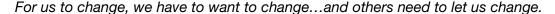# Teacher Reflection and Action
Personal Responsibility

Teacher Reflection: Moving from Values to Action

Personal Responsibility: being careful and reliable in one's actions and in contributing to group efforts.

For us to change, we have to want to change…and others need to let us change.

– 3rd/4th grade class motto

"Personal responsibility" (a term first recorded in 1787 during the U.S. Constitutional Convention!), is the notion that each of us chooses our own actions, and so can be held accountable for what we do and don't do. While there are always mitigating factors that affect the ease with which each of us is able to act in responsible ways, people are capable of building skills and demonstrating an increasing capacity to show care, reliability, and a commitment to contributing to their community.

A sense of personal responsibility in students is fostered by caring, attentive adults who model clear and consistent positive behaviors; by a supportive climate in which young people are encouraged to reflect on the areas in which they currently need support; and by having safe opportunities to practice the related skills.

How being "personally responsible" looks depends on each student's developmental stage. Age, maturity, life events, and other personal and social factors have important implications for the youth we support. One important advantage of using a normed SEL assessment instrument like the DESSA is the real-time data received immediately upon completing the assessment, highlighting areas in which students are ready for celebrations or supports. Setting clear expectations that all students can "own" and use to measure success helps ensure sustained growth.

By choosing one or two personally relevant areas on which to focus, students are able to make changes in their behavior that are visible to themselves and others. Students begin to see themselves as increasingly responsible participants in their school community, and those around them are able to view them differently and treat them accordingly. Acknowledgment of growth underscores the belief that every indicator under each of the eight DESSA constructs is a teachable, learnable skill. Each represents a possibility—an opportunity for building a sense of purpose and efficacy that becomes well grounded in daily habits.

Foundational to every "Caught Being Good" campaign or "star chart" on the wall is the belief that noticing and reinforcing desired behaviors will increase those behaviors. Helping students clearly understand what we're seeing or not seeing now, and what we hope to observe in the future, gives them solid information on which to build. Providing clear expectations that are expressed as observable actions or behaviors helps assure integration into everyday habits of thought and ways of being. When students have an ally rather than a judge, it exponentially increases the chances of buy-in, ownership, and substantive, long-term behavior change.

Teacher Reflection and Action
Personal Responsibility

REFLECTION

Respond to the questions below by writing in your journal, or in conversation with a trusted colleague.

- What are my core values related to why I want my students to show Personal Responsibility? What are specific examples of behaviors I would see on a regular basis, if every one of my students was demonstrating a high level of Personal Responsibility?

- What bothers me the most about this particular class, or individual students I have right now, related to Personal Responsibility?

- How do I assess whether my expectations are developmentally appropriate for the age group I teach? Which of my Personal Responsibility expectations are intentionally designed to help students become increasingly more capable and self-sufficient?

- What helps my students understand our classroom expectations, and recognize what they can do to meet them—and how they can support others to do the same? What opportunities do my students have to intentionally demonstrate that they are responsible, caring members of our school community?

After talking or writing about the reflection questions above, concretize your thinking into one or two actions steps.

POSSIBLE AREAS OF FOCUS FOR ACTION STEPS

- Determine how well my students already understand and demonstrate the Personal Responsibility skills that our school community values.

- Support my students in understanding the reasons for and benefits of being caring, capable and responsible at school.

- Provide more transparent opportunities for students to practice personal responsibility, so they can show that they are able to identify, demonstrate, and self-assess specific Personal Responsibility skills.

- Publicly and privately celebrate individual and group Personal Responsibility successes.

CONSIDER

- Requesting that a friend or colleague help you be accountable, checking in with you at agreed-upon times to discuss the progress you're making with your action steps.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Teacher Action: Modeling Optimism Through Storytelling

The secret of leadership is working with things as they are, not as you wish they were, nor as you think they ought to be: for the "impossible" dream can be attained only in possible stages.

- Scott Farrell, The Secret of Leadership

An essential and exciting component of Personal Responsibility is growing leadership skills. And leadership, like all other SEL skills, can and must be thoughtfully and intentionally cultivated in all students. Viewing the building of leadership skills as a step-by-step process, tailored to each learner's current abilities and needs, opens the door to many and varied opportunities for practice within the school day.

Developing students' leadership capacities can take on a limited and superficial appearance in some school settings. There are only so many slots on student council and for school ambassadors who welcome new families. These are valuable contributions, and students who engage in them are likely to accrue personal benefits and skills. However, supporting every student in developing leadership skills is essential for creating a smoothly run classroom and an empowered citizenry.

While one may occasionally facilitate lessons that directly address leadership skills, and the skills of supporting others' leadership, even greater impact may come from the daily, quiet work behind the scenes that supports the steady growth of teamwork and leadership skills—and the confidence and desire to use them.

TEACHER STRATEGIES

- Helping students navigate between being a leader and being in charge:
    - o When I'm asked to lead, do I just take over and do things my own way, or do I work to be sure all group members are heard and have a contributing role?
- Recognizing the many ways that students may show positive leadership in teamwork:
    - o Asking "Who would like to go first?"
    - o Expressing appreciation for other students' contributions
    - o Being flexible and willing to compromise to get the job done
    - o Contributing thoughts, ideas, and opinions
    - o Listening attentively to others
- Noticing and naming specific leadership qualities through private conversations:
- I've noticed and I appreciate how you help your team succeed:
    - o You're always prepared with what you were responsible for
    - o You genuinely care about what other people say is important to them
    - o You're working in a way that shows that you care about more than just yourself, you care that the whole project is done well

⚖ PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

- I've been noticing that other students really admire you and are following your example. I appreciate how you:

    o Include others in such a welcoming way

    o Often stop to help a classmate in a way that makes them feel safe and valued

    o Work with such care on your project—it's so clearly laid out and informative

- I've noticed that kids are following you at recess, and really listen to you. They want to be on your team when you're playing a game. Those are qualities of a leader. Here's something else I'm noticing:

    o You seem to always pick the same kids. Have you noticed that, too?

    o What are some ways you think might work for you, to show caring leadership toward other kids who want to be included, too?

- Provide students with opportunities to act as peer leaders during academic assignments and then discuss their leadership skills in private conferences:

    o How are you motivating your team members to fully contribute?

    o Are there some things you might be doing or saying that could make people not want to participate?

    o What ideas do you have for helping team members stay involved?

    o What are some ways that you're showing your team members that you notice and value their contributions?

REFLECT

You may wish to have a current class list in hand as you engage with these reflection questions. Consider writing down the lists that come to mind during the exercise without looking at your class roster, and then comparing your writing with the formal list to see who came easily to mind in each category and who didn't come to mind at all during your initial reflections.

- As I think about my current student group, who immediately comes to mind as a positive leader? What do they do that is evidence for me of their leadership?

- Who influences their peers, but in ways that are not conducive to a collaborative, calm, and effective learning environment? For example, who can turn the class upside down in a moment's time and take fellow students right along with them?

- How do I show my own leadership skills? Are there ways I can recognize my colleagues when they demonstrate leadership qualities that I admire and appreciate?

⚖ PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

ACT

Consider focusing on two to four students for a week. You might choose:

- Students who exhibit leadership qualities you appreciate, but who may not be aware of those qualities or realize that you have noticed them.
- Students who are using their leadership qualities in ways that diminish the positive climate you're working to build. Make a concrete plan for what you want to say to them and when and how you will say it.
- Students who didn't show up on either of your initial brainstorm lists. Make a concrete plan for how you will pay particular attention to them, to watch for expressions of overt or supportive leadership qualities that you can verbally reinforce.

STUDENT EXTENSION

Develop a positive expectations list with your students: "What would a visitor see, hear, and experience when each of us is showing positive leadership qualities?"

Personal Responsibility: Qualities of a Leader

The secret of leadership is to consider the team more important than the product. Remember, a good team can develop many products.

- Scott Farrell The Secret of Leadership

Through awareness of what it takes to be a leader, you can begin building habits with your students that lead to increased leadership capacity. Andrew J. DuBrin has identified many of these characteristics in his book Leadership: Research Findings, Practice, and Skills. This summary of leadership traits is from his blog:

- **Self-confidence:** "A leader who is self-assured without being bombastic or overbearing instills self-confidence in team members." Your self-confidence and calm demeanor can help others feel more certain that they, too, can overcome hurdles or reach a challenging goal.

- **Humility:** When you're willing to share credit with others, and you're willing to admit that you're not perfect, others see that and appreciate it.

- **Core self-evaluations:** Research shows that four self-perceptions relate to effective leadership: "Self-esteem, locus of control [that is, taking responsibility for what happens in your life], self-efficacy [akin to self-confidence], and emotional stability."

- **Trustworthiness**: People trust you when your attitudes, words, and motives align with what you actually choose to do. This includes being honest about mistakes, refusing to gossip and shift blame, and doing things the ethical way (even if it's more expedient to do otherwise).

- **Authenticity:** Be yourself, and act in line with your core values and personality. People will notice if you're trying to be someone other than who you really are.

- **Extroversion:** Most leaders maintain an outgoing demeanor, show an interest in people, and gladly participate in group or team activities. (Feel that you're not naturally extroverted? You can work on your skills by making a conscious effort to demonstrate genuine curiosity about and friendliness toward others.)

- **Assertiveness:** Be up-front about your needs, concerns, and opinions. But don't forget to be tactful!

- **Enthusiasm, optimism, and warmth:** Staying positive, being approachable, and expressing positive thoughts and feelings through both verbal and nonverbal communication help you build rapport with those around you.

- **Sense of humor:** Your ability to make people laugh can help others feel comfortable and relieve tense situations.

In addition to these general personality traits, DuBrin also lists several task-related personality traits common to leaders:

- **Passion:** Leaders show an extremely strong commitment to and enthusiasm about their work.
- **Emotional intelligence:** A solid leader exhibits empathy towards others, has a good understanding of emotions—both others' and their own—and recognizes that their own mood can have an effect on the entire organization's performance. (The primary research in this area was conducted by Daniel Goleman.)
- **Flexibility and adaptability:** A leader can bring about change...so it follows that he or she must also be ready and willing to adjust to different settings and situations.
- **Internal locus of control:** Strong leaders take responsibility for events and believe that they can have an effect on outcomes and conditions.
- **Courage:** Willingness to take risks on new ideas may put you at risk for criticism and blame, but it also carries the reward of bringing new ideas to fruition.

REFLECT

Which leadership qualities are you already exhibiting regularly, to your satisfaction? Consider one to three that you would like to focus on strengthening.

Which leadership qualities do you already actively engage your students in developing? Consider one to three others you wish to intentionally address with students.

ACT

Choose one of the leadership qualities you designated as an area to strengthen. Make a specific plan for how you will work to enhance that quality in your teaching. Consider asking a trusted friend or colleague to check in with you periodically, to see how you are progressing with your plan.

STUDENT EXTENSION

Choose one of the leadership qualities you selected as important to develop further with your students. Focus on that quality in a direct delivery lesson and follow up with ways to help your students integrate practicing the quality at school. Encourage them to self-assess and develop action steps for how they will demonstrate this quality during class time.

Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA):
Scales and Associated Items

Self-Awareness: A child's realistic understanding of her/his strengths and limitations and consistent desire for self-improvement.

- make accurate statements about events in her/his life
- teach another person to do something
- ask questions to clarify what he/she did not understand
- show an awareness of her/his personal strengths
- ask somebody for feedback
- describe how he/she was feeling
- give an opinion when asked

Self-Management: A child's success in controlling his or her emotions and behaviors, to complete a task or succeed in a new or challenging situation.

- pay attention
- wait for her/his turn
- focus on a task despite a problem or distraction
- act comfortable in a new situation
- perform the steps of a task in order
- think before he/she acted
- pass up something he/she wanted, or do something he/she did not like, to get something better in the future
- accept another choice when his/her first choice was unavailable
- stay calm when faced with a challenge
- adjust well to changes in plans
- adjust well when going from one setting to another

Social-Awareness: A child's capacity to interact with others in a way that shows respect for their ideas and behaviors, recognizes her/his impact on them, and uses cooperation and tolerance in social situations.

- cope well with insults and mean comments
- get along with different types of people
- act respectfully in a game or competition
- respect another person's opinion
- contribute to group efforts
- resolve a disagreement
- share with others
- cooperate with peers or siblings
- forgive somebody who hurt or upset her/him

Relationship Skills: A child's consistent performance of socially acceptable actions that promote and maintain positive connections with others.

- compliment or congratulate somebody
- do something nice for somebody
- show appreciation of others
- greet a person in a polite way
- attract positive attention from peers
- express concern for another person
- attract positive attention from adults
- make a suggestion or request in a polite way offer to help somebody
- respond to another person's feelings

Goal-Directed Behavior: A child's initiation of, and persistence in completing, tasks of varying difficulty.

- keep trying when unsuccessful
- take steps to achieve goals
- try to do her/his best
- seek out additional knowledge or information
- take an active role in learning
- do things independently
- ask to take on additional work or responsibilities
- show creativity in completing a task
- seek out challenging tasks
- work hard on projects

Personal Responsibility: A child's tendency to be careful and reliable in her/his actions and in contributing to group efforts.

- remember important information
- handle his/her belongings with care
- serve an important role at home or school
- encourage positive behavior in others
- prepare for school, activities, or upcoming events
- do routine tasks or chores without being reminded
- act as a leader in a peer group
- get things done in a timely fashion
- show care when doing a project or school work
- follow rules

Decision Making: A child's approach to problem solving that involves learning from others and from her/his own previous experiences, using her/his values to guide her/his action, and accepting responsibility for her/his decisions.

- follow the example of a positive role model
- accept responsibility for what she/he did
- show good judgment
- seek advice
- learn from experience
- follow the advice of a trusted adult
- show the ability to decide between right and wrong
- use available resources (people or objects) to solve a problem

Optimistic Thinking: A child's attitude of confidence, hopefulness, and positive thinking regarding herself/himself and her/his life situations in the past, present, and future.

- carry herself/himself with confidence
- say good things about herself/himself
- speak about positive things
- look forward to classes or activities at school
- say good things about his/her classmates
- say good things about the future
- express high expectations for himself/herself

REFERENCES

S

Below is a list of resources that were referenced within this strategy document. You will find links to research and additional information that may be helpful as you continue your understanding of the content in this strategy.

Teacher Reflection and Action

- Personal Responsibility

  Riebling, M. (2010). Personal Responsibility at the Founding. Retrieved from http://www.city-journal.org/2010/20_2_snd-personal-responsibility.html

- The primary research in this area was conducted by Daniel Goleman.

  Goleman, D. (1995). Emotional intelligence. New York, New York: Bantam Books.