

*A white paper on*

# **Character Education- A Cornerstone of Healthy Communities**

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*"Yes, we want our children to be smart and successful.  
But even more, we want them to be good and kind and decent. Yes,  
our children must learn how to make a living. But even more, they must  
learn how to live, and what to love. 'Intelligence is not enough,'  
said Martin Luther King, Jr. 'Intelligence plus character -  
that is the true goal of education.' "*

- George W. Bush

## A Generation Under Attack

Newspapers throughout the country are reporting disturbing accounts of an apparent decline of moral values among our nation's youth - cheating and violence in schools, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, gang violence, and sexual assaults. Such stories are underscored by studies which show just how far reaching these problems have become. For example, one survey of 12,000 high school students demonstrated significant deterioration in youth choices over a span of two years: Students admitting they cheated on an exam at least once in the past year jumped from 61% in 1992 to 74% in 2002; The number who stole something from a store within 12 months rose from 31% to 38%, while the percentage who say they lied to their teachers and parents also increased substantially; Cheating rose from 71% in 2000 to 74% in 2002; Theft increased from 35% to 38%; and those who said they would be willing to lie to get a good job jumped from 28% to 39%.

There is a growing awareness among Americans that values are under attack - values essential to a healthy society, such as honesty, courtesy, respect, and concern for others. Experts credit the character crisis in part to practices initiated in the middle part of the past century, where society witnessed a break with tradition of the notion that our schools should be a place where children could become both "smart" and "good." The second circumstance giving rise to a lack of character education can be attributed to an absence of discussion on this important topic in households across America. The result has been a situation simply surmised by Michael Josephson, founder

of the Josephson Institute of Ethics in Marina del Rey, California, "Far too many kids aren't getting (character education) from their parents. And if the schools don't do it, they won't learn it."

## Hope For Our Children's Future?

One bright spot in the battle against eroding moral values began to take shape in the 1990s- a new "character education" movement, whose goal is to restore "good character" to its historical place as the central desirable outcome of the school's moral involvement. Character education has been defined as "the deliberate effort to help people understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values."

After years of tiptoeing around moral education, hundreds of school systems are weaving values to their curricula. Education policy makers and administrators in the United States are enthusiastically lending their resources to launch programs aimed at restoring the good character of our country. The United States Department of Education granted states \$2.5 million for character education during fiscal year 2000, and \$8.2 million in 2001 alone. Former U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, explained his department's support for the character education initiative: "Good citizenship, compassion and respect for others are qualities just as important as learning to high standards in math, science and reading," Riley said, "and school is where most young people spend most of their time outside the home. With these grants, schools and communities can reinforce parents in helping students learn to make good

choices and be positive members of society throughout their lives."

## How The Character Links Program Is Changing Lives

Among the local successful models created to fill the need for a child's character education is Character Links. The Character Links initiative embraces a proactive approach to character development linking core academic knowledge to life application involving teachers, parents, students as well as the rest of the community in the process. The 32-week program consists of daily School Links, which are pages for teachers, and Home Links, which are pages for parents reinforcing the daily classroom lesson, containing weekly 5-minute lessons linking character building to state academic standards to real-life application.

Each page in the Character Links program is embedded with concise academic, value-rich lessons. Each brief lesson integrates one core value with state content standards and benchmarks fostering higher order thinking skills, enhancing learning, improving student attitude, and building character. Character Links includes program sponsors or organizations who gain goodwill and a positive image by becoming major stakeholders in the process of educating students to become academically empowered and socially responsible.

Educational leaders around the country have truly been impressed with the impact that the Character Links program makes upon the participants.

"Character Links has revolutionized our school district. It has given our entire educational commu-

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nity a positive framework. Through its unique design, teachers use it daily, students are engaged, and parents are involved," says Dr. Diane Roussel, Superintendent of Jefferson Parish Public Schools in Louisiana.

Parents of students utilizing the Character Links program have also recognized it to be a means through which they can become integrated into their child's moral education: "The Home Link has provided a non-threatening opportunity to talk about the things that matter most. Not only are the activities great, but they help us stay connected to our child's classroom," said Teresa Bensch, whose child utilized the Character Links program in Atlanta, Georgia.

## The Benefits of Character Education

In recent years, character education principles have been adopted in countries throughout the world, including Denmark, Korea, Japan, England and the United States. While research into the effects of character education is still in its early stages, the potential and impact of character education has been widely affirmed by schools that have adopted a character education focus. Where it has been implemented, character education has been associated with:

- Fewer discipline problems;
- Fewer suspensions;
- Reduced lateness and absenteeism;
- Decreased school violence;
- Higher scores on achievement tests;
- Higher reading scores;
- Better morale among school staff.

An evaluation of one Georgia school utilizing the Character Links program in 2003 yielded comparable results to the benefits listed above.

- 88% of the teachers felt that student behavior improved
- 90% of teachers indicated that students were more aware of their actions when engaged in unstructured time
- 75% of teachers rated the "Character Links" program as excellent in increasing parental communication.
- 85% of parents believe this was an effective tool to increase parental involvement.

## What "Community" Means to Kids

Recently, the Commission on Children at Risk, a panel of 33 leading children's doctors, neuroscientists, research scholars, and youth service professionals, concluded in their report entitled "Hardwired To Connect" that children are biologically primed for enduring connections to others and for moral and spiritual meaning. As stated in the report's Executive Summary, initiatives such as the Character Links program fit within a larger call to build communities where children can reach their potential through the use of positive role modeling:

**Authoritative communities are groups that live out the types of connectedness that our children increasingly lack. They are groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life. Renewing and building them is the key to improving the lives of U.S. children and adolescents.**

The efforts of community character education have yielded tangible results in the cities and states that

have made it a priority. In his address to the U.S. House of Representatives in March 1, 2000, Sheldon H. Berman, Superintendent of Hudson Public Schools in Massachusetts testified before the Committee on Education and the Workforce House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families. His remarks on the success of character education initiatives in his school district are telling:

[o]ur character education program has benefited the community as a whole and has rebuilt public confidence in and public support for our schools. We are living in a time when adults are suspicious of our youth and have low opinions of them. Similarly, as the declining civic participation among young adults shows, young people feel alienated and disaffected from our social and political community and withdraw from participating in this arena. **Character education and service learning have provided the bridge between young people and their community in Hudson in such a way as to give young people a sense of hope, an experience of community, and a belief in their own personal effectiveness.**

## Character Links- A Cornerstone of Community of One

In Jefferson Parish, government leaders have recently come together to launch an effort known as Community Of One, the first of its kind in the nation. With an ambitious mission of uniting the community in an ethically-driven process that promotes core values, personal accountability, positive character development, and social responsibility, those at the heart of this movement have recognized character education is at the

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Ryals, C.F. (2003). An Evaluation Of The Character Links Education Program In An Elementary School. (Doctoral Dissertation, Argosy University, 2003). Other US studies show similar results in character education programs as well. In 2000, the University of South Carolina's Center for Child and Family Studies evaluated its state's four-year character-education initiative. Based on surveys of administrators with character education programs in their schools, researchers discovered: 91 percent reported improvement in student attitudes; 89 percent reported improvement in student behavior; 60 percent reported improvement in academic performance, and; More than 65 percent reported improved teacher and staff attitudes. Source: <http://cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/2001/fyi/teachers.ednews/04/10/character.education/?http://www.americanvalues.org>  
Committee on Education and the Workforce House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families; "Building a Nation of Citizens - The Role of Character Education in America's Schools" [http://www.house.gov/ed\\_workforce/hearings/106th/ecyf/charactered3100/berman.htm](http://www.house.gov/ed_workforce/hearings/106th/ecyf/charactered3100/berman.htm)

foundation at what they would like to achieve. As noted by Jefferson Parish School Superintendent, Dr. Diane Roussel, when she realized that many children were coming into the public school system in Jefferson without any concept of what it means to treat others with respect, or to act courteously or to be optimistic, "Rather than just throw up our hands and blame the parents for the children's shortcomings, I thought there might be a way to teach these positive qualities to schoolchildren. That's when I found Character Links." The forty-eight qualities adopted by Jefferson Community Of One as essential elements of good character are already being addressed on a weekly basis through the Character Links curriculum.

Leaders agree that as a goal of

community character building in Jefferson Parish, lessons taught through Character Links in the public school system should be made more pervasive in the local business world as well, so that kids can then discuss the concepts with adults who have also covered the same material. One application of this effort has already emerged in the form of what is known as the Community Link, which has been created and distributed to local businesses and organizations by Character Links as a gift to Jefferson Parish.

## Summary

While children in modern America face challenges and decisions unthinkable decades ago, those con-

cerned about the apparent moral crisis in our country have taken to heart the successes found in character education programs.

As more information becomes available on the importance of community in the role of shaping a young person's sense of moral and spiritual meaning, the partnership between proven programs such as Character Links, which touches the hearts of students, and initiatives like Jefferson Community of One, which reaches out to the world, have the potential to foster the quality of life enjoyed by our nation in ages past.

For more information about how Character Links can be of service, please contact Bonnie Louque at 877-858-8341

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Jefferson Community of One Articles of Incorporation

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