

**Performance Values:  
Why They Matter and What Schools Can Do to Foster Their Development**

*A Position Paper of the Character Education Partnership (CEP)*  
**April, 2008**

As they come of age in a new century, our children face great and growing challenges. On a global scale, they confront an increasingly interdependent economy, exploding technological change, an environment at risk, and a world still plagued by war, disease, and injustice. In a workplace that offers diminishing job security, their ability to interact well with others and adapt to change will matter more than technical expertise.<sup>1</sup> And in their personal lives, young people face the challenge of building healthy relationships and a life of noble purpose in a culture that is often unsupportive of the highest values of the human spirit.

Schools, charged with preparing students to meet these formidable challenges, face a related yet more immediate set of challenges:

- Maintaining a safe and supportive learning environment
- Achieving adequate yearly progress on external academic standards
- Reducing drop-outs (30% nationally, as high as 50% in some urban areas)
- Improving students' performance on international tests
- Helping all students achieve and work to their potential, not just attain better grades or higher test scores.

What kind of character will young people need to meet the challenges they face in school and beyond—and how can schools help them develop it while meeting their own set of challenges?

**The Role of Work in a Life of Character**

“The most important human endeavor,” Albert Einstein wrote, “is striving for morality.” We are defined by our core ethical values—our integrity, our sense of justice and compassion, and the degree to which we respect the dignity and worth of every member of the human family, especially the most vulnerable among us. Research studies conducted in different cultures around the world have substantiated the universality of core ethical values.<sup>2</sup>

We are also known to others by the quality of our work. The quality of the work we do is influenced by many factors, including our skills, the presence or absence of a supportive human environment, and “performance values” such as diligence, preparation for the task at hand, and commitment to the best of which we are capable. The importance of work in people’s lives, and even what is regarded as work, may vary among individuals and cultures. Yet in broad terms, our work is one of the most basic ways we affect the quality of other people’s lives. When we do our work well—whether teaching a lesson, repairing a car, caring for the sick, or parenting a

child—someone typically benefits. When we do our work poorly, someone usually suffers. The essayist Lance Morrow notes the centrality of work to the human community: “All life must be worked at, protected, planted, replanted, fashioned, cooked for, coaxed, diapered, formed, sustained. Work is the way we tend the world.”

Where do we learn to care about the quality of our work and to develop the skills to do it well? To a large extent, in school. In his book, *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students*, Ron Berger says that during his nearly 30 years as a public school teacher, he also worked part-time as a carpenter. “In carpentry,” he writes, “there is no higher compliment than this: ‘That person is a craftsman.’ That one word connotes someone who has integrity, knowledge, dedication, and pride in work—someone who thinks carefully and does things well.”<sup>3</sup> Berger continues:

I want a classroom full of craftsmen. I want students whose work is strong and accurate and beautiful. In my classroom, I have students who come from homes full of books and students whose families own almost no books at all. I have students whose lives are generally easy and students with physical disabilities and health or family problems that make life a struggle. I want them all to be craftsmen. Some may take a little longer; some may need to use extra strategies and resources. In the end, they need to be proud of their work, and their work needs to be worthy of pride.

All of us who teach would like our students to be craftsmen—to think carefully about their work, take pride in it, and produce work that is worthy of pride. Teachers, however, say they often struggle to motivate students to care about the quality of their work. Students who don’t develop an orientation toward doing their best work in school may carry that over later in life. As educators, we recognize that some students’ path toward self-discovery, motivation, and accomplishment may emerge outside of the regular classroom in such venues as the fine arts, vocational arts and sciences, and athletics. By work, we mean all these forms of endeavor that engage a person in effortful and meaningful accomplishment.

### **Expanding Our View of Character**

As character educators, how can we foster students’ capacity to work and commitment to doing their work well, in school and throughout life? First, we must expand our view of character to recognize this important dimension of human development. Human maturity includes the capacity to love and the capacity to work. Character strengths such as empathy, fairness, trustworthiness, generosity, and compassion, are aspects of our capacity to love. These qualities make up what we could speak of as “moral character”; they enable us to be our best ethical selves in relationships and in our roles as citizens. Character strengths such as effort, initiative, diligence, self-discipline, and perseverance constitute our capacity to work. These qualities make up what we could speak of as “performance character”; they enable us to achieve, given a supportive environment, our highest potential in any performance context (the classroom, the athletic arena, the workplace, etc.). By differentiating moral character and performance

character, we do not intend to “reify” them as separate psychological entities; indeed, some persons may find it more conceptually helpful to think of these as being two “aspects” of our character rather than two distinct “parts” of character.

The moral and performance aspects of character are mutually supportive. The moral aspects, besides enabling us to treat each other with fairness, respect, and care, ensure that we pursue our performance goals in ethical rather than unethical ways. We don’t lie, cheat, steal, or exploit other people in order to succeed; rather, our performance efforts contribute positively to the lives of others. The performance aspects of our character, in turn, enable us to act on our moral values and make a positive difference in the world. We take initiative to right a wrong or be of service to others; we persevere to overcome problems and mend relationships; we work selflessly on behalf of others or for a noble cause, often without recognition or reward. In all realms of life, good intentions aren’t enough; being our best requires work.

Both moral and performance character are necessary to achieve the goals for which all schools of character strive. Moral character plays a central role in helping schools create safe and caring environments, prevent peer cruelty, decrease discipline problems, reduce cheating, foster social and emotional skills, develop ethical thinking, and produce public-spirited democratic citizens. Performance character plays a central role in helping schools improve all students’ academic achievement, promote an ethic of excellence, reduce drop-outs, prepare a competent and responsible workforce, and equip young persons with the skills they will need to lead productive, fulfilling lives and contribute to the common good. Both the moral and performance aspects of character are, of course, needed for *all* of the above pursuits; we must work hard (an aspect of performance character), for example, in order to create and sustain a caring school environment, just as we must build caring relationships (an aspect of moral character) in order to be effective at helping students learn and achieve.

### **What Research Shows**

Various studies show the contribution of performance character to human development and achievement. Stanford psychologist Walter Mischel and colleagues conducted a study, popularly known as “the marshmallow test,” that assessed the ability of 4-year-olds to delay gratification (an important aspect of performance character) and then assessed the “cognitive and self-regulatory competencies” of these same subjects when they were seniors in high school. The 4-year-olds were each given a marshmallow and a choice: If they ate the marshmallow when the experimenter left the room to run an errand, that was the only marshmallow they got; but if they waited 15 minutes for the experimenter to return, they received a second marshmallow. (Psychologists note that whether a child sees delaying gratification as an appropriate response in a particular situation may be influenced by family, neighborhood, and cultural factors.<sup>4</sup>)

Those who, at age four, had been “waiters” on the marshmallow test, compared to those who did not delay gratification, were subsequently better able as adolescents to make and follow

through on plans; more likely to persevere in the face of difficulty; more self-reliant and dependable; better able to cope with stress; better able to concentrate on a task; and more academically competent—scoring, on average, more than 100 points higher on a college entrance exam.<sup>5</sup> Mischel concluded that impulse control in the service of a distant goal is a “meta-ability,” affecting the development of many important psychological capacities.

In *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman present theoretical and empirical support for performance character attributes such as creativity, curiosity, love of learning, and persistence.<sup>6</sup> Recent research on expert performance in the arts and sciences, sports, and games reveals that stars are made, not born. Outstanding performance is the product of years of deliberate practice and coaching—training that develops performance character as well as higher levels of the target skill—rather than the result of innate talent.<sup>7</sup> Longitudinal studies such as *Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure* find that adolescents who develop their talent to high levels, compared to equally gifted peers who don’t fulfill their potential, show higher levels of such performance character qualities as goal-setting and wise time management.<sup>8</sup>

Research also helps us understand how the moral and performance aspects of character interact. Studies such as Colby’s and Damon’s *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* reveal both strong performance character (e.g., determination, organization, and creativity) and strong moral character (e.g., a sense of justice, integrity, and humility) working synergistically to account for exemplars’ achievements in fields as varied as civil rights, education, business, philanthropy, the environment, and religion.<sup>9</sup> Students themselves affirm the complementary roles of performance character and moral character. When researcher Kathryn Wentzel asked middle school students, “How do you know when a teacher cares about you?” they identified two behavior patterns: The teacher *teaches well* (makes class interesting, stays on task, stops to explain something), and the teacher *treats them well* (is respectful, kind, and fair).<sup>10</sup> In other words, “a caring teacher” models both performance character and moral character.

### **Ten Ways Schools Can Foster the Development of Performance Character**

In books, curricula, and research reports (see, for example, *What Works in Character Education*<sup>11</sup>) over the past two decades, the character education literature has described a great many practices for developing moral character. A smaller number of publications have also described practices that develop performance character; these resources include Berger’s *An Ethic of Excellence*, the report *Smart & Good High Schools: Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work, and Beyond*<sup>12</sup>, and CEP’s annual *National Schools of Character* publication (which profiles each award-winning school, including what it does to foster achievement and excellence).<sup>13</sup>

Because performance character has received less attention in the literature than moral character, we focus in the remainder of this paper on how to develop performance values, describing ten practices—some schoolwide, some classroom-focused—that are supported by research and

used by exemplary educators. These school-based strategies do not replace the important contribution that parenting practices make to performance character development; nor do they reduce the need for schools to reach out to families as partners in encouraging their children's effort and learning. But these ten practices, especially taken together, can help to shape a school and peer-group culture that maximizes the motivation to learn and achieve, even in students who might not bring such dispositions to the classroom.

**1. Create a safe and supportive learning community.** In order to be ready to learn and disposed to develop their performance character, students must feel safe and supported in school. A caring school community that respects student differences and creates a sense of belonging among students and staff lays the groundwork for hard work and academic success. A landmark study of 90,000 middle and high school students found that students who feel “connected” to school, as measured by the quality of their relationships with teachers and schoolmates, are more likely to be motivated to learn and have heightened academic aspirations and achievement.<sup>14</sup> (See Charles Elbot's and David Fulton's *Building an Intentional School Culture: Excellence in Academics and Character* for ways to create a schoolwide learning community with a high level of connectedness around shared core values.<sup>15</sup>)

**2. Create a culture of excellence.** Excellence is born from a culture. Schools should therefore do everything possible to foster a culture where it's “cool to care about excellence” and where all students, given enough time and support, are seen as capable of high-quality work. When students enter a culture that demands and supports excellence, they will do their best work in order to fit in. Berger's *An Ethic of Excellence* shows how teachers can create this culture of excellence by being consistent across classrooms in expecting students' best effort and by providing well-designed project-based learning that elicits quality work. “Work of excellence is transformational,” Berger writes. “Once a student sees that he or she is capable of excellence, that student is never quite the same. There is a new self-image, a new notion of possibility.” As we help all students aspire to quality work in the classroom, we must also keep in mind that there are many paths to excellence, including those offered by co-curricular activities. For many young people, the entry into the experience of “craftsmanship” may be the band, the art class, or the basketball team (see *Smart & Good High Schools* for illustrative case studies). Research confirms the power of co-curricular activities to positively impact life outcomes related to both moral and performance character.<sup>16</sup>

**3. Foster, in both faculty and students, a “growth mindset” that emphasizes the importance of effort.** Studies indicate that our confidence in the face of challenges, another important aspect of performance character, is affected by our underlying beliefs about intelligence and personality. Over years of research, Carol Dweck found that the way in which students and adults answer questions such as, “Is intelligence set, or can you change it?” and “Are you a certain kind of person, or can you change yourself substantially?” tends to predict how they will respond to challenges both in school and life in general. A “fixed mindset” — the belief that our abilities are for the most part set at birth — can lead us to label and stereotype ourselves and others, avoid challenges, focus more on grades than on learning, hide our mistakes, and even

cheat to avoid the appearance of failure. In sharp contrast, a “growth mindset” —the belief that we can improve with effort—can lead us to be curious, engage in learning for its own sake, pursue challenges, and increase our efforts to overcome obstacles.

To persons with a *fixed* mindset, grades are an evaluation of their worth; to persons with a *growth* mindset, grades are indication of whether they have met their goals or need to apply more effort.<sup>17</sup> Two clear educational implications of Dweck’s research: (1) emphasize effort rather than innate ability (“You worked hard on that paper” rather than “You’re such a talented writer”), and (2) view all students as full of potential rather than limited by labels and stereotypes. We can also foster a growth mindset and performance character development by helping students take on challenges that provide stretch but are within their current reach (not too easy and not too hard), by helping them build the skills needed for success, and by encouraging them to extend their reach over time.

**4. Develop thinking dispositions in all members of the school community.** Besides developing adults’ and students’ belief in the power of effort, we can foster other types of thinking dispositions that are part of performance character and that play an important role in learning. Project Zero at Harvard University has defined “intellectual character” to include such dispositions as being open-minded, curious, metacognitive (reflecting on thinking), strategic, skeptical, and seeking truth and understanding.<sup>18</sup> These thinking dispositions also contain within them moral values such as willingness to listen to others’ ideas, valuing what is true over what is self-serving or expedient, and being honest about one’s thinking and beliefs. As with moral values, these “habits of mind” are developed through discussion, modeling and observation, practice, and reflection. Coaching students in conflict resolution and teaching them to “think before acting” provide further opportunities for nurturing these intellectual dispositions. Such dispositions of mind should also be the guiding norm for the adults who make up the school’s professional learning community as they interact and help each other do their best work.

**5. Assign work that matters.** Creating a culture of thinking and a culture of excellence requires a powerful pedagogy, one that motivates students to do thoughtful, high-quality work and to acquire the performance character attributes needed to do such work. One important pedagogical practice is assigning *work that matters*—work that inspires students because it is challenging, meaningful, affects others, and is therefore intrinsically rewarding. Ron Berger describes one such project in which his 6<sup>th</sup>-graders interviewed senior citizens and wrote their biographies: “No one needed to tell them the reason for doing a quality job. These books were to be gifts to the seniors, gifts that might become precious family heirlooms. They wanted critique and help from everyone. They read the final drafts of their opening paragraphs aloud to the whole class for suggestions. They labored, draft after draft, over their cover designs. They wanted their books to be perfect.” Doing work that positively impacts others fosters students’ intrinsic motivation by fulfilling several interrelated human needs: making a contribution, feeling connected within a community, and experiencing a sense of competence.

**6. Provide models of excellence.** If we want students to aspire to excellence, they must see what excellence looks like. Many schools take pains to provide students with varied examples of high-quality work on a given assignment before students begin their own work. What makes a particular drawing, science project, or piece of writing so good? What was the process of achieving such high quality? What mistakes and revisions were likely part of the process? Berger's *An Ethic of Excellence* offers helpful examples of how teachers can become "archivers of excellence" and use models of excellence effectively to launch student projects.

**7. Develop a culture that encourages feedback and revision.** Group feedback sessions can serve as a central strategy for developing performance character. Students bring their work to the circle, solicit comments and suggestions from their peers and the teacher, and use that feedback to revise and improve their work. (Some teachers encourage multiple revisions of at least some assignments, emphasizing quality of work over quantity.) The teacher uses the critique session as the optimal context for teaching students necessary academic concepts and skills. Students presenting a piece of work typically begin by explaining their ideas or goals and stating what they would like help with. Classmates respond first with positive comments and then offer suggestions, often sensitively phrased as questions: "Would you consider making such-and-such change?" Through this process of supportive group critique, guided by norms of respect and care, students function as an ethical learning community where they not only pursue their own best work but also strive to bring out each others' best work.

**8. Prepare students to make public presentations of their work.** Students work harder to do their best when they know their work will be presented to an audience beyond the classroom. In some schools, every project that students complete is shared with some kind of an outside audience, whether another class, the principal, parents, or the wider community. The teacher's role is not to be the sole judge of students' work but to function like a sports coach or play director, helping students prepare their work for the public eye. In a similar way, some high schools require seniors to do an "exhibition"—a public presentation to a jury of teachers, peers, and at least one community expert—of long-term research or creative work. Service learning projects often involve sharing one's work in this public way. If we require students to publicly present their work, we must, of course, help them acquire and practice the skills they will need to make successful presentations.

**9. Use rubrics to help students take responsibility for their learning.** Columbine Elementary School (Woodland Park, CO), a 2000 National School of Character, shows how to use rubrics to help students learn to self-assess, set goals, and in general take responsibility for their learning. Columbine has seven "personal and social responsibility standards" that are integrated into classroom instruction and students' report cards. Performance character is represented by four of these standards: (1) "practices organizational skills," (2) "takes risks and accepts challenges," (3) "listens attentively and stays on task," and (4) "evaluates own learning." Each standard is further broken down into as many as five specific skills. For each skill, there are four levels of competence: "in progress," "basic," "proficient," and "advanced." For example, the first item under "practices organization skills" has to do with "completing and turning in work." The

four levels of competence in this particular skill are: “*in progress*: I rarely complete my work and turn it in on time”; “*basic*: I sometimes remember to hand in my completed work, but I need a lot of reminding”; “*proficient*: I usually remember to hand in my completed work with few reminders”; and “*advanced*: I consistently hand in my work with no reminders.” Teachers conference with students individually to help them assess where they are on the rubrics and set goals for improvement.

**10. Encourage mastery learning.** In 1968, Benjamin Bloom developed an approach to teaching called mastery learning that has much potential to develop performance character. Mastery learning requires all students to achieve a certain level of mastery of a given concept or skill.<sup>19</sup> If they do not achieve it on the first try, they keep trying. Five of the six major research reviews of this approach substantiate its positive effects on student achievement.<sup>20</sup> (Mastery learning, like any other pedagogy, can be abused; it can lead to demoralization if students are asked to perform at certain levels but are not helped to attain those standards.) At Quest School (Humble, TX), a 2002 National School of Character that uses mastery learning, a teacher explains: “Our whole program is about perseverance. In the beginning, kids don’t realize that they will have to redo an assignment—two or three or four times—until they get it right. They learn to persevere.” A student offered his view of mastery learning’s benefits: “You have to know your work forwards and backwards. If your data analysis on a project isn’t good, you’ll get it back. And if you get lower than a B in a class, you don’t get credit for that class—you have to retake it the following year.” A school administrator added: “Over the four years, students come to set an internal bar for the quality of their work. Our goal is for them to internalize the revision process. They know that in senior year, they have only *one* chance to revise a paper or re-take a test. They begin to turn in quality the first time.”

Throughout history, and in cultures around the world, education rightly conceived has had two great goals: to help students become smart and to help them become good. They need character for both. They need moral character in order to behave ethically, strive for social justice, and live and work in community. They need performance character in order to enact their moral principles and succeed in school and in life. Virtue, as the ancient Greeks pointed out, means human excellence. To be a school of character or a community of character is to strive to be our best and do our best in all areas of our lives.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Casner-Lotto & L. Barrington, *Are they really ready to work? Employers’ perspectives on the basic knowledge and applied skills for new entrants to the 21st century U.S. workforce.* (Washington, DC: The Conference Board, 2006). Available at [www.conference-board.org](http://www.conference-board.org).

<sup>2</sup> C. Peterson & M. Seligman, *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification.* (New York: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, 2004).



- 
- <sup>3</sup> R. Berger, *An ethic of excellence*. (Plymouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).
- <sup>4</sup> We are grateful to Professor Marisha Humphries, University of Illinois at Chicago, for this point.
- <sup>5</sup> Y. Shoda, W. Mischel, & P.K. Peake, "Predicting adolescent cognitive and self-regulatory competencies from preschool delay of gratification," *Developmental Psychology*, 1990, 26, 6, 978-86.
- <sup>6</sup> Peterson, & Seligman.
- <sup>7</sup> K. A. Ericsson, N. Charness, P.J. Feltovich, & R.R. Hoffman (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of expertise and expert performance*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- <sup>8</sup> M. Csikszentmihalyi, et al., *Talented teenagers*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- <sup>9</sup> A. Colby & W. Damon, *Some do care*. (New York: Free Press, 1998).
- <sup>10</sup> K. Wentzel, "Are effective teachers like good parents? Teaching styles and student adjustment in early adolescence," *Child Development*, 2002, 73, 287-301.
- <sup>11</sup> M. Berkowitz & M. Bier, *What works in character education*. (Washington, DC: Character Education Partnership, 2006). This report can be downloaded from [www.characterandcitizenship.org](http://www.characterandcitizenship.org).
- <sup>12</sup> T. Lickona & M. Davidson, *Smart & good high schools*. (Cortland, NY: Center for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Rs; Washington, DC: Character Education Partnership, 2005). This report can be downloaded from [www.cortland.edu/character](http://www.cortland.edu/character). See also M. Davidson, T. Lickona, & V. Khmelkov, "Smart & good schools: A new paradigm for high school character education," in L. Nucci and D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Handbook of Moral and Character Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).
- <sup>13</sup> For more information about the National Schools of Character program, visit [www.character.org](http://www.character.org).
- <sup>14</sup> M.D. Resnick, et al., "Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 1997, 278, 10, 823-832.
- <sup>15</sup> C.F. Elbot & D.V. Fulton, *Building an intentional school culture*. (New York: Corwin Press, 2007).
- <sup>16</sup> See Lickona & Davidson, pp. 112-114.
- <sup>17</sup> C.S. Dweck, *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development*. (Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press, 2000).
- <sup>18</sup> R. Richhart, *Intellectual character: What it is, why it matters, and how to get it*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).
- <sup>19</sup> Benjamin Bloom, *All our children learning: A primer for parents, teachers, and other educators*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981).
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, J.H. Block et al., *Building effective mastery learning schools*. (New York: Longman, 1989).