

The Fourth and Fifth Rs

Respect and Responsibility

Volume 10, Issue 1

Fall 2003

The Content of Our Character: Ten Essential Virtues

Tom Lickona, Director, Center for the 4th and 5th Rs

In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. said he dreamed of the day when all Americans “will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

What is the content of good character? This is the first question a school must address in developing a quality character education program. How a school defines character—what it includes or omits in its target virtues—will shape the goals and activities of its character education initiative.

Broadly speaking, the content of good character is virtue. Virtues, such as justice and kindness, are *habits*, dispositions to behave in a morally good way. They are objectively good human qualities, good for us whether we know it or not. They are affirmed by societies and religions around the world. Because they are intrinsically good, virtues have a claim on our conscience.

Choosing the School's Target Virtues

What are the particular virtues a given school should focus on in its character education efforts? To answer that question, a school should ask: *What qualities do we want our graduates to possess? What moral and intellectual strengths will best equip them to lead purposeful, productive, and fulfilling lives and to build a better world?*

In small groups, staff can brainstorm and list these qualities on sheets of butcher paper and then post their lists around the room for all to view. (Nearly always, different groups list many of the same qualities.)

A next step is to compare the character qualities generated by the staff with a pre-existing conceptual scheme defining good character, such as the “ten essential vir-

ties” and their supporting qualities (see below).

When staff compare their lists with a scheme such as the ten essential virtues, they can ask: What commonalities do we see? Which virtues are the best match for our school's culture and the developmental level of our students?



Whatever the list of target virtues a staff settles on, it's important that (a) it be comprehensive, incorporating all the important virtues in one way or another, and (b) the staff own it. Simultaneously or subsequently, surveys should be distributed to parents and students so that their input can be incorporated.

Ten Essential Virtues

Which virtues are most important for strong character? Here are ten that are recognized and taught by nearly all philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions.

1. Wisdom

Wisdom is good judgment. The ancient Greeks considered wisdom to be the master virtue, the one that directs all the others. It enables us to make reasoned decisions that are both good for us and good for others. Wisdom tells us how to put the other virtues into practice—when to act, how to act, and how to balance different virtues when they conflict (as they do, for example, when telling the honest truth might hurt someone's feelings). Wisdom enables us to discern correctly, to see what is truly important in life, and to set priorities. As the ethicist Richard Gula points out, “We cannot do right unless we first see correctly.”

2. Justice

Justice means respecting the rights of all persons. The Golden Rule, which directs us to treat other persons as we wish to be treated, is a principle of justice that can be found in cultures and religions around the world. Since we ourselves are persons, justice also includes self-respect, a proper regard for our own rights and dignity. Schools, in their character education efforts, often center on justice because it includes so many of the interpersonal virtues—*civility, honesty, respect, responsibility, and tolerance* (correctly understood not as approval of other people’s beliefs or behaviors but as respect for their freedom of conscience as long as they do not violate the rights of others). A concern for justice—and the capacity for moral indignation in the face of injustice—inspires us to work as citizens to build a more just society and world.

3. Fortitude

Fortitude enables us to do what is right in the face of difficulty. The right decision in life is often the hard one. One high school’s motto says: “Do the hard right instead of the easy wrong.” A familiar maxim says, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Fortitude, as the educator James Stenson points out, is the inner toughness that enables us to overcome or withstand hardship, defeats, inconvenience, and pain. *Courage, resilience, patience, perseverance, endurance, and a healthy self-confidence* are all aspects of fortitude. Teen suicide has tripled in the past three decades; one reason may be that many young people are unprepared to deal with life’s inevitable disappointments. We need to teach our students that we develop our character more through our sufferings than our successes, that setbacks can make us stronger if we don’t give in to feeling sorry for ourselves.

4. Self-Control

Self-control is the ability to govern ourselves. It enables us to *control our temper, regulate our sensual appetites and passions, and pursue even legitimate pleasures in moderation*. It’s the power to resist temptation, to wait, and to delay gratification in the pursuit of higher and distant goals. An old saying recognizes the importance of self-control in the moral life: “Either we rule our desires, or our desires rule us.” Reckless, self-destructive, and criminal behaviors flourish in the absence of self-control.

5. Love

Love goes beyond justice; it gives more than fairness requires. Love is the willingness to sacrifice for the

sake of another. A cluster of important human virtues—*empathy, compassion, kindness, generosity, service, loyalty, patriotism* (love of what is noble in one’s country), and *forgiveness*—make up the virtue of love. In *With Love and Prayers*, F. Washington Jarvis writes: “Love—selfless love that expects nothing back—is the most powerful force in the universe.” Love is a demanding virtue. If we really took seriously the familiar injunction to “love your neighbor as yourself,” says an essay on this virtue, would we not make every effort to avoid gossiping about others and calling attention to their faults, given how sensitive we are to such things said about us?

6. Positive Attitude

If you have a negative attitude in life, you’re a burden to yourself and others. If you have a positive attitude, you’re an asset to yourself and others. The character strengths of *hope, enthusiasm, flexibility, and a sense of humor* are all part of a positive attitude. All of us, young and old, need to be reminded that our attitude is something we *choose*. “Most people,” Abraham Lincoln said, “are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.” Said Martha Washington: “I have learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions and not on our circumstances. We carry the seeds of the one or the other with us in our minds wherever we go.” A recent book by Michael Loehrer, *How to Change a Rotten Attitude: A Manual for Building Virtue and Character in Middle and High School Students*, recognizes the great importance of attitude in educating for character.

7. Hard Work

There is no substitute in life for hard work. “I challenge you,” says the great basketball coach John Wooden, “to show me one single solitary individual who achieved his or her own personal greatness without lots of hard work.” Hard work includes the virtues of *initiative, diligence, goal-setting, and resourcefulness*.

8. Integrity

Integrity is *adhering to moral principle, being faithful to moral conscience, keeping our word, and standing up for what we believe*. To have integrity is to be “whole,” so that what we say and do in different situations is consistent rather than contradictory. Integrity is different from honesty, which tells the truth to others. Integrity is telling the truth to oneself. “The most dangerous form of deception,” says author Josh Billings, “is self-deception.” Self-deception enables us to do whatever we wish, even great evil, and find a reason to justify our actions.

9. Gratitude

Gratitude is often described as the secret of a happy life. It reminds us that we all drink from wells we did not dig. It moves us to count our everyday blessings. Asked what was the biggest lesson he learned from drifting twenty-one days in a life raft lost in the Pacific, the war hero Eddie Rickenbacker answered: “That if you have all the fresh water you want to drink and all the food you want to eat, you ought never to complain about anything.” The writer Anne Husted Burleigh observes, “Gratitude, like love, is not a feeling but an act of the will. We choose to be thankful, just as we choose to love.”

10. Humility

Humility can be considered the foundation of the whole moral life. Humility is necessary for the acquisition of the other virtues because it makes us aware of our imperfections and leads us to try to become a better person. “Humility,” writes the educator David Isaacs, “is recognizing both our inadequacies and abilities and pressing our abilities into service without attracting attention or expecting applause.” “Every virtue turns worthless,” writes the philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand, “if pride creeps into it—which happens whenever we glory in our goodness.” Humility enables us to take responsibility for our faults and failings (rather than blaming someone else), apologize for them, and seek to make amends. The psychiatrist Louis Tartaglia, in his book, *Flawless! The Ten Most Common Character Flaws and What You Can Do About Them*, says that in over twenty years as a therapist he has found the most common character flaw to be “addiction to being right.” (“Do you find yourself discussing disagreements,” he asks, “long after they are finished, just to prove you were right?”) The key to character growth in therapy and life, he says, is simply the humble willingness to change.

The life of virtue is obviously difficult. All of us, adults as well as children, fall short in the practice of these ten virtues. It helps to think of each of the virtues as a continuum and to focus on making progress in practicing each more consistently. We can also take heart from knowing, as the educator James Coughlin points out, that the virtues are linked. A decision to work seriously on even one virtue will be likely to pull all the other virtues up. ■

Adapted from Tom Lickona's forthcoming, *Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (Simon and Schuster, Feb., 2004); available from www.amazon.com.

TEN STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING THE VIRTUES

(Many may be used in combination.)

1. **A virtue a month**
2. **A virtue a week**, related to a monthly theme
3. **A 3- or 4-year cycle of virtues** (six one year, six others the next, etc.) The *Core Essentials Curriculum* (www.coreessentials.org) is an example of a 3-year program.
4. **A yearly theme** (e.g., “The Year of Courage,” “The Year of Peace”), often in combination with a quarterly focus (e.g., “Promoting Peace in Our Classrooms,” “Promoting Peace in Our School,” “Promoting Peace in Our Families,” “Promoting Peace in Our World”).
5. **Assigning a developmentally appropriate virtue to each grade level** for study over the entire school year (e.g., orderliness in kindergarten, effort in first grade, kindness in second grade), thereby affording the opportunity for in-depth study, repeated practice, and genuine habit formation.
6. **A common set of character expectations** that all grade levels work on year round, with individual teachers choosing which virtues to emphasize at any given time through a book, activity, or curriculum unit. Montclair Kimberley Academy (www.montclairkimberley.org), an award-winning, pre-K-12 independent school, uses this approach.
7. **A character education curriculum framework**, such as the K-6 *Core Virtues* (www.linkinstitute.org), that uses grade-appropriate virtues and corresponding curricular resources from literature, history, and the fine arts.
8. **A published character education curriculum** with sequenced lesson plans. Examples: *Second Step* (www.cfchildren.org), *Positive Action* (www.posaction.com), and *Life Skills* (www.kovalik.com).
9. **A character education process model**, such as the *Caring School Community* (elementary; www.devstu.org), the *Responsive Classroom* (elementary; www.responsiveclassroom.org), and our Center’s 12-point comprehensive approach (K-12; <http://cortland.edu/character/12pts.asp>). Process models are based on classroom and schoolwide strategies such as developing positive relationships, character-based discipline, and integrating character and academics.
10. **A school culture approach** that emphasizes creating an ethos of moral and intellectual excellence and stresses character in all curricular and co-curricular programs but doesn’t necessarily name a target set of virtues to which the school formally commits.