Maximizing the Power of Character through the Integration of Excellence and Ethics

by Matt Davidson and Tom Lickona

All schools face challenges in two critical areas: academic performance and ethical behavior. Performance challenges include:

- Motivating all students to do their best and care about the quality of their work.
- Improving performance on standardized tests.
- Reducing dropouts.
- Preparing students for college and/or the workplace.

Ethical challenges include:

- Teaching students to respect legitimate authority, rules, and the rights of others.
- Preventing peer cruelty.
- Promoting academic honesty.
- Reducing risky behaviors.
- Helping students become responsible citizens.

These performance and ethical challenges can be reduced to two: How can we get students to do their best work? How can we teach them to treat others with respect and care?

Where can schools find the “power” to meet these challenges? Booker T. Washington said, “Character is power.” What is the power of character, and how can schools—and other key social groups (families, businesses, religious institutions, and the wider community)—maximize the power of character to meet the performance and ethical challenges facing schools and society?

Character and Excellence

What do the following quotations tell us about the power of character?

You must discover what you are made for, and you must work indefatigably to achieve excellence in your field of endeavor. If you are called to be a streetsweeper, you should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Excellence is not an act, but a habit.

—Aristotle

The secret joy in work is excellence.

—Pearl Buck

The best preparation for tomorrow is to do today’s work superbly well.

—William Osler

I challenge you to find one single solitary individual who has achieved his or her personal greatness without lots of hard work.

—John Wooden

There is no such thing as failure. There is only giving up too soon.

—Jonas Salk

These quotes tell us that the experience of excellence is a central part of human fulfillment, and that character—working hard, doing our best, and persevering—is essential for realizing excellence. Excellence matters, and character matters in our pursuit of excellence. It follows that educating for character must be about developing ethics and excellence.

If the character education movement has had a motto, it’s been Theodore Roosevelt’s famous observation: “To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” However, the reverse of Roosevelt’s maxim is also true: To educate a person in morals and not in mind is to educate, if not a menace, at least a detriment to society. Who wants a mechanic, lawyer, or doctor who’s caring and honest, but incompetent?
Character’s Two Parts: Performance Character and Moral Character

To maximize the power of character is to define it to include the quest for excellence as well as the quest for ethics. Conceived in this way, character has two parts: (1) performance character and (2) moral character.

Moral character is a relational orientation. It consists of those qualities—such as honesty, respect, fairness, caring, cooperation, and moral courage—needed for successful relationships and ethical behavior. Moral character enables us to treat others—and ourselves—with respect and care and to act with integrity in our ethical lives. Moral character also ensures that we do not violate moral values such as fairness, honesty, and caring in the pursuit of high performance. Without strong moral character, performance character can easily run amuck—as when a student cheats to get good grades or a team plays dirty to win a game.

Performance character is a mastery orientation. It consists of those qualities—such as diligence, determination, a strong work ethic, confidence, resourcefulness, resilience, adaptability, and self-discipline—needed to achieve our highest potential in any performance environment (academics, cocurricular activities, the workplace, etc.).

Performance character is not the same as performance. Performance is the outcome (the grade, the honor, the achievement), whereas performance character consists of the character strengths, such as best effort and persistence, that enable us to pursue our personal best—whether the outcome is realized or not. In the long run, performance character does maximize performance because it brings to bear the strengths and strategies by which we get the most from our natural talent.

In the Smart & Good Schools vision, character is needed for, and potentially developed from, every academic activity.

Performance is the outgrowth of immersion in high-quality, meaningful instruction that builds character (initiative, organization, goal-setting, perseverance, etc.) in order to do their best academic work.

Students need performance character by participating in collaborative learning; eliciting other students’ best work through guided critique; examining ethical issues in literature, history, science, and current events; and carrying out service-learning projects.

Students need moral character (respect, fairness, kindness, honesty, etc.) in order to build the positive relationships that make for a supportive learning environment.

Students develop their performance character, including the ability to take satisfaction in a job well done, as they rise to the challenges of their schoolwork.

There are encouraging signs that the character education movement is beginning to embrace a concept of character education that integrates the pursuit of excellence (the task of performance character) and the pursuit of ethical behavior (the task of moral character). The Character Education Partnership recently released a position paper, Performance Values (see www.character.org), recognizing the mutually supportive roles of moral and performance character. Educators are beginning to pay more attention to the seminal work of former teacher Ron Berger, whose book, An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students, describes how to foster moral and performance character through project-based learning. (See Berger’s article in the Winter 2006 issue of The Fourth and Fifth Rs, www.cortland.edu/character/newsletters.asp.)

Welcome to the inaugural issue of Excellence & Ethics: The Education Letter of the Smart & Good Schools Initiative. This initiative is a joint project of the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs and the Institute for Excellence & Ethics (IEE), with major grant support from the John Templeton Foundation. Excellence & Ethics is a redesign of the Center’s previous newsletter, The Fourth and Fifth Rs. It features K-12 practices that help all educational stakeholders—school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and community members—do their best work (performance character) and do the right thing (moral character).

To subscribe or submit an article for consideration, go to: www.cortland.edu/character/excellenceandethics.asp. Excellence & Ethics is free, but donations are gratefully accepted (see p. 8 for details).

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Various studies show the contributions of performance character and moral character to human development and achievement. For example, Colby’s and Damon’s Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment reveals how strong performance character (e.g., determination, organization, and creativity) and strong moral character (e.g., a sense of justice, integrity, and humility) work synergistically to account for exemplars’ achievements in fields as varied as civil rights, education, business, philanthropy, the environment, and religion.¹

Students also affirm the complementary roles of performance character and moral character. When researcher Kathryn Wentzel asked middle schoolers, “How do you know when a teacher cares about you?,” students identified two behavior patterns: The teacher teaches well (makes class interesting, stays on task, stops to explain something), and the teacher treats them well (is respectful, kind, and fair).² “A caring teacher” models both performance character and moral character.

Other research has zeroed in on the contribution of performance character to high achievement. Longitudinal studies, such as Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure, find that adolescents who develop their talent to high levels, compared to equally gifted peers who don’t fulfill their potential, show higher levels of performance character qualities such as goal-setting and wise time management.³ In the Journal of Educational Psychology, Duckworth and Seligman reported that middle school girls get better grades than boys and are also superior to boys on several measures of self-discipline, a distinguishing mark of performance character.⁴

In a study of delay of gratification (another aspect of performance character), Stanford University researchers found that on a “marshmallow test,” 4-year-olds who were able to postpone eating a marshmallow were subsequently better able as adolescents to follow through on plans, persevere in the face of difficulty, cope with stress, concentrate on a task, and succeed academically, scoring on average more than 100 points higher on a college entrance exam.⁵

In Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification, Peterson and Seligman present theoretical and empirical support for performance character attributes such as creativity, curiosity, love of learning, and persistence.⁶ Recent research on expert performance in the arts and sciences, sports, and games reveals that stars are made, not born. Outstanding performance is the product of years of deliberate practice and coaching—training that develops performance character as well as higher levels of the target skill—rather than the result of innate talent.⁷


Why Not Your Best?
Creating a Culture of Excellence in the Classroom

by Hal Urban

When I was a high school history and psychology teacher, one of the life lessons I wanted to pass on to all of my students had to do with effort, determination, diligence, and good old-fashioned hard work. When I was growing up, the message I received about being successful in life was pretty straightforward: If you wanted to be good at anything, you’d have to work hard.

Unfortunately, that’s not the message our young people are getting today. In fact, they’re often bombarded with messages that claim the opposite, such as:

- The good things in life come quickly and easily.
- You deserve a good life.
- You can have it all, and you can have it all now.
- You don’t have to make any sacrifices to get what you want.

As I usually did when teaching life lessons in my classes, I started with a question. I asked my students, “Why would you ever want to give less than your very best?”

They responded by asking, “Where?” “When?” My answer: “Everywhere and all the time.” Most of them thought it was impossible to always give your best, so we would get into a provocative discussion. Here are some of the specific questions my students asked, followed by my answers:

“How do you give your best when you’re just socializing with your friends?”

*Give them the best you have. Have fun with them, laugh with them, play with them, let them know how much you enjoy being with them.*

“How do you give your best when you don’t feel well?”

*You give the best you can under those circumstances.*

“Do you think there’s anyone who gives his or her best all the time?” “Yes, I think millions of people do.”

“How often do you give your best?”

*All of the time—when teaching, meeting home responsibilities, being with my family, writing, reading, working out, playing sports, spending time with friends.*

Can You Always Give Your Best?

The concept of always giving your best was obviously new to my students. They found it hard to believe that there were millions of people, including me, who always gave their best. Most of them equated giving your best with struggle, superhuman effort, stress, exhaustion, and being too serious all the time.

I explained that life is far more rewarding when we do the best we can, no matter where we are, whom we’re with, or what we’re doing—even if we’re resting or having fun. It’s a matter of being in the moment and making the most out of it. An example I always used was teaching. It requires very hard work, but it can be fun at the same time. In fact, the harder I worked at it, the more fun I had and the more rewarding it was.

I asked them if they wanted me to give my best every time they came to my class. The answer was always yes, along with this little addition: “You’re supposed to give your best because you’re getting paid.”

That always brought a smile to my face. I responded that I was paid to teach, not to give my best. There’s a big difference. I chose to give my best because it made my teaching so much more enjoyable and fulfilling. They were starting to get it.

My students decided that there were primarily two reasons that people often chose to not give their best: laziness and self-centeredness. I agreed. I pointed out that we reap what we sow: We get out of life what we put into it.

Then I asked them the same question I started the lesson with. “Why would you ever want to give less than your very best?” I put up a sign, WHY NOT YOUR BEST?, in a prominent spot to serve as a visible reminder.

“I can’t get that question out of my mind.” It was music to my ears.

Integrating “Doing Our Best” Into a Mission Statement

Until the early 1980s, I paid scant attention to mission statements. That changed dramatically when a number of my friends and I attended a men’s retreat in the Santa Cruz mountains.

The leader of the retreat posed this question: “How many of you have a written personal mission statement that you look at and think about every day?” He said, “All good organizations with a purpose have a well-crafted mission statement. It gives the people within them both focus and clarity, and it inspires them to fulfill that purpose.”

I went away from the retreat with a concise personal mission statement that I look at and dwell upon every morning. But it wasn’t specifically tied to my responsibilities as an educator, so I decided to write a separate mission statement, one that applied solely to my role as a teacher.

When I was finished, I hand-printed my mission statement (there were no computers in those days) with a black felt tip pen. (While my personal mission statement has changed a few times over the years, this teacher mission statement never did.) The next morning I taped it on my desk at school. I shared with my students that I had both a “philosophy of education” (a long quotation by Haim Ginott) and a “teacher mission statement” taped to my desk. I read them out loud to each class and invited them to look at them any time they wanted. I also told them to bring it to my attention if they ever thought I was acting in a way that was inconsistent with my philosophy or
my mission. (Yes, it did happen a few times. Posting your mission statement for students to see keeps you focused, diligent, and accountable.)

Then it dawned on me that I was the leader of five “organizations with a purpose”—my five classes. This realization led to some questions:

- Did my students know what a mission statement was? If they didn’t, could I teach them?
- Could I help my students see and clarify their purpose?
- Should my class write a mission statement together?

The Students’ Mission Statement

I began by asking the students in all of my classes if they knew what a mission statement was. Out of more than 160 students, about four or five did.

I explained that another term for “mission statement” was a “statement of purpose,” and that businesses, service organizations, charitable foundations, places of worship, schools, universities, and even individuals used them to stay focused on their goals. I showed them the mission statements of our school, the University of San Francisco, the Girl Scouts, the Rotary, a local church, Apple Computer, and UPS.

I asked the class if they thought I should write their mission statement for them, or if they should write their own. I knew what their answer would be. One girl said: “It wouldn’t really be our mission statement if you wrote it, would it?” I answered “No. I think you’ll honor it more if you own it.”

I divided them into six groups of 5-6 students and gave them these instructions:

- The class mission statement could not be longer than two sentences.
- Their mission statement could be about one of two topics—either the environment we were going to create in the class, or the process of learning itself.

My students took this activity seriously and enjoyed the process. Over the years they came up with some wonderful mission statements. Here are a few:

**THIS IS A GOLDEN RULE CLASSROOM.**

**WE PRACTICE WHAT WE PREACH.**

**THIS IS A NO PUT-DOWN ZONE. WE LOOK FOR THE GOOD INSTEAD.**

**LEARNING IS NOT AN OBLIGATION; IT’S AN OPPORTUNITY.**

It’s important to post the mission statement in the front of the room where every student sees it every day. Any time my students looked at the front of the room, there it was, staring them in the face and reminding them of their mission.

This was a remarkably simple activity that took only about 40 minutes, and it paid dividends for the rest of the year. Writing a teacher mission statement and reading it the first thing each morning had always affirmed my purpose. It worked the same for my students.

“**What Do You Expect of Me?**”

At the beginning of each school year, I put my expectations of my students (regarding class participation, homework, tests, punctuality, courtesy, etc.) in writing and discussed them with the class. Then, I asked them if they had expectations of me. They assured me that they did. I asked them each to write them down. These are the “Top Ten” expectations they came up with over the years:

1. Make the class interesting, not boring.
2. Have control of the class.
3. Be nice, not mean. Don’t yell at us.
4. Be fair in the way you treat people (no favorites) and in grading.
5. Be reasonable on homework.
6. Return tests/papers within a week.
7. Explain things clearly; don’t assume we already know everything.
8. Have a sense of humor; make class fun.
9. Be understanding; try to remember what it’s like to be a kid.
10. Give us help if we need it.

I was always impressed with their lists. I told them they could expect two other things from me that weren’t even on their list. I promised them that I would come to class every day with a good attitude and fully prepared. I said, “I will give you the best I have every day.”

And I challenged them to give me their best—every day, in every way.

**Dr. Hal Urban is an award-winning educator and author of the best-selling Life’s Greatest Lessons. He taught high school for 35 years and now speaks internationally on character education to teachers, parents, and students. This article is adapted from his latest book, Lessons From the Classroom: 20 Things Good Teachers Do (www.halurban.com).**

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**My Mission as a Teacher:**

A Promise to My Students

**My ultimate responsibility as a teacher is to bring out the best in my students.**

1. I’ll help you perform at your highest levels in both academics and character—to do your best work and be your best self.
2. I’ll treat you with the utmost respect—the same way I expect you to treat me and your classmates.
3. I’ll do everything in my power to create the best possible classroom atmosphere—one in which I can teach and you can learn.
4. I’ll come to each class prepared with a meaningful lesson plan.
5. I’ll be consistent in maintaining high academic standards, while following my very strong belief that there’s no substitute for hard work.
6. Whenever possible, I’ll try to connect school to the larger world outside.
7. I’ll teach “life lessons” along with academic lessons.
8. I’ll make myself available to help you in both academics and personal matters.
9. I will always give you my best.
Using the CREE to Measure Excellence and Ethics

by Vlad Khmelkov

Can excellence and ethics be measured? There is, in fact, a considerable body of empirical research using a variety of approaches to measure the character of individuals and the culture of institutions (see, for example, the 2005 report, “What Works in Character Education,” by Marvin Berkowitz and Melinda Bier, www.characterandcitizenship.org).

One of our major goals in the Smart & Good Schools Initiative is to put tools into the hands of researchers and practitioners that can be used to assess the critical inputs and outcomes of a Smart & Good School.

Ultimately, we hope to provide schools with a Comprehensive Assessment System (CAS) built around the core components of the Smart & Good model (see Conceptual Matrix, p.7): the Ethical Learning Community (ELC), the Professional Ethical Learning Community (PELC), performance character and moral character, and the 8 strengths of character: (1) lifelong learner and critical thinker, (2) diligent and capable performer, (3) socially and emotionally skilled person, (4) ethical thinker, (5) respectful and responsible moral agent, (6) self-disciplined person who pursues a healthy lifestyle, (7) contributing community member and democratic citizen, and (8) spiritual person engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose.

Our first step toward the CAS has been to develop and field-test an instrument called the CREE (Collective Responsibility for Excellence and Ethics). (See box below for sample items.) The title of this instrument is based on a central idea in the Smart & Good vision: All members of the Ethical Learning Community (staff, students, parents, and the wider community) have not only an individual responsibility to pursue their personal best, but also a collective responsibility to hold other members of the ELC accountable to doing and being their best. Collective responsibility is a powerful force in shaping a culture that in turn shapes the character of its members.

The CREE builds on Global Portraits of Social and Moral Health and the Character in Action Survey (www.cortland.edu/character/instruments.asp). It has demonstrated reliability and validity and is being used by schools across the country, including those participating in several Partnerships for Character Education Projects funded by

### Collective Responsibility for Excellence and Ethics (CREE, version 2.7)

**Think about students in this school. How often does the following happen?**

1 = Almost never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Almost always.

#### Sample items (from Faculty/Staff version) that assess performance character (best work):

1. Students demonstrate diligence, including a personal concern to do a job or assignment well.

2. Students demonstrate self-discipline, including the ability to delay gratification in order to pursue future goals.

3. Students spend extra time working to improve their weaknesses.

4. Students demonstrate dependability, including the ability to do their part of a project.

5. Students try to be creative in their assignments.

6. Students come after class to discuss ideas from their readings or assignments.

#### Sample items (from Faculty/Staff version) that assess moral character (best ethical self):

1. Students treat teachers and staff with respect.

2. When they see someone having a problem, students offer to help.

3. Students do the right thing, no matter what their peers might think.

4. Students speak up when someone is bullied or harassed.

5. Students cheat on tests or assignments.

6. Students admit if they did something wrong.

_For the complete version of the CREE, and for a fuller explanation of the constructs and their interrelationships, go to www.cortland.edu/character/instruments.asp._
CREE (version 2.7) Conceptual Matrix

Program Inputs: Implementation vs Comparison Group

- School/Class Climate
  - Social Health & Safety
  - Social Capital from Adults
  - Faculty/Staff Assessment

- Professional Ethical Learning Community
  - Personal Responsibility
  - Voice & Carefrontation
  - Leadership
  - Collective Responsibility

- Ethical Learning Community
  - Acceptance of Differences in Peers & Attachment to Community
  - Collective Responsibility for School/Class Community
  - Assessment of ELC by Faculty/Staff

- School-Family Partnership
  - School Engaging Parents with Child’s Learning
  - Parents Engaging with School Activities

Experiences of Learning the Strengths of Character

- Performance Character/Moral Character Experiences with Classmates
  - Student Perceptions of PC/MC Practices by Faculty/Staff

- Faculty/Staff Practices Promoting Performance Character/Moral Character
  - Parent Practices Promoting Performance Character/Moral Character

Student Character

- Performance Character/Moral Character—Self-Reports by Students
  - Performance Character/Moral Character—Assessment by Faculty/Staff

Demographic Characteristics

Contextual Factors to Be Accounted for in Design:

- State
- School District
- School
- Hometown Community

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The CREE provides data-driven first steps for becoming a Smart & Good School.

The CREE can be used for either a one-time assessment or over-time monitoring of school outcomes (e.g., student performance and moral character) as well as school inputs in character development (e.g., school/classroom academic and social climate; intentional and unintentional practices of faculty, staff, and parents; and students’ own behaviors, experiences, and interactions with peers and adults).

To triangulate the information and explore similarities and differences in the views of character development held by various stakeholders, CREE is comprised of student, faculty/staff, and parent forms. The CREE also includes a classroom observation form for use by researchers and school coaches collecting qualitative data.

The CREE can be used to initiate a process for becoming a Smart & Good School. CREE data provide a wealth of information that leadership teams first use for in-depth benchmarking and reflection on the current state of things. Having identified areas of strength and areas of concern, leadership teams then engage in a series of meetings with all three stakeholder groups (faculty and staff, students, and parents) in which they share the data and begin a dialogue that gives stakeholders voice.

Meetings on the initial data analysis and reflection on the current state are followed by planning meetings in which participants collaboratively identify the desired state and select practices that align with their school improvement plan.

Schools are finding this data-driven approach to developing the Ethical Learning Community and the Professional Ethical Learning Community to be very helpful. Look for further reports on this work in subsequent issues.

Dr. Vlad Khmelkov is the executive vice-president and director of research and technology at the Institute for Excellence & Ethics.

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