MICHIGAN
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

# POLICY ON
# QUALITY CHARACTER EDUCATION

The Michigan State Board of Education believes that there are two important reasons to teach character education in public schools. First, the well being of a democratic society requires the civic engagement of ethical citizens. Character education must be a deliberate and long-term effort by families, schools, and community partners to help young people understand, care about, and act upon shared ethical values.

Secondly, character education helps students learn. Qualities such as caring, responsibility, respect for oneself and others, fairness, trustworthiness, citizenship, and self-restraint promote a healthy, safe, and supportive learning environment that promotes the primary mission of the school, which is to educate. With effective character development programs, schools can increase academic achievement and prosocial attitudes and behaviors and decrease negative behaviors such as truancy, violence, discipline problems, and bullying.

The State Board of Education believes that character education in public schools must be secular in nature and is best implemented using coordinated school health programs[1] with a focus on developing positive relationships and prosocial norms among students and staff.

**The State Board of Education therefore recommends that the following principles[2] be used to adopt, implement, and evaluate research-based programs, such as the *Michigan Model for Comprehensive School Health Education*, to teach character education in all public schools in the state:**

1.   *Promote core ethical values as the basis of healthy relationships and good character.* The State Board of Education believes that widely shared core ethical values, such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, respect for self and others, trustworthiness, citizenship, and self-restraint form the basis of healthy relationships and good character.

2.   *Define character comprehensively to include understanding, self-efficacy, social skills, environmental support, and behavior.* The character education program should provide students with opportunities to develop understanding through in-depth discussions at home and in school about real problems and belief in their ability to act on their values. Students should have opportunities to develop healthy life skills such as assertive communication, empathic listening, helping and help seeking, self-assessment, decision-making, analyzing influences, managing emotions, and critical thinking. The climate of the school should support the use of these skills. Students should be given opportunities to apply these skills in service to their communities, such as through cross-age tutoring, peer mediation, and service-learning opportunities.

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[1] See the State Board *Policy on Coordinated School Health Programs to Support Academic Achievement and Healthy Schools,* September 2003.
[2] These principles are adapted from the *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* from the Character Education Partnership, viewable at www.character.org.

3. *Use a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development.* The core values should be reflected in the instructional and assessment processes, the extracurricular and intramural sport programs, the behavior of the adults in the school, and in the discipline procedures. Character education should provide the opportunity for open, respectful dialogues about real-life ethical dilemmas in the life of the school.

4. *Create a caring community.* Character development has integrity only in the context of a caring environment in which everyone in the school experiences safety and a sense of belonging and is given opportunities to contribute in meaningful ways. Research indicates that bullying is often rooted in a rejection of real or perceived differences in race, ethnicity, gender, gender expression, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and disabilities. Connectedness should therefore be promoted across differences, within and across grade levels, and between and among students, staff, and families. The climate in each classroom and through the school should become one of mutual respect, fairness, and cooperation.

5. *Provide students with age-appropriate opportunities for ethical action.* Community partnerships can provide many and varied opportunities to apply the core values in real-life situations. Through service learning, students contribute to the welfare of others and reflect on the outcomes of their efforts. Students from all of the social groups in a school should be given opportunities to participate in making decisions about ethical dilemmas in school life so that they can learn how to exercise leadership in ethical ways.

6. *Provide a meaningful and challenging comprehensive curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.* Providing a curriculum that is inherently meaningful to students contributes to school success. The subject content and instructional processes used in the school should therefore engage all students, providing them with many opportunities for creative problem-solving and allow them to test their ideas and have a say in matters that affect them. Active teaching and learning methods, such as service-learning, experience-based projects, problem-solving approaches, and cooperative groups that address multiple intelligences and individual learning styles, should be used to help all students succeed. The natural intersections between subject content and character should be developed, such as addressing current ethical issues in science, debating historical practices and decisions, and discussing ethical dilemmas in literature.

7. *Strive to foster students' self-motivation.* Growing in self-motivation, like all learning, is a developmental process. Over time, effective character education provides opportunities for students to develop an internal commitment and belief in their ability to act on the core values. In order for students to be able to act responsibly in school, at home, or at work, they must be able to understand and care about how their own behavior affects others, how to act responsibly toward others, how to assess their own behavior, and how to change their behavior when needed.

8. *Engage school staff as a learning community that shares responsibility for character education.* Students learn through example. The adult members of the school community should model the same core values that are part of the student program. All school staff should be included in the character education initiative, including secretaries,

paraprofessional teachers, custodians, food service workers, coaches, playground assistants, librarians, social workers, counselors, bus drivers, and volunteers, as well as teachers and administrators. Staff should help develop the school's vision of character education and receive professional development and supervision in its application. Schools should provide time for staff to reflect on ethical dilemmas facing the school community to ensure that the school operates with integrity and that staff are able to assist students in analyzing their own ethical dilemmas.

9.   *Foster shared ethical leadership and long-range support.* Character education programs are most effective when they are used to support school-wide culture change in addition to fostering individual behavioral change. In order to affect lasting change in the culture and norms of the school, long-range support that will outlive program or administrative changes is needed. Schools should use existing committees, such as the school improvement or coordinated school health committee, to champion character education efforts. It is important to ensure that the committees include representatives from staff, student, and parent groups, and enable students to take on developmentally appropriate leadership roles.

10.   *Engage families and community members as partners in the character building effort.* The collaboration of families, schools, and community partners is essential to develop and sustain an effective character development program. When schools reach out to families, they are recruiting the help of the wider community (i.e., businesses, youth organizations, religious institutions, local government, and the media) to support their programs. Community partners can help by providing resources, recruiting volunteers, and identifying community needs for meaningful service-learning projects. Schools should take pains to communicate with families in culturally appropriate ways and make a special effort to reach out to subgroups of families who may not yet feel part of the school community.

11.   *Evaluate the outcomes of the program.* Schools should regularly assess the progress of their character education initiatives and may do so through the use of simple surveys and analysis of already existing data. Important areas to assess include the extent to which the school is becoming a more caring community, the growth of the school staff as character educators, and the growth of student character.

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