

Preface

Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.

—Albert Einstein

I had a rowing coach many years ago who shared with me the secret to rowing the perfect race. She said, “Perfect one stroke, and then just repeat it 250 times before you get to the finish line.” Now as a principal I ask myself, “What did her lesson mean, and how does it apply to teaching character development in schools today?”

I learned two important lessons from my coach. First, it’s important to *keep it simple*. Designing a simple character development program does not suggest it will be effortless or lacking in high expectations; rather, it must be *focused* on one or two key initiatives that can make a positive change in teacher morale, student behavior, and school climate. Teachers and principals have far too many priorities to become burdened with complex strategies that use up valuable time and energy. To successfully implement character development in schools and classrooms, time and energy will be best used to model perseverance and resiliency. That’s the benefit of keeping it simple. A character development program does not need to be complex to be effective in changing attitudes and behaviors.

The second lesson learned was to *make it real*. Where you put your time and energy has to focus directly on the needs of the school, the morale of teachers, and the behavior of students. Those needs can be identified by taking a snapshot of the current situations within the school. That’s the place to start focusing your character development efforts.

The main purpose of this book is to provide a comprehensive plan for creating and sustaining a school and classroom character

development program. This plan will be based on my 27 years of experiences as a teacher, counselor, coach, and administrator who has paid particular attention to the need for children and youth to not only become academically “smart” but also learn to be civil, respectful, and responsible human beings. In addition to my own experiences, which I share throughout the book, I will also provide information and resources that are based on research and best practices that will guide you and others along the path to an effective and worthwhile character development program.

The book is intended for middle and secondary school principals and teachers, particularly those working in schools where there is resistance to implementing or sustaining character development programs. What makes this book unique from other books on this topic is its focus on the two key elements: keeping it simple and making it real. Existing framework models for character development fail to address the underlying factors that limit students’ interest and/or desire to develop positive attitudes and behaviors. Those factors include the students’ perceptions about their physical, emotional, and intellectual environments and how those environments are influenced by the relationships that students establish with their principal, teachers, and each other. This book outlines a simple and realistic approach to character development for both the classroom and school that principals and teachers can implement with an immediate impact on the students’ attitudes and behaviors.

Chapter 1 offers evidence that links student development of positive attitudes and behaviors to student learning. The synopsis of current perspectives on character development will include a brief overview of successful programs at the middle and secondary school levels. The idea of “keep it simple, make it real” will be introduced by sharing the Huntsville High School journey, followed by the Six Principles of Action that support the framework.

Chapters 2 through 5 outline a four-step approach to teaching character development in the school and classroom. Chapter 2 focuses on *creating a safe and inviting physical environment* in the classroom and common areas of the school. The chapter identifies several aspects of the physical environment and discusses how improvements to them can improve student behavior and achievement. The chapter will be filled with helpful strategies for changing the environment and improving staff morale and student behavior.

Chapter 3 examines the positive influence that adults *modeling good character* can have on students' beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and learning. The chapter describes the three Es of modeling: Experience, Exchange, and Empowerment, which are fundamental to achieving personal growth and developing relationships of mutual influence.

Chapter 4 focuses on principals and teachers effectively *establishing rules and procedures for civility* without the use of fear, force, or artificial authority. This chapter provides the reader with a successful model based on the implementation of fair and clear consequences for inappropriate behavior, shared decision making, and rewarding and celebrating appropriate behavior.

Chapter 5 suggests ways that curricular and cocurricular instructional programs and activities can be connected to character development by *making curricular connections*. Strategies modeled after *the RITE of passage* will demonstrate how to engage students in the classroom, develop their leadership skills, and help them learn the life skills that lead to a positive lifestyle. The chapter emphasizes creating student voice, community-service learning, and modeling good character through arts, clubs, and athletics.

In Chapter 6, I will discuss ways of *assessing character development* and the impact of a character development program. The chapter will offer a guideline for developing active research questions about how your character development program looks and feels in your classrooms and school.

Each chapter will end with some final thoughts aimed at generating key questions and further discussions between principals and teachers. Inspirational quotes are provided for use in lesson planning, group discussions, and posting on walls or displays around the school. Resources A through F provide useful tools for lesson planning and assessment.

The opportunity I have taken here to put my thoughts and actions into words has helped me clarify the beliefs and values that I hold dear to my heart in the work I do for others as a high school principal. My struggles to nurture a positive school climate based on respect, trust, honesty, and empowerment challenge me each and every day on a very deep level. My hope in writing this book is that it will inspire you—whether you are a principal or teacher—to reflect on your trials and tribulations, struggles, priorities, successes,

and rewards in the daily work that you do. My goal, and I hope it will be yours, is to help students learn and practice the universal values and skills of life such as respect, courage, perseverance, tolerance, and kindness.