

SUMMARY

Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K-12

October 2008



reach every student



What is Character Development?

Our Definition

There are universal attributes that schools and communities value. Character development is the deliberate effort to nurture these attributes and use them as a standard against which we hold ourselves accountable.

They permeate all aspects of school life, bind us together and form the basis of responsible citizenship.

They are a foundation for excellence and equity in education and for school communities that are respectful, safe, caring and inclusive.

What Character Development Is – and What It Is Not

IT IS...

✓ the community building consensus on the attributes it values and sharing responsibility for developing them in students

✓ developing standards of behaviour

✓ developing self-discipline and interpersonal skills

✓ doing what's right because it's the right thing to do

✓ actively involving and engaging all students and the wider community

✓ embedded in all aspects of school life

✓ about inclusiveness, equity and respect for diversity

IT IS NOT...

✗ schools taking over from parents or the government imposing a set of morals

✗ compliance or indoctrination

✗ behaviour based on fear of punishment

✗ behaviour motivated by rewards and recognition

✗ something that can be done to students

✗ a new curriculum or an add-on

✗ about the “few” or the exclusion of any

Goals

Character development aims to develop school environments where everyone – students and adults alike – treats each other with care and respect.

Results will include:

- Improved academic achievement
- Improved interpersonal relationships
- Schools that are respectful, caring, safe and inclusive
- Reduced behavioural problems.

Key Principles

Shared Responsibility

Although parents have the primary role in character development, we all share in the responsibility for and the benefits of young people becoming empathetic and involved citizens. All members of school communities must model, teach and expect demonstrations of the agreed upon attributes.

Educational Excellence

Although academic learning is the primary mission of our schools, they are also about the development of the whole person. A quality education sets high expectations for all students in learning, academic achievement, citizenship and character development.

Community Building and Equity

As Ontario's population becomes more diverse, it creates an opportunity for communities to find the beliefs and principles they hold in common. Respect for diversity must be at the heart of board and school policies and programs.

The Essential Elements of Character Development

The following four elements link together, enhancing each other, to form the foundation of successful character development:

- 1.** Learning and academic achievement
- 2.** Respect for diversity
- 3.** Citizenship development
- 4.** Parent and community partnerships.

1. Learning and Academic Achievement

A growing body of research illustrates that character development and student engagement are linked closely to improvements in academic achievement.

Many boards and schools have implemented character development. Character development is evident in areas such as respectful and accessible workplace practices, environmental awareness and protection programs, local and global health initiatives, athletic codes of conduct, student-led conferences and student leadership development.

2. Respect for Diversity

Character development upholds human rights and builds respect for the dignity of all people as the foundation for positive relationships. For example, community consultations must encourage and include diverse perspectives. This ensures that groups will find consensus on the selected attributes and provide input into their board's initiative.

3. Citizenship Development

Character development creates opportunities for students to develop the skills required for positive and effective participation as citizens in their schools and communities.

It challenges students to:

- Make principled decisions and contribute to solutions
- Think critically about their world
- Become engaged in their communities
- Develop higher levels of personal and social responsibility.

4. Parent and community partnerships

The success of the character development initiative depends on the meaningful engagement of parents and community partners.

Parents can support character development at all stages of their children's development. They can serve as positive role models, nurture character attributes and talk with their children about how they apply to situations at home and in the community.

Character development is an integral part of many youth, sports and community-based programs and is nurtured by the business community in co-operative and other work experience programs. Schools must seek out alliances among parents and community partners to support learning in all forms and settings.

Conclusion

A quality education includes the education of the heart as well as the mind. It means preparing students to be citizens who have empathy and respect for others and who will think critically, feel deeply and act wisely. Character development enhances employability skills, encourages civic engagement and prepares students to be contributing citizens in our increasingly global society.

Character development is education at its best.

Character Development: a Guide to Implementation

Key Expectations

The primary responsibility for implementation lies with school boards. They are expected to demonstrate evidence of the following:

- 1.** A collaborative process to engage a diverse cross-section of the community in the development and ongoing implementation of character development
- 2.** Community consensus building to select the attributes that are most valued within each board's community and schools
- 3.** A commitment to model, teach and expect demonstrations of these attributes and to integrate character development into policies, programs and practices
- 4.** Student leadership development and expanded opportunities for student engagement in their education and communities
- 5.** The collection of baseline and ongoing data regarding the impact of character development on relevant areas including achievement, graduation rates, attendance, behaviour and student involvement in their communities.

Character Development: Roles and Responsibilities

The Ministry of Education

Will:

- Provide start-up funding to consolidate and extend implementation throughout the school community
- Coordinate and provide leadership for the Character Development Resource Teams
- Produce resources for implementation and extension
- Develop guidelines for data collection and analysis
- Monitor the effectiveness of implementation and impact at a provincial level.

School Boards

Will:

- Collaborate with their Character Development Resource Team to develop practices necessary for implementation
- Establish a collaborative, board-based process that engages students, staff, community, parents and local trustees
- Establish a culture of respect for diversity through policies, practices and programs
- Expand opportunities for student learning and citizenship engagement
- Provide key roles for students and school council members and provide the leadership development to support them in these roles
- Embed character development in workplace practices and Board Improvement Plans
- Establish partnerships with parents and local organizations to engage students in the community
- Monitor and collect data on the effectiveness of their initiative.

School Principals

Will:

- Provide leadership in implementation
- Ensure the entire school community is engaged
- Ensure that student leadership reflects the school's diversity
- Provide key roles for students and for school councils and provide the leadership development to support them in these roles
- Provide professional learning opportunities in character development for staff
- Embed character development in the School Improvement Plan and in all school and extracurricular activities
- Expand opportunities for student engagement in their learning environments and for citizenship development
- Establish partnerships with parents and local organizations to engage students in the community
- Monitor and collect data on the effectiveness of their initiative.

Teachers

Will:

- Provide the knowledge, skills and leadership development required for students to be effective in their expanded roles
- Embed character development in their subject areas, classrooms and extracurricular programs
- Assist in creating a school culture that fosters a sense of belonging, nurtures democratic principles and encourages a student voice in decision-making.

All Board and School Staff

Will:

- Model the attributes agreed upon by their community in their workplace practices and interactions
- Help create school and board cultures that value positive relationships, service excellence and equity.

Students

Will:

- Contribute to the development of plans and decisions for the implementation of character development
- Include students from diverse backgrounds in daily school life and encourage their involvement in leadership development
- Seek to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to expand their roles in schools, boards and communities
- Demonstrate concern for others by responding to issues of social injustice in their schools and communities and contributing to their solutions.

Detailed information on the character development initiative can be found in the full document *FINDING COMMON GROUND: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K–12* at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/character.html