What Works in Character Education?

by Marvin Berkowitz and Melinda Bier

A few years ago, with grant support from the John Templeton Foundation and the Character Education Partnership (www.character.org), we examined 109 research studies in an effort to answer the question, *What works in character education*? There are four ways to approach this task:

1. Identify published programs/curricula that have research demonstrating their effectiveness.

2. Identify the components of effective character education programs. What strategies do effective programs tend to share?

3. Analyze "home-grown" character education (developed by schools, rather than commercially published). What do schools do that is effective in promoting character development?

4. Examine research on individual character education practices (cooperative learning, moral discussion, etc.).

1. Effective Character Education Programs

We identified 54 character education programs that had research to back them up. We then created a system for scoring the research designs in order to identify those studies that met the standards for research in No Child Left Behind. Through this process, we identified 33 programs (see box below) with scientific evidence supporting their effectiveness in promoting one or another aspect of character development.

Our results indicate that practitioners in search of effective character education programs have a diverse set of scientifically-supported options at every developmental level. Our list overlaps significantly with the programs reviewed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in its publication *Safe and Sound* (www.casel.org). That review offers additional information on the implementation characteristics of the programs we have identified.

SCIENTIFICALLY SUPPORTED CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

1. **Across Ages** (*elementary, middle school*)
2. **All Stars** (*middle*)
3. **Building Decision Skills with Community Service** (*middle*)
4. **Child Development Project** (*elem.*)
5. **Facing History and Ourselves** (*middle, high*)
6. **Great Body Shop** (*elem.*)
7. **I Can Problem Solve** (*elem.*)
8. **Just Communities** (*high*)
9. **Learning for Life** (*elem., middle, high*)
10. **Life Skills Training** (*elem., middle*)
11. **LIFT (Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers)** (*elem.*)
12. **Lions-Quest** (*elem., middle, high*)
13. **Michigan Model for Comprehensive School Health Education** (*elem., middle, high*)
14. **Moral Dilemma Discussion** (*elem., middle, high*)
15. **Open Circle (Reach Out to Schools)** (*elem.*)
16. **PeaceBuilders** (*elem.*)
17. **Peaceful Schools Project** (*elem.*)
18. **Peacemakers** (*elem., middle*)
19. **Positive Action** (*elem., middle, high*)
20. **Positive Action Through Holistic Education (PATHE)** (*middle, high*)
21. **Positive Youth Development** (*middle*)
22. **Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)** (*elem.*)
23. **Raising Healthy Children** (*elem., middle, high*)
24. **Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP)** (*elem., middle*)
25. **Responding in Peaceful & Positive Ways (RIPP)** (*middle*)
26. **Roots of Empathy** (*elem., middle*)
27. **Seattle Social Development Project** (*elem.*)
28. **Second Step** (*elem., middle*)
29. **Social Competence Promotion Program for Young Adolescents** (*middle*)
30. **Social Decision Making & Problem Solving (SDM/PS)** (*elem., middle, high*)
31. **Teaching Students to be Peacemakers** (*elem., middle, high*)
32. **Teen Outreach** (*middle, high school*)
33. **The ESSENTIAL Curriculum (Project ESSENTIAL)** (*elem, middle*)

2. Common Practices of Effective Programs

Having identified effective programs, we were interested in what implementation strategies those programs utilized. We identified eleven major strategies: three *content strategies* (explicit character education programs, social and emotional curriculum, and academic curriculum integration) and eight *pedagogical strategies* (direct teaching strategies, interactive teaching/learning strategies, classroom/behavior management strategies, schoolwide or institutional organization, modeling/mentoring, family/community participation, community service/service-learning, and professional development).

3. "Home-Grown" Character Education

There is very little research on home-grown character education despite the fact that most of character education is of this variety. One model for investigating home-grown character education is a study by Jacques Benninga and colleagues (*Journal of Research in Character Education,* Vol. 1, No. 1, 2003). Benninga examined the relationship between school-created character education and academic achievement in California elementary schools and found that schools with higher state achievement scores also scored higher on four dimensions of character education: (1) parent and teacher promotion and modeling of good character, (2) quality service-learning, (3) a caring community, and (4) a clean and safe physical environment.

4. Effective Individual Practices

> ### Character education works— if implemented well.

There is little research on individual character education practices. One exception is cooperative learning. Robert Slavin and David and Roger Johnson have amassed more than 100 studies demonstrating the effectiveness of cooperative learning in promoting outcomes such as conflict resolution skills, greater cooperation, and higher test scores. A second exception is moral dilemma discussion; nearly 100 studies have demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting the development of moral reasoning.

Most Consistently Impacted Outcomes

The character outcomes that were most consistently impacted positively (had the highest percentages of positive outcomes) are shown in the box at the right.

From the research, we can conclude the following:

Character education does work, if effectively designed and implemented.

It varies. Character education comes in many forms: whole-school reform models, classroom lesson-based models, target behavior models (e.g., bullying prevention), integrated component models, and so on.

It affects much. As indicated by the "Most Consistently Impacted Outcomes" box below, character education affects various aspects of the "head," "heart," and "hand."

It lasts. There is evidence of sustained, even delayed effects of character education. The Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP), Child Development Project, and Positive Action, for example, show long-term effects of elementary school character education through middle school and/or high school, and even, for SSDP, into early adulthood.

Doing it well matters. Studies typically find that character education is more effective when it is implemented *fully* and *with fidelity*. It behooves character educators to maximize and assess implementation fidelity.

Effective strategies can be identified. Effective programs employ many or all of the following strategies:

Professional development. All effective programs build in structures for ongoing professional training.

Peer interaction. All effective programs incorporate peer interactive strategies (e.g., peer discussion, role-play, and cooperative learning).

Most Consistently Impacted Outcomes

1. **Sexual behavior** (91%, 10 of 11 studies)
2. **Character knowledge** (87%)
3. **Socio-moral cognition** (74%)
4. **Problem-solving skills** (64%)
5. **Emotional competency** (64%)
6. **Relationships** (62%)
7. **Attachment to school** (61%)
8. **Academic achievement** (59%)
9. **Communicative competency** (50%)
10. **Attitudes toward teachers** (50%)
11. **Violence and aggression** (48%)
12. **Drug use** (48%)
13. **Personal morality** (48%)
14. **Knowledge/attitudes about risk** (47%)
15. **School behavior** (45%)
16. **Pro-social behaviors and attitudes** (43%)

Direct teaching. Practice what you preach, but don't forget to preach what you practice.

Skill training. Many strategies directly teach social-emotional skills (e.g., conflict resolution).

Making the agenda explicit. More than half of the effective programs focus explicitly on character, morality, values, virtues, or ethics.

Family and community involvement. Effective programs typically involve families and community members and organizations. This includes parents as consumers (e.g., offering training to parents) and parents and community as partners (e.g., including them in the design and delivery of the character education initiative).

Providing models and mentors. Many programs incorporate peer and adult role models (both live and literature-based) and mentors to foster character development.

Integration into the academic curriculum. Most of the 33 effective programs (on back page) didn't test for academic gains, but of the eleven that did, ten found significant effects. Especially in the age of No Child Left Behind legislation, we should strive to integrate character education into the curriculum.

Multi-strategy approach. Effective character education programs are rarely single-strategy initiatives. The average number of strategies used by the 33 effective programs was seven.

Based on this review and our knowledge of effective practice, we offer nine broad recommendations for maximizing the effectiveness of character education:

1. Choose tested and effective implementation approaches that match your goals.

2. Train the implementers. Research has shown over and over that incomplete or inaccurate implementation leads to ineffective programs.

3. Enlist leadership support. Especially when character education is schoolwide or districtwide, its success depends on support from the principal or superintendent.

SMART & GOOD HIGH SCHOOLS

Another "what works" report is the two-year study, *Smart & Good High Schools: Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work, and Beyond,* by Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson. Based on a literature review and site visits to 24 diverse, award-winning high schools, *Smart & Good High Schools* describes nearly 100 promising practices for developing 8 strengths of character. The 227-page report can be downloaded from www.cortland.edu/character.

---

4. Assess character education and feed the data back into program improvement. Educators should assess both the outcomes and the implementation processes and consider those data as a means for improving practice.

5. Pay attention to staff culture. Principals often report that they need to first shape the culture among adults before they can effectively tackle character education and the whole-school culture.

6. Build student bonding to school. Character education depends in a large part on the degree to which students become attached to, and feel a part of, their schools.

7. Think long-term and sustain the commitment. James Comer, developer of the School Development Project, claims that it takes at least three years to begin to make a positive impact on a schoolwide culture, and that substantial effects are often seen only after five to seven years.

8. Bundle programs. Many effective character education initiatives combine components of different programs.

9. Include parents and other community representatives. Helpful resources for parent and community involvement are available at the CASEL (www.casel.org) and Developmental Studies Center (www.devstu.org) websites.

The full "What Works in Character Education" report can be downloaded from the Center for Character and Citizenship (www.characterandcitizenship.org) at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Drs. Berkowitz (berkowitz@umsl.edu) and Bier (bierm@umsl.edu) conduct research and trainings through the Center.

ATTENTION CHARACTER EDUCATORS:

The *Journal of Research in Character Education,* co-edited by Dr. Berkowitz, welcomes an array of manuscripts: research and theory-based articles, case studies of effective practices, a practitioner's column (VOICES), and reviews of books and other media. Manuscripts can be sent to jrce@umsl.edu. To subscribe, go to www.characterandcitizenship.org.