When CNHS opened its doors to students in fall 2013, it set out to demonstrate that any child from any neighborhood in Milwaukee could succeed in a college preparatory environment, exhibit excellent character, and go on to achieve college and career success. At the public charter school, which is part of MPS and the Schools That Can network, character education is integrated into every aspect of campus life to help students grow socially, emotionally, and intellectually.
In preparation for the school’s opening, school leaders set out to find a system that would make it easy for teachers to manage student behavior, discipline, and interventions, and create a positive school culture.

“We looked at few different systems and Kickboard was by far the most user-friendly,” said Liz Hein, dean of students and culture at CNHS. “Kickboard not only makes it easy to track student behavior, but it allows us to make changes on our own. If we want to add a new behavior or character trait to track, we can without having to call for support. That was a big selling point for us.”

CNHS began using the Kickboard school culture system in July 2013. Kickboard includes a highly configurable, web-based platform and collaborative, research-based professional development.

With Kickboard, educational leaders can set school- and district-wide behavior expectations to help teachers keep students on task. With just a tap, teachers can easily record and reinforce the behaviors that make up the school’s ideal culture — without adding extra work to their day.

“Kickboard provides the best way to track all of the behavior decisions our students are making, whether they’re positive or negative,” said Hein. “Because teachers can log this data in real-time, administrators and parents can also see the choices students are making, and students always know where they stand.”

Developing positive character traits

The Carmen culture revolves around eight character traits that are embedded in its academic, extracurricular, and advisory programs: social intelligence, teamwork, determination, curiosity, self-control, gratitude, zest, and integrity. Using Kickboard, teachers can instantly record when students demonstrate these traits or other behaviors, and automatically assign merits or demerits to individuals or groups of students.
“In ninth and 10th grade, if students receive demerits, they can earn merits back when they make good decisions and prevent a trip to detention. This shows them that even if they make a mistake, they can bounce back by doing the right thing,” said Hein. “Our upperclassmen also receive merits for demonstrating our character traits, but they don’t have a point value so can’t be used to erase demerits. This is because by junior or senior year, we expect students to demonstrate positive character traits because that’s what leaders and self-directed learners do. Their motivation is intrinsic.”

**Tracking the positivity ratio**

At CNHS, teachers are expected to recognize positive student behaviors throughout the day at a ratio of at least 3 to 1. With Kickboard, administrators can look up the positivity ratio — the ratio of positive to negative behaviors — to see if teachers and students are meeting school expectations.

“We send the merit:demerit ratio to our staff mid-day everyday to show them if we’re hitting that 3:1 ratio and having a great day, or if we’re recognizing more negative than positive behaviors and need to shift our focus. That would be impossible to do without Kickboard,” said Hein.

Having a positive focus is particularly beneficial for ninth and 10th grade students who need help adjusting to Carmen’s rigorous expectations, according to Hein. “Many students come from middle schools that don’t have the same culture as Carmen. When they get here, it can be a bit of a shock with regard to the things we expect them to do and the things we don’t allow them to do. Kickboard makes it easy for us to focus on the positive — and actually show students all the positive choices they’re making — so they can make that shift more quickly,” she said.

**Boosting objectivity and saving time**

Kickboard also helps teachers maintain their objectivity, so they can establish stronger relationships with students. “High school students often feel victimized, like ‘This teacher just doesn’t get me.’ Using Kickboard’s comment feature, we’ve trained teachers to leave comments that are judgment-free. So instead of saying, ‘This student was disrespectful,’ they write exactly what the student said. When we meet with students or parents, we can pull up that information and it’s all there verbatim, which makes it easy to keep things objective,” said Hein.

Kickboard saves teachers’ time, too. “We have a complex discipline policy. Kickboard makes it easy for teachers to enforce our policy because all of the behaviors we track are in the system, organized alphabetically. When a teacher marks a behavior, Kickboard automatically assigns merits or demerits. This makes teachers’ lives much easier because they don’t have to memorize how many merits or demerits are associated with each behavior,” she said.
Identifying trends and making data-driven decisions

With Kickboard, educators can look at data over time to identify trends and needs, from the individual level to the classroom, school, or district level.

Using Kickboard’s student reports, for example, educators can get an entire snapshot of a student’s behavior and contribution to the school culture over any period of time. “If teachers have a student who is often troublesome, they can look at the Kickboard data and see what kind of morning the student is having. Then they can greet the student at the door and say, ‘Hey, I know you had a rough third hour, but this is fourth hour and it’s a fresh start.’ They can give students the pep talk they need to turn things around,” said Hein.

Each week, administration sends a Character Report to every teacher. “The report has detailed analyses about every behavior — which behaviors we saw the most or the least of during the week, which students saw an increase or decrease in their merits, and much more. Each Monday at assembly, we show that data to students too, so they can see what happened and set goals for the coming week,” she said.

In addition, a Culture Report is used to identify which behavior was the biggest problem and which character trait was demonstrated the least. “We make that behavior and that trait the focus for the coming week. Then we can monitor the Kickboard data to see if our efforts are paying off,” she said.

Each quarter, the staff uses Kickboard reports to reflect on the school culture and act on the data. “We look at a million things, from what percentage of students are serving detention to what percentage are ending the week with a positive or negative number of merits. Teachers will meet in small groups and choose the behavior or the problem they feel most passionate about, and then develop a plan for how to improve that moving forward,” she said.

Managing behavior intervention plans

Each quarter, administrators also use Kickboard data to prepare Tier 2 behavior intervention plans for students who are struggling. “We use Kickboard to help us identify which students need Tier 2 interventions in our Response to Intervention framework, and which behaviors we need to target,” said Hein. “Having our behavior intervention plans in Kickboard makes it easier to see what’s working and what’s not, so we can adjust our interventions accordingly.”
A semester without Kickboard

For teachers, Kickboard has become much more than a school culture system; it is an indispensable tool that is integral to their success and their students’ success.

“One semester we had a new principal from outside the Carmen network who didn’t want to use Kickboard. That semester, teachers had to track student behavior in a data system we used for grades and attendance. Teachers hated it. The system could only be used for logging negative behaviors. They couldn’t erase an entry if they made a mistake. They couldn’t log a behavior for multiple students at the same time. It was very frustrating,” said Hein.

“As an administrator, manipulating data was a nightmare, so I didn’t do nearly as much since it was so cumbersome. Needless to say, our staff pushed to get Kickboard back. By the next semester, we had Kickboard back and we are so glad.”
Creating a strong foundation for academic achievement

Among the 165 high schools in MPS, CNHS was one of only six to earn a designation of "Meets Expectations" or higher on the Wisconsin state report card in 2015-16.

“The culture of our school and Kickboard definitely contribute to students’ academic success. To learn, students need the classroom to be a calm, safe space. If a student is worried about a classmate saying something mean or trying to fight with them, learning is not going to happen. So, having a positive culture is crucial to set students up for academic success,” said Hein.

From 2014-15 to 2015-2016, CNHS reduced suspensions by 36 percent and increased student retention by 23 percent. From 2015-16 to 2016-17, students earned 53 percent more merits. In addition, there was a 37 percent decrease in the number of student removals from the classroom due to discipline infractions.

Getting students to care about character

“When we first started, we wondered if our high schoolers would care about things like character traits. With Kickboard, they actually do. They care a great deal about what their balance is and where they stand in Kickboard. When they make a mistake and see demerits, it bothers them. It makes them want to show positive character traits and improve. That’s the biggest change we’ve seen — Kickboard helps us motivate kids to turn around and improve,” said Hein.

“During the semester we couldn’t use Kickboard, we really felt its absence in our school culture,” she continued. “Kickboard helps students buy into our character traits, which is the most important part of our culture. Without a clear way to track these traits, they got lost in the shuffle. But with Kickboard, students care, which helps these traits become intrinsic. Each day, students want to do better and better.”