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Researchers Urge Broad View on How to Build Character

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In a research lab at South Carroll High School, rare diamondback terrapins thrive in an oversized aquarium, a fungus that is threatening the American chestnut tree cultivates in petri dishes awaiting further study, and a beneficial sea algae begins to sprout on a reef of plastic pods that students designed to be environmentally friendly.



Seniors Luqman Harper, left, Sydney Williamson, and Norman Gorman discuss both their positive and negative character traits in a class at Hyde Leadership Charter School in Washington.
—Christopher Powers/Education Week

The real-world experiments conducted by South Carroll students in this rapidly growing suburb west of Baltimore are intended to teach scientific principles while also dispensing significant life lessons about the environment and nature's delicate balance. Such moral and ethical principles often go hand in hand with academic content, educators here say.

Administrators and teachers at the 1,100-student school have been working for more than a decade to infuse moral principles into school policies and processes, as well as into subject matter. All the while, they've strived to meet the school's stated mission to provide "an environment conducive to academic achievement, positive social development, and self-reliance."

Such intentional, schoolwide efforts to build competence *and* character in high school students are as rare as those diamondback turtles, experts say. But a new study promotes just such a broader view of character education, one that goes beyond the traditional emphasis on morals and values to incorporate the intellectual and personal habits and characteristics of productive citizens.

While many initiatives have focused on the morality part—primarily by emphasizing positive behaviors and relationships—it is the addition of the performance aspect that will push students to do their best work, according to the report's authors, Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson, researchers at the Center for the 4th and 5th R's (Respect and Responsibility) at the State University of New York College at Cortland.

'A Higher Standard'

In their report, the authors argue that helping teenagers navigate their way through the developmental changes of adolescence and the ethical questions they face each day is critical for both academic and personal success.

"To develop the positive intellectual and ethical potential of adolescents, reduce negative teen behaviors that injure self and others, and create safe, caring, and effective schools, high schools must embrace educating for character as central to their mission," the researchers write in a study on character education released this fall.

They describe the characteristics of "Smart & Good High Schools," based on their study of relevant literature in the field, interviews with educators and colleagues, guidance from panels of experts, and visits to 24 schools across the country—both public and private, large and small—that have put into practice a number of strategies and programs to build both "excellence and ethics."

Such schools, they say, promote those ideals through all phases of school life: the curriculum content, interactions between students and staff, high academic standards, rules and discipline, conflict resolution, co-curricular programs, parent involvement, and the overall school environment.

“When you’re talking about education reform and character education, it’s as if they are two distinct things,” said Michael Josephson, the founder and president of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, which operates the Los Angeles-based Character Counts! education initiative. “One of the things the report helps document is that, in fact, the two are very closely related. When you have an effective character education program, it does affect the academics.”

Programs should build students’ competence, diligence, perseverance, and self-discipline—or “performance character”—as well as social responsibility and spirituality—or “moral character,” the report says. All can be accomplished in meaningful, and constitutionally acceptable, ways, Mr. Lickona says.

“This is a new, richer theory for designing what character education should and could be at the high school level,” Mr. Davidson said. “This is about creating an intentional culture, ... a school that imprints or leaves a distinguishing mark on students.”

Schools can work toward such a model by establishing some essential conditions, such as strong leadership, optimal school size, time for teachers to plan and reflect on their work, manageable teaching loads, a safe environment, a focus on relationships, and adequate resources. Educators should also engage students, parents, and community members in setting goals and finding ways to meet them.

At South Carroll, the principles highlighted in the report come to the forefront in many regular activities. In daily advisory periods, for example, students debate the finer points of the school honor code or organize events that expose the largely white student body to a multicultural lineup of speakers and performers. After school, students run food drives and plan ceremonies honoring local military veterans.

“We want to emphasize personal character, ... holding yourself to a higher standard in how you conduct yourself,” said student government President Brendan Schlauch, a South Carroll senior.

Helping Families

But in a comprehensive high school of more than 1,100 students, in a once-rural community with growing tensions over increasing development and diversity, maintaining such a focus is often difficult, according to Principal George Phillips. The school has rallied school leaders and others to address increasing harassment of students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, for example. And there have been signs of gang activity.

“Whatever happens in the community, happens here in the modern high school,” he said. “We have to do the best we can to hold the line [on character and conduct], but it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain these kinds of standards.”

Such challenges face many of the two dozen schools studied.

At Hyde Leadership Charter School, a K-12 school in the District of Columbia for example, educators work with students and parents daily to build the academic capability and personal fortitude they say it will take for the 700 African-American students to overcome the crime and poverty prevalent in their neighborhoods. The school, an arm of the private Hyde Schools in New England, which are also highlighted in the report, has an intensive parent-participation initiative and promotes a code of conduct for students and adults alike.

“We accept families, not just students,” said Principal Joanne Goubourn. “You can feel like you’re loving your

kids and helping them do great academically, but still so many things are pulling them back. They have their Hyde self and their street self, and it's a constant pull for them."

Even so, nearly all of Hyde's 2005 graduates went on to a four-year college. And the parent program has helped a number of parents get their degrees, work on improving their careers, and overcome personal challenges, Ms. Goubourn said.

Such victories make for strong arguments for character education, according to Mr. Lickona.

"This is hard work. It's not just a matter of incorporating life lessons or enforcing a code of behavior," he said. "But if you don't make that kind of investment [in building character], you are not going to reach your goals."

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

"**Character Education Report Examines High Schools,**" September 15, 2005.

"**Character Education: Our High Schools' Missing Link,**" January 29, 2003.

"**What's Right and Wrong In Character Education Today,**" September 12, 2001.

"**Politicians Stand Up For Character Education Measures,**" March 21, 2001.

"**Guidelines From a Character-Education 'Manifesto',**" May 29, 1996.

"**Clinton Urges Key Place for Character Education in Curriculum,**" May 31, 1995.

"**Character Building Key School Goal, Paper Says,**" September 7, 1994.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, read **Character Education**.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

See **South Carroll High School's Character Counts** and **Hyde Leadership Charter School's character development curriculum** to learn more about character education at each school.

The Los Angeles-based **Character Counts!**, sponsored by the **Josephson Institute of Ethics**, provides a plethora of information on character education, including **free training tools**.

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