The modern character education movement emerged in the 1980s as a consequence of growing parental and public concern for moral drift, or what sociologist James Davison Hunter referred to as “the death of character.” This public anomie was captured in these words from Sanford McDonnell, chairman emeritus of McDonnell Douglas and chair of the Character Education Partnership (CEP), a national umbrella group that provides coordination, encouragement, and support to schools:

*We have a crisis of character all across America…. the good news is that we know what to do about it: get back to the core values of our American heritage in our homes, our schools, our businesses, our government, and indeed in each of our daily lives.*

Two decades later, it is time to ask, What are the successes of the character education movement? What do best practices look like? This essay explores these questions through the study of character education in six schools. Over the course of two months, I visited each of the selected schools to learn about the program in place—why it was initiated and by whom; what roles faculty, staff,
Though they differ in many ways, the six schools share the critical elements of a comprehensive program in character education. Pedagogy is guided by a set of core values or virtues.

And parents play; what the key program elements are; what the results are and how they are measured; and what obstacles the program faces. I selected programs in schools of various sizes, types, grade levels, and locations. The six sites include a suburban public school district and a small-town elementary school, a private religious school and a private secular school, an alternative public high school and a charter school. Each had been designated a National School of Character by the Character Education Partnership (CEP).

Each year since 1998, the CEP has identified several National Schools of Character through a juried process. The award recognizes schools and school districts that have improved the “behavior and learning of their students through character education.” CEP has also developed quality standards to aid schools in evaluating character education programs and curricula. National Schools of Character exemplify CEP’s Eleven Principles, among them defining “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior”; implementing “a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed”; providing “students with opportunities for moral action”; and using “a comprehensive, intentional, proactive, and effective approach to character development.” CEP describes character education not as an “add-on” to the curriculum, but as “a different way of teaching; it is a comprehensive approach that promotes core values in all phases of school life and permeates the entire school culture.”

Though they differ in many ways, the six schools share the critical elements of a comprehensive program in character education. Pedagogy is guided by a set of core values or virtues. The schools provide abundant opportunities for moral discourse about complex, contested matters and moral action through both organized community service and in-school conduct. Later, I will draw some conclusions, but first let’s hear their stories.

Educating Citizens
Hudson Public Schools
Hudson, Massachusetts

“Education is about helping young people feel they can make a difference in the world. The purpose of public education is to create a public in which a democracy can thrive. Character education is a key vehicle to both goals.” The citizenship program in the Hudson schools reflects this vision of Superintendent Sheldon H. Berman, former head of Educators for Social Responsibility. Located in a suburb of Worcester, Massachusetts, the Hudson district educates 2,750 students in four elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. The district serves an increasingly diverse population, 30 percent of whom are immigrants from Brazil and the Azores.

Dr. Berman and the faculty worked together to develop a character education program in part to prevent disciplinary problems. A citizen group conducted a comprehensive community survey to discern what residents expected of their school. Discussion in the community and in the school led to consensus around three core goals: empathy, ethics, and service. The character education program was built slowly, with broad input, and with attention to faculty development and participation.

The Hudson effort implements age-appropriate strategies at every class level. In pre-K–5 classes, faculty use a program from Educators for Social Responsibility called Adventures in Peacemaking, among others. Second Step is a violence prevention program for grades pre-K to 9 developed by the Committee for Children. Thirty lessons at each elementary grade level help students develop empathy and learn anger management and conflict resolution skills. Ninth-grade history and English classes feature ethics-based civics instruction with a focus on the Holocaust. More than 85 percent of students are involved in service learning: kindergartners connect with a local food pantry, 1st graders interact with local senior citizens, and high school students work on environmental issues.

In Brian Daniels’s senior ethics course, students cover the waterfront of current issues including affirmative action, assisted suicide, abortion, homosexuality, and a range of political topics. Daniels uses a Socratic process in addressing each topic, and students are forced to deal with their own and their generation’s inclinations toward relativism and individualism. Students learn to confront difference, take and defend positions, and practice civility.

Character education is embedded in the district’s stated goals and criteria for hiring new faculty. Teachers are highly invested through a continuing series of faculty initiatives. Superintendent Berman teaches courses for the faculty covering central pedagogical elements of the program and Mary H. McCarthy provides overall coordination. Parents are involved in the Family Character Education Council.
Building Social Skills
The Somers Elementary School
Somers, Connecticut

The 21 members of Rebecca Leiphart’s 4th-grade class gather for their morning meeting. In the first round of conversation, students exchange compliments for constructive social conduct such as reaching out to another student or always saying hello. The conversation shifts to expressions of regret by individual students: the failure to return something borrowed, not standing up for a classmate. The third part of the meeting is devoted to problem solving. A boy complains that other students are pushing him out of his seat on the bus. Class members offer advice. Each student addresses others by name, takes a turn speaking, is attentive to each speaker, and expresses thanks for the compliment or counsel. Ms. Leiphart notes that the class will return to this discussion at its next meeting to see whether or not progress has been made.

Located in northern Connecticut, the Somers Elementary School serves 750 students in kindergarten through 5th grade in a community that is increasing in economic, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Ms. Leiphart’s morning meeting is part of the school’s character education program, initiated in 1995 and motivated by the merger of three schools into one, out of concern for the social skills of the students and in response to the post-Columbine awareness that schools should give greater consideration to students’ social needs.

Principal Debra Adamczyk helped establish the character education program. Maureen Winseck, school psychologist, and Pat Clark, media specialist, provided leadership in implementation. The school identified five character goals on which to concentrate: cooperation, assert oneself positively, take responsibility, empathize, and show self-respect (CARES). The Social Skills Committee, a broadly representative group formed to give direction to the program, developed an activities guide that includes both homegrown and external vendor materials and implementation strategies to assist in developing social skills, promoting positive interaction, and integrating social skills into academic studies. Content elements include readings about Rosa Parks, Maya Angelou, and others, and the book Voices of Hope, about everyday heroes. Class exercises focus on particular virtues and social skills. Peer activities are a prominent program component. Upperclass students are trained in a pedagogy called Friendship Groups.

A parents’ newsletter and web site, workshops for parents on social skills strategies, and parent volunteer and mentoring activities create significant buy-in for the program. Parents receive regular reports on attendance, academic achievement, and discipline, which are discussed at regularly scheduled family conferences that include students in the 4th and 5th grades.

Grounded in the Classics
The Montrose School
Natick, Massachusetts

Soon after the school day begins at the Montrose School, students gather for an enrichment period. They may attend morning Mass or assemble in a quiet room for reading and reflection.

Students commute from 35 area towns to this college-preparatory day school, established in 1979 by parents who were unhappy with the direction of both the Boston-area public and Catholic diocesan schools. They wanted a school that centered on the Catholic faith and the liberal arts, as expressed in the school’s mission statement, “a Montrose education challenges each student to cultivate intellect and character, leadership and service, faith and reason.” The school enrolls 135 girls in grades 6–12; 75 percent are Catholic. The school director, Karen Bohlin, is a leading teacher-scholar in the character education movement and was previously the director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University.

In addition to core studies in English, math, science, history, languages, and the fine arts, students take a required sequence in religion and philosophy: 6th-grade students study the Apostles’ Creed and the saints; in the 7th grade, they focus on the Church and the Ten Commandments; 8th graders conduct an overview of the Bible and the Sacraments; 9th-grade students study the Old Testament, the Apologetics, and C. S. Lewis’s Mere Christianity; the 10th-grade focus is the New Testament and Church history; 11th grade introduces metaphysics and ethics; and the 12th-grade course features the philosophy and social teachings of the Catholic Church. Juniors and seniors spend time on texts by Aristotle, Plato, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and others.

The study of character is embedded in the broader curriculum. Courses in literature feature classic works, and history classes pick up on such challenging topics as the Holocaust and civil rights. Each week, homeroom teachers lead a discussion of character issues including friendship, conflict resolution, and being in control of one’s emotions. A student club focuses on service learning opportunities, and many classes include service dimensions.

School assemblies feature outside speakers on socially significant issues. On the Monday of my visit, a physician from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and the Harvard Medical School spoke about end-of-life issues. After the assembly, students gathered in homerooms for faculty-led discussions on the speaker’s presentation. Montrose students are successful participants in a local Martin Luther King Jr. essay contest as well as an annual national conference on ethics and culture at the University of Notre Dame. For six consecutive years, Montrose students have been the only high school presenters at the
Notre Dame conference, with the most recent papers discussing how the arts may reduce the allure of television and the influence of music on teen culture.

Student advisement is a key function of each faculty member. As one student explained, “It’s my advisor who challenges me to put virtue into practice. She’s the person I can talk to and get advice from; she knows when I am just being too proud; she helps me to know myself better.”

**Comprehensiveness**  
**Montclair Kimberley Academy**  
**Montclair, New Jersey**

In Ralph Paciﬁco’s kindergarten physical-education class at Montclair, students form a circle around a multicolored parachute. Each panel of the parachute represents a character expectation. The students recite each goal and then explain, in their own words, what the goal means to them. Then, in an exercise in teamwork, they move the huge parachute around the room.

The school’s motto, *Knowledge, Vision, Integrity*, has shaped the academic and character goals of Montclair Kimberley throughout its history. As students move into the upper grades, their ownership of the character goals is demonstrated in student government, community service, the honor system, and athletics.

Montclair Kimberley Academy dates to 1878. Current enrollment in the pre-kindergarten through 12th grades exceeds 1,000 students from 80 communities across northern New Jersey. Former headmaster Peter Greer arrived in 1992 and soon after convened a group of teachers, staff, parents, and alumni to write a guiding statement for the school’s character education program. “Our Common Purpose” articulates the school’s aspirations. Greek philosophy shaped the framework, and the seven virtues set forth in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*—respect, friendship, responsibility, conﬁdence, temperance, fairness, and being informed—became the character expectations for the academy. The school added an eighth expectation, honesty, in 2004 in connection with the reformulation of the academy’s honor code. The story of Gyges’s ring from Plato’s *Republic* provides the touchstone for the curriculum.

The Core Works Program, developed by the faculty, includes 60 readings representing the greatest works in Western and non-Western literature plus masterpieces in the arts. Curricula tie the material to the character goals and are tailored to each class level. *Charlotte’s Web* is the ﬁrst core work for 1st graders, 7th graders study *The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories*, while upperclass students delve into such masters as Dante, Confucius, and Plato.

Responsive Classroom guides the character education program in the pre-K though elementary grades. The goal is to identify and cultivate character goals in all aspects of the students’ experience both inside and outside of the classroom. During morning meeting, students identify, study, and practice the virtues and engage in community building.

The key, says new headmaster Thomas Nammack, is that “the school is working on character education in many ways, on many levels, all at the same time.” Moreover, he adds, “we strive to give our students a sense of what is possible in the task of mastering their own fates, and we seek to equip them to become independent practitioners of humane behavior.”

**Freedom and Accountability**  
**Malcolm Shabazz City High School**  
**Madison, Wisconsin**

For most Shabazz students, the traditional high school was an uncomfortable straitjacket; 92 percent say they were “bored” in their previous high school. Shabazz is one of the oldest alternative schools in the nation, established in 1971 to educate Madison students whose circumstances, attitudes, and conduct are often not conducive to successful academic work in a traditional school setting. The school serves a diverse student population of 140 in grades 9–12. Its mission is to create a learning environment free of discrimination and harassment and to strengthen the connection between the students and their community.

Shabazz students must commit to the academic expectations of the school and give assurance, in writing, that they will observe nonharassment, alcohol and other drug, and attendance policies. These expectations are upfront, concrete, and strictly enforced. At the same time, the school does not have a dress code, has few standard academic requirements, and provides many nontraditional learning opportunities. At the end of each course, students reﬂect on 10 or 12 key questions. Faculty members, in turn, develop their own essays to evaluate each student. If the student meets all of the required course goals and 70 to 80 percent of the optional goals, he or she passes the course.

Four pillars shape character education at the Malcolm Shabazz High School. First, there are the explicit expectations. Second, all entering students take “The Shabazz Experience” in which they explore the school’s mission and the life of Malcolm Shabazz, better know as Malcolm X. A third pillar is *Mirrors of Discrimination*. One premise of this class is that America is not a “melting pot” but a “salad bowl,” where “the races and cultures of our society remain distinct and unique even though we all live together in the same big bowl.” Readings include an essay about World War II German patriot Martin Niemoeler, Howard Zinn’s *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, and Beverly Tatum’s *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*? The fourth
pillar is service learning. Retired social worker Jane Kavaloski was a key architect of the Shabazz program, and research she initiated established a positive connection between service learning and both student motivation and learning. Projects include volunteer work in the American South, Latin America, poverty zones of American cities, neighborhood schools, and environmentally vulnerable areas. Project Green Team is a coordinated set of courses in which students earn physical education and science credits for their work on stream ecology and fly-fishing. In Equity in Computer Access, instructor Tina Murray works with her students to recycle discarded computers for use by students, families, or institutions that cannot afford to purchase one.

**Intentional Design**

**Community of Peace Academy**

**St. Paul, Minnesota**

Sarah Zosel’s 10th graders are studying world religions. In class, short video clips feature spokespersons for the Buddhist and Native American religions. Zosel asks students to identify the points of emphasis in each religion. An Asian student mentions the Buddhist emphasis on tolerance and peace, adding, “There is so much more to life than sex, television, clothes, and money and all that stuff.” Zosel reiterates the key questions that religions try to answer: How should we live? Why do people suffer? What happens when I die? Once a week the class has a class meeting or, as they call it, a “circle talk” in which students raise issues they face at school or in their personal lives or discuss current events.

Community of Peace Academy (CPA) was established as a charter school and is sponsored by the St. Paul Public School District. Seventy percent of the 550 students in grades K through 12 are Hmong and 20 percent are African American; 70 percent come from homes in which English is the second language; most are poor. On rare occasions, weekend neighborhood gang activities reverberate in school hallways on Monday morning (as they did on the day of my visit).

Community Peace Academy was designed around three components: caring relationships (community), a strong ethical focus (peace), and seriousness about academic achievement (academy). The founder and head of CPA is Dr. Karen J. Rusthoven, who got her start as an educator in the 1960s. Inspired by the idealism of that decade, she believes education is the key to resolving economic and social disparities. Her vision for CPA: “At Community of Peace Academy, our desired outcome is to educate the whole person—mind, body and will—for peace, justice, freedom, compassion, wholeness and fullness of life for all.”

Faculty serve as exemplars and motivators, attending to student needs, while respectful of the moral and intellectual freedom of each student. Relatively small classes—16 in grades K and 1, and 24 in other grades—permit faculty to give close attention to each student’s progress. Rusthoven and the CPA faculty adopted many established best practices, including a peacemaking curriculum for the primary grades developed by Growing Communities for Peace; PeaceBuilders, a conflict prevention program; the Heartwood series of readings in ethics for grades K–6, which features seven ethical principles; and the Responsive Classroom, which encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and moral conduct. Ninth graders take an ethics class focusing on care for self, others, and learning. Tenth graders study world religions, and juniors enroll in a PeaceBuilders course, which includes a vision quest retreat and a personal service project. CPA is developing a course for seniors that will involve significant engagement in a community project.

**Measuring Success**

These six character education programs share key features, many of which are explicit in the CEP criteria. The programs are comprehensive, encompassing all school activities, engaging all members of the faculty and staff, and including all grade levels. At each site, there is clarity and transparency about goals and values. Character education was initially the vision of a school principal or superintendent. Program fit in hiring and subsequent evaluation of faculty is a priority. Adequate and appropriately led and supported opportunities for faculty and curriculum development are critical components. Parent support and engagement is another common thread.
Variation across the sites is evident in stated program objectives, curricular content, and pedagogy as well as in the school culture, the student population, and the community. Program goals range from the citizenship objectives of the Hudson schools to the social action agenda of Shabazz to the moral and intellectual reflection of Montrose. The schools draw content from sources as disparate as religious works, literary classics, contemporary novels, and social commentary. As a Catholic school, Montrose can tie character education directly to a religious tradition. While this facilitates the program, results in the other schools demonstrate that religious affiliation is not a prerequisite for success. Two of the six sites—Somers Elementary and the Hudson district—are public schools to which students are assigned, while the other four are schools of choice. I observed no obvious effects of this difference on program outcomes.

Program assessment, a work in progress in most of the schools, reflects similar variety. Much of the research cited by the schools focuses on such objectives as improved discipline, campus climate, social attitudes, and community engagement. Some evaluations limit measures to those that are relatively easy to track, such as improved attendance or reduced incidents of violence and cheating. Others seek to tie character education to broader outcomes, including improved academic achievement:

- In Hudson, enthusiasm from the community for the character education program and other district initiatives is one measure of success; others are SAT scores that exceed national and state averages and the percentage of graduates (79 percent) who pursue postsecondary education.
- Somers Elementary School faculty report less classroom bullying than before the program was initiated, more time in class for academic work, and strong family support.
- Veteran teachers at Montclair Kimberley Academy speak of the positive difference the program has made in campus climate and student conduct, including a decline in the incidence of student cheating.
- All Montrose graduates matriculate to four-year colleges, many of which are among the best in the nation. While exit interviews with each graduate provide Montrose School director Dr. Karen Bohlin with feedback on all aspects of the student experience, she identified the need for a more comprehensive assessment program.
- Ninety-three percent of Shabazz students graduate from high school, and 74 percent pursue postsecondary education. Incoming students had a 40 percent truancy rate at their former schools, while at Shabazz the truancy rate is 16 percent. Both students and parents give Shabazz approval ratings that are much higher than those other district schools receive.
- Of the six, Community Peace Academy devotes the most energy and resources to program assessment. Qualitative and quantitative exercises measure everything from academic performance to campus climate. Teachers, parents, students, and graduates are part of the assessment process, which includes character education goals. The data are positive with respect to those goals. Eighty-two percent of sophomores met or exceeded the state standard on the 2003 Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment in math, and 84 percent met or exceeded similar standards in reading. No other public or charter high school in the state with similar percentages of low-income and ESL students even approached these rates. The assessment data provide the basis for an annual review of the school’s programs which, in turn, leads to an improvement plan for the following year.

While both advocates and critics call for more comprehensive research on the effects of character education strategies, a growing body of research data appears to support the experiences of the schools studied. The Journal of Moral Education has been around for a while, and an increasing number of its articles address the effectiveness of character education strategies with quantitative methodologies. The first issues of the Journal of Character Education have made their appearance with similar content. The publications of CIRCLE, The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, and CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, are also contributing to the inquiry.

Public and political emphasis on academic achievement and accountability has led both program leaders and education researchers to explore the relationship between the affective goals of character education and academic
achievement. The What Works Clearinghouse, part of the federal government’s Institute of Education Sciences, released in September 2006 its review of 55 studies of character education programs, which looked at “student outcomes related to positive character development, prosocial behavior, and academic performance.”

Marvin W. Berkowitz and Melinda C. Bier, both of the University of Missouri-St. Louis, reviewed 78 studies and identified 33 programs that researchers deemed effective with respect to both affective and academic goals. Peace-builders and Second Step were among the programs they studied. They conclude that “effective character education supports and enhances the academic goals of schools: good character promotes learning.”

CASEL president Roger P. Weissberg and Joseph Durlak, a Loyola University psychologist, reviewed 300 studies and found that, compared with nonparticipants, students participating in programs aimed at improving the social and emotional learning environment in schools “have significantly better attendance records; their classroom behavior is more constructive and less often disruptive; they like school more; and they have better grade point averages. They are also less likely to be suspended or otherwise disciplined.” Participants scored at least 10 points higher in achievement tests than students who did not participate.

So far, character education programs that are carefully designed and implemented appear to be succeeding. Undeterred by philosophical disputes on the one hand and the preoccupation with academic achievement on the other, character education finds its strength at the grass roots, in those individual schools and communities where teachers, administrators, and citizens initiate programs designed to improve civility and citizenship—legitimate goals in their own right. If research continues to show that comprehensive character education has positive effects on student achievement as well, then the movement may in time gain more robust political and financial support from education policymakers.

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