

Good Ideas for Promoting Character Education by Enhancing School Climate

For character education to be a meaningful program, it must be in evidence and reflected through the entire climate of each school. By creating a school climate that builds positive relationships among the stakeholders in the school community – administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents, community and faith partners - positive participation is enhanced and disruptive, violent and self-destructive behaviors are reduced.

Features of the school environment directly influence school climate. These features include:

- School structure and policies
- Academic expectations
- Behavior expectations
- Teacher qualifications and attitudes
- Administrative support and leadership
- Level of parental and community involvement
- Level of student involvement in extra-curriculum activities

A positive school climate is one that:

- Provides clear and consistent expectations for student behavior
- Encourages students to set high, yet attainable, academic goals.
- Responds to discipline infractions by providing a range of in-school alternatives for students to learn appropriate behavior
- Models and imparts sound societal values, beliefs, and attitudes
- Offers personalized assessment and support for students who experience academic and/or behavioral problems
- Coordinates support and referral services for students and their families
- Expects and provides meaningful opportunities for parental involvement in students' education

“Many teachers and administrators report that Character Education activities have spurred significant parental involvement in school life. Reinforcing these activities and lessons at home is crucial, and a concerted effort should be made to bring parents into the fold. Do this by speaking to them individually about your approach and by inviting all parents to regular programs coordinated by students and teachers. Also, be sure to solicit parental participation in all character related

after-school activities”(from Good Ideas to Help Young People Develop Good Character).

What follows is a list of activities, initiatives, and resources that can build an inviting school climate. These ideas focus on proactive efforts to shape behavior in productive ways as opposed to reactive responses to disruptive behaviors. While both approaches are necessarily a part of maintaining a safe and secure school environment, most schools need to expand their efforts to build a school climate that promotes and recognizes positive behaviors.

- ★ **Character Trait of the Month:** Encourage the coordinated emphasis of a common monthly character trait. The school district or individual schools can also develop a list of heroes selected for their association with specific traits. These heroes can be historical or current political, religious, artistic, intellectual, or sports figures. Their names and pictures appear on classroom bulletin boards and teachers refer to them whenever possible in discussion or writing assignments.
- ★ **Morning Announcements:** Share daily message (over intercom, for instance) about good character with the whole group. Include a “thought for the day” related to the month’s character trait. Encourage students to create thoughts for the day and select some to be read during morning announcements.
- ★ **Mottos/Slogans:** Have young people write and display “soundbites” and “catch phrases” based on the character trait for each month.
- ★ **Quotations of the Week:** Display a character related quote on the school’s marquee. Include quotes from famous people, faculty, and students. Have students practice writing and using higher order thinking skills by using character related quotes as writing prompts. Publish lunch menus with character quotes.
- ★ **Student Newspaper:** Help young people create articles for a publication or a publication focusing on ethical living and “local heroes,” including student commentary, reporting, photography and artwork.
- ★ **Library Exhibits and Book Lists:** Create wall decorations about books which promote good character and develop a list of recommended readings

which teach good character. Change these monthly to reflect specific character traits.

- ★ **Posters:** Give the hallway, cafeteria and gymnasium walls some character by displaying banners, slogans, and quotes related to character traits in all areas of the school.
- ★ **Hallway of Character:** Line the hallway walls with newsprint or butcher paper and have the students cover them with character slogans or famous quotes about the character trait.
 - Put up a “Great Wall of Character” to display quotes, recognize students, and display other character-related reminders.
- ★ **Codes and Rules of Conduct:** Design rules based on the character traits for adults and young people.
- ★ **Special Events:**
 - Have a yearbook feature or page that focuses on character traits.
 - Hold theme days (e.g. encourage wearing red, white, and blue on “Citizenship Day”)
 - Focus graduation and end-of-year ceremonies on character.
- ★ **Art/Creative Projects:**
 - Have a student write and produce plays emphasizing the traits for each month (these can draw good publicity-even TV coverage!)
 - Have students create a character “quilt” out of paper.
 - Have students create a “Chain of kindness” – a paper chain with acts of kindness written on each link.
 - Have art classes paint character quotes on the walls.
 - Hold a poster contest for posters to be displayed in homerooms.
 - Sponsor an essay contest on the importance of character traits.
 - Sponsor a contest in which students write and perform songs based on the character traits.
- ★ **Pledges:** Design and circulate pledges to “practice the character traits.”
- ★ **Character Assemblies:** Have guests address the character trait of the month.

- ★ **Contests with Awards and Prizes:** Submit and recognize essays, art, music, poetry, speeches, plays, etc. related to character traits.
- ★ **Ceremonies and Rituals:** Recognize young people annually who model the character traits. (Big Brothers and Sisters of Tarrant County, Texas, for instance, recognizes its local “SMOREs,” “Students Who Model Outstanding Responsibility and Ethics,” and calls a press conference to publicize the event.) Recognize good character award recipients at end-of-year ceremonies.
- ★ **Honor Roll (nonacademic):** Honor those who honor others with the kindness and goodwill. Institute a “Random Acts of Kindness” program that gives awards for good acts. Send home cards of praise to recognize students who demonstrate good character.
- ★ **“Recognition Wall for Student Achievement in Character”:** Periodically have youngsters nominate their peers using criteria based on character traits. Frame and retain the photos on a special wall designated for this purpose.
- ★ **Cafeteria “Table Tents”:** Have the youngsters design small folded-cards with character related quotes, ethical dilemmas, or other messages. Place these on cafeteria tables and encourage everyone to discuss them at lunchtime.
- ★ **Character Clubs:** Design clubs – one for each character trait – and have the youngsters rotate club affiliation every week or two.
- ★ **Faculty/Staff Training and Discussion:** Incorporate the character traits into the training of youth leaders and teachers. Provide a list of “examples of how to be an example.”
- ★ **Including Parents**
 - Hold parent meetings/workshops and designate a group of parents, teachers, and/or other youth leaders to design and administer Character Education.
 - Send home an informational packet on the premises and expectations of the character program.

- At the beginning of the year, have both parents and students sign a pledge to build character
 - Devote an entire parent-teacher organization meeting to the character development program.
 - Discuss character as well as academics in parent-teacher conferences,
 - Send teacher letters home to parents monthly.
 - Send newsletters on the character education program home to parents.
- ★ **Parent Meeting/Workshops:** Designate a group of parents and teachers and/or other youth leaders to design and administer Character Education activities.
- ★ **Student/Faculty Task Force:** Have students work in coordination with teachers to design, administer and carry out Character Education activities.
- ★ **Advisors/Advisee Program:** Teacher advisors meet with “homerooms” of students and stay with a group throughout their career at the school. Advisors encourage good attendance, participation in extra curriculum activities, and make contact with parents.

A range of **service learning activities** and projects can positively contribute to enhancing opportunities for students to model good character. These include:

- ★ **Peer Helping/Mentoring:** Train young people with leadership skills to serve as peer helpers and mentors. Incorporate Character Education into their training.
- ★ **Cross-age Tutoring/Mentoring:** Arrange for preteens and teenagers to support and tutor younger children.
- ★ **Public Area Beautification:** Have young people organize and carry out a cleanup of a playground, park or other neglected area.
- ★ **Landscaping and Gardening Project:** Emphasize taking responsibility for one’s own school or youth facility by having young people plant and maintain a garden. Cultivating a community vegetable or flower garden is a great way to teach many of the Character Traits.

- ★ **Clothing and Food Drives:** Collect items of clothing and food and donate them to an appropriate agency.
- ★ **Meals on Wheels:** Bring food to people who are homebound.
- ★ **Caring for the Homeless:** Organize groups of young people to serve food at a homeless shelter.
- ★ **Charity Service:** Participate as a group in a charitable cause (such as a walk-a-thon) or hold a fundraiser (such as an auction, bake sale, or car wash) and donate the money to a charitable organization.
- ★ **Hungry Child Sponsorship:** Hold a fundraiser to sponsor children in developing countries.
- ★ **Book/Magazine Drive:** Collect reading materials to donate to a hospital or nursing home.
- ★ **Student-designed T-Shirts:** Hold a contest for the design of a local Character Education mascot.
- ★ **School or Youth Organization Mural:** Organize youngsters to paint the character traits logo in a prominent location on school grounds or on a banner to place in front of the school.
- ★ **Authorized “Character Education Wall”:** Solicit the participation of all youngsters to design and paint a mural of good character on a wall. Have them maintain the condition of the wall by repainting periodically.
- ★ **“Chain of Character”:** Have various youth groups or schools sell paper “character links” as a fundraiser. Designate a color for each group if you want them to compete to sell the most. Then display the chain at a large gathering. (In Roswell, New Mexico, a “Chain of Character” circled a field twice at a football game between rival high schools.)
- ★ **Caring for Animals Club:** The Humane Society will send free pamphlets to help young people organize their own “Caring for Animals” Club.
- ★ **Youth Participation:** In United Way Campaign and The Day of Caring

