

100 Ways to Bring Character Education to Life

Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character, Boston University

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF VIRTUE

- 1** Develop a school code of ethics. Distribute it to every member of the school community. Refer to it often. Display it prominently. Make sure all school policy reflects it.
- 2** Institute a student-to-student mentoring program
- 3** Promote school-wide or intra-class service clubs to serve the school, class, or external community.
- 4** Encourage students to identify a charity or in-school need, collect donations, and help administer the distribution of funds.
- 5** Ensure that the school's recognition systems cover both character and academics.
- 6** Recognize a variety of achievements, such as surpassing past personal achievements or meeting a predetermined goal.
- 7** Consistently prohibit gossip and when appropriate, discuss its damaging consequences.
- 8** Enforce a zero-tolerance policy on swearing. Prohibit vulgar and obscene language in the classroom and on school property.
- 9** Use morning announcements, school and classroom bulletin boards, and the school newsletter to highlight the various accomplishments - particularly character-oriented ones of students and faculty members.
- 10** When conflicts arise around the school or class, teach about discretion, tact, and privacy and about discreetly informing appropriate adults of the conflict.
- 11** Have students take turns caring for class pets and taking them home over weekends and holidays. Discuss and demonstrate the responsibility required to care for living creatures.
- 12** Invite student volunteers to clean up their community. With parental support, encourage students to build a community playground, pick up litter, rake leaves, plant trees, paint a mural, remove graffiti, or clean up a local park or beach.
- 13** Find out the significance behind your school's traditions and emphasize those that build school unity.
- 14** Display the school flag. Learn the school song. If you don't have either, have a contest.
- 15** Have ceremonies to mark the beginning and end of the school year and for teachers and staff members who are leaving.
- 16** Examine school assemblies. Do a minority of students control the majority of assemblies? How could more students be involved? Are the chants at pep assemblies appropriate? Do they build school spirit without demeaning other schools?

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(continued)

17 Ensure students behave responsibly and respectfully when watching athletic competitions.

18 In physical education and sports programs, place a premium on good sportsmanship. Participation in sports should provide good habits for the life beyond sports.

19 Hang pictures of heroes and heroines in classrooms and halls. Include appropriate explanatory text.

20 Make the school a welcoming place. Can people walking through the school's halls get a good idea of what is happening in classrooms? Is the principal frequently visible to students? Are there clear welcome signs prominently placed near the school's main door?

21 Start a school scrapbook with photos, news stories, and memorabilia reflecting the school's history and accomplishments. Involve school members in contributing to and maintaining the collection. Show it off to visitors and new families.

22 Publicly recognize the work of the "unsung heroes" who keep the school running: the custodians, repairmen, secretaries, cafeteria workers, and volunteers.

23 Develop a system of welcoming and orienting new students to the school.

24 Prohibit the display of any gang symbols paraphernalia on school property. Remove graffiti immediately - including in student bathrooms.

25 Let students take some responsibility for the maintenance and beautification of the school. Classes could "adopt a hallway," shelve mis-

placed books, plant flowers, and so on. Post signs identifying caretakers.

MINING THE CURRICULUM

26 Have students do a major paper on a living public figure ("My Personal Hero"), focusing on the moral achievement and virtues of the individual. First, do the groundwork of helping them understand what constitutes a particularly noble life.

27 In history and literature classes, regularly weave in a discussion of motivations, actions, and consequences.

28 Insist that quality matters. Homework should be handed in on time, neat and complete. Details do count.

29 Include the study of local heroes in social studies classes.

30 Help students form friendships. When forming cooperative learning groups, keep in mind both the academic and emotional needs of the students. These groups can be an opportunity to group students who might not otherwise interact with one another.

31 Ensure that students have a firm understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and of the school's firm policy against it. But more importantly, help them understand why it is wrong.

32 Celebrate the birthdays of heroes and heroines with discussions of their accomplishments.

33 Choose the finest children's and adult literature to read with your students - literature rich with meaning and imagery. Don't waste time with mediocre or unmemorable texts.

34 Don't underestimate the power of stories to build a child's moral imagination. Read aloud to students daily.

35 Conduct literature discussions-even in the youngest grades. Ask questions that encourage reflection. Don't immediately jump to "the moral of the story" while ignoring the richness, beauty, or complexity of the text. General questions could include: what did this book make you think about or feel? Tell me about [a character's name]-what kind of person was he? Why do you think the author wrote this book - what did she want to say to the reader? Don't leave a story, however, without having students grapple with its moral message.

36 Build empathy in literature and social studies classes by teaching children to put themselves in the shoes of the people they are reading about or studying.

37 Read and discuss biographies from subject areas. Help students identify the person's core or defining characteristics.

38 While studying about great men and women, do not consistently avoid the subject of personal weakness-especially in the upper grades. A study of a person's "whole" character can provide a powerful lesson in discernment and compassion. Consider a thoughtful discussion of the following questions: can a person be "great" (and good) and still have some character flaws?

39 Teach students to write thoughtful letters: thank-you notes, letters to public officials, letters to the editor and so on.

40 Assign homework that stimulates and challenges students. Engaging and demanding assignments will give rise to self discipline and perseverance.

41 Set up a buddy reading system between an older and younger class. Carefully teach the older students techniques that will help make their teaching experience successful. Impress upon them the responsibility and patience required when helping those who are both younger and less skilled in a subject than they are.

42 Have students memorize poetry important prose selections, such as the preamble to the Declaration of Independence or the Gettysburg Address. In the process, make sure they understand the ideas that make these worthy of committing to memory.

43 In science, address with each unit (when appropriate) the ethical considerations of that field of study. Students need to see that morality and ethics are not confined to the humanities.

44 In math classes, specifically address the habits-such as courage, perseverance, and hard work-required to be a successful math student. Class rules and homework policies should reflect and support these habits.

45 In social studies, examine and re-examine yearly, if the curriculum affords the chance-the responsibilities of the citizen. What can students do right now to build the habits of responsible citizenship?

INVOLVING TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND STAFF

46 Choose a personal motto or mission statement.

47 Tell your students who your heroes are and why you chose them.

48 Lead by example. Pick up the piece of paper in the hall. Leave the classroom clean for the next teacher. Say thank you.

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49 Employ the language of virtue in conversations with colleagues: responsibility, commitment, perseverance, courage, and so on.

50 Make your classroom expectations clear and hold students accountable.

51 Admit mistakes and seek to make amends. Expect and encourage students to do likewise.

52 Follow through. Do what you say you will do. For example, administer tests when they are scheduled; don't cancel at the last minute after students have prepared.

53 If you engage in community or church service, let your students know in an appropriate, low-key manner.

54 Illustrate integrity; let students see that you yourself meet the expectations of hard work, responsibility, gratitude, and perseverance that you place upon them.

55 Give students sufficient and timely feedback when you evaluate their work. This demonstrates to students that their work matters and that teachers take an interest in their improvement and success.

56 Teach justice and compassion by helping students separate the doer from the deed.

57 Stand up for the underdog or the student who is being treated poorly by classmates. But use discretion: sometimes use an immediate response; sometimes use a private small-group meeting - perhaps the person in question ought not be present.

58 Use constructive criticism (individually and collectively), tempered by compassion. Use class discussions as opportunities to teach students to do the same when responding to one another.

59 Include in faculty and staff meetings and workshops discussions of the school's moral climate. How can the ethos of the school be improved?

60 Begin a bulletin board where teachers and administrators can share their own "One Hundred Ways."

INVOLVING PARENTS

61 Create a written code of behavior for the classroom and the school. Ask parents to read and sign the code, as a pledge of mutual support.

62 Consider having a parent representative present while developing such school codes.

63 Make the effort to notify parents of student misbehavior, via notes, phone calls, and personal visits.

64 "Catch students being good" and write or call parents to report it.

65 Communicate with parents about appropriate ways they can help students with their schoolwork.

66 Send a letter home to parents before the school year starts, introducing yourself, your classroom, your enthusiasm, and your expectations, particularly your hope that they will help you help their child.

67 Involve as many parents as possible.

68 Frequently share the school's vision and high ideals for its students with parents.

69 Open a dialogue with parents. They can

be a teacher's greatest ally in helping students succeed. They can provide pertinent, invaluable information about their children's academic and social background, interests, talents, difficulties, and so on.

70 In the school newsletter, inform parents of upcoming events, units of study, and opportunities to participate in school and after-school activities.

71 Develop a list of suggested readings and resources in character education and share it with parents.

72 When appropriate, provide literacy classes or tutors for parents.

73 Provide parents with access to the school library. Provide a suggested reading list of books with solid moral content that make good read-alouds.

74 Structure opportunities for parents to meaningfully participate in classrooms, beyond providing refreshments and chaperoning field trips. For example: reading with students, presenting a lesson in an area of expertise, tutoring, sharing family heirlooms, helping organize class plays or projects.

75 Send out monthly newsletters to parents that include details on your character-education efforts.

76 Include anecdotes of commendable student performances in the school newsletter.

77 Include a "parent's corner" in the newsletter where parents can share parenting tips, book titles, homework helps, and so on.

78 When your school welcomes a new student, welcome the student's family as well.

79 What can your school do to encourage greater attendance at parent-teacher conferences? Examine the times they are held and how they are advertised. What is being done to reach out to the parents who never come?

80 During parent-teacher conferences, ask parents, "What are your questions or concerns?" Then listen carefully to their answers.

INVOLVING STUDENTS

81 Begin a service program in which students "adopt-an-elder" from the community. Arrange opportunities for students to visit, write letters to, read to, or run errands for their adoptee.

82 Structure opportunities for students to perform community service.

83 Prohibit students from being unkind or using others as scapegoats in the classroom.

84 Make it clear to students that they have a moral responsibility to work hard in school.

85 Impress upon students that being a good student means far more than academic success.

86 After students have developed an understanding of honesty and academic integrity, consider instituting an honor system for test taking and homework assignments.

100 Ways to Bring Character Education to Life (continued)

87 Provide opportunities for students to both prepare for competition and engage in cooperation.

88 Help students acquire the power of discernment, including the ability to judge the truth, worth, and biases of what is presented on TV, the radio, and the Internet.

89 Invite graduates of the high school to return and talk about their experience in the next stage of life. Ask them to discuss what habits or virtues could make the transition to work or college successful and what bad habits or vices cause problems.

90 Have students identify a substantive quote or anecdote from which they can begin to develop a personal motto.

91 Overtly teach courtesy.

92 Make every effort to instill a work ethic in students. Frequently explain their responsibility to try their best. Create minimum standards for the quality of work you will accept - then don't accept work that falls short.

93 During election years, encourage students to research candidates' positions, listen to debates, participate in voter registration drives, and if eligible; vote.

94 Use the language of virtue with students: responsibility, respect, integrity, diligence, and so on, and teach them to use this language.

95 In large middle and high schools assess what is being done to keep students from "falling through the cracks." Every student needs at least one teacher or counselor to take specific interest in them.

96 In middle and high schools, consider instituting (or strengthening) an advising program. Advisors should do more than provide job and college information - they should take an interest in the intellectual and character development of their advisees.

97 Hold students accountable to a strict attendance and tardiness policy.

98 Through stories, discussion and examples, teach students about true friendship. Help them recognize the characteristics of true friends and the potentially destructive power of false friendships.

99 "Doing the right thing" is not always an easy choice-especially in the face of peer pressure. Help students, both individually and as a class, to see the long-term consequences of their actions. They may need the support of a responsible adult both before and after choices are made.

100 Remind students - and yourself-that character building is not an easy or a one-time project. Fashioning our character is the work of a lifetime.

Note: This list was created and updated by the staff of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University (605 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215, Telephone 617-353-3262) with input from various teachers and administrators.

1 Kevin Ryan and Karen E. Bohlin, *Building Character in Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999), pp. 229-238.