AMERICAN CIVILIZATION'S DECLINE:
CAN CHARACTER EDUCATION REVERSE THE TREND?

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by

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Recent polls have shown that the American people feel that the quality of moral and ethical behavior in our nation has been on a downhill slide. Just one of the many indicators is the four-fold annual increase in violent crimes committed by adolescents since 1980. Sociologists have identified a number of causal factors including the breakdown of the family unit; distrust of government; the influence of television, especially the growing violence; promiscuous sexual behaviors; dishonesty; substance abuse and general lack of respect for self, others and property. In addition, they have noted the reduction in school-based character building activities, a trend which began in the late 60's and continued throughout the 80's.

For a number of years, we have been in the blame game. Each element of society had its pet solutions and thought that every other group's solutions were off base because they did not agree with their own priorities. One good example of this phenomenon occurred when Bob Dole called on the television and film industries to reduce the violence in their productions. Even though their own studies showed the connection of their programming to violent behaviors, rather than addressing the issue, they responded by citing Dole's opposition to gun control.

Despite these problems, there is good news on the horizon. A strong consensus has been building in support of the school's involvement in the teaching of core values. Barbara Bush and Republican Senator Pete Domenici join Jesse Jackson and Democrat Senator Chris Dodd in broad nonpartisan support for character education. Further, in the State of the Union Address, President Clinton called for character education in all schools. Secretary of Education Richard Riley has also placed the U.S. Department of Education in strong support of character education. Major education associations--including the American Association of School Administrators, American Federation of Teachers, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Association of School Boards, National Education Association and the National Association of Secondary School Principals--have become organizational members of The Character Education Partnership. The active participation of these groups clearly signals that teachers, school administrators and school board members can agree on the importance of character education. The American public, as reported in the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, support the teaching of such values as honesty (97%), democracy (93%), acceptance of people of different races and ethnic backgrounds (93%), patriotism (91%), caring for friends and family members (91%), and moral courage (91%)--Phi Delta Kappan, October 1993, p. 145. We no longer need to question whether character education should be part of the curriculum but rather how it should best be implemented.

Members of the usually cynical media seem to be grasping the importance of character education. Rather than just wringing their hands, as problem after problem is identified and reported, both the electronic and print media have begun to report on interventions that

work. Jonathan Adler of *Newsweek* started this trend, followed by ABC's American Agenda. More recently articles have appeared in *Forbes, U.S. News and World Report, Congressional Quarterly, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Boston Globe, Dallas Morning News, Dayton Daily News, Los Angeles Times, Nashville Tennessean, New York Times, Orlando Sentinel, St Louis Post Dispatch, U.S.A. Today and The Wall Street Journal* which report favorably upon the success of character education programs. In addition, the Cable News Network and the Public Broadcasting Network currently have major programs under development. The message is getting out.

What must we do to ensure that our character education efforts are effective? As a first step, we must recognize that character education is not a quick fix. It takes parent, school and community cooperation. All elements of the community must model the virtuous behaviors that are necessary to sustain civilization in a democracy. The following principles identified by the Character Education Partnership in May of 1995, describe the building blocks for good character education:

A. Character education promotes core ethical values as the basis of good character.
B. "Character" must be comprehensively defined to include thinking, feeling and behavior.
C. Effective character education requires an intentional, proactive and comprehensive approach that promotes the core values in all phases of school life.
D. The school must be a caring community.
E. To develop character, students need opportunities for moral action.
F. Effective character education includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners and helps them succeed.
G. Character education should strive to develop students' intrinsic motivation.
H. The school staff must become a learning and moral community in which all share responsibility for character education and attempt to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students.

I. Character education requires moral leadership from both staff and students.
J. The school must recruit parents and community members as full partners in the character-building effort.
K. Evaluation of character education should assess the character of the school, the school staff's functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students manifest good character.

A comprehensive character education program builds upon these elements to produce behavior changes in students which in turn result in an improved school environment. Schools with character education efforts in place have reported higher school attendance rates, less verbal and physical conflict, greater acceptance of responsibility for personal actions, and an increase in random acts of kindness. Several schools have also reported increased academic achievement.

In the past, many educators were fearful of addressing values-sensitive subjects. Now we find that the real danger lies in not clearly communicating the core values important to our communities. In most communities, identifying those character traits and weaving them into the entire fabric of the school's operations is a positive and unifying process that brings together people of different cultures, religions, political views, and socio-economic levels. When parents, teachers, administrators, business and community members come together for a common purpose, we fulfill the mission statement of the Character Education Partnership:

"Developing civic virtue and moral character in our youth for a more compassionate and responsible society."

As we contemplate the steps we should take to improve education, and ultimately our society, we can be guided by the words of the wise child who observed, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." *--Anne Frank*