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Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education™

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There is no single script for effective character education, but there are some important basic principles. The following eleven principles serve as criteria that schools and other groups can use to plan a character education effort and to evaluate available character education programs, books, and curriculum resources.

1. Character education promotes core ethical values as the basis of good character.

Character education holds, as a starting philosophical principle, that there are widely shared, pivotally important core ethical values — such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others — that form the basis of good character. A school committed to character education explicitly names and publicly stands for these values; promulgates them to all members of the school community; defines them in terms of behaviors that can be observed in the life of the school; models these values; studies and discusses them; uses them as the basis of human relations in the school; celebrates their manifestations in the school and community; and upholds them by making all school members accountable to standards of conduct consistent with the core values.

In a school committed to developing character, these core values are treated as a matter of obligation, as having a claim on the conscience of the individual and community. Character education asserts that the validity of these values, and our obligation to uphold them, derive from the fact that such values affirm our human dignity; they promote the development and welfare of the individual person; they serve the common good; they meet the classical tests of reversibility (Would you want to be treated this way?) and universality (Would you want all persons to act this way in a similar situation?); and they define our rights and responsibilities in a democratic society. The school makes clear that these basic human values transcend religious and cultural differences and express our common humanity.

2. “Character” must be comprehensively defined to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.

In an effective character education program, character is broadly conceived to encompass the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of the moral life. *Good character consists of understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values.* The task of character education therefore is to help students and all other members of the learning community know “the good,” value it, and act upon it. As people grow in their character, they will develop an increasingly refined understanding of the core values, a deeper commitment to living according to those values, and a stronger tendency to behave in accordance with those values.

3. Effective character education requires an intentional, proactive, and comprehensive approach that promotes the core values in all phases of school life.

Schools committed to character education look at themselves through a moral lens and see how virtually everything that goes on in school affects the values and character of students. An *intentional* and *proactive* approach plans deliberate ways to develop character, rather than simply waiting for opportunities to occur. A *comprehensive* approach uses all aspects of schooling — the teachers example, the discipline policy, the academic curriculum (including the drug, alcohol, and sex education curriculum), the instructional process, the assessment of learning, the management of the school environment, relationships with parents, sports and physical education programs and so on — as opportunities for character development. “Stand alone” character education programs can be useful first steps or helpful elements of an ongoing effort but must not be considered a substitute for a holistic approach that integrates character development into every aspect of school life.

4. The school must be a caring community.

The school itself must embody good character. It must progress toward becoming a microcosm of the civil, caring, and just society we seek to create as a nation. The school can do this by becoming a moral community that helps students form caring attachments to adults and to each other. These caring relationships will foster both the desire to learn and the desire to be a good person. All children and adolescents have a need to belong, and they are more likely to internalize the values and expectations of groups that meet this need. The daily life of classrooms, as well as all other parts of the school environment (e.g., the corridors, cafeteria, playground, and school bus), must be imbued with core values such as concern and respect for others, responsibility, kindness, and fairness.

5. To develop character, students need opportunities for moral action.

In the ethical as in the intellectual domain, students are constructive learners; they learn best by doing. To develop good character, they need many and varied opportunities to apply values such as responsibility and fairness in everyday interactions and discussions. By grappling with real-life challenges — how to divide the labor in a cooperative learning group, how to reach consensus in a class meeting, how to carry out a service learning project, how to reduce fights on the playground — students develop practical understanding of the requirements of fairness, cooperation, and respect. Through repeated moral experiences, students can also develop and practice the moral skills and behavioral habits that make up the action side of character.

6. Effective character education includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners and helps them succeed.

Character education and academic learning must not be conceived as separate spheres; rather there must be a strong, mutually supportive relationship. In a caring classroom and school where students feel liked and respected by their teachers and fellow students, students are more likely to work hard and achieve. Reciprocally, when students are enabled to succeed at the work of school, they are more likely to feel valued and cared about as persons.

Because students come to school with diverse skills, interests and needs, a curriculum that helps all students succeed will be one whose content and pedagogy are sophisticated enough to engage all learners. That means moving beyond a skill-and-drill, paper-and-pencil curriculum to one that is inherently interesting and meaningful for students. A character education school makes effective use of active teaching and learning methods such as cooperative learning, problem-solving approaches, experience-based projects, and the like. One of the most authentic ways to respect children is to respect the way they learn.

7. Character education should strive to develop students' intrinsic motivation.

As students develop good character, they develop a stronger inner commitment to doing what their moral judgment tells them is right. Schools, especially in their approach to discipline, should strive to develop this intrinsic commitment to core values. They should minimize reliance on extrinsic rewards and punishments that distract students' attention from the real reasons to behave responsibly: the rights and needs of self and others. Responses to rule-breaking should give students opportunities for restitution and foster the students' understanding of the rules and willingness to abide by them in the future.

Similarly, within the academic curriculum, intrinsic motivation should be fostered in every way possible. This can be done by helping students experience the challenge and interest of subject matter, the desire to work collaboratively with other students, and the fulfillment of making a positive difference in another person's life or in their school or community.

8. The school staff must become a learning and moral community in which all share responsibility for character education and attempt to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students.

Three things need attention here. First, all school staff — teachers, administrators, counselors, coaches, secretaries, cafeteria workers, playground aides, bus drivers — must be involved in learning about, discussing, and taking ownership of the character education effort. All of these adults must model the core values in their own behavior and take advantage of the other opportunities they have to influence the character of the students with whom they come into contact.

Second, the same values and norms that govern the life of students must govern the collective life of the adult members of the school community. If students are to be treated as constructive learners, so must adults. They must have extended staff development and many opportunities to observe and then try out ways of integrating character education practices into their work with students. If students are given opportunities to work collaboratively and participate in decision-making that improves classrooms and school, so must adults. If a school's staff members do not experience mutual respect, fairness, and cooperation in their adult relationships, they are less likely to be committed to teaching those values to students.

Third, the school must find and protect time for staff reflection on moral matters. School staff, through faculty meetings and smaller support groups, should be regularly asking: What positive, character-building experiences is the school already *providing* for its students? What negative moral experiences (e.g., peer cruelty, student cheating, adult disrespect of students, littering of the grounds) is the school currently *failing to address*? And what important moral experiences (e.g., cooperative learning, school and community service, opportunities to learn about and interact with people from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds) is the school now omitting? What school practices are at odds with its professed core values and desire to develop a caring school community? *Reflection of this nature is an indispensable condition for developing the moral life of a school.*

9. Character education requires moral leadership from both staff and students.

For character education to meet the criteria outlined thus far, there must be leaders (a principal, another administrator, a lead teacher) who champion the effort and, at least initially, a character education committee (or several such support groups, each focused on a particular aspect of the character effort) with responsibility for long-range planning and program implementation. Over time, the functions of this committee may be taken on by the school's regular governing bodies. Students should also be brought into roles of moral leadership through student government, peer conflict mediation programs, cross-age tutoring, and the like.

10. The school must recruit parents and community members as full partners in the character-building effort.

A school's character education mission statement should state explicitly what is true: Parents are the first and most important moral educators of their children. Next, the school should take pains at every stage to communicate with parents about the school's goals and activities regarding character development — and how families can help. To build trust between home and school, parents should be represented on the character leadership committee that does the planning, the school should actively reach out to “disconnected” subgroups of parents, and all parents need to be informed about — and have a chance to react and consent to — the school's proposed core values and how the school proposes to try to teach them. Finally, schools and families will enhance the effectiveness of their partnership if they recruit the help of the wider community — businesses, religious institutions, youth organizations, the government, and the media — in promoting the core ethical values.

11. Evaluation of character education should assess the character of the school, the school staff's functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students manifest good character.

Effective character education must include an effort to assess progress. Three broad kinds of outcomes merit attention:

- (a) The character of the school: To what extent is the school becoming a more caring community? This can be assessed, for example, with surveys that ask students to indicate the extent to which they agree with statements such as, “Students in this school [classroom] respect and care about each other,” and “This school [classroom] is like a family.”
- (b) The school staff's growth as character educators: To what extent have adult staff — teaching faculty, administrators, and support personnel — developed understandings of what they can do to foster character development? Personal commitment to doing so? Skills to carry it out? Consistent habits of acting upon their developing capacities as character educators?
- (c) Student character: To what extent do students manifest understanding of, commitment to, and action upon the core ethical values? Schools can, for example, gather data on various character-related behaviors: Has student attendance gone up? Fights and suspensions gone down? Vandalism declined? Drug incidents diminished?

Schools can also assess the three domains of character (knowing, feeling, and behaving) through anonymous questionnaires that measure student moral judgment (for example, “Is cheating on a test wrong?”), moral commitment (“Would you cheat if you were sure you wouldn't get caught?”) and self-reported moral behavior (“How many times have you cheated on a test or major assignment in the past year?”). Such questionnaires can be administered at the beginning of a school's character initiative to get a baseline and again at later points to assess progress.

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