

## Chapter 1

# Character Education

## What Is It and Why Is It Important?

Sow a thought and reap an act;  
Sow an act and you reap a habit;  
Sow a habit and you reap a character;  
Sow a character and you reap a destiny.

—ANONYMOUS

You don't get to choose how you're going to die. Or when.  
You can only decide how you're going to live.

—JOAN BAEZ

**TODAY, VOICES** from within and beyond our schools are calling for a return to a focus on *character education*—a focus that has been missing from many schools since the late 1960s. This widely popular movement is gathering support from people across the political spectrum and from all facets of society. Character education, however, is not simply a movement or an educational fad; it is central to good teaching and learning. It is, in fact, the schools' oldest mission and crucial to both moral *and* intellectual development.

### The Development of Good Character

What does it mean to talk about *character* and *character education*? The English word *character* comes from the Greek word *charassein*, which means “to engrave,” as on a wax tablet, a gemstone, or a metal surface. From that root evolved the meaning of character as a distinctive mark or sign, and from that meaning grew our conception of character as, in the words of *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, “an individual's pattern of behavior . . . his moral constitution.”

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The development of good character is about fostering the *habits of mind, heart, and action* that enable an individual to flourish, that is, to use his or her time, talent, and energy well, to become the best he or she can be. Habits of mind, heart, and action are intimately connected.

- *Good habits of mind* include developing the ability to sum up a situation, deliberate, choose the right thing to do, and then do it. Aristotle called this *practical wisdom*. It is about choosing well in all spheres of life.
- *Good habits of the heart* include developing a full range of moral feelings and emotions, including love for good and contempt for evil, as well as the capacity to empathize with others. These habits are about wanting to do what is right.
- *Good habits of action* include having the *will* to act once we have thoughtfully considered all the circumstances and relevant facts. The world is filled with people who know what the right thing to do is but who lack the corresponding habit of action, the will to carry it out.

When we have good character, more is demanded from us than merely an intellectual commitment, a heartfelt desire, or a mechanical fulfillment of responsibilities. We are motivated to do the right thing and to avoid the wrong—even if that wrong will never be found out, even when we are under pressure (for example, the pressure to cheat to keep a certain grade point average).

### ► Key Thoughts

Education in its fullest sense is inescapably a moral enterprise—a continuous and conscious effort to guide students to know and pursue what is good and what is worthwhile. Therefore character education is not about simply acquiring a set of behaviors. It is about developing the habits of mind, heart, and action that enable a person to flourish.

### ► Discussion and Reflection Activities

To delve further into the components of good character, consider these questions:

- If you were to describe someone as having good character, what would you mean by that statement?
- If you could invite a historical figure to be your school's adviser-in-residence, who would this person be? What would you want your students to learn from his or her teachings and example?

## Character Education Is Respectful of Different Cultures, Religions, and Creeds

Character education is about teaching our students how to make wise decisions and act on them. It is about helping them live a good life and contribute to the good of society. But what does it mean to live a *good life*, and what is *the good*? People differ somewhat in how they define it, but there is a huge overlap of common understandings across religious traditions, cultures, and time. Some form of the Golden Rule, for example, exists in almost every culture (see Exhibit 1.1).

Additionally, in the world's literature, religions, philosophies, and art we find a huge deposit of shared moral values. The ideals that the ancient Greeks called the cardinal virtues show up most frequently, cutting across history and cultures. The Greeks named these ideals wisdom (also called good judgment or prudence), justice, self-mastery (or temperance), and courage (or fortitude). *Wisdom* is the virtue that enables us to exercise sound

### EXHIBIT 1.1

#### The Golden Rule

*If we live according to the guidance of reason, we shall desire for others the good which we seek for ourselves.*

—Baruch Spinoza

*Help thy brother's boat across and lo! thine own has reached the shore.*

—Hindu proverb

Judaism: *What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. That is the entire law; all the rest is commentary.*

—The Talmud, Shabbat 31

Christianity: *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

—Luke 6:31

Islam: *None of you has faith unless he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.*

—Hadith (Bukhari) 2:6

Buddhism: *Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.*

—Udana Varga

Hinduism: *This is the sum of duty: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.*

—The Mahabharata

Confucianism: *"Is there one word that will keep us on the path to the end of our days?"*

*"Yes, Reciprocity. What you do not wish yourself, do not unto others."*

—The Analects

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judgment in planning and taking the right course of action in our pursuit of what is right and good. *Justice* is an other-regarding, or social, virtue, concerned with our personal, professional, and legal obligations and commitments to others. *Self-mastery*, in contrast, is an inner virtue that gives us intelligent control over our impulses and fosters moral autonomy. Lastly, *courage*, knowing what is to be feared and what is not to be feared, is the steadfastness to commit ourselves to what is good and right and actively pursue it, even when it is not convenient or popular. These virtues are called *cardinal*, from the Latin *cardo*, or “hinge,” “that on which something turns or depends,” because most other virtues are related to one or more of them. Exhibit 1.2 presents a number of these related virtues.

**EXHIBIT 1.2****Cardinal Virtues and Related Virtues**

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1. Courage (or Fortitude)  
*Related virtues*  
Loyalty  
Hope  
Perseverance  
Generosity (giving without expecting anything in return)
2. Self-Mastery (or Temperance)  
*Related virtues*  
Patience  
Diligence  
Gratitude  
Courtesy  
Order
3. Justice  
*Related virtues*  
Responsibility  
Citizenship  
Dependability or reliability  
Respect  
Sportsmanship  
Kindness/compassion
4. Wisdom (or Good Judgment or Prudence)  
*Related virtues*  
Honesty  
Integrity  
Humility

According to Aristotle, a virtue is a disposition to choose well.<sup>1</sup> A virtue usually lies on a mean between two vices—one of excess and one of deficiency. For example, courage, which means knowing what is to be feared and not to be feared, lies between excessive fear or cowardice on the one hand and a deficiency of fear or recklessness on the other (see Exhibit 1.3). We can place a virtue such as kindness on this Aristotelian scale too. If we define kindness as the disposition to show care and concern for others, an excess of care for another person could manifest itself as the vice of saccharine sweetness or obsequiousness whereas a deficiency in caring could appear as mean-spiritedness.

Certain virtues are universal. They are the intellectual and moral habits that are vital not only to our personal well-being but to the well-being of the society in which we live.

### ► Key Thoughts

Character education is respectful of our multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural society and seeks to impart certain universally recognized dispositions and habits that are vital to our personal and collective well-being.

### ► Discussion and Reflection Activities

Use these activities as a means of reflecting on virtues that everyone believes are important:

- Think of a person you admire whose background is dissimilar from your own. What intellectual and moral qualities did or does this person possess?

#### EXHIBIT 1.3

#### The Aristotelian Scale

Action or Feeling	Excess	Mean	Deficiency
Fear and confidence	Recklessness	Courage	Cowardice
Pleasure and pain	Self-indulgence	Self-mastery	Self-neglect
Giving	Wastefulness	Generosity	Stinginess
Anger	Irascibility	Patience	Lack of spirit
Self-expression	Boastfulness	Truthfulness	Mock-modesty
Social conduct	Obsequiousness	Friendliness	Cantankerousness
Hope	Presumption/Naive happy-think	Optimism	Pessimism
Shame	Shyness	Modesty	Shamelessness

Source: Adapted from Aristotle, *Ethics*, J.A.K. Thomson, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1976).

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- Review the list of cardinal virtues and related virtues in Exhibit 1.2. Explain how the related virtues depend on the cardinal virtue in each case. What related virtues would you add to this list?
- Looking back at Exhibit 1.3, identify other virtues that lie on a mean between two extremes: a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency. For example, kindness, as mentioned, may be said to lie between saccharine sweetness and mean-spiritedness; diligence may be said to lie between workaholism and laziness.

### The Arguments for Character Education

You are probably aware that some teachers, administrators, and others are quite ambivalent about involving schools in character education. In fact, many people are vehemently opposed to it. Thus, if you believe that character education is important, it helps to know the main arguments in favor of it. There are five of them:

#### Argument 1: Inevitability

Children cannot enter the educational system at age four and stay until age seventeen without having their character and moral values profoundly affected by the experience, for better or for worse. Further, becoming a serious student is one of the great ethical challenges the majority of our children face during their youth. In short, character education is inevitable, so we should be intentional about helping children to develop good habits (or virtues) and to struggle against bad ones.

#### Argument 2: Our Nation's Founders

The second argument in favor of character education is that of our nation's founders. The founders' writings, particularly those of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams, Abigail Adams, and Benjamin Franklin, are filled with admonitions that the new republic must make character education a high priority. To work as it should, democracy demands an educated and virtuous citizenry.

#### Argument 3: State Laws

The third argument is found in our state codes of education, which direct the operations of our schools. These state codes overwhelmingly support actively teaching the core moral values that provide the social glue of civic life. Currently, all fifty states address character education either directly or indirectly. By *indirectly* we mean that they establish outcomes and standards that focus on the responsibilities of democratic citizenship or on particular

attributes of civility. No state codes of education or state standards outlaw, forbid, or in any way discourage character education.

### **Argument 4: The Will of the People**

The fourth argument comes from the citizens of this country. For many years, the Gallup Organization and other polling companies have been asking the American people about their views on the performance of public schools and related topics. Ninety percent or more of adults support the teaching of honesty (97 percent), democracy (93 percent), acceptance of people of different races and ethnic backgrounds (91 percent), patriotism (91 percent), caring for friends and family members (91 percent), moral courage (91 percent), and the Golden Rule (90 percent) in the public schools.<sup>2</sup>

### **Argument 5: Intellectual Authorities**

The world's great thinkers from the West, including Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Dewey, and from the East, including Confucius, Lao-tzu, and Buddha, have all been strong advocates of giving our conscious attention to character formation and focusing our energies on living worthy lives. In recent decades, however, in the midst of what has been called a knowledge explosion, and faced with increasing questions about what in this noisy modern world is good and worthwhile, many educators have turned their attention to the development of processes and skills—reading, writing, and data storage and retrieval. Although these skills are important, they leave to others the teaching of our culture's core ethical values.

### **The Lesson of Experience**

In addition to these arguments, we should recall the lesson of experience. In the 1950s, many people had the sense that individuals in this country held a set of shared ideals and attitudes about respect and responsibility, hard work, and citizenship. Such virtues were taught directly in the school.

In the sixties, with the opposition to the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, and additional social tumult, moral authority was called into question. Teachers distanced themselves from students' moral development and attempted to become neutral facilitators, leaving students free to figure out life's toughest questions on their own and to view society's traditions of civility with skepticism and scorn. They were left free to arrive at their own values. This had deeply troubling results—relationships and respect eroded between adults and children, cynicism toward authority grew, and students were left morally adrift.

Some people argue that comparisons such as this, which hearken back to the days of *Leave It to Beaver*, are pure nostalgia for a Golden Age that

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never existed. They make the case that before the changes of the 1960s, students were narrowly indoctrinated, blindly obedient, and unreflective about their behavior and that important issues, such as racial injustice and women's rights, were largely ignored. Yet recognizing such deficiencies does not mean that character education automatically results in these problems, only that we can do better.

With our experience and the advantages of hindsight, we are now better positioned to help students internalize good habits of mind, heart, and action. As educators, we know the importance of providing them with the example, guidance, and coaching they need to use their freedom well.

**► Key Thoughts**

The world's great thinkers, our country's founders, the laws of the land, and popular sentiment all recognize character education as essential. However, in part because of the knowledge explosion and in part because they have not wanted to impose moral values on their students, many schools in recent decades have decided to focus on information processing skills and to leave character education to someone else.

**► Discussion and Reflection Activities**

To increase your ability to articulate the strong arguments for character education, reflect on these questions:

- Which argument for character education do you find most compelling and why?
- What arguments can you add to this list?
- How would you define and describe character education to parents in your school? How would you describe the purpose of character education to your students?

**► Best Practice Story**

Fifty-eight words. How do you sum up the mission, vision, and ethos of a school in fifty-eight words? Try this:

*At Slavens we take the high road. We genuinely care about ourselves, each other and our school. We show and receive respect by using kind words and actions, listening thoughtfully, standing up for ourselves and others, and taking responsibility for our own behavior and learning. This is who we are even when no one is watching!*



This is the code of conduct at Slavens School, a K-8 school in Denver, Colorado, and it is not a dusty document. The Slavens community consistently uses these fifty-eight words to examine their thoughts, their actions, and their efforts to become an exemplary school.

The school created the code because, while teachers had individual classroom expectations, what they really longed for was a common set of goals and expectations that would resonate in the hallways, lunchroom, and playground. After creating a code of conduct, the faculty then had the task of not only presenting it to students, but helping it come alive in the life of the school and its pupils. This did not happen overnight. The school broke down the code sentence by sentence and put the sentences on pieces of paper throughout the school. They then asked students to take the part of the code they understood the least and write about it in terms of their personal experience: What does this mean to you? Teachers spent time in class reviewing various aspects of the code and looking for examples of these principles in history and literature. The drama teacher had students do skits in which they explored the aspects of the code. Through these efforts they started learning from each other's insights and their own understanding became more sophisticated. In an era of high profile, senseless and brutal acts by young people, take by contrast these two comments from Slavens students, "We think about our behavior. We think about what we are going to do before we do it," and "Taking the high road means we do what we know is right deep down. We [know] who we are in our hearts."