

# Getting Started with Character Education in Schools

There is no one “right” way to being character education in your school. There is, however, a framework that we have found that supports reflection on character education within your school improvement process.

- 1. Needs Assessment**—Review the data you have collected as part of your school improvement process. Look for indicators regarding the culture and climate of your school—the environment—that show a need in areas such as respect, responsibility, caring. Remember that you are looking at the—“big picture” of your environment—are students emotional, social, behavioral AND intellectual needs being met? Are the adults in their environment modeling what is expected of the youth? IF in the step you see an identified need, and IF it becomes part of your school improvement goals, THEN you are in a position to move forward with looking at a character education initiative for your school.
- 2. Planning**—Through study groups/leadership teams develop your faculty and staff into a “learning community” that can research and study character education issues/models and benefits. Review the Eleven Principles of Character Education and see to what extent you are already meeting the needs of these eleven principles that are critical to a successful initiative. Identify what you as a faculty and staff believe are the important character traits that you want your students to exhibit. Garner input from your parents and community and embrace the enthusiasm you find from them for this initiative. Decide on the values/virtues that you will emphasize in your school.

It is often at this point that many schools find that their selected values/virtues match with the Six Pillars of Character from CHARACTER COUNTS!<sup>sm</sup> This is the part of the cycle where the Institute for Character Development can begin to assist you through in-service training, consultation, arranging site visits, etc. It is important at this point to spend the time to make sure that all faculty and staff are acquainted with the framework you will be using, the values/virtues words and definitions, and the vital importance of modeling what you will be asking of the children.

ICD has found that it is especially beneficial at this point, to include a broad base of participants in this orientation and action-planning, including representatives from the faculty, staff, students, parents, bus drivers, secretaries, cafeteria, before/after school, faith community, civic and service organizations, city government, and businesses. Establishment of a central coordinating entity is critical to communication, coordination and keeping a momentum going.

- 3. Implementation**—SLOW and STEADY. Your action plan, based on the outcomes of your needs assessment and written to correlate with your school improvement goals—will detail the strategic implementation of your character education initiative. ICD has found that there are as many different ways to begin implementation as there are sites beginning to implement. You have to determine, based on the other initiatives currently being done, to what extent you are in a position to move forward with action.

ICD encourages all schools to conduct an inventory of what is already being done in the school that meets the needs identified. We suggest this for two reasons; first, you need to affirm to yourself and others that you already are doing a lot to support the values/virtues of your students; second, you rarely find that everyone in the school is knowledgeable about what all is already being done and often, schools can easily take the common language and definitions of their identified values/virtues and integrate them within the existing initiatives in the school. This has a unifying effect while not “adding” unnecessarily to your responsibilities. Some schools choose to focus on a specific value/virtue word for a period of time. Others choose an area of the school on which to concentrate; for example, common

areas—cafeteria, hallways, rest rooms, recess, etc. Often a school that already feels overwhelmed with responsibilities will ask teachers to find just one time each day to bring up the value/virtue words as they naturally fit with their curriculum material for that day. These varying ways of beginning add the opportunity to begin working toward your goal in a manageable, yet purposeful way.

Many schools choose to develop a school-wide framework that serves as the unifying base of the initiative. For example; a school might divide their staff (and include students) into three areas: 1) integration of the character values/virtues into existing codes of conduct, rules, handbooks, etc.—the behavioral aspects; 2) integration of the character values/virtues into curriculum—paying attention to the need for actual teaching of the values/virtues to the youth, but then how they will be supported by integrating throughout existing curriculum. (Keeping in mind that character education isn't a stand-alone—it needs to be integrated within everything that you do.); 3) celebration and outreach—seriously planning for on-going communication with parents and community, sharing what is happening in the school, utilizing volunteers to supplement and compliment the initiative, developing a broader vision in the community to support the initiative and looking for opportunities to recognize and celebrate progress with students.

- 4. Evaluation**—in the action-planning stage, specific objectives will be identified that will propel the initiative toward what you want to see that is different from what you see now. From these objectives, methods will need to be identified for how you are going to know if change is occurring. Periodic review of your progress fuels this on-going process. It is important to remember that you cannot just look to the changes in the behavior of the students to tell you if you are progressing toward your goal. You must look to changes in the culture and climate of your school and the ability of your staff and faculty to function as character educators as well as the extent to which the students are manifesting the good character.

And the cycle continues—as you begin to experience successes and challenges along the way, on-going assessment, planning, new implementation and evaluation will occur. It is important to remember that starting a character education initiative is making a long-term commitment. Be purposeful and strategic about growing the initiative in your school and community. Ultimately, your ability to identify small, manageable steps that build ownership and offer measurable progress will lead you to realizing your vision.

These ideas are based on the work of the Institute for Character Development at Drake University. For more information on ICD, please refer to [www.drake.edu/icd](http://www.drake.edu/icd). CHARACTER COUNTS! is a registered service mark of the CHARACTER COUNTS! Coalition, a project of the Josephson Institute of Ethics. [www.charactercounts.org](http://www.charactercounts.org)