

Character Education on the Cheap

By Peter R. Greer

In too many schools, character education has become a hodgepodge: drug-abuse prevention, conflict resolution, health education, social and emotional skills acquisition, athletics, and service-learning. Just about anything can be called character education these days.

But schools have a primary duty to educate students on what good character means and how to develop it. The survival of our system of government depends on it. That's why I worry that this vital subject is being taught on the cheap, even by well-intentioned schools. Some of what is called character education is presented in ways that require little effort and have no lasting impact. Here are a few examples:

TALKBACK

Does character education need to be improved and if so, how? Join the discussion, "[Improving Character Education.](#)"

The Virtue-a-Month Strategy. Many schools select one virtue each month to emphasize, such as "respect" in September and "friendship" in January. This means that the students will probably never understand that these two virtues, and most others, are intertwined. The virtue of "friendship" involves courage at times, respect always, self-control often, and it draws on wisdom while demanding responsibility. As Aristotle said, courage is the most important virtue—without it, you cannot deal with the others.

The Signage Strategy. Schools put beautiful signs up on their walls that express such sentiments as "Your Character Is Your Destiny," or simply "Integrity." But signs that are not used as constant referents by teachers, and aren't discussed by students, will not be well understood—and often will become simply eyewash for students.

The Service Strategy. Schools give students the impression that if one merely does community service from time to time, good character is bound to follow. But, as Aristotle again pointed out, to form good character one must understand the virtues and then practice good deeds until they become habit. Knowing what one ought to do, and then doing it regularly, are both required for character formation.

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The Fragmentation Strategy: In this approach, there is no progress report on character to accompany subject grades—even though the school may boast of a “comprehensive character program.” Students are thus deprived of a useful tool for self-reflection and for subsequent actions to form good character. Parents likewise are deprived of insight related to their children’s progress in this area.

The Celebrity Strategy. Inviting a former drug addict, a famous athlete, or a noted singer to talk to students about character becomes an event, not a lesson that sticks. What is the purpose of such an event, if there are no substantive student discussions with teachers before and after it?

The Case-Study Strategy. This is when students are asked to practice character-based decisionmaking without first having an understanding of what they are talking about. The approach seems like a rebirth of “values clarification.” That was the easiest teaching I ever did back in the 1960s and ’70s—I didn’t have to know a thing about the virtues or character.

The Teacher-Proof Strategy. In this case, a school adopts a packaged character program and slavishly follows a script provided by others. The strategy usually backfires when students begin asking tough questions the script did not anticipate.

Instead of these simplistic approaches, there are other, substantive ways for educators to succeed in nurturing good character. Here are the cornerstones of four such approaches:

School life as real life. Edwin J. Delattre, in his wonderful book *Education and the Public Trust*, wrote that we must not teach the young that life as a student is less than real. “Unless they learn that life in school is as real as life in the rest of the world,” he said, “they will never properly participate in any educational mission that concentrates on the kinds of people they become as students, *in school*.” I cringe when graduation speakers begin, “As you graduate today and enter real life ...” I believe, with Delattre, that students should be encouraged to reflect on their

personal growth as they move through the grades, asking themselves, "Am I just growing older, or am I growing up?"

Professional development. Teachers and support-staff members must know something about the virtues in order to prepare effective lesson plans, engage in meaningful conversations with their students, and reinforce good character throughout the school. At the Montclair Kimberley Academy, a New Jersey independent school where I served for 13 years as headmaster, teachers and administrators meet with scholars and take online courses that enable them to discuss with experts Plato, Aristotle, Dante, and other sources in the Western canon, as well as Hispanic, African-American, and Asian literature, about character. Familiarity with content and concepts increases both their competence and their confidence.

Most new teachers in this country are trained at schools of education, with a curriculum that commonly does not include such material. How can they learn at any depth about the nuances of the virtues of courage, self-control, justice, wisdom, responsibility, respect, and friendship? One suggestion comes from a popular course at Boston University, in which education students study Aristotle, Plato, Shakespeare, and other sources, and then develop units to teach students in the Chelsea, Mass., public schools. They are free also to use artwork from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to illustrate their lessons. Imagine the difference between teachers like these and teachers who read the scripts from packaged programs, and usually rely on the technique of "Hmm, what you do think?"

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"Aristotle is your friend." The Greek philosopher's work provides insights into the formation of good character that are relevant for today's students. Aristotle's "Doctrine of the Mean" and study of friendship, for example, are attractive to students and can be developed appropriately for all grades, once teachers have done serious study.

Two colleagues, Karen Newman of Montclair Kimberley Academy and William Wians of Merrimack College, have developed a distinctive approach to this kind of study that asks teachers to examine both the philosophical foundations of the Western

ethical tradition and the best practices in current pedagogy. Plato and Aristotle provide not just a foundation for the Western ethical traditions, but also the basis for pedagogical techniques of reflective assessment and backward curriculum design.

Quality standards. Schools serious about helping students form good character rely heavily on the Character Education Partnership's "11 Principles." These 11 key components of effective character education are research-based and clearly described.

The Montclair Kimberley Academy put these standards into action in winning designation as a National School of Character. The school had clear expectations for good student character. There was a code of honor. Teachers and some members of the support staff completed intensive study of Aristotle and Plato, so that they were well grounded in knowledge about the virtues. They integrated the study of character into all subject areas, pre-K through 12, and seized "teachable moments" to discuss student demonstrations of good and bad character—in the classroom, in the halls, on the playground, in the dining rooms, and on the athletics fields.

There was a common language about character, and common readings. Students engaged in opportunities for service-learning—with the elderly, in politics, with sister schools, and in other areas. Parents attended workshop sessions about the program and learned what they could do at home to complement it. A newsletter, *Moral Conversations*, described what teachers were doing at the school's three campuses and invited participation.

Character education on the cheap robs students of these kinds of engagement. Where there is flimsy teacher study, or no effort at all, the teaching of good character suffers from insubstantial classroom conversation and a lack of collegiality. There is less inclusion of diverse cultural sources in the literature about character, and students lose a sense of what we all, as human beings, hold in common. The emphasis is on strategies, not content.

On the other hand, when teachers have studied the virtues and tried to make themselves their exemplars, they gain the ability to reflect on these matters and teach the subject with passion and confidence. They may be able to draw helpful ideas from the packaged programs, but they know instinctively that character lessons that stick come from much deeper sources.

