Character Education

A study of effective character education programs shows that full parent involvement is a must.

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For a society to endure, it must socialize each generation of youth to embody the virtues and characteristics that are essential to that society's survival and prosperity. Schools, as social institutions, have long understood their sacred trust to help form each future generation of citizens. As John Adams once wrote to his son, "You will ever remember that all the end of study is to make you a good man and a useful citizen" (Quinn, 2004).

Although school has a central role in developing students' character, the most profound impact on students' development comes from their families, notably their parents—whether we look at social, moral, behavioral, or academic development. Schools readily admit this truth. National, state, and local documents on character education, for example, routinely begin by acknowledging that parents have the greatest influence on children's character development.

In a recent study we undertook with the Character Education Partnership titled *What Works in Character Education?* (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005), we identified parent involvement as a crucial characteristic of effective character education programs. To better understand what truly works in promoting the character development of students, we studied 33 character education programs across the United States that showed scientific evidence of effective-ness. Successful programs showed positive impact on numerous character outcomes (see "Aspects of Character Affected By Strong Character Education Programs," p. 66). The majority of the programs also had in common eight pedagogical strategies: direct instruction, peer interaction, classroom/behavior management, institutional reorganization, modeling/mentoring, community service/service learning, educator professional development, and family/community participation. We focus here on the strategy of family participation—specifically, meaningful participation of students' parents.

Our interest is in the nonacademic side of the student—the "other side of the report card." Much has already been written on the importance of parental involvement in promoting academic achievement. In these times, most people will think of schools as focused primarily on academic attainments—

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Parents as Partners

and unfortunately, they will be right. We believe that too many schools neglect the social-emotional and character development of the child.

The Complexity of Character Education

To understand the role of parents in character education, it is important to get the big picture. Broadly defined, character education is a comprehensive school-based approach to fostering the moral development of students.

The concept of character is complex. To help educators see the complexity of the set of outcomes that schools should target in developing character, we sometimes ask teachers to think of a moral hero and to share with us one characteristic of that person. The list gets long and diverse. Or we ask participants to picture their favorite student; again, the composite picture is rich and complex.

In a similar vein, Walker and his colleagues (1995) identified 40 discrete characteristics of moral persons, such as being caring, honest, patient, and just. It is interesting that high academic achievement rarely makes such lists. Educators seem to value students because of character, not because of academic achievements.

Our research identified "moral anatomy" as including seven different psychological domains: moral behavior, values, identity, moral personality, moral emotions, socio-

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moral reasoning, and foundational characteristics. Foundational characteristics are nonmoral aspects of personality—such as perseverance—that nonetheless help a person perform well in life (Berkowitz, 1997). The Character Education Partnership more simply describes character as "understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values."

In their forthcoming book on high school character education, Lickona and Davidson (2005) posit a comprehensive model of good character. They distinguish between *moral character* (for

example, being an ethical thinker, respectful, and responsible) and *performance character* (for example, showing critical thinking, goal setting, and perseverance).

The key point in looking at the complexity of character is that to nurture good character, schools need to hit on all cylinders. No school would feel successful if its graduates were altruistic and caring but cheated routinely, nor if they were scrupulously honest but sadistic bullies. This notion of coherence in character is what many mean when they speak of a person's

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integrity. Both schools and parents can contribute positively in developing the child's moral integrity.

Parent Involvement

According to Henderson and Berla (1994), the single best predictor of student success in school is the level of parental involvement in a child's education. The benefits of parental involvement include improved academic achievement, reduced absenteeism, improved school behavior, greater academic motivation, and lower dropout rates (Colker, n.d.; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001). Parents can also influence children's school outcomes in ways that have nothing to do with parental engagement with school, such as by setting high expectations and being loving and supportive at home, especially if the school uses a similar style (Epstein, 1983; Wentzel, 2002). Yet parental involvement in schools is not prevalent enough; only a small minority of public school teachers report strong support from parents (Public Agenda, 1999). Inner-city school teachers in particular do not feel supported by parents (Education Commission of the States, 2001).

Our study of successful programs identified three main ways that a school can involve parents in its character development agenda: The school can consider parents as information recipients, as partners, and as clients.

Parents as Information Recipients
This is the least active way parents are involved in character education initiatives. When schools describe how

parents are involved (in character education or in any matter), they typically describe how they inform parents about school events, products, and so on. For example, almost all schools have a newsletter that goes home to parents, often including character education information. Schools also offer Web sites, e-mail lists, and mailing lists for letters and announcements, and they routinely send documents home with students. As examples, both Open Circle and Second Step make frequent newsletters to parents a staple of their programs.

Aspects of Character Affected By Strong Character Education Programs

The successful character education programs profiled in *What Works in Character Education* positively affected these aspects of personal character:

- Socio-moral reasoning
- Prosocial behaviors and attitudes
- Problem-solving skills
- Knowledge and attitudes about risk behaviors (such as drug use, violence and aggression, and sex)
- Emotional competency
- Academic achievement
- Attachment to school
- General behavior
- Personal morality
- Character knowledge
- Relationships
- Communicative competency
- Attitudes toward teachers

Parents as Partners
Ideally, character education involves a partnership of stakeholders helping students develop socially in positive ways. The U.S. Department of Education's Partnerships in Character Education program makes parents' inclusion in the design and implementation of character education programs a criterion for receiving funding.

Parents must partner with schools because a child's parents also act as his or her teachers, and this is especially true in the domain of character formation. It is similarly true that teachers act *in loco parentis* while students are under their care. Wentzel's research (2002) demonstrates that effective middle school teachers use classic parenting strategies. There are indeed many parallels between parenting and teaching. Both character education and good parenting call for adults who behave in ways that promote the positive development of youth.

However, most character education programs offer parents traditional, limited roles. Many "parent involvement" efforts engage parents as adjuncts to the school's work, helping with homework, supporting extracurricular activities, and the like (Honig, Kahne, & McLaughlin, 2001). True partnerships—in which parents join with school personnel as creators, managers, and deliverers of character education—are relatively rare.

Some schools do recognize parents as resources with expertise. For example, Columbine Elementary School in Woodland Park, Colorado, a National School of Character, asked a school parent who was also an education professor to evaluate its character education initiative. The Caring Schools Community Project incorporates parents on its leadership team and trains them alongside school staff members.

El Gabilan School in Salinas, Cali-

fornia, reaches out to parents through its Child Development Project. El Gabilan holds a successful annual read-aloud night for families during which the core activity is children reading books to their families. Families are randomly assigned to small discussion groups after the reading session. At a recent read-aloud night, as families cuddled on the gym floor reading together, one father remarked,

> Where we live should be a community. . . . If our children all attend the same school, why shouldn't we parents get to know each other as well? That way our community will be more united, and we can create a better future for our children.

At West Hillsborough Elementary School in Hillsborough, California, a group of parents initiated a simple practice aimed at increasing both parent-school communication and student safety: the morning greeting. Each morning, four parents join the principal in greeting students as they are dropped off. Parents not only greet students but also inform them about school events. The school reports increased parent volunteerism and attendance at school events since this practice started.

One 5th grade teacher at Lexington Elementary School in St. Louis, Missouri, used excellent character education practices to bring parents to open school night, which consequently got parents more involved in their children's education, classroom, and school. Rather than simply telling parents how she runs her class, the teacher empowered her students at a class meeting to decide what open school night should be like in their classroom. Students chose to show off their science projects, which they had just completed. They designed the spacing and placement of materials, created signs, and even planned to serve as docents. Because planning open school night was their project, students went home eagerly

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enticing their parents to attend.

Partnering with families in this way touches on concerns that extend beyond the boundaries of the school building and promotes relationships among many stakeholders.

Parents as Clients

Another way schools can bring parental influence to bear positively on character education is to be a resource to parents. Many schools provide parents with training on topics related to child rearing; for example, positive discipline, bullying, and risky behavior. The character education program Second Step provides participating schools with a parent training video and discussion guide that can be used to teach parents

about the same social and emotional skills that their children are learning through Second Step at school. The program further encourages school principals or counselors to train families through a six-session curriculum. The curriculum helps parents apply within the family the same social skills that their children are mastering in Second Step.

The work of Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT) is an excellent example of schools reaching out to parents as clients. Developed by John Reid at the Oregon Social Learning Center (www.oslc.org), LIFT is designed to prevent antisocial, risky behaviors in elementary school. In addition to creating the curriculum for students, LIFT focuses on helping parents create healthy discipline and supervision at home. Six small-group parent meetings are held at the school. At each meeting, a facilitator reviews previous material, checks on how the week's home practice sessions went, and presents issues for the current week through role plays, lectures, and assigned exercises to try at home. When a parent misses a session, a LIFT staff person tries to meet with

them at home, or at least provides the materials from that night.

Wanted: Parents

One of the common refrains we hear from educators with whom we work is that they want more parental involvement in their schools. Our study of strong character education programs revealed ways to boost involvement.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) developed a model of what motivates—or discourages—parent involvement. First, schools need to help parents understand that it is part of their parental role to be involved in their children's education. Data about the impact of parental involvement on children's learning and development in school can help get this message across.

Second, some parents may not participate because they feel incompetent. As students get older, parental involvement decreases, partially because schoolwork gets more difficult and parents feel unable to provide assistance. Schools can deal with this second motivational hurdle by providing nonacademic avenues for parent involvement. For example, they might be asked to help on field trips or make cultural presentations, thereby nurturing social and emotional development.

Third, parents may hold back from getting involved because they don't feel welcomed by the school. Although school administrators often say that parents are welcome at any time, most parents' experience is quite different as they encounter locked doors, buzzer systems for entry, and a host of warning messages about not venturing into the school without authorization. Such practices are justifiable, but
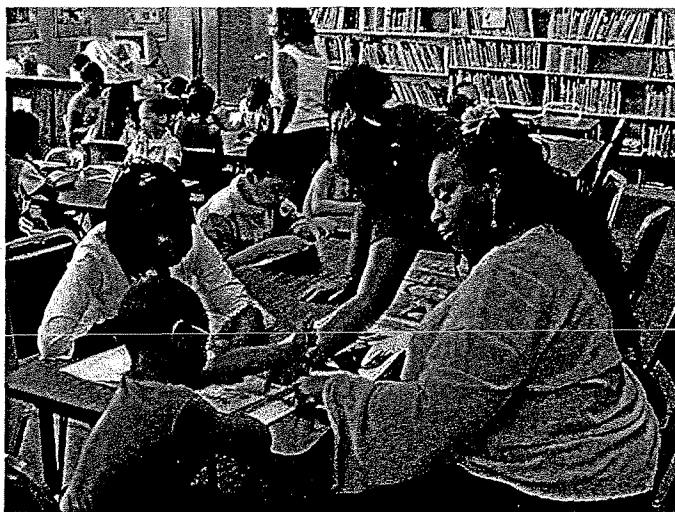
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Education is the art of making man ethical.

—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

schools should make parents feel welcome despite the need for security measures.

Some schools create a parent resource center. Forming and maintaining such a center may become a project of the school's parent-teacher organization, thereby empowering parents as partners. Laclede Elementary, a remarkably successful school in the St. Louis Public School District, sends a clear message that it values parents through its parent resource center, a large room at the front of the school fully dedicated to parents. It is an open, bright space with many seats and tables, coffee perking, and abundant resources on parenting. A staff person is assigned full-time to the room as the parent liaison. There are frequent scheduled events for parents, but the center is always open for drop-in visits.
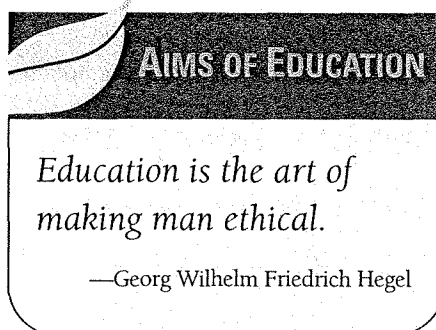
A fourth barrier to parent involvement, especially in secondary schools, may be students' outward resistance to parental involvement. Older students often appear to be less welcoming of their parents in school. Yet students consistently report that their parents are the most important guides in their lives—more so than peers, teachers, or other adults (Hart, 1999). A 1999 Public Agenda survey found that teens understood and even appreciated their parents for being involved and for pushing them to do schoolwork. "That's their job," one teen said. "Sometimes we need to be pushed; sometimes we don't behave ourselves." Public Agenda's survey revealed that "teachers, parents, and students agree on the desired goal of schooling—nurturing young people who have the motivation, self-discipline, and persistence to learn." Teens may not admit the value they place on adults who pay close attention to their progress, provide structure, and insist on responsibility.

A Win-Win-Win Proposition

Healthy character education means empowering all stakeholder groups, including such traditionally disempowered groups as students, support staff, and parents. Role modeling from parents is essential in well-functioning character education; the behaviors and practices of adults in the student's life should align with the moral mission of the school. To promote respect in students, adults must treat young people respectfully, and to foster responsibility, they must give students genuine voice and responsibility.

In this day of monomaniacal focus on core academic achievement, schools need to step back and remember their

primary mission: to promote the education and development of the whole child. Character education is a perfect complement to academic fervor. Parental involvement in schools is a win-win-win proposition for students, parents, and schools. Society also wins: The effective education of the whole child fosters the development of involved, responsible citizens. ▣

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Smart and Good High Schools

Throughout history, and in cultures all over the world, education rightly conceived has had two great goals: to help students become smart and to help them become good. They need character for both. The 2005 report *Smart and Good High Schools: Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work, and Beyond* by Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson views character as the cornerstone of success in school and life.

Eight strengths of character, taken together, offer a vision of a person flourishing over a lifetime:

■ Lifelong learner and integrative thinker.

■ Diligent and capable performer.

■ Socially and emotionally skilled person.

■ Ethical thinker.

■ Respectful and responsible moral agent.

■ Self-disciplined person who pursues a healthy lifestyle.

■ Contributing community member and democratic citizen.

■ Spiritual person engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose.

Smart and Good High Schools integrates theory, research, and on-the-ground wisdom—drawn from site visits to 24 diverse schools, hundreds of interviews, a comprehensive research review, and the input of a National Experts Panel and a National Student Leaders Panel. The report describes promising classroom and schoolwide practices that can help foster the eight strengths through an ethical learning community. It also describes practices that create a professional ethical learning community in which staff members work together to maximize their positive impact on excellence and ethics and the eight strengths of character.

The report is published by the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs and the Character Education Partnership with major support from the John Templeton Foundation. To download a free copy, go to www.cortland.edu/character/highschool.