



# Position Statement

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## EFFECTIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) believes there is a pressing need in our nation’s schools to foster not only the intellectual and academic growth of our children, but to rededicate our commitment to helping children develop into citizens of good character—citizens with the moral and ethical backbone to positively contribute to the democracy in which we live. The generally accepted term for this type of education is *character education* and is considered within the context of cultural beliefs and values. There are, however, multiple perspectives to consider in defining this term.

One conception of character education involves the transmission of a culture’s moral values and wisdom while inspiring in the young a commitment to leading a virtuous life. It is about “developing virtues—good habits and dispositions that lead students to responsible and mature adulthood.” Other approaches to character education focus on the building of just or moral communities—communities that support the development of students’ moral reasoning and their commitment to the virtues that hold a community together, virtues such as trust, care, and responsibility. Some approaches stress the role of caring relationships, the importance of educating the moral sentiments, and strengthening the capacity for empathy. Others in various ways stress democratic values and civility and focus on creating democratic or moral communities. Still others stress the hidden curriculum, arguing that good character in youth is primarily acquired through a kind of moral apprenticeship with teachers of good character.

As a national nonprofit resource center, the Character Education Partnership (CEP) in Washington, D.C., uses the term “character education” to encompass the wide set of educational approaches shared by groups who promote character education, including *moral education*, *just communities*, and *caring communities*, and that share a common commitment to helping young people develop their capacity to be good people and good citizens. The concept of character education enhances the development of students’ value systems that embrace not only social norms, but also cultural diversity—the students’ understanding of why it is important to hold such values as fairness, caring, or responsibility, and their desire to live by them and act on them. When these programs are intentional in this way, they become a part of character education. Character education confirms the belief that ethical, social, and emotional development of young people is as important as their academic achievement.

While there is no single script for effective character education, there are some important principles to consider when designing or evaluating an effective program. These inclusive principles serve as a guide for school professionals, parents, and community members as they begin or sustain initiatives aimed at helping young people develop good character. An effective program:

1. Promotes core ethical values as the basis of good character
2. Defines “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior

3. Uses a comprehensive, intentional, proactive, and evidenced-based approach to character development
4. Develops caring relationships in the school community
5. Provides students with opportunities for moral action
6. Includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners and helps them to succeed
7. Strives to develop students' intrinsic motivation
8. Engages the school staff as a learning and moral community that shares responsibility for character education and attempts to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students
9. Fosters shared moral leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative
10. Engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort
11. Endorses the evaluation of character education that assesses:
  - a. The character of the school and to what extent the school is becoming a more caring community
  - b. The school staff's growth as character educators and to what extent adult staff have developed an understanding of what they can do to foster character development
  - c. Student character and to what extent do students manifest understanding of, commitment to, and action upon the core ethical values. (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis; 2002)

## **THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS**

NASP supports the integration of evidence-based character education initiatives into the daily classroom and school environment as a critical component for the development of our nation's young citizens. School psychologists can take a leadership role assisting schools in establishing character education initiatives. They are trained to work in all three necessary domains—the cognitive, affective, and behavioral—and know how to observe and measure changes in these areas. They may serve as an essential resource in guiding schools in the development of the necessary educational partnerships to identify and effect needed change. They also are in a position to help focus on core values that enhance the multicultural complexion of our world. School psychologists bring essential developmental information to schools as they strive to become communities of caring. They know that it is critical for children to have “the experience of being connected, supported, valued, helpful, and influential in the daily life of the classroom and school” (Schaps, 2002).

While effective character education strives to develop students' intrinsic motivation, school psychologists understand that for some children with significant emotional and behavioral challenges, an intervention process will be needed that recognizes their unique needs. At times, interventions are necessary that begin with extrinsic rewards to reduce problem behavior while teaching replacement prosocial skills. From a character education perspective, individual plans should be monitored closely so that as the student begins to gain control of his or her emotions and finds more appropriate means for communication, reinforcement will focus less on extrinsic material rewards and move toward social rewards, and ultimately intrinsic satisfaction for being a good citizen of the school and classroom. NASP believes this is a much easier process when the child attends school in an environment that fosters character development and caring.

## SUMMARY

Character education may be accomplished without spending large quantities of money. Caring and time are the primary ingredients. NASP endorses the natural partnerships possible between school psychologists, students, families, schools, and caring community members in helping to establish programs to teach positive core values to children, and foster the growth of responsible, caring students and good citizens. The principles of character education allow schools to select or tailor their own character development initiatives that reflect the unique personality and needs of each school community in a culturally appropriate manner. They also provide for standards that translate into initiative assessment. The process is uniting, ongoing, and critical to the development of students with good character—students who become responsible, contributing adults in our nation’s democracy.

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