

Research Study on Character Education

by Joe Mazzola, President & CEO

"Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that is counted counts" - Albert Einstein

Measuring certain things is indeed very difficult. And, getting definitive closure on whether or not something actually works is often harder. Like many other areas, that is certainly true when it comes to character education.

Let's talk about the most recently published report. In late October, just before the 2010 National Forum on Character Education, Education Week reported on the findings of a research project that looked at seven social and character development programs. The headline alone was disheartening: "Character Education Found to Fall Short in Federal Study."

But let's take a closer here. Regarding the research design and other aspects of the actual study, two researchers already sent a letter to the editor of Ed Week. They make several fair and valid observations. You can see their actual letter.

After seeking advice from our Education Advisory Council, we submitted an article to Education Week, too. Our primary goal was to encourage readers, policy makers and others to put this new study into perspective. More importantly, we want people to avoid making hasty generalizations that all character education does not work. When all said and done, this recent project was simply one fairly limited study. There have been many others in the still-emerging research base for our field.

One of the researchers involved in the project even made the same point (Brian Flay from Oregon State University). He said, "Some people are going to see this report and think character education doesn't work, and that would be the wrong conclusion to come to, based on one report." He added, "I think it gives a false sense of failure based on limited analysis."

It is very important to note that this recent study did not explore the broader approach to character education that CEP strongly believes in. To be "effective," character education must be comprehensive, holistic and deep-dive, consistent with "The Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education." Such an approach weaves character throughout the curriculum and entire school culture. It is a "whole-school" intervention strategy. Conversely, the seven approaches reviewed in the federal study are not what many believe are truly whole-school interventions designed to impact whole-school culture.

So we have some apples and oranges here. The logical question is—what happens when using the broader, holistic, principled-based intervention strategy that CEP espouses? From over a decade of managing the National Schools of Character Program, we have a huge data base of schools and districts that show stunning results. Each one of them uses a comprehensive, whole-school strategy.

Comprehensive character education works! Consider these 2010 National Schools of Character:

1. **Beverly Elementary in Beverly Hills, MI** -- The Principal said, "Character is not a program. It is a way of life." At this school, 98% of 3rd graders scored proficient or advance in math; and 97% of 5th graders scored proficient or advanced in English Language Arts.
2. **Seckman High School in Imperial, MO** – A counselor said, "Walls have come down. Teachers are working with cross-curricular teams in partnership with students to develop the community and become a family." At this school, their ACT scores are at an all-time high; and over a five-year period their out-of-school suspensions have decreased by 98%, fights decreased by 65%, and drug-related incidents decreased by 74%.
3. **Lake Carolina Elementary in Blythewood, SC** – One parent said, "This school gives students everything they need to be great human beings." They won a National Blue Ribbon Award and earned a state rating of "Excellent." Also, the school has narrowed their achievement gap every year since

2003; they cut disciplinary referrals by 48% in one year; and their attendance rate has been at 97% over the past several years.

4. **Peters Township District in McMurray, PA** – The Principal said, “Promoting character can be a unifying and inspirational cause through which students, parents, and the community can work together for the common good.” They have achieved AYP six straight years; they have had 18 National Merit Finalists since 2005; their graduation rate is 99%; and 91% of their graduates go on to a 2 or 4-year college or trade school.

These are just some of the schools we honored in San Francisco on October 29th for their comprehensive approach to character development. The others also showed remarkable impact and striking results on a host of important metrics (see [2010 NSOC book](#)). If you asked any of the principals, teachers, parents or students at these exemplar schools if character education was “falling short,” I think you might get very different results from what the federal study just said.

Stay the course. Character education does work ... when it's done right!