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Shaping Students of Character

Activities and Adult Role Models Are Essential Elements in the Education Equation

BY KATHLEEN WILSON SHRYOCK

When we talk about character education, topics like service learning, social-emotional instruction, leadership, respect, honesty, and compassion come to mind. But recently, societal factors like poverty, parental attitudes, and an emphasis on academics have chipped away at the attention given to character education in our schools and our homes. In order to teach the whole child, we must include character development as a nonnegotiable element in the education equation. Student activities offer a perfect venue for providing kids with the skills and ideals to face the world as responsible, caring, and contributing citizens.

Sheril Morgan is the director of Schools of Character at character.org, a nonprofit organization that strives to ensure that every young person is educated to be an ethical and engaged citizen. Morgan believes that a value shift in our culture has made school-based character education more important than ever. "A lot of times, it's not being focused on at home. Multiple studies, including one at Harvard, have indicated that some parents are more concerned about what their kids are achieving intellectually than whether or not they are people of good character," she said. "For other parents, because of poverty or other reasons, the focus is on survival. So it's especially important that our schools are attending to the whole child and providing avenues to achieve success, both academically and ethically."

Lauren Maslyar, assistant principal at Willow Glen High School in San Jose, CA, agrees that it's a mistake to assume students are getting all of the character training they need at home. "At our school, 43 percent of students fall below the poverty line," she explained. "While the brains of young people are hardwired for emotions like sadness, joy, anger, and →



I coach to help young people **develop a love for sports and for others** that will steer them toward becoming someone who will **change the world for good.**

- Ryan Krzykowski

fear, our educators are learning that kids coming from poverty haven't necessarily had opportunities to develop skills like empathy, humility, and forgiveness. By creating a culture of kindness at school, our hope is to help students develop the skills they need to be compassionate human beings."

Because not every student arrives with finely tuned character traits, it is important to teach kids—early and often—about virtues like respect and honesty. Barbara Gruener, a school counselor and character coach in Wisconsin, believes that the best character-education programs begin as soon as a child enters school and continue throughout the middle and high school years. "When students first come to us, they don't have [character] skills tucked nicely in their backpacks with their school supplies," she said. "It's our job to equip and empower them, not only with academic content but also with success-for-life skills."

Gruener believes that student activities are a valuable way of pairing students with engaging activities as well as adult role models who can be intentional about reinforcing character development. By purposefully providing activities that promote responsibility, fairness, and respect, educators can build a strong foundation that starts in elementary school and progresses through the secondary school level. Eventually, the practice of good character becomes part of the culture. Gruener suggests these favorite character-building activities:

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Students can learn to reuse and recycle with a green team that includes everyone. Kindergartners can recycle crayons; first graders can collect and recycle paper, and so on. If the school receives money for recycled goods, students can vote on which charity they want to donate the proceeds to. Efforts like this lead to talks about teamwork and service.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Students can write letters to men and women serving in the military. They can research the needs of various units and send care packages overseas. Students can also reach out to local businesses that might be willing to support the initiative. This project can be used as a backdrop for discussions about citizenship, loyalty, honor, and patriotism.

HIGH SCHOOL

Older students can serve as hometown heroes to the youngest learners in the community. Encourage high school students to seek healthy mentoring opportunities. Invite them to serve as role models by partnering with elementary students to complete a service project or providing free tutoring sessions to peers at their own schools. Activities like this reinforce the importance of serving as role models of character.

CHARACTER COUNTS! at the Josephson Institute of Ethics is a nonprofit initiative that helps schools focus on developing ethical students. The program is not a curriculum or a quick-fix fad. Instead, the organization's Six Pillars of Character serve as a foundation for the integration of positive values into the culture of schools and organizations. Director Jeff McMurdy affirms that character education works best when it is introduced at an early age and then reinforced by secondary schools and the surrounding community.

The Downey (CA) Unified School District is one example of how the purposeful implementation of character education can impact the culture of an entire community. McMurdy explains that the



At Willow Glen High School, student-led activities and adult mentors combine to promote students of character.

district is in an area where school safety and quality character development is a priority. In 2007, former superintendent Dr. Wendy Doty learned about the Six Pillars from a neighboring district. She approached the mayor, school administrators, and community stakeholders with facts about the value of character education. Soon, the district installed a training program to teach educators about ways to effectively integrate character education into all aspects of student life. "Eight years later, character education with the Six Pillars is still going strong, and statistics [relating to student outcomes] are very positive," said McMurdy. "It's not so much about a specified curriculum or a lesson plan but about modeling character development so that it becomes attitudinal—so that good character becomes part of the DNA of the school. Some of the elementary students that started with this program are getting ready to graduate from high school and are looking for colleges that incorporate character on their campuses."

McMurdy agrees that activities provide ideal opportunities for students to practice good character, especially during the formative adolescent years. "At this level, the key is finding real issues that students can relate to that help them understand how things like trust and respect apply to their own lives," he said. And he believes that the evolving minds of young adults present opportunities to ramp up character education through activities that appeal to the personalized interests of students.

As an example, McMurdy points to St. Genevieve High School in Panorama City, CA, where Principal Dan Horn hosts an interactive television show accessible to students and staff. The activity allows Horn to capitalize on his students' interest in current events, pop culture, and technology. While the monthly broadcast gives students a chance to discuss hot topics, the main purpose is to encourage students to reflect on what is happening in the world and to relate these issues to ethics and integrity.

Diverse opportunities like this encourage students to grow and explore, and reinforce the idea that young people have the ability to be leaders—today. "Activities help students see an issue, find a need, and address it," said Morgan from character.org. "They give students a chance to step into service learning, share their voices, and use their creative energy to build on their strengths." Character.org's next annual forum, taking place in Atlanta, GA, in October 2015, will affirm the value of the student voice by inviting young people to be part of the process of defining their campuses as Schools of Character.

At Willow Glen High School, student-led activities are at the core of a multiyear initiative designed to promote a compassionate

culture. Athletics, arts, and clubs are structured as inclusive places to belong. “Academics are essential,” said Assistant Principal Maslyar. “But the connections that students build through activities help to build a capacity for caring.” She encourages educators to be proactive in creating programs that get every student involved. In the case of activities, one size does not fit all. Willow Glen’s Breaking Down the Walls is an initiative designed to build school-wide harmony. Student leaders run activities for small and large groups made up of diverse students. Participants learn each other’s stories and participate in motivational workshops and team-building activities. The opportunity to connect diverse populations has been a powerful exercise in unifying the student body.

An experienced teacher and coach, Ryan Krzykowski understands the importance of activities as part of the education equation. In 2012, he established Community for Coaches (CFC), a nonprofit organization based in the Kansas City area. In addition to affirming the importance of quality athletic programs, CFC stresses the critical role of coaches and adult mentors in shaping students of character. “Whether I am an athlete or actor or singer or mathematician, I have to learn to work well with others, check my ego, fulfill my defined role, and work hard to maximize my potential. Cocurricular activities help students develop these traits and grow as individuals,” he said. “The reality is that much of our society is focused on sports. When done the right way, athletics can bring together a large, diverse group of people and promote the healthy development of our kids.”

Krzykowski cautions that the benefits of student participation in sports or anything else don’t happen by accident. Instead, educators must be intentional. He shares his personal coaching story in which a love of sports led him to the coaching profession. But for Krzykowski to develop a truly effective program, an analysis of his goals beyond the love of the game was needed. By reflecting on his objectives, he was able to personalize a purpose statement: *“I coach to help young people develop a love for sports and for others that will steer them toward becoming someone who will change the world for good.”*

“When I first came up with that, the blinders came off,” said Krzykowski. “I saw every person and every situation differently, because it’s not about me. It’s about what I want young people to get from the program. Everything I do should feed that goal.”

Krzykowski recommends that all coaches develop a purpose statement that clearly defines their mission, and he suggests that self-reflection can be a valuable tool for parents as well. As a coach, he

“When students first come to us, they don’t have [character] skills tucked nicely in their backpacks with their school supplies. It’s our job to equip and empower them, not only with academic content but also with success-for-life skills.”

starts each season with an introduction that clarifies his goals for the team and the players. He also asks parents what they hope their child will gain from the experience. “Most of the time, our intentions are good, but we need to be thoughtful about what is driving our purposes and about the needs of our children,” he said. “The likelihood that we will get a favorable outcome is diminished if we don’t define our goals and make sure our kids are in the program for the right reasons.”

Morgan agrees that a shared moral and ethical community of adult role models is important. “Too often we teach students to do what I *say*, not necessarily what I *do*,” she said. “We can’t ask students to behave a certain way without telling them what is expected and then walking those behaviors out through a community of adults that consistently shows patience, perseverance, and forgiveness when others fall short.” She recommends that schools have a system of checks and balances that holds adults (and students) accountable. It is also important to value the voices of the students, and to monitor data that reaffirms what schools are doing right and provides a mechanism for overcoming shortfalls.

Character education is not extra. Instead, it must be integrated into the fabric of our schools so that it becomes a habit that drives decisions, outcomes, and the overall culture. For schools that don’t already have an effective plan in place, Gruener recommends that stakeholders be purposeful in the selection of clearly defined core values and a mission statement. “At the end of the day, it’s all about connecting with our students, letting them know they matter, listening to their stories, encouraging them to give back, and empowering them with valuable interpersonal skills . . . for good.”

TO WATCH a video of Willow Glen’s efforts to support students of character, go to a4sa.org/WillowGlen.

CHARACTER EDUCATION RESOURCES



THE CENTER FOR THE 4TH AND 5TH RS

This center at State University of New York College at Cortland promotes the development of respect, responsibility, and ethics in schools, families, and communities. The site also provides a link to Smart and Good High Schools, a comprehensive report that details best practices in character education.



CHARACTER.ORG

This nonprofit organization strives to ensure every young person is educated, inspired, and empowered to be ethical and engaged citizens. Their 11 Principles of Effective Character Education can help improve school climate and motivate students to “do well and do good.”



CHARACTER COUNTS!

This program at the Josephson Institute is centered on basic values called the Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. The program is not a curriculum or add-on, but a powerful means to advance curricular and behavioral goals.



COMMUNITY FOR COACHES

This nonprofit organization in the Kansas City area provides support and training for coaches and helps them to define their purpose in serving as influential role models in the lives of student athletes. The group uses Coaching with a Purpose, a series of lessons designed to help each coach define his or her mission.



THE CORNER ON CHARACTER

This blog by author, teacher, and character education specialist Barbara Gruener provides insights into character education and kindness. The site also lists books and resources for promoting a compassionate school community.



NATIONAL CHARACTER EDUCATION CENTER

This group provides a curriculum, strategies, and resources designed to help educators implement character education more effectively in their schools. They also provide online training, activity books, and current news about character education.

a4sa.org/resources

HOSA: Supporting the Next Generation of Health Professionals

HOSA-FUTURE HEALTH PROFESSIONALS is a nonprofit organization that promotes career opportunities in the health care industry. HOSA is more than a student club: it is an engaging instructional tool that is integrated into the health science curriculum. By providing opportunities for students to explore their interests while they are still in high school, HOSA strives to develop workers that, in addition to possessing quality technical skills, are people-oriented and able to serve as leaders and compassionate members of a team.



Currently, student-led HOSA organizations exist in more than 4,000 high schools and colleges across the United States, and in Puerto Rico and Italy. In June of 2015, the organization will expand to welcome middle school students. Every school year, HOSA chapters develop individualized action plans based on the needs in their own communities and the personal development goals of members.

HOSA's Competitive Events provide additional opportunities for students to explore a variety of health care interests while fine-tuning skills for college and career. The 55 events range from sports medicine to extemporaneous writing. There are also team challenges where members work together to complete various tasks, such as a forensic-medicine case study.

Jen Girvin, assistant director at HOSA-Future Health Professionals, believes that the organization's integrative curriculum and hands-on opportunities help students connect what they are learning in school to future career possibilities. "HOSA's dedication to the health science pathway introduces students to career options and training while they are still in high school. The experiences paint a picture of their future right before their eyes. This big-picture outlook gives students the intrinsic motivation to stay engaged in school and in their HOSA activities."

According to Matthew De Leon, a HOSA alum from the Academy of Medical Arts at Carson High School in Carson, CA, HOSA involvement helped him and his peers explore career options while developing a collective heart for community service. As volunteers, his HOSA team worked in various departments at a major hospital and also helped educate community members about healthier lifestyles through a local health fair. "From being an active participant in community service, I've developed this mindset, 'Where help is needed, that is where you must go,'" said De Leon. He credits HOSA with impactful opportunities to combine career exploration with service work.

With the current shortage of qualified workers in the health care industry, HOSA's mission is especially important. "HOSA offers hands-on, real-world experiences that are vital to the health workforce of the future," said Bergen Morehouse, manager of competitive events. "Through our programming, students develop communication, interpersonal, and critical-thinking skills, as well as the technical skills that are needed to launch postsecondary education and careers. We know that participation in student activities increases graduation rates, academic performance, and the likelihood of pursuing higher-level degrees. HOSA activities are making the difference in the lives of students." ●

TO LEARN MORE about the benefits of student engagement through HOSA, read articles from HOSA students and alums featured in the February 2014 issue of the organization's e-magazine at a4sa.org/HOSA-Magazine.

Academics and Activities Make a Winning Team

WE OFTEN TALK about nonacademic activities as a means for helping disengaged students connect to the curriculum. But for some students, academic involvement is central to a positive school connection. Competitive events that focus on academics can provide scholarly students with unique opportunities to explore new subjects, develop previously unpracticed skills, and collaborate with peers who share similar interests.

The United States Academic Decathlon is a nonprofit initiative that inspires students of all achievement levels to work together to build confidence and attain academic success. Through competitive events at the local, state, and national levels, student decathletes join forces with a team of peers to explore an annual theme. The themes are updated each year and include standards-based curricula in science, math, art, economics, social studies, music, and literature.

For members of the Academic Decathlon team at Shaw High School in Columbus, GA, game show-style quizzes are just one of the creative ways students prepare for the multidisciplinary competition. In addition to challenges that measure academic strengths, the decathlon also requires students to deliver speeches, write essays, and participate in interviews by judges who ask about current experiences and future goals. The competition culminates with an exciting Super Quiz that requires teammates to take turns solving questions from each prescribed subject while a live audience looks on.

Natasha Torres, Shaw's Academic Decathlon coach, explains that her group of 17 students meets two to three times a week, with several all-day practice sessions scattered in throughout the year. Because teams consist of young people from a



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School-wide Events Promote Campus Unity

As the activities director at Chino Hills High School in Chino Hills, CA, and a past president of the California Association of Directors of Activities (CADA), Janet Roberts has witnessed the power of student activities in creating a school climate of inclusion and student engagement. In this article, Roberts provides practical strategies for promoting a vibrant student activities program.

A SCHOOL'S CULTURE is created through student activities. Students become proud of their school when they have a place to call "home" and activities that they can connect with. At Chino Hills High School, we have over 120 clubs available to our students. There is literally something for everyone, including clubs that celebrate ethnicity, philanthropy, gaming, and academics. All of our clubs give members the ability to create T-shirts and earn cords to be worn at graduation. Because of this, students have an additional affiliation to be proud of and a place to belong.

Approximately 75 percent of our student body belong to an athletic team or performing arts group. Those who are not actually performing usually participate by joining our "Dog Pound," a student-led cheering section that shows up at most events.

Every year we host five all-school pep rallies in which the entire gym is transformed to represent a theme. Students are encouraged to wear their class colors, and each class decorates their section of the gym. The rallies introduce and recognize athletes, academic achievers, students with perfect attendance records, and staff members of the month and year. Parents are also invited to attend.

We also host activities like teacher/staff appreciation meals, campus cleanup days, and a variety of lunchtime events that increase school spirit and invite participation.

Philanthropic events have made a huge impact on the entire student body. We have a children's shelter in our neighborhood. Every Christmas, our homeroom classes adopt these children. The children compose Santa wish lists, and our students collect the items on the lists.

Another popular activity is our Kindness Week. Every student's name—all 3,200 of them—is written on a heart that is displayed somewhere on campus for students to find. During this week, our leadership students get to school early and welcome their peers to school. A long trail of butcher paper is taped down the middle of our campus with the words "High 5 Highway" written on it. Students must "high



All-school events create a cohesive community of Huskies.

5" someone and say something nice every time they step on the butcher paper. In addition, each student is given a piece of paper (measuring about two by eight inches) in his or her homeroom class. Students write their names on the papers and link them together to make a class paper chain.

Afterward, the students head outside and link up all the different class chains. The idea is that our entire school is "linked up in kindness."

Participation and support from administration and faculty is important when using activities to influence a positive school climate. When the administrative team is on board, the students and staff feel so much more supported. The occurrence of fights and inappropriate activities is reduced when students see teachers and administrators attending and participating in events. My advice is to include your colleagues and encourage them to be involved. I share our plans and event details with administrators in advance and ask their permission so that they are not surprised. I want them on board, so I need them to trust me. In addition, I always make shirts for the entire staff to wear. And my students send thank-you notes every time our staff attends anything or helps with an event.

When students want to come to school because there is something there for them, a positive school climate is created. By offering a variety of activities and encouraging support from administrators and staff, you can promote a positive environment where all students have a place to belong. ●



Chino Hills students create tangible links to signify inclusion and kindness.

—JANET ROBERTS

variety of academic backgrounds, students are encouraged to challenge themselves and work together to achieve a common goal. “[The mix of participants] gives students at all levels a chance to excel and demonstrate their academic knowledge,” she said. “It is really fun to see the different levels compete against each other at practice. The students are a delight to work with. If they are not already academically engaged, they become motivated to perform well because of the fierce competition between peers and at the formal competitions.”

In addition to fun quiz-style “games,” team members participate in team-building study groups, practice impromptu speeches, and take part in role-playing sessions where they take turns being interviewer and interviewee. The group’s mantra of “practice, practice, practice” has paid off. In the 2013–2014 school year, Torres’s new club placed first in their district and was named the Rookie Team of the Year. This year, the team continued their success by repeating their first-place victory in the district. Individual members also won 32 medals and several scholarships.

Torres believes that the benefits of team participation extend beyond valuable academic competencies. Students are also building healthy bonds with peers, adult mentors, and the overall high school experience. She credits a supportive faculty and administration with promoting a school climate where participation is celebrated. “Academic Decathlon helps students feel more connected to what they are learning in school. It also gives them a chance to teach their peers who may be struggling with a concept,” she said. “And it helps students feel connected to the school community as a whole because being on the team elevates school spirit. Competing in Academic Decathlon is no small feat; it is definitely something to brag about!”

For decathletes at Shaw High School, a focus on academics is about much more than a high test score or a seat at the head of the class. By making the time to combine academics with activities, these student athletes are acquiring practical skills, working as part of a cohesive team, and developing the confidence to succeed. ●

TO LEARN MORE about starting an Academic Decathlon team at your school, visit the organization’s website at usad.org or watch this video at a4sa.org/Decathlon.

MAKE THE TIME

TECHNOLOGY time savers

It’s a fast-paced world and multitasking has become a must for many of today’s educators. Fortunately, technology offers a wealth of time-saving strategies. Check out the latest tools and **communicate, collaborate, connect, and create** with ease.

Remind (formerly Remind 101)
Safely and efficiently send messages to a group of students, parents, or peers with this private mass-texting app.
remind.com

Wiggio
This free, online toolkit facilitates group interactions, eases project communications, and confirms that students are on task.
wiggio.com

Celly
This group-text application is similar to Remind, but more interactive. Users have the option of allowing recipients to respond, ask questions, or even participate in a group discussion.
Celly

DROPiTOME
This free service allows students to upload files and assignments to your Dropbox without giving them access to the contents of your Dropbox account.
dropitto.me

HootSuite
Manage social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and Google+ by linking them together with this helpful tool.
HootSuite.com

Skype
This video-chat service allows students and teachers to connect with classrooms across town or around the world.
skype.com

Evernote
Use this collaborative application for everything from planning a course to delivering a lesson plan to obtaining feedback after class.
evernote.com

Blackboard Collaborate
Create virtual classrooms, collaborate with others in the field, and engage students with innovative information.
blackboard.com

Make the Time.

Alliance for Student Activities

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THE ADVOCATE

The Advocate is published ten times a year by the Alliance for Student Activities, a nonprofit corporation whose mission is to promote the value of student activities through advocacy, training, resources, and networking.

a4sa.org

Submissions of student activities research and other inquiries are welcome. Contact advocate@a4sa.org

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