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UPDATE ON CHARACTER EDUCATION RESEARCH

At a Glance

This Information Capsule summarizes research-based strategies for implementing effective character education programs and discusses some of the challenges that were encountered by schools when they established character education programs. Research conducted on the impact of character education programs on students' academic achievement, behavior, knowledge, and attitudes is also reviewed. Although several character education programs have shown some evidence of effectiveness, evaluations of character education programs have generally tended to produce mixed results. Researchers therefore recommend that districts look carefully at the effectiveness of specific character education programs before implementing them in their schools.

A previous Information Capsule on character education was released in May 2008 by Miami-Dade County Public Schools' Department of Research Services. The capsule summarized types of character education programs, strategies critical to the success of character education programs, and research studies conducted on the effectiveness of character education programs. The report is available at http://drs.dadeschools.net/Information_Capsules/IC0712.PDF. The current Information Capsule updates the information provided in the earlier report and includes findings from research studies that were not available at the time the 2008 report was written.

Many school districts across the U.S. have implemented character education programs to encourage their students' positive development and pro-social behavior and even to increase their levels of academic achievement. Most scholars believe that character education provides youth with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to be life-long learners, get good jobs, maintain healthy interpersonal relationships, and be productive and contributing members of society (Fink & Geller, 2013; Montonye et al., 2013; Sojourner, 2012; Berkowitz, 2011; New Schools Venture Fund, 2007).

The U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (n.d.) defined character education programs as those that are "implemented in elementary, middle, or high schools that involve deliberate, proactive attempts to foster positive character development." The Clearinghouse noted that character education programs have features that overlap with those of other types of programs, such as conflict resolution, violence prevention, and service learning. However, character education programs differ from programs that focus on a single domain (such as drug use or anger management) and instead promote values that are generalized across contexts (such as respect, integrity, responsibility, trustworthiness, and loyalty).

Character education programs generally focus on one or more of the following areas:

- Moral character development – qualities such as fairness, empathy, generosity, and integrity;
- Performance character development – qualities such as effort, diligence, and perseverance; and
- Civic character development – qualities such as good citizenship, patriotism, and justice, that foster students’ sense of responsibility toward the community and society (Boston University, 2014; Fink & Geller, 2013; Tough, 2011; What Works Clearinghouse, n.d.).

Strategies for Effective Character Education Programs

Character.org is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of organizations and individuals committed to fostering effective character education in U.S. schools. The organization developed 11 principles of character education to serve as a guide for the design and implementation of character education programs.

1. The school community promotes core ethical and performance values as the foundation of good character.
2. The school defines character comprehensively to including thinking, feeling, and doing.
3. The school uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development.
4. The school creates a caring community.
5. The school provides students with opportunities for moral action.
6. The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.
7. The school fosters students’ self-motivation.
8. The school staff is an ethical learning community that shares responsibility for character education and adheres to the same core values that guide the students.
9. The school fosters shared leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative.
10. The school engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.
11. The school regularly assesses its culture and climate, the functioning of its staff as character educators, and the extent to which its students manifest good character (Character.org, n.d.).

Dr. Marvin W. Berkowitz, Sanford N. McDonnell Endowed Professor of Character Education and Co-Director of the Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, concluded, “Character education is much more likely to work when it is well-designed, when it relies upon research-based principles and a meaningful conceptual framework, and when it is fully and accurately implemented” (Berkowitz, 2011). He found that the following implementation practices were most prevalent in effective character education programs:

- All effective character education programs include at least optional teacher professional development.

- School leaders value character education, understand what it entails, and act as character education instructional leaders.
- Character education is reflected in all aspects of school life.
- Character education includes peer interaction strategies, such as class meetings, cooperative learning, peer mentoring, peer tutoring, and peer conflict mediation/resolution programs.
- Students receive social-emotional skills training.
- Effective character education programs incorporate two types of role models: (1) fictional characters, historical figures, or contemporary and local heroes; and (2) administrators, teachers, and support staff at the student's school.
- Character education programs have a list of targeted outcomes and a curriculum that focuses on these outcomes. The most common outcomes are respect, responsibility, fairness, honesty, and caring.
- Character education programs do not induce desirable behavior by rewarding students. Character is only truly developed if it is valued intrinsically.
- Successful character education programs integrate character-based lessons into academic lessons. Many character education programs claim integration, but instead merely "wedge" a character lesson between two academic lessons.
- Effective character education programs focus on service or service learning.
- Character education programs are most effective when families participate as partners in the programs, with schools truly collaborating with parents to design, deliver, and evaluate their character education initiatives.
- Schools reinforce the formation of nurturing relationships between adults and students, among students, and among adults. Nurturing relationships evolve when individuals have sustained contact and develop trust in each other.
- Effective character education has high but attainable expectations for both academics and behavior.
- Successful character education programs allow students to feel empowered. Class meetings are one way that teachers can prepare students to become contributing members of society (Berkowitz, 2011).

The *Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Project* was created as part of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994. The project was supported by the Office of Safe and Drug-Free

Schools at the U.S. Department of Education. Under the Pilot Project, grants were awarded to 45 states and the District of Columbia to integrate character education into the curriculum. Studies of the character education programs at Pilot Project schools found that successful initiatives implemented the following strategies:

- Steering or advisory committees were formed to involve a broad base of community members, including representatives from law enforcement, chambers of commerce, businesses, social service and health agencies, faith-based organizations, parents, and students.
- Effective character education programs allowed families to participate by offering them training or by including them in the design and delivery of the initiatives. When families were given opportunities to participate in their children's character education programs and received support in doing so, they were more likely to believe that the programs were successful. Families acted as resources for schools, were informed of developments through newsletters, and served on steering committees.
- Community members provided support and vision for character education by clearly articulating the importance of character development to students. Community leaders reported that students' community participation was an important positive influence on student acceptance of character education.
- Training for staff was provided on how to integrate character education into the culture of the school.
- Positive character traits were modeled by all adults in the school, home, and community.
- Character education was not just a single subject, but was an integral part of school life.
- A number of states created opportunities for students to learn while performing service learning or community assistance projects. Some states provided leadership roles for students by creating student-edited newspapers about character, developing student advisory councils related to character education, and providing students with opportunities to serve as mentors and role models (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Additional implementation practices that researchers have found to be associated with effective character education programs include:

- Accountability should be built into character education programs. New Schools Venture Fund (2007) recommended that students be held accountable for learning and exhibiting the principles of character, and teachers be held accountable for teaching the principles and modeling ideal behaviors. For example, Perspectives Charter Schools developed its own character education curriculum, *A Disciplined Life (ADL)*. Students' grades were based not only on their performance in ADL classes, but also on how well they exhibited the principles of character in all of their academic classes and school activities.

Regardless of students' overall grade point average, if they earned a grade lower than a B in an ADL course, they were not eligible to be placed on the honor roll.

- Schools should introduce students to character education at the earliest possible grade. Character education can be integrated into lessons at the early grade levels using techniques such as role playing and drawing (Bauer, 2015; New Schools Venture Fund, 2007).

Challenges Common to Character Education Programs

Research indicates that many states face common challenges when they establish character education programs. States participating in the *Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Project* reported that they struggled with the following issues:

- The development and implementation of character education initiatives proved to be very time-consuming for all school staff, especially teachers.
- States were often required to respond to complaints that character education programs detracted from academic priorities.
- Character education initiatives were not effective when there was a lack of cooperation between administrators and teachers or between school officials and community leaders.
- High levels of staff turnover disrupted program implementation at many schools. Some schools and districts addressed the challenge by offering staff development on a continuous basis so initiatives could continue even when staff changes occurred.
- Character education programs often competed with other budget priorities. States reported that they attempted to reduce the costs of character education initiatives by producing reusable materials, expanding the use of free Internet resources, and increasing the use of technology for training and communications (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Researchers have identified two other challenges that are frequently encountered during the implementation of character education programs.

- Many schools have struggled with how to prioritize character education or fit it into the school day. With the increased emphasis on standardized testing and teacher performance pay systems, educators have grown more eager to produce high scores on student achievement tests and are often more reluctant to use part of the instructional day for character education (Sojourner, 2012; New Schools Venture Fund, 2007).
- Some character education initiatives include youth development program components. However, according to Lapsley and Yeager (2013), studies have found that some youth development interventions actually have a negative effect on students. For example:

- *Scared Straight* required juvenile delinquent youth to spend time with actual convicts in an effort to deter criminal behavior. Instead, some studies reported that the program actually led to increases in the likelihood that youth would commit a crime in the future.
- Studies found that zero tolerance policies, which deliver severe consequences for a single instance of undesirable behavior, failed to reduce conduct problems in schools and instead increased racial inequalities in discipline.
- *Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE)* was designed to teach teenagers effective drug resistance and refusal skills. However, the negative social influences students were exposed to when they participated in the program often led to increases in their use of alcohol and other drugs.
- Some studies reported that anti-bullying interventions conducted in high schools were associated with increases in bullying rates. Researchers suggested that instead of deterring bullying, these programs taught adolescents new bullying techniques.

Based on these findings, Lapsley and Yeager (2013) concluded that problem behaviors can be “contagious.” In other words, sustained contact between youth who are engaged in negative behaviors or who have negative attitudes can have the unintended effect of spreading those negative behaviors and attitudes among participants. For this reason, Dodge (cited in Lapsley & Yeager, 2013) argued that efforts should be undertaken to (1) deliver interventions to full classes of students instead of only at-risk students, and (2) reduce opportunities for unstructured or poorly supervised peer interactions.

Research on the Impact of Character Education Programs

Studies have examined the impact of character education programs on students’ academic achievement, behavior, knowledge, and attitudes. Evaluations of character education programs have found mixed results and researchers agree that more rigorous studies are needed before definitive conclusions can be drawn (Rose, 2014; Lapsley & Yeager, 2013; Sojourner, 2012; Social and Character Development Research Consortium, 2010).

Reasons for inconsistent research findings include:

- Character education is a term applied to a broad range of programs and strategies. Success or failure of character education programs depends on the specific program being implemented, the quality of implementation, the population of students, and the way success is defined and measured.
- Student age differences may explain why some character education programs are found to be more effective than others. For example, anti-bullying programs that teach character traits such as respect and empathy have high success rates among younger students, but tend to be less effective with adolescents.
- Some initiatives are not fully implemented because teachers do not receive the professional development they need to effectively fulfill their roles as character educators.

- In some cases, schools lack baseline data to measure student improvement in behavior, knowledge, and attitudes that may have occurred as a result of their participation in character education initiatives (Rose, 2014; Lapsley & Yeager, 2013; Sojourner, 2012; Berkowitz, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Following is a summary of research that has recently been conducted on character education programs.

What Works Clearinghouse. The Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education maintains the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) that catalogs empirical evidence on the efficacy of a wide variety of educational programs. The WWC reviewed 93 studies of 41 character education programs. Of these, only studies related to 13 programs met the WWC's evidence standards. The WWC has strict screening criteria that exclude many studies from consideration. For example, in order to be included in a WWC review, studies must use a randomized trial or quasi-experimental design with strong controls and use outcome measures that have adequate levels of internal consistency and high test-retest and inter-rater reliability (Lapsley & Yeager, 2013; What Works Clearinghouse, 2007).

The WWC rated character education programs using six levels of effectiveness: positive, potentially positive, mixed, no discernible effects, potentially negative, and negative. The programs were rated on three outcome domains: (1) behavior; (2) knowledge, attitudes, and values; and (3) academic achievement.

A summary of the results of the WWC's review of character education programs indicated the following:

- *Positive Action* appeared to be the most effective character education program, with studies indicating it had positive effects on students' behavior and academic achievement.
- *Too Good for Violence* was found to have potentially positive effects on students' behavior and on their knowledge, attitudes, and values.
- Four additional character education programs were found to have potentially positive effects on students' behavior: *Caring School Community*, *Connect with Kids*, *Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence*, and *Too Good for Drugs*.
- Two additional programs were found to have positive or potentially positive effects on students' knowledge, attitudes, and values: *Building Decision Skills* and *Too Good for Drugs and Violence*.
- *Lessons in Character* was found to have potentially positive effects on students' levels of academic achievement.
- There was no evidence of positive effects on students in any of the three domains for four of the character education programs reviewed by the WWC: *Facing History and*

Ourselves, Heartwood Ethics Curriculum, Lions Quest Skills for Action, and Voices Literature and Character Education (What Works Clearinghouse, 2007).

What Works in Character Education. Marvin Berkowitz and colleagues (cited in Lapsley & Yeager, 2013) also reviewed studies that were conducted on character education programs. Their review included more programs than the WWC's review because they used less rigorous methodological inclusion criteria. Berkowitz and colleagues' review included 69 outcome studies representing 33 character education programs. They concluded that character education programs can have a positive impact on a wide range of student outcomes, including academic achievement, pro-social behavior, problem-solving skills, drug use, violence/aggression, school behavior, knowledge and attitudes about risk behavior, emotional competency, and attachment to school.

Seven character education programs were reviewed by both the WWC and Berkowitz and colleagues. Of these seven programs, there was agreement regarding four programs. Both reviews concluded that the following programs demonstrated some evidence of effectiveness:

- *Building Decision Skills*
- *Caring School Community* (formerly *The Child Development Project*)
- *Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence*
- *Positive Action*

Berkowitz and colleagues, but not the WWC, concluded that the following two character education programs had positive effects on students: *Facing History and Ourselves* and *Lions Quest Skills for Action*.

Berkowitz and colleagues also found the following two character education programs, which were not reviewed by the WWC, to be effective:

- *Roots of Empathy* was associated with increases in students' social and emotional knowledge, pro-social behaviors (helping and sharing), perceptions of caring classrooms, and decreases in aggressive behavior.
- The *Seattle Social Development Project* promoted both school bonding and academic achievement. The program also had long-term positive effects on numerous adolescent health-risk behaviors, such as delinquency, heavy drinking, substance abuse, and gang membership (Lapsley & Yeager 2013).

Both Berkowitz and colleagues and the WWC agreed that the *Heartwood Ethics Curriculum* was not effective.

Social and Character Development Research Consortium. The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Violence Prevention collaborated to conduct impact evaluations of seven programs aimed at improving students' character and behavior. The evaluations followed a cohort of over 6,000 students as they moved from third to fifth grade and examined the effects of the seven programs, together and separately, on students after one, two, and three school years. Student and school outcomes used to evaluate the impact of the programs were grouped into four domains: social and emotional competence; behavior; academics; and perceptions of

school climate. Four data collection instruments were used: the Child Report; the Primary Caregiver Report; the Teacher Report on Student; and the Teacher Report on Classroom and School (Social and Character Development Research Consortium, 2010).

The seven character education programs that were evaluated were:

- *Academic and Behavioral Competencies* - social skills training and behavior management.
- *Competitive Support Program* - social and emotional learning, social dynamics training, social problem-solving, behavior management, and peer networks.
- *Love in a Big World* - character education focused on courage, honesty, kindness, and caring.
- *Positive Action* - social and emotional learning focused on empathy, self-control, social skills, social bonding, self-efficacy, honesty, and goal setting.
- *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)* - social and emotional learning focused on emotional literacy, self-control, social competence, peer relations, and interpersonal problem-solving.
- *The 4Rs Program (Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution)* - conflict resolution and literacy (social problem-solving, anger management, and mediation).
- *Second Step* - violence prevention and social and emotional learning (empathy, anger management, impulse control, and problem-solving).

Analysis of all seven programs combined indicated that on average, the programs did not improve students' social and emotional competence, behavior, academic achievement, or student and teacher perceptions of school climate. Evaluations of the individual character education programs did not find evidence that any of the seven programs had beneficial impacts on students' social and character development.

The researchers pointed out, however, that the evaluations may have underestimated the impact of the character education programs for several reasons:

- In each of the evaluations, the control condition was not a "no treatment" control group, but a "standard practice" control group. In other words, control schools used their standard social and character development activities, which turned out to be high in quantity and broad in scope.
- A large proportion of students in each treatment group (ranging from 29 percent to almost 50 percent, depending on the program) did not participate in the studies because of non-consent or non-completion of the surveys.
- In some cases, it could not be determined whether students not taking part in the character education program differed significantly from those who did take part. In one instance (*Competitive Support Program*), researchers found differences between treatment and control groups that might have been related to differences in outcomes – treatment group teachers had less teaching experience in their current schools than

control group teachers and treatment group students reported greater negative school orientation than control group students.

Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) Schools. Character development is incorporated into the academic curriculum at approximately 150 KIPP charter schools across the country. KIPP is aimed at children and teenagers from low-income families. Its explicit goal is to increase college enrollment by combining an emphasis on factors proven to increase academic success (such as high expectations and parental involvement) with a focus on developing seven character strengths: zest, grit, self-control, optimism, curiosity, gratitude, and social intelligence. These character strengths are tracked on a “character growth card” and encouraged through classroom discussions and assignments that incorporate lessons about character into conventional academic activities. Teachers model and praise displays of good character (Steinberg, 2014).

A national evaluation of 43 KIPP middle schools conducted by Mathematica Policy Research found that although KIPP had a significant positive impact on students’ performance on state assessments in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies, the program had no significant effect on measures of character strength. The estimated impacts on indices of student-reported self-control, academic self-concept, school engagement, effort/persistence in school, and educational aspirations were not statistically significant. KIPP was also found to have no statistically significant effect on several measures of student behavior, including self-reported illegal activities, an index of good behavior, and parents’ reports of behavior problems. In fact, KIPP students were more likely to report behaviors such as losing their temper, arguing or lying to their parents, or giving their teachers a hard time, compared to control group students (those whose families had entered, but not won, a lottery to gain admission to a KIPP school) (Tuttle et al., 2013).

Summary

This report updated a previous Information Capsule on character education that was distributed by Miami-Dade County Public Schools’ Department of Research Services in 2008. The current Information Capsule summarized research-based strategies for implementing effective character education programs, including family and community involvement, teacher professional development, and modeling of positive character traits by all adults in the school. Challenges that were encountered by schools when they established character education programs were also reviewed, such as time constraints, lack of staff support, and budget shortfalls.

Research conducted on the impact of character education programs on students’ academic achievement, behavior, knowledge, and attitudes was summarized. Several programs, such as *Building Decision Skills*, *Caring School Community*, *Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence*, *Positive Action*, and *Too Good for Violence*, have shown some evidence of effectiveness, but evaluations of character education programs have tended to produce mixed results. Researchers therefore recommend that districts look carefully at the effectiveness of specific character education programs before implementing them in their schools.

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