

in DEPTH

Whenever I meet with teams of New Jersey teachers and administrators, I hear the same refrain, irrespective of the grades or subjects they teach or whether they work in an urban, suburban, or rural New Jersey community – **We want our students to get along; to be respectful, caring, and trustworthy.** This is an acknowledgement that character education is an essential element of a successful school. One of my colleagues, as part of her doctoral dissertation, reported that almost 90% of the New Jersey middle school principals in her sample rated social and emotional learning (SEL) as a *very high* or *moderate* priority for themselves and 95.5% of them *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that SEL is an important area of professional development for their teachers. (Ross, 2000)

We need to take this recognition one important step further. Social and emotional skills must be taught in our schools with the same effort and attention as traditional subjects; they cannot simply be fostered intuitively. (Elias, Bruene-Butler, Blum, & Schulyer, 1997; Goleman, 1995)

Character education cannot be achieved through an individual program or an isolated workshop. Only pervasive efforts, designed to institutionalize respectful relational norms between students, faculty, and administration, can make the difference we know we need to make.

Given this assertion, it is worth revisiting why so much attention is being paid to character education. Every day and in increasing proportions, students' social and emotional well-being is threatened in both old and new ways. Whether students

Educating for Character:

A Timely Focus

by Sharon Rose Powell, Ed.D.

*The foundation of education
is to teach one to think intensively
and to think critically. . .
intelligence plus character —
that is the goal of true education.*

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

fear that a terrorist attack is imminent or worry about their parents getting a divorce, children are suffering from depression in record numbers. (Dryfoos, 1994) The media reports regularly on the latest school shootings; and schools, once viewed as safe havens for children, are being thrust in the limelight as breeding grounds for violence.

An old problem in schools – bullying – is also getting a great deal of current attention from school officials. According to the National Education Association (1993), as many as 160,000 students miss one or more school days each month due to fear of bullying. Not surprisingly, a recent nationwide study of the prevalence of bullying in America's schools reported that 29.9% of the students sampled had moderate or frequent involvement with bullying, either as a bully (13%), being bullied (10.6%), or participating in both roles (6.3%). (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001)

New Jersey is in the forefront as a state that supports and values character education initiatives that not only address concerns about school bullying but also substance abuse, prejudice reduction, school vandalism, cheating, and sexual health problems like HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy, date rape and sexual harassment. Most recently, the New Jersey Center for Character Education (NJCCE), was created at Rutgers University to promote character education statewide. A new not-for-profit group, the New Jersey Partnership for Ethics and Character Education, also has been established. The list goes on and on.

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New Jersey cares about developing the character of our young people. For that very reason, we need to choose the most effective strategies we can and commit to implementing them in the most effective ways.

Caring about character education usually leads to action. The range of character education initiatives in New Jersey schools is as diverse as its 616 school districts. Many schools and districts have implemented exemplary, research-based programs that teach social problem-solving skills and address a myriad of health-related concerns. A few districts have even embraced a system-wide approach to developing the character of their students, including making the professional development of staff in the area of character education a priority.

Character education initiatives run the gamut from day-long events with speakers, performances, and student workshops to year-long courses for credit. Programs target themes like bullying, substance abuse issues, and violence prevention. Character education in some schools is a set of hall posters encouraging students to adopt healthy behaviors; while in others, motivational speakers urge students to avoid drugs and other risky behaviors. Then there are districts that use faculty inservice days to create a set of core values that the school wants to promote, and faculty in these schools explore ways to integrate character education principles into the academic curriculum.

A significant number of New Jersey's middle and high schools are including, as part of their character education initiatives, peer-led programs that identify and teach older students how to run activities and

discussions with their younger peers. These programs are year-long, comprehensive and usually focus on universal themes like peer and family relationships, stress and time management, prejudice reduction, community building, and healthy decision-making practices. Schools often combine peer leadership with community service opportunities or build service learning projects into the curriculum. These programs give students a chance to be responsible, positive role models and reinforce the values that the school wants to promote.

No matter what path a school takes, there is a dilemma. School administrators need to know whether their investment in character education makes sense. What are the criteria to assess whether a program is designed to make a difference or designed to fail?

Building a Strong Foundation for Character: 3 Critical Building Blocks

What most often happens in schools is that we add on programs, atop an already packed agenda, to address new concerns or issues like character development. Let's see if we can squeeze in a character education program between math and lunch; or better yet, let's ask teachers and students to develop their character during lunch. Without being too facetious, there just doesn't seem to be time during the school day to fit in one of the most essential elements of a successful school – the development of our students' character.

In my experience working in schools for over 30 years, there are three critical building blocks – a checklist of sorts – which can help create not only a strong foundation for character development, but also a healthier working environment for the teachers and administrators who serve as important role models for our students. (See Figure 1)

Building Block #1: Relationships First

Schools that place relationships first are promoting character development at the most critical level. Placing relationships first means making sure that teachers know each other well and that faculty meetings are used to encourage small group dialogue,

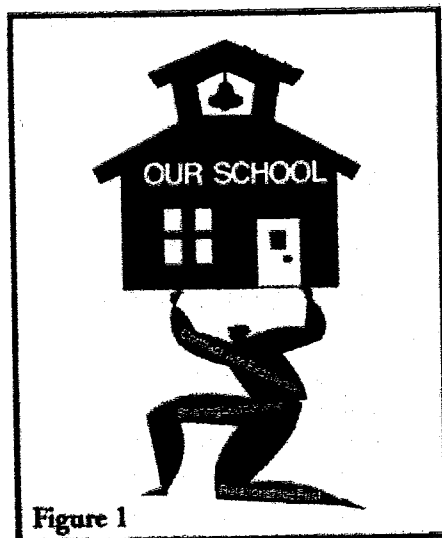


Figure 1

problem-solving, and team planning. (Powell & Ross, 2003) It means taking time for team-building and cooperative learning lessons with students on a regular basis; knowing every child's name in our schools; and never, ever belittling our students. It means talking regularly with parents and making sure that all parents feel welcomed and respected. It means that support staff feel valued and are included in discussions about the school's future direction. When relationships come first, we take the time on a regular basis to assess school norms and healthy practices. (See Figure 2) Developing trust and mutual respect among staff, students, and parents is a priority.

How Are We Doing? An Assessment of our School's Norms and Healthy Practices

Directions:

Consider the following internal norms and healthy practices.

Identify three areas of strength and three that need work.

- The way we communicate.
- The way people treat each other.
- The way we begin and end each day.
- The way conflicts or problems are handled.
- The way decisions are made.
- The way we recognize and appreciate diversity.
- The way parents and community members are made to feel welcomed.

Figure 2

Building Block #2: Sharing Leadership

Another important building block in building a foundation for character education involves sharing leadership, not only with administrators and

teachers, but also students, parents, support staff and members of the broader community. Sharing leadership for how our schools are run and what core values we live by requires time for training, meetings and on-going planning, and regularly scheduled assessments to examine the extent to which we are successful. If school officials encouraged all members of their learning community to have a voice in defining what character education is and to share responsibility for implementing research-proven strategies, then the core values of respect, trust, cooperation, and loyalty would be actively played out on a daily basis by adults and students alike.

Adults who engage in shared leadership express their daily commitment to being positive role models for young people. Shared leadership is characterized by healthy practices or skills that can simultaneously be taught to young people, including the following: (1) the art of active listening, (2) straight talk, and (3) time out.

An *active listener* focuses on what the speaker is saying and feeling and avoids the traps of making judgments, interrupting, and inserting your own opinions or stories into the dialogue. *Straight talk* is a commitment not to talk behind another person's back and to let that person know, what you appreciate and what gets in the way for you. *Time out* is a practice that anyone in a group can request when the group, or two individuals, are getting stuck. During the time out, members reflect on their contributions to the problem and what they can do differently so that the group, or individuals, can move forward productively.

Building Block #3: Contract with Excellence

A final building block is a contract with excellence – simply put, a school-

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wide agreement to have high expectations for academic conduct and standards alike. A contract with excellence stretches us to be the best that we can be. Our values and goals are evident in the way we treat each other; the care with which we share concerns and strive to excel both in the classroom and throughout the school community; and the ways in which we recognize and appreciate outstanding academic achievement, good character, and teamwork. Contrast this description with what we often see in schools, which is what I would call "a contract with mediocrity." Instead of striving for excellence and giving our best, we seem to be rushing toward the finish line (e.g. the next statewide test, SATs, graduation) – just getting by is the norm, and the results often leave educators and students frustrated and unfulfilled.

Schools that have a contract with excellence make sure that **all** students excel in some area of their work and that they receive daily recognition for their efforts. This applies to the adults who work in schools, as well. Excellence thrives in a system of accountability; we depend on each

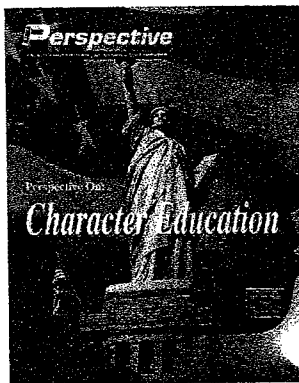
other to do our best, just like any team that expects to achieve high goals.

In summary, character education is more than just a program or even a string of initiatives. Character education permeates everything we do in our schools from the way we greet each other in the morning to the way decisions are made. If students and the adults who work with them aren't working cooperatively and treating each other with mutual respect, then those in charge of our schools are failing to create a climate conducive to learning. Character education is a timely focus, but it's about time we put our actions where I know our minds and hearts are.

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