

The 11 Principles of Character TM

A Validation Framework:

For Inspiration, Validation and Certification



Introductory Guide

2018-2020 Revision



 **Character.org**
Since 1993

OVERVIEW

What is character education?

Character education is the intentional effort to develop in young people core ethical and performance values that are widely affirmed across all cultures. To be effective, character education must include all stakeholders in a school community and must permeate school climate, culture, teaching, and learning.

The term character education encompasses a broad range of prosocial constructs, strategies, and programs including positive school culture, moral education, just communities, caring school communities, social-emotional learning, positive youth development, civic education, and service learning. All of these approaches promote the intellectual, social, emotional, and ethical development of young people and share a commitment to help young people become responsible, caring, and contributing citizens.

No single script for effective character education exists, but there are some important guiding principles. Based on the practices of effective schools, decades of research and the wisdom of leading thinkers and practitioners in the field, the *11 Principles of Effective Character Education* form the cornerstone of Character.org's philosophy on how best to develop and implement high-quality character education initiatives. As broad principles that define excellence in character education, the 11 Principles serve as guideposts that schools and others responsible for youth character development can use to plan, implement, evaluate, and sustain their programs.

Schools and organizations that intentionally cultivate and develop character comprehensively by focusing on both moral and performance values are likely to experience lower rates of student peer cruelty and indiscipline. Furthermore, they very often report a more caring community and substantially higher levels of student and faculty satisfaction.

The 11 Principles helps school communities identify, define, and function according to core values to advance their education mission. Quality character education creates a culture that supports and challenges students and adults to strive for excellence while demonstrating core values.

For those schools looking for certification as a School of Character, the core values described here are provided for descriptive purposes only and not meant to define the full universe of core values that can be identified by a school or district for inclusion in its educational mission. As the term core values is referenced throughout the 11 Principles, Character.org refers to a balance of moral and performance values. When this definition is applied to assessment for Schools of Character, Character.org evaluators will assess schools in their understanding and implementation of examples for both moral and performance values.

Character education also provides effective solutions to ethical and academic issues that are of growing concern. Using the 11 Principles framework, educators have successfully transformed

their schools by improving school culture, increasing achievement for all learners, developing ethical citizens, restoring civility, developing prosocial behaviors, and improving job satisfaction and retention among teachers. While experimental research studies of schools using the 11 Principles have not been conducted, Character.org has meaningful quantitative, qualitative, and anecdotal accounts of school improvement using this model. All the 11 Principles are also individually grounded in school research demonstrating best practice.

THE 11 PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION, A GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

This document explains each of the 11 Principles and includes a scoring guide to help measure both the current status of implementation and progress over time. It defines each principle more specifically in terms of two to four key indicators that describe what the principle should “look like” when implemented. Key indicators of exemplary practice follow each of these items. Developed in consultation with experienced Schools of Character site visitors and evaluators, these key indicators describe how schools most commonly implement the principles and offer benchmarks of successful practice.

In addition, for each principle an example from a School of Character shows the principle in practice.

Self-Assessment

Character.org strongly encourages practitioners to evaluate the extent to which their school or district is implementing each principle. This document and its scoring guide can help educators examine their current character education practices, identify short- and long-term objectives, and develop or strengthen a strategic plan for continuous improvement. Staff can review the key indicators for each principle and then use the scoring guide as part of your process for assessing existing strengths and areas for improvement. After developing baseline data, the 11 Principles Scoring Guide can be used over time to assess progress. This is also the same evaluation rubric used by Schools of Character evaluators.

Achieving a 4.0 score on the entire scoring guide is an aspirational goal. Rarely would a school or district be exemplary in every indicator at any one time. For example, schools and districts that achieve State and National Schools of Character status are usually between “Exemplary” and “Good” on the scoring rubric.

Implementation Rating	Rating Description	Implementation Rating Guidelines
4	Exemplary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple examples suggesting implementation of 11 Principles Key Indicators • Practice is guided by an analysis of the data, 11 Principles Key Indicators, and/or relevant literature guides practice • Evidence (qualitative and quantitative) reveals positive outcomes associated with principle implementation • Super majority of stakeholders (admin, teachers, students, parents) are impacted by or engaged in implementation
3	Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some examples of programs or processes addressing 11 Principles Key Indicators are provided • Practice is guided by some or limited data analysis, 11 Principles Key Indicators, and/or relevant literature • Some evidence (qualitative and quantitative) supporting positive outcomes is provided • Majority of stakeholders are impacted by or engaged in implementation
2	Developing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few examples of programs or processes addressing 11 Principles Key Indicators are provided • Unclear if practice is being guided by data analysis, 11 Principles Key Indicators, and/or relevant literature • Evidence (quantitative and qualitative) is lacking, is limited, or is unclear with no association to positive outcomes • A minority of stakeholders is impacted by or engaged in implementation
1	Lacking Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate examples of programs or process addressing 11 Principles Key Indicators • Practice is not being guided by data analysis, 11 Principles Key Indicator, and/or relevant literature • No evidence (qualitative and quantitative) to support positive outcomes • Limited number of stakeholders are impacted by or engaged in implementation

A self-assessment which automatically calculates your scores is available at www.exchange.character.org/introduction. Call Character.org at (202) 296-7743 with questions on the scoring procedure.

PRINCIPLE 1

Core values are defined, implemented, and embedded into school culture.

Schools that effectively promote good character come to agreement on the core values they wish to instill in their students. Some schools use terms such as virtues, traits, pillars, or expectations to refer to the desirable character qualities they wish to foster. These approaches can be effective within the 11 Principles framework if they affirm human dignity, promote the development of the individual, serve the common good, define our rights and responsibilities in a democratic society, and meet the classical tests of universality (i.e., Would you want all persons to act this way in a similar situation?), and reversibility (i.e., Would you want to be treated this way?).

The school makes clear that these basic human values transcend religious and cultural differences and express our common humanity. Examples of core ethical values are caring, honesty, fairness, generosity, and respect for self and others. Examples of performance values include diligence, best effort, perseverance, critical thinking, and positive attitude. The school community selects and commits to its core values as the foundation for how people interact and do their best work in the school. A school committed to its students' character treats its core values as essential to its mission and often refers to them explicitly in the mission and in its code of conduct or "touchstone" (a statement that encapsulates core values and helps the community live them).

PRINCIPLE 2

The school defines "character" comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and doing.

Good character involves understanding, caring about, and acting upon core values. A holistic approach to character development seeks to develop the cognitive, emotional, social competencies and behaviors required to do the right thing and do one's best work. Students grow to understand core values by studying and discussing them, observing behavioral models, and resolving problems involving the values. Students learn to care about core values by developing empathy skills, forming caring relationships, developing good work habits, taking on meaningful responsibilities, helping to create community, hearing inspirational stories, and reflecting on life experiences. By being taught core values, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and other competencies, they learn to act by striving to do their best in all areas of school life. As children grow in character, they develop an increasingly refined understanding of the core values, a deeper commitment to living according to those values, and a stronger capacity and tendency to behave in accordance with them.

PRINCIPLE 3

The school uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to develop character.

Schools committed to character development look at themselves through a character lens to assess how virtually everything that goes on in school affects the character of students. A comprehensive approach uses all aspects of the school as opportunities for character development. It is about weaving character into every aspect of the school culture. This includes the formal academic curriculum and extracurricular activities, as well as what is sometimes called the hidden or informal curriculum (e.g. how adults model good character, how the instructional process respects students, how student diversity is addressed, the unofficial and unwritten norms of the school, the adult culture of the school).

“Stand-alone” character education programs can be useful first steps or helpful elements of a comprehensive effort but are not an adequate substitute for a holistic approach that integrates character development into every aspect of school life. With an intentional and proactive approach, school staff do more than react to “teachable moments” to integrate character lessons that include the three domains of thinking, feeling, and behavior cited in Principle 2. They take deliberate steps to create opportunities for character development.

This principle includes teaching students the social, emotional, and character development skills they need to be ethical citizens. The development of social skills helps students establish and maintain positive relationships and enables communication with others in various settings and situations. Recognizing the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of others leads to effective cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution.

Personal and emotional development skills help students identify, understand, and effectively manage their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Personal and academic successes are built upon the ability to consider thoughts, understand feelings, and manage one’s responses. Personal thoughts and feelings impact the management of experiences and behavior outcomes.

Character development skills help students identify, define, and live in accordance with core values that aid in effective problem solving and responsible decision making. Success in school and life is built upon the ability to make ethical decisions, solve problems effectively, and to identify and apply core values in all subject areas and life (Kansas Social, Emotional, and Character Development Model Standards).

PRINCIPLE 4

The school creates a caring community.

A school committed to character strives to become a civil, caring, and just society. It does this by creating a community that helps all its members form respectful relationships that lead to caring attachments. By modeling and scaffolding excellence in academics and behavior, members of this caring community develop responsibility for one another. This involves developing caring relationships between students and staff, among students (within and across grade levels), among staff, and between staff and families. These caring relationships foster both the desire to learn and the desire to be a good person. All children and adolescents have needs for safety, belonging, and the experience of contributing. There is a complicated spectrum of behaviors that undermine students' feelings of safety – from normative moments of mis-understanding to intentional verbal and cyber instances of disrespectful or cruel behavior. These “grey zone” behaviors can lead to even more extreme instances of cruelty, harassment, or violence. Students are more likely to internalize the values and expectations of groups that meet their safety needs. Likewise, if staff members and parents experience mutual respect, fairness, and cooperation in their relationships with each other, they are more likely to develop the capacity to promote those values in students. In a caring school community, the daily life of classrooms and all other parts of the school environment (e.g., hallways, cafeteria, playground, sports fields, buses, front office, and teachers' lounge) are imbued with a climate of concern and respect for others.

PRINCIPLE 5

The school provides students with opportunities for moral action.

Service provides students an opportunity to practice putting their core values into action and demonstrate intellectual and civic character. To develop the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of their character, students need many and varied opportunities to grapple with real-life challenges (e.g., how to plan and carry out an important responsibility, work as part of a team, negotiate for peaceable solutions, recognize and resolve ethical dilemmas, and identify and meet school and community needs). Through repeated experiences and reflection, students develop appreciation for and commitment to acting on their core values. Schools with a culture of character regularly provide ways to serve the needs of their families and community. When providing service to others, the school follows guidelines for effective community service and service learning to include student voice and choice, integration of service into the curriculum, and reflection. In the practice of service learning students are constructive learners—they learn best by doing. In addition to serving the community, moral action can include student leadership to advance topics such as conflict resolution, restorative practices, bully resistance, academic integrity, and sportsmanship.

In this principle, it is important for students to learn to see and fill a need. They need to understand service is important, whether it be community service or service learning. When students participate in the decision-making process about service experiences, it takes their learning to a new level.

It is critical to know the difference between community service and service learning, both of which are valuable. Community service is defined as voluntary work intended to help people in an identified area of need. Service learning is an experiential teaching strategy that intentionally integrates academic learning and relevant community service. Both of these service types create strong community connections, value an individual's ethical growth and civic responsibility, and meet real needs in the local community and beyond.

PRINCIPLE 6

The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them succeed.

Because students come to school with diverse skills, interests, backgrounds, and learning needs, an academic program that helps all students succeed will be one in which the content and pedagogy engage all learners and meet their individual needs. This means providing a curriculum that is inherently interesting and meaningful to students and teaching in a manner that respects and cares for students as individuals. Effective character educators model persistence, responsibility, and caring as they differentiate instruction, employ a variety of active teaching and learning strategies, and look for ways that character is potentially developed in and through everyday teaching and learning. When teachers bring to the fore the character dimension of their classes, they enhance the relevance of subject matter and content area skills to students' natural interests and questions, and in the process, increase student engagement and achievement. When teachers promote social-emotional skills, such as self-awareness and self-management, and ethical decision-making, students are able to access the curriculum with greater focus. When teachers promote core values such as academic integrity, intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and diligence, students are better able to do their best work and gain greater autonomy, competence, and self-confidence.

PRINCIPLE 7

The school fosters students' self-motivation.

The development of self-motivation is a powerful force in a person's life. This principle emphasizes intrinsic motivation over extrinsic motivation. Character means doing the right thing and doing our best work even when no one is looking. The best underlying ethical reason for following moral rules, for example, is respect for the rights and needs of others—not fear of punishment nor desire for reward. We want students to be kind to others because of an inner belief that kindness is good and an inner desire to be a kind person. We want them to do a good job—work that applies and further develops their best abilities—because they take pride in quality work, not just because they want a good grade.

In a culture that is awash in extrinsic rewards, this is a challenging task. Teachers are encouraged to learn about the historical research describing moral stages, and more recent work in Domain Theory to engage students in discussions that elevate the students' ability to reason with moral principles. Moral principles often include justice and fairness, which we recognize as core ethical values. Teacher professional development focused on leading discussions to support student awareness and reasoning with core ethical values can help cultivate student understanding and appreciation of those values and an intrinsic motivation to live them out.

Becoming more self-motivated is a developmental process that Schools of Character are careful not to undermine with an emphasis on extrinsic incentives. Intensive focus on rewards and behavior modification is consciously limited. This principle emphasizes true heart change and celebration (intrinsic motivation) over compliance and reward (extrinsic motivation).

Schools of Character work with students to develop their understanding of rules, their awareness of how their behavior affects others, and the character strengths—such as self-control, perspective taking, and conflict resolution skills—needed to act responsibly in the future. Rather than settle for mere compliance, these schools seek to help students benefit from their mistakes by providing meaningful opportunities for reflection with awareness of their core values, problem solving skills, and a goal of restitution.

Consequences are relevant (logically related to the rule or offense), respectful (not embarrassing or demeaning), reasonable (not harsh or excessive), restorative (restoring or repairing the relationship by making restitution), and resource-building (helping empower students to develop the character qualities—such as empathy, social skills, and the motivation to do the right thing—that were not put into practice when the behavior problem occurred). Staff routinely deal with behavior issues in positive ways that encourage reflection according to the core values, offer students opportunities for reparation and moral growth, and respect students as individuals.

PRINCIPLE 8

All staff share the responsibility for developing, implementing, and modeling ethical character.

All school staff need to be involved in learning about, designing, discussing, and taking ownership of the school’s character education effort. First and foremost, staff members assume this responsibility by modeling the core values in their own behavior and taking advantage of opportunities to positively influence the students with whom they interact. Second, the same values and norms that govern the life of students serve to govern the collective life of adult members in the school community. Like students, adults grow in character by working collaboratively, sharing best practices, and participating in decision-making that improves all areas of the school. They also benefit from meaningful staff development and opportunities to observe colleagues and then apply character development strategies in their own work with students. Third, a school devotes time to staff reflection on issues that affect their collective pursuit of excellence and ethics. Through faculty meetings and smaller support groups, a reflective staff regularly asks questions such as: What character-building experiences is the school already providing for its students? How effective and comprehensive are these? What negative behaviors is the school currently failing to address? What school practices are at odds with its professed core values and desire to develop a School of Character? Reflection of this nature is an indispensable condition for developing an all-encompassing culture of character.

PRINCIPLE 9

The school’s character initiative has shared leadership and long-range support for continuous improvement.

Schools that are engaged in effective character education have leaders who visibly champion the effort and share leadership with all stakeholders. Many schools and districts establish a character education committee—often composed of staff, students, parents, and community members—that takes responsibility for design, planning, implementation, assessment, and support. Over time, a leadership team of the school or district continues to set goals and sustain the character initiative. The leadership also takes steps to provide for the long-range support (e.g., adequate staff development, time to plan and implement, funding) of the character education initiative, including, ideally, support at the district and state levels. In addition, within the school, students assume developmentally appropriate roles in leading the character education effort through, for example, class meetings, student government, peer mediation, cross-age tutoring, service clubs, task forces, and student-led initiatives.

PRINCIPLE 10

The school engages families and community as partners in the character initiative.

Schools that reach out to families and include them in character-building efforts greatly enhance their chances for success with students. They communicate with families—via newsletters, emails, family nights, parent workshops, the school website, and parent conferences—about goals and activities regarding character education. To build greater trust between home and school, parents are represented on the character education committee or through whatever decision-making structures exist. These schools also make a special effort to reach out to subgroups of parents who may not feel part of the school community.

Finally, schools and families enhance the effectiveness of their partnership by recruiting the help of the wider community (i.e., businesses, youth organizations, religious institutions, the government, and the media) in promoting character development. There are many benefits from these partnerships: Young people continue learning whether in or out of the school building and receive the support and resources of the larger community, while the larger community is strengthened by giving to and interacting with schools. When schools take the time to build these partnerships, they find that rather than adding more work to an already full plate, they lighten their load and enhance the effectiveness of their character education initiative. Character education must be a community-wide effort as it takes a village to raise children. It is a labor of love to prepare the next generation to be ready to ethically lead us all.

PRINCIPLE 11

The school assesses its implementation of character education, its culture and climate, and the character growth of students on a regular basis.

Effective character education includes ongoing assessment of progress and outcomes using both qualitative and quantitative measures. The school uses a variety of assessment data (e.g., academic test scores, focus groups, survey results) that include the perceptions of students, teachers, and parents. Schools report on these data and use them to determine next steps. Schools administer assessments to stakeholders early in their character education initiative and again later to assess progress.

Three outcomes merit attention. First, schools assess the culture and climate of the school in light of the core values by asking stakeholders questions about the extent to which members of the

school community demonstrate the core values and thereby function as an ethical learning community. For example, schools might administer climate surveys in which they ask students whether they agree with statements such as, “Students in this school (classroom) respect and care about each other.” These core values are reviewed annually so that they can be kept current and stakeholders feel connected. Second, the school assesses the staff’s engagement as character educators by examining the extent to which they model the core values and integrate these values into their teaching and other interactions with students. Schools ask teachers to reflect upon their character education practices, survey students about their perceptions of their teachers as role models, and have administrative procedures in place to monitor desired teacher behaviors. Third, the school assesses the initiative by examining the degree to which students manifest understanding of, commitment to, and action upon the core ethical values. Schools can, for example, gather data on various character-related behaviors (e.g., attendance, suspensions, vandalism, service hours, drug incidents, and cheating). Effective schools collect data on desired student attitudes and behaviors and report to parents on students’ reflections on character through standard practices such as report cards and as a part of parent/teacher conferences).

ABOUT CHARACTER.ORG

Founded in 1993, Character.org, is a national nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. with a mission to provide leadership and advocacy for character worldwide. It is dedicated to help people everywhere become educated, inspired, and empowered to be ethical and compassionate citizens. Character.org validates character initiatives in schools, sports, families, and the workplace through certifications and sharing of best practices.

ELEVEN PRINCIPLES OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

Effective character education:

- PRINCIPLE 1** Promotes core values.
 - PRINCIPLE 2** Defines “character” to include thinking, feeling, and doing.
 - PRINCIPLE 3** Uses a comprehensive approach.
 - PRINCIPLE 4** Creates a caring community.
 - PRINCIPLE 5** Provides students with opportunities for moral action.
 - PRINCIPLE 6** Offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum.
 - PRINCIPLE 7** Fosters students’ self-motivation.
 - PRINCIPLE 8** Unites staff through collaborative learning.
 - PRINCIPLE 9** Fosters shared leadership.
 - PRINCIPLE 10** Engages families and community members as partners.
 - PRINCIPLE 11** Assesses the culture and climate of the school.
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1634 I Street NW, Suite 550
Washington, DC 20006
(202) 296-7743
www.character.org