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COMMENTARY

Smart and Good Schools

A Paradigm Shift for Character Education

By Matthew Davidson, Thomas Lickona, and Vladimir Khmelkov

Throughout history and in cultures around the world, education rightly conceived has had two great goals: helping students become smart and helping them become good. They need character for both.

The wisdom of the ages recognizes the centrality of character in education, citizenship, and living an ethical and productive life. "Education worthy of the name," wrote Martin Buber, "is essentially education of character." "Within the character of the citizen," Cicero said, "lies the welfare of the nation." "In this imperfect world," the psychiatrist Frank Pittman has observed, "it is character that enables people to survive, to endure, and to transcend their misfortunes."



But how much do American schools really care about character? To be sure, the past two decades have seen a resurgence of character education. There's been a proliferation of grassroots character education initiatives, a spate of character education books and curricula, federal and state funding of character education, the establishment of national character education organizations, the emergence of a *Journal of Research in Character Education*, and reports on how to prepare future teachers to be character educators.

Thus far, however, the character education movement has been overwhelmingly an elementary school phenomenon. It tapers off in middle school. In high school, with few exceptions, it hits a wall.

—Nip Rogers

Despite the fact that nearly all high schools struggle with character-related challenges, such as academic irresponsibility, cheating, disrespect, peer cruelty, and unhealthy student behaviors in such areas as sex, drugs, and drinking, high school teachers typically identify themselves as subject-matter specialists rather than as "character educators." To be fair, the character education movement shares some of the blame for this state of affairs. We haven't made a strong case for the relevance of character education to all phases of school life, including academic learning.

In an effort to clarify the role of character in all areas of school achievement—curricular and co-curricular—we studied 24 diverse, award-winning high schools with the help of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The resulting 227-page report, **"Smart & Good High Schools: Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work, and Beyond,"** describes nearly a hundred promising practices for

fostering eight strengths of character (critical thinker, diligent and capable performer, socially and emotionally skilled person, ethical thinker, respectful and responsible moral agent, self-disciplined person, democratic citizen, and spiritual person engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose).

Conducting this research brought about a shift in the way we ourselves thought about character and character education. As we observed award-winning high schools go about their business, we realized that character education isn't just about helping kids be kind and honest; it's also about teaching them to work hard, develop their talents, and strive for excellence.

Conceived in this way, character has two big parts: performance character and moral character. Performance character consists of all those qualities that enable us to achieve to our highest potential in any performance environment (such as the classroom or workplace). Moral character consists of all those qualities that enable us to be our ethical best in relationships and roles as citizens.

Several lines of research show the contribution of performance character and moral character to helping us become the best persons we can be. Studies of lives of character, such as Anne Colby and William Damon's book *Some Do Care*, invariably reveal both strong performance character (exhibiting traits such as determination, organization, and creativity) and strong moral character (having a sense of justice, integrity, humility, and the like) working synergistically to account for the exemplars' achievements in fields as varied as civil rights, education, business, philanthropy, the environment, and religion. Longitudinal studies such as *Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure* find that adolescents who develop their talent to a high level show superior levels of performance-character qualities, such as goal-setting and time management, compared with equally gifted peers who do not.

Students themselves affirm the complementary roles of performance character and moral character. When the researcher Kathryn Wentzel asked middle school students, "How do you know when a teacher cares about you?," they identified two behavior patterns: The teacher *teaches well* (makes class interesting, stays on task, stops to explain something), and the teacher *treats them well* (is respectful, kind, and fair). In other words, a "caring teacher" models both performance character and moral character.

Conceptualizing character to include both performance character and moral character enables us to more effectively address the question, "What's the connection between character and academics?" In this new paradigm, character is integral to academic instruction, since it is *needed for*, and potentially *developed from*, every academic activity:

- Students need performance character (initiative, self-discipline, perseverance, teamwork, and the like) to do their best academic work.
- Students develop their performance character, including the ability to take satisfaction in a job well done, as they rise to the challenges of their schoolwork.
- Students need moral character (respect, fairness, kindness, honesty, and so forth) to build the relationships that make for a positive learning environment.
- Students develop their moral character by participating in well-designed cooperative learning; bringing out the best work in fellow students through guided critique; examining ethical issues in literature, history, science, and other areas of the curriculum; and carrying out service-learning projects that help solve real-world problems.

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There are encouraging signs that the character education movement is poised to embrace a concept of character education that integrates the pursuit of excellence (the task of performance character) and the pursuit of ethical behavior (the task of moral character). The Character Education Partnership (www.character.org), which serves both public and private schools, recently passed a resolution recognizing the mutually supportive roles of moral and performance character. Educators are beginning to pay more attention to the seminal work of Ron Berger, a former teacher whose book *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship With Students* illustrates how to foster moral and performance character through project-based learning. (Berger's 6th grade students, for example, interviewed senior citizens about their life stories, wrote several drafts of their biographies, and gave the finished books as gifts to the seniors.)

In our own work with schools attracted to the "Smart and Good" vision, we are finding receptivity to what we call the "4 Keys" to developing performance character and moral character: self-study (self-assessment and goal-setting), other study (learning from the good and bad examples of others), public performance (making goals and work public), and a community that supports and challenges (by expecting best work and best ethical behavior and holding us accountable to those high standards).

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "You must discover what you are made for, and you must work indefatigably to achieve excellence in your field of endeavor." Earlier, Booker T. Washington had said, "Character is power." If we want to unlock the full power of character education, we must conceive of it as the integration of doing our best work and doing the right thing in every phase of school life—from classroom learning to the Friday night football game. In this vision, the mission of every school is to develop performance character and moral character within an ethical learning community of staff members, students, and parents.

Helping all kids become both smart and good is the best way to leave no child behind—and to prepare every child for a flourishing and fulfilling life.

Matthew Davidson and Vladimir Khmelkov are the president and the vice president, respectively, of the Institute for Excellence and Ethics, based in Fayetteville, N.Y. Thomas Lickona is a professor of education and the director of the Center for the 4th and 5th R's (Respect and Responsibility) at the State University of New York at Cortland. They are the authors of a chapter in the forthcoming Handbook of Moral and Character Education (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates) on which this essay is based. The full "Smart & Good High Schools" report can be downloaded from www.cortland.edu/character.