COUNCIL FOR EDUCATION POLICY RESEARCH AND IMPROVEMENT
An Issue Brief on Character Education

"Without violating the legal boundaries of church and state and without infringing upon the primacy of parents in the raising of their children, the educational system must support the development not only of good students but also in a larger sense of productive people and contributing citizens."

Council for Education Policy Research and Improvement, "Recommendations for Inclusion as Strategic Imperatives for K-20 Long Range Planning", December 12, 2001

As the United States of America enters a new century, education reformers are looking to both the future, and the past, to construct the best of what works in schools to improve student achievement. Currently, 49 states are defining their education future through the setting of rigorous academic standards, use of high-stakes assessment and adoption of accountability outcome measures.

Establishing a system of standards, assessment and accountability, however, may be the easier part of education reform. The greater challenge is creating a sufficient appetite among all students for reaching high academic standards. In the search for how to challenge the mind and nourish the soul, character education is emerging from our nation's past as one means of ensuring that each student achieves high academic standards and acquires the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be a responsive participant in our democratic way of life.

This issue brief offers an overview of character education; data highlighting a growing need for character development; a review of statutory character education requirements in Florida; a look at the role of the Florida Department of Education in supporting character education; and a description of character education implementation in Florida districts and schools.

OVERVIEW

The development of character begins in the home, but as long as there have been 1st grade teachers, there has been character education in schoolrooms. Historically, classroom management procedures, behavioral expectations and classroom rules of conduct have combined with a traditional respect for authority in the acculturation of the young. With a growing awareness of the new realities and complexities of modern life, however, today's generation of character education reflects greater variety, and instructional sophistication.

Defying easy definition, the uncommonly broad umbrella of character education covers a multitude of diverse programs and practices such as citizenship/civics education, law-related education, conflict resolution, peer mediation and service-learning/community service. Character education instructional practices may range from the encouragement of simple acts of kindness to its use as an overarching strategy for school-wide reform.

Because character education programs often embody a specific set of core beliefs, virtues, and values, they can generate controversy. Legal issues tied to the separation of church and state frequently adds emotion to the debate. Arriving at a consensus is exacerbated by a lack of formal, third party evaluation studies, and the difficulty of measuring program outcomes.

According to a 2002 Education Commission of the States publication, 18 states have enacted legislation allowing, encouraging, or requiring schools to teach character education. Thirty-nine states allow, encourage, or require citizenship education in state legislation (*ECS Issue Site: Citizenship/Character Education*). Since, September 11, 2002 twenty-two states have passed legislation that addresses issues around citizenship education (ECS State Education Leader, Fall 2002).

Character education typically receives greater emphasis in elementary school, and is viewed as a "readiness" for school issue. The development of self-discipline, hard work and respect are seen as prerequisites for early learning. Character education in middle school and high school tends to be curriculum-based and/or tied to conflict resolution, peer mediation and service-learning. Moral and civic responsibility themes are becoming more prominent in college and universities classes and student activities.

THE NEED

In a nationwide Public Agenda, 1997 survey:

- 78 percent of academically successful U.S. high schools students admitted to cheating in school; and

- 40 percent of 9th graders said that they had already had sexual intercourse.

In addition, young people rated themselves a significantly more selfish and materialistic than did those surveyed in 1970. The survey also noted an increase in hostility, bigotry, sexual harassment, disrespect, defiance, and peer cruelty (Berreth and Ernst, June 2001 *ASCD Infobrief*, p. 1).

The Florida Department of Education, in its December 2000 "Florida's Partnerships in Character Education" grant application to the U.S. Department of Education, stated that among Florida's nearly 3 million students, there were approximately

- 15,000 acts of violence against persons;

- 4,000 reported incidents of illegal weapons possession;

- 25,000 reported incidents of alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drug use and/or possession;

- 20,000 reported incidents of crime against property;

- 13,000 reported incidents of harassment;

- 65,000 reported incidents of fighting; and

- 60,000 reported incidents of disorderly conduct.

Trends in student violence, disaffection and diversity are challenges in search of effective school interventions. While these data are symptomatic, and reflect complex socio-economic factors, character education can be viewed as one means by which to develop a responsive and safe school environment, shape a school culture that supports the achievement of higher academic standards, and personalize teaching and learning.

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

The 1998 Florida Legislature first authorized character education instruction in elementary schools. In 1999, House Bill 365 amended Florida Statutes, Section 233.061 (subsequently renumbered to s. 1003.42, F.S. in 2002), requiring that a character-development program be provided in elementary schools, and that the program be similar to *Character First* or *Character Counts*.

Character First! is designed around 45 character qualities. The Character Training Institute (CTI), a non-profit organization based in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, developed the program for local public elementary schools in 1996. In the spring of 2000, a junior high and high school component was added.

Character Counts! is organized around the "Six Pillars of Character" of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship into the "Six Pillars of Character." It was produced in 1993 by the *Character Counts!* Coalition, organized by the non-profit and non-partisan Josephson Institute of Ethics, located in Marina Del Rey, California.

The statute requires programs to be secular in nature and stress such character qualities as attentiveness, patience and initiative. Also amended in 1999 was Florida Statutes, Section 230.2316 (s. 1003.53, F.S), requiring all dropout prevention and academic intervention programs to provide character development and law education.

The state's continued interest in character education has been most recently demonstrated by the 2002 Florida Legislature's passage of Senate Bill 20E, requiring in school year 2004-2005, a character-development program in kindergarten through grade 12. The law (s. 1003.42(2)(q), F.S) states that, "Each district school board shall develop or adopt a curriculum for the character-development program that shall be submitted to the department for approval. The character-development curriculum shall stress the qualities of patriotism, responsibility, citizenship, kindness, respect, honesty, self-control, tolerance, and cooperation."

STATE SUPPORT

While no funds have been appropriated to implement required instruction in character education, Commissioner of Education, Tom Gallagher formed in 1999, the State of Florida Advisory Committee on Character Education (SACCE) to assist school districts in responding to the newly enacted legislation. First among the committee's recommendations was the establishment of a statewide resource center, to be located outside the Department of Education (DOE), to assist districts and schools in building their capacity to develop and deliver character education curriculum.

Acting on the SACCE recommendation, the Department of Education submitted to the U. S. Department of Education in December 2000, a grant application for the creation of the Florida's Partnerships in Character Education (FPCE). The request was funded at $250,000 a year for four years, and was assigned to the University of Central Florida (UCF), College of Education. The grant includes four strands: character education, law related education, service learning and conflict resolution.

The goals of the FPCE are to disseminate information, facilitate growth in the development and implementation of programs, provide training to schools and community personnel and conduct a comprehensive program evaluation. The FPCE grant outcomes include a reduction in violent and

disruptive behaviors, an increased sense of social responsibility and civic virtue, and an increase in positive behaviors associated with character education attributes.

The partnership includes the Consortium for Social Responsibility and Character in Education (UCF), Florida Department of Education, Florida Learn and Serve, Center for Civic Education, Constitutional Rights Foundation, Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. and International Center for Character Education. Participating Florida school districts include Bay, Flagler, Sarasota, Seminole and St. Lucie.

It is anticipated that the Department of Education and the Florida's Partnerships in Character Education will provide technical assistance to school districts in meeting the statutory requirement to have a school board adopted, and DOE approved, kindergarten through grade 12 curriculum for the character-development program by 2004-2005.

DISTRICT/SCHOOL IMPLEMENTATION

Florida is organized into 67 counties, each serving as a separate school district governed by a locally elected school board and a locally elected or appointed school superintendent. Six of the 20 largest school districts in the U.S. are in Florida. According to a December 2001 Department of Education *Statistical Brief*, student enrollment in Florida's 10 largest school districts range from 374,806 (Miami-Dade) to 62,718 (Seminole). Enrollment in Florida's 10 smallest districts ranges from 2,264 (Dixie) to 1,030 (Lafayette).

In the face of such diversity, district approaches to meeting the current elementary school character education mandate tend to resemble a kaleidoscope. The statutory language is general, and leaves many of the details to the interpretation of each school district. Consequently, the specifics of how, when, where and how long character education is taught not only varies from district to district, but in some cases, from school to school within the same district, and from classroom to classroom within the same school.

With the adoption of the Sunshine State Standards in May 1996, Florida established statewide expectations for kindergarten through grade 12 in seven curricular content areas. Although character education is not included as one of the seven areas, it is reflected in some of the content standards, particularly those in social studies. In the absence of specific character education state standards, but in the presence of content that is spread across the Sunshine State Standards, districts can claim to meet the state mandate with few, if any, curricular adjustments. More common, is the addition of a supplemental character education layer on top of the existing curriculum. The formal integration of character education into the school curriculum, climate, and culture represents the highest level of commitment. Varying levels of compliance and implementation are a reflection of the realities of local school governance, and the capacities of very diverse districts to develop character education curricula, prepare teachers and engage the community.

As patterns of compliance and implementation differ, so too, do character education instructional materials. While some materials are of high quality, others are amateurish and shallow. The Department of Education classifies character education materials as supplemental in scope, and, therefore, ineligible for consideration under the state instructional materials adoption process. In the absence of having to meet state specifications and undergoing formal state review, districts and schools are left to make their own judgments regarding program quality.

With many of the details of character education being determined at the local level, some advocates are calling for a stronger state role. That role will be defined, in part, by responses to the following questions:

- What outcomes will state policy-makers expect from the implementation of character-development programs?

- What incentives and resources can be provided by state policy-makers to link character education goals, processes and results?

- How will character-development be aligned with the high expectations of Florida's standards-based system of education reform and the No Child Left Behind Act?

- How will the actions of the Department of Education, in fulfilling its new statutory responsibility for developing guidelines for approving district character education curricula, affect the quality of character education programs, materials and instruction?

- What priority will character education be given at the local level?

- How state colleges and universities respond to the need for the character education to be incorporated into teacher and administrator preparation programs?

- How will the new K-20 education governance structure support collaborative character education initiatives?

- How will state and community coalitions be formed to provide broad-based support for character-development initiatives?

If further state action is to be considered, the challenge will be in finding the balance in how much control of character education should be at the local level, how the content to be taught should be specified, how much time should be devoted to the content, how the content should be assessed, how programs will be funded and how progress toward meeting the state's goals should be measured. Ultimately, it will be state policy-makers who will establish the expectations for the role of character education in furthering, not only the state's commitment to standards-based school reform, but in invigorating our democratic institutions.