

SSID

Briefing Paper Character Education

“We know we need character education to improve the lives of every child in America”
– Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education

The 1998 and 2000 Report Cards on the Ethics of American Youth, conducted by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, provide a grim perspective on the moral values of today’s students. The following statistics portray the dilemma that many American schools are facing:

- ◆ 47% of high school students reported stealing an item from a store within the last 12 months.
- ◆ 70% of high school students reported cheating on an exam within the last 12 months.
- ◆ 92% of high school students reported lying at least once within the last year.
- ◆ 75% high school males and 60% of high school females reported hitting a person within the last year because they were angry.

Governmental Support for Character Education

Until recent years, the focus of education in America had primarily been on the development of academic skills rather than social competencies. In the 1990s, with the dramatic and increasingly common incidents of school violence, a movement toward teaching academics in combination with character emerged.

American society has accepted this resurgence of character education with open arms. The cause has received bipartisan support, starting with President Clinton and continuing with President Bush. At a recent educational conference, Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education, stated, “It’s time for schools to get back into the business of teaching children that character, honesty, and integrity are important...We need to give our children healthier minds, healthier bodies, and healthier spirits.”

Since 1996, the U.S. Department of Education has awarded more than \$25 million dollars to states in an effort to assist in the development of character education programs (Wilber, 2000). The importance of character education is further evidenced in President Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” educational program, which includes increased funds to provide grants to states and school districts to train teachers on ways to include character-building activities in the classroom.

SSID Briefing Paper: Character Education

Character education is also being supported at both state and local levels. Sixteen states have created legislation requiring character education (Otten, 2000). Many local districts, such as those in Georgia that have been mandated to include programs but have not been given additional funding (Delisio, 2000), have raised the needed funds to implement character education programs when other sources were not available.

Character Education Defined

Character education has recently gained renewed popularity in American schools, both public and private, but how many educators, parents, and students actually understand what it is? The term has been used to describe a vast number of programs, either developed commercially or at the district/school level, to address moral and character development, as well as civic-mindedness. “Character Education” as a term has been used interchangeably for moral education, conflict resolution, life skills education, and health education.

There are as many definitions for character education as there are programs and initiatives created to address character development. One commonly accepted definition of character education is “*an integrated, intentional effort to help students understand, develop, and use commonly accepted ethical values*” (Wilber, 2000). The University of Illinois Extension in Urban Illinois expanded this definition by adding that the development of the skills gained through character education will assist the student in making informed and responsible life choices.

Although character education programs teach a set of commonly accepted set of morals and values, such as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, and caring, the emphasis of the curriculum is on the student’s observable behaviors rather than the internal values that shape one’s behaviors (Huitt, 1998 and Thomas). This is logical given the reality that morals and values cannot be observed or measured, but behaviors can. Districts and schools that have implemented character education programs have reported many observable differences in areas such as academic achievement, school attendance, student dropout rates, behavior, peer interaction, school culture, and parental involvement (Wilber, 2000; Otten, 2000).

Elements of Character Education Programs

Many organizations (both profit and nonprofit), state departments of education, and local school districts have created character education programs. The curriculum differs depending on the target ages and the specific focus of the program. Even though these differences do exist, there are some fundamental elements that must exist for a character education program to be successful.

A successful character education program requires:

- ◆ *Community participation* that requires teachers, administrators, staff, students, and parents to be invested in the process
- ◆ *An integrated curriculum* across all subject areas and grades

SSID Briefing Paper: Character Education

- ◆ *Character traits* that can be identified and clearly defined by all individuals
- ◆ A *strong experiential, service learning component* that allows community-based, real-world learning experiences
- ◆ *Outcome assessment* that measures the effectiveness of the character education program

Examples of Character Education Programs

Active Citizenship: Empowering America's Youth—A curriculum for students in grades 7-12 focused on teaching the rights, responsibilities, and civic values of U.S. citizenship. This includes a service-learning group project in which students research and develop a solution for a real problem in their community. www.activecitizenship.org

Best Friends—A character-building curriculum for girls in grades 5-12 with messages of abstinence from sex, drugs, and alcohol. This program is based on Bandura's social learning theory and includes six goals that span across the curriculum. www.bestfriendsfoundation.org

CHARACTER COUNTS!—This is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian coalition of schools, communities, and nonprofit organizations working to advance character education by teaching the Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. www.charactercounts.org

The Giraffe Project—A story-based K-12 curriculum that teaches courageous compassion and active citizenship, with a strong service-learning component. Research on the program has indicated increases in self-esteem, caring, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. www.giraffe.org

Youth Frontiers, Inc.—This is a non-profit organization that teaches elementary, middle, and high school students how to incorporate the values of kindness, courage, integrity, and respect into their personal and school lives. Includes faculty team-building days that allow teachers, administrators, and staff to experience a day of support and rejuvenation and interactive, evening workshops that help parents become more involved and communicate with their children more effectively. www.youthfrontiers.org

SSID Briefing Paper: Character Education

References

CHARACTERplus. (n.d./2001). 10 Essential Elementals of the CHARACTERplus Process. [WWW document] URL <http://www.info.csd.org/staffdev/chared/Process/process.html>

Delisio, E.R. (2000). Character education gets a boost. *Education World*. [WWW document]. URL http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr282.shtml

Huitt, W. (1998). Moral and character development. [WWW document] URL <http://www.valdosta.edu/~whuitt/psy702/morchr/morchr.html>

Josephson Institute of Ethics (2000) The Ethics of American Youth. [WWW document] URL <http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/Survey2000/violence2000-commentary.htm>

Josephson Institute of Ethics (1998) 1998 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth. [WWW document] URL <http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/98-Survey/98survey.htm>

Otten, E.H. (2000). Character Education. (ERIC Reproduction Services ED 444 932)

Thomas, R.T. (n.d./2001). Assessing Character Education: Paradigms, problems, and potentials. [WWW document] URL <http://www.quest.edu/warticles2.htm>

Urban Programs Resource Network (n.d./2001). Character Education: Creating a framework for excellence. [WWW document] URL <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/programs/character.html>

Wilber, D.M. (2000, September). Character Education: Finding ways to foster ethical behavior in youth. *Changing Schools*. [WWW document] URL <http://www.mcrel.org/products/change-schools/sept2000.html>

For Additional Reading on Character Education

Hsieh, M.F. . (2000). Character Education. [WWW Document] URL http://www.Indiana.edu/~eric_rec/ieo/bibs/character.htm
This source provides an extensive list of ERIC document related to character education.

California Department of Education. (n.d./2001). Character Education Program Evaluations. [WWW Document] URL <http://www.cde.ca.gov/character/curriculum.html>
This source rates character education programs implemented in California. It also includes the evaluation criteria used.

Institute of Character Development (n.d./2001). Links. [WWW Document] URL <http://www.drake.edu/icd/links.html>

SSID Briefing Paper: Character Education

This source provided links to 37 sites related to character education and character education programs.

U. S. Department of Education. (1998). 1998 Character Education Projects. [WWW Document] URL <http://www.doe.gov/offices/OERI/ORAD/character98.html>
This site lists 10 state department of education character education projects

Center for the 4th and 5th Rs. www.cortland.edu/www/c4n5rs
This source provides principles for effective character education, the history of character education, and additional useful information.

Character Education Partnership. www.character.org/principles/index.cgi
This source details principals for effective character education.

North Carolina Character Education Partnership. Lessons learned in the development and implementation of character education programs. [WWW document] URL www.dpi.state.nc.us/ncepe/evaluation/lessonslearned.html
This source details the lessons learned as North Carolina implemented character education programs.

National Institute for Character Education <http://www.ethics.org/character/index.html>
This site provides reasons for character education, an encyclopedia of information, as well as relates products and articles.