

There is no single script for effective character education, but there are some important basic principles. The following eleven principles serve as criteria that schools and other groups can use to plan a character education effort and to evaluate available character education programs, books, and curriculum resources.

CEP's Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education

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Effective Character Education:

1. Promotes core ethical values and supportive performance values as the foundation of good character

Character education holds that widely shared, pivotally important, core ethical values—such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others—along with supportive performance values—such as diligence, a strong work ethic, and perseverance—form the basis of good character. A school committed to character development stands for these values (sometimes referred to as “virtues” or “character traits”), defines them in terms of behaviors that can be observed in the life of the school, models these values, studies and discusses them, uses them as the basis of human relations in the school, celebrates their manifestations in the school and community, and holds all school members accountable to standards of conduct consistent with the core values.

In a school committed to developing character, these core values are treated as a matter of obligation, as having a claim on the conscience of the individual and community. Character education asserts that the validity of these values, and our responsibility to uphold them, derive from the fact that such values affirm our human dignity, promote the development and welfare of the individual person, serve the common good, meet the classical tests of reversibility (i.e., Would you want to be treated this way?) and universality (i.e., Would you want all persons to act this way in a similar situation?), and inform our rights and responsibilities in a democratic society. The school makes clear that these basic human values transcend religious and cultural differences, and express our common humanity.

The Character Education Partnership (CEP) believes that character education’s primary focus is on developing the core ethical values needed to be a good human being. But character education also seeks to develop complementary performance character qualities that enable students to perform at their highest potential in the classroom, the workplace, or any other area of endeavor. These two parts of character work together in mutually supportive ways

2. Defines “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.

Good character involves understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values. A holistic approach to character development therefore seeks to develop the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of moral life. Students grow to understand core values by studying and discussing them, observing behavioral models, and resolving problems involving the values. Students learn to care about core values by developing empathy skills, forming caring relationships, helping to create community, hearing illustrative and inspirational stories, and reflecting on life experiences. And they learn to act upon core values by developing prosocial behaviors (e.g., communicating feelings, active listening, helping skills) and by repeatedly practicing these behaviors, especially in the context of relationships (e.g., through cross-age tutoring, mediating conflicts, school and community service). As children grow in character, they develop an increasingly refined understanding of the core values, a deeper commitment to living according to those values, and a stronger capacity and tendency to behave in accordance with them.

3. Uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development.

Schools committed to character development look at themselves through a moral lens to assess how virtually everything that goes on in school affects the character of students. A **comprehensive** approach uses all aspects of schooling as opportunities for character development. This includes what is sometimes called *the hidden curriculum* (e.g., school ceremonies and procedures; the teachers’ example; students’ relationships with teachers, other school staff, and each other; the instructional process; how student diversity is addressed; the assessment of learning; the management of the school environment; the discipline policy); the *academic curriculum* (i.e., core subjects, including the health curriculum); and *extracurricular programs* (i.e., sports teams, clubs, service projects, after-school care). “Stand alone” character education programs can be useful first steps or helpful elements of an ongoing effort but are not an adequate substitute for a holistic approach that integrates character development into every aspect of school life. Finally, rather than simply waiting for opportunities to arise, with an **intentional** and **proactive** approach, the school staff takes deliberate steps for developing character, drawing wherever possible on practices shown by research to be effective.

Effective Character Education:

4. Creates a caring school community.

A school committed to character strives to become a microcosm of a civil, caring, and just society. It does this by creating a community that helps all its members form caring attachments to one another. This involves developing caring relationships among students (within and across grade levels), among staff, between students and staff, and between staff and families. These caring relationships foster both the desire to learn and the desire to be a good person. All children and adolescents have needs for safety, belonging, and the experience of contributing, and they are more likely to internalize the values and expectations of groups that meet these needs. Likewise, if staff members and parents experience mutual respect, fairness, and cooperation in their relationships with each other, they are more likely to develop the capacity to promote those values in students. In a caring school community, the daily life of classrooms and all other parts of the school environment (e.g., the hallways, cafeteria, playground, school bus, front office, and teachers' lounge) is imbued with a climate of concern and respect for others.

5. Provides students with opportunities for moral action.

In the ethical as in the intellectual domain, students are constructive learners; they learn best by doing. To develop good character, they need many and varied opportunities to apply values such as compassion, responsibility, and fairness in everyday interactions and discussions as well as through community service. By grappling with real-life challenges (e.g., how to divide the labor in a cooperative learning group, how to reach consensus in a class meeting, how to reduce fights on the playground, how to carry out a service-learning project) and reflecting on these experiences, students develop practical understanding of the requirements of cooperating with others and giving of oneself. Through repeated moral experiences, students develop and practice the skills and behavioral habits that make up the action side of character.

6. Includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.

When students succeed at work in school and feel a sense of competence and autonomy, they are more likely to feel valued and cared about as persons. Because students come to school with diverse skills, interests and needs, an academic program that helps all students succeed will be one in which the content and pedagogy are sophisticated enough to engage all learners. This means providing a curriculum that is inherently interesting and meaningful to students. A meaningful curriculum includes active teaching and learning methods such as cooperative learning, problem-solving approaches, and experience-based projects. These approaches increase student autonomy by appealing to students' interests, providing them with opportunities to think creatively and test their ideas, and fostering a sense of "voice and choice"—having a say in decisions and plans that affect them.

In addition, effective character educators look for the natural intersections between the academic content they wish to teach and the character qualities they wish to develop. These "character connections" can take many forms, such as addressing current ethical issues in science, debating historical practices and decisions, and discussing character traits and ethical dilemmas in literature. When teachers bring to the fore the character dimension of the curriculum, they enhance the relevance of subject matter to students' natural interests and questions, and in the process, increase student engagement and achievement. When teachers promote performance values such as intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and diligence, students are better able to do their best work.

Effective Character Education:

7. Strives to foster students' self-motivation.

Character is often defined as “doing the right thing when no one is looking.” The best underlying ethical reason for following rules, for example, is respect for the rights and needs of others—not fear of punishment or desire for a reward. Similarly, we want students to be kind to others because of an inner belief that kindness is good and a desire to be a kind person. Growing in self-motivation is a developmental process that schools of character are careful not to undermine by excessive emphasis on extrinsic incentives. When such schools give appropriate social recognition for students' prosocial actions (e.g., “Thank you for holding the door—that was a thoughtful thing to do.”) or celebrate character through special awards (e.g., for outstanding school or community service), they keep the focus on character. Schools of character work with students to develop their understanding of rules, their awareness of how their behavior affects others, and the character strengths—such as self-control, perspective taking, and conflict resolution skills—needed to act responsibly in the future. Rather than settle for mere compliance, these schools seek to help students benefit from their mistakes by providing meaningful opportunities for reflection, problem solving, and restitution.

8. Engages the school staff as a learning and moral community that shares responsibility for character education and attempts to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students.

All school staff—teachers, administrators, counselors, school psychologists, coaches, secretaries, cafeteria workers, playground aides, bus drivers—need to be involved in learning about, discussing, and taking ownership of the character education effort. First and foremost, staff members assume this responsibility by modeling the core values in their own behavior and taking advantage of other opportunities to influence the students with whom they interact.

Second, the same values and norms that govern the life of students serve to govern the collective life of adult members in the school community. Like students, adults grow in character by working collaboratively with each other and participating in decision-making that improves classrooms and school. They also benefit from extended staff development and opportunities to observe colleagues and then apply character development strategies in their own work with students.

Third, a school that devotes time to staff reflection on moral matters helps to ensure that it operates with integrity. Through faculty meetings and smaller support groups, a reflective staff regularly asks questions such as: What character-building experiences is the school already providing for its students? What negative moral experiences (e.g., peer cruelty, student cheating, adult disrespect of students, littering of the grounds) is the school currently failing to address? And what important moral experiences (e.g., cooperative learning, school and community service, opportunities to learn about and interact with people from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds) is the school now omitting? What school practices are at odds with its professed core values and desire to develop a caring school community? Reflection of this nature is an indispensable condition for developing the moral life of a school.

9. Fosters shared moral leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative.

Schools that are engaged in effective character education have leaders (e.g., the principal, a lead teacher or counselor, a district administrator, or preferably a small group of such individuals) who champion the effort. At least initially, many schools and districts establish a character education committee—often composed of staff, students, parents, and possibly community members—that takes responsibility for planning, implementation, and support. Over time, the regular governing bodies of the school or district may take on the functions of this committee. The leadership also takes steps to provide for the long-range support (e.g., adequate staff development,

Effective Character Education:

9. (continued)

time to plan) of the character education initiative, including, ideally, support at the district and state levels. In addition, within the school students assume developmentally appropriate roles in leading the character education effort through class meetings, student government, peer mediation, cross-age tutoring, service clubs, task forces, and student-led initiatives.

10. Engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.

Schools that reach out to families and include them in character-building efforts greatly enhance their chances for success with students. They take pains at every stage to communicate with families—via newsletters, e-mails, family nights, and parent conferences—about goals and activities regarding character education. To build greater trust between home and school, parents are represented on the character education committee. These schools also make a special effort to reach out to subgroups of parents who may not feel part of the school community. Finally, schools and families enhance the effectiveness of their partnership by recruiting the help of the wider community (i.e., businesses, youth organizations, religious institutions, the government, and the media) in promoting character development.

11. Assesses the character of the school, the school staff's functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students manifest good character.

Effective character education must include an effort to assess progress using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Three broad kinds of outcomes merit attention:

(a) **The character of the school:** To what extent is the school becoming a more caring community? This can be assessed, for example, with surveys that ask students to indicate the extent to which they agree with statements such as, “Students in this school (classroom) respect and care about each other,” and “This school (classroom) is like a family.”

(b) **The school staff's growth as character educators:** To what extent have adult staff—teaching faculty, administrators, and support personnel—developed understandings of what they can do to foster character development? Personal commitment to doing so? Skills to carry it out? Consistent habits of acting upon their developing capacities as character educators?

(c) **Student character:** To what extent do students manifest understanding of, commitment to, and action upon the core ethical values? Schools can, for example, gather data on various character-related behaviors: Has student attendance gone up? Fights and suspensions gone down? Vandalism declined? Drug incidents diminished? Schools can also assess the three domains of character (knowing, feeling, and behaving) through anonymous questionnaires that measure student moral judgment (for example, “Is it wrong to cheat on a test?”), moral commitment (“Would you cheat if you were sure you wouldn't get caught?”) and self-reported moral behavior (“How many times have you cheated on a test or major assignment in the past year?”). Such questionnaires can be administered at the beginning of a school's character initiative to get a baseline and again at later points to assess progress.

MORE RESOURCES. . .

Eleven Principles Sourcebook

Interested in starting or improving upon a character education initiative in your school or district? The *Eleven Principles Sourcebook*—composed of 11 guides and an introductory video—provides strategies and resources for putting the principles of effective character education into action.

Eleven Principles Sourcebook Seminars

Bring CEP to your school or district to provide customized professional development based on CEP's *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* and the *Eleven Principles Sourcebook*. CEP takes a systemic, hands-on approach that allows schools to begin or improve upon character education initiatives. Our professional development experiences can be one-day or year-long in helping propel your initiative forward.

National Schools of Character

Each year CEP recognizes 10 public and private schools and districts (K–12) as National Schools of Character (NSOC). The purpose of the program is to disseminate model character education practices to schools and districts across the nation. CEP selects award recipients that exemplify CEP's *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education*. NSOC receive a \$20,000 monetary award: \$10,000 to enhance their programs and \$10,000 to provide outreach to other educators. CEP honors the NSOC at the CEP National Forum on Character Education and highlights their stories in an annual NSOC publication and on CEP's Web site. The deadline for NSOC applications is in December. Support for the NSOC awards program comes from the John Templeton Foundation, the UAW-GM Center for Human Resources, Enterprise Rent-a Car Foundation, and Lockheed Martin Corporation.

State Schools of Character

The National Schools of Character awards program has moved to a tiered approach. Schools and districts in participating states are eligible to receive a State Schools of Character award in addition to being eligible for the National Schools of Character award. By expanding the scope of the program in this way, CEP intends to increase the number of outstanding schools and districts sharing best practices, localize the mentoring network among educators, and identify exemplary sites within participating states to serve as models. Schools or districts that are not in one of the participating states apply directly to CEP for the national award. Visit www.character.org/ssoc for more information or to find out how your state can get involved.

Promising Practices Awards

In addition to the National Schools of Character award, CEP gives over 100 Promising Practices awards each year for *specific* and *unique* best practices in character education. These practices are included in the annual NSOC publication and on CEP's Web site, where educators can search them for ideas and strategies electronically. Award recipients are honored at CEP's Forum. The deadline for Promising Practices applications is in March. Visit www.character.org/nsoc for details.

National Forum on Character Education

Join thought leaders, policy makers, teachers, and school and district administrators from across the country in learning about the latest strategies, research, and inspirational ideas on character education. Visit www.character.org/forum for details.

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