

INTEGRATING COMMON CORE AND CHARACTER EDUCATION Why It Is Essential and How It Can Be Done

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The Common Core needs a vessel or a container to hold the knowledge and skill standards in order to move them forward. The vessel is the school or school district that models ethical and performance character principles for students and adults, creating a culture of respect, responsibility and excellence in which all can thrive.

—Charles Elbot, Education Advisory Council, Character Education Partnership

Imagine a school, anywhere in the United States. Perhaps it is your local school. Or maybe it is a school where your grandchild or other family member attends. As a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, sister or brother, educator, community or school board member, you want your school systems to be the best they can be—dedicated to helping all children achieve academically in deep and meaningful ways. You realize the world is changing rapidly, and you reflect on the knowledge, skills and qualities every young person will need to successfully meet the challenges of the 21st century.

You wonder what it would take for your child, or any child, to thrive? You are commit-

ted to academic excellence, and you also want every child's school to be a place where students and adults are caring and responsible, and committed to a learning community which values and supports everyone! You ask yourself if students can even be successful academically if they are worried about bullying, or do not feel they have the support they need to achieve. Maybe you want your child to learn teamwork and good sportsmanship from their athletic experiences, or how to work out problems with others in the schoolyard without resorting to violence. Perhaps you want fine arts programs that help your child explore and appreciate the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of life, and what a life worth living is all about.

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Journal of Character Education, Volume 12(1), 2016, pp. 55–68
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ISSN 1543-1223
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You begin to consider what schools you care about are already doing to put children on positive life trajectories, so they can become the very best persons they can be. On top of all this, you understand that your state has adopted an initiative of national standards called the Common Core, which has high expectations for all students. You have heard that it raises the level of cognitive rigor and requires young people to develop the stamina to dig into challenging work. So what would schooling be like if your child finished with the academic skills to be college and career ready, and also with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to successfully negotiate the technological, global society we live in? What would it take for your child to graduate high school prepared to be a successful student, worker, citizen, family member, and responsible, contributing human being as well?

As the United States has struggled to answer the question of what education for the 21st century must look like, most states have now responded by signing onto the Common Core Standards. Drawn from lessons learned from a generation of standards-based education and research on what high performing countries do to enable young people to prosper, it is offered as perhaps our best hope of helping American students attain the knowledge and skills necessary for a productive, contributing life. The 21st Century Global Skills, which are at the heart of the Common Core, are an upgrade and reflect a move toward the teaching and learning strategies necessary to reach today's students. Many observers believe that the Common Core Standards represent a seminal moment in American educational history because they are the result of governors and state superintendents coming together to settle the question on the best path forward to strengthen both student success and national security.

The intent is that the standards will inspire local curriculum frameworks that provide the knowledge and skills necessary for our young people to be successful in college, careers and life. The standards will strengthen and

improve public education and keep our nation strong and prosperous so that it can continue to be the leading economy in the global marketplace and a source of stability and inspiration in the world.

There is so much to celebrate about the Common Core, such as anchor standards built on solid literacy research. Grade level standards flow out of those anchor standards and reflect a nuanced and systematic approach to student learning. They are rigorous, robust and relevant.

The standards feature:

- a back-mapped, spiral staircase design with research-based standards that provide continuity and suggest the scaffolding necessary for student mastery;
- a real paradigm shift for educators toward higher level thinking (analysis and evaluation) and depth of knowledge—moving away from quantity of content to quality of learning and reasoning;
- a focus on knowledge in the disciplines and the interdisciplinary connections that help students better understand the various disciplines;
- an embedded core of 21st Century Global Skills that include a constellation of literacy, learning, and inquiry skills that students need today to be college and career ready;
- An expectation for signature teaching practices and for students to learn the skills of collaboration, critical and creative thinking, communication, problem solving, questioning, analysis, presenting, planning, researching, building arguments, and reading and writing to learn;
- a greater demand for students to develop the cognitive rigor and stamina to do more and better work;
- an objective to strengthening literacy through daily reading and writing, speaking, listening, and reflection in every subject across the curriculum;

- an increased expectation for more text complexity in a range of texts with differentiated instruction so all students can be successful;
- an expectation for more informational text offered across the curriculum;
- an emphasis on students developing arguments with claims and evidence;
- a move toward performance-based assessments and away from multiple choice tests based on lower level cognition; and
- a recognition that the standards are concise and do not identify everything that is necessary in a quality, high performing school, and that educators need to be thoughtful in identifying the appropriate programs, resources, and supports for students to be successful.

These standards are research-based, internationally benchmarked and more concise than previous educational standards. They are intended to lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the 21st century. Common Core raises the level of cognitive rigor and requires young people to develop the stamina to dig into challenging work. However, they are still incomplete to accomplish their ambitious goals in some important ways. They are excellent, but not excellent enough for our children. Here is where the new standards fall short, and how we can make them more complete:

THREE WAYS TO STRENGTHEN COMMON CORE

1. Needed: A Specific Focus on Educating for Democracy

The standards lack a focus on and intentionality about educating for civic readiness and citizenship—surely an original purpose of the American educational system that has as much relevance today as ever. Though to be fair, the standards do clearly identify teaching seminal American documents, but are largely silent on the goal of citizenship and historic purpose of

education to sustain a democratic republic. Educating the next generation to take their place in valuing and participating in American constitutional democracy deserves more than a wink and a nod in our classrooms. How do we maintain our civic commitments to our values, principles and ideals if educating for democracy is not a centerpiece of the total school curriculum? How do we pass on American cultural and political traditions if this is not an explicit focus of our standards? How do we serve as a beacon of light to other nations if we do not provide to our own students a clear vision of democracy as the most positive route forward for human flourishing?

We believe the standards need to emphasize the importance for American public education to educate for college, career and *civic* readiness—this needs to be the resounding mantra for all American schools if we take seriously the civic commitments of the nation and continuing this grand experiment in liberty. As William Damon, professor of education at Stanford University points out,

For a country that views itself as the leader of the free world, we are surprisingly casual about passing along the interests, skills, and knowledge required for U.S. citizenship to our younger generation. Neither civics nor history comes anywhere near math or literacy in the priorities set by most of our schools today—and it shows ... when students acquire pride in the past aspirations and successes of our nation, faith in its future, and confidence that they can personally make a difference—indeed, that their contributions will be vital—they are on the road to developing strong civic purpose. (Damon, 2012, pp. 23–24)

2. Needed: A Specific Focus on Teaching Moral and Performance Character, and Socioemotional Skills for Students to Be College, Career, and Civic Ready

The standards would also be strengthened if they were built on the wisdom of the ages as well as today's research about what supports young people to flourish—that academic

achievement alone is just one side of the tapestry. The other side is character development, and the rich constellation of core ethical and civic values and socioemotional skills that weave and thread throughout it as well. In the tapestry of education, there are many threads. The one that connects them all is students' socioemotional and character development, or, moral and performance character. The latter refers to the need for children to have both an ethical compass and the skills to follow that compass. The thread of character must touch the thread of knowledge at each and every point, or else there is a chance that the tapestry will unravel. If we look at the child as the tapestry, the result of the weaving that goes on in the home, school, neighborhood, nation, peer groups, religious institutions, media, et cetera, must be intertwined with socioemotional learning and character development at every strand. This must be the case if the child is to use knowledge for good and not ill, to serve not only self but others. The goal is to be not only college and career ready but also ready for the tests of life, and not a life of tests. Character is a dimension of life that helps us persevere during challenges, treat others with dignity, and advance our community. In a 21st century global society that has the technological capacity to destroy itself, the world sorely needs the next generation to develop its character with compassion and integrity to value every member of the human community.

Students would be better served by a Common Core that expects the intentional teaching of the qualities of character, along with the attributes and dispositions they need to develop academic stamina. Students will need perseverance to successfully grapple with these more rigorous standards, and to exit high school with the character to be successful in college, career, and the community. The standards consider what American young people need to know and be able to do, but not "be like" (A term coined by Ivor Pritchard, senior researcher at the U.S. Department of Education; Pritchard, 2001). How will our young people truly succeed if they have not devel-

oped empathy to value others' perspectives and self-discipline to strive for excellence, along with respect and responsibility, courage and perseverance?

The modern character education movement has recognized character as broadly divided into moral and performance categories. Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson (2005), in *Smart and Good High Schools: Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work and Beyond*, define moral character as a "relational orientation" consisting of those qualities—such as integrity, justice, caring and respect—needed for successful interpersonal relationships and ethical behavior. They note that moral character enables us to treat others and ourselves with respect and care and ensures that we use ethical means to achieve our performance goals. Performance character, on the other hand, is a "mastery orientation" and consists of those qualities—such as effort, diligence, perseverance, a strong work ethic, a positive attitude, ingenuity, and self-discipline—needed to realize our potential for excellence in academics, cocurricular activities, the workplace, or any other area of endeavor. Performance character also enables us to enact our moral values—to translate our good intentions into effective ethical actions that make a positive difference in the world. A life of character integrates moral and performance character.

We believe that an explicit focus on moral and performance character is the value-added piece that the Common Core standards must have in order to develop high-performing schools and ethical human beings. A focus on character in this holistic sense is the route to academic achievement, prosocial behavior, and positive youth development. Common Core supported by comprehensive, high quality socioemotional learning and character education is better than just Common Core. It puts students on positive life trajectories that will help them develop all of their talents and gifts and use them to enhance the lives of others. This focus on character and prosocial behavior is also a proven path to reducing many persist-

ing problems, such as school bullying, academic failure, dropping out, and other antisocial or at-risk behaviors. A generation of research across multiple disciplines supports this conclusion (see, e.g., Battistich, 2005).

3. Needed: An Expectation of Intentional Planning to Develop a Safe and Caring School Culture that Supports Students to Achieve the Goals of the Common Core Standards

The Common Core Standards do not explicitly address the quality of the learning environment or the culture of respect, responsibility and excellence that must be in place for optimal student learning and flourishing. A pervasive sense of belonging for every person in the school community, with genuine, caring relationships between and among students, teachers, parents and staff is required for students to develop across academic, socioemotional and ethical domains. Students need a sense that the school has a deep commitment to preserving the safety, worth and dignity of every member of the school community, to providing an orderly environment to learn in, and to modeling the values it stands for. There must be an ongoing emphasis on planning for, modeling and nurturing this school culture of respect, responsibility and excellence within the entire school community. This expectation should extend throughout every aspect of school life, including adult and student behavior, discipline, academics and extracurricular activities. This is intentional work that does not just happen because everyone has good intentions. It requires the school community to consider, plan for and craft the expectations, procedures and rules that lead to student academic, civic and character success. It should be the expectation that school leaders will facilitate the development of a school culture and climate which provides inspiration and clear models of what excellence looks like throughout the curriculum, and where every

person in the school community can grow and develop.

This is the foundation necessary to support students to meet the added rigor demands of the Common Core so they can achieve academically and become the very best young people they can be. Thus, we propose the following to enhance Common Core implementation:

- School leadership should create and maintain a Common Core Committee, with representatives from stakeholder groups. This committee's responsibility must be to continually assess the extent to which the school's expectations and procedures provide an ethical learning community that maximizes the character development and academic success of all its members.

Powerful Strategies for Schools to Move Forward

What can schools do so that academic achievement levels increase in expected ways when the states and U.S. Department of Education conduct their follow-up evaluation studies documenting the successes of the Common Core? We believe the studies will be positive and document academic achievement if schools build into their implementation a sustained focus on character education, socioemotional learning, and positive school climate. Sound educational theory and abundant empirical evidence (see, for example, www.character.org, www.CASEL.org, and www.schoolclimate.org) indicate that the Common Core Standards will be most successful when their implementation is accompanied by intentional and ongoing school wide efforts to:

- create a positive school culture and climate that includes high-quality teaching and learning, safety, relationships, learning environment, sense of community, and staff leadership;

- develop an ethical learning community based on norms of respect, responsibility, and excellence;
- emphasize moral and performance character in all subject areas;
- educate for democratic citizenship. Weave ethical and civic values through every aspect of school life, including the academic curriculum, cocurricular activities, staff modeling, and all human relationships; and
- prioritize prevention by focusing on socioemotional learning, civic virtues, and broad character development.

CHARACTER AND COMMON CORE STANDARDS GO HAND IN HAND AT UPPER MERION AREA MIDDLE SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY

Upper Merion Middle School is located in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. Comprised of a diverse population of 1,270 students in Grades 5 through 8, 30.2% of students receive free and reduced lunch, 306 are special education students and 42 different languages are represented through English language learners.

Thirteen years ago, during strategic planning, stakeholders articulated the need for a program that would improve school climate by improving relationships between staff and students as well as between student peers. Other goals included increasing standardized test scores through the improvement of instruction and student engagement, decreasing incidences of bullying and suspensions and increasing parent involvement and community partnerships.

All stakeholders joined to research and study character education and prosocial programs in order to address the needs identified through the strategic planning process. Many programs were explored and after much discussion the committee selected Community of Caring because it was a K–12 research-driven program and because the outcomes described

in the research were the same outcomes the middle school was looking to achieve.

The entire school community agreed upon the core ethical values of caring, respect, responsibility, trust and family. The values were woven through every aspect of school culture and curriculum as well as the other components of building student leadership, service learning, family and community involvement and social inclusion.

Teachers immediately began to lay the groundwork for a successful socioemotional learning environment by working together with students to develop classroom constitutions regarding expectations for a positive and respectful learning community in which students feel safe and supported. Research shows that promoting social and emotional skills brings about decreased violence leading to higher academic achievement and, therefore, improved scores and academic success as Upper Merion Area Middle School found when teachers analyzed data.

Having grown since the inception of Community of Caring for 8 years, Upper Merion Area Middle School had progressed to being a strong character education and prosocial program. They had reduced bullying by 55% since the year 2000. Through analyzing data the middle school recognized that student scores were increasing due to their positive, multifaceted comprehensive socioemotional skills learning where students felt secure and respected in a community of learners supported by all stakeholders.

The school consistently reflected upon modes of improvement in order to diminish the achievement gap and to intentionally create an environment of excellence and positive youth development. To accomplish this Upper Merion Area Middle School worked through the Character Education Partnership, studying their *11 Principles of Effective Character Education* (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2002) and completing the “Quality Standards Self-Assessment” which hones in on strengths and areas for improvement. While the middle school’s scores were excellent in some areas

of the assessment the school discovered the need to improve in Principle 3, which states, “The school uses a comprehensive, intentional and proactive approach to character development.” To do this they learned that they needed to thoroughly document character education in its academic frameworks in the curriculum, applying the vocabulary of higher level thinking.

In addition, the assessment showed that the middle school needed to grow in Principle 6, “The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.” For the middle school this meant increasing academic rigor, taking steps to eliminate achievement gaps between diverse student subgroups, assisting students to strive for continuous improvement, (perseverance, academic integrity, responsible decision-making, critical thinking) all Common Core goals supported by prosocial learning.

The faculty eagerly embraced the Quality Standards Assessment feedback, developing and documenting the necessary aforementioned interventions. They conducted the survey again in 2009 and applied for CEP’s National Schools of Character distinction. In 2010 Upper Merion Area Middle School was presented the “National School of Character” award.

The District’s Voyage Through the Common Core

In 2011, Superintendent Dr. Jane Callaghan voraciously read about the nationally approved Common Core Standards. She has a strong background in curriculum and is a deep thinker. She stated that

The focus of the district is to provide equitable access to learning for all students; understanding that equitable is not always equal. The Common Core Standards provide a tool and a metric for leveling the field and establishing high standards for teaching and learning. Integrating the Common Core Standards with high standards

for professional development and school climate will assist Upper Merion Area School District to more fully meet the needs of our diverse population. (Callaghan, 2011)

Believing wholeheartedly in these standards she communicated her vision to her administrative team. Dr. Callaghan developed a plan to teach principals about the Common Core through a summer Principal’s Academy and to further develop a plan with them to provide professional development to their teaching staff through departmental cohorts. All teachers work in professional development cohorts divided by departments and as such are responsible for facilitating their rigorous professional development, documenting and sharing their growth in instruction, Common Core, and character education throughout the district through a district wiki-space. Teachers share their Common Core and character-infused lessons with one another as they continue to increase their knowledge through communication. *All* teachers know they have a major role in infusing character and Common Core—that it is not solely the responsibility of language arts and mathematics teachers.

During the summer of 2012 principals facilitated summer cohorts and continued throughout the school year. They worked with extreme diligence to bring all staff on board, enthusiastically discussing Common Core on professional development days and during faculty meetings, grade level, and content meetings.

Teachers have continued to write rigorous Common Core lessons transitioning from covering a wide variety of material to covering a more focused curriculum in an in-depth manner. Teachers continue to reflect upon their lessons as they are also working on Danielson’s Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 2011). This framework not only stresses rigor and focused instruction, but also the importance of positive climate and environment.

Dr. Callaghan is a strong leader who masterfully brings about change. She shared with all district employees the importance of Common Core and the benefits in academic success

that students will achieve by embracing Common Core Standards infused with Community of Caring. Dr. Callaghan stresses the importance of linking prosocial skills with the Common Core and all district schools will now be trained in Community of Caring. The middle school has led the way, demonstrating that students will be successful through the Common Core because character education/prosocial learning is integrated through everything they do.

While the Upper Merion Area School District has pulled together in their efforts to implement Common Core the authors understand that other districts may have difficult struggles and experience pushback from staff. For this reason the Superintendent and district office leaders and principals must have a comprehensive plan for positive change to occur through meaningful and comprehensive professional development. Deep and thoughtful work may take years of a committed journey in order to integrate Common Core Standards linked with prosocial learning.

Districts must understand that it is only through the intentional teaching of moral and performance character, integrated through the Common Core, intertwined and interdependent, that students will be truly prepared for greater success in college and careers. Much collaboration will be needed for planning a positive classroom climate and culture where the Common Core will thrive. The investment in time payoff will provide improved academic results.

Because of the superintendent's, principals', and teachers' shared leadership process, the Upper Merion Area School District has enthusiastically embraced the Common Core Standards as a means to increase rigor to prepare all students for success in college and careers.

The school community has concluded that to be successful in the 21st century all students will need to perform to high standards, and to gain the cognitive and prosocial skills that will enable them to manage the complex challenges of 21st Century Skills. To that end the district

administrators and staff researched and studied the Common Core over the course of two years. Leaders engaged in and facilitated systemic change processes to create a shared vision and collaborative leadership supported by professional development focused on improved student performance and a supportive learning environment inspiring excellence.

During cohorts teachers reviewed the Common Core Toolkit: A Guide to Aligning the Common Core Standards With the Framework for 21st Century Skills (Magner, Soule, & Westbrook, 2011). This framework promotes higher levels of academic content while weaving prosocial interdisciplinary themes such as:

- **Global Awareness:** "Learning from and working collaboratively with individuals representing diverse cultures, religions and lifestyles in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue in personal, work and community contexts."
- **Collaborate With Others:** "Exercise flexibility and willingness to be helpful in making necessary compromises to accomplish a common goal." "Assume shared responsibility for collaborative work, and value the individual contributions made by each team member."
- **Media Literacy:** "Examine how individuals interpret messages differently, how values and points of view are included or excluded, and how media can influence beliefs and behaviors."
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** "Deal positively with praise, setbacks and criticism." "Understand, negotiate and balance diverse views and beliefs to reach workable solutions, particularly in multicultural environments."
- **Be Self-Directed Learners:** "Demonstrate commitment to learning as a life-long process."
- **Work Effectively With Diverse Teams:** "Respect cultural differences and work effectively with people from a range of social and cultural backgrounds."

- **Productivity and Accountability:** “Work positively and ethically.”
- **Leadership and Responsibility:** “Use interpersonal and problem-solving skills to influence and guide others toward a goal.” “Inspire others to reach their very best via example and selflessness.” “Demonstrate integrity and ethical behavior in using influence and power.”

The above are only a few of the 21st Century Skills that are taught along with the Common Core. These skills are documented, infused and reinforced throughout the curriculum.

In addition, the Pennsylvania Department of Education adopted “Standards for Student Interpersonal Skills” (2012), which provide a target for instruction for all stakeholders. They are to be used for creating curriculum and are to be “infused, promoted, modeled and expected throughout the family, school, and community in every aspect of a student’s day” (Pennsylvania Department of Education, p. 3). An example of “Decision Making and Responsible Behavior,” Active Engagement Standard 16.3.12.c states, “Actively engage in creating and promoting an environment that encourages healthy relationships (upstanders versus bystanders) and positive responsibility as an observer of negative behavior.” This standard is a prime example of creating a culture of upstanders that promote antibullying behaviors. To access these standards go to www.pdesas.org, click on “Safe and Supportive Schools,” then click on “Standards for Student Interpersonal Skills.”

Following are indicators of success utilized by the Upper Merion Area Middle School that promote the success of Common Core Standards: Through seminal American documents and complex reading texts, students are taught to value and participate in discussions centering on the American Constitution and democracy. Civic purpose and good citizenship are taught intentionally and documented throughout the curriculum. In addition the school includes mastery of the core subjects and 21st

century themes, which include geography, history, government and civics so that students are college, career and civically prepared.

Upper Merion Area Middle School creates a common language that promotes school family, community and unity. They build strong connections between students, teachers and parents. Teachers intentionally integrate moral character such as respect, empathy and caring as well as performance character such as responsibility and work ethic through the curriculum. They utilize literature, teachable moments, modeling and rich classroom moral and ethical discussions to bring about high quality academic performance, achieved through a culture of excellence driven by the entire school community.

To balance rigor and high expectations there is a strong network of support designed to build student stamina and self-discipline. Teachers’ communication with parents is extraordinary, appraising them of student needs and growth. Data, scores and strategies are shared to assist parents’ understanding of how best to help their child succeed.

A strong group of community and staff tutors and mentors provide extra support during and after school. Stakeholders have been trained to reinforce character and values that are woven through everything throughout the school community. Profound community partnerships exist through Rotary, Optimist Club, senior citizens, the Upper Merion Martin Luther King, Jr. Committee, Lockheed Martin and the Upper Merion Police Department, to name a few. For example, one Rotarian made a major contribution for a young man at risk for dropping out of school. He tutored him biweekly in mathematics, assisting him in successfully passing the year and talking to him about prosocial skills required for a career. The student stated that he had learned much more than math. He had learned that a community member could respect him and that when he acted responsibly his focus changed so he became a willing learner instead of an unfocused, disruptive student. This Rotarian, while teaching the Common Core Math Standards,

inculcated perseverance, problem solving, compassion and teamwork. The combination of rigor and supports paid off for this student and his class. Data from the new Algebra Keystone Assessment taken in January report that 2% of students earned a score of Proficient and 98% earned an “Advanced” score in the assessment (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012–2013).

Through their cohort, health teachers wrote Common Core lessons providing high quality informational texts and discussions involving the dangers of drugs and alcohol. These teachers, in working with the superintendent, shared their motivation to learn more about teaching the Common Core. They utilized Common Core Standard cc.1.2.7 “Read and comprehend nonfiction and informational text ... proficiently” (Grade 7 Common Core State Standards; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) as a springboard to teach about how drugs/alcohol medically destroy one’s health and brain cells.

The school has done an exceptional job with prevention. After an organized convergence on student leadership the students have taken ownership of examining school and community needs, researching best practices, and addressing areas of concern. After learning of student suicides in nearby districts, student leaders created action plans to support peers and to communicate help resources to youth who were feeling sad, depressed or alone. To heighten drug and alcohol awareness students provided literature to parents at parent drop locations, raised funds for celebrity speakers for assemblies, sponsored programs about drugs/alcohol, and produced cable infomercials for the school’s website and community cable, all meaningful service to the school and community.

In sixth grade, the Common Core Standard cc.1.3.6 E states “Analyze how the structure of a text contributes to the development of theme, setting and plot” (Grade 6 Common Core State Standards; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief

State School Officers, 2010). Students read *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli and in the text analysis they studied the theme about bullying and prejudice and how it relates to the development of the plot. They completed a differentiated menu project, which included “appetizers, entrees, and side dishes” that addressed Mars Bars Thompson, the bully in the story. Students designed a campaign to ban bullying in schools. Students had the option to choose:

- Design a campaign poster and slogan including an illustration on bully prevention including your analysis of the development of theme, setting and plot.
- Write a persuasive dialogue, commercial, or produce a video and present it to the class. Include reasons why you want to wipe out bullying in schools.

In the Main Course: Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum

- Discuss the characters in the book that are prejudiced. Write a detailed essay describing how you would take responsibility to break down walls of prejudice.
- Write a journal entry explaining how you would feel seeing prejudice in your community and what you would do about it.

Along with the in-depth study about prejudice and bullying in the book, students follow up with Common Core, higher level writing about bringing positive change to replace hurtful behaviors. Deeper learning occurs regarding the theme of the book and core ethical values along with improving student-writing techniques. Students in literary groups focus on collaboration, critical and creative thinking and problem solving (performance character) as well as compassion, empathy, respect and reinforcing the value of every individual (moral character). In this way both moral and performance character are intentionally taught

while addressing the rigorous analysis of the structure of the text.

They then “Develop and analyze the topic (bullying) in writing with relevant facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples, including graphics and multimedia when useful, aiding in comprehension (cc.1.4.6 C)” (Grade 6 Common Core State Standards; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). One student’s video project about bullying earned an award from CEP, and has been used to teach peers to care about others and to “not bully” or be a bystander.

Students then plan no bullying and no cyber-bullying campaigns, organizing public relations media blasts, assemblies, videos, speak-outs, schoolwide antibullying tutorials and lessons for the elementary schools, all linked to the curriculum.

Students have joined the faculty efforts to promote every student as being valued. In addition to literature and a celebration of diversity students teach Common Core lessons about diversity to their peers. Students model their values, fostering a culture of safety and respect for self and others.

The service learning project takes place at a setting in the book called Elmwood Park Zoo, which is a distressed area not far from the school. Students plan a day of service at the zoo, cleaning up litter, assisting the zoo personnel and learning about animals, the environment, and one another while reflecting on their service.

Every student and staff member at the middle school participates in service learning. Students have a love for these nonmandatory acts of kindness for which they now formulate detailed plans, presenting their proposals to teachers and administrators for approval, leading the project to fruition. The reflections from their service are heartwarming. This year the district will work on linking *all* service to the more rigorous Common Core character lessons.

Upper Merion’s Replicable Formula for Success

How did Upper Merion Area Middle School progress to a level in which character means so much to students that they lead interventions, no bullying campaigns, the celebration of diversity and service learning projects while taking responsibility for their learning? Teachers interweave prosocial skills and Common Core trainings to infuse character through their rigorous Common Core lessons, modeling and discussing healthy, positive relationships. For example, eighth grade students analyze two to three rigorous texts about the Holocaust as required by the Common Core Standard cc 1.3.8.E. “Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its style and meaning” (Grade 8 Common Core State Standards; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). In doing so they complete research learning historical and literary facts culminating in a demanding written product. While meeting the standards, students discuss the pain experienced by the Jewish people and they talk about the importance of empathy and diversity in their school, community, and world. Bullying is again discussed and in eighth grade all students write about how they can prevent the pain caused by the Holocaust and pain caused by bullying. Students complete a paper clip service-learning project and teach lessons about diversity to all students, Grades 5–7. In this way Common Core and rigor are integrated into reading and writing and moral and performance character are demonstrated through student actions in the entire school community. Through a partnership with the Holocaust Awareness Museum a survivor speaks to middle school students about “Preserving History to Learn from the Past.” Students wrote emotional reflections following their Holocaust study and the assembly. One student cried and her hands shook as she presented her reflection to her teacher describing

what her learning experience and her service learning project meant to her.

The formula for success for Upper Merion Area School District has been one of incorporating Common Core and character through concentrated professional development, integrating Common Core Standards with corresponding character skills (best practices) and documenting them in the curriculum.

The National Schools of Character process has served as a strong model demonstrating that learning and caring (Common Core and character) provide an essential single focus.

Just as Upper Merion Middle School has perfected its character education program over thirteen years, it may take several years for teachers to totally integrate character throughout the newer rigorous Common Core lessons. District administrators believe that through intense, well-planned and continuous professional development, teachers and the entire community will be compelled to join in this movement. Through reflection, academic improvement and outreach, Upper Merion Area will continue to share the possibilities and successes they know they will attain through hard work and modeling the marriage of Common Core and character education.

Eileen Dachnowicz wrote in the 2010 National School of Character Award-Winning Practices manual the following quotation from Zeinab, an eighth-grade student—"It is not how big a school is or how beautiful. It's not the building: It's the people. Here we do not have many races. We have only one—the human race." Ms. Dachnowicz continued, "It is caring and compassionate students that make the school truly extraordinary. The school's focus on character, scholarship, leadership and service has brought about amazing results" (2010, p. 36).

In summary, by embedding positive school culture and intentionally integrating prosocial education and character throughout instruction the Common Core Standards will be strengthened and supported. Students will be inspired to excellence through the intentional foundation provided by a quality learning community

that prepares them for meaningful college experiences and careers.

SO WHAT CAN ALL STAKEHOLDERS DO TO REPLICATE THESE PROMISING PRACTICES?

Three Things School Leaders Can Do to Get Started

- Have high expectations and provide support to teachers to make the paradigm shifts necessary for Common Core implementation through quality professional development and planning time.
- Provide time at every faculty meeting for teachers to discuss Common Core issues, present model lessons and plan for a climate and culture of respect, responsibility and excellence that supports student learning.
- Provide time for teachers to comb through data and make instructional decisions together based on their findings. Explore school climate measurement tools and improvement models that shape an effective improvement process.

Three Things Elementary Teachers Can Do

- Form grade level and cross-grade level study groups to learn about the Common Core together, and do grade-level and schoolwide planning.
- Collaborate to plan a wide range of ways to integrate daily reading and writing across the curriculum, and to gather engaging, high quality informational text sets to support basal selections.
- Intentionally plan for and create caring learning environments for students by, for example, pairing sixth graders with first graders as buddy partners who walk to school assemblies together, read

together, and do service projects together.

Three Things Secondary Teachers Can Do

- Form departmental and cross-departmental study groups to learn about the Common Core together, and to gather engaging informational text sets of varying complexity to support literary selections and interdisciplinary teaching.
- Develop departmental and schoolwide plans for making the paradigm shifts necessary to implement the Common Core that include daily reading, writing and speaking in every subject, and a caring and supportive schoolwide learning environment.
- Have students read and discuss a wide range of engaging, complex informational and literary texts that illustrate people who have achieved and contributed to the work and prosperity of the world across various fields.

Three Things School Board Members Can Do

- Provide leadership to schools and districts and have high expectations for quality implementation of the Common Core, including intentional planning for the supportive school climate needed for every student to succeed. Emphasize school climate measurement tools and improvement models that shape an effective improvement process.
- Plan for and provide meaningful support and resources to schools and districts to make the profound paradigm shifts in the Common Core, and to address the new performance assessments.
- Provide ongoing quality professional development opportunities for teachers, including resource banks, to learn more about the Common Core, and to gain

expertise in implementation and performance assessment.

Three Things Parents Can Do

- Partner with their child's school to learn more about the Common Core and how to support their student to be successful.
- Provide a variety of reading materials for their child that include both literary and informational text (i.e., stories, non-fiction books, articles, etc.).
- Work with the school to encourage it to teach the same character lessons that are taught at home, such as respect, responsibility, and effort.

Three Things University Teacher Education Programs Can Do

- Make the Common Core part of all teacher education planning and embed a Common Core focus in every teacher education course.
- Include teaching on how to plan for and create optimal learning environments that help all young people develop academically, socially emotionally and ethically in all classroom management, methods, special education and English as a second language courses.
- Develop a resource bank of articles, assessments and research on the Common Core, character education, school climate and socioemotional learning that supports optimal student development and success.

Schools should be places where students become college, career, and civic ready. They should also be places where students develop, achieve and flourish physically, intellectually, academically, civically, aesthetically, socially, emotionally, ethically and spiritually.

The Common Core takes a major step toward helping schools become such places by widening and sharpening our vision of what it means to be an educated person in the 21st century. To achieve Common Core's full

potential will require integrating Common Core standards with educating for character. If Common Core is taught in a context of core values and quality character education, it can inspire hearts and minds, transform human relationships, promote both excellence and ethics, and move the work of the world forward.

To achieve a full and effective integration of Common Core and character education is no easy task. But as we have tried to demonstrate here, it is a job that can be done. And it is one we surely must do if we wish to prepare our students for a very different world than has existed in the past, and to enable all students to make a positive difference in that world and a happy and flourishing life for themselves.

Acknowledgment: The Character Education Partnership thanks the Education Advisory Council for their contributions to this position paper: Anne L. Bryant, Marvin W. Berkowitz, Jonathan Cohen, Charles Elbot, Maurice Elias, Kristie Fink—cochair, Karen Geller—cochair, Darcia Narvaez, Clark Power, Clifton L. Taulbert, David B. Wanggaard, and CEP leadership Mark Hyatt, Russ Sojourner, Rebecca Sipos, Diane Berreth, and Thomas Lickona. Go to The Character Education Partnership or www.character.org for more information.

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