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# What Makes Character Education Programs Work? B

B. David Brooks and Mark E. Kann

**Eleven elements are essential if character education programs are to improve student conduct and enrich the educational environment.**

**T**he bell rang at Limerick Elementary School in Canoga Park, California, and students made their way to the playground for lunch. A few minutes later, the daily line of disruptive youngsters began to form outside the principal's office. Long after the other students returned to their classrooms for the afternoon, the long line of students waiting to be disciplined or counseled for misbehavior remained.

Principal Ronni Ephraim ushered children in and out of her office. She

reported that she "rarely had time to do more than ask what they did, tell them not to do it again, and dole out some form of discipline." She added, "I rarely talked with the children, especially those who really needed my attention."

Fortunately, this scenario was being played out at Limerick School at the same time that the Jefferson Center for Character Education was identifying schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) that were willing to pilot a character education

program. The Jefferson Center had developed a curriculum that had proven successful in other schools and wanted to demonstrate its effectiveness in a cross-section of elementary and middle schools in the sprawling Los Angeles megalopolis. LAUSD, for its part, hoped that the character education program would improve student conduct and enrich the educational environment.

## **Key Elements for Effective Programs**

Past experiences in schools in St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Honolulu, and elsewhere provided strong evidence that character education programs could be quite effective when key criteria in developing and imple-



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menting the curriculum were met. In fall 1990, Limerick and 24 other LAUSD schools initiated a program that included the following elements:

■ *Direct instruction.* Schools cannot assume that the language, concepts, behaviors, and skills of good character are written into the genetic code; learned at home, from television, or in the neighborhood; or absorbed through the invisible hand of the general curriculum. Like arithmetic, the teaching of character values such as "responsibility" and "respect" must be purposeful and direct. Students should hear and see the words, learn their meanings, identify appropriate behaviors, and practice and apply the values. Direct instruction builds a foundation for more advanced learning infused throughout the general curriculum; even then, direct instruction is necessary for infusion to be focused and effective.

■ *Language-based curriculum.* Children entering the schools today often lack the vocabulary for understanding basic value concepts such as "honesty" and "courage." Even when they can define such values, they often fail to connect them to their own behavior. Successful character education programs focus students' attention on the basic language that expresses core concepts and links the words to explicit behavior.

For example, at Newcomb School in Long Beach, California, students in Anna Wood's 3rd grade class learned the meaning of "courage." Then, in cooperative learning groups, they developed lists of the ways in which children can demonstrate courage in the classroom. One group decided that students could show courage by "being nice to kids that other kids tease."

■ *Positive language.* Students must know what is expected of them if they are to practice appropriate behavior. Therefore, common negative language such as "Don't be late" or "Don't forget your pencil" should be translated into explicit positive language as in "Be on time" or "Be prepared."

At Bellerive School in the Parkway School District in St. Louis County, Missouri, a new teacher was often heard telling her students, "Don't get out of your seat," "Don't get up to look out the window," and "Don't wander around the classroom." Finally, a veteran teacher advised her to "tell the kids exactly what you want them to do." The next day, the new teacher firmly told her students to "Sit down!" To her amazement, they did.

■ *Content and process.* In addition to teaching the content of consensus and civic values, an effective character education curriculum should provide a process for implementing those values when making decisions. At Parmalee Elementary School in Los Angeles, students are taught that honesty is better than dishonesty, being on time is better than being late, being polite is better than being rude. Building on this content, students learn a four-step process that teaches them to examine alternatives and consequences and then assess whether their choices are likely to bring them closer to goals such as personal and social responsibility. As students learn and practice the decision-making process, they develop the skills needed for making ethical choices.

■ *Visual reinforcement.* Character education is in competition with adverse desires, messages, and pressures in our society. The visual presentation of character values is, in effect, an advertising campaign intended to keep the words, concepts, and behaviors learned in class at the forefront of students' attention. Visual displays illustrate and reinforce good character. Thus, when students and staff traverse the hallways of Santa Barbara Junior High School in Santa Barbara, California, they encounter 4' x 8' silver and blue "character" signs hanging from the ceilings. The main hallway is adorned by a huge banner that prominently displays the word RESPECT.

■ *School climate approach.* Effective character education should spill

over the boundaries of the classroom into the playground, the office, the cafeteria, the bus, and then into the home and neighborhood. This school climate approach generates a common language and culture that fosters positive peer recognition and encourages all members of the school community to exemplify and reward behavior consistent with core values and ethical decision making.

During "Be Polite" month at the Bellerive School, the first thing that staff, students, and visitors see when they enter the building is a large calendar, which lists a different way to be polite for each day of the month. On the third day of the month, for example, everyone is reminded to be polite "by listening when others are speaking."

■ *Teacher-friendly materials.* Teachers must be able to implement the character education curriculum with limited training and preparation. They should not have to write lengthy lesson plans, prepare student handouts, search out supplementary materials, or decode impossibly complex instructional manuals. Keeping curriculum materials simple and straightforward greatly increases the probability that the lessons will get taught consistently and effectively. Otherwise, teachers are likely to perceive systematic character education as an "add-on" rather than as an essential component of their teaching mission.

■ *Teacher flexibility and creativity.* Teachers not only need a basic framework to work with, but they also should be able to adjust character education lessons to individual teaching and learning styles. A successful character education curriculum is sufficiently flexible to allow teachers to exercise creativity in addressing special classroom circum-



stances while still adhering to school-wide standards. Thus, one teacher may have the class designate four or five ways to practice tolerance while another teacher may decide to have individual students select a specific tolerant behavior for practice. The teachers' approaches may vary even though the same language and concepts are taught in both classrooms.

■ *Student participation.* Character education is most effective when students develop a sense of ownership. It is not enough to tell students how to behave. They must participate in the process of framing goals in order to achieve them. At the Kauluwela School in Honolulu, Hawaii, each student in Leona Englehart's 5th grade class decides on individual character goals and how to meet them. Typical individual goals include, "I will be on time," "I will do all my homework," or "I will be polite to classmates." Each student writes his or her name and goal on a cutout of a foot. The cutouts are then placed on the classroom wall in an ascending pattern that represents the "Steps to Success." Students develop a sense of ownership because they have chosen the goals and means for achieving them.

■ *Parental involvement and then some.* Character education programs are most effective and enduring when the school routinely confers with parents, lets them know what is being taught, and involves them in the curriculum. Corona del Mar High School in Newport Beach, California, kicked off its "Respect and Responsibility" program by hosting a Character Education Day that drew together school board members, administrators, teachers, students, parent groups, and community leaders to discuss local needs and goals. Bellerive School helped to sustain and enrich its character education program, first by keeping parents informed of the "theme of the month," and then by providing suggestions regarding how parents could encourage theme-appropriate behavior at home.

■ *Evaluation.* Implementation of a character education program must include a pre-assessment of goals, occasional consultation during the program, and then a post-evaluation of results. In the planning stages, school staff members should clearly articulate their expectations and explicitly detail the various goals they hope to accomplish. As they implement the program, periodic meetings will help teachers to keep goals in mind and adapt classroom lessons accordingly. Finally, the program evaluation should assess the outcomes in terms of anecdotal reports from teachers ("My students seem to be more responsible.") and appropriate

were sent to the office really needed to be helped. Now I have time to work with them."

The effectiveness of character education at Limerick School was not unique. At the 25 elementary and middle schools completing the Jefferson Center-LAUSD pilot during the 1990-91 school year, major discipline problems decreased by 25 percent; minor discipline problems went down 39 percent; suspensions fell by 16 percent; tardiness dropped by 40 percent; and unexcused absences (which often translate into lost revenue) declined by 18 percent. In addition, surveyed teachers gener-

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data on measurable changes in key variables (Have absences decreased? Are office referrals down? Do more students make the honor roll?).

#### **Implementation Leads to Results**

The staff at Limerick School decided to participate in the Jefferson Center-LAUSD pilot project by implementing a character education curriculum that contains the 11 elements described above. Some teachers approached the pilot with an air of pessimism. The veterans had tried "savior" programs over the years and had become somewhat cynical. Nonetheless, they moved forward. Within three months, they were reporting positive changes in classroom behavior. Ronni Ephraim noticed that the lunchtime line outside her office was getting shorter. At the end of the school year, she reported that "the line was gone." Indeed, only three or four students per day were being referred to her. "Those who

ally felt that students did learn to take greater responsibility for their behavior and schoolwork while principals reported a noticeable increase in the number of students on their honor rolls.

Schools are, essentially, a community of their own. If the whole school community fosters the language, culture, and climate of good character, then the students who spend a significant portion of their time there will acquire the words, concepts, behaviors, and skills that contribute to good conduct, ethical decision making, and a fertile learning environment. ■

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# Actions Speak Louder Than Words: What Students Think

Mary M. Williams

**According to students, teachers “have to follow the rules themselves” in order to effectively teach character education.**

What’s the most effective way to teach values? According to students, teachers “have to follow the values themselves.” They have to be “fair” and “real”—not “phony.” Teaching moral values doesn’t work, students say, if teachers try to “make it a big deal” or “have a separate class about it.”

These are some of the findings from a study I conducted to better understand how moral values and traits of character are taught and learned in classrooms. As a teacher, I was aware of the growing interest in character education across the nation, and I was concerned about the implementation of schoolwide character education programs.

First, I conducted a pilot study to determine how eight of the moral values stated by former Education Secretary William Bennett are learned by students in classrooms (Williams 1987).<sup>1</sup> Because “respect for others” had the highest priority for students, it became the focal value in my qualitative/ethnographic study.<sup>2</sup>

To discover how respect was taught to students and learned by them, I surveyed, observed, and interviewed teachers, students (grades 6–8), administrators, and parents in urban and suburban settings, in public and private schools, during one school year.<sup>3</sup> I expected to find

that formal lessons about respect produce the best results. Yet, the findings indicate that respect is taught best through a hidden curriculum of modeling and quality teaching that creates a positive moral climate (Williams 1992).

## Through the Eyes of Students

Analyzing the data from the perspective of students provides a vantage point that is rarely encountered in classroom research. Had this study been conducted from the teachers’ point of view, *all* of the participants would have been judged effective. They *all* asserted that it was part of their duty to teach moral values to students, and they *all* believed that they were successful in teaching character. According to middle school students, however, only some of their teachers (“model teachers”) follow through with this stated intention.

The other teachers (“poor models”) are judged to be insincere and inconsistent.

Students from classrooms with “poor models” report evidence of double standards and differential treatment. For example, these teachers say things like, “You should be kind” and “Respect others.” Yet students report that they “choose favorites,” “treat us like babies,” “don’t listen,” and “give us busy work.” Although these poor models believe they are teaching respect, they are blind to the way their behaviors affect student learning and

behavior. As several students put it, “Teachers can’t fake it.”

When students perceive a teacher as insincere, they talk behind the teacher’s back, talk back to the teacher, and exhibit other behaviors generally deemed disrespectful. Students report that they “respect” these teachers only because they “have to.”

## What “Model Teachers” Do

Character education manifests itself in teacher practice as respect for each student as a responsible, active learner. Model teachers understand that students require an environment of mutual trust and respect.

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How do model teachers behave? Students say that they:

- present clear, consistent, and sincere messages;
- do not pull rank—are never authoritarian;
- communicate high expectations;
- really listen;
- communicate their commitment through actions;
- are hard-working and really care about student learning;
- deserve respect.

The characteristics of a “model teacher” match Glasser’s (1990)





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description of a "quality teacher." These teachers create classroom environments that are nurturing and risk-free, along the guidelines of constructivist theory as proposed by Vygotsky (Clark 1990). They are open-minded, direct, and nonjudgmental. Model teachers often use specific classroom situations as lead-ins to brief discussions about proper conduct and ethical behavior.

In such classrooms, teachers' enthusiasm and commitment are paralleled by students' enthusiasm and engagement in learning. Students do not work just to get the assigned work done—they are intrinsically motivated because they are doing meaningful work. Model teachers recognize students' contributions by restating them or posting them on the board. These teachers say things like, "There are no right and wrong answers." In such classrooms, students can make mistakes without condemnation from others.

Model teachers show their sincerity and concern for students through their daily actions. One of the exemplary teachers I observed had a commanding presence, yet was a noncoercive authority figure in the classroom. She moved among students freely, making eye contact

with them. She was observed to make individual requests only once, giving the impression that she did not repeat herself. In addition, she used inclusive language and cleared up misunderstandings as they arose: "All set? Are there any not with us?" Never angry with her students, she was patient yet persistent, saying, "It's your job. I can't do it for you."

This teacher was also skillful in delegating responsibilities to students without abandoning them. For example, one girl who was behind in a project looked sad because she had to continue working while others had free time. This teacher put her hand on the girl's shoulder and said, "I know this must be hard because you were sick last week. I'll help you get started. Then it won't take long." Respectful actions like this help build students' confidence.

### A Closing Note

"Do as I say, not as I do" clearly does not work. Quality teaching, coupled with an ethic of caring and respect for students as learners, is a powerful combination of behaviors that creates a positive moral climate in the classroom. If our classrooms lack such an environment, we risk graduating future generations of citizens without a sense

of the common good, without respect for others and the environment, without tolerance or responsibility. ■

<sup>1</sup>W. Bennett, (1985), "Core Democratic Values" [fairness, kindness, honesty, persistence, responsibility, love of country, respect, and courage], as described in the proposal for the *Boston University Character Project* submitted by K. Ryan and S. Ellenwood.

<sup>2</sup>The study was conducted for my dissertation. The completed study was published by *Dissertation Abstracts International* in January 1992.

<sup>3</sup>Eighteen teachers, 54 students, 12 administrators, and 18 parents participated in the study.

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