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# National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

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Village Oaks Elementary School  
Novi, Michigan  
Novi Community School District

## Transcript: Building School Culture by Leading with HEART

### Dr. Alex Ofili, Principal at Village Oaks Elementary School:

My name is Alex Ofili, I am the Principal of Village Oaks Elementary School and I've been in this position for two years. What's most important to us as a school, is that our kids grow in all aspects of who they are. We care just as much about their emotional development and their social development as we do about their academic development.

The HEART acronym is Have a growth mindset, Empathize and show kindness, Act responsibly, Respect everyone, and Team up and collaborate. The reason we established that acronym, when I first arrived being a new principal and a third of my staff I had to bring in with me because we had a lot of teachers that retired and they were phenomenal teachers and there was a phenomenal culture that had already been established in our building. But there were just a lot of new people and it dawned on me that I wanted to respect what had already been established, but at the same time, I wanted to clarify what we see as the most important values.

I had a pretty good sense of what I thought were some of the core values, but I thought that it would be most powerful is if we all collectively decided on what those values were. We spent time as a staff during staff meetings and individual conversations with different staff members identifying what we thought was most important. And that's how the HEART acronym grew.

Each month is dedicated to the work we're doing with HEART, so we show a video called HEART Talk, that's created by our 4<sup>th</sup> grade students and it focuses on something we think is really important that encompasses one aspect of HEART. After we show the video lead by the students, we then get to do a lesson that supports whatever it was that was on the video. It's become part of the fabric of our building.

I've always said to teachers, when it comes to kids making choices or even from kids misbehaving, the best lesson or the best classroom environment is one where kids really are engaged and feel safe to take academic risks. And that's why we believe that leading with HEART and creating that environment where the adults care just as much about the emotional wellbeing of the kids as parents care about the emotional wellbeing of the kids, it creates an environment where the kids are going to do their absolute best.

It's just a way of life at Village Oaks and it's a beautiful thing to see on a daily basis.