a survey on BMI provided encouraging comments about the initiative. Data that were gathered from students in teacher-led focus groups was also generally positive. However, while students indicated that they thought of their school as a safe and caring place, only half would say that they felt included on the playground or they thought BMI was making a difference in their school.

Reflecting on the data, the staff realized that it takes time and follow-through to effect lasting change in an institution like the school. While significant changes could be seen in student behaviour and parent understanding as a result of BMI, more time and continuing emphasis was needed to turn new behaviours and understandings into habits. Principal Jayne Hudson observed:

*In many ways we have succeeded in our goals but we also recognize that building moral intelligence is an on-going initiative. It will always need to be at the center of what we do. We will take what we have learned through this project and continue making goals for our school based on the information we have gained.*