

2009 State Schools of Character

Over half the states in the U.S. now hold a State Schools of Character (SSOC) awards competition as an extension of the National Schools of Character (NSOC) program. The purpose of both the state and national awards is to identify and honor schools and districts that can serve as models of comprehensive, transformative character education. Sponsoring organizations hold an awards ceremony for their SSOC Winners and forward the strongest applications from schools and districts in their state (including those of their SSOC Winners) to the NSOC competition. State sponsors and CEP evaluators use the same criteria—CEP’s *Character Education Quality Standards*—to judge the state and national competitions, respectively.

STATE SPONSORS HONORED 55 STATE SCHOOLS OF CHARACTER IN 2009

The State Schools of Character (SSOC) awards program experienced a surge in 2009, with 20 of the 26 state sponsors naming a total of 55 state-level Winners. Many sponsors gave additional awards, such as Finalist, Honorable Mention, and Promising Practices. All but one of the 2009 NSOC Winners and Finalists are from SSOC states, reflecting the level of activity, resources, and leadership in character education in these states. The states with organizations offering strong support experience the highest levels of participation in the program. States such as Florida, Maryland, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, and Texas received applications in the double digits in 2009. Like the NSOC/SSOC awards program itself, these states serve as models to guide the way for others. SSOC coordinators network to learn from one another’s experiences and support the same goal: to have *every* school in our nation become a school of character.

The NSOC expansion to state-level programs has raised awareness of character education and facilitated development of in-state capacity to help schools get started

or strengthen their programs. Many state sponsors offer workshops or consultation to schools seeking guidance, and state-level winners provide leadership in mentoring fellow educators in their character education journeys. According to Dr.



Rocky Heights Middle School’s mascot, Nighthawk Man, receives an SSOC Promising Practices award from Colorado State Commissioner of Education Dwight Jones.

Phil Brown, SSOC coordinator for New Jersey and director of the Center for Social and Character Development at Rutgers University, “The State Schools of Character process enables schools to measure the progress of their programs against national standards and then provides a focus that



State Senator Vicki Schmidt cheerily presides at the Kansas SSOC awards ceremony at the Brown vs. Board of Education historic site in Topeka.

energizes school staffs for continued improvement and real growth.”

Although the scoring process for selecting SSOC and NSOC is the same, each state sponsor has flexibility in deciding how they recognize their SSOC Winners. Many states present awards at the school site with staff and students participating. Other presentations are more public and occur at conferences or luncheons. Some are held at state capitals or universities with governors or state legislators presenting. Commissioners of education, presidents of state education associations, and members of state boards of education often preside at the ceremonies. In Missouri, the St. Louis Rams fund the SSOC project and a Rams vice president participated in the awards ceremony. Several states received TV coverage of their event in 2009—in Florida, ABC’s network affiliate actually sponsored the luncheon in its studios.

With the expansion of the NSOC program to the state level, CEP has realized two goals: to increase the number of schools recognized for developing effective character education initiatives, and to identify exemplary sites to serve as models and share their best practices. ★