

Character Education: What Is It, How Does It Work, and How Effective Is It?

*The Character Education Partnership, prepared by Merle J. Schwartz, Ed. D.,
Alexandra Beatty and Eileen Dachnowicz*

In an era of “high stakes testing,” policy-makers face a daunting task: exactly which educational practices should they embrace in order to produce the desired results. Adding to this dilemma is that even the concept of “desired results” becomes a debatable issue. On one side, federal legislation demands that improved student performance become the criterion for instructional success: on the other, advocates for “social and emotional intelligence” point out that our schools truly have a responsibility to develop the character of our students. At a time when our nation is recoiling from the excesses of Enron, the question arises: do schools have a responsibility to develop the ethical character of their students, and is such training at odds with the march toward measurable academic success?

A growing body of research on character education is suggesting that this relatively recent renewal of the practice of teaching ethics and morality is showing a range of positive social and academic outcomes in schools. What is interesting is that three recent studies show that effective character education programs go hand-in-hand with academic success.

How Well Does It Work—and How Can We Tell?

Individual schools that have won the National School of Character award from the Character Education Partnership (CEP) in Washington, DC, report that their character education initiatives have resulted in reduced office referrals, improved attendance and test scores, increased skills for conflict resolution, lessening of risky behavior, and

overall improved school climate and civility. To help schools and districts develop effective character education programs, three research-based studies supported through the funding of the John Templeton Foundation and, in some cases, the Character Education Partnership provide insights into what constitutes a successful program. Each study explores character education program from a different perspective.

Links to Academic Achievement on the Elementary Level. The first study, *The Relationship of Character Education Implementation and Academic Achievement in Elementary Schools* (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2003), explored links between character education programs and improvements in academic achievement in elementary schools. Most existing research addresses only the effects of individual programs. Benninga, et al., were able to obtain more general results by comparing scores on a rubric measuring traits of character education programs in more than 600 California schools to a numeric indicator that summarizes the results of various statewide assessments. The team found that schools with the strongest character education scores tended to have higher academic scores by a small but significant margin.

The team identified three program attributes that had the strongest links with academic achievement:

- a school's ability to ensure a clean and safe physical environment,
- evidence that parents and teachers modeled and promoted good character education, and
- opportunities for students to contribute in meaningful ways to the school and its community.

Examining Successful Secondary Level Programs. Successful practices in character education at the secondary level took center stage in *Smart & Good High Schools: Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work, and Beyond* (Lickona & Davidson, 2005). The researchers selected 24 schools that had received external recognition for excellence and collected information about them using focus groups, classroom observations, interviews, observations of school-specific programs, and analysis of program materials and archival data.

The authors identified six principles for developing an ethical learning community. “Smart and Good” high schools:

1. *Develop shared purpose and identity.* Explicit expectations for personal behavior as well as academic achievement, such as an honor code, school motto, and school traditions provide important guidance for students.
2. *Align practices with desired outcomes and relevant research.* Offering staff and parents specific guidance about research-based strategies for meeting designated goals reinforces the school’s efforts.
3. *Have a voice; take a stand.* When students are allowed a voice in the classroom and in school affairs, and faculty, staff, parents, and community members also have a voice, these opportunities for all to express their integrity and courage contribute to excellence and ethics in the school.
4. *Take personal responsibility for continuous self-development.* Adult members of the school community can set a critical example for students by promoting the value of striving for excellence, and of the ongoing self-reflection that is part of it; creating a

culture of excellence in classrooms and school-wide, and fostering personal responsibility.

5. *Practice collective responsibility for excellence and ethics.* In a community that values ethics and excellence, adults and students need to intervene right away when others need support to succeed and do the right thing.

6. *Grapple with tough issues.* Collective responsibility for an ethical learning community entails a responsibility to confront institutional practices or issues that are at odds with the school's commitment to excellence and ethics

Reviewing the Existing Research. The authors of a third study, *What Works in Character Education: A Research-Driven Guide for Educators* (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005), looked instead at existing research on character education programs and drew conclusions about the strategies that are most effective. The team found 33 studies that provided scientifically sound evidence that the program studied was effective, showing improved socio-moral cognition, problem-solving skills, emotional competency, academic achievement, and attachment to school. The researchers identified the characteristics of the successful programs:

Professional Development. All 33 of the effective programs identified incorporated ongoing professional development.

Peer Interaction. All 33 also incorporated strategies for fostering peer interaction, such as discussion, role-playing, and cooperative learning.

Direct Teaching and Skill Training. Many of the programs included direct instruction about character as well as teaching of specific intrapersonal (e.g. self-management) and interpersonal (e.g. conflict resolution) skills and capacities.

Explicit Agenda. More than half the programs studied use specific language about character, morality, values, or ethics.

Family and/or Community Involvement. Including parents and other community members, both as recipients of character education and as participants in the design and delivery of the programs, was a common strategy.

Models and Mentors. Both peer and adult role models foster character development.

Integration into Academic Curricula. Nearly half of the effective programs are integrated with academic curricula in some way, most often in social studies and language arts curricula.

Use Multiple Strategies. Virtually all of the effective programs use a multi-strategy approach, rather than relying on a single model or tool.

What Lessons Does Existing Research Offer?

What does this research add up to? Character education, when done effectively, can result in not only improved academic achievement, but positive youth development that leads to an increase in pro-social behavior and a decrease in risky behavior. The findings from all three studies are consistent, and a few key points stand out for effective programs:

- Goals should be both explicit and ambitious.
- Professional development is critical.
- The whole school community should be involved, and everyone should have a voice.

- Adults need to be role models.

Research on the effectiveness of character education is just getting underway, however, the conclusions from these studies point out that character education is a powerful way to help students develop the habits that lead to improved academic performance and provide a nurturing environment in which “no child left behind” means that each child is treated as an individual. Readers of these reports will indeed find a rich treasure of strategies to guide them in shaping character education programs that have lasting results.

References

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