

## Can Public Schools Really Strengthen Moral Character?

An annotated guide to select websites and articles

Educators identify school violence, slipping moral standards, breakdown in traditional family life, and troublesome student discipline problems as warranting the growing implementation of character education programs in the public schools. Can character education make a difference? Ought Christians support character education? How do we strengthen character, and what can the public schools contribute to a student's moral life?

A Student Reading Plan:

Introductory Reading: Visiting each site listed below in paragraphs 1-6 will provide the casual observer with an adequate overview of the issues surrounding this year's Penner Forum. The final URL listed in paragraph 6, the article by Nord and Haynes, is valuable but lengthy, so it is best considered as an advanced reading only.

Advanced Reading: For those interested in more depth, visit each site listed below in paragraphs 1-6, then select two of the following three articles: (1) the full chapter describing the six pillars of Character Counts! <http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/MED/MED-6pillars.htm>; (2) Alfie Kohn's article, listed below in paragraph 7; (3) Nord and Haynes' Section 4, listed below in paragraph 6.

Links

1. The Character Education Partnership is one of the nation's leaders in promoting effective character education in the public schools. Their website, <http://www.character.org/>, has an excellent document titled "Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education" that lays a foundation for public schools wishing to develop a character education program. This is a widely-used and well-respected resource. To reach the document, simply click on this title from their homepage.
2. The Ethics Resource Center is another Washington-based organization that is spearheading ethics education. Their website provides a copy of H.R.613, a current bill designed to promote character education. See [http://www.ethics.org/lg\\_hr613.html](http://www.ethics.org/lg_hr613.html)
3. The most widely-used character education program is Character Counts! developed by the Josephson Institute in San Diego. This program promotes six pillars of character. These are described at <http://www.charactercounts.org/defsix.htm> A link at top of the six pillars' page takes you to a brief chapter discussing these six pillars and their significance for ethical decision making. The six pillars originated from the Aspen conference in 1992. A copy of this formative document is at <http://www.charactercounts.org/aspen.htm>
4. The Christian response to the character education movement is mixed, with many Christians embracing it (and developing their own curriculum; see, for instance, Gene Bedley's program at <http://www.ethicsusa.com/>) and others being highly suspicious (see

World's brief article at [http://www.worldmag.com/world/issue/09-25-99/national\\_1.asp](http://www.worldmag.com/world/issue/09-25-99/national_1.asp). The Georgia Family Council has a one page document summarizing Georgia's state law mandating character education and how Christians ought to respond to it; see <http://www.gafam.org/citizen/700b.htm>.

5. Some argue against character education because it may be perceived as a vehicle to introduce religious values into the public schools. For example, the attempt to introduce Character First into Florida's public schools was thwarted because that program develops from Bill Gothard's teachings. For news commentary on this, see <http://www.newtimesbpb.com/issues/1999-04-15/news2.html>.

6. Others argue, to the contrary, that when public schools teach values, they inevitably strip those values of their religious and community heritage, thus reducing the power of the values to shape character. The key to effective character education, therefore, is to support instruction about religion in the public schools, rather than ignoring or denying the religious roots of the selected values. For a statement about this, see the PDF document "Finding Common Ground," published by The Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, available at <http://www.freedomforum.org/publications/first/findingcommonground/findingcommonground.pdf>. The relevant paragraphs are in section 15 (PDF file pages 154-155 of this 208 page document). For more in-depth explanation of this position, see Section 4: "Religion and Moral Education" in the lengthy essay by Warren Nord and Charles Haynes titled "The Relationship of Religion to Moral Education in the Public Schools" at [http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/pop\\_moral.html](http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/pop_moral.html).

7. Others challenge character education because it is ineffective, insufficient, or wrong-headed. One of the most influential articles attacking character education is by Alfie Kohn. He states, simply and directly, "What goes by the name of character education nowadays is, for the most part, a collection of exhortations and extrinsic inducements designed to make children work harder and do what they're told." Some educators and developmental psychologists claim that character education does not equip students to live in a culture where values clash and democratic decision-making is often messy. For an excellent collection of scholarly articles discussing character education, see the featured articles on Larry Nucci's site at <http://moraled.org/>. Kohn's influential article is reproduced on this site at <http://tigger.uic.edu/~lnucci/MoralEd/aotm/article10.html>. The site also includes a handy overview of moral development theories—with summaries of Piaget, Kohlberg, Turiel (which Nucci himself champions), and Gilligan—at <http://tigger.uic.edu/~lnucci/MoralEd/overview.html>.

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