Restoring Civility and Character in our Nation

By Joseph W. Mazzola, Executive Director, Character Education Partnership

Is it just me, or are we seeing more breaches of basic civility? Here are some recent examples in the news:

1. The President makes a nationally-televised address before both houses of Congress…and, during the speech, Representative Joe Wilson loudly shouts out "You lie."

2. Elected officials hold town hall meetings in communities throughout the nation… and many quickly turn into chaotic, "in your face," shouting matches.

3. Serena Williams is in the U.S. Open…and smashes her racket after losing the first set and then, after being called for a foot fault, rips into an official with an obscenity-laced outburst that included words about "shoving this ball down your [expletive] throat."

4. The President announces that he's going to speak to America's youth to encourage them to work hard, do their best and stay in school…and he is immediately accused of attempting to brainwash kids and use them for political purposes.

5. Taylor Swift wins a big MTV award…and during her acceptance speech, Kanye West snatches the microphone from her and announces that another entertainer really deserved to win.

What the heck is going on here? Sadly, this list could go on. However, I think most would agree that basic civility does, in fact, appear to be on the decline. Many in our field would also say this is just one more symptom of a larger disease in our nation—a breakdown of good character.

Aristotle defined good character as the life of right conduct in relation to oneself and to others. Dr. Tom Lickona, in Educating for Character, added that "Aristotle reminds us of what, in modern times, we are prone to forget: The virtuous life includes self-oriented virtues (such as self-control and moderation) as well as other-oriented virtues (such as generosity and compassion), and the two kinds are connected. He then added, "We need to be in control of ourselves to do right by others."

So, what role do schools have in all of this? A major role! It is impossible for a school to be character development neutral. Like it or not, realize it or not, or even admit it or not, all schools (and educators) are in the character development business. Enforcement of disciplinary policies teaches character…the behavior, attitude and modeling by adults teaches character…what is tolerated or not tolerated in classrooms teaches character…the locker room philosophy teaches character…the views toward academic integrity teach character. This list goes on, too.

Visionary teachers and leaders who want to graduate "good and smart" students from their schools understand. They take bold action by developing comprehensive programs that intentionally stress positive character development in all areas. Toward that end, they ensure that respect, honesty, responsibility and civility are woven into the entire school culture and the academic curriculum.

Nelson McLeod, former principal of Newport Mill Middle School in MD, a 2007 National School of Character, said, "Character education is an opportunity to enhance the academic, personal, and social-emotional culture of a school." He helped create a caring school community where students (and teachers) flourished.

Newport Mill and other exceptional schools of character reinforce what good parents teach their daughters and sons at home. And, they graduate young people who are more apt to grow up and become honest, just, compassionate citizens.

That wise old man, Aristotle, also said we become what we repeatedly do. If we consistently practice doing the right thing at home and school when we are young, we tend to internalize doing the right thing as we continue on life's journey. In fact, at a certain point, we don't even think about it any longer—doing the right thing simply becomes a habit.

Civility is not the entire picture when it comes to integrity and good character. But conducting yourself with humility and treating others with respect and dignity can go a long way. When about 16 years old, George Washington was given an assignment from his schoolmaster to hand-write "The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior." The list included over 100 rules. Ironically, the very first one was "Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those who are present."

Maybe it's time to bring that rule back today!