

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CHARACTER EDUCATION PILOT PROGRAM REPORT



by

Dr. Pat Conn, Consultant
Educational Services Division
Northern Trails Area Education Agency
Box M
Clear Lake IA 50428

Introduction

Character education is not a new concept, curriculum or way of teaching. It is, however, a way of acknowledging virtues and qualities we want to ensure our students acquire. The United States Department of Education recently funded four pilot programs of which Iowa was one. In June, 1996, President Clinton announced the next round of funded states at the White House-Congressional Conference on Character Building. (The Iowa State Legislature also allocated funds for character

education in fiscal year 1995). The Iowa Department of Education's grant targeted the 25 schools served by Northern Trails Area Education Agency as the pilot consortium for carrying out the grant design.

Background Information on the Grant

The 25 school districts in north central Iowa have a long history of coordination and collaboration. The culture first began in 1986 through the then Drug-Free School and Communities Act (now referred to as Safe and Drug Free School and Communities Act). This legislation allowed school districts to form a consortium to pool not only funding resources but also people resources. The initial, and ongoing emphasis has been to develop a culture among the educational professional staff focused on developing a sense of community in schools and communities. As the basis for any long-lasting school improvement effort, the sense of community was defined by skills and knowledge referred to as social technology. The ten year commitment by the twenty-five school districts provided the strong foundation for the implementation of the federal character education grant. Beginning in 1992, those 25 districts requested a waiver from the Iowa Department of Education's traditional 280.12 and 280.18 requirement to engage in a five-year process of systemic change. Dubbed "Connecting the Pieces," this effort resulted in schools developing 1) beliefs and values about teaching and learning, 2) vision and mission statements, and 3) essentials learning delineating what students would be expected to know and do by the time they graduate. Following that, schools began to examine assessment systems, map curriculum in relationship to content standards, and vary instructional strategies consistent with the research about how students best think and learn. The essential learning are the focal point into which qualities of character are integrated.

Philosophy of the Grant

The character education movement in the United States is fairly diverse. In some states schools have a specific packaged curriculum and reading materials. In other states schools have taken a more integrated approach, believing that it is important not to make character education "another thing to teach" or another project or initiative.

The latter is the approach Iowa chose to implement partly because of Iowa's tradition of local control. Iowa's grant is divided into four areas: 1) identifying the character qualities; 2) integration into the curriculum and climate of the school; 3) implementation of Unit Plans into the Curriculum; and 4) baseline data evaluation.

1. Identifying the Character Qualities

Many of the school districts in north Iowa have identified essential learnings that they want students to know and be able to do as a result of thirteen years of education. These essential learnings are often referred to as character outcomes in other states. The essential learning were identified through a series of town meetings, staff input, parent groups and clergy focus groups. In all of the meetings, the question was continually asked, As a result of thirteen years of schooling, what do we want the students in this school district/community to know and be able to do?

Examples of the essential learnings in many of the schools were similar. For example, the qualities of being a problem solver, collaborative worker, effective communicator, participating citizen, etc. were frequently cited. Within each essential learning area, indicators were identified which align themselves closely with qualities of character. For example, collaborative workers need qualities such as empathy and self discipline to be effective. Specific skills associated with being a collaborative worker would include conflict resolution strategies, consensus building techniques, etc. For this reason, the grant allows for ongoing training in conflict resolution and service learning to parents, teachers, day-care providers, clergy, bankers and students.

2. Integration into the Curriculum and Climate of the School

After the community and school collaboratively identified the essential learnings, the next step was to integrate them into the curriculum. In June 1996, 200 educators from AEA-2 came together, working in teams from their respective districts, to specifically develop units that reflected not only subject content but also essential learnings. Part of the process of curriculum writing involved asking questions

about implementation and accountability. Questions such as "How will we know if students have learned to be more collaborative workers?" were identified.

3. Implementation of the Unit Plans into the Curriculum

Implementation of the units into the curriculum will take place during the 1996-97 school year. Throughout the year, teachers will teach the units they wrote the previous summer. The ongoing evaluation of success of instructing character qualities will continue to inform the next round of curriculum writings.

4. Baseline Data Evaluation

This is another critical part of the grant. Because of the importance of assessment, many resources are going into this area. The evaluation design is based on action research teams in each participating district. The teams are trained in collecting data, analyzing data, and taking action on the data as a result of the findings. The baseline data collected in each district provide us with a student profile so at the end of the four year grant period we will know what has been effective in terms of students graduating as persons of character as defined by the local community/school. Surveys given to fifth-, eighth- and eleventh-graders in each school district assessed levels of student engagement and resiliency. The results of the engagement survey are also juxtaposed with the results of the Youth Survey, administered by the Iowa Department of Education under the auspices of the SDFSC Program. Together, this data base will inform the success of the grant longitudinally. (This survey will be given each year for the remainder of the granting period. The Youth Survey is given every three years to inform schools about student usage of substances.) Performance assessments of the essential learning integrated into the curriculum units written in the summer of 1996 will also provide an evaluative component. And focus groups, interviews from staff, parents, and community members will triangulate the data. Already the data is informing the schools of next steps in moving toward increasing performance by all students in the essential learnings. For example, it has become obvious from the resiliency research that if engagement in classroom activities is to increase, then student ownership in schools

and communities must also be increased. The implications for more active, real-world learning opportunities seem obvious.

It is the vision of schools/communities in north Iowa to create a culture where students can grow and learn in healthy ways as modeled by all adults. The federal Character Education grant will play a role in helping schools develop as moral communities and achieve their vision of students graduating knowing and demonstrating qualities of character within the context of their families, schools, and communities.