

What School Administrators Need to Know About Character and Citizenship Education

“It is not a question of whether to do character education but rather questions of how consciously and by what methods.”

— Robert Howard et al.

Character and citizenship education is not a separate program or course of study; it is an integrated approach to school improvement. It involves targeting specific core values and then infusing these values across the subject areas, through co-curricular and extracurricular activities, and in school policies and activities. There are learning outcomes related to character and citizenship education throughout the Alberta programs of study.

Character education is a deliberate effort to develop and cultivate ethical behaviour, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and personal attributes that our society values. Citizenship education constitutes the knowledge and understandings, skills, beliefs, values and attitudes that affect an individual’s sense of belonging and participation within community, nation and world. Character education and citizenship education are interrelated—both are explicit, intentional and focused efforts to promote student learning and growth. All schools are doing some form of character and citizenship education, although these efforts may not be explicitly labelled as such.

A growing body of school-based research suggests that character and citizenship education provides significant benefits to students, school culture and the community-at-large. The potential of character and citizenship education, and the key goals that it fosters, include:

- a climate of respect for self and others
- the attributes of active citizenship
- higher academic achievement
- improved interpersonal relationships
- greater self-discipline
- fewer behavioural problems
- a continued focus on safe schools
- a positive school culture
- enhanced employability skills.

Alberta Education’s new teaching resource *The Heart of the Matter: Character and Citizenship Education in Alberta Schools* provides a sample framework and strategies for developing and supporting a culture of character and citizenship. This framework helps in assessing school cultures and developing action plans to improve those cultures. It also explores ways that school administrators, teachers, other school staff, students and parents, as well as school jurisdictions and the larger community, can support these kinds of initiatives.

Sample Framework

Building a character and citizenship education initiative around a shared vision and research-based strategies involves ongoing planning, discussion and commitment. It is an ongoing process with a number of overlapping steps. A school-based team may consider beginning the process with the following five steps.

1. Building a vision
2. Strengthening school culture
3. Developing and maintaining leadership
4. Sustaining change
5. Assessing results

Teachers, administrators, students and parents need to work collaboratively to develop a shared sense of purpose and create a plan that encourages and supports sustainable change and growth for students. Initiatives should be built around the needs of students. For this reason, character and citizenship education may look different from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and from school to school.

Potential Approaches

“... it is next to impossible to separate the teaching of values from schooling itself; it is a part of schooling whether people are willing to acknowledge it or not. The question ... is how the educator can influence students’ character development effectively so that the impact is positive.”

— Mary Williams

There are a number of approaches, some philosophical and theoretical, and others based on established programs, that can be incorporated into a character and citizenship education initiative. The most effective initiatives are school-based (or what Michele Borba calls “home-grown”), with jurisdictional support. They are not prepackaged programs, although they often build on existing programs and resources such as Safe and Caring Schools resources or Lions-Quest programs.

Supporting Bullying Prevention Initiatives

A number of jurisdictions and individual schools use a focus on bullying prevention as a starting point for school improvement plans and/or character and citizenship initiatives. Bullying prevention requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach. There are no simple solutions to bullying issues. It is essential to address root causes, and this means considering and incorporating many of the bigger-picture components of character and citizenship education.

Assessing Initiatives

“Accountability looks forward ... It means taking the information and using it to make judgements—about quality, about how good is good enough and, most importantly, about how to make changes that will enhance and extend student learning, for all children.”

— Lorna Earl

No initiative can be considered successful unless there is a sound assessment component. Detailing what is to be assessed defines the purpose for developing and implementing the initiative. Assessment should ask questions about the projected impact of the work. For example, how will the initiative affect student understanding, attitudes and behaviour; instruction; and the school environment, including organization, scheduling, activities, leadership and decision making?

Infusing Character and Citizenship Education Throughout the School Day

“Building a safe, caring and inclusive school culture means teaching it minute by minute, day by day, integrating it into discipline practices and curriculum, using instructional models that provide practice in social and relationship skills and, most importantly, modelling it.”

— Vicki Mather, Executive Director
The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities

Character and citizenship education is not a separate subject to be taught in isolation. Rather, it integrates guiding principles into existing curriculum and into daily school experiences and interactions. A number of instructional strategies are especially effective in teaching for character and citizenship, including:

- cooperative learning
- group discussion
- journals and learning logs
- role-playing
- graphic organizers
- literature response
- service learning
- issue-based inquiry.

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities offer a forum beyond the daily classroom experience for students to develop, practise and demonstrate new attitudes and skills, and to work at becoming both independent and interdependent in a variety of different contexts.

Building Parent and Community Partnerships

“When parents, teachers, students, and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around students ...”

— Joyce Epstein et al.

An important component of a school learning community is an organized approach to partnerships between school, family and community, with activities that support student learning.

Epstein provides six types of involvements that can be considered when developing links between home and school, including: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community.

Creating a community of caring also recognizes that schools are a part of larger communities, and that learning happens in and beyond the school environment. The likelihood of students adopting and maintaining positive behaviours increases when expectations are consistent across settings and situations.

The Heart of the Matter

“... the biggest day-to-day repository of constructive power to improve schools is in the hearts, minds, and hands of the people who work in them.”

— Kenneth Sirotnik

To maximize the success of any initiative, it is essential to involve all staff from the beginning of the development and assessment process, and through the different stages of its implementation. As schools and jurisdictions develop deliberate and structured character and citizenship education initiatives, they can build the commitment and capacity of staff through meaningful professional development and ongoing support.

For More Information

A PDF version of the Alberta Education teaching resource *The Heart of the Matter: Character and Citizenship Education in Alberta Schools* is available at www.education.gov.ab.ca/charactered. Print copies can be purchased from the Learning Resources Centre at www.lrc.education.gov.ab.ca.