Policy Briefs

The Content of Our Character Education: It's a Process
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Intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character,
that is the goal of true education - Martin Luther King, Jr.

Public education has been asked to play a number of roles in American society. From early architects of public education who wanted to produce good factory workers, through civil rights groups who saw public education as a way to create an integrated society, to those who saw education as a way to beat the Russians into outer space, Americans have asked the public schools to address a number of hot button issues in society. Sex, guns, race, evolution, drugs—whatever the perceived problem, there will be a suggestion, and often legislation, that the schools fix it by adding content to or subtracting it from what children are taught in school. At various times throughout its history, public education in America has been asked to address the promotion of moral character, commonly referred to as character education. While national progress on aspects of academic excellence (the achievement gap, end-of-grade testing, standardized college placement exams, and so on) is a main feature of today's education agenda, character education is never far from commensurate policy attention.

The presence of character education in the educational spotlight appears to be susceptible to social and political trends. For example, a 1998 poll of one thousand likely voters showed that Americans wanted Congress to restore moral values and improve education more than any other issue.[1] Recent events such as the apparently widespread business fraud involved in the collapse of corporate giants may give character education another run on the educational priority stage, like it had a few years ago after the Columbine school shootings and other well publicized incidents of school violence.

Because the notion of character is value-laden, it can be difficult to craft a shared definition. Secretary of Education Roderick Paige, however, set forth the current administration's view when noted in his October 16, 2001 Satellite Town Meeting, "Character Education: Teaching Respect, Responsibility, and Citizenship," that the ultimate goal of character education is to foster children's ability "to know the good, want the good, and do the good." During the February 2002 Education Leadership Summit at Duke University, Paige and former Secretaries of Education William J. Bennett, Lauro F. Cavazos, Lamar Alexander, and Richard W. Riley debated the role of and best methods for teaching character education in American schools as part of what is inevitably a never-ending national dialog.

What Is "The Good" and How Can It Be Taught?
Four Approaches

Teaching children respect for other people, respect for themselves, notions like perseverance, discipline, hard work, fortitude—these are things we can teach all our children, and should. . . . [However,] I am not, in fact, in favor of special programs in moral education. I am in favor of math, English, history, science, art, and music. I think you can learn a lot about virtues and morality from the proper teaching of these disciplines.
Secretary William J. Bennett

Permeating Core Values
Most attempts at character education can be grouped into four categories. The first, represented by Secretary Bennett's and Dr. King's quotes, is to see character education as being part and parcel of a good education. By reading "great books," actively discussing ideas, and being exposed to proper teaching in math, English, history, science, art, and music, one learns about virtue and morality, which builds character. For Secretary Bennett, "the good" consists of those core ethical values that shape the moral development of individuals, and hopefully

help create a moral society. They are often conceived of as the antidote to violence, apathy, promiscuity, drug use, and civic disengagement. As Secretary Bennett's words imply, the core values must be an integral part of everything schools teach rather than be taught as an independent subject. In 1993 Secretary Bennett edited The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories, which was intended as a guide for teachers and administrators to incorporate character education throughout the academic curriculum. He noted that the idea that effective character education must be a process that undergirds the instruction of academic content areas and permeates the whole school context is easily overlooked. Critics of this approach often question if there is really a consensus about "the good" that should be taught. For instance, while tolerance may be a virtue, of what should people be tolerant, and which of the "great books" should be our guides?

Direct Instruction

The second approach, direct instruction, involves using special curricula that explicitly teach children about character. The article "What's Right and Wrong in Character Education Today? Why Three Advocates Are Worried about the Character Education Movement"[2] raises concern about four common approaches to this kind of character education: "praise and reward," "cheerleading," "define and drill," and "forced formality."

"Praise and reward" refers to cognitive-behavioral strategies that reward youth when they follow rules, which may not foster intrinsic motivation to do good. "Cheerleading" references messages about character that are displayed throughout the school in public spaces and reiterated in morning announcements. The authors question whether this approach results in the doing of good. "Define-and-drill" describes reductionist strategies that encourage children to memorize values without understanding their complexity and real-world application. "Forced formality" includes compliance to formal rules of conduct and is geared more toward maintaining order than instilling values.

A number of programs sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education have encouraged schools to use this direct approach to character education. The department provides seed money to state agencies and local districts through its Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Projects. Since 1995, thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia have received a combined total of approximately $27.5 million through the grants. Moreover, for the 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 school years the department's Blue Ribbon Schools Program, which recognizes model schools across the country that exhibit best practices in a particular area, focused on character education. Other recent federal attention to character education include the June 19, 2002, "White House Conference on Character and Community," the previously mentioned October 16, 2001, U.S. Department of Education's Town Hall satellite meeting, as well as the October issue of Community Update, which is published by the Department of Education.

There have been several evaluations of the direct approaches to character education that show positive impacts. In a landmark study, the University of South Dakota surveyed over seven thousand middle and high school students and compared the outcomes of those who participated in a national character education program, Character Counts, to those who did not. Program participants were significantly less likely to abuse alcohol and other substances, vandalize property, and participate in racial/ethnic teasing.[3] Similarly, a 2000 evaluation of South Carolina's four-year character education initiative, supported by the Department of Education's "Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Projects," reports improvements at multiple levels, namely, student attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance improved. Moreover, there were improvements in teachers' and administrators' attitudes and in the implementation of the program. Most research on direct instruction finds that this approach is most likely to produce long-term changes in student behavior when it is combined with adult modeling of proper behavior, changes in school climate, community collaborations, and opportunities that allow for personal implementation and reflection. Programs that just teach and do not involve modeling, active learning, and changes to school climate have little long-term impact on behavior.

Character Development

The third approach is best described as character development. These programs usually involve working with students, teachers, and parents and involve social-skill development, parent training, and classroom management techniques. While these programs do not focus directly on character, they help students develop social skills. When they succeed, they seem to improve character. For instance, although it never mentioned sex, the Seattle Social Development Project that focused on social skill development in elementary school was shown to produce dramatic reductions in STDs and teen pregnancy. Social skills/character development programs such as PATHS, Second Step, the Seattle Social Development Project, and a number of whole-school reform strategies have resulted in significant improvement in student character as measured by reductions in antisocial and problem behaviors and increases in prosocial behavior, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal skill development. These programs have been shown through longitudinal research to produce long-term improvements in student behavior in and outside of school.

Active Engagement

The fourth approach tries to improve character through student engagement in constructive activities outside of the traditional classroom context. The No Child Left Behind Education Act addresses this kind of character education through its initiation of 21st Century Community Learning Centers. These aim to foster school, community, and family collaborations that promote out-of-school learning, academic advancement, and character development, particularly among at-risk youth. Funds may support collaborations with for-profit companies, nonprofit agencies, postsecondary institutions, and other community-based organizations to provide afterschool programming in such areas as tutoring, arts education, music lessons, recreation opportunities, and technology education. Congress has appropriated $1 billion dollars to this endeavor, and over eight thousand geographically diverse public schools and communities currently participate. Another approach to building character is through service learning, which engages students in a number of community volunteer activities that are connected to their academic curriculum.

Still another direct engagement approach is to encourage youth involvement in decision-making processes concerning discipline and prosocial programs, particularly at the middle and high school levels. The rewards of including their perspectives are many. First, the resulting policy is more likely to coincide with youths' reality, which increases the salience and effectiveness of a strategy and decreases barriers to implementation. Second, this process provides another opportunity to shape moral behavior and promote children's social competence and strengths. Third, by being engaged in this process, they are transformed from passive recipients to active participants.[4] Stakeholder youth should be as diverse in needs as those in the student population. In other words, participation should not be limited to the high-achieving students but should include students who frequently need disciplinary action and may be the most marginalized.

Current Challenges to Character Education

A frequent challenge to character education is the citation of the "separation of church and state" notion.[5] This issue was addressed during the Education Leadership Summit in a discussion about Supreme Court and other rulings. According to the secretaries, there is a distinction between promoting a particular religion and teaching about its philosophical tenets, with the former being illegal. During his tenure, Secretary Richard Riley and his staff published a report detailing the Supreme Court's position on what is and is not admissible in public schools with regard to religion. The publication was sent to all of America's principals. Nevertheless, it appears that although work has been done to delineate the do's and don'ts of addressing religion in school, Secretary Bennett noted that the federal courts could be "more coherent and consistent" on this issue.

The direct approach to character education is often viewed as a reactive preventive strategy to address youth problem behaviors rather than a proactive promotion strategy that equips children with positive alternatives, and

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it is often aimed at at-risk children. Columbine, Enron, and WorldCom, however, are reflections of a breakdown in moral character in environments that were not traditionally viewed as at-risk. Character education policy should continue to be as explicit about the goal of an increase in positive outcomes (increased involvement in student government, increased enrollment in extracurricular activities, and increased participation in service opportunities, among others) as it is about the decrease in negative outcomes if it is going to be effective.[6] Making the implementation and support of such programs a policy priority remains a challenge.

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1. Character Education Partnership, "Frequently Asked Questions and Answers," Washington, DC, 2002.
2. E. Schaps, E. F. Schaeffer, and S. N. McDonnell, "What's Right and Wrong in Character Education Today: Why Three Advocates Are Worried about the Character Education Movement," Education Week, September 12, 2001.
3. U.S. Department of Education, Community Update, no. 92, October 2001.
4. K. Pittman, M. Diversi, and T. Ferber, "Social policy Supports for Adolescence in the Twenty-First Century: Framing Questions," in R. Larson, B.B. Brown, and J. Mortimer, eds., Adolescents Preparation for the Future, Perils and Promise: A Report of the Study Group on Adolescence in the 21st Century (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 2002), 149-58.
5. Education Commission of the States, "Issue Paper: Service-Learning and Character Education: One Plus One Is More Than Two," Denver, Colo., April 1, 2001.
6. Pittman, Diversi, and Ferber.

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