

The Missing Ingredient

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As we begin another school year, we anxiously hope that our children will learn well and be successful. To do this, our nation has promoted several strategies: No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Common Core Standards. Unfortunately, none of these programs has helped to bring the success we need for all our children. The missing ingredient, however, is the culture of schools that can bring success. Very little attention has been given to the core values at the heart of education.

Children learn best when they are in a caring, loving environment. Just as these values permeate homes where children are happy and secure, so too,

children can learn best when schools embody the same positive core values.

The focus on such core values is at the heart of character education. Within an ethical framework of respect, responsibility, empathy, compassion, and a host of other character qualities, strengths, or virtues, children get on with the business of academic learning. Academic excellence is achieved on the foundation of core ethical values.

After all, children learn best when they can be aware of and manage their emotions, when they have social awareness and make good choices in relation to others. These social and emotional qualities are also at the heart of character education. As the educator Dr. Thomas Lickona has written, children need "to know the good, desire the good, and do the good."

A comprehensive character education program involves everything that goes on in a school. To be sure, academic excellence is a necessity. But curriculum can be infused with examples of good character qualities. Service projects such as helping seniors, cleaning local parks and waterways, tutoring younger students, all help students to develop a habit of service to others.

Parents, a child's first teachers, are important as partners to teachers in this joint effort, as they support the character education initiatives at school. The school can also build community support with various service organizations such as Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, and the local Boys Club.

We all want our children to be successful. But success means more than passing tests and a 4.0 grade average. If our children experience the value of a caring, compassionate learning community, and if we help develop their character strengths, we will have academically successful students of good character.



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