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FOCUS ON: CHARACTER EDUCATION

Character Education Seen as Student-Achievement Tool

By **Caralee J. Adams**

Many school administrators are realizing character education, once thought of as an intrusion on the school day, can actually help students perform better.

A growing body of research supports its effectiveness, and educators say they've seen a difference in students when positive value lessons become part of the school's culture.

"Good character education is good education," said Marvin Berkowitz, a professor of character education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

"If kids come to schools where they feel valued, safe, and feel teachers have their best interests at heart, … they commit themselves," said Marvin Berkowitz, a professor of character education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. "They work harder, there are fewer distractions, and kids are more motivated. Of course they learn more."

Character education often entails a school embracing a set of values that are taught in regular advisory sessions or integrated into classroom lessons or both. Supporters say character education is simply about how people treat each other, and the ideas are fairly universal. The primary traits that schools promote, according to Mr. Berkowitz, are respect, responsibility, caring, fairness, and honesty. It is seen more in elementary schools, sometimes getting squeezed out at the secondary level to make room for more intense academics. But experts say resistance is lessening in some places.

Yet some challenge the notion of the public schools, rather than families, being charged with teaching values. They are conc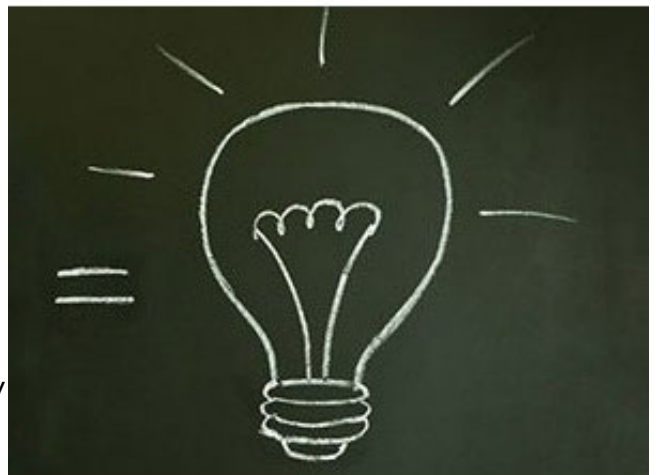erned about whose values will be taught. Others, however, maintain that schools and families should share the job of nurturing character.

Signs of a Renaissance

While many think of character education as a curriculum, the values permeate all interactions in

schools where it is effective.

"It's hard to call it a program because it's really embedded in everything we do," Julie Williams, the principal of Russell Middle School in Colorado Springs, Colo., says of her school's emphasis on what it calls the rocks values—respect, ownership, choices, knowledge, and safety. "We don't stop the day to talk about character education. We do it in every day, in every class. It's how our family works."

Since implementing character education at Russell eight years ago, discipline referrals have fallen, test scores have increased, and the school has been recognized nationally.

The popularity of character education ebbs and flows in reaction to issues of accountability, bullying, and school violence. Some say it is gaining momentum as part of the comprehensive whole school reform movement.

Concern over sexting, bullying, and the need to get students college-ready are also factors for the increased interest, according to Scott Seider, an assistant professor of education at Boston University and the author of last year's *Character Compass: How Powerful School Culture Can Point Students Toward Success*.

Russ Sojourner, the director of leadership development for the **Character Education Partnership**, a Washington-based advocacy organization, and a former principal, senses the pendulum is swinging back in favor of character education, fueled in part by the recent killings of 26 students and adults in Newtown, Conn.

In the wake of that massacre, the U.S. Department of Education is considering ways to improve school culture and invest more in character education, according to Mark Hyatt, the president and chief executive officer of the partnership.

"I do believe there is a renaissance of late," Mr. Sojourner said. "School life can be so much better than it is. Teachers and kids can be happier," he said. "Disrespectful behavior can be reduced, and all the disastrous things from chronic bullying can be so reduced."

Some advocates also point to the Common Core State Standards as a selling point for character education because the standards will require students to be more diligent in their studies.

"We do have data that show attendance goes up, discipline problems go down, achievement rises," said Mr. Hyatt.

Research on the topic is mounting. Mr. Berkowitz and Melinda Bier, also a University of Missouri research scientist, identified 69 studies of 33 different character education programs that had scientific evidence supporting their effectiveness in enhancing the academic goals of schools. A 2011 meta-analysis of school-based social and emotional learning programs published in *Child Development* found significant improvements in academic achievement, behavior, and attitudes compared with control groups.

Results of a **2010 study** commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, however, did not find social- and character-development programs improved student outcomes or teachers' perceptions of school climate. Mr. Berkowitz, among others, cites weaknesses in that research.

Building on Values

Independent and charter schools tended to be the early adopters of character education, largely because they have a nimbleness to experiment with new initiatives that regular public schools often

lack.

The **Democracy Prep** public schools in New York City are among them. Lessons in character begin in kindergarten and evolve through 12th grade.

"Before you get to academics, college-going, and rigorous courses, you have to build a school culture," said Seth Andrew, the network's founder and schools superintendent. Children start with learning to dream (discipline, responsibility, enthusiasm, accountability and maturity.) By high school, it becomes dream big, with bravery, integrity, and grit added.

The first two weeks of school every fall are dedicated entirely to values and development. Then small, weekly homeroom sessions help build long-term relationships with teachers and students around school values.

For each value, students learn concrete skills with the hope that, over time, they will develop the disposition to demonstrate them when no one is looking or rewarding them. The emphasis switches from extrinsic rewards to more intrinsic ones as the students mature, Mr. Andrew said.

Democracy Prep also requires that students demonstrate mastery of 13 civic values, including publishing a piece of work, fundraising for a cause, and canvassing the neighborhood before an election.

Great Hearts Academies, made up of 15 nonprofit charter schools in Arizona, is all about a classical liberal arts education where virtue is the aim, said Daniel Scroggin, the founder and chief executive officer. Character education is woven into all aspects of the schools, from hiring teachers who embrace its charter network's values to asking students to set their own consequences for discipline.

Honesty, kindness, friendship, perseverance, justice, and citizenship are pillars in the K-5 schools, while truth, beauty, and goodness are the focus at the 6-12 level.

Mr. Scroggin said the pillars lay a solid moral foundation. "If just grit and perseverance are key moral attributes that you see, the question is grit and perseverance for what—to make money, to rule the world?" he said. "Ultimately, it's about seeking how we can be truthful and good. … We want students to have a deep and enduring sense of care for others."

He points to college-admission test scores as one example of how the moral order leads to high achievement. The average SAT score is 1840, out of 2400, and the average ACT score is 27.3, out of 35. In 2012, the mean national scores on the SAT and the ACT were 1498 and 21.1, respectively.

'Don't Rush'

Character education is more effective when a designated portion of the day is devoted to character education, according to Mr. Seider. On top of that, the language of character education can be infused into classroom lessons and other school activities, he said.

It is also most effective when a school focuses on a specific set of traits, according to Mr. Seider's research. In his book, he looks at three Boston public schools that stress different aspects of character education. One chooses moral characteristics that are centered on integrity and compassion. Another values a civic approach, similar to that of Democracy Prep. The third selects performance characteristics of resilience and problem-solving because they are closely linked with academic achievement.

"Different types of schools are contending with different

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kinds of challenges," said Mr. Seider, noting that some need to boost academic performance for first-generation, college-going students while others in more affluent areas may have issues with cheating and could benefit from moral lessons. He advises schools to reflect, host focus groups, or administer surveys to get feedback from students, parents, and teachers about what is important to the community. Then using the data, the school can develop character education that best fits its needs.

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In St. Charles, Mo., Amy Johnston, who recently retired as the principal of Frances Howell Middle School, said she spent a year back in 2001 with her staff figuring out the direction they wanted to take with character education. The teachers read books, discussed them together, and developed a plan. Her advice: "Don't rush this."

Respect, responsibility, honesty, and compassion became the focus of the school's character-connection classes, made up of a mix of 15 students from 6th to 8th grades. At first, they met for about 20 minutes weekly to discuss issues related to character through news stories, quotes of the day, and service learning. But as teachers and students became more comfortable with the concept, relationships grew (the same group stayed together for three years), and the class began to meet daily.

"I saw changes in the kids," said Ms. Johnston, whose school was recognized by the Character Education Partnership for its model efforts. "There was more time to teach because we were not disciplining as much and not sending kids out of the classroom." Detention numbers dropped from 1,200 to just 250 after the new approach was implemented.

She said the term "character education" has gotten stale and should be rebranded. "You are just creating better people to send out into the world. It is part of being a good educator," she said. "Once you get that in place, they are going to get good grades and want to come to school."