

# What Works In Character Education:

A report for policy makers and opinion leaders

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**Character Education Partnership**

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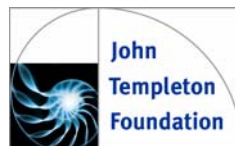
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*The **Character Education Partnership (CEP)** is a nonpartisan national coalition of organizations and individuals, based in Washington, DC, dedicated to developing young people of good character who become responsible and caring citizens.*

*The **University of Missouri-St. Louis' (UMSL)** School of Education has the only endowed chair for character education. UMSL resources include a character education library consisting of well over 10,000 resources related to the development of character in children, adolescents, and adults, the What Works in Character Education Advisory Board (an interdisciplinary panel of national experts from character education and related disciplines), and the equipment and facilities of the Des Lee Technology Learning Center.*

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## What Works in Character Education

Over 2000 years ago Aristotle noted, “All adults involved with children either help or thwart children’s growth and development, whether we like it, intend it or not.” Notwithstanding episodic “back to basics” movements in education that have suggested that schools should only focus on academic achievement, it has been widely recognized, for a very long time, that schools cannot avoid influencing students’ character development—for better or for worse. Character education is not optional in the school—it is inevitable. The inescapable fact is this: as adults involved intimately with children, educators cannot avoid “doing” character education.

Despite this fact, character education has waxed and waned in popularity in education at least for the past century. Over the past decade, interest in and commitment to character education in American schools has steadily increased, thanks in large part to the explicit and material support of the U.S. Department of Education and the past two administrations. Federal dollars have without question raised the profile of character education, provided funding, and made it a bi-partisan priority. At the same time, however, requirements within No Child Left Behind legislation have caused many states and school districts to shift resources to academic state testing and consequently left little to spend on character education.

So even as interest continues to rise, educators face quandaries when considering how to implement character education in their classrooms, schools, and districts. (1) Is character

education a priority? (2) Can they (dare they?) spare the time and resources from high stakes testing preparation to focus on character education? (3) How do they know what is effective practice in character education; i.e., what works in implementing character education?

### **Is Character Education an Educational Priority?**

There are many reasons why character education is and must be an educational priority. As already noted, it is unavoidable; schools impact the character of students whether they intend to or not. It is good educational policy to do so intentionally, proactively, and effectively.

Second, it is good politics: as long as humans have experimented with forms of self-governance, it has been recognized that self-governance itself depends upon the character of citizens. Plato recognized this when he crafted the blueprint for *The Republic*. The American founders repeatedly emphasized that our own experiment in democracy would succeed or fail depending upon the character of its citizenry. When Alexis De Tocqueville visited the US in the 1830s to discover how this band of European cast-offs had managed to fashion a world power out of wilderness, he concluded that America was a great nation because of the goodness of the American people. Many of the American founders understood that education is vital for self-governance and the success of our form of representative democracy. Schools simply have to contribute to the formation of civic character if the nation is to survive. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Intelligence plus character, that is the true aim of education.”

Finally, good character education is good education. In fact, recent findings show that effective character education supports and enhances the academic goals of schools; in short, good character education also promotes learning.

It is clear that just as we cannot avoid character education, we cannot afford to implement it half-heartedly or wrong-headedly. We need to take character education as seriously as we take academic education.

### **Can schools afford to emphasize character education?**

Many educators who believe in character education in principle, still feel that they cannot afford (literally and/or figuratively) to expend limited resources on character education. Unmistakably, character education like any other aspect of schooling requires resources. These resources need not be extensive or novel. When educators bemoan the fact that “there is no more room on my plate” for character education, the common retort is that “character education **is** the plate.” In other words, character education is foundational, a different way of going about the business of education, rather than another add-on to the already over-packed school day. It is a different way to manage the classroom, to lead class discussions, to deal with matters of discipline, to hold staff meetings, to run student government, to involve parents, to hire, and so on.

Professional development is the most critical area of investment in character education, requiring time, substitute teachers, support for learning, the development of professional learning communities and the use of consultants.

Schools can afford to implement quality character education. It simply requires a mental shift of gears in how one approaches existing practice and content and a redirecting of the focus of professional development activities.

### **What are effective character education practices?**

This brings us to the *What Works in Character Education (WWCE)* report, an effort to uncover and synthesize existing scientific research on the effects of K-12 character education. Commissioned by the Character Education Partnership and funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation with support from Proctor & Gamble and the 3M Foundation, *What Works in Character Education* research was conducted by the University of Missouri St. Louis. This report for policy makers is one of three coming from the WWCE project. It addresses two issues: (1) what did we find out about effective character education practice? and (2) what more do we need to know about effective character education practice? A second report for educators summarizes best practices in character education. The last report details the research project that generated these conclusions.

### ***The What Works in Character Education Project***

In order to understand what is known from scientific research about effective character education practice, we began with the following conceptual model of character education:

- Character is psychological. The outcome of effective character education is the psychological development of students.
- Character education targets a particular subset of child development, which we call character. Character is the composite of those psychological traits that impact the child's capacity and tendency to be socially and personally responsible, ethical, and self-managed.

- It then follows that character education is most effective if it relies predominantly on those social, educational, and contextual processes that are known to significantly impact the psychological development of such traits.

We decided to focus on Kindergarten-12<sup>th</sup> grade (K-12) character education implementation. We defined character education broadly as *any school-based K-12 initiatives either intended to promote the development of some aspect of student character or for which some aspect of student character was measured as a relevant outcome variable*. This allowed us to include areas such as drug and alcohol prevention, violence prevention, service learning, and social emotional learning, all of which included initiatives that fit some or all of the above definitions. We enlisted an expert panel from key institutions that was comprised of Dr. Roger Weissberg (social emotional learning), Dr. Nancy Guerra (violence prevention), Dr. Susan Anderson (service learning), Dr. William Hansen (drug and alcohol prevention), and Dr. Jere Brophy (teacher impact on student development).

With a broad definition of character education, much of the research included in *What Works in Character Education* does not use the term “character.” Those who define character education (or character, for that matter) more narrowly may balk at this strategy. In reviewing the literature, however, we have found that regardless of the labels (character education, social-emotional learning, school-based prevention, citizenship education, etc.), the methods employed, the underlying theoretical justifications, and the outcomes assessed are remarkably similar. After all, they are all school-based endeavors designed to help foster the positive, pro-social, moral, and/or civic development of youth.

Using our expert panel, our own expert knowledge, electronic database searches, published literature reviews, and contacts with program developers, we attempted to collect all research on character education. We identified over 100 studies of over 50 different character education programs. When we removed those studies that did not meet our criteria for scientific merit and those that showed no significant effects of character education, we were left with a pool of 69 studies of 33 character education programs (see Table 1). In addition we found two meta-analyses of two of the programs that accounted for more than 100 additional studies. It is from these scientific studies that we draw the following conclusions.

### **Conclusions about What Works in Character Education**

1. **It *does* work, if effectively designed and implemented.** Clearly there is ample evidence of effective character education. We have identified 33 existing character education programs for which there is scientific evidence of effectiveness (Table 1). However, it is not particularly meaningful to state that character education works. Rather it is more appropriate to state that character education does work, if effectively designed and implemented. We have found much to substantiate that claim.
2. **It *varies*.** Effective character education comes in varied forms. There are whole school reform models, classroom lesson-based models, target behavior models (e.g., bullying prevention), integrated component models, and so on.
3. **It *affects much*.** Effective character education can have many different outcomes (see Table 2). Character education affects various aspects of the “head” (knowledge, thinking), “heart” (emotions, motivation), and “hand” (behavior, skills). Clearly there is ample evidence that character education frequently improves academic performance, reduces risk behaviors (e.g., drug use, violence, pre-marital sexual behavior), increases desirable behaviors (e.g., altruism), and improves social-emotional and pro-social competencies (e.g., socio-moral reasoning, problem-solving skills, emotional competency).

4. **It lasts.** There is evidence of sustained and even delayed effects of character education. The **Seattle Social Development Project**, the **Child Development Project**, and **Positive Action**, for example, show long-term effects of elementary school character education through middle school and/or high school, and even, for SSDP, into early adulthood. In fact, there are even “time release” effects; e.g., the CDP found academic achievement gains in middle school that were not present during the elementary school implementation period.

5. **Doing it well matters.** When studies examine levels of implementation, they typically (and not surprisingly) find that character education is more effective when it is implemented fully and faithfully (accurately, with fidelity). It behooves character educators to pay heed to the need to maximize and assess implementation fidelity. To underscore this, all effective character education programs include professional development, at least as an option but often as a requirement, and often with substantive support materials and training experiences.

6. **Effective program strategies.** The following are the categories of strategies observed most frequently in effective programs (more details are provided in the separate report to practitioners):

a. **Professional development.** All effective programs build in structures for ongoing professional training experiences for those implementing the character education initiative or elements of it.

b. **Peer interaction.** Likewise, all effective programs incorporate peer interactive strategies. Certainly peer discussion (usually at the classroom or small group level) fits this bill. So do role-play and cooperative learning.

c. **Direct teaching.** It is very common to include direct instruction about character. As Thomas Lickona has long reminded the field, “Practice what you preach, but don’t forget to preach what you practice.”

d. **Skill training.** Many of the common strategies are forms of promoting the development of and often the direct teaching of social-emotional skills and capacities. These fall into both the categories of *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* skills (e.g., self-management and conflict resolution, respectively).

- e. **Make the agenda explicit.** More than half the programs either make it explicit that character is the focus or make a focus on morality, values, virtues, or ethics explicit.
- f. **Family and/or community involvement.** This common strategy involves the inclusion of families, especially parents, and community members and organizations. This includes parents as consumers (i.e., offering training to parents) and parents and community as partners (i.e., including them in the design and delivery of the character education initiative).
- g. **Providing models and mentors.** Many programs incorporate peer and adult role models (both live and literature based) and mentors to foster character development.
- h. **Integration into the academic curriculum.** It is important to integrate character education into the academic curriculum, especially in this age of *No Child Left Behind* legislation and educational accountability. We have seen that character education does in fact promote academic learning and achievement. Nearly half of the effective programs do this.
- i. **Multi-strategy approach.** Effective character education programs are rarely single-strategy initiatives. In fact, only **Moral Dilemma Discussion**, of the 33 programs studied, is a single-strategy program, and that still encompasses three of our strategy categories (explicit focus on morality, peer interaction, professional development). The overall average number of strategies within each of the 33 programs was slightly over seven.

### **What we still need to know**

We need to know much more about what works in character education; there is still a comparative dearth of scientifically sound research. We therefore recommend the following:

- In general, more resources need to go into funding and encouraging well-designed, well-conceptualized character education research. Most current funding, with the notable exception of the IES/CDC “Social and character development” project ([www.sacdprojects.net](http://www.sacdprojects.net)), includes research only as an addendum or an afterthought. Research was not a primary focus in the first rounds of *Partnerships in Character Education* (PCE) grants funded through the US Department of Education. While expectations and standards for research were raised significantly in the PCE program under NCLB, we are still concerned that

methodologies in current projects fall short of being scientifically sound. There is a national need for funding of basic research (e.g., how does character develop in children?), encouragement of scientifically rigorous research (SACD is an example), and resources for educators and others outlining how to do such research.

- There is a need for large scale research studies of character education. Such studies may be multi-site studies, program comparison studies, epidemiological studies (what is actually being implemented nationally?), or longitudinal studies (how long do the effects of character education last?).
- Studies of isolated character education implementation strategies and elements are also needed. We do not know, for example, if most of the strategies listed above actually are effective because they have not been studied in a controlled component fashion. We only know they are prevalent as components of effective multi-strategy programs.
- Practitioners need support in how to do meaningful program evaluations of character education initiatives. To date, publishing booklets on the topic has proven insufficient. To ensure a useful empirical legacy in funded projects, guidance needs to be built into funding streams as well. Practitioners need to know that it is vitally important to start evaluation from the project's inception, and would benefit immensely from guidance on how to find technical support for evaluation.
- There is a need for implementation research. We know far too little about how educators are trained to implement character education, the role of school leadership in character education, or about stages in implementation.
- Financial resources are needed to build the infra-structure and capacity for character education research. Institutions of higher education, in particular, need to have the resources to attract and support graduate students and faculty who have the necessary skills and inclinations to engage in well-designed, meaningful character education research. The development of comprehensive databases on projects and studies would go far to advance the work of researchers and practitioners across the nation.

## APPENDICES

**TABLE 1**  
**LIST OF SCIENTIFICALLY SUPPORTED PROGRAMS**

1. Across Ages (elementary, **middle**\*)
2. All Stars (**middle**)
3. Building Decision Skills with Community Service (**middle**)
4. Child Development Project (**elementary**)
5. Facing History and Ourselves (**middle** , high)
6. Great Body Shop (**elementary**)
7. I Can Problem Solve (**elementary**)
8. Just Communities (**high**)
9. Learning for Life (**elementary**, middle, high)
10. Life Skills Training (elementary, **middle school**)
11. LIFT (Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers) (**elementary**)
12. Lions-Quest (**elementary, middle, high**)
13. Michigan Model for Comprehensive School Health Education (elementary, **middle**, high)
14. Moral Dilemma Discussion (**elementary, middle, high**)
15. Open Circle Program (Reach Out to Schools)(**elementary**)
16. PeaceBuilders (**elementary**)
17. Peaceful Schools Project (**elementary**)
18. Peacemakers (**elementary, middle**)
19. Positive Action (**elementary**, middle, high)
20. Positive Action Through Holistic Education (PATHE) (**middle, high**)
21. Positive Youth Development (**middle**)
22. Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) (**elementary**)
23. Raising Healthy Children (**elementary**, middle, high)
24. Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP)(**elementary**, middle)
25. Responding in Peaceful & Positive Ways (RIPP)(**middle school**)
26. Roots of Empathy (**elementary, middle**)
27. Seattle Social Development Project (**elementary**)
28. Second Step (**elementary, middle**)
29. Social Competence Promotion Program for Young Adolescence (**middle**)
30. Social Decision Making & Problem Solving (SDM/PS) (**elementary, middle, high**)
31. Teaching Students to be Peacemakers (**elementary, middle, high**)
32. Teen Outreach (**middle, high school**)
33. The ESSENTIAL Curriculum (Project ESSENTIAL) (**elementary**, middle)

\* Bold text indicates the level for which we analyzed research.