



# HUMAN RELATIONS MEDIA

## Newsletter

# WHAT'S WORKING IN CHARACTER EDUCATION?

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# Introduction: What is Character Education?

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As all teachers know, an educator's job extends far beyond simply instructing children in reading, math, or science. A teacher plays a major role not only in the academic development of a student, but also in her development as a person. If your goal is to turn a child into a

healthy, well-adjusted and happy adult, then you must also do your best to instill good character traits in your students. Good character is essential for success in all aspects of life, from career to social relationships—and you can make an enormous impact by helping your students get on the right track at school.

Character is like the inner workings of a building, says Gary Schwartz, guidance counselor at Wisconsin's Richland Middle School. While the outside of a building is what is immediately visible, it's what goes on inside that counts. "Character education is really building the inside of a person. It's the inner drive of a person," he says.

That inner drive can be nurtured by teachers, administrators and staff at any school. Arlene Hummel, counselor specialist for the Clark County School District in Las Vegas, defines a school-based character education program as "a program in which values, positive behaviors, and character traits are lived and modeled by role models on a campus. It's a school climate."

Teachers who have already embarked on this journey have high praise for character education programs—not only do discipline problems decrease and positive actions increase on school grounds, but students are better equipped to

succeed when they learn the basics of good character. If you'd like to start a program at your school, this is a great place to begin. Read on for an overview of character education methods from the people who know—teachers and administrators who work with kids every day. You'll also find concrete tips for implementing these methods in the classroom, plus ways to measure progress and suggestions for helpful supplemental materials. With planning and cooperation, you can start a program that will change your students' lives.

## Character Education in Schools

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Why teach character in schools? Isn't that the parents' job?

As the old adage goes, it takes a village to raise a child. Children are shaped and influenced by everything they encounter, not just the lessons they get at home. "We have kids for an inordinate amount of their time," says Character Education Coordinator for Duval County Schools in Florida Deborah Hansen. "Character education begins in the home, and once they come in the school doors it's important for us to support those lessons."



*Hal Urban*

develop their character and become good and productive citizens."

Indeed, many teachers feel that character is a key part of their duty as educators. Dr. Hal Urban, a teacher, author and motivational speaker on character, says, "Education has always had a dual mission. One of them was to increase knowledge, and the other one was to help them

Michele Belisle, K-12 crisis counselor for Richland School District in Wisconsin, agrees. "I don't think you can just separate academics and not include character education. If we're really trying to prepare healthy human beings for the world, I think we have to include it."

There are practical reasons for teaching students about good character too. Think about your classroom: Has rude behavior ever disrupted your class? Have you had to waste time disciplining children instead of teaching? Wouldn't a respectful, safe atmosphere help your students learn? And besides the obvious benefit of making school a pleasant place to be, "If you run a successful character education program, it's almost guaranteed your test scores will go up," says Urban. Character education leads to a win-win situation—your students will behave better *and* learn more.

Standards vary when it comes to character education, but many states encourage such programs and provide resources, partnerships and support for their school districts. Check your state's department of education website to find out exactly what the policies are. The U.S. Department of Education also supports character education through the Office of Safe and Drug-Free schools. The Partnerships in Character Education Project Program offers grants for school districts to design and implement new programs; for more information, go to [www.ed.gov/programs/charactered/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/programs/charactered/index.html).



## What's Working in Character Education?

Character education is a great idea, but certain factors should be considered in order to create the most effective program possible. Professionals who have developed their own programs point to several essential components.

## A Schoolwide Approach

One of the key requirements for a good character education program is a commitment from everyone involved. Students need a consistent, clear message about the importance of good character from every teacher and staff member they meet throughout the day in order to fully internalize the lessons. "It simply cannot be one person talking about a 'Trait of the Month.' It simply cannot be the counselors taking the kids who are well-behaved on a field trip," says Hummel. The school must instead show students that character matters in all aspects of education.

The best way to coordinate staff is for the school leadership to make character education a priority, says Hummel. Urban echoes that sentiment; "It always starts with the principal. The administrator in charge, number one, has to be respected by the rest of the staff. Number two, that person has to be really enthusiastic about it and sell it to the rest of the staff."

When the principal sells it, the teachers and staff must also buy into the program in order for it to be successful. It is critical for teachers to send a consistent message about character and to constantly reinforce it—and that's most easily done when all teachers understand how important their program is. Role modeling good behavior is also crucial. "If we're going to expect students to model certain character traits, then we have to model the same things," Belisle points out.

Staff training is vital. Administration should provide training days, seminars and resources so that everyone grasps the goals of the program and can send the same positive message to children. "We have brought in guest speakers for our counselors and we've made it mandatory that they attend," says Hummel. Training sessions can also help by suggesting class activities and showing teachers how to weave character discussions into the daily routine. Make sure the training is ongoing by arranging for teachers to meet periodically to discuss strategies and swap ideas for creatively integrating character lessons.

## ***Planning Ahead***

A solid plan will focus your program and achieve maximum results. Coming up with a plan takes work, but the commitment your school makes to prepare a good program will prove invaluable. The whole staff should meet to discuss ideas and make sure that everyone understands the purpose of the program and how best to implement it. Together, come up with clear goals: Which character traits do you want to emphasize? What behaviors do you want to encourage? How will you get parents and community members involved?

Launching a major new program all at once can be hectic. Hummel suggests implementing a character education program gradually, perhaps by outlining a 2-3 year plan to introduce it to district schools. Teachers can begin presenting the basics to their students in the first year, then expand the program as they get a sense of what works. Schools can also build excitement for a character education program with a public kickoff; Hummel's district organized a family potluck dinner with door prizes donated by community businesses to celebrate.

The students themselves should be a part of the planning stage—ask your students what rules they think are fair and consider their ideas as you develop your program. Schwartz suggests asking student council representatives to take a hands-on role in designing your approach. “You empower kids as much as possible the more you involve them in decision-making,” he says.

## ***Integrate, Integrate, Integrate***

The last thing teachers need is another standard lesson in an already crowded day. The good news: The best way to teach children about character is to integrate it into existing lesson plans. Hummel suggests adding a character component to other subjects; for example, a history teacher can hold a class discussion about character traits shown by historical figures and an English teacher can have students write a story or essay featuring certain traits. “Kids are talking about that trait without having a formal lesson

on it. It becomes more meaningful,” she explains.

Integrating character into every subject reinforces its importance for students, driving your message home with added force. Hansen urges staff to make character “part of the conversation” among everyone in school. “That’s the most effective way because then the students understand that it’s important from one end of the day to the other.”

Above all, character education should be enjoyable, not an extra burden on you. “This should add an element of caring and fun to a campus,” says Hummel. You’re probably already teaching basic character to your students; it’s just a matter of making your lessons more explicit. “Most teachers do this naturally,” Hansen points out. “It’s just a matter of being intentional and making sure that you make those connections for kids.”

## ***Community Involvement***



The more students hear about character, the better they will learn it; by reinforcing the lessons of character education in extracurricular activities, town

public spaces and the home, children will get the message. That’s why it’s so important to get the entire community involved in your program. When parents and neighbors cooperate with the schools, everyone wins.

Parents are your primary allies in character education—the more they know about your program and its goals, the more they can help you instill good character traits in their children. Some tips for getting parents involved include:

- Forming a parental advisory committee to help plan the program

- Partnering with your school's PTA
- Writing a character education column for the school's newsletter
- Inviting parents to staff workshops and training opportunities
- Displaying posters or bulletin boards about the program at athletic and performing arts events
- Opening a "parent resource center" in the school library with books and other materials for parents to browse
- Having students discuss a character-based "question of the week" with their families

The best character education program will also feature support from community members. Raising children of good character benefits everyone in a town—neighbors, coaches and business owners can work with you to provide your students with guidance, encouragement and advice. Some tips for involving the community include:

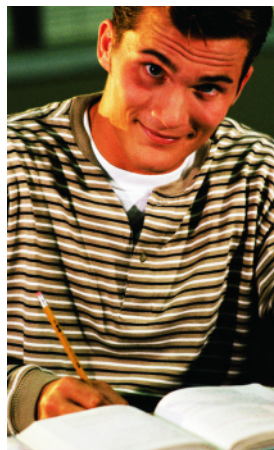
- Asking a local business to sponsor a monthly award for students who demonstrate good character traits or a poetry or essay contest about character
- Partner with coaches and activity leaders to discuss ways to relate character to students' after-school engagements
- Write character education program updates or columns for the local newspaper
- Ask local businesses to display character-based posters and/or to distribute copies of the school newsletter
- Invite community members to speak to your class about how character relates to their jobs and lives
- Encourage community members to volunteer at school functions

## Measuring Progress

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It's a great idea to track your character education program's effectiveness so that you can see how much progress you're making, identify successful aspects, and revise weaknesses. Your progress should be tied to the goals you set out in the planning stage—look for the specific accomplishments you hoped to make and discuss ways to measure those indicators.

One way to gauge the impact of your program is through before-and-after surveys for teachers and staff. Conduct your first survey before you implement the program to find out how staff members feel about students' behavior; issue the same survey after a semester or a year has passed to see how responses have changed. Do teachers see improvement in the classroom atmosphere? Have grades gone up?



Another way to check on your program's effectiveness is to examine discipline statistics. Many schools that start character education programs report a reduced number of detentions, suspensions, and other disciplinary actions. Is your school seeing the same effect? How about other indicators of

character, like coming to class on time or completing homework assignments?

Some schools organize a task force to keep tabs on character education. Hummel, for example, oversaw a task force of counselors, who in turn discussed the program with the teachers and students at their respective schools. "They would report to me, and I would give them evaluations to give to their teachers on the materials that we purchased for them. The counselors themselves led a team within their schools," she explains. Such a group helps

administrators and teachers give feedback, rate the tools and activities that have been provided, and constantly improve their programs.

## Supplemental Materials

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There are all kinds of materials you can use to help teach students about good character—probably too many! Not all the character education materials you find will be high quality or effective, so take care when you decide which materials to use. You can start by adding an element of character

education to supplies you already have.

“I would start with the materials they already have, such as literature books,” Hansen advises. “Many schools do a book of the month—why not have that book be character-based?” You can bring this concept to life in individual literature classes by discussing character themes found in the books you’re already reading. Social studies and history teachers can do the same thing by talking about character traits displayed by historic figures. With a little creative thinking, character lessons can be added to just about any topic.

Character videos can also be very useful. “A good video promotes discussion,” says Urban, so choose ones that will spark lively conversation in class. Think about your program’s goals and look for videos that match. You have lots of choices when it comes to video programs; Human Relations Media has recently released a seven-part series on character called *Real Character/Real People*.

You can reinforce the lessons you teach in class with some visible, fun reminders for the halls, cafeteria, gym, and even student desks and backpacks. Hummel’s Las Vegas district provided posters, workbooks, pencils, and t-shirts to promote its character education program.

Hansen adds that signs, banners, and character slogans “printed on everything” added to the team atmosphere in her county. A character resource center in the library, dramatic plays or presentations, or even an outdoor curriculum of team-building activities, like Hansen’s county designed, can enhance your classroom lectures too.

## Building Healthy, Happy Children

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You’ve already seen how character traits like honesty, responsibility, perseverance and empathy pay off in school, work, and personal life—this is your chance to help your students develop the qualities that will allow them to shine as they enter the real world. “Without those fundamental traits that make up good character, a person’s success rate is really diminished. It’s important that we come right out in the open and say these things are important and we’re going to help you learn these things and incorporate them into your life,” says Schwartz.



A great character education program in your school will make a difference in your students’ lives. Not only are you taking charge of their intellectual development, you are also nurturing the character guidelines that will empower them to succeed as they grow. The

planning, discussion and creativity required to teach children about character are well worth the effort; though your students will leave your class and your school, the rewards of good character you helped instill in them will endure.

## Media Resources from HUMAN RELATIONS MEDIA

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### **The Real Character/Real People Series**

*Grades 6 – College*

### **The Bully Proof Kit**

*Grades 3 – 6*

### **Surviving Peer Pressure: You Can Do It!**

*Grades 5 – 9*

### **Standing Tall: Learning Assertiveness Skills**

*Grades 5 – 9*

### **Bullying: You Don't Have To Take It Anymore**

*Grades 7 – College*

### **No Name-Calling: Creating Safe Environments**

*Grades 4 – 8*

### **STARsteps:**

#### **Conflict Resolution Strategies for Students**

*Grades 5 – 8*

### **The Character Ed Workbook Series**

*Grades 3 – 6*

## Other Media Resources

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### **In Search of Character**

*Grades 6 – College*

Elkind + Sweet Communications, Inc.

### **Life Steps**

*Grades 7 – 12*

Live Wire Media

### **Student Workshop: Building Character**

*Grades 5 – 9*

Sunburst Visual Media

### **Suppose That Was Me**

*Grades 5 – 9*

Sunburst Visual Media

### **Bullying: Take a Stand**

*Grades 5 – 9*

Sunburst Visual Media

### **Teaching Character Through Service:**

#### **A Year's Worth of Activities for Kids**

#### **Who Want to Make a Difference**

*Grades 4 – 8*

Bureau for At-Risk Youth