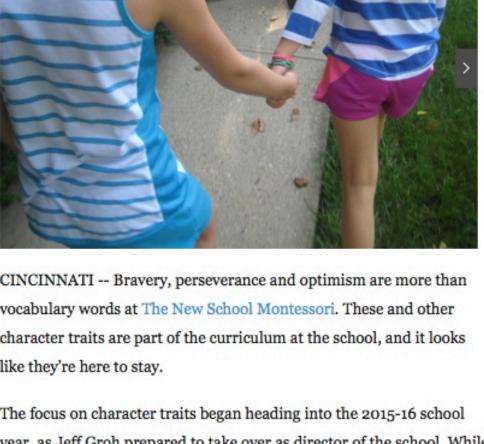
Identifying character traits gives New School Montessori students insight — and builds character 'It heightens their awareness of their behavior'

BY: Roxanna Swift, WCPO contributor POSTED: 12:00 PM, Jun 13, 2016 UPDATED: 12:04 PM, Jun 13, 2016



CINCINNATI -- Bravery, perseverance and optimism are more than vocabulary words at The New School Montessori. These and other character traits are part of the curriculum at the school, and it looks like they're here to stay. The focus on character traits began heading into the 2015-16 school year, as Jeff Groh prepared to take over as director of the school. While preparing for the role, Groh, who was the school's assistant director from 2012 to 2015, spent time reading and interviewing staff members.

"Although we collaboratively all understood that we value reflection and character development, we never had a common language that was attached to that common value," he said.

psychology, which was developed about 15 years ago and promoted by former American Psychological Association President Martin "Marty" Seligman. One particular discipline of positive psychology that caught Groh's interest was character science, which focuses on developing an individual's strengths.

"I became very interested in the value in well-being, of knowing

While seeking a character education model to implement in a school

setting, he connected with Neal Mayerson, who as a Mayerson Family

Foundations Trustee and Mayerson Academy Chairman helped found

and fund the nonprofit VIA (Values in Action) Institute on Character.

Mayerson and academy President Jillian Darwish worked with Groh

yourself," he said.

Caesar."

classmates exhibit.

help them grow."

activities.

Donaldson.

Slanker said.

Through his reading and research, he learned about positive

and teachers to help implement a character education model at The New School similar to the Thriving Learning Communities (TLC) initiative employed within Cincinnati Public Schools. The model, which is primarily geared toward fourth-through sixthgrade students, teaches students the names of character traits and

helps them identify those traits in themselves and others. Teachers

incorporate the traits into lessons by challenging students to identify

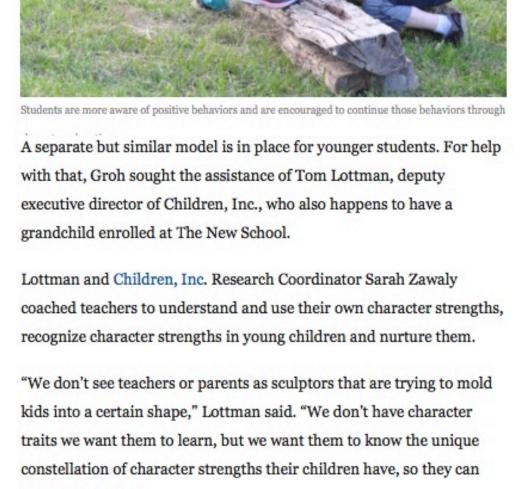
the strengths of characters in texts such as "The Odyssey" and "Julius

Kids also acknowledge each other through weekly character-spotting

activities, when they share positive behaviors they've seen their

"I think it heightens their awareness of their behavior," said Laura

Slanker, head teacher for fourth- through sixth-grade students at The New School.



Unlike the fourth- through sixth-grade practices, the model for younger

students is oriented more toward vocabulary and character-spotting

Learning about character strengths and identifying them over the past

year has helped students recognize the positive things already taking

Since character education programming began at The New School,

she's started noticing when her peers help pick up supplies someone

The impact is cyclical. As the students recognize positive behaviors,

While the acknowledgement helps, it's not solely responsible for the

"It's not just that they want to be acknowledged," he said. "I think they

acknowledgement, but in self-reflecting or talking with their peers,"

While school staff and students have begun to recognize character

Groh has surveyed staff members and students to help shape the

programming for future years. One of the biggest hurdles has been

learning to frame the language in a way that doesn't seem artificial.

"It's a little less embedded in the academics," Groh said.

place at the school, said fifth-grader Katherine Swift.

"It just makes everybody more aware of it," she said.

dropped, or help each other resolve conflicts.

they're encouraged to carry on the trend.

increase in positive behavior, he said.

want to do good in the community."

"I think when people hear their name on an acknowledgement, it makes them want to do more good," said sixth-grader Brando

strengths, there have been challenges, too.

Character spotting extends beyond the curriculum, too.

"I hear the kids using the character traits, not only in

"What may have happened naturally in the past has a stiffness to it," Groh said.

He's hopeful that the language will become more naturally

incorporated into the curriculum over time.

weakness and strength.

Another challenge has been in not looking to character education as a means for measuring success. In an educational climate that emphasizes grade-point average and test

results, character science encourages individuals to understand

themselves, recognize and accept strengths and weaknesses and develop both. One of the lessons Groh found most impactful over the past year was a situation that was immeasurable by state standards and dealt with both

A young student, embarrassed after losing his temper in class, didn't want to return to the room. With Groh's help, the student recognized that going back to class required courage - a character trait he was then able to find in himself. "We're giving him a language to identify a feeling within him," Groh

said. "He was able to identify and use that. My hope is that in future

years, there will be more and more examples like that."