

The Centrality of Character Education for Creating and Sustaining a Just World

Marvin W. Berkowitz

When Tim Crutchley and Kristen Pelster were hired as the new principal and assistant principal (respectively) at Ridgewood Middle School in Arnold, Missouri, the school was in a shambles. Serving a mostly poor rural and suburban population, the building was covered in graffiti, the grounds were rotting and rusting, student behavior was unacceptable (it was the only school in the district with a police presence), and academic achievement was abysmal (only one in four students met state standards for communication arts, and less than 7 percent met standards for math). The students knew that the school did not care about them and behaved accordingly.¹

This school failure was the product of years of neglect and an unofficial district policy to allow failing teachers in other district schools to be transferred to Ridgewood, resulting in two-thirds of the staff being educators who should not have been teaching. The new superintendent, Diana Bourisaw, quickly diagnosed this problem, hired the administrative team of Crutchley and Pelster, and charged them with the task of essentially “cleaning up Dodge City.” Fortunately, both administrators had graduated from the Leadership Academy in Character Education (LACE) in St. Louis and understood that the school climate—the quality and character of school life—was the first hurdle that needed to be tackled, which meant starting with authentically caring about students.²

This met with great resistance from the existing staff, but Crutchley and Pelster persevered. They helped clean up the physical plant. They modeled student-centered teaching methods and behavior management for the instructors. They drove to truant students’ homes and dragged them out of

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bed and to school. They personally staffed an hour-and-a-half daily study hall for students who did not hand in homework assignments, because they understood that students cannot learn if they do not do the work, and because they believed that students at this age should not be able to opt out of learning. They had open, frank discussions with staff, and they encouraged burned-out and incompetent staff to leave. And they created structures for students to own, run, and co-create the school. They created a leadership class that ran new student orientation and special events, and they delivered character lessons in advisories. They allowed teachers to create new classes and structures for students who were not succeeding within traditional structures.³

After three years of remarkable wisdom and dedication (and a commitment of hours way beyond what could reasonably be asked of them), Crutchley and Pelster replaced two-thirds of the staff with educators who shared their vision of a great school, allowed the staff and students to have profound control of the school, built a school that truly centered on kids and what was in their best interest, drastically reduced misbehavior by students, and achieved impressive success in academics. As a result, that small minority of students who were meeting state standards ballooned to about 70 percent in both communication arts and mathematics.

In 2006, Ridgewood Middle School was recognized as a “National School of Character” by Character.org, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that provides leadership and advocacy for character in schools and communities worldwide. To earn this distinction, Ridgewood was evaluated for how well it implemented each of Character.org’s *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education*, which include “providing students with opportunities for moral action,” “fostering students’ self-motivation,” and “engaging families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.”⁴

Why Character Education?

What Ridgewood Middle School accomplished is not atypical, except for the speed with which they did it. Good character education is good education. When done comprehensively and well, it leads to a caring and fair school climate, prosocial and responsible student behavior, increased academic achievement, and development of character in youth. Society’s future depends upon the character of its youth and how that will manifest when they become adult citizens. Intelligent, comprehensive, effective character education will contribute greatly to the positive future that our world needs.

But what is character education? Unfortunately, that is more difficult to answer than it might seem. One thing character education is *not* is optional. *How* schools attempt to nurture the development of character is an option, but *whether* they affect character development is not. Schools (and the people who populate them) always shape character, for better or for worse, and whether intentionally or not. Hence, character education is ubiquitous, but also quite variable. The real question is how to have a positive impact on the character of our youth, by intentionally and systematically applying evidence-based practices.

Character is a broad concept that includes all the psychological characteristics of an individual that both motivate and enable him or her to do the right thing. This includes values, identity, moral emotions (such as compassion, empathy, guilt, and shame), the capacity to reason critically about social and moral issues, and so on. Most important is “moral character,” the part of one’s character that supports one’s ability and inclination to do what is right. Other parts of character have to do with excellence (“performance character”), regardless of whether one excels at doing good or evil; with one’s functioning as a citizen (“civic character”), such as participation in the political process; and with one’s capacity to learn, think, and reason (“intellectual character”).

These are somewhat overlapping, as performance character enables one to be effective in the moral realm, and there are parts of intellectual and civic character that have specific moral aspects to them (searching for the common good, respecting truth in intellectual inquiry, etc.). When aiming toward the larger goals of sustainability and making a better world for all, particular focus is needed on the moral aspects of character, including those parts of civic and intellectual character that are about morality, and performance character as a support for moral character.

Applying developmental psychology to the broad global demands of sustainability is challenging. To value and enact sustainable behaviors, one has to be able to think in the long term. It is much more difficult for children and adolescents to do this than it is for adults. This does not mean that children cannot care about the future; it is just hard for them to envision it, logically think about it, plan for it, monitor long-term change, etc. A second challenge is the tendency of people to favor consequences first to the self, and then to others who are close to them. Sustainability is about much broader impact than oneself and one’s friends and relatives, and often it can conflict with what would be best for these interests. That choice takes mature moral reasoning and wisdom, which again do not come easily or early for most people.

So What Works?

When done well—meaning comprehensively, authentically, and via evidence-based practices and principles—character education is very effective. A 2005 analysis of the existing school-based research on character education found that implementing it most commonly results in improvements in the capacity to critically reason about morality and social issues, increases in prosocial behavior and attitudes, better problem-solving skills, less drug use and violent behavior, better school behavior in general, more knowledge about and healthier attitudes toward risky behaviors, greater emotional competency, and improved academic achievement. Ridgewood Middle School, like many schools that make character education the authentic centerpiece of school reform and success, demonstrates these results clearly.⁵

Such findings have been shown repeatedly in research, including in large-scale statistical analyses of hundreds of separate studies. A 2011 meta-analysis of social and emotional learning program evaluation studies found a consistent pattern of such programs increasing academic achievement. (See Chapter 8.) These findings were echoed in a set of studies of hundreds of schools in Missouri implementing “The CHARACTERplus Way,” where the authors found 33 percent more students achieving state standards in communication arts and nearly 50 percent more achieving state standards in mathematics than in schools not implementing character education. Character education schools also showed significant decreases in discipline referrals, particularly around moral issues such as justice and fairness. There also were significant differences in school climate favoring the character education schools.⁶

Research has found that six foundational principles, which can be termed “PRIMED,” help guide effective character education. The following paragraphs provide examples and specific strategies within each.⁷

PIs for Prioritization

The first principle is that for character education to be effective, it has to be an *authentic* priority in the school. It cannot merely be an add-on or “silo-ed” part of the school. It has to drive the train, ideally by having the principal or head of school be its champion and leader. The Center for Character and Citizenship has been running the LACE academy in St. Louis (and other places) for nearly two decades. Experience has shown that when a school sends someone who does not have broad decision-making authority—such as an assistant principal, counselor, or teacher—to learn how to lead a comprehensive school reform

designed to foster character development, the outcomes are less effective, as the task of character education usually is not a true priority of the school.⁸

Rob Lescher, the principal of Busch Middle School in the St. Louis Public Schools, graduated from LACE and decided that character education would be the foundation for building a great school in a struggling and unaccredited urban school district. He championed it in all staff meetings, in staff evaluations, and in his choices of new initiatives. Slowly, he transformed the staff and the school culture by never taking his leadership foot off the character education pedal. As a humble learner, he asked for advice, professional development, and mentorship. In 2016, Busch was named a National School of Character based on its climate, implementation, and student outcome data.

A second set of prioritization strategies centers on rhetoric. At Evergreen Secondary School in Singapore, for example, teachers are told that they are “character coaches” first and academic teachers second. In Colorado, principal Charles Elbot led Slavens School, a kindergarten through grade eight (K–8) school in Denver, to excellence in character education in part by working with stakeholders to craft a shared language around it—“The High Road”—which served as the organizing frame for character excellence in the school. Slavens began its character education journey in 1997 ranked twenty-seventh for academic achievement of eighty elementary schools in the Denver Public School district. Four years later (in 2001), it was recognized by Character.org as a National School of Character and ranked first in the district.⁹

A third prioritization strategy is the emphasis on professional development for character education. Julie Frugo, head of school at Premier Charter School (a K-8 urban charter in St. Louis), led her school to excellence and national recognition in part by being what she calls a professional growth leader. She created a culture of professional growth, modeled it, and invested in the development of her staff through in-service training, visits by national experts, and an internal process of learning among staff.



Students at Busch Middle School of Character celebrate the school being named a “Missouri School of Character” in 2015.

A final strategy for prioritizing character education is the allocation of limited resources. Pat McEvoy, the former principal at Maplewood-Richmond Heights High School and currently principal at Bayless High School (both in the St. Louis region), has said that “if I have to buy less footballs to pay for a character education project, I will do so.” When he took over Maplewood-Richmond Heights, it was infested with gang activity, violence was common, and 10 percent of junior and senior girls were pregnant. By investing in character education, he drove out the gangs, ended the violence, and reduced the pregnancy rate to zero.

R Is for Relationships

Positive relationships are foundational to good schools, both academically and for character development. However, many educators assume that if the school (or classroom) is a good one, relationships will naturally develop. And they will—for some, but many will be left out. Relationships can be understood as central to the school climate, which the National School Climate Center defines broadly as the “patterns of students’, parents’, and school personnel’s experience of school life.” Therefore, character education must permeate the school community and all of its stakeholders. This includes students, teachers, and administrators, but also the wider community of support staff, parents, and community members such as local government, shop owners, and law enforcement.

Those latter relationships likely will not develop unless they are intentionally targeted. Schools with strong character education programs tend to have a systematic way to connect support staff to parents, to connect students to support staff, to connect teachers to community members, and to develop a strong, interlocking set of relationships. Former principal Amy Johnston recognized this at Francis Howell Middle School in Weldon Spring, Missouri, when she said, “If we don’t make time in our master schedule for relationships, they won’t happen.” To create the necessary time, she created a cross-grade, looped advisory program in which students would have sustained and close relationships with at least one teacher and with students in all grades. She also linked support staff to the advisories.¹⁰

Using peer-interactive educational methods is a core strategy that supports both academic achievement and character development. Cooperative learning is among the most studied of these methods. The Developmental Studies Center (now the Center for the Collaborative Classroom), based in Alameda, California, used cooperative learning to help craft the very successful character education program called the Child Development Project, and

offers an excellent guide to cooperative learning in their book *Blueprints for a Collaborative Classroom*.¹¹

Karen Smith, the former principal of Mark Twain Elementary in Brentwood, Missouri, building on the work of Fairbrook Elementary in Dayton, Ohio, created a “family program” with weekly meetings of groups of two students from each grade focused on character issues, led by fifth-grade students. At Mark Twain, she asked every adult who worked in the building (herself as principal, her secretary Marie, the cook, etc.) to lead a family, helping to expand the number of adult mentors and role models for students while being inclusive, respectful, and empowering of all adults working in the school. Under her leadership, the achievement gap plummeted and Mark Twain was recognized as both a Blue Ribbon School and a National School of Character.



Mark Twain Elementary School

Students of various ages work collaboratively at Mark Twain Elementary School in Brentwood, Missouri.

Is for Intrinsic Motivation

Ultimately, the goal of character education is to shape the nature of the child; that is, to help the child become more moral and effective at navigating the world in ways that add to the world—to be *value-added*. What we do not want is people who do the right thing only when others are watching or when there is a payoff for doing so. Far too many schools load on such extrinsic incentives, even to the point of giving money or parking spots to students who achieve good grades or meet other behavioral goals. All too often, schools rely on tangible rewards and public recognition ceremonies as their primary means of promoting character and managing student behavior.

Such extrinsic strategies are fraught with peril and can actually reduce the internalization of the desired values. One elementary school in the Kansas City Public Schools worked for a year to promote an ethic of service in its elementary grade students, only to discover that when there was no tangible reward, the students would not even throw a surprise retirement party for the

most beloved member of the staff. Their own conclusion is that “the students never internalized the value of service. They just did it for the rewards.”

Character is about motivation along with capacity and knowledge. Doing the right thing because it is a valued good is necessary for character to be complete. One way to foster the internalization of values is through rethinking one’s behavior management (discipline) strategies. Developmental discipline and restorative practices are related ways of managing behavior respectfully, collaboratively, and productively; that is, in ways that nurture the long-term positive growth of the child rather than merely trying to stop the specific undesirable behavior immediately.¹²

Another common strategy is for schools to provide opportunities for students to serve others in meaningful ways, either through service activities or by integrating them into the academic curriculum through service learning. When Barbara Lewis taught at Jackson Elementary in Salt Lake City, Utah, her students studied hazardous waste disposal and, when they discovered that a disposal site was within blocks of the school, they worked with the Utah legislature to create a state Superfund site to clean it up. Ron Berger, when teaching in a rural Massachusetts elementary school, led his students to test and clean up local water supplies and create a safe pathway for migrating amphibians, a method that he now helps spread worldwide through Expeditionary Learning Schools.¹³

M Is for Modeling

When people are asked to reflect on their own character and what led to it, they almost always invoke significant role models, mostly their parents. Yet schools rarely strategically leverage this key element of effective character education. When they do, it is mostly by stating that the adults in the school are or should be positive role models, yet the schools rarely have a strategy for making this happen. One way to implement this is to make character modeling an explicit part of the adult culture and an intentional point of discussion among the adults in the school. Staff at Amy Johnston’s school, Francis Howell Middle, would say one’s “character crown is slipping” as a way to address when adults failed to be models of the character they wanted to see in their students. Adults would say it about themselves or about their coworkers as a reminder of the importance of modeling character.

Another strategy is to focus on the academic study of role models, as is done in the Giraffe Project. Giraffe, a K–12 curriculum, has three main parts. First, the implementers collect and create biographies of Giraffes (people who

stick their necks out for others) around the world, and students study them. Second, students search out Giraffes in their own communities, and study and honor them. Lastly, students become Giraffes by finding ways to serve others.¹⁴

E Is for Empowerment

Ideally, schools should respect each member of the educational community through what can be called a “pedagogy of empowerment.” Yet schools all around the world tend to be authoritarian and hierarchical, which is ironic in democratic societies that need to socialize each generation to responsibly shepherd the democratic societies that are bequeathed to them. This is one place where the overlap between areas of character is most apparent—for example, the overlap between moral and civic character. The best ways to instill empowerment relate to sharing power and democratizing school systems. The Center for the Collaborative Classroom’s Caring School Community program highlights the regular use of class meetings to empower students to make decisions, plan events, and solve problems. This program has been shown to promote character and a positive school climate and has been lauded by the U.S. Department of Education for both drug and violence prevention.¹⁵

Another empowerment strategy is for principals to share leadership with others, such as having student advisory committees or transforming faculty meetings into class meeting formats. When Tim Crutchley left Ridgewood Middle School to work in the district office, Kristen Pelster was promoted to principal. When students came to her to suggest that there was a cheating problem (even though neither she nor the teachers thought there was one), she told the students, “I don’t see a cheating problem, and I asked the teachers and they don’t either. But I believe you. So what are you going to do about it?” The students took the challenge and created an academic integrity program. None of the teachers nor students knew that when academic integrity programs are student-owned and led, they are more effective; they were just being true to a pedagogy of empowerment.

And D Is for Developmental Perspective

Students, and their education, can be seen through many lenses. Having a developmental perspective leads to choosing strategies that are designed specifically to support the long-term growth of students. A simple, common, and straightforward strategy is to teach about character—to promote the study of character. The Jubilee Centre in Birmingham, in the United Kingdom, has offered a set of British core virtues that they call the Knightly Virtues,

including humility, honesty, justice, service, and courage. This project uses literature to teach the virtues, and it leads to better understanding of the virtues and to improved behavior.¹⁶

Another strategy, and one that strongly aligns with the research on parenting, is to set high expectations (both for academic achievement and character

development), but with ample supports (scaffolding) to provide the resources needed to have a chance at meeting those expectations. This was central to what Ron Berger called “educating for an ethic of excellence.” One strategy was to teach students to do multiple drafts of work and to provide each other with constructive critical feedback. Another strategy is to teach and enact personal goal-setting around character. The Inspiring Purpose program in Scotland, which builds on the John Templeton Foundation’s Laws of Life Essay Contest, asks students to

choose a virtue of importance to them, to study it and exemplars of it, and to make it a personal priority by creating a graphic portfolio about it and their personal journey.¹⁷

Where to Begin?

As ever, initiatives rely on leadership, priorities, and resources. If one authentically wants to use character education to foster the positive development of the next generation in order to make a better world, then the priority is there. It is critical that key leaders share that priority. In Singapore, for example, the past and current Ministers of Education (as well as the Prime Minister) strongly supported character education as critical to national flourishing, never missing a chance to publicly proclaim it and providing impressive resources, including a significant branch of the Ministry of Education dedicated exclusively to character and citizenship.



Inspiring Purpose/ www.inspiringpurpose.org.uk

Students at Ikusasaletu High School in South Africa display their Inspiring Purpose posters.

Finding resources is not difficult; however, discerning those that are more effective and evidence-based is. For those who want to adopt an existing program, U.S. national organizations such as Character.org (formerly the Character Education Partnership), the National School Climate Center, Expeditionary Learning Schools, and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) all have evidence-based frameworks for effective implementation. At a national level, it is wise to invest in dedicated staff and resources and to rely on expertise, although this unfortunately remains limited, and on research. It also is wise to balance a culturally specific approach with avoiding reinventing the wheel.¹⁸

Ultimately, if we want to support the development of character in students, we need to know and implement research-supported strategies. Those strategies cluster under the six categories of the “PRIMED for Character” model: prioritizing character education as a central purpose of the school; being strategic and intentional about nurturing healthy relationships among all stakeholders; using practices that lead to the internalization of values and intrinsic motivation to do good in the world; modeling the character we want to see in students; sharing power through a pedagogy of empowerment; and strategically creating the conditions that lead to positive development, especially over the long term.¹⁹

A more sustainable, just, and compassionate world will only happen if there are more people able and motivated to steer the world in that direction. This is precisely the definition of character: “characteristics that motivate and enable one to act as a competent moral agent.” The students at Ridgewood Middle School were effectively written off until Diana Bourisaw, as the new superintendent, and Tim Crutchley and Kristen Pelster, as the new school leaders, brought in character education to allow those students to see that they were valued and of value. When their voices were liberated and their beautiful minds were allowed to help craft a great school, they could reach their potential as learners, as people, and as shepherds for the future of their communities and the world.

And it was sustainable. Nearly two decades after starting the character education journey with abysmal academic outcomes and student behavior, through three very different principals, Ridgewood, still with the same under-resourced student population, was ranked thirteenth out of four hundred and thirty-four middle schools in Missouri in state academic achievement scores.

Character education ultimately is a process of motivating and equipping all children to more strongly repair the world. But people of character do not

grow on trees and cannot be manufactured in an assembly line. They must be slowly and carefully nurtured, and it does indeed take a village to raise a child of character. Of course, parenting is at the center of that village, but schools are critical, too.

Chapter 7. The Centrality of Character Education for Creating and Sustaining a Just World

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