

ELEVEN PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION

Effective Character Education:

- ✓ PRINCIPLE 1: Promotes core values.
- ✓ PRINCIPLE 2: Defines “character” to include thinking, feeling, and doing.
- ✓ PRINCIPLE 3: Uses a comprehensive approach.
- ✓ PRINCIPLE 4: Creates a caring community.
- ✓ PRINCIPLE 5: Provides students with opportunities for moral action.
- ✓ PRINCIPLE 6: Offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum.
- ✓ PRINCIPLE 7: Fosters students’ self-motivation.
- ✓ PRINCIPLE 8 Engages staff as a learning community.
- ✓ PRINCIPLE 9: Fosters shared leadership.
- ✓ PRINCIPLE 10: Engages families and community members as partners.
- ✓ PRINCIPLE 11: Assesses the culture and climate of the school.

OVERVIEW

What is character education?

Character education is the intentional effort to develop in young people core ethical and performance values that are widely affirmed across all cultures. To be effective, character education must include all stakeholders in a school community and must permeate school climate and curriculum.

Character education includes a broad range of concepts such as positive school culture, moral education, just communities, caring school communities, social-emotional learning, positive youth development, civic education, and service learning. All of these approaches promote the intellectual, social, emotional, and ethical development of young people and share a commitment to help young people become responsible, caring, and contributing citizens.

Character education so conceived helps students to develop important human qualities such as justice, diligence, compassion, respect, and courage, and to understand why it is important to live by them. Quality character education creates an integrated culture of character that supports and challenges students and adults to strive for excellence.

Why “do” character education?

“Throughout history, and in cultures all over the world, education rightly conceived has had two great goals: to help students become smart and to help them become good.”

— Thomas Lickona & Matthew Davidson, *Smart & Good High Schools*

Character education is not new. It was included as an important objective for the first U.S. public schools. Today, it is even legislatively mandated or encouraged in most states. The current movement is simply a reminder of education’s long history of stressing core values such as respect, integrity, and hard work to help students become capable people and good citizens.

Character education provides effective solutions to ethical and academic issues that are of growing concern. Educators have successfully used character education to transform their schools, improve school culture, increase achievement for all learners, develop global citizens, restore civility, prevent anti-social and unhealthy behaviors, and improve job satisfaction and retention among teachers.

Because students spend so much time at school, our schools offer a critically important opportunity to ensure that all students get the support and help they need to reach their full potential. Schools with high-quality character education are places where students, teachers, and parents want to be. They are places where young people do their best work because they feel safe, appreciated, supported, and challenged by their peers and the adults around them.

Principle 1

The school community promotes core ethical and performance values as the foundation of good character.

Schools that effectively promote good character come to agreement on the core ethical and performance values they most wish to instill in their students. Some schools use other terms such as virtues, traits, pillars, or expectations to refer to the desirable character qualities they wish to foster. Whatever the terminology, the core values promoted by quality character education are ones which affirm human dignity, promote the development and welfare of the individual, serve the common

good, define our rights and responsibilities in a democratic society, and meet the classical tests of universality (i.e., Would you want all persons to act this way in a similar situation?) and reversibility (i.e., Would you want to be treated this way?).

The school makes clear that these basic human values transcend religious and cultural differences and express our common humanity. Examples of core ethical values are caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others. Examples of performance values include diligence, best effort, perseverance, critical thinking, and positive attitude. The school community selects and commits to its core values as the foundation for how people interact and do their best work in the school. A school committed to its students' character development treats its core values as essential to its mission and often refers to them in its code of conduct or "touchstone."

Principle 2

The school defines "character" comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and doing.

Good character involves understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical and performance values. A holistic approach to character development therefore seeks to develop the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dispositions required to do the right thing and do one's best work. Students grow to understand core values by studying and discussing them, observing behavioral models, and resolving problems involving the values. Students learn to care about core values by developing empathy skills, forming caring relationships, developing good work habits, taking on meaningful responsibilities, helping to create community, hearing inspirational stories, and reflecting on life experiences. And they learn to act upon core values by striving to do their best and be their best in all areas of school life. As children grow in character, they develop an increasingly refined understanding of the core ethical and performance values, a deeper commitment to living according to those values, and a stronger capacity and tendency to behave in accordance with them.

Principle 3

The school uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development.

Schools committed to character development look at themselves through a character lens to assess how virtually everything that goes on in school affects the character of students. A comprehensive approach uses all aspects of schooling as opportunities for character development. This includes the formal academic

curriculum and extracurricular activities, as well as what is sometimes called the hidden or informal curriculum (e.g., how school procedures reflect core values, how adults model good character, how the instructional process respects students, how student diversity is addressed, and how the discipline policy encourages student reflection and growth).

“Stand-alone” character education programs can be useful first steps or helpful elements of a comprehensive effort but are not an adequate substitute for a holistic approach that integrates character development into every aspect of school life. With an intentional and proactive approach, school staff do more than react to “teachable moments” to integrate character lessons. They take deliberate steps to create opportunities for character development.

Principle 4

The school creates a caring community.

A school committed to character strives to become a microcosm of a civil, caring, and just society. It does this by creating a community that helps all its members form respectful relationships that lead to caring attachments to and responsibility for one another. This involves developing caring relationships between students and staff, among students (within and across grade levels), among staff, and between staff and families. These caring relationships foster both the desire to learn and the desire to be a good person. All children and adolescents have needs for safety, belonging, and the experience of contributing, and they are more likely to internalize the values and expectations of groups that meet these needs. Likewise, if staff members and parents experience mutual respect, fairness, and cooperation in their relationships with each other, they are more likely to develop the capacity to promote those values in students. In a caring school community, the daily life of classrooms and all other parts of the school environment (e.g., hallways, cafeteria, playground, sports fields, buses, front office, and teachers’ lounge) are imbued with a climate of concern and respect for others.

Principle 5

The school provides students with opportunities for moral action.

In the ethical as in the intellectual domain, students are constructive learners—they learn best by doing. To develop the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of their character, students need many and varied opportunities to grapple with real-life challenges (e.g., how to plan and carry out an important responsibility, work as part of a team, negotiate for peaceable solutions, recognize and resolve ethical dilemmas, and identify and meet school and community needs). Through repeated

experiences and reflection, students develop appreciation for and commitment to acting on their ethical and performance values. When providing service to others, the school follows guidelines for effective service learning to include student voice and choice, integration of service into the curriculum, and reflection. In addition to service learning, moral action can include conflict resolution, bully resistance, academic integrity, and sportsmanship.

Principle 6

The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.

Because students come to school with diverse skills, interests, backgrounds, and learning needs, an academic program that helps all students succeed will be one in which the content and pedagogy engage all learners and meet their individual needs. This means providing a curriculum that is inherently interesting and meaningful to students and teaching in a manner that respects and cares for students as individuals. Effective character educators model persistence, responsibility, and caring as they differentiate instruction, employ a variety of active teaching and learning strategies, and look for ways that character is potentially developed in and through everyday teaching and learning. When teachers bring to the fore the character dimension of their classes, they enhance the relevance of subject matter and content area skills to students' natural interests and questions, and in the process, increase student engagement and achievement. When teachers highlight models of excellence and ethics and promote social-emotional skills, such as self-awareness and self-management, and ethical decision-making, students are able to access the curriculum with greater focus. When teachers promote moral and performance values such as academic integrity, intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and diligence, students are better able to do their best work and gain greater autonomy, competence, and self-confidence.

Principle 7

The school fosters students' self-motivation.

Character means doing the right thing and doing our best work "even when no one is looking." The best underlying ethical reason for following rules, for example, is respect for the rights and needs of others— not fear of punishment nor desire for reward. We want students to be kind to others because of an inner belief that kindness is good and an inner desire to be a kind person.

We want them to do a good job—work that applies and further develops their best abilities—because they take pride in quality work, not just because they want a

good grade. Becoming more self-motivated is a developmental process that schools of character are careful not to undermine by an emphasis on extrinsic incentives. Intensive focus on rewards and behavior modification is consciously limited.

Schools of character work with students to develop their understanding of rules, their awareness of how their behavior affects others, and the character strengths—such as self-control, perspective taking, and conflict resolution skills—needed to act responsibly in the future. Rather than settle for mere compliance, these schools seek to help students benefit from their mistakes by providing meaningful opportunities for reflection, problem solving, and restitution.

Consequences are relevant (logically related to the rule or offense), respectful (not embarrassing or demeaning), reasonable (not harsh or excessive), restorative (restoring or repair the relationship by making restitution), and resource-building (helping students develop the character qualities—such as empathy, social skills, and the motivation to do the right thing—that were not put into practice when the behavior problem occurred). Staff routinely deal with behavior issues in positive ways that encourage reflection according to the core values, offer students opportunities for reparation and moral growth, and respect students as individuals.

Principle 8

The school staff is an ethical learning community that shares responsibility for character education and adheres to the same core values that guide the students.

All school staff—teachers, administrators, counselors, paraprofessionals, resource teachers, school psychologists and social workers, nurses, coaches, secretaries, cafeteria workers, playground and classroom aides, bus drivers—need to be involved in learning about, discussing, and taking ownership of the school's character education effort. First and foremost, staff members assume this responsibility by modeling the core values in their own behavior and taking advantage of opportunities to positively influence the students with whom they interact. Second, the same values and norms that govern the life of students serve to govern the collective life of adult members in the school community. Like students, adults grow in character by working collaboratively, sharing best practices, and participating in decision-making that improves all areas of the school. They also benefit from meaningful staff development and opportunities to observe colleagues and then apply character development strategies in their own work with students. Third, a school devotes time to staff reflection on issues

that affect their collective pursuit of excellence and ethics. Through faculty meetings and smaller support groups, a reflective staff regularly asks questions such as: What character-building experiences is the school already providing for its students? How effective and comprehensive are these? What negative moral behaviors is the school currently failing to address? What school practices are at odds with its professed core values and desire to develop a school of character? Reflection of this nature is an indispensable condition for developing an all-encompassing culture of character.

Principle 9

The school fosters shared leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative.

Schools that are engaged in effective character education have leaders who visibly champion the effort and share leadership with all stakeholders. Many schools and districts establish a character education committee—often composed of staff, students, parents, and community members—that takes responsibility for planning, implementation, and support. Over time, the regular governing bodies of the school or district may take on the functions of this committee—or, as character education goals become well-known and fully shared, formal organizational structures may no longer be necessary. The leadership also takes steps to provide for the long-range support (e.g., adequate staff development, time to plan) of the character education initiative, including, ideally, support at the district and state levels. In addition, within the school, students assume developmentally appropriate roles in leading the character education effort through, for example, class meetings, student government, peer mediation, cross-age tutoring, service clubs, task forces, and student-led initiatives.

Principle 10

The school engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.

Schools that reach out to families and include them in character-building efforts greatly enhance their chances for success with students. They communicate with families—via newsletters, e-mails, family nights, the school website, and parent conferences—about goals and activities regarding character education. To build greater trust between home and school, parents are represented on the character education committee or through whatever decision-making structures exist. These schools also make a special effort to reach out to subgroups of parents who may

not feel part of the school community. Finally, schools and families enhance the effectiveness of their partnership by recruiting the help of the wider community (i.e., businesses, youth organizations, religious institutions, the government, and the media) in promoting character development.

Principle 11

The school regularly assesses its culture and climate, the functioning of its staff as character educators, and the extent to which its students manifest good character.

Effective character education includes ongoing assessment of progress and outcomes using both qualitative and quantitative measures. The school uses a variety of assessment data (e.g., academic test scores, focus groups, survey results) that include the perceptions of students, teachers, and parents. Schools report on this data and use it to determine next steps. Schools administer questionnaires to stakeholders early in their character education initiative and again later to assess progress.

Three outcomes merit attention. First, schools assess the culture and climate of the school in light of the core values by asking stakeholders questions about the extent to which members of the school community demonstrate the core values and thereby function as an ethical learning community. For example, schools might administer climate surveys in which they ask students whether they agree with statements such as, "Students in this school (classroom) respect and care about each other." Second, the school assesses the staff's growth as character educators by examining the extent to which they model the core values and integrate these values into their teaching and other interactions with students. Schools ask teachers to reflect upon their character education practices, survey students about their perceptions of their teachers as role models, and have administrative procedures in place to monitor desired teacher behaviors. Third, the school assesses student character by examining the degree to which students manifest understanding of, commitment to, and action upon the core ethical values. Schools can, for example, gather data on various character-related behaviors (e.g., attendance, suspensions, vandalism, service hours, drug incidents, and cheating). Effective schools collect data on desired outcomes in student attitudes and behaviors and report to parents on students' growth in character just as they report academic progress (e.g., on report cards, during parent/teacher conferences).

ABOUT THE ELEVEN PRINCIPLES

Tom Lickona, Ph.D, Eric Schaps, Ph.D, and Catherine Lewis, Ph.D., wrote the *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* in 1995. It has since become the cornerstone of Character.org’s philosophy on effective character education, well respected in the field, and widely used by practitioners.

To provide an assessment tool based on the 11 principles and a scoring rubric by which to evaluate Schools of Character award applicants, Character.org developed the *Character Education Quality Standards*. Character.org revised the Quality Standards document in 2003 and again in 2006, with Kathy Beland writing the 2006 revision after coordinating feedback from the Schools of Character blue ribbon panel, Schools of Character site visitors, and other experts in character education. In a 2008 reprinting, Character.org added “performance values” language to the document.

In 2009, Character.org decided to combine the Eleven Principles and Quality Standards into a single document and update its language to reflect current movements within education and better reflect the best practices being implemented in model schools as revealed in Schools of Character applications and site visits. Character.org’s President and CEO, Rebecca Sipos and Former Schools of Character Director, Lara Maupin led a staff committee that included Janice Stoodley, Dr. Merle Schwartz, Barbara Luther, and Michael Shreve. The committee worked in consultation with experts in the field of character education and experienced character education practitioners as it wrote the 2010 revision.

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ABOUT CHARACTER.ORG

Character.org, founded in 1993, is a nonprofit organization that strives to ensure every young person is educated, inspired, and empowered to be ethical and engaged citizens through the character transformation of schools.

Leading a national call to character, Character.org works with federal, state, local, and nonprofit leaders to inform discussions and encourage policy related to school culture, whole-child education, school leadership, and character education.

Character.org's Programs

Schools of Character

Character.org Schools of Character program focuses on systemic change in a school. We offer foundational training through Eleven Principles Sourcebook Institutes along with a wide array of skill-based workshops and leadership training. We also have a rigorous application process to be designated a School of Character who serve as models for effective character transformation. Character.org also gives Promising Practices awards for unique and specific strategies.

National Forum on Character Education

Each fall Character.org hosts a national conference that features outstanding speakers, dynamic workshops, and networking opportunities.