

Making the Grade



by Ruth Hobeika

A values program gains altitude by teaching things that don't fit in textbooks

Living Values educator-training session in August offers a key to building a peaceful future for our children

The time for killing is over" is the roadblock a Thailand refugee camp leader placed before his fellow inmates, who were poised to deal with intruders in the time-honored way.

What, you ask, could this possibly have to do with a new educational program now actively seeking participants in the United States?

One clue lies in the name itself — Living Values: An Educational Program, Inc. (LVEP). The governing word here is "living." The title tells you LVEP intends to walk its talk, road-testing its values, and the refugee camp story is practical proof of success even in a nontraditional setting.

The "values" component of the Living Values equation cuts across sectarian lines and cultural boundaries, which must be why the chord it strikes resonates in five continents. This UN-supported program, founded in 1996 in consultation with UNICEF, now reaches about 2,400 teaching sites in 64 countries. The US program, incorporated as recently as 1999, is a branching out of this partnership of world educators.

LVEP is a train-the-teachers initiative that provides practical methods, in module form, on how to integrate values-development into course curricula for students from preschool to young adult. Training takes place workshop-style over an intensive weekend retreat.

The core values are twelve positive concepts that seem to suit all and offend none — freedom, respect, responsibility, honesty, humility, simplicity, tolerance, cooperation, unity, happiness, love, and peace. These virtues were endorsed at the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1992 Aspen Conference because they are so universally recognized. LVEP students are free to add to the list.

The LVEP track record is already something to be reckoned with. Most teaching sites report striking negative-to-positive turnarounds in the classroom and ripple effects on outside relationships as well.

You're talking fewer fights, lower voices, no door slamming, less gossip, more focused discussions, kids cooperating with both peers and teachers, more engaged students, higher self-esteem, even brighter color palettes on paintings. In the refugee camp, nine out of 24 teachers saw total cessation of aggressive behavior in their students within a year of LVEP implementation, while the others cited an 80 percent improvement. "The atmosphere changes" is a common comment.

The program's early successes abroad with at-risk children make it interestingly applicable to the pressure-keg climate building at home. A case in point: one Queens, New York City second-grader switched drawing styles — from guns and shooting to greenery and nature subjects — within ten weeks of LVEP projects highlighting his own "star" qualities.

A Long Beach, California fourth-grade teacher found, "It's the antagonistic, marginalized students who changed the most."

walking the talk

Practice what you preach" is a simple concept, but it says a lot about why LVEP works so well. Talk to any of the LVEP directors (an all volunteer, educator-run, ten-person board) and you'll hear variations on that theme — you can't teach one thing and practice another. Kids are too quick to spot inconsistencies, and they turn off at anything imposed from above. LVEP kids, in fact, have been known to take their teachers to task if they don't follow through personally on the values discussed.



An LVEP confidence-builder: Waltham, MA kids strut their stuff with the Living Values peacock preening in the background.

"It's important to have not only a mission statement but a way to live it," says vice president Anne Rarich, who is also a Concord, Massachusetts-based executive management coach and lifelong-learning advocate. LVEP, she says, is "not just another program that delivers ideas and then puts them on the shelf."

You couldn't rightly say that Living Values "teaches" values. The program works more as a catalyst for change, and the teacher's role-modeling of key values is a critical change agent.

LVEP practitioners are asked to think through and clarify their own values and are trained to listen respectfully to students, acknowledging their input and individual truths. This kind of attention alone, they say, can have a powerful impact on anyone not used to feeling heard and valued.

The spotlight on consistent, positive role-modeling is one of the things that sets LVEP apart from many character-education programs. A top-down approach, focused on prescribing values and influencing behavior, is more typical. LVEP-induced behavior changes, by contrast, seem to be more of a side-effect of students' increasing self-confidence.

LVEP also paddles against the current by focusing on encouraging emotional intelligence in the face of the prevailing teach-to-the-test performance standards.

The program uses no numerical yardsticks for development. A typical activity might involve the mural-sized "Emotion Landscape"™ — with Lake of Tranquillity, Volcano of Anger, and other appropriately colored icons that students relate to differently at different times. Anonymous post-it notes stuck on the landscape let students identify, chart, and change feelings of where they fit at any moment — king of the mountain, for example. They also help teachers catch at a glance the class' tenor and better adapt to its needs.

"The world already produces information faster than we can consume it," says Ed Wondoloski, LVEP president and emeritus professor of business management at Bentley College. Wondoloski also runs a self-empowerment workshop (called "Self-Managing Leadership") for business professionals and transfers its principles to LVEP.

"It's knowledge within a context that we're after," he says. He calls that wisdom, or usable values that prepare kids to function in their relationships, school, community, and environment.

standing in each other's moccasins

A great strength of the program, and one of the reasons it works with kids who are marginalized, is that we don't moralize," says Diane Tillman, an educational psychologist and the west coast program coordinator. "Kids say whatever they want. We listen."

Students, too, learn to listen nonjudgmentally. Respectful role-playing is a staple in the LVEP toolbox, which is chocked with lively, interactive projects that engage students at many levels — physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual.

Older students trying to get a grasp on what tolerance actually feels like might be called on to trade places in an argument — playing first the talker, then the listener — and then to articulate what they imagine the other guy is feeling. Or positive power-sharing might be addressed through the LVEP peacock project, which encourages appreciation for diversity by adopting corporate team-building techniques from a "Peacock in the Land of Penguins" video. As the story goes,



Developing the whole person: Even the setting for LVEP teacher-training sessions earns its A's.

what saves a threatened community is the banding together of the outliers who take leadership initiative. Students each contribute a feather to create a communal peacock — younger ones just decorating theirs, older ones showing their colors by writing up a personal perspective.

What the program offers is a process to help individuals of any age choose what's meaningful to them and coax it more regularly into their daily life. "You have to" is not on the LVEP vocabulary list.

The tools designed to help the process along run an unusually wide gamut: songs, dances, storytelling, artwork, games, reflection and communication exercises, visualization and imagining, "not making things complicated" homework, conflict resolution, "being benevolently assertive" training, and activities related to social justice — to name a handful. Workbooks and cassettes are available at minimal cost.

Living by your values may sound like a very tall order even for grownups, much less for kids. Where LVEP has succeeded is in adapting sophisticated concepts (such as "mind-mapping") to the lunchbox set. Even kindergardeners have proven able to cope with complicated hypothetical situations — Who's your friend? When is your friend not a friend? Wondoloski sees kids as in many ways more able to change than adults, because they are less encumbered by habit.

"We redirect their programming and their vision to see the positive, first in themselves and then in others" is the LVEP cornerstone stressed by Liza Haddad, a Boston parent who teaches off-site LVEP workshops for a mixed age group. She attributes the pull-toward-the-positive to the teacher's ability to believe that every student has an inherent goodness, in one form or another.

"A program that makes students want to keep coming back, that involves their parents in home assignments, and that makes children think about the impact of their actions on the way they feel and the way they make others feel — this is very unique," says Haddad. Her experience is more telling because attendance at parent-run workshops is voluntary.

LVEP students in general report that activities make them feel good about themselves and each other.

one size never fits all

The LVEP circle is drawn so wide that there don't appear to be any fringes.

- ❑ In heterogeneous classes, high-achievers work alongside students often labeled "resistant" or "poorly motivated," and skill-building works for both left- and right-brained thinkers.
- ❑ Age groups addressed are 3-7, 8-14, and 15 or older, with some activities and materials appropriate for children as young as two.
- ❑ The learning community includes (with specific training modules) parents and other caregivers, as well as anyone in a position to set an example — e.g., guidance coun-

selors, curriculum developers, and administrators. The LVEP board itself represents education roles from teachers, administrators, and support staff to parents and activists.

- ❑ Settings can be urban, suburban, or rural, during school hours or in extracurricular activities.
- ❑ Scale of implementation may encompass whole schools getting together to identify common ground or individual teachers practicing LVEP activities within their private domains. Facilitators help teachers incorporate activities into existing curricula, including those with time and budget constraints.
- ❑ The Living Values Web site (www.livingvalues.net) is being translated into four languages. Materials are available in 20.
- ❑ Cost is not a barrier to entry: training workshops are largely free, workbooks and cassettes affordable, and other suggested contributions voluntary.

The volunteer culture of the organization provides an extra stamp of authenticity. It assures practitioners that the commitment they see in their LVEP facilitators is the genuine article.

the greater enterprise

This has changed me and how I view working with kids" is the experience of LVEP director Andrea Martin, a New York City guidance counselor, longtime teacher, and sixteen-year member of the New York Board of Education. Because there's less aggravation, she doesn't have to take it home with her. She sees LVEP as a powerful antidote to teacher burnout, a well documented phenomenon.

Other teachers say there's a professional morale boost just from knowing that LVEP has been launched. Whole-child teaching is something many creative educators have been doing for years. What's new is the international network that articulates and supports the value of this kind of effort.

Many of the Living Values activities ask children to visualize their ideal setting — really walk through the world as it would look if they created it themselves — and then come up with action plans to make it happen. And they do. The freedom from fear of failure that LVEP fosters makes it easier for kids to recognize and explore the choices that are open to them, to see what's conducive to both their own and the social good.

"We don't have to pitch anything," says Wondoloski. "Values, however we call them, are something to be found in everyone. We're simply providing a process for individuals to do some soul-searching." LVEP kids mainly just call it fun.

The next LVEP east coast educator-training session is August 23-26 in the Catskill Mountains, NY. For information or registration contact: Ed Wondoloski, LVEP National Coordinating Office, POB 415, O'Hara Road, Haines Falls, NY 12436. Phone: 518.589.7577; email: usa@livingvalues.net; Web: www.livingvalues.net.



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