

Character Counts!

Tier 1

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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. The *Character Counts!* curriculum, and the coalition which supports it, works to overcome the 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 (Anderson, 1999a) across cultures and communities

What is *Character Counts!*?

Character Counts! offers a framework and materials to teach each of six character values. The “Six Pillars of Character” which form the core of ethical values for the program are: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Character Counts, 2014). *Character Counts!* is an ethics and character-building curriculum program designed for students ages 4-19. The program is intended to teach and develop a consensus regarding a set of ethical values that transcend race, creed, politics, gender, and wealth (Character Counts, 2014). The framework employs a model called “TEAM” which stands for Teach, Enforce, Advocate, and Model. Each of the pillars is overtly taught to students accompanied by lessons, activities, and role-playing scenarios (Character Counts, 2014). The effect of *Character Counts!* may be enhanced when adopted and implemented by an entire school system, community, city, or state. However, it can also be used by only one school as a school-wide character development program. It has been implemented in elementary, middle, and high schools (Josephson Institute, 2014).

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 many walks of life and various ethnic and religious groups was formed to develop a consensus on the ethical values. Ideally, these values could be taught at home, in the classroom, and at the office without offending political, racial, religious, gender, or socioeconomic sensibilities (Josephson Institute, 2014). A purposeful way to address character and values in our communities and schools was needed. The *Character Counts!* program is the result of these efforts.

Coalition. 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. 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 school children learn and try to live by the six pillars of character (Anderson, 1999b). In 2012, the United States Senate designated a week in October as “National *Character Counts!* Week” to encourage schools and students to practice good character and bring awareness to the need for students to develop character. The resolution also mentions the six pillars of *Character Counts!* as character traits to be promoted (S. Res. 569, 2012).

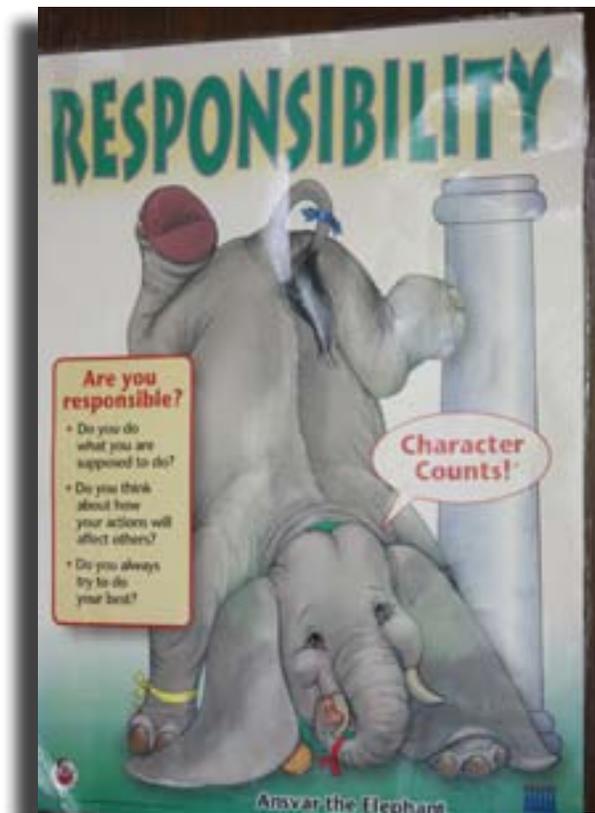


The Six Pillars of *Character Counts!*

- **Trustworthiness.** Trustworthiness is the first pillar in the Character Counts! program. This pillar encourages students to build trust and credibility with their peers by keeping promises, being honest, and being sincere.
- **Respect.** The second pillar is Respect, in which students should treat others the way that they would like to be treated. This pillar also emphasizes the need to be accepting of others and tolerant of their differences, as well as being courteous and acting in a civil, nonviolent manner.
- **Responsibility.** Responsibility encourages students to think for themselves and act independently. Students must also be held accountable for their words and actions, as well as being proactive, persistent, and hard working in their duties.
- **Fairness.** Fairness is the fourth pillar of the program, which encourages children to treat all people equally, play by the rules, and overall, pursue justice over injustice.
- **Caring.** Caring is the fifth pillar, which encourages students to be kind, compassionate, empathetic, forgiving, and grateful.
- **Citizenship.** Citizenship is the final pillar in the program. This pillar instructs children to obey laws, help other citizens, volunteer and protect the environment, and participate in the political actions of society, such as voting.

The Josephson Institute. The *Character Counts!* Curriculum and materials are distributed by the Josephson Institute. The goal of the Josephson Institute is to develop materials to increase ethical commitment, competence, and practice in all segments of society. It is a nonpartisan and nonsectarian 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the Institute is funded by individual donations, foundation and corporate grants, fees and contributions for services, and sales of educational resources. The Institute also works collaboratively with influential organizations and individuals in a variety of fields.

Extent of Implementation. 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. For example, in Nebraska, by 1999, an estimated 123,000 youth (33% of the state's youth population) or 33 % of ages 5-19 have had access to the program through schools or community organizations such as 4-H, local Rotary International clubs, and the County Extension Offices (Anderson, 1999a). By 1998, about half of South Dakota's schools had incorporated the program into the school environment (Moss, 2001). It is unclear whether implementation has continued in all of those schools, or how extensive further implementation has been since that time. Nevertheless, *Character Counts!* is likely the most widely used character education program in schools.



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 (Josephson Institute, 2014). It currently costs about \$825 for one person to be trained to use the program and the cost of materials varies by the age level and curriculum options chosen (Character Counts, 2014).

What do 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% believed students helped each other more, 55% saw participating students blaming others less and taking more responsibility for their own actions, and 75% said that as *Character Counts!* teachers, they were changing their own behavior (Anderson, 1999b).

A three-year statewide evaluation study in South Dakota found that approximately 8,419 respondents to a survey showed overall very positive results compared to a baseline (Moss, 2001). Crime and drug use declined sharply from 1998-2000, with students reporting a 28-56% drop in various at-risk and criminal behaviors (Josephson Institute, 2014). Almost all of the evaluations have been focused on surveys, rather than other measures of behavior change. However, the Josephson Institute has been making an effort to gather measurable data from schools and districts using Character Counts!.



In Downey, California, after *Character Counts!* was implemented the test scores rose 5.12% when they had only been rising at a rate of 3.14% the previous three years, representing a 63.1% increase in the first year of implementation of *Character Counts!*. Further, high school graduation rates have been over 92% since implementation, compared to the statewide graduation rate of 68.3% (Josephson Institute, 2014). In Florida, test scores at an elementary school rose from 45% to 78% in one year with the implementation of *Character Counts!* – Williams and Taylor (2003) attributed this to the school culture and sense of being a community of learners that the *Character Counts!* program developed. In Illinois, the only new variable that was introduced in a high school was *Character Counts!*, and the school has shown consistent improvement in adequate yearly progress test scores, ACT test scores, and increases in the number of National Merit Scholars (Josephson Institute, 2014). The Maryland Department of Education reported that Easton schools using *Character Counts!* have shown statistically significant gains in academic performance (Josephson Institute, 2014). In Lennox, California, teaching and curriculum strategies, as well as the implementation of *Character Counts!*, have led to a 21.3% increase in students scoring at or above proficiency on the state mathematics exam for students from elementary through high school (Josephson Institute, 2014).

An elementary school in Georgia implemented the six pillars of character in the *Character Counts!* program. Following this, they have achieved yearly adequate progress goals for the past eight years and they have had a dramatic decrease in student behavior problems and discipline referrals that the administration attributes to their character education program. Their character education vocabulary “appears



in newsletters, student agendas, the school website, newscasts...TV, signs and paintings. Students learn about character through the reading buddies program, tutoring, modeling good behavior, books, role playing, writing essays, conflict resolution, and self-esteem lessons” (Character Counts: Don’t leave home without it, 2011, p. 38). The program is assessed by school climate surveys, analyzing discipline data and test scores, and media spotlights. Students have several different rewards for showing good character and the students work with several different community-based organizations to provide toys and money for the organizations (Character Counts: Don’t leave home without it, 2011,).

The research that has been conducted suggests that *Character Counts!* may be an effective way to improve student behavior and academic achievement. However, to date no research on the program has been published in peer-reviewed academic journals. Data published in peer-reviewed journals is important because it provides evidence that data collection and analysis were conducted properly, and that the claims made in the research are supported by these data. Further, much of the research available on the program comes from the program developers, the Josephson Institute. Further research, particularly conducted by outside researchers and published in peer-reviewed journals, would strengthen the claims made by the program developers.

Conclusion

The *Character Counts!* Program is a comprehensive character education program for students grades K-12. It is based on six pillars of character, and has been widely implemented across the United States. Training in the program is available on the program website, both for district-wide implementation or smaller scale, school-wide implementation. Research on *Character Counts!* is ongoing, and early data suggests that it can have positive effects on student behavior and academic performance. Still, more peer-reviewed research is needed, particularly by outside research groups before *Character Counts!* can be considered an evidence-based strategy. Currently it may be considered a promising program.



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Character Counts! References

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