

COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT PLAN (CAP) for Continuous Program Improvement

Assessment is typically the weakest link in a school's character development initiative. There are at least three reasons to rigorously assess a school's character development work:

1. *What gets measured, matters.* Character development will be a higher priority in the minds of staff, students, and parents if results are assessed. If character development *isn't* assessed but academic achievement is, should we be surprised that character recedes in importance?
2. Assessment shows to what extent the character education program is actually *making a difference*. When staff have concrete evidence that their character-building efforts are paying off, they are more likely to continue to invest effort.
3. Assessment data are needed to *guide decision making* about how to increase program effectiveness. Without such data, planning for improvement is shooting in the dark.

Desirable CAP Components

1. ***Create a CAP Committee to design, propose, and guide implementation of a Comprehensive Assessment Plan aligned with the character education framework(s) chosen by the school.***

Assessment is too big and important a task to add to the work of an existing committee. Recruit a staff member with a talent for assessment to lead a *CAP Committee*.

Decide at the earliest possible point what the school will be assessing, and how. That will help shape the character education action steps needed to achieve the desired character outcomes. If the school wants to reduce cheating, for example, deciding how to measure that will energize and guide faculty efforts to foster academic integrity in their classrooms.

2. ***Gather and use school data to track trends in character-related indicators.***

These trend data tell an important story. Each year (and even during the year)—the CAP Committee should examine—and report to faculty data on both positive and negative character-related indicators. These can include:

- school attendance
- test scores
- discipline referrals
- levels of participation in co-curricular activities
- successes in inter-school competitions
- awards won
- numbers of students involved in different kinds of community service
- lost property returned
- numbers of students seeking counseling for stress-related problems
- cheating incidents
- bullying incidents
- thefts
- fights.

3. ***Conduct formative assessment of character education practices.***

To what extent is the school implementing the schoolwide and classroom practices recommended by the character education framework(s) it has adopted?

There is no point in trying to assess a character education program's impact on student outcomes if there are no data on the extent to which staff are in fact faithfully implementing the intended program practices. Research shows that implementation predicts outcomes. For example, it would make no sense to assess a bullying prevention program's impact on bullying if the school has not documented the degree to which the program's essential practices are being carried out.

4. ***Assess learning—the extent to which students understand and apply what the character program is trying to teach.***

If the character program seeks to teach a *set of virtues*, can students define those virtues and give relevant behavioral examples? Write about

a time when they did or did not display a particular virtue? Describe how a person model from history or current events demonstrated (or did not demonstrate) the virtue? Do a role-play demonstrating the virtue?

If the program seeks to teach *particular character skills* (listening, cooperation, conflict resolution, time management, goal-setting, etc.), when and how are students asked to demonstrate those skills in the context of a class? What evidence are students asked to provide that they are using those skills in their lives outside the classroom?

5. Engage students in self-assessment and goal-setting.

Student self-assessment and goal-setting should be ongoing. Schools can use character self-inventories to have students assess their strengths and areas for growth and then set goals in selected areas. One example: The “Grit Scale” developed by Angela Duckworth enables students to assess their performance character virtues. Sample item:

Setbacks don’t discourage me.

- Very much like me.
- Mostly like me.
- Somewhat like me.
- Not much like me.
- Not like me at all.

In one elementary school, students take out their *Character Record Book* at the end of each day and write in response to three questions pertaining to the focus virtue of the week, e.g.:

1. **How have I shown kindness today?**
2. **How have I *not* shown kindness today?**
3. **How will I show kindness tomorrow?**

In another school, all students keep a *Character Behavior Journal*, choose a specific behavior (e.g., saying “please” and “thank you”) to improve on over the course of a month, and write an entry at the day’s end on how they did that day. In one middle school program, students choose a particular virtue they wish to get better at, work on that virtue for a month,

reflect at the end of each day on how they are doing, and record their progress in a journal.

In one K-6 school, every classroom has a *Levels of Responsibility* rubric. Two or three times a day, students assess the level they are working at—individually and as a class.

Schools using Sean Covey’s “The Leader in Me” program have all students write a *personal mission statement* and use that to self-assess. At the beginning of each new school year, students revisit and revise their mission statement.

Student portfolios make students responsible for documenting their learning, projects, and achievements as those relate to the school’s character goals. In one school district, all students, with teacher guidance, work on their portfolios beginning in first grade. The portfolios are organized around the desired grade 12 graduation outcomes.

6. Conduct annual surveys of school culture.

Because school culture has the power to shape character, annual assessment of school culture—the character of the school as a community—is essential. Such assessment should measure staff, student, and parent perceptions of the extent to which students and adults act according to the school’s target values and virtues.

One measure of the school as a caring community is the School as a Caring Community Profile (SCCP) (www.cortland.edu/character, “Assessment”). A school culture survey that focuses explicitly on respectful and responsible behavior and various kinds of bullying, is the *Respect & Responsibility School Culture Survey* in the winter/spring 2012 *excellence & ethics* (www.cortland.edu/character). For an instrument that measures overall excellence and ethics (performance character and moral character) in the school culture, see the *Culture of Excellence and Ethics Assessment (CEEA)*, (www.excellenceandethics.org).

7. Use anonymous student self-report surveys (or self-report items included as

part of a school culture survey) to assess targeted aspects of student character.

In addition to assessing overall school culture, the CAP should assess certain aspects of student character that the school has decided to make a high priority. If a school is focusing on reducing cheating, for example, it should use a self-report instrument such as the *Academic Integrity Survey* developed by Dr. Donald McCabe. On this survey, students are asked to anonymously report their attitudes toward different kinds of cheating and the frequency with which they have engaged in each. For an excerpt, see the winter 2011 *excellence & ethics*, www.cortland.edu/character.

Similarly, if a school is seeking to reduce bullying, it should use a school culture survey that includes self-report items, ones that ask students to report how often they have engaged in emotional or physical bullying.

8. Conduct focus groups.

Use student, staff, and parent focus groups to get input/feedback on school culture (“Describe this school,” “What are its good points?”, “What would you change?”), particular programs (“What did you like service learning this year? How could it be improved next year?), and particular issues (“To what extent does bullying occur at this school? Where and when does it happen? How can it be reduced?”)

9. Conduct school-designed surveys.

Short, home-grown questionnaires (“What’s working well?”, “What needs improvement?”) can be used to get qualitative feedback on whatever the school sees as the key components of its character effort. One middle school, for example, each year conducts a written survey of all teachers and students to evaluate what they liked and didn’t like about the school’s once-a-week advisory groups. Stakeholder groups should be asked to suggest questions for these surveys and/or to give feedback on a draft of any survey.

10. Present the data to relevant stakeholders (e.g., staff, students, parents, community members) and involve them in discussing the findings and recommending action steps.

—Thomas Lickona, 2013,
www.cortland.edu/character

Comprehensive Assessment Plan (CAP)

1. Create a CAP Committee to develop, propose, and implement a comprehensive assessment plan. Revise to incorporate feedback from staff, students, & parents.
2. Use school data to track trends in character-related behaviors.
3. Conduct formative assessment of character education practices.
4. Assess the extent to which students are learning and applying what the character program is teaching.
5. Engage students in self-assessment and goal-setting.
6. Conduct annual surveys of school culture.
7. Use anonymous self-report surveys to assess student character.
8. Conduct focus groups on key issues.
9. Conduct school-designed surveys on the same issues.
10. Present assessment data to relevant stakeholders and involve them in discussing the findings and recommending action steps.