

## Babylon Memorial Grade School

Grades 3–6 • Babylon, New York • Public/Suburban  
Enrollment 575 • Babylon Union Free School District

### Respecting the Right to Be Different

The village of Babylon lies at the midpoint between bustling New York City and the trendy Hamptons, yet it seems like a small town in Middle America. Babylon

Memorial Grade School, while preserving that old-fashioned Norman Rockwell family spirit, emerges as a microcosm of the new “tolerant world” envisioned by Martin Luther King, Jr.

**The scene:** Cheryl Murphy’s fourth-grade language arts lesson. The students are preparing to write their own character reflections for an annual class publication called “Chicken Soup for Students.” Students listen to a sample essay from the previous year that shows how three girls ease the loneliness of a friendless student by joining him at lunch. Brian says, “Hey, my sister Kelsey was one of those girls. I want to be just like her.” The class responds warmly to Brian as if he’s related to a celebrity.



Babylon has raised more than \$250,000 for St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital over the past 12 years by holding an annual Math-A-Thon.

**Another scene:** Bill Singleton’s fourth-grade class. Counselor Francesca Johnson guides the students in a thoughtful discussion of *That’s What’s Different about Me*, an original play that she wrote with a special education colleague in order to “demystify autism.” Some of the students’ responses:

**Cynthia:** My cousin has autism and sometimes acts weird, but I’ve discovered she’s great to have around.

**T.J.:** This play teaches you to be patient. Sometimes, you have to say things slowly and carefully.

**Matt:** This play taught me that you should treat these students the same as everyone else.

**Ronnie:** Not just autistic kids. You should be kind to everyone.

**Alex:** Don’t be afraid that just because they’re different, they’ll hurt you. Not just autistic kids, but anybody who’s different in any way. We should remember everybody is somebody.

Alex’s “everybody is somebody” could well serve as the theme song for Babylon Memorial Grade School, located on Long Island’s sprawling south shore, some 45 miles east of New York City. These two scenarios typify the students’ deep caring for one another. With a 17 percent minority population and more than 99 percent of its special education population fully mainstreamed, the school strives to foster acceptance of others. The four pillars of respect, responsibility, honesty, and empathy dominate every nook and cranny, but it is tolerance in thought and deed that gives the school its special character. The tendency of many graduates to “go home again” shows the powerful community bond of a special place that respects each person’s individuality. Serving as both PTA president and a school aide, parent Maria Cullen says, “I just like the kind of young adults my children are becoming. That’s why so many graduates return here to raise their families.”

#### Wooing the Faculty

The motivational force behind Babylon’s emphasis on character building is principal Eric Freidman, who has guided the school for 16 years and has hired 80 per-

cent of the staff. The principal owes his interest in character education to a presentation by Rich Parisi, then the principal of Morgan Road Elementary School (a 2000 NSOC), at an Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) conference.

Freidman realized the next step was to develop a more formalized program, secure faculty and community buy-in, and seek initiatives that would make character building a way of life at Babylon.

January 2002 saw the development of the Character Education Committee, comprised of teachers from every grade level, support staff, parents, and administrators. Many of the original members still serve on the committee. After much discussion, the committee agreed on the four pillars that come to life today in a myriad of ways. The principal believes that exposure to the leading experts in the field sparks both discussion and support, so he has provided the staff with common readings. Selections such as Thomas Lickona's *Educating for Character* and Hal Urban's *Life's Greatest Lessons* gave the staff both a philosophical and practical foundation, while *That's My Buddy* and *The Morning Meeting Book* have been indispensable guides in setting up initiatives. Freidman and the staff attribute the students' strong academic performance to the school's emphasis on training for character. "It's made us nicer, smarter, and more proactive," says the principal.

### Implementing a Multi-Layered Process

The character education "process" that now exists at Babylon is many-layered. On one level, the character education message is visible everywhere: in the school's mission and belief statements, in class constitutions and class rules, in the agenda of faculty and PTA meetings, in student behavioral definitions at class meetings, in catchy cafeteria slogans, in the Home-School Character Connection exercises, in "do good" projects on each level, and in assemblies that target bullying. Clearly, students have also internalized the messages. In random conversations with sixth graders, all students could readily identify their favorite slogans and explain their choices. Susan prefers "Sticks and stones will break your bones, but words will break your heart." She quickly adds, "Because it shows that cruel words really stay in your heart." When asked if character education is working at her school, Eileen responds, "The proof is that everyone's nice to each other." Brandon says, "Character education means the four pillars—everyone's following these."



## The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Babylon Memorial Grade School:

- Minimal number of students sent to building administrators because of unacceptable behavior
- 50 percent increase in students receiving the National Association of Elementary School Principals' President's Award for Educational Excellence (score of at least 85 percent on standardized achievement tests, and academic average of A-minus or better): from 27 percent of students prior to 2001, to 42 percent in 2006–07
- Student attendance rate of 95 percent or higher each year
- Significant strength and continuous improvement in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, as indicated by No Child Left Behind state testing data
- Adequate Yearly Progress goals met or exceeded each year
- High degree of satisfaction with school climate, as reflected in surveys of parents, teachers, and students
- Morning Meetings utilized by all teachers
- Increasing number of students who perform unsolicited acts of kindness (e.g., turning in found money, cutting their hair for donation to Locks of Love, etc.)
- Observable harmonious relationships between the various working groups (aides, custodians, secretaries, teachers, administrators)

But Babylon Memorial goes far beyond the traditional trimmings to make the character message known to all, by making the media center (Babylon still affectionately calls it "our library") the hub for character education. The library's glass double doors, just off the main lobby, welcome everybody—students, faculty, and support staff. Lively librarian Grace Kiernan (Suffolk County's Library Media Specialist of the Year) has made certain that there's something for everyone here: a critic's corner where young readers share new-found treasures with their peers, an inviting section of character-related books marked with the appropriate grade level, and shelves of teacher resources on every facet of character education. Students serve as clerks and charm each visitor with a pleasant "Have a nice day." Kiernan, who polled the entire staff to assemble the first character-related reading list, says, "It's not a job—it's my life."

## Babylon Memorial Grade School Pillars of Character

respect

responsibility

honesty

empathy

Former assistant principal Carole Polney-Marinello recalls that when she came to the school four years ago: “The staff was so kind to me that I wondered, when will they stop being so nice? Well, there seems to be no end-line!” Again and again during the day, similar sentiments about caring resonate in interviews with teachers and students. Fourth grader Stephen, a transfer from another school system, agrees: “Teachers are different here. They were so nice to me when I came, and the kids were nice too.” Fifth graders Samantha and Sophia, when asked their opinion of the school, respond in unison, “Everybody loves everybody here.”

### Opening a Second Layer: Character in Classes

If these visible trappings and testimonials indicate that character education is on the front burner at Babylon, a second layer occurs in the classroom, where the four pillars come to life through daily morning meetings and lessons that support both moral and performance character. A visitor to the school can quickly see proof of Freidman’s belief that

“it’s all about character.” For example, in Eric Solnick’s sixth-grade meeting, students are discussing “Odd One Out,” a vignette in which a boy has to make a choice about telling the truth to his mother. This, in turn, leads to a “pair and share” exercise in which students reflect on a personal experience in which they confronted a similar dilemma.

In a different vein but an equally effective morning meeting, students in Donna Hendrickson and Beth Marinelli’s self-contained special education class practice the skills needed in introductions—eye contact, loud voice, and firm handshake—before going on to review the previous day’s lesson. Teachers also creatively weave character into their daily lessons. For example, sixth-grade math teacher Kathleen Whittier designs word problems that involve ethical situations. In one example, students find a wallet and then put up posters to find its owner. When an elderly lady calls them, she offers to give them 15 percent of the amount in her wallet. In the two-step process, students have to decide how much of the 15 percent to give to charity and how much to keep. Whittier declares she knows the lesson is working when one student asks, “Why didn’t they give it all to charity?”

To help frame effective lessons, every teacher receives a binder that contains suggestions of ways to reinforce character in the curriculum, and teachers at the same grade level regularly share lessons. Students receive grades on their report card for “Effort” and “Learning in a Social Environment.”

### Developing a Third Layer: Empathy, In School and Beyond

“Good character should take place both inside and outside school,” says fifth grader Julia. A third layer exists in training students to develop empathy at all times. In the cross-age buddy program, classes are paired with classes in the nearby primary school. Babylon Elementary principal Dana Spinola comments on these caring attachments: “The little ones really look forward to meetings with their buddies. The teachers from the two schools also form friendships.” Fourth grader Treavor reveals how he saw the limitations of his younger buddy, whose fingers were too small to hold the light bulb: “I began to see how hard it was for him.” Claudia, a fifth grader, reflects, “It’s a good way to become a role model.”

### PRINCIPAL’S BEST PICKS:

Eric Freidman

**TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL:** *growing character*

**CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD:** Morning Meetings, which serve to unite us as a family

**BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE:** unsolicited acts of kindness (e.g., five percent of Babylon girls donated their hair to Locks of Love in consecutive years)

**EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT:** 50 percent increase in the percentage of students receiving the National Association of Elementary School Principals’ President’s Award for Educational Excellence

**WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION:** *Form a character education committee comprised of dedicated people, and provide common readings to get the group started.*

“If you live it and role model it, showing character is contagious,” says Rita Bartenback, a veteran of 28 years here and a Babylon graduate herself. Teachers model patience and caring in every class, but this compassion is readily apparent in the class for severely disabled students. Marinelli and teacher aide Debbie Shea work together like master builders, getting quality work from students once thought unreachable. On the day of the site visit, Tylar, a student somewhat agitated at the start of the period, becomes fully cooperative and accompanies Max, an autistic student, to his next class. A further proof of this caring school: Students in the hall greet the two warmly.

Fifth grader Ronnie says, “What makes our school so different is that we are caring. We really want to make the world a better place.” The school has designed both small-scale and large-scale service projects at each grade level that accent reflection as well as action. Whether it is helping victims of Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 tsunami or benefiting needy families close to home, students see the need to help the less fortunate. A consistent participant in the St. Jude Math-A-Thon, Babylon Memorial is rated fourth nationally in raising money for St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital.

### Including Everyone in Character Building

Alena Berenblatt, a past PTA president, describes “the many ways that the school involves parents.” A Character Corner column in each newsletter keeps parents abreast of what’s going on; an annual Family Fun Night, chock full of old-time activities, draws a crowd of over 500; and a hands-on presentation provides workshops on the school’s character efforts. The Home–School Character Connection exercises give parents the tools to reinforce what is being taught during the day. An interesting point that arises in chats with parents is the improvement they see in their children’s behavior. Mary Ann Connolly, one of the founding members of the Character Education Committee, says, “My kids have become much more caring citizens.” Tammy Tillinghast, another past PTA president, describes the work of the Kids Character Club: “It’s amazing how willing the children are to help. They’ve put messages over the doorways, created posters, made bird feeders, and participated in quilt-making for a cause.”

Modeling good character is not just a teacher’s role; it also comes from the top. Billy Des Jardin, the custodian, remarks: “I’ve been in other schools, and this is the only place that the principal treats

everybody the same—whether you’re a maid or a top teacher. He listens to your problems, but he doesn’t tell you his.” Substitute teacher Danielle Sikoryak comments, “Mr. Freidman has an open-door policy to his office, and he’ll listen to your perspective, even if it’s different from his. The only problem is that you won’t find him in his office. You have a better chance of catching him in the hallway or in the cafeteria talking to the kids.”

Babylon Memorial looks forward to another stage as a National School of Character. The Character Education Committee has a three-pronged plan for the school: increase the opportunities for teachers to share effective practices, improve student behavior in non-instructional areas, and enrich the quality of student reflections. In terms of outreach, the committee is already developing plans to share their story with other Long Island schools, work with the Academy for Character Education at The Sage Colleges, and serve as a resource to other Babylon schools.

One teacher who is bound to be on the outreach team is Cheryl Murphy, who has seen first-hand the amazing changes that character education has made in school climate and in her own children who attend the school: “Every time I read a student journal that talks about an experience that opened a child’s mind, and every time I see my own children behaving kindly to someone who’s different, I am grateful for that day when Eric said to me, ‘How about serving on a committee to jump-start character education?’”

### REFERENCES

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*That’s My Buddy! Friendship and Learning Across the Grades: Ideas from the Child Development Project*. Oakland, CA: Developmental Studies Center, 1996.

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Babylon invites students and parents to read and share character-related literature at home through its interactive Families and Books program.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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