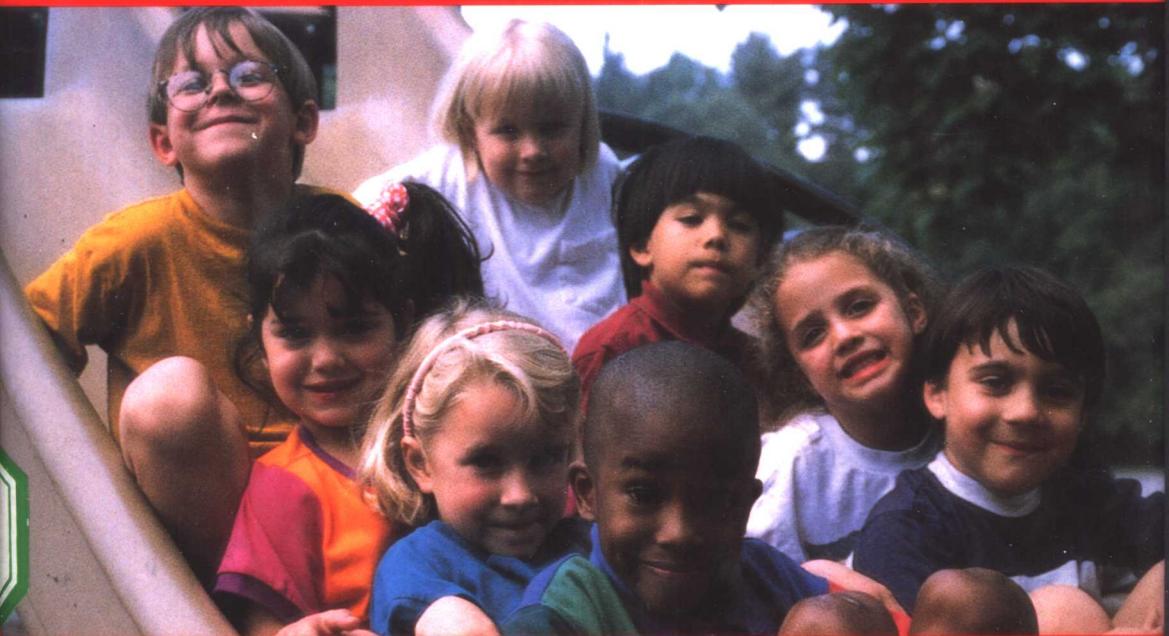


Building Character in Schools

PRACTICAL WAYS TO BRING
MORAL INSTRUCTION TO LIFE



Kevin Ryan & Karen E. Bohlin

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Kevin Ryan

Karen E. Bohlin

Foreword by Sanford N. McDonnell



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Foreword

In 1748, Baron Charles de Montesquieu published his magnum opus, *The Spirit of Laws*, a work that had a profound effect on our nation's founders. In it, Montesquieu developed the concept of separation of powers, which formed the basis of our Constitution over two hundred years ago. Montesquieu also explored the relationship that must exist between a people and their government, without which no form of government can survive. For example, a dictatorship depends on fear, and when fear disappears the dictatorship is overthrown. A monarchy depends on the loyalty of the people and dies when loyalty dies. The most desirable form of government is a free republic, obviously; but it is also the most fragile form of government, because it depends on having a virtuous people.

Virtuous people, people of character, live by high ethical standards. But what do we mean by "ethics"? One of the best definitions I have come across was given by Dr. Albert Schweitzer: "In a general sense, ethics is the name that we give to our concern for good behavior. We feel an obligation to consider not only our own personal well-being but also that of others and of human society as a whole." Therefore, in a free republic the leaders and a majority of the people are committed to doing what's best for the nation as a whole. When that commitment breaks down, when the people consider only their own personal well-being, they can no longer be depended on to behave in the best interests of their nation. The result is laws, regulations, red tape, and controls—things designed to force people to consider others. But these are the instruments of bondage, not of freedom.

Benjamin Franklin underlined this concept of Montesquieu's when he said, "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom." Throughout most of our history, certain basic, ethical values were considered fundamental to the character of the nation and to the people who made up the nation. These values were passed on from generation to generation in the home, the school, and religious institutions—each one undergirding and reinforcing the others. We had a consensus not only on values but also on the importance of those values; and from that consensus, we knew who we were as a people and where we were going as a nation.

In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville came to this country to find out what it was that made this upstart nation so progressive and prosperous. He traveled all over the country and talked to people from all walks of life. He then went back to France and in 1835 published his classic *Democracy in America*. Incidentally, de Tocqueville hated slavery and considered the true America to be the northern, free states. In that context he wrote, "America is great because she is good, but if America ever ceases to be good America will cease to be great."

Today in America we have far too many twelve-year-olds pushing drugs, fourteen-year-olds having babies, sixteen-year-olds killing each other, and kids of all ages admitting to lying, cheating, and stealing. We have crime and violence everywhere and unethical behavior in business, the professions, and government. In other words, we have a crisis of character all across America that is threatening to destroy the goodness that, as de Tocqueville put it, is the very foundation of our greatness. That is the bad news, but the good news is that we know what to do about it: get back to the core values of our American heritage in our homes, our schools, our businesses, our government, and indeed in each of our daily lives.

In other words, we need to dramatically uplift the character of the nation. How can this be accomplished? First of all, we need to understand what we mean by character—*good* character. Kevin Ryan has a very succinct definition: "knowing the good, loving the

good, and doing the good.” So when you build character, you must address the cognitive, the emotional, and the behavioral—the head, the heart, and the hand.

Traditionally, character was built primarily in the home, but today far too many of our homes have fallen down on that responsibility. In the past, the church and synagogue played a major role in building character in our young, but their influence on our children seems to have waned considerably. The business and professional worlds have in recent years begun to put more emphasis on ethical behavior, but they have a long way to go before they are the role models we need for our children. The media, especially television, are having perhaps the most powerful impact on the character of old and young alike; but it has been a more negative than positive influence. Unethical behavior in our government, at the state and national levels, is rampant. Our national leaders are often poor role models.

When our country was founded, building character was considered just as important as imparting intellectual knowledge by our educational system, from the first grade through college. However, for many reasons formal character education has been largely absent from our public schools over the last thirty to forty years. Nevertheless, our educational system is the most logical and potentially effective place to begin the rebuilding of our national character.

Today’s students are tomorrow’s leaders and citizens. If the schools educate them to be young people of high character, our country will eventually become a nation of high character. Also, one of the many benefits of character education in the schools is that academic performance goes up with good behavior. It is obvious that if teachers spend all their time maintaining discipline in the classroom, there can be no effective learning. It is not as obvious, but equally true, that if you create a moral and caring community in the classroom, not only can the teacher teach, but the students will feel better about themselves and work harder. The

unmistakable conclusion: character education should be an integral part of the country's formal education system, from kindergarten through graduate school.

Indeed, character education has come back into vogue, but there is far too little understanding of what it is really all about and even less knowledge of how to implement it. The danger is that too many schools, in their ignorance, will implement what they consider to be a character education program but what in actuality is a woefully inadequate substitute. And when their programs do not live up to their expectations, they might reject the entire character education movement as ineffective. In this book, Ryan and Bohlin provide the information needed to counter that potential problem. *Building Character in Schools* is a tremendous resource for anyone wanting to understand, design, and implement an effective, comprehensive character-building program in their school.

It won't bring us back to the goodness of de Tocqueville if we graduate young people from our schools who are brilliant but dishonest, who have great intellectual knowledge but don't care about others, or who have highly creative minds but are irresponsible. It will bring us back to the goodness and greatness of de Tocqueville if we teach our young to "know the good, love the good, and do the good." That is character education, and that is what Ryan and Bohlin are all about.

August 1998

Sanford N. McDonnell
Chairman Emeritus, McDonnell Douglas
Chairman of the Board,
The Character Education Partnership

Preface

In recent years, efforts in our public schools to foster good character in students have generated enormous interest. Although it is difficult to determine just what the impetus for this renewed interest in character has been, it appears to have come from outside the educational community. Politicians on both the left and the right, spurred on by a rising drumbeat of frightening statistics about youth homicides and suicides and by soaring numbers of teenage pregnancies, began calling teachers and administrators back to what is now being called character education. In earlier decades, the call would have been for “moral education” or, more recently, “values education.” But even though concern for the moral domain and the teaching of moral values never disappeared from our schools, until very recently moral education was noticeably on the professional educator’s back burner.

One of the most positive changes in American culture in recent years has been what Stephen Covey has called a paradigm shift away from a “personality ethic” and toward a “character ethic.” This change has been marked by a departure among Americans from an individual moral compass driven by a desire for personal popularity or power and the emergence of a moral compass directed by a desire to become a good person, a person of character. This concern for character represents a search for personal qualities that are more stable and enduring than merely projecting a positive attitude or learning to be more open with one’s feelings. The “how to win friends and influence people” mentality, with its focus on external behavior and social skills, has dominated much

of our popular psychology and culture. It is still very much with us today, but Covey and others suggest that it is slowly being replaced. The focus has gradually returned to something deeper and more fundamentally human: the centrality of character in a worthy life. Nevertheless, as other parts of American society began talking about the importance of good character, our schools were still functioning in the “personality mode,” heavily influenced by the idea that the schools should be a place for personality adjustment and emotional therapy. It was only a matter of time, though, before the need for genuine character development caught up with the schools. And thankfully, it has.

By 1998, there had been six White House–congressional conferences on character education in this decade. The term *character education*, coupled with appeals for schools to reengage this mission, has become prominent in the president’s annual State of the Union address to the nation. Educators, who have become accustomed to harsh criticism about students’ low test scores, are now also being blamed for the moral failings of their students and urged to “do something.”

Over recent decades, as elementary and secondary schooling have taken up more and more of the time, attention, and energy of young people and as we have come to perceive a person’s education as the key factor in his or her economic success, pressure has been building on educators. They have become accustomed to harsh criticism and agile at moving in on perceived problems and shortcomings. They are typically supported in their responses to problems—both real and trumped-up ones—by an army of commercial curriculum developers and consultants and by myriad special interest advocacy groups and professional associations. Such has also been the case with this recent call for character education.

Since few teachers hear about character education in their teacher education programs or, for that matter, their postgraduate training, these efforts would appear to be especially necessary. In fact, many teachers and administrators fear being sued for dealing

with even the most benign moral issues, such as citizens' patriotic duty to their country. They report being warned in education courses and elsewhere "to stay away from all that values and moral stuff." They have been cautioned to leave these topics to parents or religious leaders or someone else. Now, however, things have turned around sharply, and both conservatives and liberals (with varying degrees of sympathy) are entreating teachers to become "character educators." Many teachers welcome this, because it speaks to their deepest motivations for becoming a teacher in the first place. Some are ambivalent and surprised because they did not experience character or moral education in their own schooling during the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s. And some are put off by what they see as yet another job being foisted on them that should be performed by someone else. Overwhelmingly, though, educators acknowledge that they need help in responding to this call to build good character in our students and schools.

As elementary and secondary school educators have asked for help in this matter, they have been met by the usual array of advice, admonitions, and curricular materials. Several dozen books, ranging from highly practical to overly theoretical, have been published about character education. At least four large national organizations have come into being to provide guidance to the field. A dozen or more centers related to character education have been established on college and university campuses. Materials of widely varying quality for classroom and schoolwide use have been made available. Education conferences have devoted keynote addresses and "special strands" to character education. Education magazines have begun hawking T-shirts, ballpoint pens, and coffee cups with kitschy character education slogans. What was once a modest movement has become a thriving industry. But although educators of good will are taking these messages seriously and attempting to transform their educational programs accordingly, there is one large stumbling block: "character education" has dozens of meanings, some quite contrary to others.

The impetus for this book is to provide a blueprint for educators who seriously wish to help children forge good character. Two years ago, with our colleague Judy Thayer, we wrote and circulated a one-page document entitled “The Character Education Manifesto” (see Appendix A). Our purpose was to offer seven guidelines to educators who were considering taking a more conscious and active role in this area. A number of leading scholars and education leaders, including Diane Ravitch, Robert Coles, William Bennett, and Diane Berreth, liked what we had written and became signatories. So, too, did eight sitting governors. Since that time we have gone on to other character-related activities, but we kept getting inquiries about the manifesto, from school board members and administrators and teachers trying to infuse their classes with character education. Often it was clear that the inquirers wanted more specifics, not just our guidelines. They agreed with the principles, but they wanted more. They wanted a fuller understanding of what “character” actually is. And they wanted to know what specific steps they needed to take to translate a personal commitment to character education into a schoolwide vision and effort. This book is our response.

Chapter One, “Character Education: What Is It and Why Is It Important?” is the foundation. One important reason we wrote this book is because all sorts of ideas and materials are being embraced under the name of character education that have little or nothing to do with character. Our vision is person-centered. We are interested in helping educators engage the heads, hearts, and hands of their students so that students may come to *know* the good, *love* the good, and *do* the good. Coming to grips with who our students are and who we want them to become—persons of good character and integrity—is the foundation to everything else. Whatever a school does should rest on the bedrock of a strong understanding of this core goal.

Chapter Two, “Views, Values, or Virtues?” discusses how some educators are building flimsy, substandard character education

programs. The chapter's main theme, however, is that the keystone of good character is virtue. Without a keystone firmly in place, even the grandest building can quickly become a pile of rocks and rubble. Therefore the focus of energy and support in any character education initiative or program must be virtue.

Chapter Three, "Building a Community of Virtue," is about framing the building, putting up the structural elements that support the various components of character education. Although some authors and consultants suggest that a school's character education efforts can and ought to rest on a single element (for instance, a schoolwide word-for-the-week program), we believe character education is a good deal more demanding. The frame is all about *who we are* and *what we stand for*. All the elements of school life, from the sports field to the cafeteria, from the faculty room to the school bus, contribute to or detract from this framework for character education.

Chapter Four, "Cultivating Character Through the Curriculum," takes us to the raw materials of character building. A good builder has an intimate knowledge of the materials he or she uses—the bricks, the wood beams, the foundation stones, the paints and plasters—and knows how to use them well. The content students learn, the books they read, the skills they master—all have a great deal to do with their developing good character. We argue in this chapter that a school's curriculum is more than knowledge to be learned; it is also the means by which students gain good character.

Chapter Five, "Engaging Parents in Character Education," takes up the crucial connection between parents and teachers in the work of character education. Our theme here is that parents are (or should be) teachers' principal partners in this building enterprise. In this chapter we discuss not only the need to keep parents informed about teachers' character education efforts but also the need to involve them in those efforts, to make them understand their responsibility in helping their children develop strong character.

Chapter Six, “The Teacher’s Work: Nurturing Character,” is concerned with the mortar that keeps the bricks in place. The commitment of the total school staff to the goal of student character formation is the glue that keeps all the elements of a character education effort focused and working together. In this chapter we address how to engage all of the professionals in our schools in this mission and make it a central part of their work together.

Chapter Seven, “Helping Students Take Command,” brings us to the core of the book, the transformation of students. We see students both as works under construction and as apprentice builders in their own right, both as “the craft” and as “craftsmen.” Students are neither totally in charge of their character formation nor merely passive recipients of character training. Accordingly, this chapter emphasizes teachers’ role as mentors in their students’ character education.

Every good set of blueprints includes some specialized sheets detailing the heating plant, the electrical system, and any particularly tricky aspects of the design. Likewise, we have included a number of appendixes for those who want to apply our design to their own situation. Among them are “The Character Education Manifesto,” mentioned previously, “Pitfalls to Avoid in Character Education,” our list of “One Hundred Ways to Bring Character Education to Life,” and many others.

Everyone who puts pen to paper or fingertips to keyboard has debts. When we write, we stand on the shoulders of others, hoping to see just a littler bit farther, a little bit more clearly. Certainly that is our hope. Whether we have achieved it we leave to you, the reader, to decide. Nevertheless, we need to acknowledge a number of people whose shoulders bear the imprint of our boots. Among them are our colleague Steven Tigner, whose eye for detail, thoughtful feedback, and commitment to character education have been a source of inspiration to us. Additionally, we are grateful to our colleagues William Russell, Judy Thayer, Edwin Delattre, Emma Adler, Carol Ingall, Cathy Stutz, Sue Tauer, Esther Schaeffer,

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Boston
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Kevin Ryan
Karen E. Bohlin

To my family—past, present, and future.
— KEVIN RYAN

*To Mom and Dad, on whose strength
of character I could always lean.
With love and gratitude.*
— KAREN E. BOHLIN

The Authors

KEVIN RYAN is the director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University. A former high school English teacher, Ryan has taught on the faculties of Stanford University, the University of Chicago, Harvard University, the Ohio State University, and the University of Lisbon. He has written and edited eighteen books, among them *Moral Education: It Comes with the Territory*; *Reclaiming Our Schools: A Handbook for Teaching Character, Academics, and Discipline* (with Ed Wynne); and *Those Who Can, Teach* (with James Cooper). He received the University of Pennsylvania National Educator of the Year Award and the Paideia Award for excellence in educational leadership. Ryan is the current president of the Character Education Partnership.

KAREN E. BOHLIN is the assistant director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University and is completing her dissertation on moral motivation. She has taught middle and high school English and directed several student drama productions. For more than ten years, she has led student educational and service programs, including trips to England, Italy, and Lithuania. Her experience includes curriculum development in literature, language arts, and character education. She has served as a trustee of the Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter School in Franklin, Massachusetts, and is currently on the board of the Montrose School in Natick, Massachusetts. She has also worked as a consultant to corporations in education. Bohlin is a

member of the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) National Commission on Character Education and assists with special programs at Bayridge, a center for university and professional women in Boston.