

# WWC EVIDENCE REVIEW PROTOCOL FOR CHARACTER EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS

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## Topic Area Focus

Character education is an inclusive concept regarding all aspects of how families, schools, and related social institutions support the positive character development of children and adults. *Character* in this context refers to the moral and ethical qualities of persons as well as the demonstration of those qualities in their emotional responses, reasoning, and behavior. Character is associated with such virtues as respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Character education *programs* are activities and experiences organized by a provider for the purpose of fostering positive character development and the associated core ethical values (also described as moral values, virtues, character traits, or principles).

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) review of this topic focuses on character education programs designed for use in elementary, middle, or high schools with attention to student outcomes related to positive character development, prosocial behavior, and academic performance. Closely related program areas, such as social-emotional learning, conflict resolution, violence prevention, social skills training, service learning, and the like, may be addressed in future WWC reviews but are not intended to be covered by this one.

A systematic review of evidence in this topic area addresses the following questions:

- Which character education programs have proven effective for improving student outcomes related to positive character development, prosocial behavior, and academic performance?
- Are different character education programs effective for improving different outcomes, particularly academic performance?

## Key Definitions

***Character education.*** Broadly, character education encompasses all aspects of the influence that families, schools, and other social institutions have on the positive character development of children and adults.

***School-based character education programs.*** These are programs implemented in elementary, middle, or high schools that involve deliberate, proactive attempts to foster positive character development. Character education programs are distinguished by a predominant emphasis in their program materials and implementation on instilling, teaching, or promoting a range of core values (described also as ethical values, moral values, virtues, character traits, or principles). Character education programs have features that overlap with those of such other program areas as social-emotional development, conflict resolution, violence prevention, social skills training, and service learning but are differentiated from them by having both the following characteristics:

- Character education programs are primarily designed to promote values that may be generalized across contexts rather than focused on a single domain (e.g., conflict resolution, drug use, unsafe sexual behavior).
- Character education programs dedicate most or all of their lesson units or prescribed activities and events to teaching core values directly or indirectly (e.g., through role models, literary examples, etc.).

**Values.** The value domains on which character education programs generally focus are the following:

- Intrapersonal values—those characterizing the individual’s behavior and attitudes in a wide range of situations and activities (e.g., honesty, courage, perseverance, self-discipline, responsibility, integrity).
- Interpersonal values—those characterizing the individual’s behavior and attitudes toward others, especially as expressed in relation to family, peers, teachers, and persons in the student’s immediate social environment (e.g., caring, respect, empathy, trustworthiness, fairness, tolerance of diversity).
- Civic virtues—those characterizing the individual’s behavior and attitudes toward the community and society (e.g., good citizenship, patriotism, justice).

**Comprehensive and “modular” character education programs.** School-based character education programs can be divided into two broad categories differing in the nature and scope of their implementation as follows:

- *Comprehensive programs* are those aimed at affecting the school as a community by integrating character education into the full spectrum of school activities and school life through such means as (a) involvement across curricular topics, discipline practices, after-school activities, and other such school functions; (b) participation by teachers, principals, school staff, parents, and especially students in program design and implementation; and (c) multiple approaches to teaching character (e.g., instruction, modeling, special events, community service, experiential learning).
- *Modular programs* are those designed to be used in a single classroom or group of classrooms (e.g., a set of character education lessons) or involve a particular type of event or activity, such as an inspirational speaker. Modular programs can be schoolwide without necessarily being comprehensive (e.g., lessons taught to all students in at least one class, such as social studies, or with all students exposed to one or more special events).

**Character development and behavioral outcomes.** Within the field of character education, core values are typically understood as having cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. That is, students are expected to understand what the values mean (e.g., be able to reason about them), care about them (e.g., internalize them as enduring dispositions), and enact them in their behavior. Examples of relevant outcomes include:

- **Understanding values.** Students' ability to recognize values and how they may affect people and actions in different situations, their understanding of ethical dilemmas, and their ability to make critical judgments about their own and other people's behavior in different situations. This category encompasses all outcome variables that center on knowledge or reasoning about any relevant aspect of character or the values and behavior associated with it.
- **Caring about values.** The perceived importance of core values and students' opinions about how they should behave in different situations. This category encompasses all outcome variables that center on attitudes, feelings, self-perceptions, character or personality traits, and the like that are related to character or the values and behaviors associated with it.
- **Enacting values.** Behavior that displays core values (e.g., participation in community service), prosocial behavior (e.g., supporting peers), or decreased problem behavior (e.g., substance use, fighting, disciplinary referrals). This category encompasses all outcome variables that center on the actual enacted behavior of students that relates to character or the values associated with it.

**Academic outcomes.** Measures of academic achievement, such as grades or test scores, and measures of academic persistence or participation, such as attendance, retention, or graduation.

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## GENERAL INCLUSION CRITERIA

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### Populations to be Included

The population of interest includes K-12 general and/or special education students attending elementary, middle, or high school at any type of school (public, private, parochial, etc.). The students must attend a school in the U.S. or its territories or tribal entities, or in an English-speaking country with a sufficiently similar cultural context that the study can be realistically replicated in the U.S.

### Types of Interventions to be Included

The interventions considered for inclusion are identified through an exhaustive search of the published and unpublished literature as well as a review of nominations submitted to the WWC. For an intervention to be included in the review, the main goal and focus in its lessons, activities, and/or organization must be the direct or indirect teaching of a range of core values. The intervention does not necessarily have to be referred to as a character education program if it otherwise meets this criterion. Only interventions that are replicable (i.e., documented well enough that they can be distinctly identified and reproduced) will be included. Finally, all interventions should be delivered during the regular school day and school year; after-school and summer programs will not be included.

Within the above constraints, three broad types of interventions are eligible for inclusion:

1. **Programs.** Examples of school-based character education programs include:

- A curriculum to promote character values among high school students that integrates character education activities into several academic subject areas including social studies, English, and math.
- An elementary school program in which the entire school becomes a community in which all participants—children and adults alike—work together to foster values of caring, helping, respect, and tolerance. The approach involves training the adults in a child’s life to model, teach, and embody core principles.
- A literature-based program to promote core values. The program consists of in-class lessons that include stories, puppets, finger plays, rhymes, songs, and activity books.

2. **Practices or strategies.** Examples of character education practices include:

- Processes in which school staff and community members reach consensus about what a character education program should include and/or participate in the ongoing implementation of the program.
- Teaching strategies (e.g., cooperative learning focused on promoting helping/caring behaviors or acceptance of diversity, classroom disciplinary system to enable student responsibility).
- Professional development for school staff on character education topics or methods.
- Procedures for assessing and recognizing relevant values and attributes (e.g., awards, recognition ceremonies).

3. **Policies.** Examples of character education policies include:

- Systemwide or schoolwide behavior codes and discipline policies that focus on promoting core values in character education.
- School policies that require moral leadership from school administrators, staff and students.

For this WWC review, character education *products* (e.g., workbooks, videos, and interactive CD-ROMs) are not included, except as they are incorporated into a program, practice, or policy as described above. A large variety of products are offered to elementary, middle, and high schools for individual or group use. Scrutiny of the full list is beyond the scope of this review. In addition, it is believed that little research exists on the outcomes produced by the use of such products.

## Types of Research Studies to be Included

The review focuses on well-conducted randomized and nonrandomized controlled trials of character education programs, practices, and policies. To be eligible, studies must have been published in 1983 or later and report outcome measures taken on students, not solely teachers, parents, or other participants in the program or school. At least one of the outcome measures must focus on character education outcomes or academic performance and demonstrate adequate reliability or face validity.

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## SPECIFIC TOPIC PARAMETERS

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The following parameters specify which studies will be coded for the review and the aspects of those studies that are critical to how they are coded.

- 1. Commonly shared and/or theoretically derived characteristics of the intervention that should be reflected in its definition and implementation.**
  - The primary emphasis of the intervention is on instilling, teaching, or promoting core values that can be generalized across contexts (that is, are not focused on a single domain such as conflict resolution, drug use, or unsafe sexual behavior). Values of this sort include, for example, honesty, courage, perseverance, self-discipline, responsibility, integrity, caring, respect, trustworthiness, fairness, citizenship, patriotism, justice, and the like (described also as moral values, virtues, character traits, or principles). Qualifying interventions will have most or all of their lesson units, prescribed activities or events, and/or training and program materials dedicated to this objective in readily apparent ways.
  - Attention is given to a range of values of the sort identified above; that is, multiple values can be identified in lesson plans, prescribed activities, etc. in contrast to a focus on a single value or a set of very closely related values (such as those having to do only with peer relationships or only with community service activities).
  - The intervention is a program, practice, or policy but not exclusively a product (e.g., workbook, video, interactive CD-ROM), and it is replicable. Replicability will be assumed for branded programs that have a name and are marketed to schools, and for distinctly identifiable programs, practices, or policies (i.e., those that appear under the same name in different places or are associated with a particular developer or disseminator) that are documented well enough to be implemented by a provider other than the developer.
  - The intervention is implemented in an elementary, middle, or high school during the regular school day and academic year; after-school and summer programs will not be included.

- In addition, interventions will be characterized for descriptive purposes as comprehensive, modular, or (if necessary) something in between, with all these variants eligible for inclusion.

**2. Important characteristics of the intervention that must be known in order to reliably replicate it with different participants, in other settings, at other times. An intervention is considered to be replicable if:**

- The intervention is “branded.”
- The intervention is not “branded” but meets the following conditions:
  - The intervention is described in general terms.
  - The duration of the intervention is described.
  - The characteristics of the individuals who are expected to deliver the intervention are described.

**3. Important classes of outcomes.**

- Character development as reflected in understanding, caring about, and/or enacting core ethical values (knowledge, attitudes/values, or behavior)
- Prosocial behavior or reduction of problem behaviors that represent a behavioral expression of core values
- Academic performance

**4. Evidence sufficient for an outcome measure to demonstrate each type of reliability (internal consistency, temporal stability/test-retest, and inter-rater).**

Standard WWC values will be applied to these reliability considerations as follows:

- Internal consistency: .60
- Temporal stability/test-retest: .40
- Inter-rater reliability: .50

**5. Interval of time within which studies should have been conducted to be appropriate for the Evidence Report.**

Studies must have been conducted within the past 20 years (i.e., with a publication date of 1983 or later). This is the default time interval for all WWC reviews. Timing will be judged by the date of earliest publication of any report on the study outcomes. The publication date for unpublished studies will be the date the document reached its final form.

**6. Necessary characteristics that define the target population.**

Students are between the ages of 5 and 21 and are enrolled in grades K through 12. Students attend an institution within the United States (including U.S. territories and tribal entities) or within an English-speaking cultural setting for which the study could realistically be replicated in the U.S. In addition, interventions will be characterized for descriptive purposes with regard to the population with which they are implemented, including special subpopulations of children (e.g., children with learning disabilities or language impairments, English language learners, etc.).

**7. Important characteristics of participants that might be related to the intervention's effect that must be equated if a study does not employ random assignment.**

Studies that do not employ random assignment must demonstrate the initial equivalence of the comparison groups, or ensure it through statistical control, with regard to:

- Pretest scores for at least one outcome measure
- Grade level or age
- Gender
- Any special status such as special education, ELL, etc.
- Location of the schools involved (urban, suburban, or rural; geographical region)

**8. Relevant subgroups of interest for this review, in addition to age or grade, gender, disability status, and race/ethnicity.**

- Second-language learners or children with cultural backgrounds different from the local dominant culture
- Children with a history of school disciplinary infractions or who are otherwise identified as at risk for anti-social behavior

**9. Relevant settings of interest for this review.**

- Schools in urban, suburban, or rural locations
- Public, private, and special-purpose schools

**10. Appropriate interval for measuring the intervention's effect relative to the end of the intervention.**

The benefits of a character education intervention are expected to appear by the end of the intervention and to be retained past that point. Thus measures at the end of an intervention and any time thereafter are appropriate.

**11. Amount of differential attrition from the intervention and control groups assumed to be problematic.**

The WWC default value will be used: Differential attrition is defined as a differential loss of greater than 7%. If differential attrition is less than or equal to 7%, the associated bias will be assumed minimal. If differential attrition is greater than 7%, the study must show that it did not bias the effect size estimate by demonstrating post-attrition group equivalence on the pretest for at least one major outcome variable. This may be accomplished by showing nonsignificant differences with an adequately powered (.80) statistical significance test or a standardized mean difference between groups of  $d = .10$  or less.

**12. Amount of overall attrition from the study sample assumed to be severe.**

The WWC default value will be used: Severe overall attrition is defined as a loss of more than 20% of the sample assigned to the relevant study conditions. If overall attrition is less than or equal to 20%, the associated bias is assumed to be minimal. If overall attrition is greater than 20%, the study must show that it did not bias the effect size estimate by demonstrating post-attrition group equivalence on the pretest for at least one major outcome variable. This may be accomplished by showing nonsignificant differences with an adequately powered (.80) statistical significance test or a standardized mean difference between groups of  $d = .10$  or less.

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## METHODOLOGY

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### Literature Search Strategies

The WWC Evidence Report Team employs comprehensive and systematic literature search strategies to identify the population of published and unpublished relevant studies. This section contains topic specific elements of the literature search (e.g., search terms, additional journals, and associations).

### Key Word List

Academic Aspiration	Civics	Courage
Academic Goal	Civility	Cultural
Altruism*	Classroom Climate	Curriculum
Anti-Semitism	Classroom Environment	Decision
Attitude skills	Collegiality	Decision Making
Bully*	Commun* Responsibility	Delinquen*
Caring	Community	Democra*
Character	Community Service	Disciplin*
Character Development	Compete	Disrupt*
Character Education	Competit*	Diversity
Character Traits	Conflict	Emotion*
Citizenship	Conflict Resolution	Emotional Intelligence
Civic Engagement	Cooperation	Emotional Learning



Empath*	Multicultural	Service Learning
Empower*	Nonviolence	Sexism
Equality	Patience	Social Development
Ethical Development	Peaceful	Social Justice
Ethics	Peer	Social Responsibility
Expulsion	Peer Pressure	Social-Emotional
Fairness	Perseverance	Substance Abuse
Family Values	Problem behavior	Suspension
Generosity	Problem solving	Theft
Graduation	Pro-Social	Tolerance
Homophobia	Racism	Trustworthiness
Honesty	Relationship	Values
Impact	Religion	Values Clarification
Integrity	Religious Education	Vandalism
Interpersonal	Resilience	Violence
Interpersonal Skills	Respect	Virtue
Involvement	Responsib*	Volunteer
Justice	Retention	Whole Child
Kindness	Safe*	Work Ethic
Leadership	School Climate	Work Habit*
Moral	School Environment	Youth Activity
Moral Education	Self Esteem	Youth Program
Moral Reasoning	Self-Reflection	
Motivation	Service	

A combination of Boolean terms such as AND and OR will be used with this keyword list. The librarian at AIR will be consulted as to the appropriate combination to use and then tailor according to each specific electronic database.

### **Supplementary List of Journals to be Hand Searched**

1. Journal of Research in Character Education
2. Journal of Adolescent Research
3. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology
4. Journal of Research on Crime and Delinquency
5. Journal of Quantitative Criminology
6. Criminology
7. Journal of Community Psychology
8. Psychology in the Schools
9. Criminal Justice and Behavior

10. Justice Quarterly
11. Crime and Delinquency
12. Evaluation Review

Additional journals will be added to the supplementary list when a few articles appearing in them are identified through other search procedures.

### **Supplementary List of Organizations**

1. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
2. Tanglewood Research (<http://www.tanglewood.net/>)
3. Character Education Partnership (<http://www.character.org/>)
4. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning ([http://www.casel.org/sel\\_resources/linksindex.php](http://www.casel.org/sel_resources/linksindex.php))
5. SAMHSA's National Registry of Effective Programs (NREP)
6. Office of Safe and Drug Free School Programs Exemplary and Model Programs (<http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/exemplary01/index.html>)
7. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (<http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov/template.cfm?page=nrepbutton>)
8. Michigan Model Partnership for Character Education (<http://www.emc.cmich.edu/charactered/>)
9. National Service Learning Partnership (<http://www.service-learningpartnership.org/>)
10. National Center for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States ([http://www.ecs.org/html/projectsPartners/clc/clc\\_main.htm](http://www.ecs.org/html/projectsPartners/clc/clc_main.htm))
11. Service Learning Research and Development Center (<http://gse.berkeley.edu/research/slc/>)
12. Center for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> R's (<http://www.cortland.edu/c4n5rs/CONTENTS.htm>)
13. (indexes of similar organizations embedded in the above websites, such as [http://www.cortland.edu/c4n5rs/reso\\_iii.asp](http://www.cortland.edu/c4n5rs/reso_iii.asp))

## **Personal Contacts**

The WWC Character Education Evidence Report Team will solicit studies directly from knowledgeable informants in the field of character education. This will include members of organizations associated with character education, researchers who publish on character education, grantees, evaluators funded for character education programs, and other such persons.

Another source of contacts will be the developers of programs identified as relevant to the topic. The WWC Character Education Evidence Report Team will solicit studies and any additional information about the program from the developers.

A third source of personal contacts will occur after the identification of studies to be reviewed. We will contact the authors of these studies to answer specific queries and request additional materials.