Character Education

At A Glance

Character education uses all aspects of school life to develop ethical, responsible, and caring students. Universal values are emphasized to increase students' awareness of moral and ethical issues to help them become responsible citizens. This Information Capsule discusses types of character education programs and summarizes implementation strategies that are critical to their success, such as building community consensus for the values being taught, modeling positive behavior, and integrating character education and the academic curriculum. Research conducted on character education's impact on students' behavior and academic achievement is also reviewed and a summary of Miami-Dade County Public Schools' character education initiative is provided.

What is Character?

Character has been described as a broad "constellation of attitudes, behaviors, motivations, and skills" that contribute to "one's positive development as a person - intellectually, socially, emotionally, and ethically" (Battistich, 2005). According to Battistich, character is comprised of:
- attitudes such as wanting to do one's best and having concern for the welfare of others;
- intellectual capacities such as critical thinking and moral reasoning;
- interpersonal and emotional skills needed to interact appropriately with others; and
- behaviors such as being honest and responsible and contributing to the community and society.

Educators recognize that students' levels of character development are not solely within the control of schools. Since character is heavily influenced by other factors, such as heredity, home environment, peers, and community and societal values, schools must determine to what extent they can influence character development (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Park, 2004; Finck et al., 2003).

What is Character Education?

Some educators claim it is impossible to have a value-free school since curricula, teaching strategies, student-teacher relations, and extracurricular activities are all value-laden. Therefore, they maintain that the only difference between schools with and without character education initiatives is whether they are unplanned or deliberately linked to an educational agenda (Huffman, 2006; Trissler, 2000; Etzioni, 1998). Kohn (1997) asserted that schools are filled with values, but the public doesn't realize it because they are so similar to the values held by society at large. Similarly, Huffman (1995) concluded that the question is not "Will schools nurture moral development?" but "How will they carry out that responsibility?"

Character education is not a course or a subject, but a process. Berkowitz and Bier (2006) defined character education as the use of all aspects of school life to develop ethical, responsible, and caring young people through an emphasis on universal values, such as responsibility, respect, honesty, courage, fairness, and kindness. All character education programs share the goals of increasing students' awareness of moral and ethical issues and helping them become responsible citizens (Schwartz et al., 2005; McBrien & Brandt, 1997).

Trends in Character Education

Public support for character education has fluctuated over the years. Since the inception of public schooling in the U.S. until the 1990s, character education initiatives were alternately created and eliminated every 10 to 20 years on a widespread basis. Character education programs have remained popular since the 1990s, however, mainly due to increases in school violence and self-destructive behaviors and the perception that both peers and the media were having a negative influence on children (Davidson et al., 2007; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006; Howard et al., 2004; Howard, 2002; Davidson & Stokes, 2001; Gathercoal & Nimmo, 2001; Otten, 2000; Wilbur, 2000; Leo, 1999). A growing number of Americans believed some children were no longer learning basic values at home or in the community and they turned to schools to help with the socialization process (Nisivoccia, 1998; Lasley, 1997; Etzioni, 1994). In 2006, Huffman estimated that as many as half of American schools were undertaking character education initiatives. The Character Education Partnership (2005a) reported that polls indicated over 90 percent of Americans believe character education should be taught in schools.

Deciding to Implement a Character Education Program

Schools often struggle when deciding whether or not to include character education in the curriculum. Considerations that arise include (Benninga et al., 2006; Howard et al., 2004; Bulach, 2000; Exstrom, 2000; Otten, 2000; Trissler, 2000; Wilbur, 2000; Leo, 1999; Titus, 1994; Harris & Hoyle, 1990):

- Many educators are concerned they will teach values counter to those held by families in the community.

- Some parents don't want schools to teach values because they believe there is a strong connection between character education and religion.
- Questions arise as to whose values should be taught and what particular methods should be used to teach them.
- Many educators believe schools should focus on the core subject areas. They are concerned that character education will detract from their main goal of increasing academic achievement.
- Most teachers already feel pressure to cover the material in their subject areas. Some in the educational community believe it is not fair to add to their responsibilities by asking them to teach character education.

Types of Character Education Programs

Today's character education programs take many different forms (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Halverson, 2004; Krajewski, 1999). Some schools design their own programs, some adopt pre-packaged programs from commercial publishers, and others combine elements from a variety of programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Gathercoal & Nimmo, 2001; Harned, 1999). Experts suggest that when pre-packaged programs are used, they be considered as starting points from which to develop local initiatives so that character education programs meet each school district's individual needs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Exstrom, 2000).

Some schools implement character education initiatives on a school-wide basis, while others operate on a class-by-class basis, with teachers gathering ideas and materials from a variety of sources (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007; Schwartz et al., 2005). The *Character Counts* web site, for example, provides 69 links for character educators, featuring resources such as sample lesson plans, activities, books, articles, videos, CDs, and posters (www.charactercounts.org/links.htm). Some schools begin implementation with a core staff and gradually expand to include all staff (Scerenko, 1997). Most character education initiatives are implemented in elementary schools, with efforts usually tapering off at the middle and senior high school levels (Davidson et al., 2007; Titus, 1994).

Berkowitz and Bier (2006) reported that most character education programs use a social-emotional curriculum that includes lessons in social

skills and awareness, personal improvement, problem solving, and decision making. The majority of programs integrate character education into the core academic curriculum, most frequently into language arts and social studies. Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) reported that the current trend in character education is to emphasize similarities rather than differences; establish good behavioral habits; and focus on the responsibilities of the individual and the community. Some researchers have suggested that since educators cannot possibly teach all of the specific knowledge and behaviors needed to establish good character, programs should help students clarify and develop their own value systems instead of focusing on the teaching of specific character traits (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006; Trissler, 2000).

Researchers have cautioned that some initiatives call themselves character education programs, but are aimed only at providing quick behavioral results or promoting good manners and compliance with rules. These techniques are unlikely to result in a lasting commitment to character development. The most common quick-fix approaches, often used in combination with one another, include (Halverson, 2004; Schaps et al., 2001; Leo, 1999; Kohn, 1997; Leming, 1993):

- **Cheerleading**. This approach uses posters, banners, and bulletin boards to highlight a value of the month. Public address announcements, motivational assemblies, and an occasional high-profile event, such as a fund-raiser, promote the featured value. The assumption is that students will become committed to doing the right thing if they are repeatedly exposed to the character message.

- **Praise and Reward**. This approach relies almost exclusively on positive reinforcement by rewarding students for good behavior. Students attend award ceremonies and receive tokens for good behavior that can be exchanged for privileges or prizes. The significance of students' actions is diminished because rewards become the primary focus of the program.

- **Define and Drill**. Students are asked to memorize a list of values and their corresponding definitions. They are drilled in specific behaviors, rather than engaged in discussion, reflection, and practice.

- **Forced Formality**. When schools use this approach, they focus on compliance with specific rules of conduct. They emphasize certain kinds of behavior (walking with one's arms at one's side) or formal terms of address ("yes, sir" or "no, ma'am").

Strategies Critical to the Success of Character Education Programs

Whether a school district chooses a pre-packaged character education program, designs their own program, or uses a combination of the two, researchers have identified the following strategies as critical to the success of the initiative:

- **Planning for the initiative.** Before beginning implementation of a character education program, researchers suggest that schools develop a structured plan for sustaining the initiative. Planners should consider the following questions (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006; Harned, 1999; Scerenko, 1997; Tomaselli & Golden, 1996):
  - Will a committee be formed to provide initial direction to the program?
  - Are the goals and objectives of the program clearly articulated?
  - What curriculum materials will be used?
  - What funds are available?
  - How can character education be integrated into the academic curriculum?
  - What types of staff development activities will be conducted to build skills for delivering the program?

  Planners may also want to conduct a character inventory that assesses the current school environment. The character inventory should include questions such as (Lickona et al., 2007; Etzioni, 1998):
  - What character building experiences is the school already providing its students?
  - Do any current school practices contradict the values to be taught? For example, do students understand the basis upon which grades are assigned and do they believe grades are distributed fairly? Does the school deal with both major and minor disciplinary infractions in a consistent manner?
  - Are there any negative character issues the school is currently failing to address (such as cheating or disrespectful behavior)?

- **Building community consensus.** Successful character education programs build community consensus before deciding which values to teach. Many educators find it worthwhile to identify character traits the community wants included in the initiative prior to actual program implementation, rather than adopting an approach that includes a predetermined set of values. The community assessment should involve as many diverse people as possible to help educators avoid the impression that they are imposing their own values on students (Narvaez, 2002; Bulach, 2000; Otten, 2000; Harned, 1999; Vessels & Boyd, 1996).

  Although it is impossible to formulate a large set of values that meet everyone's approval, researchers have identified some values that most people agree on. For example, several surveys found that most community members agreed students should be taught respect for self and others, honesty, and self-discipline. Other traits that community members have consistently cited as important for schools to teach include responsibility, citizenship, courage, fairness, and compassion (Bulach, 2000; Lyons, 1995; Mathers, 1995; Titus, 1994).

- **Adopting a school-wide focus.** Character education should be incorporated into all aspects of school life, including the academic curriculum and co-curricular activities, and emphasized in the interactions between students and staff. In schools with successful initiatives, every activity and event is considered an opportunity to develop character (Lickona et al., 2007; Huffman, 2006; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Bencivenga & Elias, 2003; Krajewski, 1999; Schaeffer, 1999; Huffman, 1995; Titus, 1994).

- **Fully implementing the program.** In order for character education programs to be effective, they must be fully and accurately delivered. Research suggests that the extent to which character education programs are implemented may play a significant role in program outcomes (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). For example, the Promising Practices Network's (2004) review of research conducted on the *Child Development Project* found that schools with higher levels of program implementation noted greater cognitive and behavioral changes among their students than schools with weaker levels of implementation. Similarly, evaluations of the *Community of Caring* program (Community of Caring, 2004) reported that higher levels of implementation were significantly and positively associated with increased attendance and homework completion, reductions in at-risk behavior, and positive student character development. Findings such as these led Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) to conclude that the specifics of the program chosen may not be as important as the extent to which the program is implemented.

- **Utilizing a multi-strategy approach.** Effective character education programs are rarely single-strategy initiatives. Many schools bundle components from different programs together into one larger initiative. In Berkowitz and Bier's (2006) study of 33 effective character education programs, they discovered that, on average, schools incorporated more than seven different strategies into their initiatives. Battistich (2005) concluded that a multi-strategy approach was usually more efficient and cost-effective than the adoption of a variety of smaller programs focusing on particular issues or problems.

- **Creating a supportive school environment.** Effective character education programs emphasize positive character traits in all areas of the school environment, including classrooms, hallways, the playground, the cafeteria, and the bus. Supportive environments are characterized by the following (Lickona et al., 2007; Benninga et al., 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Battistich, 2005; Davidson et al., 2004; Hawkins et al., 2001; Merenda & White-Williams, 2001; Otten, 2000; Schaeffer, 1999; Brooks & Kann, 1993):
  - mutual trust, respect, and concern for others;
  - caring relationships among students, among staff, and between students and staff;
  - strong student commitment to the school; and
  - staff responsiveness to behavioral issues, such as bullying or student isolation.

- **Leading the effort.** Researchers have concluded that committed school leadership is essential to effective character education initiatives (Lickona et al., 2007; Berkowitz & Bier,

2004; Exstrom, 2000; Schaeffer, 1999). Schools that are engaged in effective character education have leaders who convey their support by modeling good character, organizing professional development for staff, placing character education on the agenda at faculty meetings, monitoring the implementation of the initiative, and reinforcing its priority through communications with students and parents (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Huffman, 1995). Bulach (2000) concluded that unless school leaders take an active role in promoting the program, staff are not likely to fully support the initiative.

- **Modeling positive behavior.** Comer (2003) stated that children do not learn character as much as they "catch" it from the adults around them and the ways in which these adults interact with them. In schools with effective character education programs, adults model and promote the behaviors and attitudes they want students to acquire (Lickona et al., 2007; Benninga et al., 2006; Battistich, 2005; Bencivenga & Elias, 2003; Vess & Halbur, 2003; Huffman, 1995).

- **Integrating character education and the academic curriculum.** Effective character education programs integrate core values into all areas of the academic curriculum (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Davidson et al., 2004; Narvaez, 2002; Bulach, 2000; Harned, 1999; Schaeffer, 1999; Huffman, 1995). Character educators look for the natural intersections between the academic content they are covering and the values they want to teach. These "character connections" can take many forms, such as considering the moral and social implications of what is being learned, addressing ethical issues, and debating historical practices and decisions (Lickona et al., 2007; Davidson et al., 2004; Schaps et al., 2001).

The character education curriculum should be flexible enough to allow teachers to adjust lessons to individual teaching and learning styles while still adhering to school-wide standards. Furthermore, providing teachers with user-friendly materials greatly increases the probability that lessons will be taught consistently and effectively. Teachers should not have to write lengthy lesson plans, prepare student handouts, search out supplementary materials, or decipher complex instructional manuals (Brooks & Kann, 1993).

- **Teaching values directly.** The teaching of character values should be purposeful and direct. Discussion and exploration should be incorporated into character education lessons as students become familiar with the words, learn their meanings, identify appropriate behaviors, and practice and apply the values (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Exstrom, 2000; Brooks & Kann, 1993). Character instruction can take many forms, including (Battistich, 2005; Davidson et al., 2004; Finck et al., 2003; Bebeau et al., 1999; Harned, 1999):
  - teaching literature-based lessons through stories of heroes and the situations in which their moral attributes are displayed;
  - teaching social-emotion skills, such as listening when others are talking, disagreeing respectfully, and managing emotions; and
  - teaching conflict resolution skills by having students think, write, and talk about how to solve various types of conflicts.

Bebeau, Rest, and Narvaez (1999) cautioned that research has not yet determined which direct instructional strategies are most effective for teaching character. For example, studies conducted by Narvaez (Narvaez, 2002; Narveaez et al., 1999; Narvaez et al., 1998) found that the vast majority of elementary students were unable to extract a story's intended moral theme simply by reading the story. Narvaez and her colleagues suggested that using literature to teach a complex set of behaviors may not be effective unless children can draw on their prior knowledge and experiences to enhance their understanding.

- **Providing opportunities for interactive learning.** Students need many and varied opportunities to apply what they learn in authentic learning environments (Lickona et al., 2007; Huitt, 2004; Bencivenga & Elias, 2003; Narvaez, 2002; Merenda & White-Williams, 2001; Exstrom, 2000). Interactive learning strategies include (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Davidson et al., 2004; Schaps et al., 2001; McBrien & Brandt, 1997; Scerenko, 1997).
  - role playing;
  - decision-making exercises;
  - cooperative learning groups;

- peer discussions;
- problem-solving sessions;
- perspective-taking;
- reflection; and
- debates and discussions of moral dilemmas.

- **Making character education relevant.** Researchers have concluded that character education initiatives have the greatest impact when educators make learning tasks relevant to students' lives. Teachers should help students understand how the development of certain character traits is important to their lives both inside and outside of school (Battistich 2005; Schaps et al., 2001; Harned, 1999; Nisivoccia, 1998). Schaps, Schaeffer, and McDonnell (2001) concluded that the most successful forms of character education involve students in honest discussion and reflection about the moral implications of what they are told, what they observe, and what they personally do and experience.

- **Creating a democratic classroom environment.** Character education is most effective when students develop a sense of ownership in the process. Democratic environments involve students, on a regular basis and in developmentally appropriate ways, in shared decision making, often through structured classroom meetings. Students must be allowed to become character educators to their peers, set ground rules, plan upcoming activities, solve problems, and take responsibility for setting their own personal goals (Davidson et al., 2004; Bencivenga & Elias, 2003; Schaps et al., 2001; Harned, 1999; Brooks & Kann, 1993).

- **Incorporating service learning.** Schools with successful character education programs arrange learning experiences in a variety of collaborative community contexts. They provide opportunities for students to contribute to their school and community by participating in volunteer activities, such as recycling, fund raising, community clean-up programs, food drives, and visits to senior centers (Benninga et al., 2006; Vess & Halbur, 2003; Narvaez, 2002). Service learning is not treated as an isolated experience, but is used as the basis for discussion and reflection in the classroom (Schaps et al., 2001; Schaeffer, 1999). Studies have found that students engaged in service

learning combined with reflection developed higher levels of moral judgment and ethical reasoning than students involved in service learning alone (Leming, 2001; Sprinthall et al., 1992).

- **Rewarding good behavior.** Many researchers believe that students should be rewarded for appropriate behaviors. They emphasize that there must be a system in place that allows the school community to recognize good character (Lickona et al., 2007; Huitt, 2004; Merenda & White-Williams, 2001; Goode, 1999; Ryan, 1995). Some experts have suggested, however, that an excessive emphasis on extrinsic rewards undermines self-motivation (Lickona et al., 2007; Davidson et al., 2004). Kohn (1997) cited a series of studies that found individuals who were rewarded for good deeds were more likely to attribute their behavior to the reward and eventually came to believe that the point of being good was to receive the reward.

- **Designing a fair discipline policy.** Most experts agree that punishments, based on fair discipline policies, must also be a part of character education programs in order to communicate the fact that there are consequences for inappropriate behavior. Character-based discipline uses rules and consequences to develop students' moral reasoning, self-control, and respect for others. It helps students understand why rules are needed and increases their moral obligation to respect them (Davidson et al., 2004; Huitt, 2004; Finck et al., 2003; Schaps et al., 2001).

- **Providing professional development.** Successful character education initiatives include ongoing professional development experiences to help staff acquire the skills needed to implement the program. Since research has repeatedly shown that level of implementation affects student outcomes, it is critical that those charged with implementing the program receive appropriate training (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Shaeffer, 1999; Scerenko, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

- **Involving parents and community members.** Schools should inform and engage parents and community members as part of the

character-building effort. School staff should communicate regularly with parents and the community about their character education programs and keep them informed about what is being taught. Parental engagement can be increased by holding informational conferences, requesting parents to join the school's character education committee, encouraging parents to work with their children on service projects, and training parents to create positive home environments that reinforce character lessons covered in school (Lickona et al., 2007; Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Huitt, 2004; Merenda & White-Williams, 2001; Bulach, 2000; Exstrom, 2000; Trissler, 2000; Schaeffer, 1999; Nisivoccia, 1998; Tomaselli & Golden, 1996; Huffman, 1995; Brooks & Kann, 1993).

Schools should also recruit the help of community organizations, such as businesses, youth associations, the government, and the media, to promote character development (Lickona et al., 2007; Benninga et al., 2006).

Research Limitations

There are many character education programs for educators to choose from, but few empirical studies to guide the selection process. Research conducted to date has produced few conclusive results and more studies are needed to better understand how and when character education is most effective (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Howard et al., 2004; Leming et al., 2000). Reasons why evaluations of character education programs have contributed little to our understanding of character development include (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Park, 2004; Leming et al., 2000; Huffman, 1995).

- There is little agreement on how character should be measured. Furthermore, the real tests of character often occur when no one is watching or measuring the outcome.

- Most studies have used qualitative methods, such as observations and survey administrations. No firm conclusions can be drawn from these studies because their findings cannot be generalized to other programs or populations.

- It is difficult to conduct comparative studies because character education programs are so diverse. The term character education has been applied to a wide array of educational initiatives, including youth development programs that focus on specific behaviors, citizenship training, life skills education, and conflict resolution. Some programs are stand-alone initiatives, while others are integrated into the entire curriculum.

- Many evaluations fail to measure the level and quality of implementation of character education programs. As previously noted, level of implementation has been shown to influence program outcomes.

- The goals of character education programs are usually stated in broad terms, with initiatives focusing on general character-related behaviors instead of specific, quantifiable outcomes.

- While most character education programs bundle a variety of strategies, research is usually conducted on the impact of the overall initiative and not on the effectiveness of the individual strategies. Without research that isolates the effects of the specific program components, it is impossible to determine which ones are contributing to the observed outcomes and which may be ineffective or even counter-productive to the initiative.

- There are no consistent expectations for character education programs. For example, what amount of change should be anticipated and with regard to what variables? Is it realistic to expect schools to have more influence on character development than the home and community environments?

Research Studies on Character Education Programs

Keeping the above limitations in mind, some tentative conclusions can still be drawn regarding the impact of character education programs on students. In general, studies have found that these programs help to promote pro-social behavior; reduce some at-risk behaviors; improve school climate; and reduce absenteeism and disciplinary referrals.

Some studies have also suggested that character education programs may even lead to increases in students' levels of academic achievement, but no conclusive evidence has yet been provided. Results of these studies have been inconsistent and have not identified the conditions under which character education programs may lead to increases in student achievement. In addition, in no case can increases in achievement levels be attributed solely to the implementation of a character education program, and not to other variables such as additional programs or reforms initiated within the schools.

Following are highlights of some of the larger studies conducted on character education programs.

Behavioral Outcome Studies

- Berkowitz and Bier (2006) identified 33 research studies that provided evidence of character education programs' effectiveness. The researchers found an overall success rate of 51 percent; that is, approximately half of the time, the implementation of a character education program resulted in positive outcomes. The greatest amounts of change were noted in the areas of socio-moral cognition (thinking about ethical and moral issues); pro-social behaviors and attitudes; sexual behavior; problem-solving skills; and drug use.

- Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) examined five school districts in an eastern state implementing one of four pre-packaged character education programs: *Educating for Character, Community of Caring, Character Education Institute, and Character Counts!* The control group was comprised of the seven districts in the state that had not implemented a character education program. The study covered a four-year period from program planning through the first three years of implementation. In all five districts, teachers and administrators had more positive perceptions of students' pro-social behaviors following program implementation. In four of the districts, there was no clear relationship between suspension rates and the presence of character education. The fifth district (*Character Counts!* curriculum) had the highest initial suspension rates but also the largest decline in suspension rates. High school

dropout rates generally declined in all districts, but differences between character education and control schools were small. The researchers concluded that, as with suspension rates, it was difficult to determine the extent to which the presence of character education was related to dropout rates because other school programs may have impacted the results.

- Studies conducted on the *Child Development Project* (CDP) have concluded that participation in the program enhances interpersonal classroom behavior and social problem-solving skills (Kansas State Department of Education, 2006; Huitt, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 1995). The Character Education Partnership (2005b) reported that elementary students in CDP schools engaged in more pro-social behaviors (were helpful and cooperative; displayed more support, concern, and caring toward others) and were more skilled at resolving interpersonal conflicts. At the middle school level, students were found to be more involved in their classes and youth activities and less likely to engage in misconduct. Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, and Lewis (2000) reported that the CDP may have contributed to a short-term decrease in students' use of alcohol and marijuana, although a follow-up study (Battistich et al., 2004) found no significant long-term program effects. Battistich, Schaps, and Wilson's (2004) follow-up study also reported no significant differences between the frequency of treatment and control groups' violent or delinquent behaviors.

- Evaluations of *Community of Caring* have studied schools from across the country and concluded that the program has led to improvements in students' social problem-solving skills and peer relationships. Decreases in disciplinary referrals and suspensions were also documented (Community of Caring, 2004; Jones & Stoodley, 1999). In schools classified as having high levels of implementation, the *Community of Caring* program was also linked to higher rates of attendance and homework completion, increased character development, and a more positive school climate (Community of Caring, 2004).

- A character education program developed and piloted by the Jefferson Center for Character Education was implemented in 25 Los Angeles Unified School District elementary and middle schools. Following the first year of implementation, major discipline problems decreased by 25 percent; minor discipline problems decreased by 39 percent; suspensions decreased by 16 percent; tardiness decreased by 40 percent; and unexcused absences decreased by 18 percent. Teachers' survey responses indicated they believed students took more responsibility for their behavior and school work following participation in the program (Brooks and Kann, 1993).

- The *Ethics Curriculum for Children*, a literature-based approach to teaching values to elementary school children, was evaluated in four schools in Illinois and Pennsylvania. Results of the evaluation indicated that, following program implementation, treatment group students had significantly higher levels of ethical understanding, compared to control group students. The program did not, however, have an impact on students' ethical sensibility (preference for actions corresponding to the values taught). The treatment group demonstrated a significantly higher level of respect for others at grades 1-3, but not at grades 4-6. In Pennsylvania schools, disciplinary referrals for treatment group students decreased by 50 percent, while the control group's referrals increased by 10 percent. In Illinois schools, no post-program differences in the percent of disciplinary referrals were found between treatment and control groups. It should be noted that assignment to treatment and control groups was not made on a random basis, but on teachers' willingness to volunteer for the program, which might have served as a potential source of bias (Leming et al., 2000).

- Duer, Parisi, and Valintis (2002) evaluated a character education program implemented at three middle and senior high schools in the midwest. Program activities incorporated into social science and literature classes included role-playing, conflict resolution strategies, and cooperative learning to promote respectful behavior and individual and group

responsibility. Data gathered from administrative referral records documented a reduction in unacceptable behavior following implementation of the program, as measured by tardiness, truancies, insubordination, and fighting. Student and staff surveys, interviews, and focus groups revealed that the program was perceived to have increased students' levels of respect and responsibility.

- Leming (2001) studied the effects of the *Building Decision Skills* (BDS) curriculum combined with community service on twelfth grade students from a large high school in Missouri. BDS is designed to help students develop core values, raise their awareness of ethics, and provide them with practical strategies for dealing with ethical dilemmas. Program activities included class discussions, small-group activities, and homework assignments. Students were divided into three groups: community service with BDS; community service without BDS; and a control group. Students in the community service with BDS group demonstrated significantly higher ethical capacities (such as awareness and issue framing) than students in the community service without BDS group; however, no statistically significant differences were found between the three groups' confidence in social settings or general sense of social responsibility.

Achievement Outcome Studies

- In Skaggs and Bodenhorn's (2006) examination of five school districts implementing four pre-packaged character education programs, no evidence was found to suggest a relationship between character education and student achievement. Achievement in districts that had implemented character education programs lagged behind control districts, even after controlling for pre-program achievement levels and socioeconomic status. The authors concluded that as outcome measures became further removed from the goals of character education programs, their relationship to character education weakened.

- Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, and Smith (2006) studied the relationship between character education and academic achievement in California elementary schools. The

researchers selected a random sample of 120 schools that had applied to the California Department of Education for recognition as distinguished elementary schools. Therefore, the sample was not representative of all California elementary schools, only the more academically successful schools in the state. The extent of schools' implementation of character education programs was compared to each school's SAT-9 scores and their Academic Performance Index (the API is the foundation of California's accountability system and measures schools' academic performance and growth using test score and demographic data). The extent to which schools implemented a character education initiative was found to be significantly and positively correlated with language and math SAT-9 scores over a period of three years and with reading scores for two of the three years. Higher rankings on the API and SAT-9 were significantly and positively correlated with four character education indicators: schools' ability to maintain a clean and safe physical environment; evidence that teachers modeled good character; opportunities for students to contribute to the school and community; and promoting a caring community and positive social relationships. The authors concluded that character education programs can have a positive impact on academic achievement, but recognized the need to study this relationship in a larger range of schools, especially in schools classified as academically average and below-average.

- Evaluations of the *Child Development Project* (CDP) have produced mixed results regarding the program's impact on students' levels of academic achievement.

  - Solomon, Watson, Delucchi, and Battistich (1988) studied the effects of the CDP in San Francisco area elementary schools. Six schools were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Treatment and control schools were statistically similar on a variety of demographic variables, such as school size, student mobility, and achievement test scores. Students began the CDP in kindergarten and continued through grade 4. The researchers found no significant differences between grade 4 treatment and control groups' California Achievement Test (CAT) scores. However, a follow-up study (Solomon et al., 1996) analyzed student data from four of the original six schools and found that the treatment group received significantly higher grade 6 reading comprehension scores (on a test developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress) than the control group. The researchers suggested that participation in the CDP may have provided students with long-term academic benefits. (Due to decreased financial support, one treatment school and one control school were omitted from the follow-up study.)

  - Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, and Lewis (2000) evaluated the CDP in 24 elementary schools from six school districts across the United States. Control schools were matched with treatment schools on a variety of demographic characteristics. The researchers found no significant differences between treatment and control group students' levels of achievement in reading, math, or inductive reasoning. The authors then compared control schools with five schools that were determined to have implemented the CDP to a great extent (high-change schools). In reading and math, scores in two of the high-change schools were significantly higher than scores at control schools, although results were inconsistent across the three program years studied. No reading and math differences were found between the other three high-change schools and the control schools. In addition, no differences were noted between any of the high-change schools and the control schools in inductive reasoning.

  - Battistich, Schaps, and Wilson (2004) tracked the above sample of elementary students through six, seventh, and eighth grades. They found no significant differences between CDP and control group students in grade point average or scores on district-administered reading and math achievement tests. However, a comparison of students in high-change and control schools yielded significant positive effects favoring the treatment group for both grade point average and reading and math scores.

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On A Local Note

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) has required that character education be taught in grades K-12 since 1995. At that time, the district adopted nine core values that served as the basis for the district's character education program: citizenship, cooperation, fairness, honesty, integrity, kindness, pursuit of excellence, respect, and responsibility. Although Florida State Statute requires each school district to adopt or develop a character education program for students in grades K-12, the district's implementation of a character education program predated the state requirement by almost 10 years. To support the initiative, teaching materials were developed for elementary, middle, and senior high school teachers. Professional development on the implementation of the program, as well as workshops and ethics-based programs, were offered to all schools throughout the district.

In 2005, M-DCPS was awarded a $1.5 million Partnership in Character Education Program (PCEP) grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Following recruitment and planning phases, implementation of the program began in early 2007. The grant is currently being used to expand the district's existing character education initiative by providing materials, curriculum development projects, and professional development for teachers. The PCEP is currently implemented in 22 M-DCPS schools (10 elementary schools, 6 middle schools, and 6 senior high schools) on a voluntary basis and the district plans to expand the program in future years. The program's philosophy is that teachers are key to character development and they must have the autonomy to design, choose, and implement the activities best suited to their students. Therefore, the PCEP does not provide teachers with an add-on curriculum, but exposes them to best practices, experts in the field, and the resources needed to implement character development activities. Information provided by program staff indicated that character education is infused throughout the school day in language arts, social studies, and science.

Staff from the PCEP monitor program implementation at participating schools on a regular basis and provide teachers with needed assistance and support. Professional development activities have included character development workshops and symposia with leading character education experts from organizations such as Character Development Systems and the Institute for Humane Education. Teachers are also given numerous opportunities to meet and share ideas with each other. All participating teachers have received grade-level character and ethics lesson plans containing activities and resources and are provided with books and supplies to assist with their implementation of the program.

As part of the initiative, students participate in service learning activities. Examples of recent projects include providing toiletry packages to a local homeless shelter, contributing "wish list" items to a foster home, and donating worn tennis shoes to resurface playgrounds in low-income neighborhoods. Parent meetings and family activities have been developed for each of the nine core values and conducted at all participating schools. The initiative is publicized through articles in *The Social Studies Sentinel* newsletter. The PCEP has partnered with St. Thomas University's Center for Ethics to provide speakers for professional development and meeting space for staff and parent events.

The PCEP grant includes funding for an external evaluator who will gather data on the impact of the program. Areas evaluated will include student behaviors and academic achievement, as well as teachers' and students' perceptions of the program. The evaluation will be conducted at the conclusion of the 2007-08 school year.

Summary

Character education uses all aspects of school life to develop ethical, responsible, and caring young people through an emphasis on universal values, such as responsibility, respect, honesty, courage, fairness, and kindness. Character education programs come in a wide variety of styles. Some schools design their own programs, some adopt pre-packaged programs from commercial publishers, and others combine elements from a variety of initiatives. Most character education programs in U.S. public schools use a socio-emotional curriculum that includes lessons in social awareness, personal improvement, problem solving, and decision making. Researchers have identified strategies that are critical to the success of character education programs, such as building community consensus for the values being taught,

modeling positive behavior, and integrating character education and the academic curriculum. Research indicates that character education programs help to promote pro-social behavior; reduce some at-risk behaviors; improve school climate; and reduce absenteeism and disciplinary referrals. Some studies have also suggested that character education programs lead to increases in students' levels of academic achievement, but no conclusive evidence has yet been provided. As Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) observed, as outcome measures become further removed from the goals of character education programs, their relationship to character education tends to weaken.

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