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## **The Courage to Teach Character**

With so much collective handwringing about the abysmal state of public education revisiting the issue may, at best seem redundant, at worst disheartening. The three-stanza mantra of educational experts wailing like the Fates over a broken system designed to instill knowledge and inculcate good citizenship in the next generation blames lack of funding, poor attraction and retention of teachers, and raging disciplinary dysfunction in the classroom and corridors. Occasionally a supporting chorus of “economic and racial inequity” can be heard from the wings of the educational establishment. The proffered solution is always “spend more.”

Forty years ago Adlai Stevenson summarized the remarkable life of Eleanor Roosevelt with simple elegance: “She always thought that it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” Appropriately, a public high school named in our honor of the nation’s most enlightened First Lady provides a clear beacon of hope in rescuing America’s sinking schools.

Eleanor Roosevelt High School on the edge of the Washington Beltway fulfills all of the criteria for an urban educational disaster. Drawing from the edges of some of the capital’s worst neighbors by 1998 ERHS was caught in the double headlock of plummeting state and district funding and a loss of 1/3 of its teachers in less than three years. By the standards of all conventional wisdom, the 2,800 students in this predominantly African-American school should have been teetering on the precipice of failure.

Instead, Eleanor Roosevelt H.S.’s SAT and AP test scores combined with a remarkably low drop-out rate and exemplary classroom and building discipline earned the school an entire chapter in Mary Ann Horeinstein’s book “Twelve Schools That Succeed.” By every objective criterion ERHS is thriving, achieving, and succeeding. The ERHS secret – character education as a primary commitment of the administration, teachers, staff, and parents.

Without additional expense or radical restructuring ERHS introduced “11 Principles of Effective Character Education” under the guidance of the Character Education Partnership in Washington D.C. The change was in basic approach, attitude, and expectations from the administration, teachers, parents, and students rather than new curriculum or added programs. And it worked – in 2002 ERHS was awarded the coveted distinction of “National School of Character” by the CEP with a \$20,000 grant to continue and expand the “best practices” that have made the school “a candle in the darkness.”

Everyone agrees on what we want from public education. As the CEP notes “Parents’ greatest hope is that their children grow up to be kind, caring adults. Teachers want to educate respectful and motivated students. Employers want to hire honest and productive workers. We all want to live in a society composed of people with good character.” Character education turns these hopes and desires into action. The 11 Principles are guidelines to living and exemplifying the core universal ethical values such as integrity, honesty, fairness, responsibility and respect for themselves and for others upon which just, democratic, non-sectarian societies are built.

*Will it work elsewhere?*

A study funded by the U.S. Department of Education reports dramatic improvements for both teachers and students in schools that have implemented character education. The study of school administrators found that 91% reported improvement in student attitudes toward authority and school work, 89% reported marked improvement in student behavior, 60% reported improvement in overall academic performance and more than 65% reported improvement in teacher and staff attitudes and morale.

A 20-year study of the long-term impact of character education conducted by the Developmental Policy Center is even more encouraging. Students engaged in character education over a number of years exhibit more pro-social

behavior, demonstrate superior skills in resolving interpersonal conflicts, exemplify greater concern for others and are more committed to the values of democracy than those from similar social, economic, ethnic, religious and family-backgrounds schooled without an emphasis upon character education.

In the overarching areas of school safety and academic achievement a consistent emphasis upon core universal values expressed in character education yields equally impressive result. In a study of four schools that introduced character education the average number of behavioral incidents requiring disciplinary referral (including violence and substance abuse) dropped by 74% in the first year and by an average of 80% over the next six years. The rate of absenteeism decreased between 30% to 60% in these schools and achievement scores improved from an average of the 43rd to an average of the 71st percentile after the first full year of implementing character education. By the ninth year of the study average overall achievement test scores in the character education schools increased to the 88<sup>th</sup> percentile.<sup>1</sup>

*We are running out of time*

The sole social and cultural institution of our society that touches the lives of almost every American in their formative years is public education. One of the principal goals of our universal, free and accessible public educational has always been the training of “good citizens.” Without the inculcation in our youth of the core values upon which democracy is founded a democracy cannot survive.

Forty years of good intentions in Federal spending has proven that money alone cannot solve social ills. All of the best equipment and most modern facilities will not create better citizens if the educating of the young in these buildings and with this technology does not include a clear emphasis upon integrity, honesty, responsibility, and compassion. The cure for the ills of our ailing educational systems is not more courageous spending; it is in the courage to teach character.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: *The Prince Georges School District that directs and funds Eleanor Roosevelt High School spends \$1,450 per pupil less than MPS.*