

Trying to build character in schools

In semi-retirement, Pieper focuses on improving education for children

BY RICH KIRCHEN
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As the semi-retired chairman of one of Milwaukee's largest electrical contractors, Dick Pieper could spend summer captaining his 36-foot power boat on Lake Michigan or his 58-foot sailboat on European seas.

While Pieper, 71, plans to enjoy both warm-weather pursuits, he's also busy on land tackling some of the most daunting problems facing American education. Pieper is dedicating most of his time — and some of his money

PROFILE

DICK PIEPER

— to instilling character in kindergarten-through-12th-grade schoolchildren.

He's a director for the national Character Education Partnership, Washington, D.C., a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nonsectarian group that includes business executives, educators and nonprofit groups. Their goal is training educators to show kids how to be nicer and more respectful.

While the initiative sounds simple and old-fashioned, Pieper and other advocates believe such training provides a practical strategy to turning around some of the nation's worst schools.

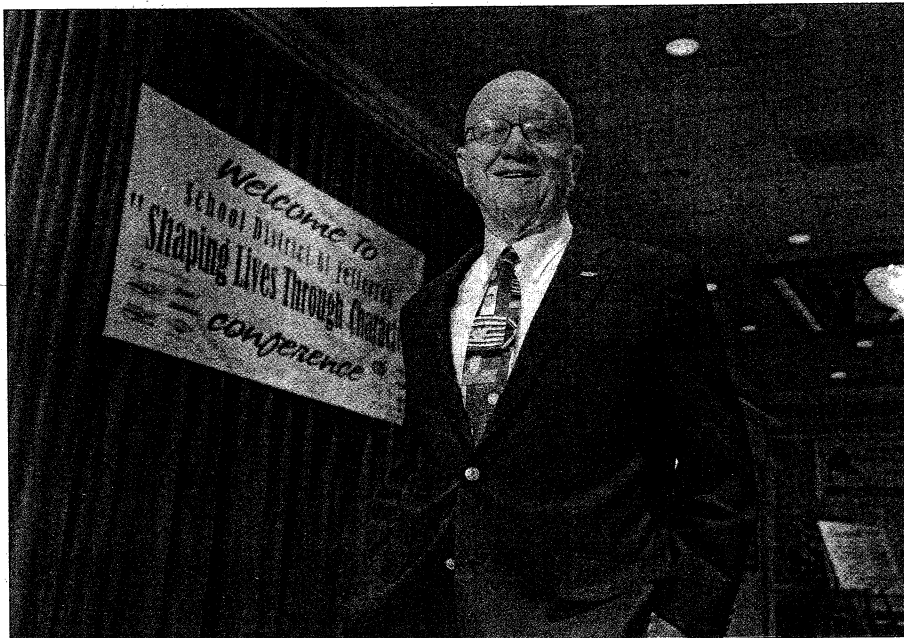
"The stories are just glorious," Pieper said during a recent interview at the Milwaukee Yacht Club after a lunchtime boat cruise. "Kids in hellish circumstances — in 12 to 24 months, the schools are turned around."

Pieper helped organize a conference this week at the Country Springs Hotel in Waukesha where educators and other supporters met to learn more about improving students' lives through character-building. The conference was hosted by the Jefferson School District.

Pieper sees his commitment to character-education fitting his philosophy of giving back to the community. While he was building his electrical contracting business, he volunteered for nonprofits including Junior Achievement, the Boy Scouts and the Boys & Girls Clubs.

He has taken an interest in the plight of the poor for three decades, lobbied Wisconsin governors on policies affecting the poor and funded leadership training for nonprofit groups that work with the poor.

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JOHN PAUL GRECO

Dick Pieper . . . "I'm a man of faith, and I just think to be engaged in something well beyond yourself is a very rich journey."

engaged in something well beyond yourself is a very rich journey," said Pieper, who is Lutheran.

BETTER LEARNING

Leaders of the Boy Scouts urged Pieper to get involved in the Character Education Partnership, he said.

The partnership, founded in 1992, has set 11 principles primarily around school administrators and teachers treating students with respect and students, in turn, treating each other and school staff with respect. The national group had assets of \$2.2 million as of June 2005 and annual expenses of \$1.9 million, according to its most recent annual report.

When students learn self discipline, self respect and respect for others, it leads to better learning, according to at least one study, said Bob Pavlik, a professor at Marquette University.

"There are other ways to solve a problem than hitting someone," Pavlik said.

Pavlik is director of the School Development Center at the MU Institute for Transformation of Learning and a member of the Wisconsin character education advisory committee.

Pieper has served on the national board for five years. He said he has contributed "hundreds of thousands" to the national partnership, but views it mainly as contribution of his time.

While still in his early 20s, Pieper bought Pieper Electric from his father, Julius, in 1960. The younger Pieper grew the company from a half-dozen employees to 1,000 today with offices in five states and four corporate entities under the PPC Partners Inc. banner.

He retired as chief executive officer in January 2006, but Pieper has kept his office at his company's longtime Milwaukee north side headquarters, 5070 N. 35th St. From there, he marshals his efforts to promote character education.

"Dick is the moving force right now for character education," said Joe Dannecker, a former Milwaukee School Board president and member of the Wisconsin advisory committee. "He's a guy who made this his cause and puts a lot of his resources into it."

Pieper's hands-on mission to give a positive jolt to K-12 education dovetails with his investment in encouraging college students to volunteer in their communities. He has funded "servant-leadership," chairs at the Milwaukee School of Engineering and Lawrence University.

'PROBLEM SOLVER'

Sam Scheibler, the Pieper servant-leadership chair at MSOE, calls Pieper a prime example of a successful businessman taking the reins in addressing society's problems.

Scheibler and others said Pieper plays a direct

role in everything from organizing the state character education group to getting questions answered from the national office.

"Dick's a problem-solver and he sees society and community challenges and he looks aggressively for solutions," Scheibler said.

So far, 90 percent of the Wisconsin school

Dick is THE MOVING FORCE

right now for character education.

Joe Dannecker Wisconsin Character Education Advisory Committee

administrators and teachers interested in character education are outside the Milwaukee area, Pieper said. He's working to change that, starting with Milwaukee's Lynde & Harry Bradley Technology & Trade School, where Pieper Electric was one of several major Milwaukee businesses that donated cash, equipment, supplies and staff time to create a model high school that will prepare students for jobs.

Instead of attracting attention for innovative education, Bradley Tech was in the news earlier this year for student fights. Pieper said character education could help change the culture at Tech, and he noted that a dozen of the school's administrators and teachers attended this week's conference in Waukesha.

Tech principal Ed Kovoichich, who is retiring from the Milwaukee Public Schools in early July and becoming principal at Dominican High School in Whitefish Bay, said Bradley Tech, 700 S. Fourth St., will institute character education beginning this fall. Teachers and administrators will include training and implementation of the principals in their weekly planning sessions.

"This is just perfect timing for Bradley Tech," Kovoichich said.

Pieper believes it's perfect timing for schools everywhere.

DICK PIEPER

Chairman of PPC Partners Inc., Milwaukee, and director with the Character Education Partnership, Washington, D.C.

FAMILY: Wife, Suzanne; daughters, Bridget Sullivan, a homemaker, and Ann Eisenbrown, a real estate developer; son, Rick, a general foreman and apprentice instructor in electrical work

EDUCATION: Attended the University of Miami in Florida

HOBBIES: Sailing

CURRENTLY READING: "Ex-Tenebris" by Russell Kirk and "The Little Book of Common Sense Investing" by John Bogle

