



# THE STRENGTH OF Character Education

By Donna Usewick and  
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Establish these five principles before  
adopting a character education initiative.

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN** character and learning is supported through years of educational research. Benefits include improved problem-solving skills, academic achievement, and classroom behavior. While there are numerous character education programs that school leaders can select for their schools, here are five foundational principles that should be in place before adopting character education as a whole-school model.

**1 Strong Leadership.** Schools seeking to adopt character education practices need principals who are willing to fully invest themselves in the process. Principals can model their support for the initiative by holding schoolwide assemblies as well as through positive interactions with students. Best practice supports establishing a separate committee that is solely dedicated to character education. The principal should be an integral member of character education initiatives, but should not necessarily be the primary leader. Character education should be a shared commitment and staff need to have input and decision-making powers.

**2 Strong Principles.** Schools that are committed to capitalizing on the benefits of character education can begin by selecting a few key principles to focus on. The principles should be chosen based on the needs of the school through the use of academic/behavioral data, parent/staff surveys, and most certainly the current school improvement plan. Once a school has firmly established a few practices, others can be added as needed.

To further illustrate, if a school decides to focus on creating a caring community, it will need input from staff regarding what a caring community looks and sounds like. Staff should brainstorm ideas such as teachers greeting all students at the classroom door, providing mentors for needy students, or developing a student buddy system pairing younger students with older ones.

**3 Strong Character Traits.** Determining the key traits to focus on as a school—patience, perseverance, kindness, and confidence, for example—is the next step in building a foundation for character education. Schools can purchase curricula with pre-selected traits and guidelines on how to present them to students, or they can develop their own program to meet their needs. Focusing on one trait per month is a good practice. Schools can decide how to introduce and reinforce these traits so that they become meaningful and purposeful for each student.

**4 Strong Connections to the Community.** The process of integrating character education should not be limited to the school building. Many of the initiatives that a school may want to implement require giving back to the outside community or the development of a service learning component. Such service could include food drives or accepting donations for a local animal shelter. Every community is different, so needs will vary. Schools need to become familiar with their surroundings and align their charitable work with one of their chosen character traits.

**5 Strong Evaluation.** Once a school has made the commitment to infuse character education, it must evaluate the effort. The school should consider reserving one of their end-of-year meetings to examine the principles it has chosen and to determine which aspects have been successful and where things need to be tweaked based on clear goals. This can be accomplished through student and staff surveys as well as behavioral and academic data. For example, if the core character education principle revolves around the school community promoting ethical values, the principal should interview teachers to find out if they are observing those traits in the classroom. If the school has a way of tracking and positively reinforcing the traits, the committee will need to determine whether this is happening often enough or if the system needs to be adjusted. Any adjustment to the plan needs to be clearly defined to the staff first and then the student body.

### **Strong Results**

Creating a positive school culture through character education is an on-going process that is ever-changing based on the academic and social needs of students. Hard work and determination are the key factors. Ultimately, it's all worth it when you enter a school of character and observe a climate where students and staff are kind to one another and value their school community. These are schools where students are truly invested in the learning process. 

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