

# Want to salvage public schools? Try character education

By Richard R. Pieper Sr., Rich Teerlink And Ron Sadoff

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To people who run companies, honesty and punctuality are as important as computer literacy. Traits such as these are about respect for ourselves and others; they make up our character. Without character, quality work is almost impossible to produce no matter the number of employee incentives.

This is why we believe in character education. Starting in primary schools, we are advocating for a culture of character, one where we respect each other and are willing to sacrifice some personal pleasure for the greater good. It pays in more ways than one.

There is a national organization, Character Education Partnership, and a local chapter, Wisconsin Character Education Partnership, enabling schools to incorporate these fundamental ideas across the curriculum and in the atmosphere of the school.

At its inception in Washington, D.C. in 1993, the CEP thought character education was an end unto itself. What was hoped for was proof that character education affected academics.

The CEP outlined Eleven Principles as its core belief. (See the [Web site www.character.org](http://www.character.org).) Nothing about the Eleven Principles is sectarian or related to ethnicity or economic background. Character can be found or taught anywhere.

CEP observed a host of problems resulting from loss of character emphasis in America. Not the least of these being the decline of the American education system relative to the performance of other countries.

After 17 years, the data is in. Our hopes were well-founded. When teachers, students and school administrators respect each other, reading, math and science scores go up. This is without a change of curriculum, text books or the addition of expensive equipment. (We're not Luddites; we're for technology, but if a school is in turmoil how will the students learn to use it?)

Milwaukee College Preparatory School (MCPS), on N. 36th St., is a shining example of this concept. Its outstanding academic results are evidence. The school was the recipient of a National School of Character award in November of 2009. Check out these facts:

In fourth-grade reading scores, MCPS scored 21% better than MPS; eighth-graders scored 15% better. In math, MCPS fourth-graders scored 27% better than MPS and eighth-graders 24% better.

About 98% of MCPS graduates remain in high school. Nearly 66% of the first MCPS graduating class went to college. Other schools from California to New York incorporating the Eleven Principles see the same results.

Curriculum experimentation is expensive and confusing to children. New equipment is expensive. Instructing principals and teachers how to encourage children to exhibit good character, especially by modeling it, is not expensive. CEP seminars are the primary method for disseminating knowledge about character education. Then, schools are given freedom to develop a program best suited to their circumstances. We believe with the Buddhist monk that, "There are many paths to the top of the mountain."

Milwaukee is in the midst of a heated debate about salvaging our distressed public schools. Nowhere have we heard discussions about character education. We're here to help. Teaching kids to be good is low hanging fruit with a lifetime payoff making for a productive society.

If you suspect we have a vested interest in this debate, we confess. First, we want children to be proud of themselves and excel academically. Second, we want them to be successful contributing members of society. Third, we hope they join the workforce of companies in southeastern Wisconsin.

*Richard R. Pieper Sr. is the founding CEO/Chairman of PPC Partners. Rich Teerlink is the former CEO/Chairman of Harley Davidson and Ron Sadoff is founder of Sadoff Investment Managers and founder also of Milwaukee College Preparatory School.*

