

# Belleville District 118 receives national recognition

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This year, [Belleville District 118](#) is one of four school districts in the country and the first in Illinois to be nationally recognized for its character development.

It was named a national district of character by [Character.org](#), a designation it will hold for five years. The announcement comes after District 118 was the first school district in Illinois to be named a [state district of character](#) earlier this year.

## **Belleville School District 118 superintendent on national award**

Belleville School District 118 Superintendent Matt Klosterman talks about the National District of Character award that District 118 earned.

“By no means is the job over,” said Superintendent Matt Klosterman. “You have to keep going at it. But this is a well-deserved recognition at this point in time for the work that our staff has done, the quality of our kids, their families and the community members.”

District 118, which serves about 4,000 students, has been fusing character development with academics for more than 20 years, according to Klosterman. Lessons on “core values,” like respect and responsibility, start even before kindergarten when students are about 2 years old.

“You can have book smart kiddos. ... But if they don’t have empathy for others, if they’re not able to work effectively in groups, if they don’t have respect for themselves and other people, then they’re not going to be most effective with the knowledge that they have,” Klosterman said.

[Union Elementary School](#) first-grader Ellori Douglas-Hill said she thinks everybody should learn about character.

“It will make our Earth kinder and nicer, and that’s what I really think should happen,” Ellori said. “I feel that it will happen in the future, and I hope it does.”

In school, Klosterman said character development helps with student behavior in the classroom, which gives teachers more time for instruction and has a positive influence on grades. Later in life, he said the same lessons will help students when they enter the workforce.

“These are truly life skills that they will be able to use forever,” he said.

Third-grader Payton Schilling has her future planned out. After working with younger students through a peer mentoring program at Union School, she wants to become a teacher

at the school — and a lifeguard in the summers. She said the character lessons apply to other professions, too.

“Like if you want to be a firefighter, you’re gonna have to be kind,” Payton said. “You don’t wanna throw people out of the house. You want to safely get them out of the house.”

## **Abraham Lincoln Elementary students learn from each other through school program**

Abraham Lincoln Elementary students talk about how the buddy program is important to the school being designated a State School of Character.

Klosterman said mentoring or “buddy” programs like the one at Union are district initiatives that follow Character.org’s principles, which are used to evaluate schools and districts for recognition.

“The buddies is one example of a way for the older students to take responsibility and leadership roles but also show caring and empathy towards younger students,” Klosterman said. “And for the younger students, it’s an opportunity to develop friendships with older students but also see good role models.”

Ellori is one of the first-graders helped by older students like Payton in Union School’s program.

“I’ve learned that it’s gonna be OK if you make mistakes and that you should be kind and honest and respectful to others, and I really appreciate that from them,” Ellori said.

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District 118 had been applying for Character.org’s national recognition for the last five years, according to Klosterman. Four of the district’s 11 schools were previously named national schools of character, including Union School, Jefferson School, Henry Raab School and, most recently, [Abraham Lincoln School](#).

Several other schools in the district have earned state school of character designations, too.

## 11 PRINCIPLES OF CHARACTER

The following are Character.org's 11 Principles of Effective Character Education, which are used to evaluate schools and districts for recognition:

- The community promotes core ethical and performance values as the foundation of good character.
- The school defines "character" comprehensively to include thinking, feeling and doing.
- The school uses a comprehensive, intentional and proactive approach to character development.
- The school creates a caring community.
- The school provides students with opportunities for moral action.
- The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character and helps them to succeed.
- The school fosters students' self-motivation.
- The staff is an ethical learning community that shares responsibility for character education and adheres to the same core values that guide the students.
- The school fosters shared leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative.
- The school engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.
- The school regularly assesses its culture and climate, the functioning of its staff as character educators and the extent to which its students manifest good character.