

The Effectiveness of Character Education Programs in Middle and High Schools

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### Abstract

This document defines character and character education, as it applies to the school setting. It explores the history and purpose of character education, the impact that character education has had on school violence, programmatic attempts at character education, and the strengths and weaknesses associated with character education programs. The researcher also identifies developmental targets and explains the role of the school counselor in implementing character education.

The researcher sought out to determine the core values that were being incorporated and the teachers' perceptions of the character education program at the middle and high school level. This project took place at a rural public school in Livingston County, located approximately 20 miles southwest of Rochester, NY. The individuals who were selected to participate were employed as full-time teachers in the middle and high school.

Teachers were asked to provide their perceptions of the character education program in regards to planning and implementation. Overall, teachers indicated that they were supportive of the program and were successfully able to teach, demonstrate, and model the behaviors that they expected their students to exhibit. Teachers identified several core values that were being incorporated into their classroom curricula, but integrity, responsibility, and respect were identified as being the most significant.

### The Effectiveness of Character Education Programs in Middle and High Schools

A person's character is a culmination of his behaviors, qualities and attitudes (Battistich, 2000; Josephson Institute, 2011). Character has also been referred to as the behaviors that are exhibited by an individual when no one else is watching (Battistich, 2000). Good morals and behaviors are not inherited, but rather learned and developed (Character Education Partnership, 2010; Josephson Institute, 2011).

Cordry & Wilson (2004) highlight the importance of parents' involvement with their children at home and in school (pg. 56). Since a child will spend approximately 43,800 hours with his parents before he reaches school-age, the parent is considered the first "teacher" in his/her child's life (Cordry & Wilson, 2004). With that said, it is the parent's job to educate and instill positive values into the child before the child ever enters the classroom. According to a survey published by Psychological Self Help (2003), 20% of people surveyed in 1965 believed it was acceptable to cheat on a test. Twenty five years later, the same survey revealed that 37% of people believed it was okay to cheat on a test and that number was up to 67% in 2003. The results of this survey could indicate that parents are not acting as responsible role models for their children.

One study revealed that parental involvement greatly decreases from grades K-5 to grades 6-8 to grades 9-12 (Child Trends Databank, 1999). The study showed that 77.4% of parents were actively involved in their child's academics in grades K-5. In grades 6-8, only 67.4% of parents were actively involved and this number dropped even more in grades 9-12, where only 56.8% of parents were actively involved. Another study conducted by Annual Surveys (2003) indicated that teachers who had been in the field for 10 years or more believed that parents were:

- Less willing to spend time with their children,
- Less involved with their child's growth in the classroom,
- Less ethical or moral,
- More self-absorbed,
- Less demanding.

In the same study, 81% of teachers who had been in the field for more than 20 years reported that students have become more disrespectful to authority figures (Annual Surveys, 2003). The survey also revealed that 73% of teachers believed students are more unethical; 65% believed students are more irresponsible; 60% believed that students are more self-absorbed; 57% believed that students spend less time studying; and 44% believed that students display a lack of interest in their academics.

If parents truly are less involved in their child's academics and character-building, then the responsibility falls on the child's teachers, who are most likely to influence a student's character aside from the child's parents (See & Arthur, 2011). The aforementioned data clearly outlines a significant need for implementing character education into schools' curricula, especially at the higher grade levels. It is imperative that teachers play a significant role in helping a child to develop and maintain good character, morals, and values.

Character education is one way to facilitate character development (Character Education Partnership, 2010). According to the Character Education Partnership, character education is a "national movement creating schools that foster ethical, responsible and caring young people by modeling and teaching good character through emphasis on universal values that we all share" (2010, para. 1). Some of the values that can be addressed in a character education program include respect, justice, and responsibility for self and others (Parker, Nelson, & Burns, 2010).

According to Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, and Smith (2006), the older generation is responsible for shaping the character of young people.

As of 2008, 18 states had already mandated character education, while an additional eight states had legislation that supports character education in the schools (Character Education Partnership, 2010; Stiff-Williams, 2010). The federal government has provided funding for 40 states to support the implementation of character education in the schools.

The aim of the research discussed in this article was to explore teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward a character education program in their middle and high school. Based on the findings, suggestions are made as to how the school can use teachers' experiences in order to better implement and improve character education. The research is relevant, because teachers have the potential to impact students' character development and, therefore, must model good behavior (See & Arthur, 2011).

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

The review of the literature has supported the need to study character education in the higher academic levels, specifically middle and high school. The literature review outlined seven main themes. The first theme addressed the history of character education, beginning in ancient Greece. Character education has played several different roles in education since ancient Greece and continues to evolve over time. The second theme addressed character education's impact on school violence. Educators who have integrated character education into the schools have credited these programs for improvements in student behaviors. The third theme outlined the purpose of character education. Character education is often incorporated into schools to improve student academics and behaviors, reduce violence and bullying, and instill values into

students. The fourth theme identified the programmatic attempts and successful programs that have been used to incorporate character education into schools. Two examples of programmatic attempts included a national curriculum in Britain and the Smart Character Choices (SCC) program, which was designed to positively influence children's behavior in schools. The *Unified Studies*, CHARACTER COUNTS!, and Second Step programs were identified as successful character education programs. The fifth main theme addressed strengths and weaknesses associated with implementing a character education program. In general, the schools that spent more time and effort implementing character education programs have found more positive results than schools that spent less time and effort. The sixth main theme outlined the developmental targets for character education. Although character education can be implemented at any academic level, this section recognized elementary schools as being the most likely to include character education. The seventh main theme addressed the role of the school counselor in implementing character education. School counselors may be one of the most important roles within the school atmosphere when it comes to character education. Since the school counselor is often responsible for making assessments and forming therapeutic relationships with students, they are likely to be a good resource for students who need moral development.

## **History**

The idea of character education was introduced to the United States' education system centuries ago, but the focus on its importance has varied throughout the years (Brimi, 2009). Character education was introduced in ancient Greece, but there has been a constant debate about whether or not character education should be incorporated into the general education curriculum (Brimi, 2009; Healea, 2006).

Prior to the 1800's, educational focus was primarily on morality and religious expectations (Brimi, 2009; Healea, 2006). Schools in this era attempted to infuse a particular set of values into their students, while teaching the Christian values that were so prominent at the time. Distinguished institutions such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were originally established as religious institutions with the primary goal of educating priests (Healea, 2006). As the 1800's progressed, colleges began to focus less on religion and character education. Colleges began to reintroduce character education initiatives in the 1900's.

Beginning in the 1800's, societies placed a large emphasis on socializing youth in order to prepare them for their futures (DeMause, 1974). In the nineteenth century, the American education system shifted its focus again when the country experienced a heavy influx of immigrants (Brimi, 2009). Educators became responsible for teaching the American values that were necessary to live and work in the country. For example, promptness, respect and dependability were taught specifically to aid those who would be working in a factory. The people of the immigration generation seemed to experience a mix of religious and middle-class expectations. Children of immigrants were taught Protestant values, along with the aforementioned values that were being taught to their factory-working parents. At the same time, Americans also began to instill moral values not only for the overall well-being of the individual, but also for the well-being of society as a whole.

In the first half of the twentieth century, educators honed their attention in on encouraging specific behaviors and beliefs in their students in order to create a stable society (Brimi, 2009). Moral reasoning was infused into character education programs with the use of Lawrence Kohlberg's six stages of moral reasoning (Healea, 2006). Around the same time as moral reasoning, David Tyack's "One Best System" was put into place to group students by age

and grade level for the first time (Urban & Wagoner, 2004). The changing school system also brought an emphasis on different values. Much like the values that are encouraged in the current educational system, the “One Best System” emphasized: being on time, behaving appropriately and attending school on a regular basis. William Hutchins outlined even more values in his *Children’s Morality Code of 1916* (Mulkey, 1997). He expressed an interest in emphasizing responsibility, self-discipline, and cooperation in the classroom. Critics would argue that teaching these moral values in school does not ensure that students will behave appropriately outside of school (Beachum & McCray, 2005; Mulkey, 1997).

After two world wars and the rapid advance of Soviet technology, the American education system made yet another change in its curriculum (Brimi, 2009). Per the federal government’s demands, American educators turned their focus towards increasing the intensity of math and science instruction in order to keep pace with their Soviet counterparts. Character education was not completely neglected, although it did become a secondary priority to math and science education during this time period.

Values clarification was introduced in the 1960’s by researchers Louis Rath, Merrill Harmon, and Sydney Simon (Beachum & McCray, 2005). Values clarification is centered on the idea that people struggle with uncertainty about their values (Kirschenbaum, 1977). The purpose of values clarification was to educate students about making the “right” decisions, but without forcing them to make decisions based on what is expected by the school or society. Students were taught how to apply a process of valuing in order to ease their uncertainty about their values (Kirschenbaum, Harmin, Howe, & Simon, 1977). Teachers would offer hypothetical situations to the students and encourage them to formulate potential resolutions to these situations. It was the hope that, by working with other students and discussing the possible

outcomes of a situation, students would come to learn what was morally right and wrong. A potential downfall to values clarification was that students did not always choose the action or behavior that was considered morally correct (Brimi, 2009). After the focus on values clarification fizzled out, William Bennett reintroduced the emphasis on religious morality, specifically school prayer (Urban & Wagoner, 2004). Since the Constitution orders the separation from church and state, mandatory school prayer was prohibited. State officials were not deterred from passing laws, however, which incorporated moments of silence into the schools. Policy makers determined that religion could encourage students to act in a particular way, even if the schools could not.

In the 1980's, schools moved away from encouraging students to use moral reasoning and instead, implemented social programs that promoted very specific behaviors (Brimi, 2009). Possibly the most familiar program to date, the "Just Say No" campaign clearly demonstrated the difference between right and wrong. Instead of allowing students to work together and formulate possible resolutions to situations, students were simply told what to do and what not to do. They were expected to "just say no" to drugs, alcohol, sex, and any other behaviors that were deemed inappropriate by the school or society.

There continued to be a strong push for character education in the 1990's (Brimi, 2009). In 1992, there were three events that catapulted character education into the national spotlight (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009). First, the Character Education Partnership was founded, allowing individuals and organizations to collaborate on the development of character of students across the United States. Second, a group of 30 individuals and organizations were brought together by the Josephson Institute of Ethics to create a plan for facilitating character development. The same group wrote the Aspen Declaration, which later became Character Counts and its "Six Pillars of

Character.” The “Six Pillars of Character” is recognized as an influential set of values amongst character educators. Third, a law was passed to provide financial support for the implementation of character education programs, under the direction of President, Bill Clinton. To this day, the three events that raised the awareness of character education in the 1990’s continue to play a large role in the character education movement.

### **Impact on School Violence**

There were many high-profile events that took place in the 1990’s that highlighted the violence trends in American schools (Brimi, 2009; Character First 2010). Educators have also noticed more disrespect, bullying and a general lack of manners from their students. As cited by Stedje (2010), the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported:

- In 2005-2006, approximately 38% of public schools reported one or more acts of violence to police.
- In 2007, nearly 30% of students reported gangs at their schools.
- In 2003-2004, approximately 10% of city school teachers, 6% of suburban teachers, and 5% of rural teachers reported that students had threatened to harm them.
- In 2006, schools reported almost 30 violent crimes (including rape, sexual assault, aggravated assault, and robbery) per 1,000 students.
- In 2007, just over 30% of students reported being bullied. Four percent reported being victims of cyberbullying.

Stedje (2010) reported a direct link between the violent behaviors exhibited by students and the lack of values being taught in the students’ homes. The educators who have integrated

character education into the schools have credited these programs for improvements in student behaviors.

Some character education programs, such as “Character Counts,” were recently implemented into schools districts across the United States as a result of the increased incidences of violence in the schools (Josephson Institute Center for Youth Ethics, 2008). These character programs strive to teach respect, responsibility, honesty, and integrity, but they can be difficult to measure.

### **Purpose**

The Character Education Partnership (CEP), founded in 1993, is the leading advocate for character education in the country (Character Education Partnership, 2010). The CEP identifies the following as the main reasons for incorporating character education into schools: improve school climate and culture, increase teacher satisfaction, enhance student achievement, and prevent disruptive behaviors.

The CEP developed the *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* to assist schools with their implementation of effective character education programs (Character Education Partnership, 2010). The 11 principles that are outlined are meant to serve as a guide for executing an effective and comprehensive character education program. Programs based on CEP’s 11 principles would adhere to the following:

1. Promotes core ethical values.
2. Teaches students to understand, care about, and act upon these core ethical values.
3. Encompasses all aspects of the school culture.
4. Fosters a caring school community.
5. Offers opportunities for moral action.

6. Supports academic achievement.
7. Develops intrinsic motivation.
8. Includes whole-staff involvement.
9. Requires positive leadership of staff and students.
10. Involves parents and community members.
11. Assesses results and strives to improve.

The purposes of character education go beyond preparing students to behave and achieve in school. Ideally, effective character education programs will also instill moral values into students by addressing specific issues within society and generating solutions that will provide a safer atmosphere for youth (Arthur, 2005). Some would say that the primary goal of general education has always been to “produce good citizens,” and incorporating character education into the schools is one way to accomplish this (Arthur, 2005; Character Education Partnership, 2010). Stedje (2010) reiterated this point by stating that the goal of character education is to help students make smart, sound decisions that reflect morality and good values, not to follow the demands of educators to exhibit good character.

The National Curriculum reported that citizenship education is intended to help students become contributing members of society (Revell & Arthur, 2007). Although character education and citizenship education are not interchangeable, The National Curriculum recognized the connection between students’ character development and their involvement in community and political life. Many character education programs across the country support the idea that these programs instill values that allow students to become good citizens to society (Howard, Berkowitz, & Schaeffer, 2004).

### **Programmatic Attempts**

In Britain, there is a national curriculum in place that divides school-age children into four different stages (McColloch & Mathieson, 1995). These stages, which all include personal, social, and health education sections, are correspondent to students' ages. In the final stage, students should be able to stand up for themselves, exhibit assertiveness, and confront the issues of bullying and discrimination in their school (Department for Education and Skills, and Quality and Curriculum Authority, 2005). The Office for Standards in Education (2008) is responsible for assessing the schools and publishing reports which evaluate the character growth within entire schools. Although American schools provide similar programs to enhance character growth in the schools, they are less likely to conduct assessments or hold the schools accountable for the programs' success.

The Smart Character Choices (SCC) program is a character education program that was designed to positively influence children's behavior in schools (Glasser, 1998; Glasser, 1999). Choice Theory and its implementation into schools was the foundation of this program. Choice Theory is based on the belief that an individual's desires and needs influence his behavior. The SCC program strived to meet five basic human needs (physiological survival, belonging, fun, freedom, and power) by using Choice Theory (Glasser, 1998). Teachers and parents reported positive outcomes from the SCC program (Parker, Nelson, & Burns, 2010).

The *Unified Studies* has been in existence since 1975 and is specifically targeted toward a secondary school population. *Unified Studies* was developed to change the experiences of eleventh and twelfth grade students, so they could further enjoy and appreciate the learning process (Lewis & Hatch, 1991). Although the program was not designed specifically to enhance the character of the students involved, graduates of the program have identified character

development as one of the most significant outcomes. Based upon the research that has been done on the *Unified Studies* program, character education programs at the secondary level can be successful when they are spearheaded by compassionate teachers (Anderson, 1997; Lickona, 1991; & Weber, 1998) and implemented while using a variety of settings to enhance learning (Williams, Yanchar, Jensen, & Lewis, 2003).

The *Unified Studies* program accepts 65-75 students per year (Williams et al., 2003). Students must apply to the program and the teachers select participants from a wide range of populations. By working with individuals from diverse populations, students have the opportunity to learn from the different backgrounds and experiences of their peers. The program focuses on incorporating valuable lessons into core education classes, such as English, science, and social studies. To incorporate the lessons, teachers use real life experiences in and out of the classroom. By doing so, teachers are introducing and demonstrating skills that students can use well beyond their high school years. Teachers in the *Unified Studies* program believe that character issues can be incorporated into all of their lessons in some way. Unlike other character education programs, teachers do not preach the development of character or teach specific values. Instead, they give students the opportunity to enhance their character traits through classroom sessions and day-long field trips. *Unified Studies* incorporates experiential activities into the educational atmosphere. The course disclosure document reveals that learning through the involvement of activities is the foundation of the *Unified Studies* program (Lewis & Hatch, 1991). The teachers believed that students would learn more if they were actively involved with the environment, rather than just reading about it from a textbook. They also maintained that learning occurs more quickly if students are engaged in real situations that require real problem-solving. Personal values and priorities are often exposed in the natural environment, according to

the course disclosure document. The fears and anxieties that are often associated with new experiences are not typically encountered in the *Unified Studies* program, because students enjoy learning and are motivated to try new things.

Graduates of the *Unified Studies* program were interviewed and asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their experiences with the program (Williams et al., 2003). Results revealed that teachers of the *Unified Studies* program provided a positive environment by showing genuine compassion towards the students who participate. Teachers also changed the program's curriculum to accommodate the different needs of the students. Through the interviews and questionnaires, researchers learned that *Unified Studies* facilitated character development, because participants were motivated to learn, set goals, and explore new things. They were taught how to apply what they learned in the program to their real lives, to succeed in school, and become contributing members of society. *Unified Studies* also enhanced character by enabling students to develop positive relationships with their peers, teachers, and environment. Lastly, the program gave students the opportunity to learn outside the realm of traditional education. There are some components of traditional education that can be identified in the *Unified Studies* program, but teachers also provided non-traditional activities and environments to enhance the learning process. These non-traditional experiences allowed some otherwise unenthusiastic students to appreciate learning and pursue further educational opportunities.

CHARACTER COUNTS! is a character education program that has been implemented by thousands of schools, communities, public agencies, and non-profit organizations across the country (Josephson Institute, 2011). The program is administered by the Josephson Institute, which is a non-profit organization based in Los Angeles, California. There are six basic values at the core of the CHARACTER COUNTS! program. The "Six Pillars of Character" are

trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. CHARACTER COUNTS! is not a curriculum or add-on program, but rather an enhancement to a curriculum that is already in place. The program encourages educators to teach the difference between right and wrong, enforce the “Six Pillars of Character,” advocate for character, and exhibit good behavior. In addition, CHARACTER COUNTS! provides a framework with values that are universally recognized and an association of more than 850 organizations that share ideas and information with each other. The Character Development Seminar training course is presented as part of the program and the Josephson Institute’s national office offers free consultation and resources to the educators who implement the program.

Educators who have implemented CHARACTER COUNTS! have reported that kids displayed more positive interactions with adults after participating in the program (Josephson Institute, 2011). Research indicated that students exhibited fewer behavior problems, received higher test scores and recorded fewer absences from school. Overall, the CHARACTER COUNTS! program promoted a set of values that, when modeled by teachers and administrators, improved behaviors and academic success.

The Josephson Institute provided several reports of schools experiencing fewer problem behaviors as a result of incorporating CHARACTER COUNTS! (2011). At Lakeview Middle School in Michigan, discipline referrals declined from 425 in the first semester of 1997-98 to 389 in the first semester of 1998-1999, after CHARACTER COUNTS! had been implemented. Garfield Middle School in Albuquerque, New Mexico reported 91 incidents of physical violence in the first 20 days of the 1994-95 school year. After the students had been exposed to CHARACTER COUNTS! for one year, the school reported only 26 incidents of physical violence. CHARACTER COUNTS! was implemented at Glenn Westlake Middle School in

Lombard, Illinois in 1997-98. The Lombard police provided reports from 1997 to 2002 that indicated improvements in youth crime. For example, incidences of graffiti decreased 61%, curfew violations decreased by 68%, absenteeism decreased by 63%, marijuana use or possession decreased by 18% and illegal alcohol use or possession decreased by 41%. In 2000, teachers in Nebraska were surveyed after using the “Six Pillars of Character” framework (Josephson Institute, 2011). Out of 57 surveys:

- Eighty-five percent reported positive changes in students.
- Seventy-three percent reported students using the language outlined in the Six-Pillar framework.
- Seventy-five percent reported making changes in their own behaviors as a result of implementing the CHARACTER COUNTS! program.
- Sixty-one percent reported noticing students being more helpful.
- Fifty percent reported noticing students being more honest.

Schools around the country are implementing CHARACTER COUNTS! and observing more positive student behaviors as a result.

Character First (2010) conducted several studies to determine the impact of character education programs across the country. In the Topeka, Kansas school district, results indicated that 95% of students were setting educational goals, compared to 50% prior to implementation (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Attendance rates increased 4.8%, while graduation rates increased 5%. Suspensions decreased from 3,641 to 2,434 over a span of one year and discipline referrals decreased from 13,548 to 10,380.

The Maryland Department of Education implemented character education using three different methods: *Second Step*, the *Lickona Model*, and *Character Counts* (Maryland State

Department of Education, 2007). From 2004-2006, participating schools reported increased attendance, while 77% of the schools reported higher honor roll rates. Almost half of the schools (48%) reported a decrease in referrals and suspension rates improved by 43%.

The Massachusetts Character Education Pilot Program reported many improvements between 2000 and 2005 as a result of their character education project (Samuels, 2005). Brighton High School was one of 11 schools involved in the initiative. From 2001 to 2002, the school's retention rate increased from 11.3% to 15.1%, but then dropped to 6.1% in 2004. Brighton High School's enrollment increased by 194 students in a five-year span, while the dropout rate decreased by 2.9%. The school also noticed improvements in student academics. Only 25% of tenth grade students were failing English Language Arts in 2004, compared to 68% that were failing in 2000. During this same time period, Brighton High School reported only 17% of students failing mathematics in tenth grade, a significant drop from 87% in 2000.

The Alabama State Department of Education implemented a character education program in Baldwin County (Hough, 2008). Part of the initiative included collecting data from every school in the county, 48 in all, from 2005-2008. Staff reported a 19% improvement of overall school climate. Student surveys also indicated improvement in the school climate, from 57% to 94%. Similar to the staff surveys, parents perceived a 20% increase in the improvement of the overall school climate. The data that was compiled from the 48 schools also revealed that the degree of program implementation was consistent with the perceived improvement of school climate.

The Character Education Partnership also provided some examples of successful character education programs (2010):

- In South Carolina, a four-year character education project resulted in improvements in student attitudes, behaviors, and academic achievements. When administrators were surveyed, 91% of them perceived improvements in attitudes, 89 % perceived improvements in behaviors, and 60% perceived improvements in academic performance. More than 65% of the administrators reported that faculty and staff attitudes had also improved since executing the character education program.
- *Second Step*, a violence-prevention program, has resulted in fewer aggressive comments and behaviors amongst students. Students who had been trained in this program exhibited fewer physical interactions than students who had not participated in the program.
- In a study that was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the *Resolving Conflict Creatively Program*, 64% of teachers reported less physical altercations amongst students and three quarters (75%) reported more student cooperation. Ninety-two percent of students reported an increase in self-esteem, while more than 90% of parents indicated that their communication and problem-solving skills had improved.
- In a study that was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the *Positive Action* program in four schools, the average number of behavioral issues requiring referrals dropped an average of 74% after the program had been in place for one year. During the next six years, referrals improved to 80%. At the same time, the number of absences decreased between 30% and 60%.
- Studies that have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the Child Development Project (CDP) have shown that students in CDP schools exhibited more positive social skills. The CDP focused on teaching students how to resolve conflicts with their peers and identify values. Students from CDP schools were typically more concerned for

others, harder working, and more engaged in classes. They were also more likely to participate in organized activities (e.g. sports, clubs) and less likely to engage in problem behaviors.

### **Strengths & Weaknesses**

Schools that have implemented character education programs have reported varying results (Stedje, 2010). Overall, the schools that spent more time and money implementing a character education program had more significant results than the schools who implemented their programs to a lesser degree.

Many schools that have implemented character education programs have experienced significant improvements in the areas of academics, behaviors, and school culture (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006; Character Education Partnership, 2010). They have noticed students exhibiting more positive behaviors (cooperation, respect, and compassion) and less negative behaviors (violence, disrespect, insensitivity). The atmosphere of a character education school exemplifies caring and respect amongst students, teachers, administrators, and staff.

Although funding is necessary to implement a character education program, the cost of implementation is not substantial (Stedje, 2010; Character Education Partnership, 2010). The most costly components of implementation are the staff and in-service trainings that are involved with this type of program. Implementation costs may vary, depending on the curriculum.

There are some weaknesses or limitations that are associated with implementing a character education program in a school setting. Regardless of the evidence supporting the specific benefits of character education, there are still some doubts surrounding its effectiveness in schools (Character First, 2010). The values that should be included in a character development program seem to be up for debate. Parents want schools to teach the same values that are taught

at home. The diversity amongst the different cultures and communities may prevent schools from teaching the values that each individual family desires. If parents do not “buy in” to the concept of character education or to the specific values that are being emphasized at the school, then they are likely to question the effectiveness of character education (Romanowski, 2005).

One complaint about the character education movement is that it is sometimes perceived as a conflict with the general education curriculum (Stiff-Williams, 2010). Schools are often pressured to provide a standards-based education and incorporating character education can get in the way of that. Teachers, administrators, and parents may question or resist implementation of a character education program if it is likely to take any focus away from the standards-based curricula.

Educators may be reluctant to incorporate character education programs into their curriculum if they cannot measure the effectiveness of the programs (Josephson Institute Center for Youth Ethics, 2008). Homework assignments, tests, papers, and projects all give teachers the opportunity to appropriately measure students’ academic achievement in their core classes. Students receive grades on their report cards that indicate how successful they have been in their classes. There is not a grade given, however, for exhibiting moral behavior. How can character education be measured properly? It is possible to examine a school’s detentions, referrals, suspensions, and expulsions, but these records only encompass a small percentage of the school’s total population (Brimi, 2009). Tracking incidences of disciplined behavior does not measure moral growth of the students who are not receiving detentions, referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. Educators can question students about how they might handle a particular situation, but that does not mean that students are guaranteed to act appropriately just because they know what is right and wrong.

Some character education programs have found effective ways to measure success (South Carolina Department of Education, 2001). The programs that target specific areas for improvement, such as absenteeism, tardiness, and disruptive behaviors in class and on the bus have been more effective than programs that do not measure specific aspects. Other indicators of program success include improvements in the following areas: student attitudes and behaviors, student performance, test scores, parental satisfaction, teacher motivation, and school climate. Although it takes time to gather and analyze data, there appears to be effective ways to measure the effectiveness of character education programs.

### **Developmental Targets**

While there are questions about what should be taught in schools, there are ideas about when it is developmentally appropriate to teach character education. Character building begins the moment a child walks into school and takes place throughout the entire school day (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Schools do not need to implement a specific curriculum in order for character development to take place in school. Students are constantly watching and learning from the adults in school, such as teachers, administration and support staff (Character Education Partnership, 2010). They can observe the ways that these adults handle conflict, disciplinary issues and behavior problems.

Character education can be initiated at any grade level and would be beneficial to all grade levels (Character Education Partnership, 2010). At the elementary level, students may learn about social and emotional skills. Students may learn about more complicated or mature topics, such as reducing prejudicial behaviors, at the secondary level, after they have developed a strong foundation of values. It is essential for school districts to infuse character education at the

elementary level, so the skills and behaviors that were taught can be reinforced at the middle and high school levels.

According to Lockwood (1997), about 80% of character education programs target elementary schools, while only 5% take place in the high school setting. When Lockwood inquired about why more character education programs are implemented at the elementary level, he learned that elementary teachers focused much more on the socialization of young children than their high school counterparts. In high school, teachers were more likely to concentrate on specific subjects than on character education. Character education can still be incorporated into the high school curriculum and be an impactful experience for students at this level (Williams et al., 2003). Several authors have supported the idea that character education has been introduced at the elementary level and revisited during the high school years when students are more likely to display problem behaviors (Higgins, 1995; Mosher, Kenny, & Garrod, 1994; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989; Strom & Parsons, 1982; Veugelers, 1997).

### **Role of School Counselor**

Since children spend so much time in school, educators have a unique and special opportunity to impact all students through the implementation of character education (Character Education Partnership, 2010). Schools are in a primary role to offer support to our youth and help them to achieve their greatest potential, both as students and as people. When schools offer a place for students, teachers, and parents to feel safe, valued, and encouraged, they are more likely to do their best work.

Educators must be proactive in teaching good character, especially with all of the challenges and negative influences that our youth face today. The No Child Left Behind Act requests that schools work to enhance students' character, in addition to their academic success

(Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006). Both the federal government and the National Education Association (NEA) have recognized the importance of schools' contributing to students' character.

The entire school community should be involved with the implementation of a character education program in order for it to reach its maximum effectiveness (Character Education Partnership, 2010). The role of the school counselor, however, may be one of the most important roles within the school atmosphere. Since school counselors are often responsible for making assessments and forming therapeutic relationships within the school environment, they are already prepared to work with students who need guidance in the fields of character development and values clarification (Rayburn, 2004). Teachers, principals, and other school personnel will typically contact the school counselor regarding students who are exhibiting problem behaviors. The school counselor is likely able to identify the school bullies and the victims of bullying more easily than any other faculty member in the school environment, so they play a vital role in advocating for these students. In addition to playing a significant role in bullying prevention, school counselors are often relied upon to deal with students who have demonstrated violent behaviors. They aim to help these students by drawing out their needs and focusing on their nonviolent behaviors. According to Carlson (2003), "The perpetration of a violent act may be framed existentially as a desire for meaning and belonging, or as a reaction to the fear and anxiety caused by repressed anger or free choice" (p. 312). In many schools, counselors are expected to serve in committees, lead the school community in program advocacy and design, develop therapeutic relationships with students, advocate for students, and fulfill the administrative component of their job (Baker, 2000; Dollarhide, 2003; Hatch & Bowers, 2002; Herr, 2002).

As leaders, school counselors are often depended on for addressing the schools' most pressing needs (Dollarhide, 2003). They are expected to be advocates for respect, social justice, and a positive school atmosphere (Cole & Ryan, 1997; Kurpius & Rozecki, 1992; Smaby & Daugherty, 1995). School counselors aim to enhance the educational experience for students by facilitating multicultural awareness, directing student assistance groups and mentoring programs, and encouraging student leadership development (Clark & Stone, 2000). According to Hughey (2001), "Effective leadership is important for professional school counselors and necessary for active involvement in school reform efforts" (p. ii). If school counselors are to be leaders of transformation efforts within the schools, then they must play a significant role in helping students to become better people and better citizens (Rayburn, 2004).

School counselors are in a very unique position because they have the opportunity to raise awareness about the school's most common issues and guide the rest of the school community towards implementing the proper curriculum to address these issues.

### **Rationale for Study**

Teachers can make a great impact on students by teaching and exhibiting moral behaviors (Auciello, 2007). Students can learn by observing what teachers do right and wrong. Sometimes, teachers' behaviors are especially noticeable if they are incongruent with what they are teaching. Since teachers play such a crucial role in the socialization of their students, they must modify their curriculum to meet the needs of their students and facilitate students' moral growth (Post, 1997). Teachers should be educated about core values and understand how important it is to display these values for their students. They must also have the knowledge, understanding, drive, and commitment to enable positive change in their students and schools.

This study presented the teachers' perceptions and understandings of the character education program in their school. Based on these findings, the perceptions of teachers can be used to improve the quality of the character education program.

### **Research Questions**

1. According to teachers, what are the core values that are being taught as part of the character education program at the middle and high school level?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of character education at the middle and high school level?

### **Method**

The researcher used mostly descriptive research to illustrate the character education program at a rural public middle and high school. The research described the different aspects of the program, including the core values, teacher involvement, and administrative support.

### **Participants**

Participants for this project were selected from a rural public school district in Livingston County located approximately 20 miles southwest of Rochester, NY. The individuals who were selected to participate were employed full-time by the school district as teachers in the middle and high school.

Approximately 45 individuals were asked to participate and all of the participants worked with students in grades 6-12. Of the participants who were selected, approximately 56% of them were female and 39% were male. The remaining 5% of the population opted out of providing their gender. Less than 6% of the participants taught students in the sixth grade, approximately 17% taught students in the seventh grade, and roughly 22% taught students in the eighth grade. Half of the participants taught students in the ninth grade, approximately 38% taught students in

the tenth grade, roughly 72% of participants taught students in the eleventh grade, and two-thirds (66.6%) of the participants taught students in the twelfth grade. Approximately 17% of the participants represented the 21-30 age group, 22% in the 31-40 and 41-50 age groups, one-third (33.3%) in the 51-60 age group, and less than 6% represented the 61+ age group.

### **Materials**

A two-page, 23 item survey was distributed to all of the participants via email and faculty mailboxes in the schools' main offices. The survey was adapted from the Character Education Partnership's "11 Principles of Effective Character Education Self Assessment" survey, which was drawn from "A framework of student success: 11 principles of effective character education" (Character Education Partnership, 2010). The purpose of the survey was to identify the character education program's core values and assess the teachers' perceptions of the character education program that was implemented throughout the school district. Teachers were asked to write in their answer for the first question on the survey and then rate the remaining 22 questions on a 5-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree).

The first question on the survey is a fill-in and asked participants to identify up to three core values that were taught in the character education program. This was the only question of its kind on the survey. The next four questions on the survey were based on the teachers' perceptions of how the core values were incorporated into the program. Questions 5, 7, and 8 evaluated how well teachers demonstrated and promoted certain habits and behaviors in the classroom. Questions 6 and 12 evaluated the teachers' perceptions of how well the administration fostered a supportive and cooperative atmosphere for character education. Questions 9 and 10 evaluated how teachers perceived their relationships with students in terms of

mutual respect, support, and courtesy. Question 11 evaluated teachers' perceptions of if and how much staff is involved in the planning and implementation of the character education program. Questions 13-15 evaluated teachers' perceptions of how well students understand and practice the core values and behavioral skills that are emphasized in the character education program. Questions 16 and 17 evaluated teachers' opinions of how students perceive the staff and student body. Question 18 evaluated teachers' perceptions of whether or not bullying is reported by students, while question 19 evaluated teachers' views of student involvement in activities promoting tolerance, understanding, and conflict resolution. Question 20 evaluated teachers' perceptions of whether or not students value the leadership roles that are available to them and question 21 evaluated teachers' opinions about whether or not students rate the importance of core values in their lives as high. Finally, question 22 evaluated how teachers perceived the data on student behavior and whether or not the data demonstrated growth and commitment to good character.

### **Procedure**

The researcher used a case study to analyze the character education program at a rural public school. She used non-probability sampling to select the teachers in the middle and high school. In non-probability sampling, there is no way to determine bias or sampling error and the samples are not externally valid. The survey results are only representative of the teachers at this particular middle and high school and are not representative of the entire target population.

The researcher emailed all of the selected participants with a detailed description of the intended project. She explained that she was exploring the different aspects of character education that were being incorporated into the program, examining how it was being executed, and evaluating how the teachers perceived its effectiveness. Participants were given an

opportunity to respond with any questions regarding the project. All of the accessible full-time teachers who worked with students in grades 6-12 on a daily basis were asked to participate in the survey.

The surveys were then distributed via email and to the faculty mailboxes in the schools' main offices. Each survey was prepared with a description of the project, a letter of informed consent, and some additional questions regarding the participants' demographics. The informed consent assured participants that their participation was voluntary and they had the right to refuse to answer any questions. Participants' confidentiality was guaranteed and the surveys were returned anonymously. The researcher had no way of connecting the participants to their written surveys. The researcher also kept all data locked in a drawer until the completion of the project in order to protect participants' surveys and demographic information. As indicated on the informed consent, participants signified their consent by completing the survey.

Along with the survey and informed consent, each participant also received a candy bar as a small token of appreciation from the researcher. Participants were asked to complete the surveys anonymously and return them in an envelope labeled "Character Education Survey" to the Counseling Center's mailboxes in the main offices. Participants were given two weeks to complete the survey and return it to the researcher. Two weeks after the surveys were distributed, the researcher collected them from the Counseling Center's mailboxes in the main offices.

At the completion of the project, the researcher presented the results of her project to the middle and high school teachers and administrators, so they could evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the character education program in their school district and set some short- and long-term goals to improve the quality of the program.

## Results

Participants returned completed surveys to the Counseling Center's mailbox in the main offices at the middle and high school. The researcher collected the completed surveys from the mailboxes every school day (Monday through Friday) for two full weeks. The surveys were collected frequently and only by the researcher to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Of the 45 surveys that were distributed to teachers, 18 of them were returned, for a return rate of 40%. Upon retrieving the surveys, the researcher entered the results into an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was designed so the researcher could enter the responses to questions 2 to 23 for up to 25 participants. The average responses were automatically calculated and a bar graph was created to display the average responses (Appendix C). Since question #1 was a write-in response, the researcher recorded the responses in a separate table. The write-in response addressed the first research question: According to teachers, what are the core values that are being taught as part of the character education program at the middle and high school level? Below is the table that was created to outline the core values of the character education program based on the teachers' responses, as well as the number and percentage of teachers who identified each core value.

Table 1

### *Core Values*

<b>Core value identified</b>	<b># of teachers who identified core value</b>	<b>% of teachers who identified core value*</b>
Appropriate intervention	1	6%
Kindness	1	6%
Acceptance	1	6%
Diversity	1	6%
Friendship	1	6%

Accountability	1	6%
Consistency	1	6%
Caring	2	11%
Fairness	2	11%
Honesty	2	11%
Integrity	4	22%
Responsibility	7	39%
Respect	13	72%

\*Based on total number of participants (18), rounded to nearest whole number

The top three core values identified by teachers were integrity (4), responsibility (7), and respect (13). Based on the aforementioned results, respect is clearly the core value that is focused on the most by teachers. Not all of the participants responded to the write-in question regarding the core values being taught in the character education program. Four of the 18 teachers (22%) who participated in the survey did not respond to question #1. It is possible that they did not know what the core values were, did not think that the core values were an important part of the character education program, or did not see the question since it was designed differently than the rest of the survey questions. One teacher (6%) only identified one core value, two teachers (11%) identified two core values, 10 teachers (56%) identified three core values, and one teacher (6%) identified four core values. The teachers who identified less than three core values may not have thought that it was essential to incorporate three core values into the character education program. They also may have thought that the core value(s) they identified encompassed all other values. For example, the teacher who only identified one core value reported, “Respect is essential and covers all the rest.”

Questions 2 through 23 addressed the second research question: What are the teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of character education at the middle and high school level?

Teachers were asked to provide their opinions about how the core values were taught and incorporated into the classroom, how their behaviors engaged and enabled students to develop core values, how they perceived students' relationships with staff and peers, and how they perceived the administrative support to the character education initiative. Teachers used a 5-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree) for questions 2 through 23. The table below outlines the average response for each question (to the nearest whole number), while Appendix C identifies each participant's response to questions 2 through 23 and identifies the average response for each question (to the nearest hundredth). Every question produced an average response of either 3 (Neutral) or 4 (Agree), although there were some outliers for certain questions.

Table 2

*Average Responses*

<b>Question #</b>	<b>Average Response (rounded to nearest whole #)</b>
2	4
3	3
4	3
5	4
6	4
7	3
8	4
9	4
10	4
11	4
12	3
13	3
14	3
15	3
16	3
17	4
18	3
19	3

20	3
21	3
22	3
23	3

According to the results of the Character Education Self Assessment, teachers mostly agreed that there is staff ownership for teaching, modeling, and integrating the core values into all aspects of school life (e.g., discussions in grade-level, subject-area, and full staff meetings) and that their classroom routines and procedures are respectful of students and engage them in ways that develop core values such as responsibility, fairness, caring, diligence, and perseverance. Two teachers (11%) disagreed with each of the above statements, while the remaining teachers (89%) responded with “Neutral,” “Agree,” or “Strongly Agree.” Teachers also agreed that staff demonstrates ways to identify, constructively address, and discourage peer abuse (e.g., bullying; put-downs; racial slurs; insensitive gender remarks; remarks on appearance, economic, or social status) and increase students’ understanding and respect for personal, economic, and cultural differences. Two teachers (11%) circled responses of 2 and 3 for the above statement, which was interpreted as a response of 2.5 for data purposes. One of these teachers commented, “In some rooms, seems some staff favors the student who is doing the bullying and not helping the other student.” As indicated by an average response of 4, teachers agreed that they promote work-related habits (e.g., perseverance, responsible decision-making, self management, and challenge seeking) and social habits (e.g.; honesty, responsibility, collaboration). According to the results of the survey, teachers agreed that staff and students recognize and express positive comments to each other in natural settings as part of the everyday life of school. One teacher (6%) disagreed with the above statement. The statement “Staff is courteous to students and each other and demonstrates respectful and supportive behavior toward

students” also produced an average response of 4, which indicated the teachers’ agreement to the statement. One teacher (6%) circled responses of 2 and 3 for the above statement, which was interpreted as a response of 2.5 for data purposes. The teacher commented, “Again, it depends on the students and teacher.” According to the results of the survey, teachers agreed that students perceive staff as caring and report that they could go to an adult in the school with a problem. Two teachers (11%) indicated disagreement with the above statement. The same teacher who commented on the last statement, also commented here: “Depends on the staff member. Not all students feel they can go to any staff member.”

For the remaining questions on the survey, (Questions 3, 4, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23) teachers indicated *on average* that they were neutral. In other words, they did not agree nor disagree with the statements. There were several teachers, however, that agreed or disagreed with the statements. The table below outlines the number and percentage of participants who agreed and disagreed with the aforementioned questions.

Table 3

*Participants who Agreed and Disagreed with Neutral Statements*

Question #	# of participants who agreed with statement	% of participants who agreed with statement	# of participants who disagreed with statement	% of participants who disagreed with statement
3	8	44%	4	22%
4	8	44%	5	28%
7	9	50%	2	11%
12	7	39%	7	39%
13	10	56%	4	22%
14	7	39%	5	28%
15	7	39%	2	11%
16	8	44%	4	22%
18	7	39%	2	11%
19	8	44%	3	17%
20	6	33%	2	11%
21	5	28%	1	6%
22	4	22%	4	22%
23	4	22%	1	6%

Question #3 which states, “Staff consistently explains to students how the core values can help them make choices that demonstrate good character,” produced two “Strongly Agree” responses, six “Agree” responses, and four “Disagree” responses. Three teachers strongly agreed with the statement, “Staff can explain how they help students understand the core values.” Five teachers agreed with the same statement, while five teachers indicated disagreement. Question #7 which states, “Staff reports that the administration fosters a collegial atmosphere,” obtained the following results: three “Strongly Agree,” six “Agree,” one “Disagree,” and one “Strongly Disagree.” Question #12 which states, “All staff has opportunities to be involved in character education planning and implementation,” elicited a wide range of results. Three teachers indicated that they “Strongly Agree” with the statement, four teachers indicated that they “Agree,” five teachers suggested that they “Disagree,” and two teachers selected “Strongly Disagree.” There was also a wide range of responses for question #13 which states, “Actions and statements of the principal and other key leaders are clearly supportive of character education and the long-range survival and growth of the initiative.” Two teachers strongly disagreed, two disagreed, nine agreed, and one strongly agreed with this statement. One teacher commented, “Again it is not seen throughout the administration. High school principal is wonderful – another administrator walks around saying ‘I’m done with this and students.’” Question #14 which states, “Students can explain why the core ethical and performance values are important, how various behaviors exemplify those values, and why some behaviors are right and others are wrong,” produced two “Strongly Agree” responses, five “Agree” responses, and five “Disagree” responses. One teacher commented, “Some can when asked.” Seven teachers agreed with the statement, “Students receive practice in and feedback on academic and behavioral skills through ordinary conduct of the classroom,” while two teachers disagreed. Question #16 elicited a wide

range of responses. One teacher strongly agreed, seven teachers agreed, three teachers disagreed, and one teacher strongly disagreed with the following statement: “Students have the opportunity to practice the core values in the context of relationships and in the context of classroom work.” One teacher stated, “Depends on the student and how we promote what they are doing.” The statement, “Students perceive the student body as friendly and inclusive” produced seven “Strongly Agree” responses and two “Disagree” responses. Two teachers strongly agreed with the statement, “Students report that bullying, teasing, and acts of cruelty or intolerance are infrequent and are not tolerated by staff.” Six teachers agreed with the same statement, while three teachers indicated disagreement. Question #20 which states, “All students participate in activities, programs, and processes that promote tolerance, understanding, respect, and peace among students,” obtained the following results: six “Agree” and two “Disagree” responses. Five teachers agreed with the statement, “Students value the leadership roles available to them and identify themselves as members of wider communities in which they can play positive and contributory roles,” while only one teacher disagreed. One of the teachers who agreed added, “Depends on the student. Not everyone feels that they can be in these programs due to staff.” Four teachers agreed, three disagreed, and one strongly disagreed with the following statement: “In questionnaires and reflections on character-related behaviors and core values, students rate the importance of core values in their lives as high.” The teacher who strongly disagreed with the above statement commented, “Students take the surveys as a joke!” Finally, question #23 which states, “Data collection on student behavior demonstrates the growth in the understanding of and commitment to good character,” produced four “Agree” and one “Disagree” responses. One teacher was undecided about how to respond to the last question and stated, “Again it depends on if the students are being truthful.”

Question #1 on the Character Education Self-Assessment addressed the first research question: According to teachers, what are the core values that are being taught as part of the character education program at the middle and high school level? Teachers identified 13 core values that are being taught in the character education program. Integrity, responsibility, and respect were identified as the top three core values being taught by teachers and garnered 67% of the total responses to question #1.

Questions 2 through 23 addressed the second research question: What are the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of character education at the middle and high school level? Teachers used a 5-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree) to identify their level of agreement or disagreement to each statement. Every question produced an average response of 3 (Neutral) or 4 (Agree) when rounded to the nearest whole number. As indicated by their responses, teachers generally perceived that core values were being taught and incorporated into the classrooms, teachers' behaviors were engaging and enabling students to develop core values, students' relationships with staff and peers were positive, and administration was supportive of the character education initiative.

## **Discussion**

### **Overview**

This study was conducted to determine what core values are taught and how teachers perceive the effectiveness of the character education program at a middle and high school. Forty-five teachers at a middle and high school were asked to identify the core values being taught in the character education program by writing in their response. A total of 13 core values were identified, but the majority of the teachers identified at least one of the following core values: integrity, responsibility, and respect.

The remaining questions on the survey explored teachers' opinions about the quality of the character education program. Using a Likert-type scale, teachers provided their perceptions about how the core values were incorporated into the classroom, how teachers helped students to develop core values, how they viewed the students' relationships with staff and other students, and how supportive the principals and other leaders are of the character education program. Teachers generally responded in agreement to the responses on the survey, indicating overall effectiveness of the character education program.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The teachers identified the following core values as part of the character education program: appropriate intervention, kindness, acceptance, diversity, friendship, accountability, consistency, caring, fairness, honesty, integrity, responsibility, and respect. The three core values that were identified the most were integrity, responsibility, and respect. Respect has been established as the main focus of the character education program in the middle and high school.

Based on the results of the survey, teachers have effectively incorporated core values into the character education program at the middle and high school levels. They have also successfully planned and implemented a curriculum that enables students to develop core values. According to the Character Education Partnership (2010), a character education atmosphere would promote core ethical values and teach students to understand, care about, and act upon these core ethical values.

The majority of teachers (89%) agreed that they have effectively dealt with peer abuse including bullying, put-downs, racial slurs, insensitive gender remarks, and remarks on appearance, economic, or social status. Teachers have successfully promoted work-related and social habits in the classroom, which has undoubtedly contributed to the effective

implementation of the character education program. By discouraging negative behaviors and promoting positive behaviors, the character education program successfully adheres to the Character Education Partnership's standards for an effective program (Character Education Partnership, 2010).

The positive comments exchanged by staff and students throughout the school day and the respectful, courteous, and supportive behavior exhibited by staff when interacting with students are more examples of how teachers are actively demonstrating important aspects of the character education program. Students can learn by observing what teachers do right and wrong, so teachers have the opportunity to influence students' behaviors by teaching and exhibiting what is morally correct (Auciello, 2007; See & Arthur, 2011).

Finally, students perceived staff at the middle and high school as caring and reported that they could go to an adult in the school with a problem, as stated by the survey participants. A school that has implemented a successful character education program exemplifies caring and respect amongst students, teachers, administrators, and staff (Character Education Partnership, 2010).

The findings from this study indicated that character education programs can be successful at the middle and high school level and teachers can effectively incorporate core values into the school's curriculum.

### **Implications for School Counselors**

The findings of this study can provide valuable information for school counselors who are interested in and given the opportunity to implement character education programs into schools. School counselors have the privilege and unique advantage of working with all of the adults in the school including teachers, administrators, support staff, and other school personnel.

Since counselors are often responsible for making assessments (e.g., career, college, interest, skill, personality) and forming relationships within the school environment, they are well-equipped to identify students who need guidance in character development (Rayburn, 2004). Counselors also play a vital role in identifying the school bullies, victims of bullying, and students who exhibit other violent behaviors. Since counselors work so closely with these students, they are likely to have a valuable perception about the need for character education. In many schools, counselors are viewed as leaders and are often depended upon for identifying the schools' most urgent needs and implementing a plan to address these needs (Dollarhide, 2003). Implementing a character education program in a middle or high school may be the most effective way to identify multiple needs in a school.

School counselors are in a unique position, because they have the opportunity to impact the other adults in the school (teachers, administrators, support staff, and other school personnel) about the school's most pressing needs and guide the entire school community towards implementing the proper curriculum to address these concerns.

### **Limitations**

Since the return rate of the survey was less than half (40%), it is difficult to determine if there was enough data to accurately represent the faculty's perceptions of character education. If this project were to be repeated or duplicated, the researcher could distribute the survey in person at a faculty meeting or team teacher meeting and ask the participants to complete the survey prior to the end of the meeting. This may increase the odds of a higher return rate.

In the demographics portion of the survey, participants were asked to indicate the grade level in which they taught. Most teachers (84%) indicated that they taught at the high school level (grades 9-12), while only 16% of participants taught at the middle school level (grades 6-

8). According to this data, the middle school teachers were not properly represented and therefore, the results may not accurately reflect the character education program at the middle school level.

Since only the teachers at the middle and high school were surveyed, there is no data to represent the rest of the faculty and staff who have implemented the character education program. The results may have varied if other members of the school personnel were asked to provide their perceptions of the program's effectiveness.

Lastly, because a portion of the survey was created by the researcher, there is no validity or reliability history.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Since 80% of character education programs are implemented at the elementary level, it may be beneficial to explore elementary teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of character education (Lockwood, 1997). It may also be helpful to survey other adults who work with students in a school setting, since the entire school community should be involved with the implementation of a character education program (Character Education Partnership, 2010).

Another recommendation for future research is to conduct a study that includes more qualitative research regarding the teachers' perceptions of character education. The few teachers who chose to include additional comments on their surveys provided the researcher with valuable insight into the program that might have otherwise been overlooked.

Lastly, the researcher recommends exploring other aspects of character education programs in further research. For example, the Character Education Self-Assessment did not fully explore the impact and role of the parents and/or the community on the character education program.

**Conclusion**

In a generation where violent acts are on the rise, parents have become less involved with their child's academics, and students have become more disrespectful to authority figures, character education has resurfaced as an effective solution to an ongoing problem. Teachers and other school personnel are more responsible now than they have ever been before for modeling good behavior and shaping students' morals and values. Character education supports the age-old concept, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

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## **Appendix A – Institutional Review Board Proposal**

### **Category 2 Proposal for Individual Research**

#### **1. Project description:**

This project is an investigation into the teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of character education in the Caledonia-Mumford Middle and High School. According to Still-Williams (2010), incorporating character education into a standards-based curriculum gives our youth a better chance to develop into productive adults. Effective character education programs are associated with improved school climate and academic achievement (Still-Williams, 2010). I will be inviting all accessible full-time teachers in the Cal-Mum Middle and High School to participate in this project, because any adult who comes into contact with a student has the opportunity to help shape his/her character (Character Education Partnership, 2010).

Since Cal-Mum already has a Character Education program in place, I will be exploring the different aspects of character education that are being incorporated into the program, examining how it is being executed and how the faculty perceives its effectiveness. Every staff member that is asked to participate will receive the “Character Education Self Assessment” survey, drawn from “A framework of student success: 11 principles of effective character education” (Character Education Partnership, 2010). The publisher of the survey indicated that “Portions of this document may be reproduced for educational and assessment purposes.” This survey will be used to assess the Character Education program at Cal-Mum through the teachers’ perceptions. It provides an opportunity for schools to examine the program’s overall effectiveness, as well as identify some short and long-term goals for improving the program.

I will distribute the survey to all full-time teachers at the middle and high school levels to obtain their perceptions about the Character Education program. Each faculty member who is invited to participate will receive the survey in his/her office mailbox, along with an informed consent form. Participants will return completed surveys in an unidentifiable envelope to the Counseling Center’s mailbox in the main office.

#### **2. Number of participants and relevant characteristics:**

I will contact all teachers in the Caledonia-Mumford Middle and High Schools. Teachers of both genders and all ages who are currently working full-time in the 6-12 grade levels (approximately 45 participants) will be invited to participate.

#### **3. Selection Process (how participants will be selected):**

All teachers in the Caledonia-Mumford Middle and High Schools will receive an email from the researcher with a description of the intended project. The email will instruct the faculty and staff to check their mailboxes in the main offices, where the researcher will distribute the surveys and consent forms. They will return completed surveys to the Counseling Center’s mailbox in the main office. I have attached an email correspondence with Merritt Holly, high

school principal, in which he gives me permission to use the Caledonia-Mumford email list and distribute the surveys via staff mailboxes for this project. There are no anticipated risks to the participants.

**4. Status of Research Assistants (background/qualifications):**

There are no research assistants for this project.

**5. Source of Funding:**

The researcher will be funding this project.

**6. Start – Completion dates:**

The project will start upon IRB approval. Data will be collected by the end of the Fall 2011 semester.

**7. Attach copies of all questionnaires, testing instruments, or interview protocols, and any cover letters or instructions to participants.**

Please see the following attached materials:

- Statement of Informed Consent
- Letter from high school principal, Merritt Holly, in which he gives me permission to use the Caledonia-Mumford email list and distribute the surveys via staff mailboxes for this project
- Message to faculty requesting their participation

**8. Attach a copy of your certificate of completion for the online training course. If you don't have it, indicate that you completed it and records will be verified by the IRB Administrator.**

I completed the refresher course on the protection of human subjects in September 2011.

**9. Anonymity/Confidentiality (how you will protect participants so they are not identified with their responses):**

Participants will have the opportunity to leave their completed surveys in an unidentifiable envelope, which will be returned to the Counseling Center's mailbox in the main office. Furthermore, the demographic information that I am seeking will not allow me to identify participants.

**10. Consent form**

A consent form with all of the required information has been attached to this document.

**11. N/A**

**12. N/A**

### STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

The purpose of this research project is to examine the teacher's perceptions of the importance of implementing a character education program at the middle and high school levels. Several areas will be studied including the different aspects of character education that are being incorporated into Caledonia-Mumford Middle and High Schools, how the Character Education program is being executed, and how the teachers perceive its effectiveness. This research project is also being conducted in order for me to complete my master's thesis for the Department of Counselor Education at the College at Brockport, State University of New York.

In order to participate in this study, your informed consent is required. You are being asked to make a decision whether or not to participate in the project. If you want to participate in the project, and agree with the statements below, then your completion of the survey signifies your consent. You may change your mind at any time and leave the study without penalty, even after the study has begun.

I understand that:

1. My participation is voluntary and I have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
2. My confidentiality is protected. My name will not be written on the survey. There will be no way to connect me to my written survey. If any publication results from this research, I would not be identified by name.
3. There is a minor risk in the time that it will take to complete the survey.
4. My participation involves reading a written survey of 23 questions and answering those questions in writing. It is estimated that it will take 5-7 minutes to complete the survey.
5. Approximately 45 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for the completion of a master's thesis by the primary researcher.
6. Data will be kept in a locked drawer by the investigator. Data and consent forms will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been accepted and approved.

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the study realizing I may withdraw without penalty at any time during the survey process. Returning the survey indicates my consent to participate.

If you have any questions you may contact:

Primary Researcher	Faculty Advisor
Chelsea Graff	Dr. Summer Reiner, Ph.D., LMHC, NCC
(716) 998-XXXX	Counselor Education, (585) 395-XXXX
cgra0411@brockport.edu	sreiner@brockport.edu

# Caledonia-Mumford Central School

## Counseling Office

99 North Street

Caledonia, New York 14423

(585) 538-3445 Fax (585) 538-3480

October 25, 2011

IRB Administrator

IRB Office

6th Floor Allen Administration Building

350 New Campus Drive Brockport, NY 14420

To whom it may concern:

I give Chelsea Graff, school counseling intern, my permission to distribute surveys to the teachers at Caledonia-Mumford Middle and High School via the faculty mailboxes in the main office. If time allows, she may also conduct a brief presentation at a faculty meeting to notify the faculty of her project and give them an opportunity to ask questions. If the opportunity to present at a faculty meeting is not available, then she has my permission to utilize the faculty email list to notify the faculty of her project and the surveys that they will be receiving.

If you have any questions, please contact me at [mholly@cal-mum.org](mailto:mholly@cal-mum.org) or by calling (585) 538-3483.

Sincerely,

Merritt Holly  
High School Principal

# Caledonia-Mumford Central School

## Counseling Office

99 North Street

Caledonia, New York 14423

(585) 538-3445 Fax (585) 538-3480

February 13, 2012

Dear Cal-Mum Teachers,

I have had the privilege of meeting many of you already, but for those of you who don't know me, my name is Chelsea Graff and I am the School Counseling Intern at Caledonia-Mumford Middle and High School. As part of my internship at Cal-Mum, I am required to design and complete a thesis for The College at Brockport's Counselor Education program.

I have decided to write my thesis about the teachers' perceptions of the Character Education program at Cal-Mum. I will explore the different values of character education that are being incorporated into the program, examine how it is being executed, and evaluate how the faculty perceives its effectiveness.

As part of this project, I am distributing a survey to all of the teachers in grades 6-12 to obtain their perceptions about the Character Education program at Cal-Mum. The survey will include 23 questions and will take approximately 5-7 minutes to complete. I will also be including a consent form with each survey. I am asking that each of you complete the survey and return it to the Counseling Center's mailbox in the main office. For your convenience, I have provided you with an envelope labeled "Character Education Survey." Feel free to use this envelope when returning your survey to protect your anonymity. Finally, please enjoy this candy bar as a small token of my appreciation for your participation.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me via email or phone (x3418). If at all possible, I would like to have all of the surveys returned by Wednesday February 29<sup>th</sup>. Thank you in advance for your time and cooperation and I look forward to hearing from all of you!

Sincerely,  
Chelsea Graff  
School Counseling Intern

**Appendix B – Character Education Self-Assessment**

1. In your opinion, what are the core values of the character education program at School XYZ? (i.e. respect, responsibility, fairness, integrity, etc.)						
a.						
b.						
c.						
<b>For the following questions, please circle your responses.</b>						
<b>5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree</b>						
2	There is staff ownership for teaching, modeling, and integrating the core values into all aspects of school life (e.g., discussions in grade-level, subject-area, and full staff	5	4	3	2	1
3	Staff consistently explains to students how the core values can help them make choices that demonstrate good	5	4	3	2	1
4	Staff can explain how they help students understand the core values (e.g. teachers can point to lessons they have taught).	5	4	3	2	1
5	Classroom routines and procedures are respectful of students and engage them in ways that develop core values such as responsibility, fairness, caring, diligence, and perseverance. Teachers explain to students how the core values underlie classroom routines and procedures.	5	4	3	2	1
6	Staff demonstrates ways to identify, constructively address, and discourage peer abuse (e.g., bullying; put-downs; racial slurs; insensitive gender remarks; remarks on appearance, economic, or social status) and increase students' understanding and respect for personal, economic, and	5	4	3	2	1
7	Staff reports that the administration fosters a collegial	5	4	3	2	1
8	Teachers promote work-related habits (e.g., perseverance, responsible decision-making, self management, and challenge seeking) that help students do their best work.	5	4	3	2	1
9	Teachers promote social habits (e.g., honesty, responsibility, collaboration) that help students work together harmoniously (e.g., through cooperative learning).	5	4	3	2	1
10	Staff and students recognize and express positive comments to each other in natural settings (e.g., hallways, classrooms, playing fields, meetings) as part of the everyday life of	5	4	3	2	1
11	Staff is courteous to students and each other and demonstrates respectful and supportive behavior toward	5	4	3	2	1
12	All staff has opportunities to be involved in character education planning and implementation. Teachers, administrators, and counselors are substantially involved.	5	4	3	2	1

13	Actions and statements of the principal and other key leaders (e.g., articulation of goals and principles; modeling and personal example; and decisions regarding policies, personnel, staff development, and allocation of time and other resources) are clearly supportive of character education and the long-range survival and growth of the	5	4	3	2	1
14	Students can explain why the core ethical and performance values are important, how various behaviors exemplify those values, and why some behaviors (e.g., treating others as you wish to be treated, giving your best effort) are right and others are wrong.	5	4	3	2	1
15	Students receive practice in and feedback on academic and behavioral skills (e.g., setting goals, monitoring their progress, listening attentively, using "I" messages, apologizing) through ordinary conduct of the classroom (e.g., the normal flow of teaching and learning, procedures, role plays, class meetings, cooperative learning groups).	5	4	3	2	1
16	Students have the opportunity to practice the core values in the context of relationships (e.g., through cross-age tutoring, mediating conflicts, and helping others) and in the context of classroom work (e.g., students demonstrate that they care about the quality of their work and incorporate feedback in order to improve their performance).	5	4	3	2	1
17	Students perceive staff as caring and report that they could go to an adult in the school with a problem.	5	4	3	2	1
18	Students perceive the student body as friendly and inclusive.	5	4	3	2	1
19	Students report that bullying (including cyber-bullying), teasing, and acts of cruelty or intolerance are infrequent and are not tolerated by staff.	5	4	3	2	1
20	All students participate in activities, programs, and processes that promote tolerance, understanding, respect, and peace among students (e.g., conflict resolution, anti-bullying programs, peer mediation, class meetings).	5	4	3	2	1
21	Students value the leadership roles available to them and identify themselves as members of wider communities (e.g., state, nation, and world) in which they can play positive and contributory roles.	5	4	3	2	1
22	In questionnaires and reflections on character-related behaviors and core values, students rate the importance of core values in their lives as high (e.g., on a survey question such as "Students in the school (classroom) respect and care about each other," more than 80 percent of students would	5	4	3	2	1
23	Data collected on student behavior (e.g., attendance, suspensions, vandalism, service hours, drug incidents, and cheating) demonstrates growth in the understanding of and commitment to good character.	5	4	3	2	1

**Appendix C – Character Education Self-Assessment Data**

Character Data Self- Assessment																			
5 = Strongly Agree 4 = Agree 3 = Neutral 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree																			
Responses:																			
Question#	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	AVG
2	5	4	5	5	4	3	4	2	4	4	3	2	4		4	4	4	3	3.76
3	5	4	5	4	3	4	2	3	4	2	2	2	4	3	3	3	4	3	3.33
4	5	5	5	4	2	3	2	3	4	2	2	3	4	2	4	4	3	3	3.33
5	5	4	5	5	5	4	4	3	4	4	4	2	5	3	4	4	4	2.5	3.97
6	5	4	5	4	5	4	4	4	4	2.5	4	3	3	3	4	5	4	2.5	3.89
7	3	3	4	4	5	3	4	3	4	4	1	3	3	2	5	4	4	3	3.44
8	5	5	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	4	4	4.33
9	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	3	4	4	5	4	4	3	4.22
10	4	4	4	4	5	4	5	5	3	3	3	2	4	3	4	3	4	3	3.72
11	4	5	4	5	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	3	5	4	4	4	4	2.5	4.14
12	4	4	5	5	2	3	2	2	2	2	1	4	3	1	5	4	3	3	3.06
13	4	5	4	4	2	3	4	3	4	4	1	2	4	1	4	4	3	3.5	3.31
14	4	2	5	5	2	4	2	4	3	3.5	2	3	4	2	3	3	3	3.5	3.22
15	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	3	2	3	4	3	2	3	4	3	3	3.33
16	4	3	4	5	4	3	4	4	3	2	2	3	3	1	4	4	3	2.5	3.25
17	4	4	5	5	5	3	5	4	3	4	2	4	4	3	4	3	4	3	3.83
18	4	3	4	4	4	3	2	4	3	3.5	3	2	3	3	4	4	3	3	3.31
19	4	3	4	5	4	3	2	3	3	4	5	3	2	2	4	3	4	3.5	3.42
20	4	3	4	4	2	3	3	3	4	2	4	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3.22
21	3	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	4	2	3	3	3	4	3.22
22	3	3	4	4	2	3	3	4	3	2	3	3	4	3	3	2	3	1.5	2.97
23	3	3	4	3	2	4	3	3	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	2.5	3.14

