

## **Character Education in Ohio Schools: Results of the Ohio Partners in Character Education Evaluation Study (1998-2002)<sup>1</sup>**

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Much attention in schools, the press, and communities is focused on student achievement. Our increasingly technological society requires a more educated workforce and citizenry, hence higher levels of achievement are essential. Most states mandate a minimal level of achievement that every child must meet, and No Child Left Behind legislation reinforces accountability for achievement nationally. Significant research and resources have been directed specifically at improving instruction so that student learning is maximized. There is growing evidence, however, that social and emotional learning and a safe, supportive, and orderly school environment are equally as important to learning. Further, most will agree that youth need to learn how to be responsible, show respect, caring and compassion towards others, be truthful, honest and fair. To achieve these goals, many schools have implemented character education (CE) programs.

According to Thomas Lickona, a respected authority and author of numerous books on character education, “Character education is the deliberate effort to help people understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values”. Although parents are the primary and first teachers of character, it is essential for schools, churches, and communities to support parents, or provide guidance when families are unable to. Many schools implement character programs by focusing on core values that are chosen by consensus with the larger school community. These values are taught through curricular and extracurricular activities. For example, in language arts, students can talk about how a character in a story was honest, or courageous, or showed respect or responsibility. Older students might learn about caring and compassion by performing a service project at a local food pantry or shelter. Teachers, counselors, and administrators can integrate character into the daily activities of schools in a variety of ways.

Ohio received a federal grant in 1998 to develop and evaluate pilot projects in character education, and 14 sites were chosen to participate in the project. Survey data was collected over four years from students, teachers, and parents at these pilot sites. Local School Report Cards were used to obtain Proficiency Test passing rates and student and teacher attendance rates. The goal was to evaluate the impact of character education programs on student attitudes, behavior and learning; on the overall school climate; and to provide information about how, in what situations, and by what means character education programs are successful. Initially, the desire was to include in the data collection a group of schools that did not implement character education programs to use as a comparison group. Although every site was not able to secure a comparison school, several control schools did participate in the study and insightful comparisons were made.

The 14 pilot projects ranged in composition from small rural schools to large inner-city districts. Single schools as well as entire districts and communities developed programs. While this produced a rich diversity of program implementation models, it made evaluation difficult. After much discussion among the evaluators, project directors and pilot site coordinators, the general consensus was that the evaluation process should include as many participating partners as possible, rather than

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<sup>1</sup> This report is a summary of the “Final Evaluation Report on the Ohio Partners in Character Education Program, 1999-2002” conducted by Ronald M. Katsuyama, Ph.D., University of Dayton, 2004. Errors and omissions from the original report are the responsibility of OPCE.

focusing more intensively upon only a few programs. Subsequent site visits identified important issues and resulted in the development of questionnaires for students, teachers, parents and administrators to assess attitudes and behaviors of students, important curricular components of the character education programs, and overall school climate factors. Questionnaires were administered in the spring of each of the 4 project years. In all, 9,470 elementary students (49 schools), 6,637 middle and high school students (12 schools), 1,906 teachers, and 2,998 parents filled out questionnaires over the 4 years.

The student questionnaires (elementary and middle/high school) included questions about student and classmate behaviors, attitudes and perceptions about various aspects of the school setting and perceptions of potential benefits of the school CE program. Teachers were asked about their students' attitudes and behaviors in school, their feelings about other characteristics of the school environment, including staff communication and support from parents, their perceptions of potential benefits of the CE program at their school, and the frequency and types of character activities they employed. The parent questionnaire asked about the school environment, including perceptions of children's attitudes and behaviors at school, teacher effectiveness, communication with teachers and school staff, and their perceptions of potential benefits of the CE program at their child's school. Because of the number of questions on each questionnaire and the finding that responses were related to each other, responses were statistically grouped into 8 school climate factors – for example, one factor that emerged from the student responses was “own prosocial behavior” that included responses to questions such as “Do you do helpful things for others in class, say kind things to show that you care about others, and include other students when playing?” Other factors dealt with teacher expectations, teacher support, classmates' prosocial behavior, motivation, citizenship, and peer relations.

Overall, results supported a positive benefit for implementing character education programs. While some results must be interpreted with caution because of the limited comparison samples, other results are quite encouraging and provide ample support for recommending that character education is an important tool in school improvement efforts. Results are discussed below, organized according to significant questions that the study sought to answer.

**Are students, parents and teachers aware of character education programs in their school?** Pilot projects differed in their level of program implementation. Some programs were implemented on a district or even community-wide basis, others were limited to single schools or even some classrooms or teachers within schools. Given these differences, one of the first questions addressed was the degree of awareness of the pilot site's character education program. Participants were asked whether there was a character education program in their school. Most elementary students (86% - 94%) were aware of programs in their schools, as were teachers (96%). One exception was that only 76% of teachers in schools with relatively new programs (two or fewer years) were aware of the program. Awareness of parents followed a similar trend, 86% of parents from schools with 4-5 years of established character education programs were aware of the program, whereas only 41% of parents from newer programs knew about the program.

There was more variability in the percentage of middle and high school students who were aware of character education in their schools. For middle school students, the range was 8% to 100%, with the average at 62%. High school students ranged in awareness from 27- 94% with an average of 49%. It was not possible to determine whether this was due to low participation in character activities or less visible programs. Elementary schools tended to have more visible character programs in which character words were discussed frequently and displayed prominently in the school. In middle and high schools, character programs often involved fewer students and were integrated into service projects and extra-curricular activities, making them less salient for students and parents. This finding,

however, enabled us to do some further analyses that provided interesting results, which are described below.

**Does character education affect school climate?** A major component of the school climate is the attitudes and behaviors of students. Improving these is a primary goal of character education. One way to assess whether this occurred was to examine responses to the questionnaires over the four years of the project for indications that student behavior improved. Analyses of questionnaire data revealed that some schools saw improved scores on things such as student kindness and inclusiveness, while other schools had no significant changes. Overall, however, there was a slight increase in student prosocial behavior (caring, kindness, inclusiveness) over the four years.

Another approach is to look at schools with CE programs compared to similar schools without programs. A few pilot sites were able to secure a “control” site for comparison. In one pair of comparison schools, the students in the schools with CE indicated greater inclusiveness and greater classroom order in responding to the question, “Do your classmates push or hit others when angry?”, and they were also more likely to report that they “Have a good friend at school” and that they “Try to do their best in school.” Further support for improved school climate in this comparison group comes from the finding that teachers at the CE schools were perceived as being more supportive by their students than teachers at the comparison school without CE.

Support for positive behavioral change also came from comparisons between schools that had longer, well-established CE programs and newer programs. Students in more established programs responded that they and their classmates “include other students when playing” more frequently than students in newer programs. In another comparison of elementary students from a school with a CE program that had been in existence for 5 years with students from schools with CE programs that had begun only 2 or 3 years before, the more established program was rated as having more teacher support, higher teacher expectations, more classmate prosocial behaviors, better classmate citizenship, and higher motivation to learn.

Results from middle and high school students were also positive. In one comparison of an urban high school with an established character program to another high school without a program, CE students had more positive ratings on “Respectful Behavior” and “Service to Others” than the non-CE school. This positive benefit persisted over the duration of the study, providing strong support for the conclusion that character education is effective in positively influencing student behavior.

Results from the teacher questionnaires also indicated improvement in student behaviors. A decline in “unruly behaviors” as rated by teachers in middle and high schools was obtained throughout the project’s duration.

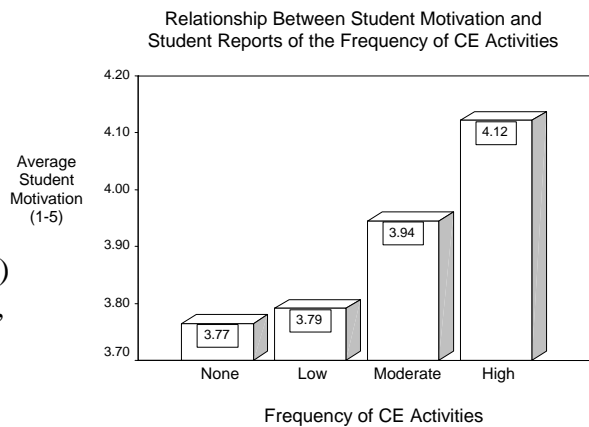
Another approach to the analysis was enabled by the result discussed above that fewer middle and high school students were aware of their character education program. One assumption was that those who responded that their school didn’t have a program were most likely not participating in CE activities, therefore these students formed a “non-CE” group and those that responded positively were called “CE students”. Looking at the responses to the questionnaire items for these two groups, the CE-students had more positive perceptions of the social and academic climate at their school than did the non-CE students. This result was true for both middle and high school.

**Do character education effects increase over time?** Because all questionnaire respondents were promised anonymity, it was impossible to follow the same group of students and teachers over

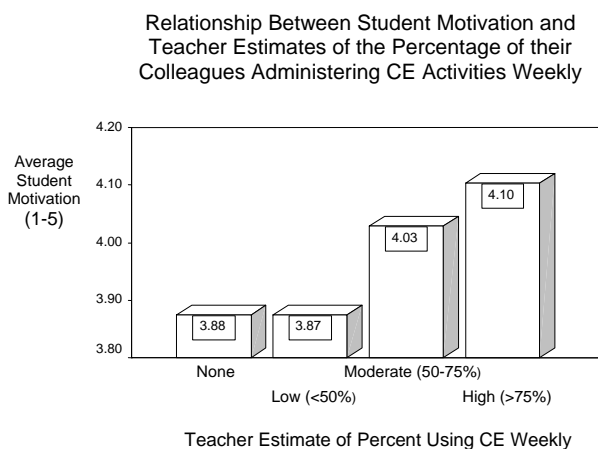
the 4 years of the study; therefore, changes from year to year could not be directly assessed. Looking at the ratings by students, teachers and parents over the 4 years can be misleading because of the changes in the samples and lack of a comparison. Even so, most of the factors showed a positive trend, especially “prosocial behaviors”.

Comparing older CE programs to newer ones also provides support for cumulative benefit for CE. Overall, longer running, more established programs had higher ratings than the newer programs. For example, in one comparison, on every item pertaining to encouragement and support from their teachers, students from 5-year-old CE programs rated their teachers more highly than did students from the 2-year-old CE program. Responses from teachers corroborated this trend, teachers at schools with longer established CE programs attributed greater benefits to character education.

**Do more frequent character education activities result in greater benefits?** Both teachers and students were asked how frequently they engaged in character based activities and teachers were asked what percentage of the teachers in their school administered character activities on a weekly basis. At the beginning of the study about 30% of students reported that they participated in daily character activities, and by the end of the study 34% reported daily activities. This trend is encouraging because more participation in character activities was related to other positive benefits. Students who reported that they participated in character activities more frequently also rated the school climate higher and they reported that they believed those activities (1) increased their motivation to do their best schoolwork, (2) improved their school’s learning environment, (3) helped them become more cooperative, (4) helped other students with their behaviors, (5) helped them learn, and (6) helped them become better students.



In schools where teachers engaged in more frequent character activities and more staff participated in the program, both teachers and students had higher ratings of the school climate and reported a higher “perceived benefit” of the program. The results clearly support the conclusion that more frequent character activities by a higher percentage of the school staff result in a greater positive impact on the school climate.



CE activities appear to be most effective when a majority of teachers administer them on at least a weekly basis. Teachers at these schools are most likely to report that their program has improved the learning environment, increased their students’ motivation to learn, and helped them become more effective teachers.

**What components of character education programs were utilized?** The most frequent character activity reported by teachers was a “focus upon character words or traits” (98%). Other reported activities included: display of posters about character

traits in halls or other public areas (96%), formal recognition of students for achievement (95%), reading about character traits (94%), intentional modeling of character traits by teachers (93%), display of art work or bulletin boards about character traits (89%), assemblies about character traits (85%), plays or skits about character traits (78%), and school TV presentations about character traits (45%).

### What were the perceived benefits of implementing a character education program?

Teachers who rated their character education program as beneficial were more likely to also say: (1) “Our school has a good working relationship between teachers and administrators,” (2) “Students say kind things to show that they care about their classmates,” (3) “Teachers at our school recognize and

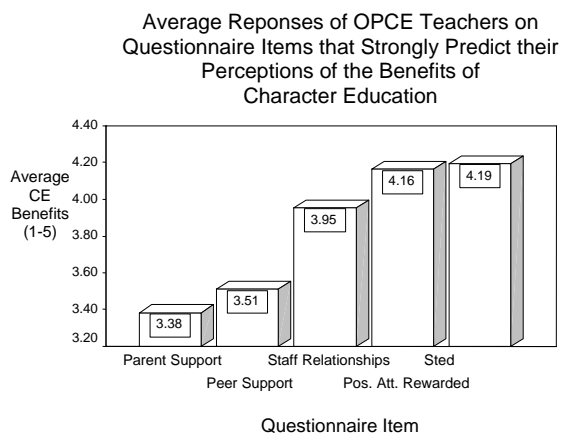
nurture the inherent goodness in students,” (4)

“Parents encourage their children to do their best at school,” and (5) “Students are regularly recognized for positive attitudes and behaviors.”

Parents who rated the programs beneficial also said: (1)

“Students are recognized for attempting to do their best work,” (2) “Students are well-behaved at school,” (3) “My child’s teacher challenges students to learn,” (4) “My child enjoys learning,” and (5)

“The principal clearly communicates what is going on at school.” All of these findings confirm that the benefits of character education impact the relationships among students, faculty and parents in a positive manner.

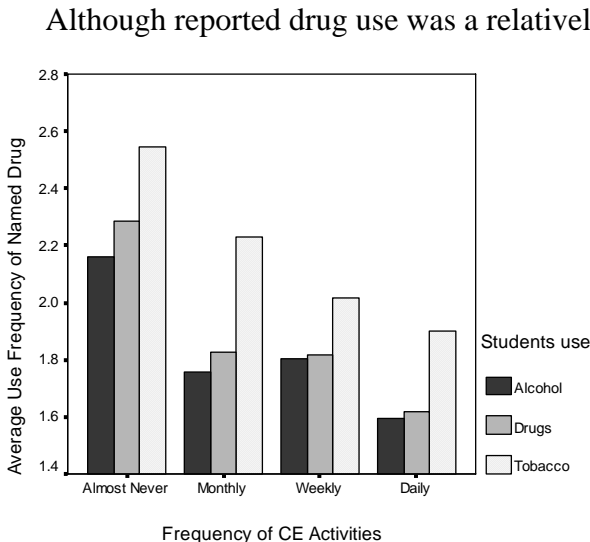


### What were the characteristics of “successful” CE programs? Pilot sites were divided into

“more” and “less” successful CE programs based on the student perception of their program’s benefits. More successful programs were those which were rated higher than average in perceived benefits, that is, students viewed the CE programs in the more successful schools as having a positive benefit on their behavior. In the more successful schools, students also had higher ratings of the school climate factors than at the less successful schools. Teachers at the successful schools also rated the school climate higher, reported that they employed CE activities more frequently, and that a greater percentage of staff participated in CE activities. In addition, teachers at schools with more successful programs were more likely to have reached consensus in the use of school assemblies, school TV presentations, books or readings about character traits, plays or skits about character traits, and formal recognition of students for achievement. In addition, a focus upon character words was more frequently utilized and greater utilization of posters about character traits and intentional modeling of character traits by teachers.

**Is character education a prevention strategy?** Survey items were added on the 2000 middle and high school student surveys about alcohol and drug use by classmates to assess whether character education programs may be encouraging more responsible behaviors in these areas. One item asked how often classmates attended school under the influence of alcohol, and a second item asked how often they attended school under the influence of drugs. A third item asked how often classmates had 5 or more drinks in a day (binge drinking). The responses on these items indicated these were infrequent events and they were especially infrequent before high school. For example, over three-fourths (77%) of high school students responded that their classmates “rarely” or “never” attend school under the influence of alcohol, and even more (88%) of middle school/junior high school students responded that their classmates avoid this type of behavior. In 2002, additional questions about smoking or use of smokeless tobacco were included and the drug and alcohol questions were modified

slightly for simplification. Again, high school students reported more frequent use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs by themselves and among other students than middle/junior high students did.



There were also profound differences in reported alcohol and drug use between students who reported participating in character education activities and those who did not. Students who almost never had CE activities in school were

more likely to report using alcohol, drugs, and tobacco than students who had some CE activities. It seems that experience with and awareness of character education programs is associated with less drug and alcohol abuse in the schools. While lower alcohol and drug use rates cannot be attributed directly to CE programs, nevertheless, the findings are consistent with what one would expect if the CE activities discourage risky behavior with these substances.

**What is the relationship between character education and academic achievement?**

Because of the promise of anonymity in completing the surveys, direct measures of achievement by survey participants was not possible. However, data on school percentages passing the Ohio Proficiency Tests was available for the participating sites, as well as student and teacher attendance rates. These data were compiled and analyzed to examine the relationship between character education and achievement.

What is the appropriate comparison? Comparing the Proficiency Test passing rates of the 36 pilot site elementary schools to statewide passing rates is problematic. First, there is no reason to assume that the pilot sites reflect the same characteristics as the state as a whole. In fact, this is true, the achievement passing rates for the pilot sites at the beginning of the study in every comparison (4<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading, writing, math, science, and citizenship) are lower than state averages. It is likely that many of the pilot sites chose to initiate character education programs as a school improvement strategy. Another strategy would be to see if the CE schools improved their Proficiency Test passing rates over the 4 years more than the state averages. This comparison is problematic also because statistically, greater gains are expected from lower achieving schools (regression to the mean). However, it is interesting to note that in the 10 comparisons of improvement in passing rates, the CE schools made greater gains in all but one, and one of the comparisons, (6<sup>th</sup> grade writing) was large enough to be statistically significant. Though not conclusive, this pattern is consistent with CE programs benefiting performances on these tests.

Another way to examine the relationship between character education and achievement is to look at the relationship between the Proficiency Test measures and the survey results. Interesting findings were obtained from these analyses.

First, the relationship between the student climate factors and Proficiency Test passing rates was examined. For elementary school students, the reporting of helpful, caring behaviors and the avoidance of mean or aggressive behaviors among classmates is strongly associated with the percent of 4<sup>th</sup> graders passing each of the Proficiency Tests. For 6<sup>th</sup> graders, the results were even stronger; schools in which students had high ratings of “prosocial” behaviors had higher passing rates on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade Proficiency Tests.

For teachers, only one factor was related to Proficiency Test rates: “parental involvement”. That is, when teachers rated the parents as involved in their child’s education, schools had higher Proficiency Test passing rates. For parents, the most important factor was “student attitudes and behaviors”; parents who responded that the students were well behaved and treated teachers with respect were from schools with higher passing rates.

Among middle/junior high school and high school students, the recognition and opportunities for service that schools provide had the highest relationship to Proficiency Test passing rates. Teacher ratings of helpful behaviors were also related to the percent passing Proficiency Tests. While recognition for academic and non-academic effort, opportunities to lead and serve, and encouragement of supportive peer relationships would not be expected to directly contribute to learning that is measured by Proficiency Tests, nevertheless, such aspects of a school’s climate could help motivate students toward acquisition of knowledge and general high achievement.

**What is the relationship between character education and student and teacher attendance?** As with Proficiency Test passing rates, the best predictor of student attendance is “classmates prosocial behavior”, that is student attendance is higher in schools where students rate their classmates as kinder and more inclusive. For teachers, the climate factors, “Parental Involvement” and “Student Involvement” were most strongly related to student attendance.

Although teacher attendance is generally high, there was enough variation to produce interesting results. Teacher attendance is strongly associated with the student climate factor “Own Citizenship” which refers to questions about the student’s behavior in school (cooperation, working hard, following rules, paying attention). Teachers’ ratings of the support they are given by administrators also accounts for a substantial amount of the variance in teacher attendance.

It is important to keep in mind that finding a relationship does not imply causation – in this case it is hard to say whether teachers are more motivated to go to work where students are highly motivated to do their best, comply with school rules, and pay attention to their teacher’s instructions, and where they have administrative support, or whether teacher dedication (by attending school consistently) produces these type of student and administrative behaviors.

These positive associations support the conclusion that a positive learning environment affects both students’ attitudes and behaviors and teachers’ commitment to their roles as mentors. Such positive learning environments might, of course, also contribute to the nature and extent of learning and skill acquisition as measured by Proficiency Tests.

## **Conclusions & recommendations**

The findings of the Ohio Partners in Character Education pilot project evaluation support the conclusion that character education contributes to a more positive school climate, better teacher-

student-parent relationships, improved student behaviors, better peer relationships, lower reported rates of drug, alcohol and tobacco use, and possibly higher academic achievement. A successful character education program involves a majority of teachers and school staff who provide regular and frequent character building activities. Further, there is sufficient evidence of a positive impact to recommend that character education be part of school improvement efforts.