

# THE **Essence** OF **CHARACTER** Strengths, Skills, Habits

*“Habits we train are habits we gain!” (author unknown)*

In March, the Center sponsored a full day character education program offered by the Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation. It was terrific—all you have to do is ask the 79 teachers who attended.

During the day, a group of teachers asked me: *“Which character traits would you recommend for a character education program?”*

A simple, straightforward question but not easy to answer. Educators, like you, want to know exactly what strengths, skills, traits, virtues, habits, should make up the “core” of a school’s character education efforts.

Take your pick as we start with the “character strengths” story.

Seligman and Peterson published a book titled, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, in which they describe 24 widely-valued character strengths, organized under six broad virtues:

## **1. wisdom and knowledge**

- creativity: thinking of novel and productive ways to do things
- curiosity: taking an interest in all of ongoing experience
- open-mindedness: thinking things through and examining them from all sides
- love of learning: mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge
- perspective: being able to provide wise counsel to others

## **2. courage**

- honesty: speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way
- bravery: *not* shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain
- persistence: finishing what one starts
- zest: approaching life with excitement and energy

## **3. humanity**

- kindness: doing favors and good deeds for others
- love: valuing close relations with others
- social intelligence: being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others

## **4. justice**

- fairness: treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice
- leadership: organizing group activities and seeing that they happen

- teamwork: working well as member of a group or team

## 5. temperance

- forgiveness: forgiving those who have done wrong
- modesty: letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves
- prudence: being careful about one's choices; *not* saying or doing things that might later be regretted
- self-regulation: regulating what one feels and does

## 6. transcendence

- appreciation of beauty and excellence: noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life
- gratitude: being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen
- hope: expecting the best and working to achieve it
- humor: liking to laugh and joke; bringing smiles to other people
- religiousness: having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life

The KIPP Schools, another example, focus on these seven “character strengths.”

**Zest**—Enthusiastic and energetic participation in life

**Grit**—Perseverance and passion for long-term goals

**Curiosity**—Eagerness to explore new things with openness

**Optimism**—Confidence in a future full of positive possibilities

**Self-Control**—Capacity to regulate one's own responses so they align with short and long-term goals

**Gratitude**—Appreciation for the benefits we receive from others, and the desire to express thanks

**Social Intelligence**—Understanding the feelings of others and adapting actions accordingly

**Curiosity**—Eagerness to explore new things with openness

As you know, business leaders are talking and writing about “soft skills.” Some call them “skills to pay the bills.” Shari Caudron, in an article titled, “The Hard Case for Soft Skills,” says:

*“Like it or not, emotions are an intrinsic part of our biological makeup, and every morning they march into the office (and our schools and classrooms) with us and influence our behavior.... The ability to understand, monitor, manage and capitalize on our emotions can help us make better decisions, cope with setbacks and interact with others more effectively.... Executives are starting to talk about the importance of such things as **trust, confidence, empathy, adaptability and self-control.**”*

In addition to the “character strengths” and “soft skills” listed above, we could add **social skills, communication skills, higher-order thinking skills** (problem-solving, critical thinking, decision-making) and the skills associated with **self-control, self-confidence and**

## **relationships.**

Let's look at "social skills."

The Social Skills Improvement System—Classwide Intervention Program (Elliott and Gresham) identified 10 top skills that students need to succeed, surveying over 8,000 teachers and examining 20 years of research.

1. Listen to others
2. Follow the steps
3. Follow the rules
4. Ignore distractions
5. Ask for help
6. Take turns when you talk
7. Get along with others
8. Stay calm with others
9. Be responsible for your behavior
10. Do nice things for others.

[www.PearsonAssessments.com](http://www.PearsonAssessments.com))

*"How to Build a 36-Week Character Education Curriculum" suggest 36 traits from which teachers and school leaders may choose to meet the needs of their students and educational programs. For space purposes, I selected 10 of the 36-trait curriculum. ([Mentoring.minds.com](http://Mentoring.minds.com))*

- ACCOUNTABILITY
- BRAVERY
- DETERMINATION
- FRIENDLINESS
- GRATITUDE
- LOVE
- PERSEVERANCE
- POLITENESS
- SERVING OTHERS
- TRUSTWORTHINESS

Whew! Enough already. I think I answered their question.

*Whoever our students may be, whatever subject we teach, ultimately we teach who we are.*

- Parker Palmer, Author, Educator and Activist

Ed DeRoche, Director, Character Education Resource Center, SOLES. USD  
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