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EDUCATION WRITERS ASSOCIATION

# CHARACTER EDUCATION

## Reporter Guide

*This reporter guide aims to help education journalists explore, research, and pitch articles on character education. At a time of political division, societal discord, and deep distrust in many communities, schools are helping students make sense of the upheaval. And character education can play an important role in those teachable moments. The subject lends itself to numerous angles and stories. This guide will provide essential background for any reporter—seasoned or new.*



# INTRODUCTION

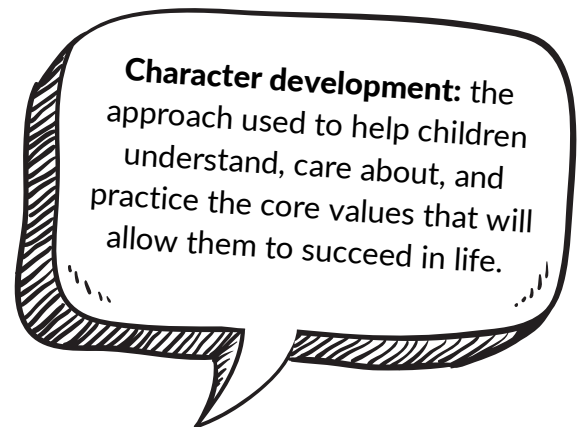
**What is a school's role?** Is it simply to impart academic knowledge and skills? What about teaching students how to work collaboratively? To become better listeners? To understand how to become active and informed citizens who seek to make the world a better place?

Proponents of character education believe it's all of this and more. In addition to focusing on academics, they see a vital role for schools to both model and help instill core values like honesty, compassion, self-discipline, and respect for others.

To be effective, experts say, **character development** needs to be deliberate and comprehensive so that all students have the opportunity to see, discuss, learn, and practice the values embraced by their community.

Ron Berger, a longtime champion of character education and a senior adviser at EL Education, observes that whether or not schools choose to deliberately emphasize character development, students' experiences in classrooms and hallways inform their values.

"Many districts or schools will say to me, 'We don't have time to teach character,' " Berger says. "My answer is always this: 'You don't have a choice to teach character: You're doing it all day long.' "





# WHAT IS CHARACTER EDUCATION?

## **Definitions for character education vary.**

Character.org—a national nonprofit founded in 1993 by educators, researchers, and civic leaders—describes it as a "comprehensive, holistic approach that parents, teachers, and all caring adults use to help students understand, care about, and consistently practice the character strengths and core values that will enable them to flourish in school, in relationships, in the workplace, and as citizens." Character education emphasizes fairness, respect, honesty, and other core values inside and outside the classroom. It's also intended to help children and young people answer questions, such as: What kind of person do I want to be? How will I live out my values?

One helpful primer for journalists is "[A Framework for Character Education in Schools](#)," published by the Jubilee Center for Character & Virtues at the University of Birmingham in England. It divides character into four categories:

- Moral virtues (such as compassion, courage, gratitude, and humility);
- Performance virtues (such as confidence, determination, motivation, and resilience);
- Civic virtues (such as civility, community awareness, and volunteering); and
- Intellectual virtues (such as critical thinking, curiosity, and reflection).



**Moral character:** having a desire for and prioritizing goodness; includes skills, such as honesty, integrity, and compassion.



Character.org also embraces this broad conceptualization on its website (with a slight twist, calling these dimensions **moral character**, **performance character**, etc.). To be meaningful, character education should be part of the fabric of school life—not just an add-on or a once-a-week lesson, suggested several experts at an [EWA seminar](#). And educators must practice what they preach.

**Performance character:** the virtues and qualities that allow us to accomplish goals, such as self-discipline, diligence, loyalty, and responsibility.



## Character Studies: Casco Bay High School



Casco Bay High School in Portland, Maine, boasts a 98 percent college-acceptance rate. Its students are mostly low income and come from very diverse backgrounds. One of many ways this Expeditionary Learning school tries to foster an accepting environment is by creating deliberate structures of support, such as teams of teachers working with teams of students. Freshmen go on week-long trips in the wild to learn how to work together with different types of people. Seniors do a kayak or backtracking “quest” to work on citizenship and leadership skills. Community members (including Casco Bay students) teach week-long intensives on Muslim American history and hip-hop. The school focuses on conflict resolution and has social justice issues at the core of its curriculum. After a group of students experienced a hate crime on a Friday afternoon, students and teachers hosted a march to walk in solidarity.

In order to teach students how to exist in communities with each other—whether that’s in a relationship, a house, or a school—we must be explicit in what they should know (e.g., values, morals, what makes someone a good member of society).

"It starts with a shared language, one that everyone in the school—including substitute teachers, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers—must practice," says Arthur Schwartz, president of Character.org.

The approach schools or districts take to character education should be based on decisions they make about the core values that are important to them, and those values should drive the expected behavior of everyone—children and adults alike, experts say. They add that formulating this approach should be a conscious decision that needs to be age appropriate for students the school or district serves.

How might reporters recognize schools that place a priority on character education? Hallmarks of such schools differ, but they may be evident in whether and how students are explicitly taught a school’s core values, what those values mean, what they look like in practice, and how students should behave to reflect those values. Such schools often place a premium on teachers and students treating one another with respect.



**“It starts with a shared language, one that everyone in the school—including substitute teachers, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers—must practice.”  
—Arthur Schwartz**





**Intrinsic motivation:** behavior that is driven by an internal reward or rewards, rather than extrinsic motivation, which is when behavior is based on an external reward or to avoid punishment.

Schools that prioritize character education may extend their approach to the ways in which parents interact with the school. Often, families and even the community have a voice in some of the ways the school operates. Schools emphasizing character education may create opportunities for service learning for students. Their school climate may be characterized by an emphasis on **intrinsic motivation** for learning as opposed to a reward system. Students may have a chance to help determine the classroom rules and have choices in which books they read or how they demonstrate what they've learned. Ideally, an evaluation system is in place that lets people know if character education efforts are working and guides what schools will do next.

## Character Studies: Polaris Charter Academy



At Polaris Charter Academy, a K-8 Expeditionary Learning school in Chicago with a student body made up completely of low-income students of color, the middle-school students wrote and published a book to combat gun violence. They created public service announcements and organized a city-wide day of peace during which people put their guns down, swept city streets, and shared music and food. Eighth-graders investigate responsibility; seventh-graders work on change and food choice; everyone learns how to be an active citizen of the world. "We work together to get smart for a purpose. To make our community and the world a better place," says Polaris graduate Ameerah Rollins (now in high school).





# HOW DOES CHARACTER EDUCATION DIFFER FROM SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)?

**It's easy to get confused between character education and SEL because some elements of each overlap; however, they are not the same thing.**

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

Character education is about teaching skills, embedding core values, and helping students of all ages learn how to reflect those values in their daily lives; SEL is about learning skills and putting them into action. "With SEL, the emphasis is on skills development, how the skills fit into the community, and how we apply SEL skills," says David Adams, chief executive officer of Urban Assembly (see page 18). "Character education focuses on traits and how we enact those traits."

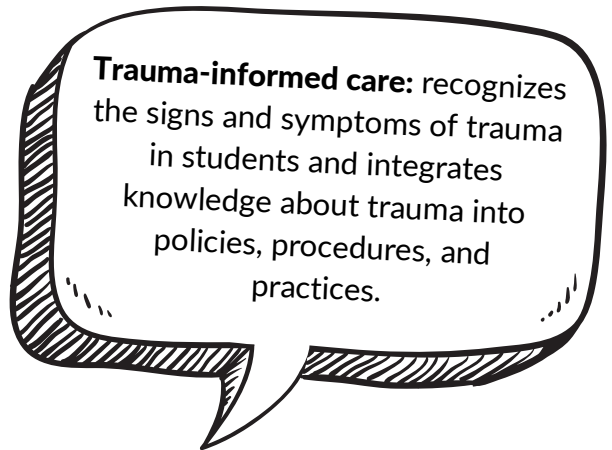
Justina Schlund, senior director of content and field learning for CASEL, goes a little deeper in describing the similarities and differences: "Character education focuses a lot on the what-to-know (values, morals important to being a good member of society and the community) and teaches traits for kids to exemplify (respect, honesty, etc.)."



**"With SEL, the emphasis is on skills development, how the skills fit into the community, and how we apply SEL skills. Character education focuses on traits and how we enact those traits."  
—David Adams**

SEL focuses on the how of the work, including the skills and the types of environments in which students and adults need to navigate their goals. While they are distinct, they can be complementary and supportive of each other.”

One educational organization might opt to put SEL under character education’s umbrella, while another opts for the reverse. As Maurice Elias, a psychology professor and director of Rutgers University’s Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab noted, what really matters is that “the vast majority of children are not under either umbrella and continue to get deluged.... Skills without character is not a desirable outcome. And it is hardly possible to enact such character attributes as honesty, responsibility, and fairness without a good complement of SEL skills.”



**Trauma-informed care:** recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in students and integrates knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.

Another important distinction between character education and SEL is that some frameworks consider SEL as encompassing mental health and **trauma-informed care**. Character education does not focus on those elements.



## Character Studies: Alamo Heights



A quick peek at the Twitter feed for Alamo Heights Junior School in San Antonio, Texas, shows that this junior high is all about kindness, positivity, and caring for one another. The district (Alamo Heights Independent School District) integrates The Eight Keys of Excellence into its curriculum and infuses character education traits in all activities and outside projects. Parents are encouraged to sign up for the Eight Keys Family Program. From the Junior School Ambassadors program—in which students in all three grades (6, 7, 8) mentor new students and sit on the character education committee—to the sixth-grade girls’ service club that supports local charitable organizations to the after-school Tutor Outreach Program—in which students tutor elementary students in neighboring districts—this school strives to infuse character education into every school day.





# A SHORT HISTORY OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

**Character education has been around a lot longer than many people might guess, tracing back to Plato and the Greek philosophers who helped people become virtuous citizens.** In the early 20th century, the Bureau of Education, Department of the Interior released a bulletin directing high schools to align curriculum to improve transition to postsecondary success—in an early iteration of college- and career-readiness skills. A large part of the curriculum included the seven Cardinal Principles of Education, which emphasized civic education and ethical character.

By the 1960s, personal freedom took center stage, and people questioned who and what should be the source of values and morality. Schools pushed character education aside until the 1980s, when President Reagan asked teachers to focus on students' morality by teaching right and wrong alongside core subjects.

And then came the 1990s. Character education was back in vogue, with various programs trying to establish a systematic way to teach character education in schools. In 1993, business and government leaders worked with students, parents, media, and religious groups to form the Character Education Partnership (now called [Character.org](http://Character.org).) The Partnership worked with the U.S. Department of Education from 1995 through 2001 to create a [character education curriculum and grant program](#) to help schools get started.

Today, many schools devote time to teaching character values. There are a lot of programs available to help schools teach character education, and many are integrated into the curriculum.

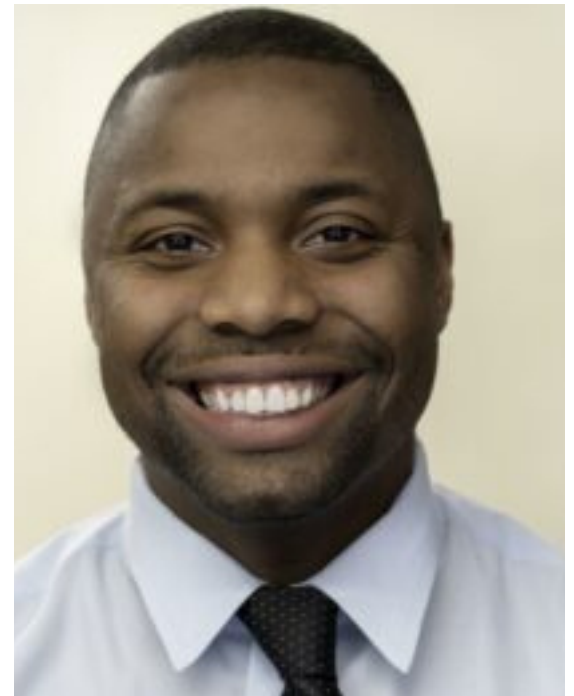




# LEADERS IN CHARACTER EDUCATION

## David Adams

In 2014, Adams became director of social-emotional learning for The Urban Assembly (UA, see page 19), a non-profit that works to advance students' economic and social mobility by improving public education. Today, he is chief executive officer. Adams helped develop the Resilient Scholars Program, which integrates SEL into the UA curriculum. In 2021, he received the Champion of Equity Award from the American Consortium for Equity in Education. He also co-authored a textbook, *Challenges to Integrating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Programs in Organizations*, and is a board member of CASEL. "It is important to be clear about what we are teaching. Skills help develop values. Teaching social-emotional skills allows us to support our young people to live in community with one another. As those skills are developed, students naturally begin to value relationships, the spaces they learn and live in, and the community they are trying to build for the future."



## Ron Berger

Berger has been in education for 46 years, with 28 of those as a teacher. He became chief academic officer for EL Education, where he helps transform schools in low-income communities into high-achieving schools filled with students of strong character. He writes about inspiring quality and character in students, specifically through project-based learning, original scientific and historical research, service learning, and the infusion of arts. He works with the national character education movement to embed character values into the core of academic work. "Kids spend seven hours a day at school. How can it not shape who they are? Schools can't opt out of character education; how can we help them to do it well?"



## Marvin Berkowitz



As the inaugural Sanford N. McDonnell Endowed Professor of Character Education, co-director of the Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and University of Missouri President's Thomas Jefferson Professor, Berkowitz wrote the book(s) on character education. He has directed the Leadership Academy in Character Education in St. Louis since 1999 and served as the inaugural Ambassador H.H. Coors Professor of Character Development at the U.S. Air Force Academy. His latest book, out in April 2021, is *PRIMED for Character Education: Six Design Principles for School Improvement* (Eye on Education). The PRIMED model stands for Prioritizing character education, Relationships, Intrinsic motivation, Modelling, Empowerment, and Developmental perspective. "Why is character important?" he asks. "Because it saves the world. Literally. And it saves people's lives."

## Geoffrey Canada

A leader in the education-reform movement, Canada was president and chief executive officer (CEO) for the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) from 1990 to 2014 and was featured in the documentary *Waiting for Superman*. He grew up in the South Bronx but had people who believed in his ability to succeed, encouraging him to thrive. After receiving a master's degree from Harvard, Canada began helping children who grew up in poverty. When asked about his hope for the future of education in an interview with *Christianity Today*, Canada said: "I am optimistic that when our country, cities, and communities decide to prioritize encouraging young people to grow up to become important and meaningful contributing adults in society, we will begin to innovate and be scientific about these children learning." In 2014, Canada stepped down as HCZ's CEO, but continues to serve as president. He continues to advocate for innovation in education and is a respected voice in the character education movement.



## Angela Duckworth

She's the founder and chief executive officer of Character Lab, a nonprofit that aims to advance scientific insights that help children thrive; a professor; faculty co-director of the Penn-Wharton Behavior Change for Good initiative; and faculty co-director of Wharton People Analytics. A former teacher and researcher, Duckworth wrote the best-selling *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* and delivered one of the most popular TED Talks ever, with the same title. When asked why she focuses on character on the Scratch Your Itch podcast, Duckworth answered: "Overwhelming scientific evidence now shows that character strengths like self-control, curiosity, and gratitude are critically important to social and emotional well-being, physical health, and achievement. Although character strengths are malleable, surprisingly little is known about how they can be intentionally cultivated. This is why Character Lab exists—to research and create new ways to help all children develop character."



**"Overwhelming scientific evidence now shows that character strengths like self-control, curiosity, and gratitude are critically important to social and emotional well-being, physical health, and achievement."—Angela Duckworth**

## Maurice Elias



Elias is a psychology professor, director of the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab, co-director of the Collaborative Center for Community-Based Research and Service, and co-director of the Academy for SEL in Schools. Recipient of numerous awards, including the Sanford McDonnell Award for Lifetime Achievement in Character Education, Elias focuses on students' emotional intelligence, school success, and social-emotional and character development. "Character education and SEL overlap in some ways, and that matters because skills without direction can be dangerous. You need both, and they need to be in alignment. Don't think about SEL or character education as ends in themselves but rather as tools. How are people using the tools?"

## Tia Kim



Kim leads a team of education designers and research scientists working to develop and evaluate the quality, effectiveness, and reach of the Committee for Children’s programs. She is a driving force of the organization’s efforts to continually gather information about implementation fidelity and promote partnerships within the field. As vice president of education, research and impact, she is helping the Committee for Children reach its goal of positively transforming the social-emotional well-being of 100 million children annually by 2028. While the 42-year-old Committee focuses more on SEL than on character education and provides SEL curriculum to about 30 percent of the elementary schools in the U.S., Kim understands that students must develop SEL competencies to have strong character development. “We ask—and try to answer—the really hard questions so we can help move the field forward as a whole, not just our organization,” she says. This spring, Kim is starting an SEL training program for K-12 educators.

**“We ask—and try to answer—the really hard questions so we can help move the field forward as a whole, not just our organization”—Tia Kim**

## Tamra Nast

As Character.org’s director of training & coaching, Nast works with schools and districts around the world to help them apply The 11 Principles Framework. She is a licensed professional counselor and was a teacher, school counselor, and character coordinator before coming to Character.org—all of which help inform her work. “Infusing the 11 Principles into a school is a process; it takes time. We want schools to understand the nuances and how it comes together.”



## Jodi Newton

Newton is executive director of The Hope Institute, which partners with Samford University's Orlean Beeson School of Education (where Newton is a professor of educational leadership) to help Alabama schools develop good character in students. Newton previously served as the associate dean of the School of Education, director of doctoral programs, and superintendent of Homewood City Schools. Samford is a Christian university, but Newton says The Hope Institute does not incorporate religion in its work. "We help schools become a culture that is caring and infused character into academics, instructional strategy, discipline, and so on. Schools must establish the core values that are important for their children to learn. It is different for each school; they need to develop it and own it."



**"The secret sauce of character education is how shared it is through the entire school community, including parents. Shared values change everything. Schools must be intentional about what it means to create a caring community."**

**—Arthur Schwartz**

## Arthur Schwartz



As the president of Character.org, Schwartz is on the front lines for helping schools deliver character education. For 15 years, he was an executive at the John Templeton Foundation, where he conducted research on youth purpose, forgiveness, gratitude, altruism, and grit. He served as the senior scholar at the United States Air Force Academy and chaired the team that developed the Academy's conceptual framework for developing leaders of character. "The secret sauce of character education is how shared it is through the entire school community, including parents. Shared values change everything. Schools must be intentional about what it means to create a caring community. You have to double down on what that means and what it looks like, sounds like, feels like. Once all of this is in place, it helps the school function better."

## Sean Talamas



Talamas serves as executive director of Character Lab, a nonprofit with the mission of advancing scientific insights that help kids thrive. As a Cuban American first-generation college graduate who served in the U.S. Air Force in special operations, Talamas studied experimental psychology and developed a passion for leadership, research, and practice. He is on an advisory board for *Behavioral Scientist* magazine. “For character education to be done well, it needs to be everywhere—from how we’re thinking about teaching, how kids are greeted in the classroom, in edtech products, on posters lining the walls. It must be embedded into teacher training and the curriculum. It’s particularly important now as we are all attuned to racial reckoning and context. We must understand the situation and the context in which students are operating. That will be key to doing character education in an appropriate way.”

### Character Studies: Brookwood Elementary



Brookwood Elementary in Cumming, Georgia, focuses on character development and SEL in different ways (see page 18), but one that stands out is its Heritage Night. Brookwood is made up of families from around the world; 18 languages are spoken in the school. On Heritage Night, families bring in food and do performances to share their traditions with each other. “We celebrate one another, promote connection, and make everyone feel like they belong,” says Tracey Smith, principal. When the school could not host the event due to COVID-19, leaders opted to produce a Heritage Cookbook instead. Families submitted dozens of recipes for the book, which will also include information about various regions and their customs.





# MISCONCEPTIONS & CONTROVERSIES

Here are five of the most common perceptions that cause educators to shy away from character education or harbor skepticism about its value.

- 1 Character education is the role of parents and families—not schools.** Advocates note that all adults who interact with children may affect their development, whether for good or for ill. This impact can be long-lasting, inspirational, or painful. Cruel or insensitive words from a teacher can resonate for many years. Character education proponents believe adults in schools must be made aware the hours they spend with their students play an important role in shaping their characters and that children learn about good character from educators and classmates as well as families.
- 2 Character education is about getting kids to do what they're told.** This belief often leads to an imposed set of rules and a system of rewards and punishments that may produce temporary or limited behavioral changes but may do little or nothing to promote character development. Instead, experts advise to think of character education as a way to develop independent thinkers who practice moral principles and are likely to do the right thing even under challenging circumstances.



## Character Studies: Vestavia Hills Elementary



Every morning, each student at Vestavia Hills Elementary Cahaba Heights in Vestavia Hills, Alabama, promises to be a person of character. As a 2020 National School of Character, the school's "Connect 5" program connects students in need of social and emotional support with five staff members who regularly check in with students to provide encouragement and support. Older students help younger students learn to read; the fifth-grade students lead a recycling effort, and students in all grades serve the elderly. "Heights Heroes" are lauded each day in the morning announcements, and the school celebrates differences as well as successes.



**3 Character education has religious undertones.** When people learn that character education is about teaching values, they may ask, “Whose values are you talking about?” EL Education’s Ron Berger says that character education in America has roots across a wide span, including conservative, liberal, and progressive faith-based traditions; psychology professors; and social justice organizations. Today, experts say that character education is about teaching children how to be good human beings who make smart decisions.

**4 Character education and SEL discriminate against people of color.** Justina Schlund, senior director of content and field learning for CASEL, says her organization is aware that some people mistakenly think of SEL as a way to control or “fix” children of color, or promote white, middle-class values. In response, CASEL has worked with its urban district partners to think about how SEL connects to their equity goals and emphasize that SEL or character education is not an intervention but a universal approach that’s about building on students’ strengths, including cultural and linguistic strengths, to reflect on and celebrate experiences and identities. “We’ve seen a lot of things being conflated or bumped into SEL that don’t match the original definition, so we updated the definition to be as clear as we can and support implementation,” Schlund says.

**5 Character education programs take away from “real” learning (aka core subjects).** William Trusheim—president of the New Jersey Alliance for Social, Emotional & Character Development—says, “When schools do character development work, their standardized test performance improves ... [This work] establishes a learning environment that supports academics.” Researchers have been gathering evidence that success in school and life is dependent on healthy social and emotional development. For more, check out “The Evidence Base of How We Learn: Supporting Students’ Social, Emotional, and Academic Development” from the Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (see Research on page 16).

## Journalist resources

Organizations, websites, blogs & podcasts:

[CASEL](#)

[Center for Character & Citizenship](#)

[Character Lab](#)

[Character.org](#)

[Committee for Children](#)

[Conversations on Character podcast](#)

[EL Education](#)

[The Hope Institute](#)

[The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues](#)

[National School Climate Center](#)

[New Jersey Alliance for Social, Emotional & Character Development](#)

[Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab](#)

[Virtue Insight: Conversations on Character](#)



# WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?



Below is a collection of studies to explore, including some that are more focused on SEL.

The [Jubilee Centre's research](#) on character education in schools across the United Kingdom

["The Evidence Base of How We Learn: Supporting Students' Social, Emotional, and Academic Development"](#) from the Aspen Institute's national commission, 2017

["The effectiveness of character education on student behavior,"](#) from Rowan University, 2019

["What Works in Character Education,"](#) *Journal of Research in Character Education*, 2007

["Smart & Good High Schools: Integrating excellence and ethics for success in school, work, and beyond"](#) from the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect & Responsibility) and the Institute for Excellence & Ethics, 2005

["The Relationship of Character Education Implementation and Academic Achievement in Elementary Schools,"](#) *Journal of Research in Character Education*, 2003

[School Climate Research Summary,](#) from the National School Climate Center, 2012

[The Case for a Holistic Approach to Social-Emotional Learning,](#) from the Committee for Children, 2021

[Finding Your Place: The Current State of K-12 Social Emotional Learning,](#) from Tyton Partners, 2020



# WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN ACTION?

**Character education may look different at every school, and experts say it should.**

Once a school or district decides to embark on this work, the first step is choosing their core values and creating a common language around them. “If a school’s mascot is a tiger, every first- or ninth-grade student should be able to explain the ‘Tiger way’ or the identity formation that happens around their core values,” says Arthur Schwartz, president of Character.org.

## Character Studies: Alexander Hamilton



The high school students at [Alexander Hamilton Preparatory Academy](#) in Elizabeth, New Jersey, are expanding their social, emotional, and character development through the school’s PRIDE initiative (Perseverance, Respect, Integrity, Diversity, and Excellence). Special school PRIDE events include Humans of Elizabeth, in which each grade focuses on a different aspect of life in Elizabeth (e.g., restaurants, senior citizens) and takes photos and interviews people; the Week of Respect, focusing on a positive school climate; and Hamilton PRIDE Bingo, which turns a Bingo board into one that celebrates the tenets of PRIDE (e.g., under Respect, “took initiative to clean around the house without being asked to”; under Integrity, “was on time to all my classes last month”).

From there, a next step can be choosing or creating a framework to follow, such as Character.org’s [11 Principles Framework](#). A framework guides schools in planning, developing, implementing, and assessing their programs. The framework is not a curriculum with prescribed lessons; instead, schools use the framework to develop a character education program that fits their building and community.

Other character education programs:

- [Character Counts!](#): explores the Six Pillars of Character and SEL best practices to create a positive school climate
- [Character Development & Leadership](#): an online and face-to-face curriculum for middle and high school students that addresses character ed and SEL needs; it’s aligned with Common Core Standards and includes 216 lesson plans
- [Goodcharacter.com](#): character education, mindfulness, and SEL curriculum that includes lesson plans, activities, and resources
- [Character First Education](#): helps public, private, and home school educators deliver character-based leadership development programs
- [Collaborative Classroom](#): helps students grow as readers, writers, and thinkers while they develop the social and emotional skills necessary to thrive.

At Brookwood Elementary in Georgia, Principal Tracey Smith focuses on character education and SEL. In the past, the school used Second Step for its character development work. The program focused on bullying but has now rebranded to be a broader, more SEL-focused program. Smith now uses 7 Mindsets, which she likes because it addresses staff needs first. “If you take care of your teachers, they’ll take care of their students,” says Smith.

Every staff meeting starts with mindfulness strategies that teachers take back to their classrooms. Each week starts with time dedicated to teaching that week’s mindset, such as Making a Difference. Then everyone embeds the mindset in multiple activities. For example, for Making a Difference, staff left notes in the staff room to show how others were Living to Give. For example, “Jennifer: You made a difference today when you shared your lunch because I left mine home.” Teachers carry the theme into their classes. For Making a Difference, a fifth-grade science lesson on circuits featured discussion of how students could make a difference by opening a door for someone or picking up their pencil.

On Fridays, the school wraps up the week’s mindset with a morning meeting that recaps what students and teachers learned about that week’s mindset as well as any past mindsets. “It’s really pretty cool, and I love that we designate a time specifically for this so our staff knows we value that time as much as they do,” says Smith.

“When you have an established program and you can use the common language, everyone sees the connections,” adds Smith, who wrote the book *Ridiculously Amazing Schools: Creating a Culture Where Everyone Thrives* (Publish Your Purpose Press, 2019), based on her long-time commitment to character education and SEL.

Character education and SEL look different at The Urban Assembly, a nonprofit that supports 23 New York City public middle and high schools, as well as urban districts in California, Delaware, Massachusetts and Texas. The nonprofit organization uses Resilient Scholars, an SEL program it developed that helps students build on their resiliency, develop prosocial behavior, and take part in positive experiences beyond the classroom. “Some people think teaching basketball is about teaching how to dribble and shoot; we say it’s a way to teach responsibility, about being part of a team, and making good decisions,” says David Adams, chief executive officer of The Urban Assembly. Students and teachers continually assess one another and themselves, because understanding their strengths and challenges is an SEL competency, Adams says.



The Urban Assembly Unison School—a middle school in Brooklyn, N.Y., focused on critical literacy, problem solving, and research—has periods called Advisory, during which groups of 15 students come together for empathy-building and perspective-shifting activities. Pods (or classes) of students name themselves after people they admire.

“We care about values,” says Adams. “We identify skills, attitudes, and values, and we help students to develop those values. We place a heavy emphasis on skills, but we want to match skills with people who use those skills to contribute to the common good.”

See more examples of character education in action in the **Character Studies** boxes throughout this reporter guide.



## Character Studies: Joseph H. Brensinger

2020 State School of Character Joseph H. Brensinger PS #17 in Jersey City, New Jersey, uses R.I.S.E. (Respect, Responsibility, Integrity, Service and Excellence) to define and explore its core values. This diverse school is located in the middle of the city; 87 percent of its students are economically disadvantaged. Students attend TEDEd Club classes in which they identify and try to solve community problems. They use the character and SEL skills they learn about via the district’s SEL curricula, Peekapak and Mosaic by ACT, in their homerooms. The TEDEd Club lessons are guided by the school’s core values and help the students identify “big ideas” to present to an audience. At the end of the year, students plan and host a celebration during which they present their TED-style talk to their peers and community members. Their presentation includes how their ideas would impact the community. “TEDEd’s mission is to spark and celebrate the ideas of every student,” says Janeen Maniscalco, assistant principal. “Our school’s mission is to ensure all children have equal and equitable educational opportunities whereby they can learn, grow, enhance their self-worth, and succeed academically. It is our desire to build future leaders, one citizen at a time.”



# THE FUTURE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

Here are three examples of where character education is headed:

## 1 Future teachers are learning about character education.

In the spring of 2020, the education school at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, produced a two-day training event on character education for its faculty in response to growing faculty interest in the subject. The dean of the school has made character education a priority and developed a task force to work on curriculum development. In addition, the school has established a network with four universities across the Southeast and will be training principals and working to develop additional training in character education.

## 2 Data and assessment are becoming increasingly important.

CASEL has started an assessment working group to study how SEL is affecting school climate and teaching; more information can be downloaded [here](#). None of the assessments that the work group looked at were validated by research scientists to be used as a summative measure of any specific “gaps” in students’ social and emotional skills. Instead, the intended use of the assessment is as a formative tool for teachers to look at trends in their classroom instruction (what skills to focus on), and/or as a way for students to celebrate their strengths or set goals. Character.org is creating a survey on parents’ perception of character; it will ask what core values people try to foster at home and more. Character.org is also building an infrastructure to collect more data.

## 3 Character development will become more integrated into product development.

“Edtech products, such as BrainPOP and Zearn, are revolutionizing schools,” says Character Lab’s Sean Talamus. “Students are spending more time on computers in schools every day. Character development needs to be woven into as many touch points with students as possible—in math class, in sports, in extracurricular activities, in electives, and in the games and technology they are using every day.”



## Story ideas

Here are a few ideas to get started in reporting and writing about character education.

- Is it possible to teach compassion, resilience, and other character skills?
- A profile of one or more schools/districts and how they are teaching character skills.
- How are schools using curriculum related to character education and civic virtues to help students find connections between their classroom learning and real-world current events?
- New methods for integrating character education throughout the curriculum
- The ‘homework’ of character education, or how teachers and schools engage parents and families
- Why some teacher training programs are focusing on character education
- New ways to evaluate character education and what that means for parents, educators, and policymakers



## Character Studies: Childersburg High School



In 2017, [Childersburg High School](#) in Childersburg, Alabama, wanted to change its school culture. A group of teachers focused on Character.org’s principle of Creating a Caring Community and started the “Homes” initiative. Every student, teacher, and staff member is placed into one of four houses that plan activities on service, spirit/pride, and character education. From pep rallies to dynamic learning projects that involve parents and community members, Childersburg students work on character education and unity. “The House System promotes respect, consideration, and courtesy of all students and teachers,” says Quentin Lee, Childersburg principal. “The Houses also provide a well-ordered, stimulating, and enjoyable atmosphere in which deep learning and effective teaching can flourish.” As a result of this system, the community donated an air hockey table, ping pong table, foosball table, pool table, interactive television, board games, and more for the Student Lounge Game Room.



# GLOSSARY

**Character development:** the approach used to help children understand, care about, and practice the core values that will allow them to succeed in life.

**Moral character:** having a desire for and prioritizing goodness. It includes skills, such as honesty, integrity, and compassion.

**Performance character:** the virtues and qualities that allow us to accomplish goals, such as self-discipline, diligence, loyalty, and responsibility.

**Intellectual character:** the skills and habits that direct a person's thoughts, including curiosity, reflection, strategy, skepticism, and open-mindedness.

**Civic character:** the knowledge, skills, and virtues that contribute to being a responsible citizen who serves the common good; includes fairness, respect, and volunteering.

**Trauma-informed care:** recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in students and integrates knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.

**Student data privacy:** covers the use, collection, handling, and governance of student information, such as educational records and other personal information—both inside and outside the traditional classroom setting.

