

Chapter 11, Thomas Lickona, *CHARACTER MATTERS: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 2004). For more information about *Character Matters* and a link for ordering, go to the website of the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs: www.cortland.edu/c4n5rs.

MAKE YOUR SCHOOL A SCHOOL OF CHARACTER

The school itself must embody good character. It must progress toward becoming a microcosm of the civil, caring, and just society it seeks to create.

— ELEVEN PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION¹

Character education is about becoming a school of character, a place that puts character first.

How does a school become a community of virtue, a place where moral and intellectual qualities such as good judgment, best effort, respect, kindness, honesty, service, and citizenship are modeled, upheld, discussed, celebrated, and practiced in every part of the school's life—from the example of adults to the relationships among peers, the handling of discipline, the content of the curriculum, the rigor of academic standards, the ethos of the environment, the conduct of extracurricular activities, and the involvement of parents?

“Over time,” says one California headmaster, “the de facto mission of our school has evolved into helping our students get into Stanford. I'd like us to be asking: Are we developing a better person, a fuller person, a healthier person in every sense? Are we helping students develop the sense that they are *moral agents*—able to create a better character for themselves and a better world for us all?”

“Give me a blueprint,” one high school principal said. The truth is, if you study 20 different schools that have achieved *National Schools of Character* recognition, you'll find 20 different stories, each reflecting the creative ideas of the people who shaped the character effort. But beneath the great diversity of character education success stories are common strategies that can guide any school. Taken together, they provide a game plan for starting, sustaining, assessing, and continually improving a systematic effort to educate for character.

These strategies for becoming a school of character can be summed up as *staff involvement, student involvement, and parent involvement*. Those are the three groups

whose participation is crucial to the success of a school's character education initiative. Strategies for involving parents were described in Chapter 3; strategies for involving students will be described in Chapter 12. This chapter focuses on where character education necessarily begins, with the school staff.

1. CREATE A TOUCHSTONE

In their implementation manual, *Educating for Character in the Denver Public Schools*, Charles Elbot, David Fulton, and Barbara Evans write, "Many schools that have created deep, sustained character education have done so with the aid of a schoolwide touchstone."² The touchstone is a creed or "way" that expresses the shared values and aspirations of all members of the school community. The importance of having a touchstone, the authors note, has been borne out in numerous studies from the business and non-profit world. "A creed or 'way' has been the glue that has held successful organizations together and kept them focused even during turbulent times."³ Such a creed creates an "intentional community," one in which members feel strong connections and a shared moral identity because they are joined by commonly held values.

Here, for example, is the touchstone of Slavens School (www.slavens.dpsk12.org), a Denver K-8 school and 2001 National School of Character. Its touchstone was developed over the course of a year with input from staff, students, and parents.

At Slavens we take the high road.

We genuinely care about ourselves, each other, and our school.

We show respect by using kind words and actions, listening thoughtfully, standing up for ourselves, and taking responsibility for our own behavior and learning.

This is who we are even when no one is watching!

As Elbot and colleagues point out, a touchstone can serve as an ever-present reference point ("Is that the Slavens way?") in the life of a school, guiding the daily decisions of students and staff. It is broader and deeper than a mere rule (such as "No pushing in line," "Clear your trays in the cafeteria"); it is meant to inspire critical thinking and ethical judgment about a wide range of situations, including ones for which there may be no specific rule. What does it mean, for example, to "take the high road" in any given circumstance?

Creating a school touchstone can begin by examining the school's mission statement (usually longer, more complex, and harder to remember than a touchstone statement). What ethical and intellectual values are expressed by the mission? What important values are missing or should be made more explicit in a touchstone? A school committee can then write four or five "We" statements, such as those in the

Slavens way, to propose as the school's creed or touchstone and circulate this draft among staff, students, and parents for their feedback. (For a copy of *Educating for Character in the Denver Public Schools*, with suggested steps for creating a school touchstone, contact Charles Elbot: charles_elbot@dpsk12.org.)

2. HAVE A CHARACTER-BASED MOTTO

Does the school's creed live in the hearts and minds of staff and students? One way to help that happen is to choose a school motto—ideally, one of the belief statements in the touchstone—that captures the touchstone's essence and then make that motto a vibrant part of school culture. Here are four examples of school mottos:

We take the high road. (Slavens School, K-8)

Together, we are the best we can be. (Sheridan Hills Elementary School)

Whatever hurts my brother hurts me. (Saint Benedict's Preparatory School, for boys)

Purpose, Pride, and Performance. (Mountain Pointe High School)

The last of these schools, Mountain Pointe High School (Phoenix, Arizona), was a 1998 *National School of Character*. The three Ps of its motto—Purpose, Pride, and Performance—figure prominently in all of the school's communications, from the parent newsletter to the student handbook. Teachers use the language of purpose, pride, and performance in their classrooms. Students are asked to keep track of how they use their time in the course of a day (how much time do they spend watching TV, for example?) and to assess their use of time using the standard represented by the school's motto.

3. SEEK THE PRINCIPAL'S SUPPORT FOR MAKING CHARACTER A PRIORITY

The priorities of the principal or school head are usually the priorities of the staff. During the eight years our Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect and Responsibility) has conducted Summer Institutes in Character Education, we've found that when the principal—or the principal's clearly designated representative—attends at least part of our Institute as a member of the school's team, there's a much better chance that character education will be implemented in that school.

This doesn't mean the principal has to be the hands-on leader of implementation. We worked with one elementary school where the principal, nearing retirement, appointed his media center director to head up the character education committee. She got special training. She wrote and secured a small grant to provide a series of

workshops to train the rest of the staff. When new faculty joined the school, she oriented them to the program and did a demonstration class meeting with their students to help them learn that important character education strategy. She developed a character education resource center for the teachers and a resource center for parents. But although she was the in-the-trenches champion of the character education effort, everyone knew that this initiative was one of the principal's top priorities—something he signaled by attending all the staff development workshops and asking teachers to include, in their weekly lesson plans, how they were promoting character development.

What if you can't get active leadership or support from your principal? Then a group of faculty should ask the principal for permission to present the idea of character education for consideration by the staff. One of the stronger character education programs in our area was begun by a group of middle school teachers who, faced with a passive principal, decided to take the initiative to make their school a better place.

4. FORM THE LEADERSHIP GROUP(S)

Becoming a school of character requires a leadership team to plan and sustain implementation. Our experience in working with schools over the past decade leads us to make four recommendations in this area:

1. ***Make use of the school's existing infrastructure.*** For example, is there a School Improvement Committee or other team that could head up the character effort or form a subcommittee to do so? At the secondary level, can academic departments take a leadership role?
2. ***Create several small committees, each with a different task.*** This divides the labor and gets more people involved. The broader the participation, the broader the ownership. For example, Wasatch High School (Heber City, Utah) maximized staff and student involvement by forming eight different committees, including Curricular Infusion, Building Enhancement (character posters), Student Recognition, Community Service, and Extracurricular Activities.
3. ***Extend an invitation to all, including potential nay-sayers.*** Reach out to recruit influential individuals, including persons who might be skeptical about or even opposed to the character effort.
4. ***Make sure all groups are represented.*** All the key groups that make up the school community—administrators, teachers, professional support staff (counselors, psychologists, librarians, coaches), other support staff (secretaries, custodians, cafeteria and playground aides), students, and parents—should be represented on one or another of the character education committees.

5. DEVELOP A KNOWLEDGE BASE

The leadership team needs to become knowledgeable about character education. There are now dozens of helpful character education web sites (students can help to research these). A good place to start is the Character Education Partnership's website (www.character.org), which, among many resources, includes the foundational document, *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education*. Our Center's web site (www.cortland.edu/character) offers an overview of a 12-point comprehensive approach to character education and links to other sites. The website of Boston University's Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character (www.bu.edu/education/caec) provides lots of good resources, including a comprehensive bibliography.

Books that provide an introduction to the field are *Character Education in America's Blue Ribbon Schools* (elementary level) by Madonna Murphy, *Building Character in Schools* (middle and high school) by Kevin Ryan and Karen Bohlin, and my own *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (K-12). To get a common picture of the field, some leadership groups have all members read the same book. In other cases, committee members each take different readings and provide a summary for the rest of the group.

I also strongly recommend visiting other schools that have been doing character education for a while (ideally for more than two years) to see first-hand what a working program looks like. A valuable part of such a visit is sitting down with the character education committee(s) and asking: How did you get started? Cover costs? Get faculty and other staff on board? Students and parents involved? What's worked, and what hasn't? How have you tried to assess impact?

If possible, the leadership group should also get some formal character education training through a conference, workshop, course, or other professional development opportunity.

6. INTRODUCE THE CONCEPT OF CHARACTER EDUCATION TO THE ENTIRE STAFF

I strongly recommend inviting *all* school personnel to an introductory meeting on character education. Inviting everyone makes a statement: "We are all important members of the school community. We all have a part to play in modeling good character for our students and making our school the best it can be."

This introductory session should address four basic questions: (1) What are the goals of character education?; (2) What will it require of me, in my work?; (3) What will this look like if we do it schoolwide?; and (4) What will be the benefits if we do this?

Let's look at how to approach each of these questions.

7. CONSIDER, "WHAT SORT OF PERSONS DO WE WANT OUR STUDENTS TO BECOME?"

The goals of character education are three: persons of good character, schools of character, and a society of character.

That raises the important question, what is "good character"?

Staff can address that question by asking: *What qualities do we want our graduates to possess? What moral and intellectual strengths will best equip them to lead fulfilling, purposeful, and productive lives and to build a better world?*

In small groups, staff can brainstorm and list these qualities on a sheet of butcher paper and then post their lists around the room for all to view. (Nearly always, different groups list many of the same qualities.)

A next useful step is to compare the character qualities generated by the staff with a pre-existing conceptual scheme defining good character, such as the "ten essential virtues" and their supporting virtues:

10 ESSENTIAL VIRTUES

1. *Wisdom*

- Good judgment; ability to make reasoned decisions.
- Knowing how to put the virtues into practice
- Discerning what's important in life; ability to set priorities

2. *Justice*

- Fairness (following the Golden Rule)
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Honesty
- Courtesy/civility
- Tolerance (respect for freedom of conscience, exercised with respect for the rights of others)

3. *Fortitude*

- Courage
- Resilience
- Patience
- Perseverance
- Endurance
- Self-confidence

4. *Self-Control*

- Self-discipline
- Ability to manage one's emotions and impulses
- Ability to delay gratification
- Ability to resist temptation
- Moderation
- Sexual self-control

5. *Love*

- Empathy
- Compassion
- Kindness
- Generosity
- Service
- Loyalty
- Patriotism (love of what is noble in one's country)
- Forgiveness

6. *Positive Attitude*

- Hope
- Enthusiasm
- Flexibility
- Sense of Humor

7. *Hard Work*

- Initiative
- Diligence
- Goal-Setting
- Resourcefulness

8. *Integrity*

- Adhering to moral principle
- Faithfulness to a correctly formed conscience
- Keeping one's word
- Ethical consistency
- Being honest with oneself

9. *Gratitude*

- The habit of being thankful; appreciating one's blessings
- Acknowledging one's debt to others
- Not complaining

10. *Humility*

- Self-awareness
- Willingness to admit mistakes and take responsibility for correcting them
- The desire to become a better person.

When staff compare the list they generated with the ten essential virtues, they can ask, what commonalities do we see? Do the ten essential virtues and their supporting virtues provide a general framework that serves our school's needs? How might this scheme be modified to fit our school's culture and the developmental level of our students?

Whatever the list of target virtues a staff settles on, it's important that (a) it be comprehensive, touching on the important virtues in one way or another, and (b) the staff own it. Separately, a survey should be distributed to parents and older students—middle school and up—so that their input can be incorporated.

Once character is defined, a definition of character education follows naturally: *Character education is the deliberate effort to develop the virtues that enable us to lead fulfilling lives and build a better world.*

8. CONSIDER, “WHAT WILL CHARACTER EDUCATION MEAN FOR ME?”

To address this question, I recommend an easy-to-do activity using the handout *100 Ways to Promote Character Education* (for the complete handout, go to our website, www.cortland.edu/character), or see the Appendix of *Building Character in Schools* by Kevin Ryan and Karen Bohlin).

- Have staff form pairs.
- Ask people, individually, to spend 7 minutes silently reading the list of “100 Ways,” with these instructions: “Circle those things you already do. Star those things you haven’t done but would be willing to try. At the signal, stop and share with your partner *one thing* you circled and one thing you starred, and explain why.”

Here are a dozen illustrative items from “100 Ways to Promote Character Education”:

1. Lead by example. Pick up the piece of trash in the hall or on the schoolyard. Use courteous language with students.
2. Whenever you witness peer cruelty, intervene to stop it, helping the perpetrator understand why it is wrong.
3. Admit mistakes and seek to make amends. Help students do the same.
4. Teach students to write thank-you notes. As a class, write thank-you notes to people who have done thoughtful things for the students.
5. Regularly use the “language of virtue” — terms such as respect, responsibility, integrity, wisdom, diligence, perseverance, and humility — and teach students to do the same.
6. Share with students one of your personal heroes and why he or she is a hero for you.
7. Display character quotes in your classroom or work space. (See Lickona and Davidson, *Character Quotations*, Kagan 2004, for one source of these.)
8. Choose the finest children’s and adult literature — rich in moral meaning and memorable characters — to read with students. Don’t waste time with mediocre texts.

9. Read biographies of men and women of achievement in your academic discipline and discuss the qualities of character they demonstrated.
10. Help students develop media literacy—the ability to evaluate the truth and worth of what is presented on TV, the Internet, and in other media.
11. Discuss the habits needed to be a successful student—in your subject or in school generally.
12. Remind students that developing one’s character is not an easy task but the work of a lifetime.
 - *After the 7-minute time for silent reading, give partners 5 minutes to share one thing they circled and one thing they starred.*

To wrap up this activity, ask the whole group, “What conclusions can you draw from this exercise?” Three points to draw out are: (1) We already do a lot of these things, even if we haven’t called them character education; (2) There are a lot of other things we could be doing; and (3) There are many different ways to implement character education; we don’t all need to be doing the same thing.

9. CONSIDER, “WHAT WILL CHARACTER EDUCATION LOOK LIKE IF WE DO IT SCHOOLWIDE?”

Once staff begin to feel comfortable with what character education will mean for them in their individual work, they’re ready to consider what it might mean for the whole school.

I find that the quickest way to convey that is by looking at case studies—reading and discussing character education success stories from around the country. When a school staff can see how schools like them, facing similar problems, have improved student learning and behavior and staff morale through character education, it will be natural to think, “Why couldn’t that work for us?” If, in addition, you can arrange for a live presentation by an enthusiastic principal or character education coordinator whose school has a reputation for having a strong character program, so much the better.

Here’s how I suggest using the case-study approach:

1. ***Put staff in mixed triads*** (different grade levels, different subject areas, or different work roles). Give each person a packet of Character Education Success Stories, containing at least one story at the elementary level, one at the middle school level, and

one at the high school level. The mix of stories is important for showing that character education has been done effectively at all developmental levels and for helping people to see how their efforts can contribute to or build on work at other levels. Three sources of success stories are: the Character Education Partnership's annual *National Schools of Character* publications (www.character.org); Philip Vincent's *Promising Practices in Character Education, Volumes 1 and 2* (www.CharacterEducation.com); and back issues of our Center's *Fourth and Fifth Rs* newsletter, available on our web site (www.cortland.edu/character).

2. ***Explain:*** "Take 6 minutes to read the first story silently. *Star* two or three things this school did that you think your school might benefit from doing. At the signal, share what you starred—and why—with the members of your group. Then, as a group, pick your top two strategies to recommend for consideration by your school."

3. ***After giving triads 5 minutes to discuss what they selected as promising strategies, ask someone from each group to briefly report the top two strategies their group chose and why.*** Keep a running posted list of the strategies selected and the number of times each is mentioned.

4. ***Repeat this process with a second success story and again with a third,*** each time asking small groups to discuss, "What additional strategies do you see being used in this story—ones you'd like to consider for possible use or adaptation in your school?"

5. ***After considering several such case studies, ask: "Based on the stories you've read, what do you see as the benefits of a good character education program?"*** (List them. Ones named usually include improved student learning, fewer discipline problems, higher staff morale, students taking leadership roles, and greater parent or community involvement.)

6. ***Close by reviewing the composite list of strategies generated*** by the small group reports, asking: "Which strategies were most often named?"

If the school staff subsequently commit to becoming a school of character, the top five strategies can be taken as the beginning of its character education plan. If a character education program is already in place, these strategies can be used to enhance the existing effort.

To illustrate how I format these case studies for ease of identifying effective strategies, here is one I often use: the story of Kennedy Middle School (Eugene, Oregon). Kennedy was the only middle school in the nation to win a *National School of Character* award in the 1999 competition sponsored by the Character Education Partnership.

The Kennedy Middle School Story

A substitute teacher says of Kennedy: "I've been in every school in the district, and I can tell you, when you walk into Kennedy, there's a definite difference. It's a warm and caring place." Just a few years ago, "warm" and "caring" were not words used to describe Kennedy Middle School. Finding parents to help monitor lunch was difficult because they felt uncomfortable and threatened around several groups of students. Here is how Kennedy became a school of character:

1. It tied character education to school improvement. In fall of 1995, Kennedy teachers who were unhappy with disrespectful student behavior met with the school's Site Council, which included parents, community members, support staff, and students. Together they came up with three school improvement goals, one of which dealt with school climate and character.

2. It adopted a character education curriculum: *Second Step* (www.cfchildren.org) Says Kay Mehas, then principal of Kennedy: "*Second Step* is a schoolwide curriculum that teaches skills such as how to communicate, problem-solve, and work together in a community. It actually changes students' behavior."

3. It trained the staff. Mehas and a Kennedy counselor attended a "train the trainer" institute to learn how to train the other staff to teach the *Second Step* curriculum. Before the new school year began, Kennedy held a training day for all staff. The staff decided that every Tuesday from 9:45 to 10:25 am would be dedicated to teaching *Second Step* lessons.

4. It involved support staff in teaching the curriculum. Kennedy invited every member of the staff—including secretaries, custodians, cafeteria workers, and playground aides—to take part in teaching the *Second Step* lessons. A secretary would be paired with an 8th-grade math teacher, a custodian with an 8th-grade science teacher, and so on. This would show students that the entire school was committed to character development.

5. It made a more effective use of the curriculum in Year 2. Mehas says: "After the first year with *Second Step*, some students still weren't coming to school with common expectations about classroom behavior. We wanted to say to them right at the start of the school year, 'This is how we treat each other at Kennedy Middle School.'" So instead of spreading out the *Second Step* lessons—one a week over the whole year—Kennedy decided to concentrate them: a lesson a day for the first three weeks of school. Says Mehas: "We're now able to spend more time teaching the academic curriculum because we have fewer behavior problems."

6. It provided multiple opportunities for student leadership. These included:

Respect Committee. This group meets every day and has the mission of trying to ensure that all students feel comfortable and respected at the school. For example, it organizes assemblies at which students from different backgrounds share their cultural heritages.

Leadership Club. This club meets weekly to discuss ways to improve the school. One year club members worked with a landscape architect to create a design and then plant trees to enhance school grounds.

Teens and Tots. A service learning class, this program involves Kennedy students in working at Relief Nursery, a child care and support facility for abused children and their families.

Jump Start Tutors are Kennedy students who work with their at-risk peers, teaching them study skills and helping with assignments in the different subject areas.

Student Conveners are elected representatives from each class who function as Kennedy's student government.

7. Students developed a system for recognizing positive behavior. Kennedy's Student Conveners created a schoolwide system—PRIDE (Personal Responsibility in Daily Efforts)—for recognizing students on a daily basis for "doing the right thing." Every six weeks, Kennedy students who have all their assignments in on time, no more than one absence, no more than one unexcused tardy, and no behavioral referrals, become a member of PRIDE. For each PRIDE celebration, qualifying students participate in special activities such as ice skating, snow skiing, movies, and swimming. Every six weeks students have a fresh start, so they have many chances to make PRIDE.

8. It took steps to create closer teacher-student relationships. In 7th- and 8th-grades, Kennedy implemented the practice of "looping," whereby students remain with the same teachers for more than one year. This allows faculty to develop closer relationships with both students and their parents.

9. It increased parent involvement. Kennedy has had so many parent volunteers that one parent now serves almost full-time as the volunteer coordinator. Parent volunteers cover the office and other essential staff functions while the regular staff are teaching the *Second Step* lessons during the first three weeks of school. Parent volunteers also run the school library and help with the many clubs.

10. It evaluated impact. Kennedy looked at academic and behavioral indicators to assess its character education efforts. In 1997, only 59% of Kennedy's students met Oregon's state academic standards, and discipline referrals averaged 100 a month. In

1998, 74% of Kennedy's students met state academic standards, and discipline referrals were down to a 35 a month.

Schools that already have a character effort underway feel affirmed by finding from these case studies that they are already using a number of the practices employed by nationally recognized schools. And they also find new ideas that can be used to keep their program fresh and growing.

10. ANALYZE THE MORAL AND INTELLECTUAL CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL

The next step is to take a close look at the strengths and areas for improvement in the school's moral and intellectual culture.

This is an indispensable step in becoming a school of character. If this isn't done, a school may end up ignoring the "elephant at the table" —the big problems right under its nose that, unaddressed, will undermine a character education effort. The most powerful character education curriculum consists of the moral and intellectual experiences that make up the day-to-day life of the school. These lived experiences—the ways adults relate to students, the ways students relate to adults, the ways students treat each other—more than anything else, shape character.

A systematic way to reflect on these experiences is to use the following four-part *Analysis of the School's Moral and Intellectual Culture*. This may be completed individually by staff prior to a staff meeting, with results compiled and presented by the character education leadership group, or completed and discussed in groups of 3-4 at a staff meeting.

Analysis of the School's Moral and Intellectual Culture

1. **Positive Experiences:** In your judgment, what *positive, character-building experiences* (e.g., requiring students' best work and supporting them in meeting that standard, trying to make every student feel valued, efforts to prevent bullying, teaching the virtues through formal instruction and teachable moments) do we, as a school, *already provide for our students*?
2. **Omissions:** What *important character-building experiences* (e.g., learning to work effectively with others, goal-setting, experiencing cultural diversity, student leadership in helping to develop the character education program and solving problems in the school environment) are we as a school *not adequately providing*?

3. **Trouble spots:** What *undesirable student or adult behaviors* (e.g., peer cruelty, academic dishonesty, bad language, disrespect for school property, poor sportsmanship, adult disrespect toward students) are we as a school *neglecting to deal with adequately?* (Give examples, but no names.)

4. **Inconsistencies/Mixed messages:** What *institutional practices* (e.g., professing one thing by our rhetoric and another by our practice, failing to enforce the school's discipline code even-handedly, inequities in educational opportunities, over-reliance on extrinsic incentives to motivate good behavior, time pressures that keep staff from paying attention to character development, failure to involve parents) *are at odds with the character qualities we seek to develop as a school?*

If the moral and intellectual culture of the school is *not* a matter of rigorous and continuing reflection, then the character of a school—and all its efforts in character education—will be the poorer.

11. CHOOSE TWO PRIORITIES FOR IMPROVING THE SCHOOL CULTURE

Reflection must be followed by action. The first step in devising an action plan to strengthen the school culture is to focus on just one or two concerns that the above analysis brings to light. A way to choose a focus is to distribute an “Improving the School Culture” survey listing expressed concerns, asking staff (and separately, students and parents) to indicate which ones they think the school should concentrate on in the coming year. For example:

Improving the School Culture

Of the following school issues, which two do you think we should focus on, as a school, in the coming year? (Give a 1 to your top choice, a 2 to your second choice, or add other items if your top priorities aren't listed here.)

- Increasing students' responsibility toward their academic work
- Increasing respect for teachers and other school staff
- Increasing the respect that adults show students
- Increasing peer kindness and reducing bullying and other peer cruelty
- Increasing academic honesty
- Increasing respect and responsibility regarding sexual attitudes and behavior
- Increasing parental involvement
- Improving language in the building
- Improving the sportsmanship of students and adults at athletic events
- Improving staff morale

- ___ Building school pride
- ___ Addressing issues of unfairness (example: _____)
- ___ Other: _____
- ___ Other: _____

For each of your top two issues: What is one thing you think the school could do to bring about improvement in this area?

(1) _____

(2) _____

12. ASK, "SHOULD WE COMMIT TO BECOMING A SCHOOL OF CHARACTER?"

The next step is to decide: *Should we commit to becoming a school of character? If so, what action steps should we take toward that goal?*

If all of the preceding steps have been done well, there's a strong likelihood that a solid majority of the staff will say yes, it makes a lot of sense to commit to becoming a school of character. By this point, staff should be thinking, "Character education is basically about helping kids become good students and good people by being the best school we can be."

However, if there's still resistance to making a formal commitment to becoming a school of character, find out why. It may be that staff feel overwhelmed by current pressures and priorities. They may wonder, "When are we going to get the time to do this, and do it well?" They may be reluctant because past reform initiatives have faded when there wasn't time for follow through. To encourage frankness about reasons for reluctance, I recommend asking staff to state their reasons in writing, anonymously. Then, at a subsequent meeting, distribute a list of reasons expressed and brainstorm possible ways to address these concerns.

However long it takes to get it, staff commitment is essential. When people feel as if change is being pushed at them, they resist it. But when they feel as if they have a voice in the change, they are much more likely to support it.

13. PLAN A QUALITY CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM

The next task is to plan the substance of the character education program. The challenge here is to design a program that has most, if not all, of the components that

constitute quality character education. Here are 20 components—a kind of Character Education Audit—that show up repeatedly in character education success stories.

20 Common Components of Quality Character Education

1. Administrative leadership/support, including, ideally, a Character Education Coordinator
2. Strong staff involvement
3. Strong student involvement
4. Strong parent involvement
5. A school touchstone (creed) and motto that emphasize character
6. Use of the language of character in everyday interactions and in the school's behavior code(expressed as "the way" members of the school act), routines and rituals, assemblies, extracurricular activities, student handbook, report card, public relations, and communications with parents
7. An agreed-upon set of target virtues, encompassing work-related and interpersonal virtues
8. A schoolwide plan for intentionally promoting and teaching the school's target virtues
9. Behavioral examples generated by staff and students of what these virtues "look like" and "sound like" at different ages and in different parts of the school environment
10. An emphasis on the responsibility of *all* staff and students to model these virtues
11. Ongoing integration of these virtues into instruction across the curriculum
12. The use, where appropriate, of a published character education curriculum
13. An approach to discipline that teaches the virtues, including recognizing good character in a way that keeps the focus on the character reason for doing what's right
14. A schoolwide effort to develop a caring community that prevents peer cruelty
15. A character-rich visual environment (e.g., signs, posters, quotes)
16. Hiring staff who are persons of good character committed to modeling and teaching character
17. Staff development in the skills and strategies of character education and accountability for using them (Are they part of lesson plans? Do the principal's observations take note of them? Do staff regularly report and share what they are doing to promote character development?)
18. Scheduled time for staff planning, sharing, and reflection on the character program and the school's moral and intellectual culture
19. At least modest financial support (Character education doesn't usually require a big budget, but some funds are needed for inservice workshops, conferences, release time for planning and program development, and a resource library of books and materials; a purchased curriculum will be a larger expense.)
20. A plan for ongoing assessment of program impact.

14. CHOOSE AN ORGANIZING STRATEGY FOR PROMOTING THE VIRTUES

The school staff should also discuss and decide how to organize its character education program. Here are ten options, many of which can be combined:

10 Organizing Strategies

1. *A virtue a month*
2. *A virtue a week*, related to the monthly theme
3. *A 3- or 4-year cycle of virtues* (six one year, six others the next, etc.), thereby avoiding the repetition of the same virtues year after year (the *Core Essentials Curriculum*, www.coreessentials.org, is an example of a 3-year program)
4. *A yearly theme* (e.g., “The Year of Peace,” “The Year of Self-Discipline,” “The Year of Courage”), often in combination with a quarterly focus (e.g., “Promoting Peace in Our Classrooms,” “Promoting Peace in Our School,” “Promoting Peace in Our Families,” “Promoting Peace in Our Community and World”)
5. *Assigning a developmentally appropriate virtue to each grade level* for study over the entire school year, e.g., orderliness in kindergarten, effort in first grade, kindness in second grade, responsibility in third, perseverance in fourth—thereby affording the opportunity for in-depth study, repeated practice, and habit formation
6. *A common set of character expectations* that all grade levels work on year round, with individual teachers choosing which virtue or virtues to emphasize at any given time through a book, activity, or curriculum unit (Montclair Kimberley Academy, www.montclairkimberley.org, a pre-K to 12 National School of Character in Montclair, New Jersey, uses this approach; the *Six Pillars of Character*—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, caring, fairness, and citizenship—promoted by the Character Counts! Coalition, www.charactercountscoalition.org, can also be used in this way).
7. *A character education curriculum framework*, such as the K-6 *Core Virtues* (www.corevirtues.org; see Chapter 6), that recommends developmentally appropriate virtues and corresponding curricular resources from literature, history, and fine arts.
8. *A published character education curriculum* with sequenced lesson plans (*Second Step*, K-12, www.cfchildren.org; *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies*, K-6,

www.channing-bete.com; *Wise Skills*, K-12 www.wiseskills.com; *Positive Action*, K-12, www.posaction.com; *Life Skills*, K-12, www.kovalik.com.

9. *A character education “process model,”* such as the *Caring School Community*, www.devstu.org (elementary), *Responsive Classroom*, www.responsiveclassroom.org (elementary), Seattle Social Development Project, <http://depts.washing.edu/ssdp> (elementary), our Center’s *12-point comprehensive approach*, www.cortland.edu/character (K-12); and our Center’s *Smart & Good High Schools* model (www.cortland.edu/character/highschool); these process models are based on classroom and schoolwide strategies—creating caring relationships, character-based discipline, integrating character and academics, student participation in creating a school of character, parent involvement—such as those described in this book.
10. *A school culture approach* that emphasizes creating an ethos of moral and intellectual excellence and stresses character in all curricular and co-curricular programs but doesn’t necessarily name a target set of virtues to which the whole school formally commits; this approach is used by some secondary schools with a long-standing tradition of emphasizing character.

The school’s character education leadership team can present a list of these different possibilities to the staff, briefly describe what it sees as their pros and cons, have staff discuss in small groups the options and possible combinations, and then facilitate a staff decision on an organizing strategy to launch (or re-focus) the program. My own view is that a thoughtful combination of compatible strategies, including the process strategies (#9) that integrate character deeply into the daily life of the classroom and school, offers the best chance of success. I also strongly recommend that a school staff regularly revisit this decision—at least every two years—to consider whether a modification or different approach might increase the effectiveness of its character-building efforts.

15. MAKE ASSESSMENT PART OF THE PLAN

There are at least three important reasons to assess a character education initiative: (1) What gets measured, matters; staff motivation and accountability for implementing a character education effort will be much greater if there is a plan to assess results; (2) assessment will tell you to what extent your character education program is actually making a difference; and (3) assessment data can then be used to guide decision making about how to increase program effectiveness.

The necessary work of assessment is more likely to get done if the school sets up an Assessment Committee that has this responsibility. The assessment effort can start

modestly and expand over time. Eventually, it should try to answer the following four questions:

1. *To what extent are staff implementing the character education program as intended?*
You can reasonably expect program effects only to the extent that staff are competently putting the program into practice. (Teacher self-reports and principal observations can serve as data sources on staff implementation.)
2. *To what extent do students understand the target virtues being taught at their grade level?* (Can they define them? Give several behavioral examples? Write about a time when they did or didn't display a particular virtue? Describe how a particular role model exemplifies a virtue?)
3. *To what extent are students progressing in the practice of the virtues*—as measured by school data such as discipline referrals, test scores, and prosocial conduct such as volunteering for service or leadership activities; the results of a school climate survey; and data from a survey focused on a particular aspect of character such as academic honesty?
4. *To what extent is behavior improving in a particular part of the school environment or school life*—such as corridors, cafeteria, playground, busses, assemblies, and athletic events?

Assessment requires work, but it's not as complicated as it may sound. For starters, you'll certainly want to look at data the school already collects on student conduct and academic achievement. To get a measure of the overall character of the school, there are a number of school climate measures available, including *The School as a Caring Community Profile (SCCP)* (free from www.cortland.edu/character) that our Center developed for elementary school use and the *Character Education Survey* (free from characterresearch@aol.com) designed by Meg Korpi for grades 7 to 12. (See the above website for further information on character education assessment instruments.) Both of these instruments measure staff and student perceptions of the school environment. For example, our SCCP instructs the respondent: "On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means 'almost never' and 5 means 'almost always,' circle the number that describes how often you observe the following behaviors in your school." Sample items: "*Students treat classmates with respect*"; "*Students behave respectfully toward all school staff*"; and "*In their interactions with students, teachers act in ways that demonstrate the character qualities the school is trying to teach.*"

On the last of those three items, the teachers in one elementary school we worked with gave themselves an average rating of 4.5, whereas on the same item, students (grades 4 through 6) who completed the survey gave teachers a significantly lower rating: 3.1. The faculty were brought up short by the discrepancy between their self-

perception and students' perception and, to their credit, made narrowing that gap their highest priority for the coming year. This is a good example of how assessment data can be helpful in guiding decisions about program improvement.

Suppose you were concerned about bad language, which in some states is now ranked by teachers as the number 1 behavior problem they have to deal with in the school building. One middle school, following several parental complaints that their children were uncomfortable with the amount of bad language in the building, asked its student council to take the lead on this problem. With guidance from its faculty advisor, the council developed a Language Survey that defined three kinds of bad language—put downs, obscene/vulgar language, and swearing/profanity—and asked students grades 5 to 8 to indicate, for each category, whether they considered such language *“always wrong in school and deserving a consequence,” “wrong in school but deserving just a reminder,”* or *“no big deal.”*

The results of the survey were shared and discussed schoolwide. Six months after efforts by adults and student council to get students to improve their language, the council did another survey and found that: (a) two-thirds of students agreed that “teachers have spoken to students about bad language more often this year”; (b) a third of students said they had heard less bad language that year and that students “apologized more quickly when they used it”; but (c) two-thirds said they didn’t notice any change in student language. Some progress, but obviously more work remained to be done.

16. BUILD A STRONG ADULT COMMUNITY

In the long run, the quality of a school’s character education effort will be a function of the quality of the adult community. To what extent do staff know, respect, and support each other?

Strengthening a staff’s sense of community can be as simple as making sure people feel appreciated. A new principal took over a St. Louis middle school that was suffering from low staff morale. One of the first things she did was to tape an 8 ½ x 11” manila envelope, marked “Appreciation Notes,” on the door of every staff member—teachers, counselors, custodians, and administrators. She sent an invitation to all staff, students, and parents: “Whenever the spirit moves you, please write a note expressing appreciation for something a particular staff person has done and put it in the envelope on that person’s door. You don’t need to sign it.”

Gradually, envelopes began to fill up. Parents wrote to thank teachers for ways they had helped their child. Colleagues affirmed each other for things they had always admired or been grateful for but never put into words. Many students also wrote notes. Morale in the building soared. Faculty said, “This is the most important thing we’ve done in ten years.”

17. MAKE TIME FOR CHARACTER

The lack of time is the number one enemy of sustained educational reform. How can time be protected for planning and monitoring a quality character education program?

A school needs to step back from its schedule and find the time that can be profitably used to pursue the character education goals of intellectual and moral excellence. Some schools have cleared the deck in faculty meetings and used them for meaningful sharing and professional growth. Says Pat Floyd-Echols, principal of Martin Luther King, Jr. School in inner-city Syracuse, New York: “We now devote *all* of our faculty meetings to staff development and sharing. The memos that we used to read at meetings we now send out by e-mail or put in mailboxes. Using our faculty meeting more productively has made us a closer staff. It has also enabled us in the past two years to raise our students’ math scores by being more consistent in our instructional approach.”

Another good staff development activity is a Common Book Project. Staff commit to reading, and discussing as part of a faculty meeting, a book that pertains to character development. I recommend starting with ones that are enjoyable to read and that people can apply in their personal and family life as well as in their professional work. Hal Urban’s *Life’s Greatest Lessons*, Daniel Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence*, Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, F. Washington Jarvis’s *With Love and Prayers*, Helen LeGette’s *Parents, Kids & Character*, Michele Borba’s *Building Moral Intelligence*, William Bennett’s *Book of Virtues*, Chip Wood’s *Time to Teach, Time to Learn*, Richard Curwin’s *Rediscovering Hope: Our Greatest Teaching Strategy*, Anne Colby’s and William Damon’s *Some Do Care*, Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Ernest Boyer’s *The Basic School*, and Alfie Kohn’s *Punished By Rewards* (controversial but worth a look, given the temptation to over-rely on extrinsic incentives) are all good candidates.

Support for this kind of adult development is absolutely essential to becoming a school of character. As Rick Weissbourd, author of *The Vulnerable Child*, points out, “We will never greatly improve students’ moral development in schools without taking on the complex task of developing adults’ maturity and ethical capacities.” Adults cannot give what they do not have.

Most educational change has a short shelf life: here today, gone tomorrow. That’s why experienced teachers are often cynical, thinking, “This, too, shall pass.” The business of becoming a school of character, however, must not become a passing fad—because developing good character is at the heart of effective schooling and what it means to be human.

Educational reforms that endure—those with the power to transform school culture—are ones that remain in the forefront of a school’s collective consciousness. Over time, they become part of a school’s identity, how it defines itself. To have that kind of transformative power, character education must be regularly thought about and talked about by a critical mass of staff—especially a core of committed teachers who can sustain a school culture when the administrative leadership changes. The challenge for that critical core is to keep the character conversation going.

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Five resources that can help your school become a school of character are: *Smart & Good High Schools: Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work, and Beyond* (www.cortland.edu/character/highschool); *Eleven Principles Sourcebook: How to Achieve Quality Character Education in Your School or District*, by Kathy Beland (www.character.org); *Building Character in Schools: Resource Guide*, by Karen Bohlin, Deborah Farmer, and Kevin Ryan (www.josseybass.com); *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (www.neosonline.com); and *Smart & Good: Developing Performance Character and Moral Character in America’s High Schools* by Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson (available August 31, 2004: to preorder, go to <http://web.cortland.edu/templeton>). For information on SUNY Cortland’s Summer Institute in Character Education, go to www.cortland.edu/character.

¹ For the full document, *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education*, see the Character Education Partnership’s web site: www.character.org