earlier this year, at the Hyde School, a private high school in Bath, Maine, dedicated to “family-based character education,” I witnessed a confrontation in an 11th-grade honors English class the likes of which, it is safe to say, few educators or scholars have ever seen. The teacher, Barbara Perry, asked if everyone had finished reading the assigned novel, Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*. All but two of the dozen or so students had. It was a Monday, and Perry asked Brad, one of the two, if he had done any of the reading at all over the weekend.

“No,” said Brad. “It was a really rough weekend for me. I’ve had a lot of trouble with believing in myself, and I’ve been trying to figure out where it comes from. Mr. Gauld [Malcolm Gauld, president and CEO of the Hyde Schools] thought it came from my father, and I should talk to him. I brought it up, and he got really upset.”
Both students and teachers assured me that this exercise in tough love was nothing out of the ordinary at Hyde; several kids said that they had been on the receiving end of it themselves, to their lasting benefit. Radical truth telling, accompanied by an ethos of mutual responsibility known as “Brother’s Keeper,” lies at the core of Hyde’s vision of character development. And these principles are meant to guide the conduct of not just the students but all the adults in what is very consciously referred to as “the Hyde community”—teachers, administrators, parents. Everyone is obliged to hold everyone else to the standards they themselves would wish to be held to. The Hyde experience is, if nothing else, exhausting.

A Secular Morality
The Hyde School is scarcely typical of schools professedly dedicated to character education; it is, if anything, the extreme case, where principles that elsewhere have been applied halfheartedly have been most deeply considered and uncompromisingly followed. Hyde is, in fact, so peculiar, so supremely dedicated to its eccentric founding principles, that it’s not easy to imagine the school’s serving as a useful exemplar of anything. Nonetheless, Hyde schools are now flourishing in Woodstock, Connecticut, and in the inner-city systems of New Haven, Connecticut, and Washington, D.C. The school’s founder, Joseph Gauld, Malcolm’s father, says that he hopes to have charter schools operating in New York City and Oakland, California, by 2005. In the great, ongoing laboratory project known as whole-school reform, Hyde may turn out to be the leading entry under the heading “character education.”

And a very large heading it is, too. (See sidebar.) Thomas Lickona, the head of the Center for the Fourth and Fifth Rs (the fourth and fifth being respect and responsibility) at the State University of New York at Cortland and a leading figure in the field, says that two-thirds of the states’ schools are now required either by legislative mandate or by administrative regulation to implement programs in character education. The U.S. Department of Education has been awarding grants in the field since 1995; the No Child Left Behind Act

One of the kids jumped on Brad. “You say you don’t believe in yourself, but you don’t give yourself an opportunity to believe in yourself. It’s like how you didn’t go to lacrosse practice on Saturday. I don’t know how not doing your work, not going to lacrosse, is going to make you believe in yourself.”

A chorus of “uh-huh”s rose around the room. Miss Perry said gently, “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Do I know what I’m doing?” Brad repeated, in a heartbreakingly toneless, defeated voice. “Hardly.”

And now the other students tried to direct Brad to the deeper causes of his malaise. He was, they said, holding something back. “I’m really worried about you,” said one of the girls.

A boy turned to Brad and said, “I was talking about you to my mom yesterday—how you have this reputation for being the kid who fluctuates the most. It’s up to you whether you’re going to be in charge or not.”

Brad listened silently. Finally, he said, “So I guess I should leave now?”

“It’s up to you,” Miss Perry said. Brad pushed his chair back, gathered up his books, and left. And only then did the class begin to discuss The Farming of Bones.
The expression “character education” would have seemed a redundancy until quite recently in history. Virtually all elite private education, whether at prep schools or colleges, was designed to ensure that young men of the better classes were prepared for the leadership positions in government and the professions to which they were destined. And the public schools were unabashed about their role in turning the children of immigrant families into Americans. Not until the age of John Dewey and the progressives was this inculcation of civic and personal virtue questioned; Dewey mocked the rigid pieties of McGuffey’s Reader and called for a pedagogy that would liberate the child’s own questioning nature, that would replace inculcation itself with a more “child-centered” form of learning. And by midcentury, as a test-driven meritocracy made deep inroads into the old world of inherited privilege, character began to take a back seat to intellect at the elite institutions.

The modern character education movement began as a reaction to the aggressively value-neutral school culture that emerged thanks to this combination of progressivism and meritocracy. In The Closing of the American Mind, which appeared in 1987, Alan Bloom wrote that among young people “openness” had ascended to the status of supreme moral principle, just as “relativism” had become axiomatic in philosophy. Bloom’s call for a return to the search for truth and meaning, in school as well as in intellectual life, struck a deep chord, or so the staggering sales of his rather dense tome implied. At the same time, neoconservative thinkers like Gertrude Himmelfarb were extolling the much-denigrated virtues of the Victorian age. The word “virtue” itself began to take on an almost talismanic power, especially in the wake of William Bennett’s Book of Virtues, published in 1992. The very willingness to use the word meant that you accepted the principle that some things were true and some were not, as against the woolly relativism and permissiveness that pervaded the schools.

This philosophical and ideological assault on liberal, secular-minded culture put character education on the public agenda. But many parents and educators who had no interest in fighting the culture wars lamented the generalized loss of authority of traditional institutions. They felt angry that schools had succumbed to an anything-goes ethos that was harmful to both the schools and the young people passing through them. The killings at Columbine and elsewhere seemed to offer terrifying proof that the schools had somehow lost their way. Schools had left the development of values to parents at the very moment when parents were leaving it to . . . whomever. This widespread sense of unease lent an impetus to the intellectual critique and shifted the debate toward less ideological and more pragmatic objectives.

Character education really took wing, before Columbine, in 1992, at a conference sponsored by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, in Aspen, Colorado. There a group of educators and ethicists agreed on a list of values—not virtue and every value known to man. These were codified as “The Six Pillars of Character” (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, citizenship). The following year, the institute established the Character Counts! program to help schools and communities incorporate the six pillars. At the same time, a group of civic and education organizations formed the Character Education Partnership, which now functions as the movement’s clearinghouse and professional organization (and promotes its own “Eleven Principles” of character). President Clinton seized on the fledgling movement as one of the cost-free, nonpartisan initiatives he was then touting. The White House began sponsoring annual conferences on “Character Building for a Civil and Democratic Society” in 1994. And in 1996 the president gave the movement the ultimate blessing when he said, in his State of the Union address, “I challenge all our schools to teach character education, to teach good values and good citizenship.” By that time, according to a survey by the National School Boards Association, 45 percent of school districts said they had instituted character education programs, while another 38 percent said they planned to do so. Thus the character education bandwagon swiftly became a juggernaut.

Education publishers now offer kits and exercises designed to teach every virtue and every value known to man. The Character Counts! folks, for example, offer a 45-minute lesson plan designed to teach caring to teens. The class begins with a moralized version of musical chairs, in which the kids (continued on page 27)
of 2001 established the new Partnership in Character Education Program, which gives $25 million annually to schools. In part, perhaps, because the very term “character education” evokes such an all-American image of wholesomeness and high moral purpose, this is one bandwagon that educators are almost sure to be climbing aboard in growing numbers.

Indeed, although the character education movement began essentially as the educational wing of a campaign of conservative moral uplift, it long ago shed those dowdy Victorian garments. Whatever values schools wish to propagate nowadays, whether multicultural sensitivity or teamwork, now travel under this glorious banner. And character education has come increasingly to be seen as an educational rather than a social reform, with measurable inputs producing measurable consequences, for both student behavior and academic performance. Indeed, if the vast and various character education movement is unified by anything, it is the conviction that schools can, and must, consciously and explicitly develop a healthy peer culture because such a culture is the indispensable foundation for successful learning.

Hyde Origins
Like so many of the programs of reform now competing for primacy, the Hyde idea emerged entirely from the mind of one extremely determined and deeply dissatisfied individual. This was Joe Gauld, a math teacher and administrator at the New Hampton prep school in New Hampshire in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It was the early days of the burgeoning postwar meritocracy, and Gauld felt increasingly repelled by the ethos of “giftedness” and the honors track and the rat race for college placement. The schools, he concluded—not just New Hampton but all schools—were failing children by rewarding innate ability rather than seeking to draw out each child’s “unique potential.” And so this lonely dissenter from the post-Sputnik fixation on academic achievement quit his job as assistant headmaster in order to pursue his flinty New England faith in self-improvement and transcendence. Gauld ultimately scraped together the funds to purchase the 145-acre Hyde family estate in Bath, in southern Maine, and the Hyde School opened its doors in 1966.

"Instead of relying on intellect to produce good grades and high test scores," Gauld writes in Character First: The Hyde School Difference, "students at Hyde learn to follow the dictates of their conscience so they can develop the character necessary to bring out their unique potential."

The kids demanded the right to smoke; Gauld refused. A boy of admirable character but limited intellect couldn’t pass math; Gauld eliminated academic requirements for graduation for the entire school.

The history of the school, as Gauld recounts it, was a sequence of moral dramas in which the founder insisted on clinging to the original vision in the face of threats to Hyde’s very existence. The kids demanded the right to smoke; Gauld refused. A boy of admirable character but limited intellect...
A Brief History of “Character Education” (continued from page 25)

form groups of three the moment the music stops. Some kids inevitably get excluded in each round. “How did it feel to be left out?” the teacher asks. “What words describe the way you were treated? Do students at your school ever treat other students that way in real life?” The teacher delivers a potted lecture on caring. She then produces a golf ball, which she tosses to a student, who is asked to “name something that makes people hard to like.” The teacher asks, “Does a person’s neighborhood, size, or color give us the right to drop our standards?” The instruction sheet does not indicate whether there is more than one answer to this question.

The tens of thousands of schools now obliged to institute character education programs need materials, and a world of providers stands ready to help them. A company called Integrity Matters offers “entertaining, attention-capturing character education videos” on 35 “basic moral values” (including “Virtue”). Tolerance is a mini-industry all its own, with manuals offering “proven strategies” to stamp out hate. A curriculum program called “The Seven Cs of Thinking Clearly” (Criticism, Creativity, Curiosity, Concentration, Communication, Correction, and Control) helps children identify “faulty thinking practices” by way of “The Stink’n Think’n Gang,” a gang of no-goodniks whose members include Iwannit Now, Judge B. Fore, and—well, you get the picture. The most hopeful thing one can say about most of these lessons-in-a-box is that they are so hokey and tone-deaf that it is hard to imagine a child, even one of tender years, taking them seriously. At the same time, they constitute a terrible waste of a precious commodity. Whatever time you spend revamping your faulty thinking practices or stamping out hate is time you are not spending studying history or chemistry.

If tossing a golf ball while delivering stilted homilies about caring can be considered character education, it is probably safe to say that the field has a serious quality-control problem. But what about schools like Hyde or others that have taken this reform seriously? Are they effective? And if so, at what are they effective? Some studies have found that character education programs do, in fact, build character, though none of these studies is rigorous enough to be remotely definitive. The largest of them is a study by researchers at South Dakota State University of 8,419 students in schools that have adopted Character Counts! The study concluded that between 1998 and 2000 the number of students who reported various acts of cheating, stealing, drinking, drug taking, class cutting, and the like decreased significantly.

Many an ulcerous principal would be delighted to adopt a program that promised greater student compliance; this very prospect probably impels many schools to go the character education route. But a central premise of the field is that character is a matter not only of social behavior but also of accomplishment. This is what Thomas Lickona means when he says, “Virtue is human excellence. To be a school of character, a community of virtue, is to be equally committed to two great goals: intellectual excellence and moral excellence.”

If this is so, then character education programs should improve academic performance. In the maiden issue of the Journal of Character Education, a team of researchers reports on a study of the relative academic performance of schools in California that described themselves as having substantial character education components. They concluded that performance on standardized tests from 1999 to 2002 was “significantly positively correlated” with “a school’s ability to ensure a clean and safe physical environment,” “evidence that its parents and teachers modeled and promoted good character education” and opportunities “for students to contribute in meaningful ways to the school and its community.” The findings were based on self-reporting, which is scarcely conclusive. The researchers struck a note of modest hopefulness, but cautioned that “no evidence exists for a broader relationship that spans a range of character education approaches in a large sample of schools.”

Should one expect such evidence to surface? Not if character education means pious sermonettes on tolerance. But even if virtue is understood as human excellence, it’s naive to expect instant results. “It’s all about how you tap into and help them exercise their will,” says Karen Bohlin, coauthor of Building Character in Schools. “That’s where the real work is. And we don’t see the results immediately. The really stable dispositions show up much later.” That may well be true, especially where character education has been densely woven into the fabric of intellectual life. You have to wonder, however, if the same will be true at a school like Hyde, where character is understood as a kind of antidote to excessive academicism.

—James Traub
couldn't pass math; Gauld eliminated academic requirements for graduation for the entire school. Gauld demanded that teachers subject themselves to the same searching self-scrutiny as the kids; a third of them left, and Hyde soldiered on. The board forced Gauld out of his own school in 1980; Malcolm stayed on and was able to engineer his father's return five years later. After all these years of choosing purity of doctrine and bloodlines over pragmatic calculation, the Hyde School today has an atmosphere charged with the dedication to first principles of a religious community as well as the air of immemorial ritual of an old Maine summer camp. Only about 220 students, almost all of them boarders, attend grades 9 through 12. Hyde charges $32,000 a year in tuition, room, and board; nevertheless, the school has almost no endowment, and both its facilities and its faculty payscale are very modest by the standards of New England prep schools. The school can afford no more than a dozen or so scholarships a year, which means that the student body is overwhelmingly white.

Joe Gauld wanted to work with the kids who hadn't been comfortable in the orthodox academic settings that he himself had spurned. From the outset Hyde attracted children who, for a variety of reasons, had failed in more conventional schools. Hyde very quickly gained a reputation, which it has never shaken, as a turnaround school. The Gaulds chafe under this unsought distinction, but recognize that they are powerless to change it. For many kids, Hyde is the last stop before some terrifying tough-love, boot-camp institution socked away deep in some western wilderness (as Malcolm, strikingly, says it was for himself). An appalling fraction of the kids I talked to had drug or alcohol problems and also had parents with drug or alcohol problems—all of which they talked about with stunning candor. Hyde has no electric fences or muscle-bound counselors. But the rules forbid everything the kids were used to back home—smoking, drinking, sex, cheating, and mistreating your fellow adolescents. Most of the kids arrive kicking and screaming.

"We're not the school the kids want to go to," as Malcolm Gauld puts it. "We're the school the parents want the kids to go to." Several of the kids I spoke to singled out the school's rigid schedule for special loathing: up at 6:30; breakfast at 7:30; jobs at 8; then classes, lunch, more classes, performing arts, sports, "Discovery Group"; dinner; then study hall or "Mandatory Fun." The school sometimes feels to the kids like prison on the honor code. About 40 percent of each class drops out. One senior told me that she was one of 9 kids remaining from her freshman class of 25 or 30.

But the most demanding aspect of Hyde is the Brother's Keeper code, for it is conscience, rather than fear of punishment, that is meant to guide behavior at Hyde. And each individual must act as a guardian of the conscience of others, even—and especially—if that requires a painful confrontation. This is a principle that the Gaulds bluntly call "truth over harmony." It sounds like a dreadful weapon in the hands of 15-year-olds, and in fact a teacher in Hyde's school in Washington, D.C., the Hyde Leadership Public Charter School, said that they were "trying to get away from the Jerry Springer thing." But I never witnessed an abuse of this power. I don't know how Brad, the student in the honors English class at the Bath campus, felt about being on the receiving end of the Brother's Keeper ordeal, but it was plain that the message was, We're not going to stand by and watch you fail. Many of the kids described to me the painful process of seeing themselves for the first time as others saw them. Sarah Flint was one of the small number of Hyde students who had been perfectly successful in her previous school, in Charlotte, North Carolina. (Her brothers had preceded her as students at Hyde.) "I hated it here," she said, "because they were being honest with me." Students and faculty accused her of coasting and demanded that she work harder. And, she said, she did.

Joe Gauld writes that his wife, Blanche, was an alcoholic and that he himself had abused alcohol. This painful history may account for the cult of honesty that sometimes makes life at Hyde feel like a free-floating session of Alcoholics Anonymous. Students at Hyde must tell rule breakers to turn themselves in; if that doesn't work, they have to inform the administration themselves. In the outside world, this last practice goes by the name of snitching, and it violates the adolescent code of conduct as profoundly as does the practice of confronting one's friends. Many of the kids resist this most of all; but seniors, who are given a large hand in running the
school, are expected to fully accept this responsibility. James is an obviously bright kid who had been through a wilderness program, a “lock-down facility,” and an alcoholism treatment center—and was now, he said, clean and sober. He explained, “If you report several people for an infraction, they’ll stop whatever we’re doing and the whole community will go down to the Pit,” the outdoor auditorium. “They’ll say, ‘We think there’s an awful lot of dishonesty going on’.” James said that the ensuing outbreak of penitence often leads students to confess absurdly trivial transgressions.

The comfort zone is the great enemy of the Hyde ethos. As innate talent is denigrated, so pressing against your limits is celebrated. Every student is required to go on wilderness trips, to engage in demanding physical activities, to play team sports, and to perform on stage. For boys who have never sung or girls who have never run—or vice versa—this can be a terrifying prospect. But of course the whole idea is to force students to find in themselves the courage to face something they never thought they could face. The Gaulds are great believers in the character-building qualities of team sports. The Hyde school in D.C. has the nation’s only all-black rugby team, and the coach, Tal Bayer, told me proudly not only how well the team had fared against far more experienced opponents, but also how extravagantly they had been praised by other coaches and parents. Good character is meant to lead to good performance, just as it is supposed to produce academic excellence.

Parental Involvement

Hyde is by no means the only school that seeks to transform peer culture; that, after all, is the foundation of successful parochial schools, though the transformation they seek is of a slightly different nature. But Hyde’s ambitions run deeper still. After years of meeting the parents of his students, many of them utterly blithe in the face of their own child’s manifest unhappiness and apathy, Joe Gauld concluded that he could not work lasting changes in the child unless he could force the parents to undergo the same painful process of growth through self-scrutiny. Gauld is a social critic, but his sense of the world is guided less by the neo-Victorianism of today’s conservatives than by a kind of New England transcendentalism—the exacting spirit of the old evangelicals. “The American family today,” he writes, “is spiritually sick,” obsessed with status and acquisition, deaf to the deeper registers. The lives of the children of such parents, he writes, “are empty, devoid of meaning.” Gauld takes the view—and here he parts ways from much of the reform world—that even the most powerful school culture will eventually lose out to a larger, pernicious culture. As Laura Gauld, Malcolm’s wife, a former Hyde student (along with her four siblings) and now the director of Hyde’s Family Education Programs, puts it, “If you’re not going to change the parents, you’re not going to change the kids.”

Hyde admits families as much as it does students. The interview process serves as an eye-opening introduction to the
school’s truth-seeking ethos. Lauren Franklin, an admissions officer (and a former Hyde student), says that she will ask the parents what “personal issues”—of theirs—they would like Hyde to address. This question flummoxes most parents, who typically take the position that while their children may have very serious problems, they don’t. But since Hyde’s premise is that the child’s problems originate within the family, the school asks a great deal of parents, above and beyond the annual check. Parents are expected to gather for “regional meetings” at one another’s homes every month, to attend family weekends at the Bath campus twice a year, and to spend three days each year at the school’s Family Learning Center, also on campus. Parents spend a great many hours with one another and one another’s children, even overcoming their mortification in theatrical and dance performances. The Hyde literature is full of stories of world-beating dads who finally abandon their defenses in these settings and admit to their anger, their insecurity, their alcoholism; and of families crying together in relief. Many of the kids told me that their relationship with their parents had for the first time moved beyond the superficially amicable or the ritualistically hostile.

All adults at Hyde, including the faculty, are expected to conduct themselves according to the school’s dictates. Each teacher at Bath is paired with a student to talk about issues in their own life; in the D.C. school, teachers anonymously adopt a senior and correspond with him or her. The faculty in Bath has a monthly seminar in which they talk about their own progress as teachers and individuals. And at the end of the year, students gather to collectively evaluate their teachers. I attended one such session in Washington, where teachers advanced, one by one, to a folding chair set up in the front of the auditorium. Kids popped up from the audience to say “You always gave me good advice,” or “I want to thank you for not giving up on me when I was in your class.” The criticism tended to be mild: “You could be more patient.” (It would certainly have been harsher in Bath, where the truth is usually delivered unvarnished.) One refrain I scarcely expected was, “You could be a little harder on us, especially if we’re trying to take advantage of you.” The kids’ relationship to school authority had the character of a social contract rather than of submission to a higher power.

The Hyde Truths
The Hyde experience culminates in an exercise that is, in a way, the ultimate test of character and of the virtues of the doctrine of radical truth telling. Seniors are expected to stand, one by one, before the entire class and the entire faculty and relate how they have grown at Hyde, how they have fallen short, and how they envision their future; then they propose the level of honors with which they deserve to graduate. When they are finished, everyone is invited to comment. As transparency is another incontestable virtue at Hyde, I was invited to sit in on one such session. A muscular Asian boy named Tim, a fine athlete and a sweet kid, took what is known as “the hot seat.” His voice quaking, his head cast down, Tim commenced to lacerate himself for his shortcomings. “I was very afraid to look at myself,” said Tim. “I would rely on my hard work and my personality.” He deprecated his “people-pleasing attitude” and his “achievement-oriented attitude”—attributes that, one might think, would take him a long way in life. Tim seemed to have overdosed on the Hyde Kool-Aid. And the kids, strikingly, buoyed him up. “You’re so much greater than you think you are,” said one, “and everyone sees it but you.” “You have to deal with your father,” said another. “You have to deal with being adopted.”
He had pegged himself at the middle of the three levels of attainment, but the kids and the teachers almost unanimously agreed that he deserved the top.

It was like watching psychoanalysis practiced by a community of loving amateurs: I didn’t know whether to cover my eyes or join in a group hug. I said later to Paul Hurd, an administrator who first came to Hyde in 1966, that the truth does not, after all, set one free. He replied, “It may feel that way at the time, but it’s been our experience over the years that this is what works for the kids.” And the kids themselves say much the same thing. It’s true that the ones I met were the survivors. But this hardy remnant talked about the school in salvific terms. Two of the kids at the Hyde Leadership School in D.C. told me that they and their friends often came to school even when there were no classes. The school is open most weekends and holidays. “We love it here,” said Dawnyetta Burke, a senior. “It’s our second home.”

Joe Gauld, a prophet and evangelizer in the great New England tradition, has always believed that the Hyde model is destined to replace what he sees as a dead-end academic-achievement model. So far, however, Hyde’s efforts at self-replication, which Gauld has headed, have been rocky. In the early 1990s, the Hyde team tried and failed to open schools in nearby Gardiner; in Springfield, Massachusetts; and in Baltimore. In several cases, say the Gaulds, they were blocked by hostile teacher unions, since they demanded the right to hire their own faculty. Hyde now enrolls about 1,400 students at its four schools. The New Haven school is widely considered successful, but the Hyde content has drained out of it almost altogether. Only in D.C. can one test whether the Hyde model can be applied to a public school rather than to a private residential one and to a school that serves disadvantaged kids rather than financially privileged ones. Most of the seven hundred or so children who attend this K–12 institution located in a tough neighborhood in Northeast Washington enter scoring well below their grade level in reading and math; the school is overwhelmingly black and largely poor or working-class. Joanne Goubourn, the headmistress, said that she had had to scuttle certain aspects of Brother’s Keeper for fear of ensuing “fights out in the street.” She notes that parental involvement is much less than it is at Bath (though still significant by the standards of urban public schools). Goubourn feels that it may take another five years before the school is fully Hyde-ified.

It may be that the spiritual dedication at Bath depends on its monastic enclosure and the wounded souls there. Indeed, at times, Hyde feels almost like a cult, or at least a caste. Joe Gauld’s son, Malcolm, married his former classmate Laura, whose sister Claire married Malcolm’s classmate Ken, who founded Hyde’s Woodstock school. Malcolm’s sister Laurie married Paul Hurd; together they started Hyde’s New Haven school. Another of Joe’s daughters, Gigi, married another faculty member, and together they established the Washington, D.C., school, which Joe continues to visit at least monthly. It is as if the supreme level of engagement required to maintain the Hyde culture depends, in the end, on tribal bonds. If this is so, of course, the culture may begin to wane as soon as the institution becomes too large for the family to control. Indeed, Joanne Goubourn told me she can’t quite imagine how the school would carry on without Joe Gauld.

Character cannot be taught as if it were an article of knowledge. Our characters are formed by slow accretion and by innumerable adaptations to the totality of our experience.

A Gradual Soul Turning

Many theoreticians of character education recognize that character cannot be taught as if it were an article of knowledge. Our characters are formed by slow accretion and by innumerable adaptations to the totality of our experience. If school is to consciously shape this process, it will have to do so pervasively, but indirectly. As Malcolm and Laura Gauld write, “Character is inspired; it is not imparted.” In Building Character in Schools, one of the most thoughtful works in the field, Kevin Ryan and Karen Bohlin cite Socrates’ comment, recorded in Plato’s Republic: “The instrument with which one learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body.” Education, Socrates goes on, is thus an act of “gradual soul turning.” This, Ryan and Bohlin remark, is the perfect metaphor for character education.

The Hyde schools are a model of gradual soul turning. They do not, for example, teach courage; instead, daily life at the school, as well as the periodic baptism-under-fire experience, is designed to foster courage. Thomas Lickona, of the Center for the Fourth and Fifth Rs, says that he believes the Brother’s Keeper code has effected profound changes in Hyde’s peer culture, adding that he was “deeply impressed” by
The American Character

Character education has legs. It is a reform so thoroughly in the American grain, not to mention so various and adaptable, that it cannot be dismissed as just another shiny and insubstantial bubble. Moreover, the wish for schools to somehow address the sense of drift and anomie in the larger culture is not likely to abate. And so the issue is not whether we will have character education, but instead, what kind we will have and what relationship it will bear to the ongoing campaign to improve children's academic skills.

Joe Gauld founded the Hyde School in opposition to what he considered the excessively academic focus of conventional schools. Gauld has not changed his view. In an exchange of e-mail, he wrote me: “The emphasis on academic achievement is basically elitist,” since “roughly 10 percent naturally respond to classroom instruction,” while the other 90 percent either give up or “seek recognition elsewhere.” Most education reformers would reel at this sweeping dismissal; in any case they would argue that the problem lies in the means or the content of instruction. Gauld insists that the bottom 90 percent will not succeed academically until they are reached by some other means. And he puts very little faith in schools that aim to change those odds. While he concedes that kids who go to the new crop of academically rigorous inner-city schools, like the KIPP Academy, may do better on tests than his kids, he is confident that Hyde students will be likelier to stay in college and succeed in life. Were it not so, after all, he would be forced to reexamine his central premise.

At bottom, Gauld shares that deep American fear of the soul-killing effect of academic learning that long predates John Dewey. Ralph Waldo Emerson famously expressed it when he wrote, “I had better never see a book than be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite inside of a system.” Gauld is inclined to think of academic success not as the royal route out of a life of poverty and ignorance, but rather as a beguiling snare. In his e-mail he also declared that “every study done so far has found either no or an inverse relationship between grades and test scores with success and fulfillment in life.” This is an astounding statement, backed up with some eccentric documentation, including a study by AT&T that apparently found that managers with high SAT...
scores “were reliably less happy and more psychologically maladjusted by their mid-adult years” than those with lower scores. Gauld also noted that Bill Gates had dropped out of college, and he observed that Thomas Edison, the Wright brothers, and Winston Churchill were “terrible students.”

But I saw few signs that Hyde had discovered the key to intellectual growth. Adam, one of the seniors, said to me, “Academics kind of takes a back seat here.” Classes were often adjourned in the name of some higher good—an emergency session at the Pit, for example. Both teachers and students talk about personal issues, not intellectual ones, among themselves. One reason why Hyde has trouble attracting conventionally able students is that it relegates academics to a secondary status. Only in the past few years has it introduced a series of honors classes to appeal to more academically ambitious students. And the honors English class I sat in on didn’t seem terribly demanding: The students were reading four books that trimester, and they were expected to produce a standard five-paragraph essay on each as well as a final project “designed to capture your process through Hyde”—a characteristically self-referential assignment. Seniors are typically admitted to second- or third-tier colleges, though it is a point of pride that a high fraction of these students find the inner resources to graduate from college. (The same is true at Hyde’s other prep school, in Woodstock, which serves a similar population.)

Rich kids with behavior problems are not, of course, the demographic for whom most school reforms are intended; poor and working-class black kids are. The success or failure of the Hyde school in Washington is thus a matter of real importance.

“We’ve got some high school kids who can’t decode,” Joanne Goubourn says. The Gaulds had no idea that children could suffer from such profound academic deficits when they opened the D.C. school in 1999, and they quickly discovered that a healthier peer culture wasn’t going to improve anyone’s reading comprehension. Only in the past few years has the school begun focusing intently on the teaching of basic skills, and there has been no startling progress on test scores. And yet Hyde must be doing something right: all 13 of last year’s seniors graduated, enrolled in four-year colleges, and made it through the first year. And all 30 of this year’s seniors are scheduled to attend four-year colleges. Hyde may have had very little effect on the kids’ cognitive development, but it still had a great effect on the kind of behaviors—self-discipline, steady work habits, respect for others—that lead to success in school.

Joe Gauld says that he is now working with Craig Ramey, a founding director of the famed Abecedarian Project on early childhood development, on a school for children ages birth to five that would combine parental involvement, character formation, and cognitive development. He believes that he can infuse into little children the confidence and the drive he finds sadly lacking in so many of the older kids. One can only hope that he is right. It is, after all, widely understood that the academic gap between blacks and whites, and for that matter between whites and Asians, has a great deal to do with the expectations, habits, and values the children bring with them from home. Most schools view all that as a given; they are left, in effect, to work the margins. Hyde proposes to go to the heart of the matter.

James Traub is a contributing writer for the New York Times Magazine. Article funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.