

CHARACTER EDUCATION: PRICE LABORATORY SCHOOL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM



by

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Introduction

Increasing numbers of American educators are talking about character education. Closely allied with the study of ethics, morals, values, civics and citizenship, character education is receiving renewed interest in schools and communities across the nation. Some states such as Virginia, Alabama, New York, Utah,

and California have even passed legislation to mandate character education in their schools. This rapidly-growing movement has not gone unnoticed by the media. For example, highly visible and widely-read publications such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Times*, and *Newsweek* recently featured character education programs. In addition, President Clinton endorsed the concept of character education in his most recent State of the Union Message. He acknowledged a growing consensus that character education must be a part of every child's education.

The need for character education is self-evident. The media regularly exposes an alarming increase in violent crime among children and teens. Even "safe" neighborhoods and communities are not immune to the disparaging results of irresponsible social behavior on the part of youth. A growing anxiety in local communities translates into a collective national concern regarding the flagging social behavior of America's youth. Parents, teachers, business persons, religious leaders and politicians ask themselves and one another what can be done to inform and inspire the moral sensibilities of our youth to become respectful adult citizens.

Price Laboratory School Citizenship Program

In April of 1993, an informal group of elementary educators at Price Laboratory School at the University of Northern Iowa moved forward to address their concerns regarding a general lack of civility they observed among students at Price Laboratory School. These concerns were reinforced by comments from administrators, other faculty and staff members who enthusiastically welcomed a school-wide effort to address these student concerns. Titled the Price Laboratory School Elementary Citizenship Program, this project was implemented during the 1993-1994 academic year to develop a cohesive community of learners who value and respect one another. This program emphasized the establishment of an ongoing sense of community through prevention of anti-social behaviors and development of positive citizenship behaviors.

Monthly Citizenship Themes

Monthly themes were selected by the Elementary Student Council for each year's citizenship program and were displayed visibly in each

classroom. Over the past three years the following themes were selected:

- Rules & Safety
- Respecting & Valuing Each Other
- Kindness & Courtesy
- Thoughtful Words & Actions
- Cooperation (conflict resolution & problem-solving)
- Friendship
- Good Sportsmanship
- Active Learning
- Goal Setting
- Strengths and Limitations
- Keep Trying: Don't Give Up
- Helping Our Community
- Valuing Our Environment
- Rights & Responsibilities

Citizenship Assemblies

Once each month the elementary school held a citizenship assembly where classes took turns reviewing the month's theme as part of the assembly. Class presentations included dramatizations of the theme, performances of original songs written by students, slide and video presentations, and presentations of posters and art work. The following illustrates a typical citizenship assembly:

- Opening Songs Music Teacher
- Pledge of Allegiance Student Council
- Price Laboratory School Pledge Student Council
- Review of Last Month's Theme Elementary Class
- Featured Presentation Culture Council
- Introduction of New Theme Guidance Counselor
Resource Teacher
- Closing Songs Music Teacher

The PLS Pledge

An important component of the monthly citizenship assembly, was the reciting of the Price Laboratory School Pledge. Developed by the 1993-94 Elementary Student Council, ideas from each classroom were

solicited by Student Council representatives to be included in the Price Laboratory School Pledge. These ideas were first synthesized into categories and then into statements that promoted students' ideas. The elementary principal and elementary counselor facilitated this process. The final document read as follows:

I promise to respect everyone at Price Laboratory School, to follow school rules, to value all property, to listen to others, to do my best at learning, and to cooperate. I will not hurt others with my words or actions. I want Price Laboratory School to be a safe and happy place for all.

The PLS Pledge was enlarged, mounted, and laminated for display in each classroom and throughout the building. At the beginning of each citizenship assembly, the Elementary Student Council led the student body in reciting the PLS Pledge following the Pledge of Allegiance. Because the PLS Pledge was written by the students, they felt a sense of pride and ownership for it.

Introducing New Themes

At each assembly, the theme for the upcoming month was introduced under the leadership of the elementary guidance counselor and resource teacher. They solicited the involvement of the entire school community. For example, the music teacher and technology coordinator (a musician by avocation) wrote original songs related to various citizenship themes. The drama teacher assisted with skits related to the themes. The elementary art teacher coordinated student art projects which were displayed at citizenship assemblies. The physical education teachers presented on the theme, "Good Sportsmanship." The middle and high school students were even invited to help introduce some themes.

School-Wide Involvement

Over the course of each month, classrooms implemented the themes in various and unique ways. During the "Valuing Our Environment" theme, one classroom read books on recycling. Another class developed a "Beautification Project" in which sections of the school

were assigned to classrooms to maintain. Signs were placed in each section acknowledging which class was responsible for the beautification.

During the "Kindness and Courtesy" theme, the entire school community (secretaries, principals, cooks, janitors, teacher associates, teachers, the guidance counselor, elementary students, and university students) was involved. When a student was caught giving a hand in a "random act of kindness and courtesy" the behavior was described in writing on a green piece of paper cut in the shape of a hand. It was then placed in a box in the classroom. At the end of the day, the hands were read and placed on a large piece of poster paper cut in the shape of a tree. At the end of the month, the trees were brought to the elementary citizenship assembly. Everyone could see students' collective efforts in "Kindness and Courtesy." The trees were also displayed in the cafeteria for the entire school to view.

Citizenship Concern Form

Another example of school-wide involvement in our Citizenship Program was the development of a Citizenship Concern Form (see page 30). Structured around the Price Laboratory School Pledge, this form was designed to provide an accountability system in instances when a student's behavior didn't conform to the spirit of good citizenship and the Price Laboratory School Pledge. When an incident of misbehavior occurred, the supervisor intervened and asked the student to complete a Citizenship Form. The form was then processed with the student and sent home for a parent signature. One copy was given to the principal and one to the classroom teacher. This procedure emphasizes the importance of the character education principles upon which this program is built. It also solicits the cooperation of parents and to the extent possible, places the responsibility for good behavior on the student.

Conclusions

Like many new innovations and trends in education, the citizenship/character education band wagon may quickly become crowded, confusing, and chaotic. Early enthusiasm and good intentions may die a quiet death if the band wagon's occupants squabble over definitions, rationale, and implementation and lose sight of the universal impor-

tance of citizenship education and the underlying principles of honesty, respect, responsibility, perseverance and generosity. Throughout the ages, philosophers from Socrates to Ghandi have cited these virtues as necessary pillars of civilization. In 1837 Horace Mann, the father of the common school, didn't mince words about the schools' responsibility in character education:

"The highest and noblest office of education pertains to our moral nature. The common school should teach virtue before knowledge, for ... knowledge without virtue poses its own dangers ..." (Amundson 1991)

If we as educators stay true to these virtues and honestly identify those which are most crucial to our particular community, a place for character education will always be found in the curricula of America's schools.

Research continues to affirm the importance of role modeling in shaping a child's character. When educators come together committed to the development of character in students, we send a powerful message and we expand our opportunities to provide positive, life enhancing experiences for our students. As a community of learners at Price Laboratory School, we view our citizenship program as an ongoing, constantly-changing process that grows in response to our current understandings and relevant needs in the area of character education.

Bibliography

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- Boyer, Ernest L. *Making a Commitment to Character*. Principal, 1995.
- Ryan, Kevin. *Character Education in the United States: A Status Report*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Journal for a Just and Caring Education, 1996.

CITIZENSHIP CONCERN FORM

PRICE LABORATORY SCHOOL PLEDGE: I promise to respect everyone at Price Laboratory School, to follow school rules, to value all property, to listen to others, to do my best at learning and to cooperate. I will not hurt others with my words or actions. I want Price Laboratory School to be a safe a happy place for all.

Student Name _____

Date _____ Classroom Teacher _____

1. What did I do? (Check all that apply)

_____ I did not show respect to _____.

_____ I did not follow school rules.

_____ I did not respect other's property.

_____ I did not cooperate.

_____ I hurt others with my words.

_____ I hurt others with my actions.

Explain: _____

2. What effect did my actions have? _____

3. What should I do in the future? _____

Teacher Signature _____

Supervisor Signature _____

Comments: _____

Student Signature _____

Parent Signature _____

Comments: _____