

Frequently Asked Questions about Character Education

1. What is character education?

Character education is an educational movement that supports the social, emotional and ethical development of students. It is the proactive effort by schools, districts, and states to instill in students important core, ethical and performance values such as caring, honesty, diligence, fairness, fortitude, responsibility, and respect for self and others. Character education provides long-term solutions to moral, ethical, and academic issues that are of growing concern in our society and our schools. Character education teaches students how to be their best selves and how to do their best work.

CEP, a national leader in the character education movement, outlines what effective character education looks like in its Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education:

- ⊕ Promotes core ethical and performance values
- ⊕ Teaches students to understand, care about, and act upon these core ethical and performance values.
- ⊕ Encompasses all aspects of the school culture
- ⊕ Fosters a caring school community
- ⊕ Provides opportunities for moral action
- ⊕ Supports academic achievement
- ⊕ Develops intrinsic motivation
- ⊕ Includes whole-staff involvement
- ⊕ Requires positive leadership of staff and students
- ⊕ Involves parents and community members
- ⊕ Assesses results and strives to improve

Character education has always been an essential part of our schools' mission. In fact, since the founding of our nation's public schools, character development was always an integral part of schooling along with academics. Today's character education movement is a re-emergence of that important mission.

2. Why do we need character education?

As Dr. Thomas Lickona, author of *Educating for Character*, stated, "Moral education is not a new idea. It is, in fact, as old as education itself. Down through history, in countries all over the world, education has had two great goals: to help young people become smart and to help them become good."

Since children spend about 900 hours per year in school, schools must be proactive in helping develop supportive environments where students develop into healthy, caring, hard-working men and women. In order to create the caring and respectful schools and communities we all want, we must be intentional and comprehensive in educating for character.

3. Is character education as important as academics?

The social, emotional and ethical development of young people is just as important as their academic development. It is, in fact, the precursor to academic achievement. As Theodore Roosevelt stated, "To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society." After all, we know that good workers, citizens, parents, and neighbors all have their roots in good character.

4. How do we know character education works?

Schools that infuse character education into their curricula and cultures, such as CEP's National Schools of Character, find improved academic achievement, behavior, school culture, peer interaction, and parental involvement. They see dramatic transformations: pro-social behaviors such as cooperation, respect, and compassion are replacing negative behaviors such as violence, disrespect, apathy, and underachievement. And when these positive attitudes and behaviors are present, students are better able to commit themselves to their work, which paves the way for perseverance, diligence, and ultimately, increased academic achievement.

Some specific examples of research conducted on character-based programs include:

In a study of four schools using [Positive Action](#), the average number of behavioral incidents (including violence and substance abuse) requiring discipline referral dropped by 74 percent after the program was implemented for one year and by an average of 80 percent during the next six years. Additionally, absenteeism decreased between 30 to 60 percent, and achievement scores improved from an average of the 43rd to the 71st percentile range after the first year of implementation, and to an average of the 88th percentile after two to nine years.

5. Isn't character education just another "add-on" that contributes to teachers' workloads?

Character education is not an "add-on." It is, instead, a powerful and necessary method of school reform. Character education helps educators fulfill their fundamental responsibility, preparing young children for their future, by fostering caring, respectful, achievement-minded school environments.

6. How much time each day/week is needed for character education?

Character education should not be relegated to a "character education class" that is conducted periodically, but should be infused throughout the structures and processes of the entire school curriculum and culture.

7. Can character education work at all grade levels?

Although it is important to set a strong foundation during earlier grades and to reinforce that foundation during the later grades, character education can be initiated at any grade level.

8. Shouldn't parents be the primary character educators?

Developing character is first and foremost a parental responsibility. The task, however, must be shared with schools and the broader community. Young and old alike regularly voice concern about the challenge of raising ethical, responsible children. As such, parents and communities are increasingly looking to schools for assistance.

9. Who decides which character education traits are emphasized?

Each school community should reach consensus on which values are taught. To be effective, school-based character education programs need broad support from all stakeholders in the community –

educators, parents, community leaders, youth service groups, businesses, and faith and charitable groups.

Effective character education initiatives nationwide have shown that, despite differences, schools and communities can join together around a commitment to ethical and performance values. We know that there are some things that we all value – for ourselves and for our children. We want our children to be honest and hard-working. We want them to respect those different from themselves. We want them to make responsible decisions in their lives. We want them to care about their families, communities, and themselves.

10. Who teaches character education in a school?

Every adult in a school is a character educator by virtue of interaction with students. Regardless of whether a school has formalized character education, all adults serve as role models. Students constantly watch as adults in the school – teachers, administrators, counselors, coaches, cafeteria aides, bus drivers – serve as models for character – whether good or bad.

11. How does a school implement character education?

Comprehensive, effective character education begins when members of a school, along with the local community, come together to determine the core values that they share. These values then become the foundation for all that the school does – curriculum, teaching strategies, school culture, and extra-curricular activities. Character education is then infused into the broader community.

For more information, refer to the Resources section of CEP's website.