



Character Counts!

Notes

See related SRS fact sheets on:
Character Education
Developmental Assets
School Value Statements

Resources

Character Counts! National Office and Coalition;

The Josephson Institute of Ethics,
4640 Admiralty Way, #1000, Marina
Del Ray, CA 90292-6610;
310-306-1868; Fax 310-827-1864;
E-mail: ji@ethics.org;
<http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/>;
<http://www.charactercounts.org>.

This website has a vast wealth of materials related to character counts and character education, including books, reports and other materials, some of which are available at no charge. There is also evaluation and testimonial information, information about organizations and individuals who support the coalition, and links to other character education sites. There are also many links to state and local implementation efforts. The following are two examples mentioned in this fact sheet:

Lancaster County Extension

Office, 444 Cherrycreek Road,
Lincoln, NE 68528; 402-441-7180;
<http://lancaster.unl.edu/4h/char.htm>.

South Dakota Cooperative

Extension, Youth Development/4-
H; South Dakota State University,
Brookings, SD 57007;
http://4h.sdstate.edu/character/eval_study.htm.

In order to teach students positive alternatives to violence and disruptive behavior, many schools have attempted to provide a positive set of values that would counteract these negative values. “Character Counts!” has become a popular and widespread benchmark character education program that includes a universal set of core values and can be adopted on a building, district or community wide basis.

What is “Character Counts!”?

Character Counts! is an ethics and character-building curriculum program designed for students ages 4-19. The program teaches and develops a consensus regarding a set of ethical values that transcend race, creed, politics, gender, and wealth. The Character Counts! curriculum, and the coalition which supports it, work to overcome the false but surprisingly widespread idea that no single value is intrinsically superior to another and the belief that ethical values vary by race, class, gender and politics. Specifically they oppose the idea that greed and fairness, or cheating and honesty carry the same moral weight as other positive values.

The program originated as a result of a meeting sponsored by the Josephson Institute of Ethics in July, 1992. Based on a survey of young people, a coalition of organizations with people from a range of walks of life and various ethnic and religious groups was formed to develop a consensus on the ethical values that could be taught at home, in the classroom, and at the office without offending political, racial, religious, gender or socioeconomic sensibilities. A purposeful way to address character and values in our communities and schools was needed. The Character Counts! program is a result of these efforts.

The Character Counts! Coalition, which includes a diverse partnership of education and human service organizations, hopes to build a consensus that there are values that clearly define us “at our best,” however diverse our views and backgrounds. The “Six Pillars of Character” which form the core of ethical values for the program are:

- ❑ **Trustworthiness.** Be honest, don’t deceive, cheat or steal. Be reliable- do what you say you’ll do. Have the courage to do the right thing. Build a good reputation. Be loyal- stand by your family, friends and country.
- ❑ **Respect.** Treat others with respect; follow the Golden Rule. Be tolerant of differences. Use good manners, not bad language. Be considerate of the feelings of others. Don’t threaten, hit or hurt anyone. Deal peacefully with anger, insults and disagreements.
- ❑ **Responsibility.** Do what you are supposed to do. Persevere: Keep on trying! Always do your best. Use self-control. Be self disciplined. Think before you act. Consider the consequences. Be accountable for your choices.
- ❑ **Fairness.** Play by the rules. Take turns and share. Be open-minded; listen to others. Don’t take advantage of others. Don’t blame others carelessly.
- ❑ **Caring.** Be kind. Be compassionate and show you care. Express gratitude. Forgive others. Help people in need.
- ❑ **Citizenship.** Do your share to make your school and community better. Cooperate. Stay informed. Vote. Be a good neighbor. Obey laws and rules. Respect authority. Protect the environment.

Some communities have adopted the Character Counts! “pillars of character” as a community wide program in which a whole range of businesses, community organizations, government agencies, as well as individual citizens, officials and schoolchildren learn and try to live by the six pillars of character (Anderson, 1999b).

The Josephson Institute website indicates that the Character Counts! program is in place in virtually every state, and in some states the involvement has been extensive. In Nebraska for example, an estimated 123,000 or 33 % of the state’s youth population ages 5-19 have had access to the program through schools or community organizations including 4-H, local Rotary International clubs and the County Extension Offices by 1999 (Anderson, 1999a). By 1998, about half of South Dakota’s schools had incorporated it into the school environment. Character Counts! is probably the most widely used character education program in schools.

Throughout the United States a wide variety of community, youth and service organizations, the National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, American Association of School Administrators, Cooperative Extension, 4-H Programs, in addition to schools and child care agencies, have supported this program and are members of the Character Counts! Coalition. These same organizations have provided financial, as well as in-kind support.

What We Know about Character Counts

While Character Counts! has become a widespread program in schools and community organizations, there are few thorough technically adequate evaluations of its effectiveness. The evaluation reports and surveys of schools or agencies employing the Character Counts! program have shown some positive outcomes for the program. For example, a national Character Counts! survey reported that 85 % of teachers and program leaders involved in the program saw an overall positive difference in participating students, 61 percent believed students helped each other more, 55 percent saw participating students blaming others less and taking more responsibility for their own actions, and 75 percent said that as Character Counts! teachers, they were changing their own behavior (Character Counts! website; Anderson, 1999b).

A five-year statewide evaluation study in South Dakota indicates in its third-year report (Moss, 2001) that approximately 8,419 respondents to a survey showed overall very positive results compared to a baseline. Almost all of the evaluation has focused on surveys, rather than other measures of behavior change.

Nevertheless, no major national research studies could be identified in journals on Character Counts!. Much of the support for the program is anecdotal and is based on the logical, common sense value of this type of program, rather than empirical research support.

Making it Work

Character Counts! offers a framework and materials to teach each of the six character values. The framework employs a model called “TEAM” which stands for Teach, Enforce, Advocate, and Model. Each of the pillars is actually taught to students accompanied by lessons, activities and even role-playing scenarios. The enforcement uses naturally occurring consequences, both positive and negative, to reinforce and shape the use of the pillars. Advocacy relies on all students and staff or community members standing up for the ideals taught. Modeling depends on the facilitators at first, but eventually all involved. The effect of Character Counts! may be enhanced when adopted and implemented by an entire school system, community, city or state and used on a widespread basis.

Character Counts! curriculum kits are available, including leadership guides and activity sheets for each pillar of character for each of five age groups (ages 4-6, 6-9, 9-11, 11-13, and teens). Posters, game boards, books, activities, as well as a video that supports the 4-9 year-old curriculum are also available. Various student recognitions and awards, including insignia and materials are also available.

Due to its widespread use nationwide, there is a large support system for its implementation in a variety of settings including Internet websites that offer educational materials.

The Josephson Institute and others strongly request that those not trained in Character Counts! not use the materials. Seminars are available to train and certify teachers and others who might use the program. Training is widely available and can be provided on-site. Materials are offered at reduced prices when those certified train others in its use.

Conclusions

Although there is not as yet adequate research evaluating the effectiveness of Character Counts! in achieving its goals, or in improving student behavior or reducing violence, the program has significant face-validity as a useful tool for schools to provide a positive value orientation to school and community behavior. Its widespread use, its goal of identifying universal values, and its ability to integrate well with curriculum, school rules, or other behavioral interventions also make the program appealing as an approach to teaching civility and moral development in schools and communities.

Reece L. Peterson, May 2003

References

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- Moss, M. (2001). Character Counts! Evaluation Report, Third Year’s Data. Brookings: South Dakota State University, Cooperative Extension Office. <http://4h.sdstate.edu/character/CEvaluationyr3.PDF>; http://4h.sdstate.edu/character/eval_study.htm; <http://www.charactercounts.org/doing/SD2000report-1-method.htm>

About the Safe and Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing prevention-based approaches to school safety, discipline reform and behavior improvement in schools.

Websites: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/> or <http://www.unl.edu/srs/> Or Contact:

Russell Skiba, Indiana Education Policy Ctr., 170 Smith Ctr., 2805 E. 10th Street, Bloomington, IN 47408; 812-855-1240 skiba@indiana.edu, or

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