



Character Education

RESOURCES:

The Character Education Partnership

918 16th Street NW, Suite 501
Washington, DC 20006
800-988-8081

www.character.org

(Numerous related websites are listed on the Character Education Partnership website.)

Organizations in the Partnership:

American Association of School Administrators (AASA)

American College Testing Service

Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation

National Association of Elementary School Principals

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)

National Education Association (NEA)

National School Boards Association (NSBA)

Templeton Foundation

(Addresses character education in higher education.)

www.templeton.org or

www.collegeandcharacter.org

The Search Institute

700 S. 3rd Street, Suite 210
Minneapolis, MN 55415
www.search-institute.org

Many schools have looked for ways to provide proactive guidance for the positive behaviors and values that should be a part of the education of all people. Many experts have called for schools to be more active in teaching the moral and civic values that are an essential part of our social fabric and sense of community. These calls are not new. In 1909 Dewey stated, "A successful school, like a successful business is a cohesive community of shared values, beliefs, rituals and ceremonies."¹ Others more recently have described the need for telling stories to children about the heroes and heroines who embody the core values of the community.² As a result, many schools have embraced "character education" as a way to teach a core group of community values.

Overview: What is Character Education?

Character education is a broad term that is used to describe the general curriculum and organizational features of schools that promote the development of fundamental values in children at school. While both family and religious institutions have more primary roles in this process, few deny that the schools may also have a role here as related to civic and community values. Some have argued that, consciously or not, schools and classrooms transmit values.³ Character education simply does that in a more systematic way. Character education includes two primary components: 1) Education in civic virtue and in the qualities that teach children the forms and rules of citizenship in a just society, and 2) Education in personal adjustment, chiefly in the qualities that enable children to become productive and dependable citizens.⁴

Character education may include a variety of subcomponents that can be a part of a larger character education program or that can be self-standing. These can include social skills instruction and curricula, moral development instruction and curricula, values clarification instruction and curricula, caring education and curricula,⁵ and school values statements. Other programs such as cooperative learning strategies, participatory decision-making for students, and service learning are sometimes also classified as components of character education. Character education itself is often viewed as simply one component of some larger school reform and improvement strategies. For example, the "Basic School" has four components, one of which is a "Commitment to Character."⁶

According to Likona,⁷ the moral or character education of elementary students is designed to accomplish three goals:

- To promote development away from self-centered thinking and excessive individualism and toward cooperative relationships and mutual respect;
- To foster the growth of the capacity to think, feel, and act morally; and
- To develop in the classroom and in the school a moral community based on fairness, caring, and participation - such a community being a moral end in itself as well as a support system for the character development of each individual student.

In order to accomplish these goals, he advocates for four processes which he feels should be going on in the classroom: Building self-esteem and sense of community; learning to cooperate and help others; moral reflection; and

participatory decision-making. Specific qualities sought in children are:

1. Self-respect that derives feeling of worth not only from competence but also from positive behavior toward others;
2. Social perspective-taking that asks how others think and feel;
3. Moral reasoning about the right thing to do;
4. Such moral values as kindness, courtesy, trustworthiness, and responsibility.⁸

There is much diversity and variation regarding character education programs. While several are available nationally, two are currently most prominent: "Character Counts!"⁹ and "The 40 Developmental Assets."¹⁰ Many others have been developed at the local level.

What We Know About Character Education Programs

Character education programs have logical and common sense value, particularly if one hypothesizes that violence and inappropriate behavior in school arises in part from deteriorating home and community values as well as poor moral judgment by the perpetrators. While character education programs are widely accepted and have been advocated for by a wide array of prominent organizations and individuals, there is little research evidence to support the effectiveness of these types of efforts in the prevention of violence or in the reduction of other kinds of behavior problems. While local evaluations of some programs have been conducted, there have been no major national studies of these defined programs, let alone the more general concept of character education. Part of the difficulty arises because character education is a general philosophy and does not prescribe specific practices. Without prescribed practices and curricula or identified measurable outcomes, it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of such approaches. Even specific examples of such programs, such as Character Counts!, which identifies character goals and provides some curriculum materials, do not provide specific practices regarding how the program is to be instilled throughout the school environment, thus challenging evaluation, although some evaluation is being attempted.¹¹

Making it Work

According to Likona, Schaps & Lewis,¹² in order to implement character education the school staff must become a learning, caring, and moral community in which

all share responsibility for character education and attempt to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students. They state that effective character education is defined to include student thinking, feeling, and behavior. It includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, helps them succeed, and strives to develop students' intrinsic motivation. The schools should provide opportunities for moral action and acknowledge appropriate moral responses. The schools must recruit parents and community members as full partners in the character-building effort.

Summary

Although there is little data that verifies the value of character education programs, they have become common in a large number of schools. According to its advocates, effective character education requires an intentional, proactive, and comprehensive approach that promotes the core values in all phases of school life, and which requires moral leadership from both staff and students. These programs typically address both citizenship in a just society and personal adjustment and are delivered via curricula and a variety of other approaches.

- Reece L. Peterson

¹ Dewey (1909) in *Moral principles of education*, as quoted in Henley, M., Ramsey, R., & Algozzine, R. (1999). *Teaching students with mild disabilities*, Third Edition. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

² Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M., & Van Bockern, S. (1990). *Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for the future (p. 31)*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.

³ Henley, M., Ramsey, R., & Algozzine, R. (1999). *Teaching students with mild disabilities*, Third Edition. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

⁴ London, P. Character education and clinical intervention: A paradigm shift for US schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, May, 1987, p. 671.

⁵ Kohn, A. Caring kids: The role of the schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, March, 1991, p. 496-506.

⁶ Boyer, W. (September, 1995). Character in the basic school: Making a commitment to character. Article from *Principal Magazine* reprinted on website: <http://www.naesp.org/char.html>.

⁷ Likona, 1987, p. 420.

⁸ Likona, 1987, p. 420.

⁹ The Character Education Partnership, 918 16th Street NW, Suite 501, Washington, DC 20006, phone 800-988-8081, www.character.org.

¹⁰ The Search Institute, 700 S. 3rd Street, Suite 210, Minneapolis, MN 55415, <http://search-institute.org>.

¹¹ The Character Education Partnership.

¹² Likona, T., Schaps, E., & Lewis, C. (1999). Eleven principals of effective character education. Web document at www.character.org/principles/index.cgi.

About the Safe & Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing and studying prevention-based approaches to school safety. The Project is currently working with schools in districts in Indiana and Nebraska to integrate best-practice strategies in school violence prevention into comprehensive school-based plans for deterring school disruption and violence. Visit our web site: www.indiana.edu/~safeschl.

Indiana: Indiana University/Richland-Bean Blossom Community Schools/
Spencer-Owen Community Schools

Contact: Dr. Russell Skiba, Indiana Education Policy Center
174 Smith Research Center
2805 E. 10th Street
Bloomington, IN 47408
812-855-1240

Nebraska: University of Nebraska/Beatrice Public Schools

Contact: Dr. Reece Peterson
202A Barkley Center
University of Nebraska-Lincoln Center
Lincoln, Nebraska 68583-0732
402-472-5480