

# Findings



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Preservation of the Family

## Character Education

### *Helping Our Children to Develop Good Character*

By Anne R. Lee



uring the past few decades, schools have continued to experience alarmingly high rates of crime, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, suspensions, and incidents that reveal

a lack of respect for others and responsibility for oneself. These are not strictly school problems but are reflective of our society at large. Communities are asking, “What is causing these problems, and what can we do about them?” Although multiple causes have contributed to this situation, including the breakdown of the family, negative elements in the media, and racial prejudice, many educators are now looking at an even more fundamental cause—the erosion of character within our society.

Across the nation, schools are implementing character education as an integral part of the curriculum. Is this just another fad that will be loudly trumpeted today and disappear tomorrow? Dr. Kevin Ryan, professor of education at Boston University and director of the University’s Center for Advancement of Ethics and Character, says, “Character education is the central curriculum issue confronting educators. Rather than the latest fad, it is a school’s oldest mission.” Indeed, schools historically have considered the passing on of virtue and morality to the next generation an essential task.

In the 2001 session of the North Carolina General Assembly, state lawmakers increased their commitment to this task by requiring character education in all of the state’s public schools. Pairing this recent legislative action with the positive experiences many schools have had once they have implemented character education instruction, North Carolina should see significant improvement in many areas

including school safety, student and teacher satisfaction, student performance and overall school climate. The extent of this improvement, however, hinges on several critical factors surrounding the manner in which schools implement character education.

#### **What is Character Education?**

Character education is the process of developing strong character traits in young people that will enable them to make wise decisions and to become good citizens. It is inherent in the efforts of families, religious

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and civic organizations, and communities in passing on those qualities that ensure the continuity of a free and democratic society.

Character education emphasizes those common-ground traits, such as respect, responsibility, integrity and good judgment, which parents want their children to exhibit. The true test of the effectiveness of character education is the extent to which those involved are actually motivated to choose right over wrong.

#### **Why Character Education?**

During the 1960s, our nation started losing sight of the goal of instilling virtue and character into our youth. An increasing emphasis on individualism and individual rights, coupled with Supreme Court decisions that raised concerns about what schools could legally teach without crossing the line into religious instruction, led many educators to shy away from discussing

morality and ethics with their students. Some believed our schools should be “value-free.” References to God or religion were removed from many textbooks. “Values clarification” entered the school scene, with the teacher instructed not to convey any of his or her own concepts of right and wrong but to merely raise ethical questions and allow the students to determine their own values. Unfortunately, there was no yardstick of integrity or kindness or responsibility provided to help measure their ideas. Students too often have been left to believe that there are no basic rights and wrongs, yet our society is based on laws and values. Students often do not understand that important point, do not recognize basic rights and wrongs, and do not know how to apply ethical principles in their own day-to-day decision making.

Today, it is easy to see the folly of a value-free approach to education. As a result, there is a massive movement in schools across our country to integrate character education into the curriculum. Character education is built on that common ground of values that all parents agree should be taught to children—those values that are esteemed by the major religions and civilized societies.

Character education in the public schools focuses on ethical principles, such as responsibility, integrity, and respect. It is designed to complement the efforts of parents, the faith community and civic organizations in developing character.

#### **Character Education in N.C.**

Much of North Carolina’s modern character education movement began in Wake County in 1993. In December of that year, the Wake County Character Education Task Force was formally organized and launched a community-wide effort to incorporate character education instruction in the county’s public schools. The 32-

member task force, which consisted of parents, community representatives, principals, teachers and students, spent about six months identifying, discussing and defining admirable character traits that would be the subject of character education instruction. The task force narrowed its list to eight core character traits. These eight defined traits ultimately served as the model for North Carolina's character education law.

In 1996, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the School-based Management and Accountability Program, better known as North Carolina's ABC's education plan. Included as part of this legislation, the General Assembly authorized local boards of education to include character education instruction in the schools in their districts. This instruction centers around the teaching of the following eight character traits defined in the law:

- **Courage:** Having the determination to do the right thing even when others don't and the strength to follow your conscience rather than the crowd; and attempting difficult things that are worthwhile.
- **Good judgment:** Choosing worthy goals and setting proper priorities; thinking through the consequences of your actions; and basing decisions on practical wisdom and good sense.
- **Integrity:** Having the inner strength to be truthful, trustworthy, and honest in all things; acting justly and honorably.
- **Kindness:** Being considerate, courteous, helpful, and understanding of others; showing care, compassion, friendship, and generosity; and treating others as you would like to be treated.
- **Perseverance:** Being persistent in the pursuit of worthy objectives in spite of difficulty, opposition, or discouragement; and exhibiting patience and having the fortitude to try again when confronted with delays, mistakes, or failures.
- **Respect:** Showing high regard for authority, for other people, for self, for property, and for country; and understanding that all people have value as human beings.
- **Responsibility:** Being dependable in carrying out obligations and duties; showing reliability and consistency in words and conduct; being accountable for your own actions; and being committed to active involvement in your community.

- **Self-Discipline:** Demonstrating hard work and commitment to purpose; regulating yourself for improvement and restraining from inappropriate behaviors; being in proper control of your words, actions, impulses, and desires; choosing abstinence from premarital sex, drugs, alcohol, and other harmful substances and behaviors; and doing your best in all situations."

The Student Citizen Act of 2001 expanded on the 1996 character education law by directing all of the state's 117 local boards of education to "develop and implement character education instruction with input from the local community," and to incorporate the instruction into the standard curriculum beginning with the 2002-2003 school year. In addition, the Student Citizen Act of 2001 encourages local boards of education to instruct students in the following "responsibilities:"

- **Respect for school personnel:** In the school environment, respect includes holding teachers, school administrators, and all school personnel in high esteem and demonstrating in words and deeds that all school personnel deserve to be treated with courtesy and proper deference.
- **Responsibility for school safety:** Helping to create a harmonious school atmosphere that is free from threats, weapons, and violent or disruptive behavior; cultivate an orderly learning environment in which students and school personnel feel safe and secure; and encourage the resolution of conflicts and disagreements through peaceful means including peer mediation.
- **Service to others:** Engaging in meaningful service to their schools and their communities. Schools may teach service-learning by (1) incorporating it into their standard curriculum, or (2) involving a classroom of students or some other group of students in one or more hands-on community-service projects.
- **Good citizenship:** Obeying the laws of the nation and this State; abiding by school rules; and understanding the rights and responsibilities of a member of a republic.

While integrated instruction in the eight character traits is now mandatory, instruction in these additional responsibilities is suggested, but not required.

## Does It Really Work?

For the last decade, schools and school districts have been designing character education initiatives, but only a few have conducted careful evaluations. Too many efforts have been haphazard at best, with no thought given to measuring change in such indicators as attendance, discipline problems, academic achievement, substance abuse, incidents of violence, school climate or student/teacher satisfaction. Others have seen progress in these indicators, but have so many different strategies to effect change that they are understandably hesitant to attribute improvement to any one factor.

Now, however, evidence is beginning to accumulate that character education really does work:

- The North Carolina Character Education Partnership (NCCEP) reports that principals who were surveyed credited character education with an increase in the level and type of community involvement among students, a new language of character and ideals to which students aspire, and improved school climate and test scores. A climate survey showed that 79 percent of 19 pilot schools indicated a more positive school climate after one year of implementation. Schools also reported a higher percentage of students scoring at or above grade level on the standardized End-of-Grade, Writing, and End-of-Course tests; a higher score on the SAT; and a decrease in violent incidents. (NCCEP, 1996-2000)
- The Developmental Studies Center in Oakland, CA, has been conducting research in character education for almost 20 years. Among their documented outcomes are: increased pro-social behavior (e.g., students are more helpful and cooperative), improved skills in resolving interpersonal conflicts, greater concern for others and more commitment to democratic values. Their most recent study showed significant reductions in use of alcohol and marijuana, and in delinquent behaviors (outcomes which were not examined in earlier studies). (Battistich, V., et al., 2000)
- In a study of four schools using another character-based prevention program, the average number of behavioral incidents (including violence and substance abuse) requiring disciplinary referral dropped by 74 percent after one year of implementation and by 80 percent after two to six years. In addition, absentee-

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ism decreased between 30 and 60 percent and achievement scores improved from an average of the 43<sup>rd</sup> to an average of the 71<sup>st</sup> percentile range after the first year of implementation, and to an average of the 88<sup>th</sup> percentile after two to nine years. (Flay, et. al., 1999)

- A longitudinal study of students in a character-based program showed increased academic performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills of 22 percent for those students compared to an increase of only 3 percent for the control group students. The character education students also displayed fewer discipline referrals and increases in pro-social behavior. (Northeast Foundation for Children, 1996-99)

## **Implementation**

Many school districts in North Carolina have been integrating a focus on character into the mission of their schools for many years. However, others have not done so. A survey developed and distributed by the North Carolina Character Education Partnership in the 1999-2000 school year revealed that of 115 school districts responding: 41 percent had an initiative in place, 17 percent were in the process of beginning an initiative that year, 18 percent were planning to implement an initiative, 17 percent were not considering an initiative, and seven percent were in other categories, e.g., leaving implementation decisions to individual schools. As a result of the new law requiring character education across the state, many educators and school systems have a renewed interest in character education and how this instruction can be implemented in their schools.

North Carolina is fortunate to have a number of valuable resources in the arena of character education to help schools teach character. In addition to the initial enactment of North Carolina's character education law in 1996, a federal grant obtained during that same year established the North Carolina Character Education Partnership. The purpose of the NCCEP was to design a character education model and develop resources that would be available to every school in the state. That model is based upon the three "C's of Curriculum, Climate and Community which was first utilized in Wake County. Every school is encouraged to infuse elements of character such as respect, responsibility, and integrity into what they are already doing. In fact, one thing that has become very clear is that the effectiveness of character education

initiatives depends greatly upon the instruction itself, how it is developed, and how it is presented. In schools, character education should not be a separate course or an add-on program. An effective school initiative integrates a focus on character into the existing curriculum, and is woven into all aspects of the school experience.

## **The Curriculum**

Character education is not a separate course to be added to the curriculum, rather, it must be integrated into the entire curriculum. It is evident that many subject areas are well-suited to discussions of character. Language arts courses, for example, are rich with opportunities for talking about the elements of character and analyzing whether individuals in a story displayed a particular trait. Students can infer how a story might have changed if a character had exhibited kindness or courage or perseverance. They can select which character they admire the most or would like to have as a friend and tell why. Journal and creative writing offer limitless opportunities for focusing on issues of character.

History and social studies also afford tremendous possibilities for highlighting character. Individuals and events can be examined for evidence of how commitment to a particular character trait may have altered history itself. How can events such as the Holocaust or the civil rights movement be studied without reference to the importance of respect for others?

In science classes, the importance of integrity in research might be discussed. In physical education, a teacher might emphasize the necessity of self-discipline and perseverance. In theater arts, an ethical dilemma might be presented, and students could be instructed to improvise a way to resolve the situation. The ideas are never-ending.

As schools implement character education, school personnel must receive training. There are consultants and training groups who work with schools and communities to provide such training. (See the resource guide at the end of this paper.) To be successful, the training must be consistent throughout the entire school system and must emphasize that character education is not just another "add on" program for the schools. A word of caution: One should be very skeptical about buying a curriculum that promises to develop character in youth. It will not work without commitment from school staff and opportunities for the staff to develop ownership in the process. Ideally character instruction should also be a K-12 initiative and all schools in a school district

should be included in the effort.

Character education must become part of the life of the school. The goal should be to integrate character education into all areas of the curriculum, permeate the school climate with support for and encouragement of character, and sustain and expand community involvement in the process. Educators must identify where character education already exists and additional areas where it can easily be incorporated into the existing curriculum. Many teachers already emphasize character, but an organized effort to incorporate the language of character throughout the curriculum will help take advantage of those teachable moments that occur every day. In addition, continuity of character instruction throughout the school day and the school year will reinforce for students the importance of personally incorporating these traits into their own lives.

## **School Climate**

The second area of focus must be the school climate. The goal is to create a culture of character in our schools. We want to reverse the current trend in which it is considered "cool" to break the rules and get away with it. Our goal is to model and affirm ethical behavior so that it is once again considered "cool" to be a person of character.

Whenever modeling is mentioned, there are always a few people who say, "I don't want to be a role model. I was hired to teach, not to be a role model." How do you respond to that? The question is not "Do you want to be a role model?" All of us are role models, whether we want to be or not. Our students are constantly watching our attitudes and behaviors. The question is whether you will be a positive or negative role model. We can discuss the elements of character with our students all day long, but if we don't display those same character traits, our words will be totally void. Someone once said, "The footsteps children most often follow are those we thought we'd covered up."

Educators need to assess the climate at their schools to determine how well it encourages and affirms the practice of good character. The behavior code and discipline policies should be carefully examined. A sense of community and pride in "our school" should be promoted.

## **Community Involvement**

The third focus area for character education is community involvement. Traditionally, the home, the schools and the faith community were seen as partners in

training children to be good citizens. Somewhere along the way, we lost that cooperative spirit and replaced it with a suspicious, critical and sometimes even adversarial relationship. Our goal is to recapture the idea that we are all on the same team, working toward a common goal.

Schools need to welcome members of the community as volunteers and use them effectively. Tutors and mentors can play a significant role in character development. During a time when many children lack positive role models or adults who display a keen personal interest in them, a committed tutor or mentor can be life changing. Community members can also be utilized as motivational speakers and readers.

Just as the community needs to come into the schools, the schools need to go into the community. More and more school systems are recognizing the value of giving students opportunities to serve their community. Dr. Thomas Lickona says students not only have to “know the good,” they have to also “desire the good” and then “do the good.” They need to put into practice those character traits they are being taught and to experience the intangible rewards that come from helping others. The possibilities are endless, from cleaning up the environment to working at a food bank, from visiting hospitalized children to having “buddies” at a nursing home.

It is important to continue promoting ever-expanding community involvement. As others acquire the conviction of the importance of character education, they will develop a commitment to become part of the process and a desire to communicate the vision to others, resulting in consensus and ownership throughout the local community.

### **How To Get Started?**

One of the initial steps of developing a character education initiative is to set up a community task force to spearhead the character education effort. Individuals from across the community should be involved including students, parents, educators, community leaders, the faith community and the business community. These individuals will need to start by identifying the interests and needs of their particular community. Surveys can help to bring focus to specific character traits that may need

more attention.

Next, the task force should begin to explain the goals of character education and discuss the character traits with the community. This is an excellent way to educate the community about the program and to increase community support.

The job of developing, encouraging and affirming good character can be compared to a three-legged stool. The child sits on this “seat of character,” trusting that it will provide secure support. Traditionally the support for this stool has been the three strong “legs” of the home, the school and the community, especially the faith community. If any one of these legs does not provide proper support, the stool will tilt, possibly even fall, injuring the child in the process. The process of enlisting community support, however, is an ongoing one, and it is critical that all segments of the community be reminded of their role in supporting character development.

### **Conclusion**

North Carolina’s renewed commitment to character education may prove to be one of the most important and significant education reforms in recent state history. As demonstrated in programs across the country, instilling character into our students will result in benefits in many areas of our schools including: improved student performance; heightened teacher and student satisfaction; reductions in crime, school dropouts and truancy; and a more safe and conducive learning climate. However, for character education to be effective, care must be given to the type of instruction provided and the manner in which it is taught. Integrating character education instruction throughout the existing curriculum, with involvement from the local community, will reinforce positive character traits throughout the school year and throughout the lives of our children.

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*Anne R. Lee is the Director of the North Carolina Center for Character Education.*

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### **Editor’s Note:**

Portions of this paper were drawn from the publication *Character Education Workbook: For School Boards, Administrators & Community Leaders* by Judith B. Hoffman and Anne R. Lee. Copies of this publication can be obtained from the North Carolina Center for Character Education.

### **Additional Resources**

#### **The North Carolina Character Education Partnership**

[www.dpi.state.nc.us/nccep](http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/nccep)  
1-888-890-2180

#### **The North Carolina Center for Character Education**

[www.NCcharacter.org](http://www.NCcharacter.org)  
919-828-1166

#### **Center for the 4th and 5th Rs**

[www.cortland.edu/www/c4n5rs](http://www.cortland.edu/www/c4n5rs)  
607-753-2455

#### **Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character**

[web.bu.edu/sed/caec/homedesc.html](http://web.bu.edu/sed/caec/homedesc.html)  
617-353-3262

#### **Character Counts!**

[www.charactercounts.org](http://www.charactercounts.org)  
310-306-1868

#### **Character Education Partnership**

[www.character.org](http://www.character.org)  
1-800-988-8081

#### **CHARACTERplus**

[info.csd.org/staffdev/chared/characterplus.html](http://info.csd.org/staffdev/chared/characterplus.html)  
1-800-835-8282

#### **Institute for Global Ethics**

[www.globalethics.org](http://www.globalethics.org)  
207-236-6658

#### **Josephson Institute of Ethics**

[www.josephsoninstitute.org](http://www.josephsoninstitute.org)  
310-306-1868

#### **The Kenan Ethics Program**

[kenan.ethics.duke.edu](http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu)  
919-660-3033

#### **The Center for the Prevention of School Violence**

[www.ncsu.edu/cpsv/](http://www.ncsu.edu/cpsv/)  
1-800-299-6054

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