

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION?

Thomas Lickona

Director, Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect and Responsibility)
State University of New York at Cortland

The Stony Brook School Symposium on Character
October 6, 2001

In my efforts in character education, I'm privileged to work in two different contexts. As a Roman Catholic, I am sometimes invited to speak to Catholic schools. There I begin by saying that our first responsibility in Catholic education is the care of souls—and that our approach to character formation must be guided by that mission. We must help students understand the three interrelated purposes of their lives: to save their souls and help others to heaven; to build the kingdom of God, what Pope John Paul II calls “the civilization of truth and love”; and to develop the character of Christ. This is character education in what my colleague James Hunter would call a “thick moral community,” one that has a rich tradition and shared worldview to draw on in guiding the formation of character.

Most of the time, however, I work in what Professor Hunter would call the “thin moral community” of the public schools. I don't think it is quite as thin as he makes it out to be, but nevertheless it presents us with a different set of challenges. How can we form character when we can't teach or promote a particular worldview?

Not long ago, this question came up when I was speaking to parents about character education at a public school in rural central New York. In the discussion period, a father asked, “If you can't bring the Bible into discussions of morality, then what basis do you have for saying that something is right or wrong?”

I said it was a good question. I pointed out what many theologians and moral philosophers have long held: that there is a natural moral law inscribed on the fleshy tablets of the human heart. We can discern this moral law through reason and experience. Fresh evidence for the existence of such a moral law comes from the research of Professor Larry Nucci (1985) at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Nucci asked children of several different faiths—Jewish, Catholic and Protestant—about actions such as hitting, stealing and telling lies about a person; would these things still be wrong even if God didn't give us a commandment prohibiting them?

About 85% of these children said these things would still be wrong even if God had forgotten to give us a commandment about them. All of the reasons they gave had to do with the fact that these actions were unfair or hurt other people. Then Nucci asked the same children

a second question: “What if God had actually given us a command telling us to do these bad things? Would that make it right? The response of most children is illustrated by an interview with a 10-year-old Jewish boy named Michael:

Interviewer: Michael, how do we know that what is written in the Torah is really the right thing to do?

Michael: Well, it doesn’t harm us, it doesn’t do bad for us. We believe in God. We think God wrote the Torah. We think God likes us if we do those things, and we think we are giving him presents to God by praying and following His rules.

Interviewer: OK, but how can we be sure that what God is telling us is really the right thing?

Michael: We’ve tried it. We’ve tried every rule in the Torah, and we know.

Interviewer: Suppose God had written in the Torah that Jews should steal. Would it then be right for Jews to steal?

Michael: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

Michael: Even if God said it, we know he can’t really mean it because it is a very bad thing to steal. Maybe it’s just a test, but we know He can’t mean it.

Interviewer: Why wouldn’t God mean it?

Michael: Because we think of God as very good—as an absolutely perfect person.

Interviewer: And because God is perfect, he wouldn’t tell us to steal? Why not?

Michael: Well, we people are not perfect, but we still understand. We’re not dumb. We still understand that stealing is a bad thing.

What is Michael saying? First of all, that a good God can’t give us a bad law—He would be contradicting Himself. Second, that even a kid, using his human intelligence, can figure out the moral law—can understand that something like stealing is wrong. In short, there is a natural moral law that is consistent with God’s revealed law (e.g., the Ten Commandments) but that has its own independent logic that even a child can grasp.

This centuries-old idea that there is a natural moral law is re-appearing in contemporary discussions of character. For example, in the popular book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens* (1998), Sean Covey (son of the famous Steven Covey) writes:

We are all familiar with the effects of gravity. Throw a book up in the air and it comes down. That is a natural law or a principle. Just as there are principles that rule the physical world, there are principles that rule the human world. Principles aren't religious. They aren't American or Chinese. They aren't mine or yours. They aren't up for discussion. They apply equally to everybody: rich or poor, king or peasant, male or female. They can't be bought or sold. If you live by these principles, you will excel. If you break them, you will fail.

Covey goes on to say you may *think* you can get away with violating these principles—with lying, cheating and stealing, for example—but in the end you will always pay a price. What are some of these principles? He says honesty is a principle. Respect is a principle. Hard work is a principle. Love is a principle. Moderation in all things is a principle. Service is a principle. These principles or natural laws are wired into us. We can, of course, use our God-given free will to go against these moral laws, but we can't escape the negative consequences of doing so. Covey quotes a line from Cecil B. DeMille, who directed the movie *The Ten Commandments*: "It is impossible for us to break the law; we can only break ourselves against the law."

How does all this relate to the task of character education? Let's begin with the question, "What is good character?" I would define the content of good character as virtue—and virtues as *objectively good human qualities* that we develop by living in harmony with the natural moral law.

The Fundamental Virtues

What are the virtues we need for strong moral character? The ancient Greeks named four. They considered *prudence*, or practical wisdom, to be the master virtue, the one that steers the others. Wisdom tells us how to put the other virtues into practice. It tells us when to act, how to act, and how to integrate competing virtues (e.g., being truthful and being charitable toward someone's feelings). Wisdom also enables us to make the essential distinctions in life: right from wrong, truth from falsehood, fact from opinion, the eternal from the transitory.

The second virtue named by the Greeks is *justice*. Justice is the virtue that enables us to treat others as they deserve to be treated. In their character education efforts, schools often center on justice because it covers all the interpersonal virtues—civility, courtesy, honesty, respect, responsibility, and tolerance—that make up so much of the moral life of the school. Justice is clearly important, but it's not the whole story.

The third, often neglected virtue is *fortitude*. Fortitude enables us to do what is right in the face of difficulty. The right decision in life is usually the hard one. One high school captures this truth in its motto: "The hard right instead of the easy wrong." Fortitude, in the words of the educator James Stenson, is "inner toughness." It enables us to deal with adversity, withstand pain, overcome obstacles, and be capable of sacrifice. If you look around at the

character of our kids and many of the adults in our society, we see a character that is soft and self-indulgent, that lacks the inner strength to handle life's inevitable hardships. Patience, perseverance, courage, and endurance are all aspects of fortitude.

The fourth virtue is *temperance*. By this the Greeks meant something profound, namely, self-mastery. Temperance is the ability to govern ourselves. It enables us to control our temper, regulate our appetites and passions, and pursue even legitimate pleasures in moderation. Temperance is the power to say no, to resist temptation, and to delay gratification in the service of higher and distant goals. An old saying recognizes the importance of temperance: "Either we rule our desires, or our desires rule us."

Christian tradition calls these four virtues the "cardinal virtues" because of the pivotal role they play in the moral life. All schools, secular and religious, must strive to develop the cardinal virtues, which are necessary for strong moral character. Christian schools must also strive to develop the theological virtues—faith, hope, and charity—which are necessary for transformation in Christ.

Virtues thus provide a standard for defining good character. Without such a standard, the concept of "character" becomes mired in subjectivism. We can claim that virtues are objectively good for the individual because in their absence no person can hope to lead a fulfilling life. We can claim that virtues are objectively good for society because in their absence no community can function effectively.

Character—and any particular virtue—must also be defined in terms of its essential psychological components: knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. To possess the virtue of justice, for example, I must *understand* justice—what it demands of me in any situation (the cognitive side of character). Second, I must *care about* justice—want to be a just person, admire fairness in others, feel constructive guilt when I fall short of that standard, and have the capacity for moral indignation in the face of injustice (the emotional side of character). Third, I must *practice* justice—behave justly in my personal relationships and try to contribute as a citizen to building a more just society and world (the behavioral side of character).

What, then, is character education? It is the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue in its cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. It does so intentionally through every phase of school life, from the teacher's example to the handling of rules and discipline to the content of the curriculum to the conduct of sports.

Our challenge as schools is not whether to do character education but rather how to do it well. In the rest of this paper, I would like to propose ten criteria that I think can be useful in defining and assessing effectiveness in character education. We are at a point in the national resurgence of character education where the question of quality, and how to assess quality, looms increasingly large.

Criterion 1: Character education is effective to the extent that it implements widely accepted principles of character education.

A few years ago the national Character Education Partnership published a document titled *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 1995). These eleven principles were intended to define the essential elements of character education. Slightly abridged, these principles are:

1. *Character education promotes core ethical values.*
2. *"Character" is defined comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.*
3. *Character education is intentional, proactive, and comprehensive.*
4. *The school is a caring community.*
5. *Students have opportunities for moral action.*
6. *The academic curriculum challenges all learners and helps them succeed.*
7. *The program develops students' intrinsic motivation to learn and to do the right thing.*
8. *All school staff share responsibility for modeling and promoting good character.*
9. *There is leadership from both staff and students.*
10. *Parents and community members are full partners in the character-building effort.*
11. *Evaluation assesses the character of the school, the school staff's functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students manifest good character.*

Let me illustrate just one of these Eleven Principles, number 3: *"Character education is intentional, proactive, and comprehensive."*

As an example of principle 3 in practice, consider a classroom activity carried out by Hal Urban, an award-winning teacher of history and psychology in a school outside San Francisco. He was troubled by something all of us have seen, not only among students but in our whole society: the decline of good manners. Teacher Urban decided to address the issue head on at the start of the new school year. On the first day, he gave his students a handout titled *"Whatever Happened to Good Manners?"* He prefaced this by saying two things:

In my experience, I've found that people are capable of courteous behavior when they know clearly what is expected of them. Second, the classroom is a more enjoyable place for all when everyone treats everyone else with courtesy and consideration.

Listed on this handout, under the heading "How Things Were Different Not Too Many Years Ago," were a series of Mr. Urban's observations of changes in student behavior over his 30+ years of high school teaching. For instance: *"Students rarely came late to class. When they did, they apologized. Today many come late. Only rarely does one apologize."* Another: *"Students used to listen when the teacher was talking. Today many students feel they have a right to ignore the teacher and have a private conversation with their friends."*

Under this list of behavioral observations were seven questions, including: *"Why is this happening?" "Is a society better when people treat each other with respect?" "Is a classroom better when both students and teacher show mutual respect?"*, and *"Which impresses people more—being 'cool' or being courteous?"*

Each student was asked to think about these questions and write a paragraph in response—but not sign it. Mr. Urban then collected the students' written responses and used them as a springboard for a class discussion of manners.

Urban comments: "This simple exercise [which took a full period] made a noticeable difference in the behavior of my students. Later in the semester, several students told me they wished all of their teachers would discuss manners in the classroom, because it improved the atmosphere for learning." At the end of the course one student wrote: "That manners page you handed out really made me think. Sometimes we do rude things and aren't even aware we're being rude."

What made this an effective character education activity? It combined strong moral and intellectual leadership by the teacher with active involvement on the part of the students. Mr. Urban respected his students as thinkers by asking for their input. He did so by having them write, which ensured everyone's involvement. He stimulated their thinking by posing good questions. He made manners the intentional focus of a whole-period lesson. The whole design of the lesson guided students toward the conclusion that manners are important in human relations. And he did this proactively, on the first day of the school year. It's been said that one of the hallmarks of character education is that it teaches what's right before something goes wrong. Things will still go wrong, of course—character education doesn't eliminate human nature—but now, when the teachable moment arises, you have a framework in place, a standard of expected behavior to refer to.

Effective character education, then, will do as Hal Urban did. It will be intentional and proactive. It becomes comprehensive when teachers at all grade levels in all areas of the school environment foster, by word and example, a common set of character expectations.

So this is one way to define effectiveness in character education. How well does our school's program conform to a set of principles that reflect a widely shared understanding of what effective character education is?

Criterion 2: We can say that character education is effective if it produces greater gains in students who experience the program, compared to students who do not.

In the early 1980s, a team of psychologists in San Ramon, California, under the leadership of Dr. Eric Schaps, secured foundation funding to launch the Child Development Project (CDP). CDP's character education program consists of five interlocking components:

- (1) *reading and language arts curriculum that uses values-rich children's literature*
- (2) *collaborative classroom learning*
- (3) *developmental discipline, which emphasizes community-building and group problem-solving to promote a caring classroom and student responsibility*
- (4) *parent involvement through values-based family "homework" and a school coordinating team consisting of parents and teachers*
- (5) *schoolwide community- and character-building activities such as a Buddies Program, Grandpersons' Day, Family Film Night, and Cooperative Science Fair.*

CDP was first evaluated in San Ramon, California, a relatively homogeneous middle-class suburban district in the San Francisco Bay area, where three K-6 elementary schools implemented the program and three comparable schools did not. The second phase of the research involved six socioeconomically different districts throughout the U. S.: three in California, one in Kentucky, one in Florida, and one in White Plains, New York. Two program schools and two comparison schools were selected in each district. Here are the major findings of this ambitious study (Solomon *et al.* 2000):

- (1) ***Teacher Implementation.*** Teachers in the program schools varied considerably in the degree to which they implemented the classroom components of the CDP program. Greater teacher implementation was associated with stronger student outcomes.
- (2) ***Student character outcomes.*** When most of the teachers in a given school implemented the program, students in that school were superior to non-program students in three categories:
 - * *interpersonal attitudes and behavior*—such as conflict resolution skills, trust in and respect for teachers, altruistic behavior, and commitment to democratic values.
 - * *self-related attitudes*—such as sense of personal efficacy and reduced loneliness in school.
 - * *school-related attitudes and behavior*—such as active engagement in class and liking for school.

- (3) *Follow-up findings:* In the middle school years, when the CDP program was no longer in effect, many of the above program effects were still evident (such as trust in teachers, sense of personal efficacy, and liking for school). And some new differences favoring program students emerged: They showed higher middle school grades, higher standardized achievement, and more frequent attendance at religious services (even though the character education program had no religious content). But some of the previously significant effects had weakened to the point of statistical non-significance, such as concern for others and use of marijuana and alcohol. This last finding shows the importance continuing the character education effort as students move through the grades, in order to consolidate gains made at earlier levels. Secondary schools can't assume that character development will take care of itself as the by-product of a good academic program.

We could summarize the CDP findings as follows: Character education that is comprehensive—involving classroom and schoolwide strategies, sustained over time, and aided by conditions that support teacher implementation—makes a significant and, on some measures, lasting difference in students' moral thinking, attitudes, and behavior.

Criterion 3: Character education is effective if it strengthens a school's sense of community.

Before he carried out the Columbine High School massacre, Eric Harris sent the following e-mail to the Littleton community: "Your children who have ridiculed me, who have chosen not to accept me, who have treated me like I am not worth their time, are dead." A study last year by the U.S. Secret Service reported that two-thirds of school shooters had felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others.

The psychologist and character educator Marvin Berkowitz has observed, "The school's most powerful moral influence is the way people treat each other." A central principle of character education, therefore, is that the school must be a caring community. Creating a strong sense of community is arguably the best way to prevent the peer cruelty from which much of our school violence has sprung.

Empirical evidence of the importance of this principle comes from an article in *The Journal of Staff Development* (Schaps, Watson, & Lewis, 1996) titled, "A Sense of Community is Key to Effectiveness in Fostering Character Education." The authors report research by the Child Development Project that has measured the degree to which a school has a caring community. It measures this by asking students and staff to indicate their agreement or disagreement with survey items such as: "People in this school care about each other," "Students in this school help each other, even if they are not friends," "I feel I can talk to the teachers in this school about the things that are bothering me," and "My school is like a family." Parallel items (for example, "My classroom is like a family") measure each student's experience of the classroom as a caring community.

In its study of six school districts across the U.S., the Child Development Project found that the stronger a school's sense of community, the more likely it is that its students show positive outcomes such as:

1. *Greater liking for school.*
2. *Less feeling of loneliness in school.*
3. *Greater empathy toward others' feelings.*
4. *Stronger motivation to be kind and helpful.*
5. *More sophisticated conflict resolution skills.*
6. *More frequent acts of altruistic behavior.*
7. *Higher academic self-esteem.*
8. *Stronger feelings of social competence.*
9. *Fewer delinquent acts.*
10. *Less use of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana.*

The above data come from elementary schools. Evidence of the importance of sense of community at the secondary level comes from the 1997 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Resnick et al., 1997). This landmark investigation interviewed more than 12,000 7th-to 12th-grade students from 80 high schools across the country and their feeder middle schools. The researchers looked at eight high-risk adolescent activities, ranging from sexual activity to drug and alcohol use to violence and attempted suicide. They identified two “protective factors” that tended to keep teens from becoming involved in these self-injurious behaviors. The first factor was *family connectedness*, a feeling of closeness to parents. The second was *school connectedness*, a feeling of closeness to people at school.

Criterion 4: Character education is effective if it employs practices that are research-based.

Studies like those carried out by the Child Development Project enable us to point to comprehensive programs whose effectiveness has been demonstrated. But we can also point to research demonstrating the effectiveness of each of the separate components that make up a comprehensive approach. To the extent that a school makes effective use of these various components, it can expect to have positive effects on students' character development.

For example, the comprehensive approach advocated by our Center (Lickona, 1991) includes nine classroom components and three that are schoolwide (See Figure 1). Each of these 12 strategies has its own research base (see *Educating for Character* for sample findings). Regarding the first classroom strategy—the teacher as caregiver, model, and mentor—we know from the research that a warm, caring relationship between an adult and a child enhances the adult's impact as a model and socializer.

We also know from a stack of studies that cooperative learning, if well-designed to include both interdependence and individual accountability, fosters empathy, acceptance of differences, a variety of social skills, and academic learning.

We know from the research that that conflict resolution training develops perspective-taking and ability to solve disputes without force. We know that skillfully guided moral discussions, in which the teacher asks Socratic questions, develop better moral reasoning and decision-making than do unguided discussions.

We know that discipline that develops moral understanding of the rules and class commitment leads to greater internalization than discipline that neglects reasoning and participation but instead relies heavily on rewards and punishments. We know that high academic expectations promote greater student effort and achievement than low expectations.

In short, if our character program makes competent use of educational practices that are, taken separately, shown by research to be effective, then such practices, used in combination, should be even more effective.

Criterion 5: We can regard character education as effective if classroom or schoolwide behavior improves after we implement the program, even if there is no control group.

Even without a comparison group, a character education effort can reasonably claim to be effective by making a pre- and post comparison: Did things get noticeably better after the character education program was implemented?

Suppose, as a part of your character education effort, you decide to make a major commitment to conflict resolution. A few years ago, the Ann Arbor, MI public school system did just that. Its effort encompassed all 14,000-plus students and 900 teachers, K-12. The district provided all teachers with a 6-8 hour inservice training session that introduced them to mediation techniques and showed them how to incorporate a conflict management curriculum into their classes. More than 60 teachers went on to take an additional 12-hour workshop, where they learned how to train students to be mediators. In Ann Arbor, there are now more than 125 student mediators in the elementary grades, some 65 in the middle grades, and more than 30 in the high schools.

The principal of Logan Elementary School in Ann Arbor says that in the year before the program was instituted, she had to deal with about 320 student conflicts, ranging from disputes in the cafeteria to conflicts on the school bus. After the school started using mediation, the number of conflicts requiring her intervention dropped to 27.

A program evaluation would also want to ask: Was there a drop in the number of conflicts that involved violence? Was there a drop in the number of *recurring* conflicts between the same students? If a mediation program is working, both of these indicators should show a drop. If they did, one could reasonably attribute such decreases to the school's conflict mediation program.

Criterion 6: Character education is effective if it makes an observable difference in an individual student.

Richard Curwin (1993) begins his article "The Healing Power of Altruism" with the story of Billy. A 4th-grader in a rural community, Billy was surly, fought constantly, and did little schoolwork. His father was in jail, and his mother was an alcoholic. Billy had already started to use alcohol in times of stress.

Billy's 4th-grade teacher, his principal, and school counselor got together and worked out the following plan: Billy would be the special friend and protector of a 1st-grade boy in a wheelchair, on one condition—that he not fight at school. He could help the boy on and off the school bus, sit with him at lunch, be his guardian on the playground, and visit him daily in his classroom. If he got in a fight, however, he lost the privilege of further contact with the 1st-grader for the rest of the day.

Billy watched over the younger boy as a mother might watch her baby. The boy in the wheelchair came to treasure his time with Billy. Billy's fighting dropped dramatically. He still struggled academically, but his attitude was much more positive. Billy had a new social role and a new social responsibility. Somebody was counting on him. He felt needed and important. This character education intervention developed Billy's responsibility by giving him responsibility.

We build a moral society one child at a time. It makes sense therefore to count our successes with individual children when we assess our character education efforts.

Criterion 7: Character education is effective if students testify that it had a positive effect on them.

Students' own testimonies regarding the effect of a character education program are obviously subjective but nonetheless important.

Facing History and Ourselves (www.facinghistory.org) is a published, 8-week social studies curriculum, initially developed for eighth-graders and later adapted to high school and college levels as well. It uses history, films, and guest lectures—including talks by death camp survivors—to investigate the Nazi Holocaust and the Turkish persecution of the Armenians. Along the way, it has students look within themselves to examine the universal human tendency toward prejudice, scapegoating, and hatred of those who are different from us.

An experimental study conducted by Harvard University found that *Facing History* students were significantly superior in their understanding of how individuals' decisions are affected by their society and superior in the complexity of their reasoning about issues such as leadership, exclusion, and conflict resolution. Students also keep journals during the eight weeks of the unit. Here is one girl's entry (Strom, 1980):

I'm glad this unit was taught to us, and especially to me. At the beginning, I have to admit I was prejudiced against Jews and was glad they were killed. I know this is awful, especially if that is your religion. Then you and the class discussions proved to me I was wrong! Jewish is just like me and other people.

Teachers report that years after the *Facing History* class, students come back and say that it changed them as persons. One young man in his 20s told his former teacher that he had recently cared for someone dying of AIDS—something that he attributed to his having taken *Facing History and Ourselves*.

Criterion 8: Character education is effective if it mobilizes the peer culture on the side of virtue.

If we do not deliberately recruit the peer culture on the side of virtue, it tends to develop in directions that are antithetical to good character. How to recruit the peer culture is illustrated by a high school in Croton-on-the-Hudson, New York. Two years before I visited it, it had instituted a school government that it called its "Congress," consisting of elected student delegates from "seminars." Students made up the majority of the Congress, but it also included elected representatives of the faculty, administration, and parent body.

The Congress met over lunch hour every Wednesday to discuss issues of concern raised by any representative. Then delegates carried concerns and/or recommendations into their respective seminars, which met immediately after the lunch period. When I attended a Congress meeting, I asked, "What have you accomplished in your 2-year history that you feel good about?" The first two accomplishments students mentioned involved dealing with vandalism. One problem was students ripping out the cafeteria phone that had been installed for student use. After this happened twice, administration refused to re-install the phone. Another problem was students' vandalizing other students' art work that hung in the hallways. Both kinds of vandalism ended after they were discussed in Congress and in seminars. One can surmise that these discussions had altered the peer culture to bring about a new norm: It wasn't cool to rip out the common phone or to deface somebody else's art work.

Participatory school democracy, which has been used effectively at all developmental levels, makes it possible for students to play an active part in creating a positive moral culture in the school. It encourages students to think: "This is *our* school. If we've got a problem, we should fix it."

Criterion 9: Character education is effective if it helps our students become effective parents when they have children of their own.

As families go, so goes a nation. No society has survived the widespread disintegration of its families. We need a 20-year plan for strengthening the American family. If the character

education movement neglects this challenge and tries to make the school the chief vehicle for developing character, it will ultimately fail.

One way to strengthen the family is for high schools to help students learn the responsibilities and commitments of marriage and parenting and how to care for young children. We need to train the next generation of parents. This is a crucial responsibility. On this point, I recommend the position paper, *Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation* (1995), by the Council on Families in America. It states:

We as a society are simply failing to teach the next generation about the meaning, purposes, and responsibilities of marriage. If this trend continues, it will constitute nothing less than an act of cultural suicide.

The current generation of children and youth is the first in our history to be less well-off—psychologically, socially, economically, and morally—than their parents were at the same age. Many factors have contributed...but what ranks as the most fundamental factor of all is the weakening of marriage as an institution.

Making marriage in America stronger will require a fundamental shift in cultural values and public policy. We must reclaim the ideal of marital permanence and recognize that out-of-wedlock childbearing does harm. Our goal for the next generation should be to increase the proportion of children who grow up with their two married parents and decrease the proportion who do not.

Criterion 10: Character education is effective if it helps students to make use of all their intellectual and cultural resources, including their faith traditions, when they make moral decisions.

Character educators have taken pains to point out that developing good character in a public school does not mean teaching religion. One can promote basic virtues such as respect, responsibility, honesty, and self-control without promoting religious belief. However, this leaves an important question unanswered: What is the proper and constitutionally legitimate role for religion in secular character education?

Consider an area of young people's lives where they are highly vulnerable: sexuality. Our children are growing up in a decadent sexual culture. The media bombards them with sexual sleaze. All of this takes a toll on their hearts, minds, and souls. Approximately half of American high school students have engaged in sexual intercourse, although sexual activity among high schoolers is now beginning to drop. Approximately one million American teenage girls, most of them unmarried, get pregnant each year; slightly more than half give birth, and about 40% get abortions. According to a United Nations study, we have the highest teenage abortion rate in the developed world. According to the Centers for Disease Control, each year brings 15 million new cases of sexually transmitted disease, most of them in young people under 25. About a third of sexually active teen girls have chlamydia (the fastest growing cause of infertility) or human

papilloma virus (the cause of nearly all cervical cancer), both of which can be transmitted by skin-to-skin contact in the whole genital region. Such STDs are not, medical research shows, significantly impeded by the use of a condom (see Boudreau, 1994 & www.medinstitute.org).

Recently, there has also been attention (e.g., Lickona, 1994 & Duran and Cole, 1998) to the emotional dangers of premature sexual involvement—consequences such as regret, guilt, lowered self-esteem, difficulty trusting in future relationships, and depression (12-16-year-old girls who have had intercourse are six times more likely to attempt suicide than girls who are virgins).

There are also the character consequences of teen sexual activity. Sex is arguably the area where young people display the poorest character—the lowest levels of respect, responsibility, and self-control.

Religion impedes premature sexual activity. Wallace and Williams (1997) summarize the relationship between adolescent religiosity and sexual activity: "Attendance at religious services, self-rated importance of religion, and denominational affiliation have all been found to relate significantly to lower levels of sexual involvement. Accordingly, [religiously active teens] are less at risk of experiencing the negative physical and social health problems associated with early sexual involvement."

Obviously, public schools can't engage in religious indoctrination. In sex education, they should begin by developing the ethical reasoning that supports abstinence. For example: *Does premarital sex carry serious risks?* Yes: pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, possible loss of fertility (as a result of STD), and injurious emotional and spiritual consequences. *Does contraception eliminate those dangers?* No, it offers only partial protection against physical consequences and no protection at all against other consequences. *Is it ever morally responsible to take serious, unnecessary risks with one's own or another's physical and psychological welfare?* Clearly, it's not.

But in addition to these non-religious arguments, public school teachers can judiciously bring religion into the picture. We can acquaint students with the empirical fact that, according to the 1992 Gallup Poll, 95% of American teens say they believe in God or a universal spirit. We can then say:

It's not the business of the school to tell you that you should or shouldn't believe in God. To do so, the Supreme Court has ruled, would be unconstitutional. But if you happen to hold a belief in God, it makes sense to bring that belief to bear on important moral decisions, including decisions about sex. If you believe in a Creator, you might want to ask yourself: How does God intend for me to use the gift of my sexuality? How can I find that out?

If students check out what their faith tradition teaches on this matter, they will find that God, in the view of major world religions, did not intend sex to be part of the relationships of unmarried teenagers. Many students, even those who practice a faith, are unfamiliar with these

religious teachings about sexuality. Many are surprised to learn the striking similarity of major world religions on this issue. Here are three examples I have shared with high school and college students:

***Rabbi Isaac Frank:** Rabbinic teaching for at least 2500 years has consistently opposed premarital sex. Judaism removes sexual intercourse from any context of selfishness or primitive lust, and enshrines it as a sanctified element in the most intimate and meaningful relationship between two human beings: marriage.*

***Father Richard McCormick, Catholic priest:** The promise of two people to belong always to each other makes it possible for lovemaking to mean total giving and total receiving. It is the totality of married life that makes sexual intercourse meaningful.*

***Muzammil H. Siddiqui, Islamic teacher:** Islam views sexual love as a gift from God. It is a sign of God's love and mercy. Islam limits sexual activity to a man and a woman within the bond of marriage.*

Exposure to such visions would contribute to the religious literacy of all students, religious and non-religious. It would help to counter society's trivialization of sex. All of this would be an educationally sound and constitutionally permissible way for the public school to draw upon religion as a support for abstinence.

These, then, are ten different ways to define effectiveness in character education. We can say that character education is effective if it: (1) implements widely accepted principles of character education; (2) produces greater gains in students who experience the program compared to those who don't; (3) strengthens a school's sense of community; (4) employs practices that are research-based; (5) is accompanied by significant improvement in students' behavior in the classroom or school; (6) produces an observable positive change in individual children; (7) elicits students' testimony that the program had a positive and enduring effect; (8) improves the peer culture; (9) helps students develop the attitudes and skills needed to be good parents; and (10) helps students to use all of their intellectual and cultural resources when they make important moral decisions.

To what extent are schools in fact doing effective character education? We know that a growing number are engaged in deliberate character education, but we have no data on what percentage are doing it well. To what extent do the changes wrought by schools endure beyond graduation, into adult life? That research also remains to be done. Can schools, while they have students in their charge, make an observable difference in their character—the degree to which they know, love, and do the good? That question we can answer: Good schools, like good families, do make a difference. That is a source of hope as we face the formidable challenge of renewing our moral culture.

REFERENCES

Boudreau, W. Why is premarital sex a danger to my physical health? In T. Lickona and J. Lickona, *Sex, love & you: Making the right decision*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1994.

Council on Families in America. *Marriage in America: A report to the nation*. New York: Institute for American Values, 1995.

Covey, S. *The 7 habits of highly effective teens*. New York: Fireside Books, 1998.

Curwin, R. The healing power of altruism. *Educational Leadership* (November, 1993).

Duran, M and Cole, D. *Sex and character*. Richardson, TX: Foundation for Thought and Ethics, 1998.

Lickona, T. *Educating for character: How our schools can teach respect and responsibility*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.

Lickona, T. The neglected heart: The emotional dangers of premature sexual involvement. *American Educator* (Summer, 1994).

Lickona, T., Schaps, E., and Lewis, C. *Eleven principles of effective character education*. Washington, D.C.: Character Education Partnership, 1995.

Nucci, L. Children's conceptions of morality, societal convention, and religious prescription. In C. Harding (ed.), *Moral dilemmas: Philosophical and psychological issues in the development of moral reasoning*. Chicago: Precedent Press, 1985.

Resnick, M. et al. Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *JAMA* (September 10, 1997).

Schaps, E., Watson, M. and Lewis, C. A sense of community is key to effectiveness in fostering character education. *Journal of Staff Development* (Spring, 1996).

Solomon, D., Battistich, V., Schaps, E., and Lewis, C. A six-district study of educational change: Direct and mediated effects of the Child Development Project. *Social Psychology of Education*, 2000, 4, 3-51.

Strom, S. Facing history and ourselves: Holocaust and human behavior. In R. Mosher (ed.), *Moral education: A first generation of theory and research*. New York: Praeger Publications, 1980.

Wallace, J. M. and Williams, D. R. Religion and adolescent health-compromising behavior. In J. Schulenberg et al. (eds.), *Health risks and developmental transitions during adolescence*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997.

www.medinstitute.org Austin, TX: The Medical Institute for Sexual Health.