

# Character Education

Tier 1

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Many schools have looked for ways to provide proactive guidance for the positive behaviors and values that many believe should be a part of education for 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". More recently others have described the need for telling stories to children about the heroes and heroines who embody the core values of the community (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). More than 90 percent of people polled in 1993 said that schools should be teaching values such as courage, caring, acceptance and honesty (Elam, Lowell, & Gallup, 1993). As a result, many schools have embraced character education as a way to teach a core group of community values, as well as to support academic excellence (Huston-Holm, 2010).

## What is Character Education?

Character education is defined as "the process of developing in students an understanding of, commitment to, and tendency to behave in accordance with core ethical values" (Milson & Mehlig, 2002, p. 47). 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 as it relates to civic and community values. Some have argued that, consciously or not, schools and classrooms transmit values (Henley, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 1999). Character education simply does that in a more systematic and intentional way. Character education includes two primary components: a) education in civic virtue and in the qualities that teach children the forms and rules of citizenship in a just society, and b) education in personal adjustment, chiefly in the qualities that enable children to become productive and dependable citizens (London, 1987).

Character education may include a variety of subcomponents that can be part of a larger character education program or it can be self-standing. These can include social skills, moral development, values clarification, caring, and school values statements (Kohn, 1991). 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, in Boyer's (1995) school reform book "The Basic School, a



Community for Learning”, he proposed “a Commitment to Character” as one of ten key components of his vision for a school.

According to Likona (1988), the moral or character education of elementary students is designed to accomplish three goals:

1. To promote development away from self-centered thinking and excessive individualism and toward cooperative relationships and mutual respect;
2. To foster growth of the capacity to think, feel, and act morally, and;
3. To develop in the classroom and school a moral community based on fairness, caring, and participation

In order to accomplish these goals Likona (1988) advocates for four processes which he feels should occur 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:

- Self-respect that derives feeling of worth not only from competence, but also from positive behavior toward others;
- Social perspective-taking that asks how others think and feel;
- Moral reasoning about the right thing to do;
- Such moral values as kindness, courtesy, trustworthiness, and responsibility (Likona, 1988).

### State Policy on Character Education

Many states have enacted laws or administrative policies addressing character issues either related to the character of teachers or to the content of public education. These originated from the earliest establishment of public education as a responsibility of each state. There are currently 18 states that mandate character education, including Nebraska. There are 18 states that encourage character education, 7 states that support character education, but don't have any legislation concerning this topic, and 8 states that don't have any legislation on the topic (Character.org, n.d.). These would

today be considered components of character education. For example, Nebraska's law requires:

*Every teacher employed to give instruction in any public, private, parochial, or denominational school in the State of Nebraska shall . . . give special emphasis to common honesty, morality, courtesy, obedience to law, respect for the national flag, the United States Constitution, the Constitution of Nebraska, respect for parents and the home, the dignity and necessity of honest labor, and other lessons of a steadying influence which tend to promote and develop an upright and desirable citizenry. (Neb. Rev. Stat. § 79-725, 2012).*

Although rarely enforced, they remain in statute and if not followed could result in a Class III misdemeanor in criminal court (Neb. Rev. Stat. § 79-727, 2012).

In another example, the Michigan State Board of Education has adopted a “Policy on Quality Character Education”, which advocates



for all Michigan schools to “adopt, implement and evaluate research based programs ... to teach character education.”

## Character Education Programs

A wide variety of character education programs have been developed. In the following section, four representative examples of character education programs are briefly described to provide some examples of the types of programs available. More information on these programs can be found in the resources list at the end of this document. Inclusion here does not imply endorsement of these programs.

### Character Counts!

“Character Counts!” is a character education program that is based on six universal core

values represented as pillars of character. The six pillars of character are: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. 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, and works to embed these values within all aspects of the school day with teachers pointing out positive examples of these values and reinforcing them in students. The program can be adopted on a building, district, or community wide basis. Materials are available at website of the Josephson Institute (2013), <http://charactercounts.org/>.

### CHARACTERplus Way

The CHARACTERplus Way curriculum was developed for ages 4-18 years and is based on the Ten Essentials developed in 1988 by the St. Louis, Missouri school districts and the McDonnell-Douglas Corporation. The Character Education Partnership services Missouri and south-western Illinois. This curriculum is a comprehensive, whole school process using data-based planning and collaborative classroom practices (Marshall, Caldwell, & Foster, 2011). The curriculum is implemented in two phases, the first being to collect data and get a baseline of where the school and students are starting and the second phase being to implement the program. There are several activities used to implement the program including assessment, school reports, staff development, coaching, training institutes, networking, and using the Ten Essentials to develop the program (Marshall et al., 2011). There have been studies on the effectiveness of this program, two of which were large-scale, four-year experimental studies (Marshall et al., 2011). In the first study the researchers found a positive change in the school environment, a reduction in discipline referrals, and increased test scores in language arts and math (Marshall et al., 2011). For more information: <http://www.characterplus.org>



## Developmental Assets

In an effort to identify the elements of a strength-based approach to healthy development, the Search Institute (2013) developed the framework of “Developmental Assets”. This framework was developed from a comprehensive synthesis of over 800 studies on “adolescent development, prevention, risk reduction, protective factors, and resilience” (Stevens & Wilkerson, 2010). This framework identifies 40 critical factors for young people’s growth and development. When drawn together, the assets offer a set of benchmarks for positive child and adolescent development. The first 20 developmental assets, the “External Assets,” focus on positive experiences that young people receive from the people and institutions in their lives. Examples are: “family support”, “service to others”, “school boundaries”, and “creative activities”. An additional 20 assets are internal and developed or nurtured to guide choices and create a sense of centeredness, purpose, and focus. Examples are: “achievement motivation”, “caring”, “planning and decision making”, and “personal power”. Several research studies through the Search Institute have supported the assertion that the more of these assets students’ possess, the more likelihood of school success, overcoming adversity and having good physical health (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Rose (2006) concluded that the “asset-based approach is both relevant and useful in formulating interventions that target positive development for all children and youth” (p. 239-240).

## “Forgiveness” as Character Education

This forgiveness education program is an example of a more focused character education effort which is focused on forgiveness as a moral concept as a part of a larger character education effort (Knudson & Enright, 2002, 2008). “Forgiveness is a moral response to situations in which youth are treated unfairly. It has behavioral, cognitive and emotional components.” As youth learn about, and practice, forgiveness

they strengthen aspects of their moral development. “Because children and adolescents cannot avoid being hurt by others, forgiveness education is relevant to all youth” (Lin, Enright, & Klatt, 2011, p.250). These two curricula for grades 6-8 and 11-13 guide teachers in educating students about forgiveness as a core value.

## What Do We Know About Character Education Programs?

“Developing character in youth is a complex process that is unlikely to yield immediate or easily measured results” (Milson & Mehlig, 2002, p. 48). However, character education programs have logical and common sense values, 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. At South Carroll high school in Baltimore, Maryland, researchers have concluded that an effective character education program positively affects academics (Manzo, 2005).

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 very few national studies of these defined programs, or the more general concept of character education, particularly for youth with emotional and behavior disorders. 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 fidelity of implementation, let alone the effectiveness of such approaches.

Programs like Character Counts! and Developmental Assets have had research conducted on their effectiveness and there has been

quantifiable data gathered, although there has not been enough data gathered yet to consider these programs evidence-based practices. Moreover, much of the research is published by the program developers, making it difficult to determine program effectiveness in more diverse contexts. The results for the specific programs show some positive results, but other studies on character education in general have not found character education to significantly affect the variables being measured.

### **Making Character Education Work**

According to Likona, Schaps, and Lewis (2001), 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.



When implementing a character education program, students need to be taught to speak the same language about character for simple communication. Students that come from different cultural and religious backgrounds do not always use the same words to refer to a type of character or they may not have learned these terms before coming to school. After implementing a character education program, Singh (2001) found that classroom behavior improved and students began to expect more of themselves and each other. A good character education program takes time to develop. It must include the entire community, be infused throughout the school curriculum, involve everyone at the school from custodians to administrators, and needs to help students understand core ethical values and how to act upon them (Huston-Holm, 2010).

Sipos and Maupin (2010), have identified eleven principles of effective character education that schools and administrators implementing a character education program should consider. These include promoting core values; defining character to include thinking, feeling and doing; using a comprehensive approach; creating a caring community; providing students with opportunities for moral action; offering a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum; fostering students' self-motivation; engaging staff as a learning community; fostering shared leadership; engaging families and community members as partners; and assessing the culture and climate of the school (Sipos & Maupin, 2010). The report by Sipos and Maupin (2010) explain these principles in much more detail and give examples of them being used by different schools.

### **Conclusion**

Although there are not a lot of data that verify the effectiveness of character education programs, these programs have become common in a large number of schools. Furthermore, there are many individuals and organizations that support character education, including the federal government. 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. Programs typically address both citizenship in a just society and personal adjustment, and are delivered via curricula and a variety of other approaches.



## Resources on Character Education

**Character Counts! and the Josephson Institute** have 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. <http://josephsoninstitute.org/> and <http://www.charactercounts.org>. See also the Program Brief on Developmental Assets at: <http://k12engagement.unl.edu/character-counts>.

**The Character Education Partnership**, Washington, DC 2006. This is an organization that advocates for integrity, honesty, respect, and other core ethical values to be taught and practiced in schools and at home. The website is for parents, students, and schools. There are character education lesson plans and a number of different resources and training options offered on their website. [www.character.org](http://www.character.org).

**CHARACTERplus**. This organization has offices in both St. Louis and Kansas City. This is a website devoted to the CHARACTERplus curriculum that explains the philosophy and history behind the curriculum. It also explains the organizations programs and services, events and conferences. It is a local education agency serving Missouri and parts of Illinois. [www.characterplus.org](http://www.characterplus.org).

**Community of Caring**. Community of Caring is a comprehensive K-12, research-based character education program with a unique focus on students with disabilities. Community of Caring schools teaches values everywhere: in the classroom, hallway, cafeteria, and on the playing field. <http://education.utah.edu/research/programs/community/index.php>

**Developmental Assets**. The Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN; This is an independent, nonprofit, non-sectarian organization whose mission is to advance the well-being of adolescents and children by generating knowledge and promoting its application. At the heart of the institute's work is the framework of 40 developmental assets. It offers the main source of materials and support for implementing the developmental assets program. [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org). See also the Program Brief, Developmental Assets at <http://k12engagement.unl.edu/developmental-assets>.

**The Adventure of Forgiveness: A Guided Curriculum for Children Ages 6-8**. (Knudson, J. & Enright, R.D., 2002; Curricula for other ages 11-13 also available 2008). These curricula guide teachers in educating students regarding forgiveness as an important element of character education.

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