

# CHARACTER EDUCATION: ANOTHER NICHE FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS

By Robert Holland

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## Executive Summary

From kindergarten to the great universities, increased attention is being paid to the proper place of character formation in education. Much energy and resources are going into helping educators find useful tools for implementing character education.

This movement is proceeding in public, private, parochial, and home schools. However, charter schools offer a special opportunity for innovation in this area. Because they are schools of choice, charter schools can engage in moral instruction that might ignite controversy in conventional government schools.

From the Academy of the Pacific Rim in Boston to the Children's Success Academy in Arizona, charter schools are on the cutting edge of character education. This paper takes a look at the kinds of choices they are offering.

Details follow.

## Character Education: Another Niche for Charter Schools

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A common definition of character is “what we do when no one is looking.” Repeated scandals at high levels of government in recent decades have given new strength to the old concept that character formation is an important part of education. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., stated the case as succinctly as anyone ever has. “Intelligence plus *character* - that is the goal of a true education,” said Dr. King.

“Character is not engraved by age six - or even sixteen,” wrote John M. Templeton, Jr., M.D. “We can change and improve our character. However, like a comfortable pair of shoes, selfishness, laziness, dishonesty, and irresponsibility are easy to slip into. But the uplifting message of character development is that we can acquire a good and sound character - one that is durable yet evolving. All it takes is hard work and commitment. Just as a mountain is constantly being reshaped by weather patterns, our character is reshaped by the different choices we make and the virtues we choose to practice. In much the same way, *our choices develop our character - and our character determines our choices.*”<sup>1</sup>

The John Templeton Foundation supports colleges and universities that take the initiative in character development. The Foundation also provides information to college-bound students and their parents, education policy-makers, and the general public as to how higher education is rising to the challenge of shaping good character. *Colleges That Encourage Character Development* is a Templeton publication that profiles 555 programs, presidents, and institutions of higher learning that try to inspire students to lead ethical and civic-spirited lives.

A great deal of emphasis is also going to formation of character and a moral focus in elementary and secondary schools. This work goes on in public, private, parochial, and home schools. However, this paper focuses primarily on public charter schools, which have an advantage in this realm of education that they share with the universities and private institutions - i.e., teachers, parents, and students are not assigned to them. People study or work in charter schools by choice. They are not assigned to charter schools as is often the case with conventional public schools. Character education can be controversial when questions arise as to “whose values will be taught,” or when inclusion of the spiritual dimension of character spurs allegations that a publicly funded school is advancing religion. However, the edge comes off such contentiousness when participants have bought into the approach used to instill sound character and moral values.

## **Innovation Blooms in Arizona**

Arizonans possess a rich array of choices among charter schools, thanks to the state's strong authorizing law. Arizona has more charter schools (464) than any other state. In Tucson, **Children's Success Academy** illustrates the innovative techniques charter schools can bring to bear on formation of character at an early age.

The Academy for K-5 is located in a low-income, primarily Hispanic part of the city and is designed to assist in particular "behaviorally challenged" children. But the school attracts as much as one-third of its families from outside the neighborhood because of interest in its instructional approach.

A central element is use of The Virtues Project, a program started in Canada by Linda Kavelin Popov. The academy emphasizes a Virtue of the Week, which each class presents at a Monday morning assembly. All staff members, teachers, and students use a language of virtues in acknowledging each other for their helpfulness, flexibility, responsibility, courtesy, and other positive traits.

The school also draws on the Nurtured Heart Approach, a positive behavior modification program developed by Howard Glasser, an Arizona family therapist who has recently co-authored a book with Jennifer Easley, *Transforming the Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach*. The approach offers a set of strategies that are developed particularly for working with the child who has been diagnosed with ADHD. It assists parents, teachers, and other school personnel in channeling such children from using their intensity in negative ways to using it in creative and constructive ways. The program has achieved considerable success in almost every case without the need for medications like Ritalin or long-term treatment. Conventional medical wisdom is that the ADHD child's intensity is the problem. Nurtured Heart uses it as an asset for helping the children become successful.

Dr. Nanci R. Aiken, Executive Director of the Academy, has used her academic studies in nutrition to develop an additional component of character formation - the Nurtured Body Approach. This consists of an emphasis on healthy eating -- specifically, no sugar or sugar substitutes allowed at school, use of whole grain breads and vegetables, and only 100 percent fruit juice or water. Dr. Aiken has found that common characteristics of children who have had behavior problems are that they are bright, bored, and have been fed "tons of sugar." She firmly believes proper nutrition makes a huge difference in easing hyperactivity and could significantly reduce the medicating of children with psychiatric drugs.

The emphasis on virtues has gone over well at this charter school now in its third year of existence. "We have not found any 'down side' to teaching the virtues - quite the contrary," said Dr. Aiken. "They help all of us to interact together in a positive, supportive, and nurturing manner. We could not work as successfully as we do without the Virtues Project in place."

One parent who works at a Catholic school recently enrolled her two children at Children's Success Academy specifically because the school uses the emphasis on virtues. Furthermore, she contacted the Academy's Virtues Project trainer to request that the Catholic school be given information on using the program, Dr. Aiken noted.

Another of the Arizona charter schools that takes character education to heart is the K-8 **Stepping Stones Academy** in Phoenix. Co-founder Dedre Alliger noted that she and another educator had taught in schools where character education was a concept not much reinforced or emphasized. They wanted to do more than have character education on paper. They wanted to practice the desired traits throughout the school day.

The Academy uses Character Counts, a program supported nationwide by a coalition of 500 schools, school districts, municipalities, and civic organizations. In addition, the staff has developed its own specific curriculum for each grade level. There is a Character Counts class on Mondays and Tuesdays for 45 minutes, and each class has age-appropriate activities to complete. Student work is graded. The teaching of character fits into the overall curriculum, and into the Academy's overall philosophy. The program meshes with the school's Code of Conduct, and students receive monthly awards for demonstrating the character traits. All staff members are expected to exemplify the traits in their own words and actions. Besides the classes exclusively devoted to character, the traits are discussed whenever they fit into an academic lesson, such as in a literature class. The objective is to convince students that the traits are essential for becoming an all-around good person.

The Character Counts program emphasizes six traits called Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. (More information about the nonprofit, nonpartisan, nonsectarian Character Counts movement is available at [www.charactercounts.org](http://www.charactercounts.org)) The effect on students and academic performance is pervasive. Said Ms. Alliger, "We have the discussions about doing the right thing even when it is not the popular choice. We talk about being loyal to friends or being loyal to yourself. All of these traits fit right into study habits, test-taking, and peer relations."

Parents do not provide input into which traits are taught, given that the program is pre-designed. However, parents do help develop the activities that reinforce those traits. In addition, they help with homework, which further involves them in the process. The biggest down side to taking this comprehensive approach, according to Ms. Alliger, is the time involved, especially because of the state's emphasis on standardized test scores. In the long run, she is convinced that the emphasis on character will help improve test scores, but that can't be proven for now.

### **The Lessons of Literature**

The desire to emphasize character is generating a variety of methods and materials around the country. For instance, the **Red Bank Charter School** in Red Bank, New Jersey is using a K-12 program called "Literacy and Values," which has been developed by a company called

Voices of Love and Freedom in Newton, Massachusetts. This approach draws on children's literature to develop not only literacy but also those values and character traits that are designated for emphasis. The literary selections are multicultural, which gives students exposure to diverse ways of thinking about issues they may face. The **Benjamin Banneker Charter School** in Cambridge, Massachusetts uses the program as part of its language arts instruction.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, some of the books used for character development in the third grade are as follows:

-- *Baseball Saved Us*, by Ken Mochizuki, a story about how baseball offered hope to a Japanese-American family sent to an internment camp in World War II. "Confronting racism and injustice" is one of the values conveyed by study of this work, while literary skills brought out in the students include retelling, presenting, dramatizing, and writing a story sequel.

-- *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree*, by William Miller. This story written from an African-American perspective tells how Zora learned to use her knowledge and gifts to attain her goals after her mother dies. The values highlighted by a study of this work are self-determination, racial pride, and family love. The literary skills developed as part of the study include sharing oral stories, predicting, drawing inferences, imagery, and writing stories about achieving a goal.

-- *The Carp in the Bathtub*, by Barbara Cohen, a story from a Jewish-American perspective. In this story, two children try to rescue the carp that is designated to become gefilte fish for Passover. The story asks children to consider what can be done when we disagree, and stresses such values as family love, respect, cultural traditions, and conflict resolution. Literacy skills that teachers develop in pupils from working with this story include summarizing, dramatizing, writing an original story ending, and writing a story about a disagreement.

-- *Angel Child, Dragon Child*, by Michele Maria Surat. This is a story written from a Vietnamese-American perspective that invites children to consider different ways to solve conflicts. The story tells of Hoa, who is homesick for Vietnam and who is teased by a bully who eventually learns how to understand her. Among the values prominent in the story are an appreciation of diversity, kindness, empathy, compassion, and conflict resolution. Literacy skills emphasized by study of this story are interviewing, reporting, note-taking, story-mapping, predicting, researching, and writing a story about being teased.

The literature-based approach continues throughout elementary and middle schools and into the upper grades. In grades 9-12, students explore themes in such great works as *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare ("*Should we seek revenge?*"), *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry ("*What do we inherit from our families?*"), *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou ("*How do our voices shape who we are?*"), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee ("*How can we make peace?*")

## **A New View of Competence**

Many character education programs emphasize a process that will develop character while simultaneously increasing student achievement. The two goals are joined, instead of standing separate and apart. That is certainly true of Character and Competence, a teacher training program that is based on a fresh view of human competence. Dr. A. Lynn Scoresby, an educational consultant and child psychologist who developed this program, points out that most teaching has been structured to make students competent according to their factual knowledge. He argues that any definition of competence that does not include character is incomplete and too narrow. His training manual asks teachers who define competence purely as acquisition of factual knowledge the following questions: “Does it (the definition) account for the ability to manage time, set goals, keep promises that are made, demonstrate respect, and participate in high quality relationships where people act responsibly and help rather than harm one another? If it does not, then is the outcome to which you are teaching all that you really want for your students?”<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Scoresby argues that factual knowledge - all the information in the curriculum - is indeed one of the important components of competence. But it is just one of three. The other two are character, which includes a sense of right and wrong, and achievement, which entails an ethic of work in an organized way toward meeting high standards. Following the 1983 “A Nation at Risk” report, and subsequent reports of test scores, criticisms of lagging achievement have led many schools to concentrate single-mindedly on increasing students’ grasp of factual knowledge. However, Dr. Scoresby contends that a comprehensive view of competence that includes good character actually figures to yield greater success in students acquiring knowledge “because we will be teaching students achievement skills while we reduce distractions and conduct problems which can be solved by improved character.” He adds:

We also increase the receptivity of students because they are more likely to cooperate, respect and trust one another and display kindness and compassion. They will understand how to set goals, organize their time, persist, and work effectively. In addition to factual knowledge, these lessons will benefit them for the rest of their lives.<sup>4</sup>

Mary Eubank of the Utah-based Legacy Foundation, which contracts for schools’ use of the program, notes that Character and Competence has been field-tested on more than 65,000 students of differing ages and ethnic backgrounds, including more than 600 high-risk students in grades K-9. “The results indicate a marked reduction in conduct problems, greater focus on learning tasks, increased social and emotional skills, and improved achievement-test results,” she says.

Among the charter schools that use Character and Competence is Heritage Academy in Mesa, Arizona, which enrolls 390 students in grades 7-12. In its eighth year, Heritage (not affiliated

with National Heritage Academies) is one of Arizona's original three charter schools. The school has used Character and Competence for four years, and has a long waiting list of families from throughout the region.

Sandra Reid, the teacher who is in charge of Heritage Academy's in-service training as well as a related class for parents, said the program combines character concepts (such as responsibility, integrity, and self-knowledge) with achievement skills (such as goal-setting, note-taking and listening, and attitude) and brain-based learning strategies. As a result of combining achievement with classroom management, "it is extremely rare that a teacher will have to go out of the class to get help with classroom management."

What makes this approach to character education "unique," she said, "is application." Teachers don't just talk about qualities of character in the abstract. Students learn from experience and understand right away that lapses have consequences. An important technique is the class meeting, at which teachers and the class address misbehavior on the spot and corrections are made. Because they know there will be public consequences, Ms. Reid noted, students are more likely to reflect before acting unwisely.

### **A Moral Underpinning**

**National Heritage Academies** (NHA), founded in 1995 by Christian businessman J.C. Huizenga, is among those charter-school companies that consider moral education to be central to the classroom experience. NHA, one of the nation's most successful education management organizations, operates 32 charter schools in Michigan, New York, North Carolina, and Ohio.

Part of what distinguishes an NHA school is the strong moral focus of instruction. Each month, an Academy emphasizes a different quality of character, one that is based on the Greek Cardinal Virtues of justice, temperance, prudence, and fortitude. Taught throughout the year and integrated into the curriculum rather than taught as separate units, these four Virtues are taught as character qualities - such as responsibility, respect, cooperation, courage, and perseverance - that the children can more readily understand. Teachers discuss these qualities with students, model the trait, and encourage students to demonstrate it in their lives.<sup>5</sup>

For instance, when a reporter visited the new NHA-operated **Queen's Grant Community School** in the Mint Hill community of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina last fall, she found the school concentrating on the trait of wisdom. Said the school's principal, Christy Morrin, "What we're doing here reinforces what the parents are doing at home." Educators "actually are doing a disservice to society," she said, if they teach children how to read and write without also teaching them to respect others.<sup>6</sup>

As is true of other NHA schools, Mint Hill has a daily assembly at which students recite the Pledge of Allegiance and sing patriotic songs. Teachers use direct instruction and the curriculum is based on E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s Core Knowledge Sequence.

Mint Hill Mayor Ted Biggers, Jr., fought for state approval of this K-5 charter school because of his conviction that a good Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system would become even better. As the region grew and schools became more and more crowded, recognition grew that "if you wanted any other choice in education, you couldn't find it in Mint Hill." In this case, a charter school helped meet the demand for solid education with a moral underpinning.<sup>7</sup>

In Syracuse, New York, the **Southside Academy Charter School** is another NHA-managed school that opened just last fall. At one of the school's thrice-weekly "moral focus" assemblies, Jill Grevelding's third-grade class made a presentation on the meaning of "respect," the school's featured moral quality for October. After the Pledge of Allegiance, the school's 148 children sang the national anthem as two of them held up the American flag. In some ways, reported the *Syracuse Post-Standard*, the school "resembles an old-fashioned Catholic school as much as a contemporary public one. It uses the Open Court reading series, which centers on phonics, and Saxon math, which is based on repetition and mastery of concepts. Children wear uniforms, white shirts and blue slacks or skirts..."<sup>8</sup>

**Vista Academy** in NHA's home base of Grand Rapids was among the winners of the 2002 Summit Award, given by the Michigan Association of Public School Academies for successful implementation of programs that help students make notable personal and academic progress. Before a school year begins, teachers and each student's family sign a Commitment to Excellence Agreement. Among the special programs that help build character are the Vista Voices Choir, a community service venture, and the goal-setting Start Something program sponsored by Target and the Tiger Woods Foundation.<sup>9</sup>

"Our parents insist and our culture requires the transmission of certain moral values from generation to generation," commented Todd Avis, Vice President of Education for National Heritage Academies. "Our moral focus curriculum does just that. Our role as teachers is to support and uphold the teachings of the home. When parents and teachers work together, supporting and promoting each other, the net result is that our children are certain to enter adulthood as solid, moral citizens."

### **Where East Meets West**

Another charter school that takes character education to heart as integral to its academic mission is the **Academy of the Pacific Rim (APR)** in Massachusetts. Located in a converted factory in a blue-collar Boston neighborhood, the APR has become one of the most innovative and productive charter schools in the nation since opening its doors in 1997. Its demographics are diverse: 64 percent African-American; 24 percent white;

7 percent Hispanic; 5 percent Asian. Slightly more than half of APR's students meet the federal poverty guidelines for receiving free or reduced-price lunch. And its academic standards are high and being met: Recently, all of APR's 10th grade students passed the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam in the first year it is being required for high school graduation.

What really distinguishes this public charter school is its emphasis on character development, which its staffers believe to be vital to the realization of academic excellence. The school attempts to integrate the best of East and West into its educational approach. Patti Hartigan described the blended philosophy this way in an article for *Teacher* magazine:

“The school’s mission - to combine the high standards, character education, and discipline of the East with the individualism, creativity, and diversity of the West - is reinforced in many ways, from a school year 30 days longer than usual to enrichment projects at the local zoo.”<sup>10</sup> The rules of behavior are no nonsense. If any student disrupts the learning environment, he or she is removed from it, without exception. Parents are obliged to support the code of conduct. An unusual extension of discipline into the curriculum is the selection of Mandarin Chinese as the sole foreign language that is taught. The reasoning is that mastering this tongue requires such discipline that the mental exercise will prepare students for successful language study later. Another significant import from the Far East is the requirement that students clean their classrooms and desks regularly - a practice intended to promote pride and a sense of responsibility.”

The Academy is based on inculcation in students of the timeless virtues of responsibility, diligence, respect, perseverance, integrity, duty, and courage. These are taught via the school’s traditions and structure, as well as via academic courses and character classes.

So thorough is APR’s character-formation program that the Massachusetts-based Project for School Innovation (PSI), a federally supported teacher-to-teacher network that shares information about effective practices, recently has published a book entitled *Building Character* spelling out the APR approach in detail. Information about the book is available at [www.psinnovation.org](http://www.psinnovation.org). In addition, PSI co-founder Michael Rothman notes that PSI organizes professional development workshops and consultations with APR teachers telling the full story of their character-building practices.

In stating the case for character education, the authors of *Building Character* note that “many public school educators are highly averse to what may be construed as imposing morals or values on students. Such educators argue that teaching morals, character, and values is better left to parents or pastors rather than schoolteachers, who are funded by the state.” While conceding that “it is important to be wary of moral indoctrination,” the authors asserted two key arguments for embracing non-religious character education.

The first has to do with an intellectual tradition that has proven to be astute in both East - through the teachings of such great thinkers as Confucius, Lao-tze, and Buddha - and the West via the likes of Aristotle, Plato, and Kant, all of whom shared the view that education at its best means “imagining a moral life and pursuing it.” Warning against an education that ignored the moral dimension, Confucius noted that “men possess a moral nature; but if they are well fed, warmly clad, and comfortably lodged without at the same time being instructed, they become like unto beasts.” The Founders of the American Republic were profoundly influenced by that thinking. James Madison, the Father of the U.S. Constitution, expressed the belief that without virtuous citizens, “no theoretical checks, no form of government, can render us secure.” Today, with the rise of violent anti-social behavior among school-age youth, Madison’s warnings are more pertinent than ever.<sup>11</sup>

APR has set six goals for its comprehensive character education. As set forth in *Building Character* they are as follows:

### **Student Skills**

1. **Reflect on good behaviors.** Students think critically about, articulate, and display traits of good character - courage, diligence, duty, integrity, perseverance, respect, and responsibility.
2. **Address Negative Behaviors.** Students have the tools to identify, reflect on, and address negative behaviors.

### **Student Beliefs and Attitudes**

3. **Effort Over Ability.** Students believe that effort is more important than ability and, as a result, success is within their reach.
4. **Communal Responsibility.** Students see themselves as part of a community that is affected by their actions - actions for which they will accept responsibility.

### **Faculty Attitudes and Resources**

5. **Faculty expectations.** Faculty views character education as an integral part of their job and a shared responsibility, making them an efficient, collaborative team that produces a culture of character and high expectations.
6. **Faculty Tools.** Faculty have a range of simple, clear, and effective tools with which to reinforce positive behaviors and respond to negative ones - leaving more time to focus on teaching instead of classroom management.<sup>12</sup>

APR pursues these goals in a determined and thoughtful way, through a variety of techniques. For instance, it accentuates the positive by having regular celebrations bestowing on students the

coveted Gambatte award for exemplifying one or more of the school's virtues. (*Gambatte* is a Japanese word that means "fight to the end, persevere, never give up," qualities that APR stresses in developing a work ethic.) APR also has competitions for homerooms showing best behavior and rates of homework completion. Thereby the school encourages students to think of themselves not just as individuals but as members of a community. In dealing with negative behavior, APR has a code of discipline with a very low threshold, one that sets up a process for dealing with even the smallest of infractions and that treats all students the same. In addition, teachers can take away "breaks" in the middle school or hand out demerits in the high school as ways to deal with small disturbances in the learning environment without compromising learning.

The innovative approach this public charter school has devised with regard to character education is one that may well interest other schools across the country, whether public or private.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This paper has presented a sampling of character education programs without trying to draw distinctions among differing philosophical approaches. But such differences do exist. It ought to be noted that character education does not mean the same thing to all who promote activities in its name.

Scholar Denis P. Doyle may have described most cogently the differences in approach to character education in a 1997 article for *Phi Delta Kappan* entitled "Education and Character: A Conservative View." One side favors student self-expression, self-esteem, critical thinking, values clarification - in short, a process not necessarily leading to right or wrong answers. In terms of political thinkers, that school of thought is associated with the French romantic Rousseau, whose ideas helped mold progressive education in the USA. The other school of thought favors self-restraint, structured learning, assiduous study of great books, and an understanding of right and wrong based on eternal verities. That mindset might be called Hobbesian, after the English thinker, Thomas Hobbes.<sup>13</sup>

In Doyle's ideal paradigm, sound character education is composed of three elements: example, study, and practice. Life is ultimately about moral choices we make, he argues, not about technique or "spontaneous unfolding." By example, he means the role of virtuous adults -- first parents, then teachers and friends -- who model virtuous behavior for students. As part of study, he recommends reading the ancients (*The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, the *Old and New Testaments*); the enduring documents of citizenship (the Magna Carta, Bill of Rights, Lincoln's Second Inaugural, Martin Luther King Jr's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail"); the classics of prose and poetry (Sophocles, Shakespeare, Donne, Marlowe, Spenser); and more recent storytellers (Hemingway, Steinbeck, Melville, Twain, Cather, Bronte). By practice, he means not only doing the intellectual tasks of reading, essay composition, and organized

research, but also the exercise of being a good person. That means the sustained discipline of respecting teachers, classmates, and self, and being honest, punctual, and honorable.

While Doyle's preference is clear, he ended by arguing against any particular approach being dictated. "As I do not want to have Rousseau's views imposed on me," he wrote, "I do not propose to force my Hobbesian views on hapless romantics. Let us agree to that. That is what liberty -- or liberalism -- is supposed to be about. The logic of liberalism is to leave people free to pursue the aims that suit their values. Let the followers of Rousseau and Hobbes compete in the marketplace of both ideas and practice. The schools of Rousseau for those that want them, the schools of Hobbes for the rest."<sup>14</sup>

This is precisely the beauty of public charter schools. They can be organized by devotees of competing educational philosophies so that, within the publicly financed school system, parents and students and teachers are free to choose what most appeals to them or motivates them. Character education is a particularly good fit with charter schools, because potentially divisive instruction on moral and spiritual issues is done within classrooms of the willing. Other public and private schools can learn from charter schools what approach to character formation might work for them, given the informed consent (and even better, outright endorsement) of families and teachers.

## ENDNOTES

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