

The Complementary Goals of Character Development and Academic Excellence

Schools that emphasize either scholarly achievement *or* responsible behavior without focusing on both shortchange society and their students.

To serve their rightful role in society, schools need to focus jointly on the educational goals of character development and academic learning. These two goals are not mutually exclusive, but are entire-

ly complementary (Wynne and Walberg, 1985).

By our definition, "character" involves engaging in morally relevant conduct or words or refraining from certain conduct or words. Put another

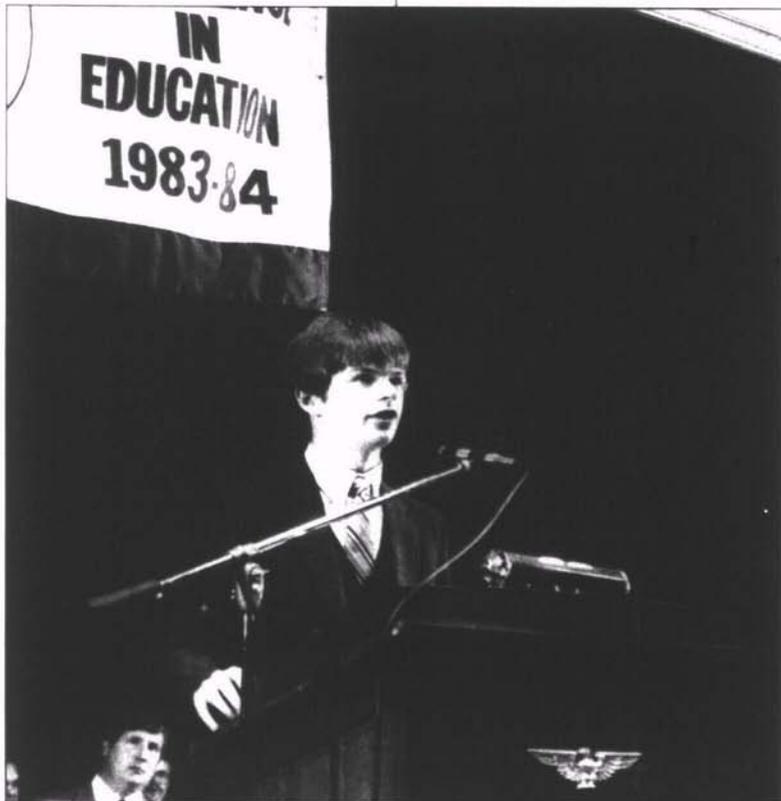
way, character, good or bad, is observable. Of course, character is significantly affected by feelings and values, but the final test of good or moral feelings is whether individuals *act* in an appropriate fashion.

Academics Help Character

Student character development depends greatly on the school treating its academic program seriously. This means that teachers should assign substantial and relevant homework, give tests and other forms of evaluation appropriate to the age level of their pupils, provide a sound curriculum, and treat teaching and academic learning as important. Without such academic activities, pupils correctly see that their school time is not being spent purposefully, and they conclude that the adults employed in the school are irresponsible employees. These perceptions inevitably "teach" important lessons about character to the pupils.

Ironically, many former pupils actually believe they were not worked hard enough during their school years (Astin and others, 1984). Sixty-seven percent of freshmen entering college in 1984 agreed that the grading standards in their high schools were "too easy."

Of course many pupils, if asked, will say they want little homework, non-demanding teachers, freedom from exams, and so on. And some schools and teachers justify their academic laxity on the grounds that they're satisfying



Awards ceremony photographs courtesy of Rich Township High School, Richton Park, Illinois. Donald H. Trimble, principal.

pupils' desire for less academic pressure. However, developing good character requires more than pandering to the young. An important element of acquiring character is learning how to be committed and how to push toward excellence. If pupils perceive school as a lackadaisical experience, they will develop lackadaisical approaches to other aspects of character: they will become clock-watchers and seek easy ways out.

Good character also requires obedience to legitimate authority, and teachers are the most prominent extra-family authorities that students meet. Because teachers exercise their authority in the formal academic program, they should ensure that pupils arrive on time, pay attention in class, apply themselves to recitation, and display commitment. Teachers who do not make such demands on pupils, or do not monitor their compliance, viti-ate an important character-teaching experience.

In addition to these indirect influences, the academic curriculum can contribute directly to character development. For example, poems, plays, and other literature often identify admirable character traits. History and biography can be used to provide role models, strengthen group identification, broaden students' horizons, and heighten their ability to delay gratification.

Character Helps Academics

Character development is almost as important for the academic program as academics are for character. Accepting discipline is a central element of character development. Yet it is a notorious fact of teachers' lives that much of their energy, which should be spent on teaching academics, is dedicated to maintaining discipline. Academically successful schools must master student discipline.

Another and more complicated factor in the relationship between academics and character development concerns student group life. Since displaying good character involves relationships with others, schools that

"teach" character must also focus on students' interactions with one another.

Researchers such as Coleman (1961) have found that many students find the grading practices used in their schools relatively divisive. To attain good grades, individual students must compete academically and display their academic superiority over other pupils. Coleman concluded that many pupils resent such successful students, who implicitly "put down" less able academic achievers, and that even able students are apt to withdraw from

such implicitly antisocial competition. Thus, students often form peer groups that pursue goals, such as athletics, that are indifferent to the school's academic goals. They may even demonstrate active hostility to the school's goals by participating in delinquent behavior. In effect, only 20 to 30 percent of the students in some high schools are seriously engaged in the school's academic purpose.

Any school seriously interested in improving student character must shape and monitor the quality of stu-



dents' life in school. Destructive peer groups must be suppressed. Other peer groups must be formed or redirected to pursue goals in harmony with the school's goals for pupils' academic and character development. Cooperative learning can facilitate the formation of student groups that help build good character. Coleman and his scholarly successors proposed that schools should devise more academic activities in which pupils work as teams, and compete against other learning teams. The International Society for the Study of Cooperation in Education represents one outgrowth of this proposal.¹ In addition, many forms of cooperative learning activities—some relatively "traditional" and others novel—have been identified and developed to foster such purposes.² The point is that individual academic competition undoubtedly turns off many students and lowers their overall learning rates, while well-designed cooperative learning can overcome some of these difficulties. Cooperative learning groups also can encourage students to practice politeness, tact, loyalty, and other virtues. These virtues can be harnessed to academic ends while their development is simultaneously monitored and guided by classroom teachers.

Therefore, our first recommendation is: students, at all grade levels, should more frequently be assigned group responsibilities for academic and school-related activities. The assignments should stress both individual and group excellence and be evaluated through grades and other forms of recognition. The activities should emphasize the theme of service to others. They might include students working with their own classmates, with students in other classes, and with or for community members. Typical activities could be student-to-student tutoring; "team" academic projects; assignments giving some students authority over other students (for example, hall guard, class monitor); many forms of extracurricular activities; and school-to-school, class-to-class, or row-to-row academic competitions.

The Virtue of Civility

"This is a school in which civility is a virtue," said William Schreiner, principal of Glenbrook South High School in Glenview, Illinois. "I know it's beginning to sound a little corny, and we've been hearing a lot about it lately; but there really is something to this character phenomenon. I try to establish a tone here of sensitivity to others, of good humor to all.

"Our academics are high. Over half of the students participate in interscholastic sports; two-thirds are actively involved in the student activities program. We like the kids to buy blue and gold jogging suits and wear them when they run through the community. It's another way of identifying ourselves and reaching out.

"You know, when the President of

Monmouth College spoke to the faculty not long ago, he said, 'This is the happiest day I've spent in a school. Everyone seems to enjoy being here.' We do.

"We're like a big fraternity here—Gamma Beta Sigma. Everyone's a member. We're in this together, and I manage, well . . . by roaming around, by cheerleading."

—Glenbrook South was honored as a winning school in the 1984–85 For Character Awards Program sponsored by the University of Illinois at Chicago. The School was featured in the 27 August 1984 issue of U.S. News and World Report: "What Makes Great Schools Great," the same year Schreiner was named Illinois Principal of the Year.

There are several other things schools can do to promote both character development and academic excellence.

- School and community service projects appropriately monitored by adults can be conducted by pupils at all grade levels. In the longer run, such projects may moderate some tax-supported education costs. We do not envision current service employees

being terminated, but gradually they might be phased out through turnover and retirement. States and districts might make such service a requirement for high school graduation.

- Schools should maintain a relatively high continuity of relationships among pupils and among pupils and teachers. Although increasing discontinuity is appropriate as pupils mature,

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it is desirable for pupils through high school age to be able to identify with a supportive base group and frequently be engaged with the same responsible adult. Ideally, this adult should act as a teacher for the group, leading pupils in significant intellectual and cooperative activities. Some schools now maintain homerooms, which, if properly managed, can help attain this end. But subschools, discrete programs in schools, and various extracurricular activities can also be appropriate tools.

● Schools should ensure that students acquire the basic facts of American history: dates and sequences of important events; major figures and

controversies; and the common experiences and diverse contributions of our ancestors, older contemporaries, and ethnic groups. As students mature, they will be expected to analyze and evaluate such information. But first it is essential that they learn a core of information.

● Schools should maintain frequent and high-quality ceremonial activities. These activities should stress the importance of group cooperation and individual effort. They should also focus on the themes of “contribution”: the contributions of past and present Americans and those that students will make to our society and the human

race. The occasions should be managed with taste and imagination. The adults involved should participate with enthusiasm and sincerity—basic requirements for good role-modeling.

● Many of the activities we recommend should be managed at the classroom, local school, and district levels. But many “external” forces maintain policies that constrain such activities. Some court decisions, for instance, restrict public schools from considering pupil character as a criterion for graduation. Tenure laws and union contracts make it harder to expect teachers to display strong commitment. State regulations may inhibit necessary flexibility in managing extracurricular activities. Members of the public sometimes confuse effective extracurricular programs with frills (though the distinction is occasionally tricky). Where there are external constraints, educators must ask the agencies involved to reconsider their policies. Effective efforts to improve pupil character require a combination of local initiative and external facilitation. □

¹For information about the Society, write to 136 Liberty St., Santa Cruz, CA 95060.

²See, for example, Robert Slavin, *Using Student Team Learning* (Baltimore: Center for the Study of Schools, 1980).

References

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