

Character Building Curriculum Takes A Plan Of Action

Dr. Thomas Lickona, a developmental psychologist and professor of education at the State University of New York at Cortland, is generally regarded as the nation's foremost authority on Character Education. He is the author of five books on moral development and Character Education. His book, *"Educating For Character"* has been cited as "the definitive work in the field" and won a 1992 Christopher Award for "affirming the highest values of the human spirit." Dr. Lickona recently shared some of his personal views on the subject in an interview with *Colleagues*. Following are some excerpts:

How can "Character Education" be described in a simple, succinct fashion:

Character Education is the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue through every phase of school life.

Why is it imperative that schools and educators take an active role in implementing it in everyday activities for students:

There are basically three reasons why schools must engage in Character Education. First, students need good character to be fully human. They need qualities like self discipline, empathy, honesty and good judgment to be capable of love and capable of work. Secondly, there is a need for the good of our schools so that they are better places of teaching and learning. They accomplish this when they become symbols of loving learning communities. And third, we need it to build a moral society. The root problem behind the many moral problems in society today are things such as dishonesty, violence, drug abuse and sexual promiscuity. Those kinds of things are rooted on the absence of good character.

Is creating a character-building curriculum a difficult, arduous task for teachers to undertake:

If we define Character Education as everything the school does and everything the teacher does — an oral message constantly being taught either intentionally or unintentionally — doing it well is a very difficult effort. We need to be setting a good example consistently through our professional and personal conduct.

We accomplish this by treating all students with respect and love and by handling discipline and conflict resolution with an approach that doesn't only control their behavior, but develops self discipline and internal controls. To do it in a comprehensive sense, it is a demanding challenge, but it is an inescapable one, because it is inevitable that we affect students' character.

What are the primary arguments you hear from opponents of Character Education:

There is a criticism that it can be reduced to nothing more than conformity training — and there are some aspects where it can be done like that. In an article entitled "How Not to Teach Values," the author sets up a straw man and knocks it down by painting a picture of Character Education as being an oppressive, behavioral, control indoctrination. Whereas, we understand it as education of the mind, the heart and the behavior. It is really an attempt to cull students' moral judgment, moral feeling and moral conduct, and those three taken together in a moral sense is certainly trying to develop critical thinking to foster a responsive behavior.

Other kinds of critics see it as impractical, because schools are already overwhelmed with current responsibilities and can't effectively manage any more. That is mistaken, because schools are engaged in formation of character. It comes down to being a matter of doing it poorly or doing it well. If they do it well, they help their other tasks, because academic values increase where there is virtual respect for authority. Character education contributes to an effective academic environment.

There have been some fears that Character Education might involve inappropriate introduction of religion in public schools. That is a mistaken

criticism, because Character Education promotes virtues of respect and self control which transcend cultural differences. The Character Education effort is not a violation of our First Amendment rights.

In a public school setting — from a legal standpoint — what are some ways teachers can separate "imposing personal values" from teaching children how they should act and behave for the "good of society":

The school is wise to begin by attempting to involve not only the whole school staff, but whole parent community to target areas that adults would most like the school to teach students. Whatever process you use — and there are a number of ways to choose which core qualities you want to focus on — schools come up with a remarkably similar list. There are basic virtues that are so fundamental, that rational people everywhere would agree that they want them to be taught to their children. It is also important in a democratic society that there is a public forum to identify those qualities and have an ownership in a school.

I don't think it's a sense of imposing personal values on somebody else, but there is a common ethical ground that is essential for survival of our society and for our humanity as we move into the 21st century.

It is also necessary for people to lead a fulfilling life. You can't possibly lead a fulfilled life of lying, cheating and exploiting your fellow human being. Contributing to the welfare of others brings a sense of well being and fulfillment.

In what areas do our students need the most immediate focus and what is the best way to begin formulating a plan of action for the classroom:

Every teacher has the opportunity to develop good character in his or her classroom. You need classroom order and need rules to govern behavior to provide an opportunity to foster respect and responsibility and to have an orderly classroom where instruction is possible.

Set up a discipline plan. Foster a sense of community in the classroom. Teachers have countless opportunities to foster it without even formal consensus or without a community effort. A school-wide effort is the ideal goal.

If schools were just to make civil behavior a starting point, they could build from there. What do we already do? What else might we do? A simple compelling starting focus for any school is to make a starting list of ways to develop character, even if they hadn't called it "Character Education" in the past.

Nationwide, how large of a movement is taking place toward implementing forms of Character Education in our schools, and how large of a role do you foresee it having on K-12 curriculums as we head into the next millennium:

There are a number of signs that are showing the movement of Character Education in our classrooms continues to grow. This is a responsibility of public education. There is an explosion of websites and research available on the internet and you will continue to see growth in this area as schools realize that Character Education is the among the most important things schools do, and the foundation of everything else.

*Colleague
to
Colleagues*



*An Interview With
Dr. Thomas Lickona
Author of "Educating
For Character"*