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Minnesota Character Council

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Why is it Difficult to Discuss Character?

Everyone supports the concept of “character.” There is no anti-character lobby, demanding that we avoid any discussion of character. So, for a topic which is completely defined as essential, why does serious consideration lack public attention?

The initial answer is that in a society lacking agreement on public discussion, everyone defines character in their own terms. We favor the idea of character, if it is defined in terms of our self or group. When the subject is raised for schools, public officials, or business organizations, then differing definitions emerge. Yet, the elements for agreement exist.

There are institutions, like the Caux Round Table, school districts, churches, and civic organizations like Rotary which provide existing platforms for serious thought and common definitions. We require public discussion of those elements of character which are a shared base of future action. In the 1800s, personal character was essential to quality. It can be again.

Second, because of the loud ideological division of those on both the right and left, individuals who believe in rational solutions, become worn down by the forces of entropy which bureaucracy presents. Teachers are asked to provide solutions in one-hour segments, to societal and family issues which have developed over years.

We are faced with issues of both process and content. We need to create materials, processes, and ongoing support systems, so that change-agents are not frustrated by the forces of anger and hatred.

Third, we need to understand that the element of “trust” is basic to any definition of character. The growing lack of trust in institutions, in both public and private spheres, produces a block to faith in our personal and corporate potential for betterment. America was based upon a faith in the ability of humans and created channels to provide an improved society. The future was automatically assumed to be an improvement over the past. That faith is gone.



Why is it Difficult to Discuss Character? . . . continued

We become trapped by the self-limitations of failure, which creates a downward path of depression and lack of renewal. We have many good qualities in America, and outstanding institutions and individuals, as a base for innovation and renovation. We control our future.

Other countries did not produce legislation which increased American inequality, nor any reduction of investment in education or research and development. We did that to ourselves, and we can change the path forward by ourselves. We need to more clearly define the elements of character and trust which are shared across society, and not defined by various ethnic, geographical, ethnic, and political groups.

Fourth, we require both common definitions and models for training and example. There are outstanding schools, principals, public figures, community organizations and businesses which are models of character. These should be recognized and promoted as models.

We are a society which seeks to measure outcomes. Many elements of "character" are understood, but are not easily measured. We can measure the numbers of programs produced or individuals reached, but we cannot guarantee an improved measurable outcome in character. These will be seen by increased public discussions and actions which are commonly defined as essential to a good society.

When we don't know how to solve a problem, we ask teachers and principals to provide an instant solution. This is an issue which clearly extends beyond schools to governments, corporations, and families.

Complexity theory reflects an understanding that relationships are developed exponentially, and not geometrically. The solutions reflect thinking across vertical patterns, with an understanding of the horizontal nature of the issue. This will only be approached with any possibility of solution by both process and products. The reality that so few institutions are working effectively in this area, provides both a challenge and an opportunity for those with the courage and integrity to face the issues directly.

The Minnesota Character Council is one point where this discussion can begin. The issues of trust, civility and character are central. We possess the base for discussion and the need for attention. Now, we require the process to begin, so let us.

By Todd J. Lefko, President, International Business Development Council and MCC member

How the Earliest Years Lay the Foundation for Character Development

A child's learning and outlook on life begin at birth, and the trajectory he or she is on is shaped from the very earliest years. How the early years mold a child can be explained by the answer to a question I posed to Marti Erickson, Ph.D., an esteemed retired professor from the University of Minnesota, respected scholar of attachment theory, current host of the weekly podcast, *Mom Enough*[®], and regular guest on KARE-TV News (podcast at momenough.com).

I asked Marti what the three most important things were that a child needs to flourish. I thought that since she was a brilliant scholar, she would say that the question is too simple, but I was wrong. Here are the three things she shared and how they lay the foundation for strong character:



How the Earliest Years lay the Foundation for Character . . . continued

1. **A child needs a consistent, caring adult he or she can count on.** Strong attachment is vital in the first few years of life as it leads to a child developing trust. Being able to trust other people, and trust one's self, is foundational to relationships that enable character.
2. **A child needs the ability to explore his or her world safely.** This can take many forms, many of them messy, full of missteps and what adults call "failures." Under the care of a loving adult this ability to explore is how children learn. This ability includes curiosity that builds confidence. That confidence is crucial for character development.
3. **"Language, language, language."** Exposing children to the spoken word early, and the written word when appropriate, provides the essential ingredient for school success, which in turn leads to success in life. If children do not receive this, they begin to believe they are failures. A sense of competency is key to character. The belief that you are a failure leads to a tragic downward cycle.

In the world of early childhood development, the most important ingredient that needs to be nurtured is called "social-emotional development" and it includes factors like self-regulation, empathy, and the ability to play with others. Social-emotional development is the bedrock of success in school and in life. Kindergarten teachers view the social-emotional well-being of an entering kindergartner as the most important quality for a child to thrive in school. Parents and care-givers can learn how to nurture this key building block to character.

The culture of a family, and the actions of parents and siblings, are hugely important in the positive growth and development of children. Children can either absorb the core ideas of right and wrong and how to love, or they can see how to abuse and disrespect, lessons taught not just from words but from actions. A parent is, and always has been, a child's most important teacher.

Great programs like Head Start, Minnesota's Early Childhood Family Education, and accredited childcare centers or family settings all include effective partnerships with parents. Programs like Way to Grow and those of the Northside Achievement Zone have wonderful parenting mentor programs.

So, the foundation of school success and life success is laid in the first five years. Every child in our state and Nation must have access to quality early learning and consistent love. If "character is destiny," then our Nation's destiny will be shaped by how we serve our youngest citizens.

If we continue to fail young children, our national character is at grave risk of declining further. On the other hand, if and when we give our youngest citizens what they need, America will realize its full and glorious potential.

By Todd Otis, Public Affairs Consultant and MCC member

Professional Development Opportunities for Schools

Saint Mary's University of Minnesota School of Education has begun a new professional development series for teachers and educational administrators. Both sessions are free to the first 75 registrants. Six Continuing Education Units (C.E.U.s) will be awarded to participants who attend the workshop. Register for each session separately. Learn more at <http://character.smumn.edu/events/>

A Day of Self Discovery: Socio-Emotional Leadership Foundations, March 8, 8:30 a.m.–3 p.m., St. Mary's University, Minneapolis campus

Professional Development Opportunities for Schools . . . continued

Workshop description:

No one understands more than educational leaders the daily challenges of creating school communities where every staff member and student can thrive and succeed. Effective leadership is an essential and defining means of ensuring that all in the school community achieve their highest potential.

Julie Sperry, Ed.D. will help educators learn how to understand themselves first, so they can intentionally create an environment where teachers, administrators, staff, and students not only meet academic goals but thrive in a more holistic sense.

Relationships: The Real Priority in Education, April 26, 8:30 a.m.–3 p.m., St. Mary's University, Minneapolis campus

Workshop description:

The three most important words for educators should be relationships, relationships, relationships. When schools don't prioritize relationships, the culture is toxic, behaviors are disrespectful, and learning is diminished. The focus on improved test scores and our increased reliance on virtual learning has made creating and sustaining relationships challenging.

Amy Johnston, Ed.D. will help educators understand the importance of relationships to a school's culture and to learning. Participants will discuss the importance of vulnerability in educators, delve into the critical need for a healthy adult culture, learn strategies for improving school culture, and grow in understanding about the need to carve out time to intentionally teach our children social and emotional skills they need to navigate life.

Ethics & Integrity Initiative – NEW Programs for Students

Character.org received a 3-year grant from the School for Ethical Education to increase ethical awareness and behavior in society by advancing the ethical education of young people. Two programs are now available to incorporate into your curriculum that will inspire and equip students to "live their values."

The *Laws of Life Writing Program* encourages middle school and high school students to reflect and write about a core value that means the most to them and why. The program is available to all students in middle schools and high schools. The submission deadline is April 1, 2022.

The *Academic Integrity PSA Program* is an opportunity for high school students to create their own message about the importance of academic integrity, honesty, and ethics in action. The submission deadline is April 15, 2022.

Learn more at character.org/ethics-integrity-initiative/

