

Report Highlights

Character Education in Pennsylvania Public Schools

House Resolution 2013-108 calls on the LB&FC to study the extent to which school districts have implemented character education programs and to make recommendations with respect to character education for the Commonwealth's elementary and secondary students. Character education teaches universal values, such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others.

The study found:

- **Character education is encouraged, but not required, in Pennsylvania school districts.** Act 2004-70 amended the PA School Code to encourage character education by providing for the establishment of character education advisory groups at the school district level, requiring the PA Department of Education (PDE) to undertake certain responsibilities, and by creating a grant program. The last such grants were awarded in FY 2008-09.
- **PDE has developed character education standards and provides access to extensive resources.** PDE has established 48 standards pertaining to character education, tailored to specific grade levels. Each standard is linked on the PDE website to various resource materials teachers can use to address the standard.
- **PDE has also developed standards for Safe and Supportive Schools (SSS).** As part of the SSS effort, PDE has offered 25 scholarships in each of the past two fiscal years for schools to send an employee to become a certified Olweus Bullying Prevention Program trainer.
- **91% of PA school districts reported implementing at least one component of character education.** Components include trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Such instruction is typically offered as a component of other class content, (e.g., history/government/civics, health/guidance, and/or English/reading). 20% of school districts indicated they implemented character education as a stand-alone course of instruction (e.g., Olweus Bullying Prevention).
- **PA is home to several organizations that promote character education.** These include the National Character Education Foundation (Zelienople), DeSales University (Center Valley), CITRS (Bryn Mawr), Kids of Character (Lehigh Valley), and Medal of Honor Character Development (Erie).
- **Studies of the effectiveness of character education programs have found mixed results.**

A rigorous study of 3,300 elementary school students in 7 different character development programs found little difference in 20 different measures of behavior after 3 years when compared to the control group. Other studies have found more promising results, and numerous anecdotal examples exist of schools where character education has been effective. The lack of consistent program effectiveness may be attributable to poor implementation or programs that are too narrow in scope (e.g., targeting a specific problem, such drug abuse, rather than comprehensive school climate reform).

- **Federal funding for character education programs has been declining.** Federal funds for school character education programs were available through much of the mid-2000s, but the last such grants were awarded in FY 2008-09. Very limited federal funding is still available, but through programs that do not have character education as their core mission.
- **States vary widely in how they implement character education programs.** While many states, including PA, simply encourage character education, several states have taken it a step further and mandate some form of character education. The report includes information on states that mandate character education.

Recommendations

We recommend PDE consider:

- Establishing comprehensive character education and development standards. Such standards should then be presented to the State Board of Education for adoption as a complement to the Pennsylvania Academic Standards.
- Requiring character education instruction for an Administrative/Supervisory Certificate and/or in teacher preparation programs or for a Level II teaching certificate.
- Expanding character education instruction that qualifies for Act 48 credit.
- Establishing a core group of character education "champions," similar to the PACE initiative that dissolved in 2007.