

What Is Character Education?

Character education seeks to develop virtue—human excellence—as the foundation of a purposeful, productive, and fulfilling life and a just, compassionate, and flourishing society. Character education takes deliberate steps to cultivate moral and intellectual virtues through every phase of school life—the example of adults, the relationships among peers, the handling of discipline, the resolution of conflict, the content of the curriculum, the process of instruction, the rigor of academic standards, the environment of the school, the conduct of extracurricular activities, and the involvement of parents. Everything that happens in the life of the school is character education, because everything affects character.

Character education is based on the following premises:

1. Virtues are *objectively good human qualities*—good for us whether we know it or not. They have a claim on our personal and collective conscience. They are affirmed by cultures and religions around the world; they express our common humanity. They transcend time and culture. Diligence, wisdom, the pursuit of truth, justice, respect, responsibility, honesty, unselfishness, compassion, courage, patience, and perseverance always have been and always will be virtues, regardless of how many people practice them.
2. We can claim that virtues are objectively good, and that we are obliged to uphold and practice them, because they meet the following ethical criteria:
 - *They affirm our human dignity.*
 - *They promote the well-being and happiness of the individual person.*
 - *They serve the common good, making it possible for us to live in community.*
 - *They define our rights and obligations as citizens.*
 - *They meet the classical tests of reversibility (Would you want to be treated this way?) and universalizability (Would you want all persons to act this way?).*
3. To develop character, the school must strive to be a *community of virtue* in which moral and intellectual virtues are modeled, expected, studied, reflected upon, upheld, celebrated, and continually practiced in daily life.