



What can schools do?

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■ WHAT IS CHARACTER EDUCATION?

The "character education" label is applied to a wide range of programs and strategies in schools and is designed to help young people become morally responsible, engaged citizens. The Character Education Partnership (CEP) promotes an intentional, proactive approach that affects all aspects of school life. Working with experts in the field, CEP has identified 11 broad principles for comprehensive and effective character education:

1. Promote core ethical values as the basis of good character.
2. Define character comprehensively to include thinking, feeling and behavior.
3. Use a comprehensive, intentional, proactive and effective approach.
4. Create a caring school community.
5. Provide students with opportunities to engage in moral action.
6. Provide a meaningful and challenging curriculum that helps all students to succeed.
7. Foster students' intrinsic motivation to learn and to be good people.
8. Engage school staff as professionals in a learning and moral community.
9. Foster shared moral leadership and long-term support for character education.
10. Engage families and community members as partners in character education.
11. Evaluate the character of the school, its staff, and its students to inform the character education effort.

■ 2006 NATIONAL SCHOOLS OF CHARACTER

- Centennial Arts Academy, Gainesville, Ga.
- Cross Bayou Elementary School, Pinellas Park, Fla.
- Herrington Elementary School, Pontiac, Mich.
- McKee Road Elementary School, Charlotte, N.C.
- Millard Hawk Primary School, Central Square, N.Y.

By **Charles C. Haynes** and **Marvin W. Berkowitz**

After the endless headlines involving corrupt politicians, corporate cheats, doped-up sports stars and Internet predators, you might think that the American people would be demanding more character education in schools.

Think again.

"Good character," like the weather, gets a lot of talk — but too little action. We bemoan the loss of integrity and lack of responsibility in American public life. We decry the numbing statistics about teenage substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and gang activity. We wring our hands over surveys that report widespread cheating in schools and colleges. And then we move on to more important things.

Test scores, for example.

That's right: Standardized test results seem to trump everything else in education these days. No matter how many warning bells are sounded about the crisis of character in our society and despite the long-standing understanding that education is for the whole child, all we want to hear is how each school did on the exam.

Reading and math are important, but if we care about our kids (and our future) shouldn't we be paying more attention to the kinds of human beings who do the math and read the books?

"To educate a person in mind and not in morals," said Theodore Roosevelt, "is to educate a menace to society."

Fortunately, taking academics and character seriously in schools isn't an either/or proposition. Done well, character development enhances academic performance. Just ask Kristen Pelster, principal of Ridgewood Middle School, a rural/suburban school of about 503 students (42% of them economically disadvantaged) in Arnold, Mo.

When Pelster arrived as assistant principal six years ago, Ridgewood had all the marks of the proverbial "failing school": high absenteeism, low academic achievement and a constant stream of discipline problems. Located in a poor community plagued by inadequate housing and meth labs, the school had graffiti on the walls, profanity echoing in the halls and a rusty chain fence surrounding it. It could have been the movie set for *Blackboard Jungle*.

Working as a team, Pelster and then-Principal Tim Crutchley, who was also new, made a commitment to transform Ridgewood. First, they diagnosed the problem: Students didn't feel as though anyone cared about them or the school.

Then they articulated a vision for "a school where there is caring, a sense of belonging and academic achievement."

Facing angry parents and a dispirited staff, Crutchley and Pelster knew they had much convincing to do. When they first

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- Shades Cahaba Elementary School,
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- St. Stephens Elementary School, Conover,
N.C.

- Zane North Elementary School,
Collingswood, N.J.

*For a profile of each school, visit the website of
the Character Education Partnership at
www.character.org.*

arrived at Ridgewood, dozens of parents had requested that their children be moved to another school. Step One was to clean up the physical environment (the rusty fence was the first thing to go).

Initially, "caring" was a lot like "tough love." Crutchley and Pelster raised the bar on attendance, often going to truant students' homes to bring them to school. They established a "failure is not an option" program that prohibited the giving of zeros for missing work. Students had to make up missing homework during lunch hour. Teachers were required to integrate character education into academic lessons and behavior management.

By the end of the first year, the two leaders had won over a core team of teachers, critical support that, with the help of parents and members of the community, let the school progress.

How it works

The Ridgewood activists learned early on that "character education" is far more than slogans or quick-fix lessons about a word of the week. To be effective, character education must become integral to the daily actions of everyone in the school community.

It starts with the faculty. Early in the process, Crutchley and Pelster drove out teachers who didn't show concern for students and recruited teachers who did.

They allocated resources to provide staff development. This modest investment in teacher training — a few thousand dollars — constituted almost the entire cost to implement their plan.

Effective character education is not an add-on, but instead uses "teachable moments" in every classroom. Seventh-grade teacher Kacie Heiken, for example, has her students write and illustrate fairy tales that have a positive moral lesson. The students go to elementary schools and read their stories to classes before donating the books to a local children's hospital.

In American history classes, students study veterans, war and military service, culminating in a school-wide celebration of Veterans Day that includes breakfast and a patriotic slide show for local veterans and their families.

Science students recently collaborated with a local church group to build a nature trail.

Ridgewood's effort extends beyond the curriculum. For half an hour each day, students meet with an adult mentor in small family-like advisory groups. "The advisory helps form strong relationships between staff and student and among students. It creates a sense of being more of a family than an institution," Crutchley says.

But character education at Ridgewood isn't solely, or even predominantly, a top-down process. Daily class meetings include ethics discussions led by students. A one-semester course in "teen leadership" prepares students to take the lead in implementing an honor code and dealing with problems such as bullying.

Parents also play a key role. After all, they have primary responsibility for the moral development of their kids. While some parents have abdicated this responsibility, most want schools to reinforce and model the moral values taught at home. Many Ridgewood parents now volunteer at the school, and attendance at parent conferences has risen from 44.5% in 2000 to 75% in 2005.

A 'new' school

Today, Crutchley is assistant superintendent of the district and Pelster, now principal, presides over a transformed Ridgewood.

Academic performance is up, disciplinary referrals are down by more than 70%, and the student failure rate has dropped to zero. Attendance has also improved, with the formerly daily home visits for truant students now down to four or five per year.

The rusty fence and graffiti are long gone, replaced by displays of student classwork and high expectations: Ridgewood has been on Missouri's list of Top Ten Most Improved Schools for four of the past five years.

In October, Ridgewood was one of 10 schools and districts in the nation to be recognized as a 2006 National School of Character by the Character Education Partnership.

Ridgewood's turnaround may be unusual, but it is not unique. "Schools of Character," schools that are implementing a comprehensive plan for character education, can be found in school districts across the USA. No study has yet been done on how many schools are providing character education, but the need is clear and the interest is understandably immense.

Ridgewood is a remarkable case study, but the success of character education is well-documented. It works.

Victor Battistich of the University of Missouri-St. Louis, examined all the scientific research of the past 15 years and concluded that "comprehensive, high-quality character education" can prevent a wide range of problems, including

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"aggressive and antisocial behaviors, drug use, precocious sexual activity, criminal activities, academic underachievement and school failure."

Change is coming

So why aren't all schools doing it? In the early history of public education, developing good character was seen as an essential part of preparing people for citizenship in a democratic society. But in the latter part of the 20th century, many public schools moved away from the traditional emphasis on character and citizenship as American society grew more complex and diverse.

Today, character education is making a comeback. Thirty-one states mandate or encourage character education by statute. While pronouncements by legislatures don't necessarily translate into quality character education programs, it's a start.

Much is at stake in getting this right. At this critical moment in America's history, we need far more than higher math and reading scores. We need citizens who have the strength of character to uphold democratic freedom in the face of unprecedented challenges at home and abroad.

"Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom," is the familiar aphorism from Benjamin Franklin. Less well-known, but worth recalling, is the warning in the sentence that follows: "As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters."

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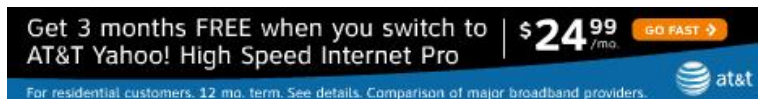
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