Character & SEL: A Roadmap

I just read the 32-page report on "Model Standards" for the teaching and learning of character and social-emotional development. These standards *"provide a roadmap for school leaders and teachers to help children and teens understand, care about, and consistently practice the SEL skills and character strengths that will enable them to flourish in school, in the workplace, and as citizens."*

https://www.character.org/model-standards

My intent is to provide an overview of a few major points in the report. I encourage you to read this report, reflect on it, discuss it with your colleagues and others, and then use the ideas to develop your own school and district's character and social-emotional programs and initiatives.

The **Model Standards** address four dimensions of <u>character-strengths</u> – *moral character, performance character, intellectual character, and civic character* – and five skills of <u>social-emotional learning</u> – *self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal/relationship skills, and responsible/ethical decision-making.*

These "character strengths" and "social-emotional skills "are based on **Six Core Beliefs.** In summary, they are:

1. *The family is a child's first character educator.*
2. These strengths and skills *are not add-ons, but rather add significant value to student success.*
3. *A positive school climate is critical to fostering the whole child.*
4. *Character and social-emotional development requires thinking, feeling, and doing.*
5. *The character strengths should be taught, caught, and sought.*
6. *The "model standards" align with the fill-range of classroom and school-based initiatives.*

The report includes a section describing "a conceptual framework" that includes:

- **The Developing Child and Teen** – *There are essential building blocks of development.*

- **Caring and Supportive Environments** – *Our role as adults is to offer and*

provide a "constructive web" for every child and teen to learn and practice the SEL skills and character strengths.

- ▪ ***Opportunities to Learn and Practice*** *– Research confirms that well-scaffolded, engaging and evidence-based instructional and curricular design can impact the development of self-regulation and executive functions.*

- ▪ ***A Thriving/Striving Person of Character*** *– Raising or graduating smart teenagers – to be kind and honest, and individuals who other people trust – a good person.*

Section 4–Part 1 of the model defines and describes the four character dimensions – *moral, performance, intellectual, and civic*. Each dimension is defined with outcomes by grade and age level, examples and resources.

Let me share one example from Part 1.

I selected "performance character" defined with grades 9-12, ages 14-18+. There is an "outcome" statement, and then there is a list of six activities about what should be learned and practiced. I listed three so that you'd get the idea.

- ▪ *Give an example of a habit you have developed because you wanted to become a better person.*
- ▪ *Explain the relationship between being responsible and a person's reputation.*
- ▪ *Explain a time when you had a 'setback' but your grit kept you motivated.*

Section 4-Part 2 defines and describes the five skills of social-emotional learning – *self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal /relationship skill and responsible and ethical decision-making*. Each defined. Each with outcome statements. Each with age and grade levels. Each with a list of resources.

I selected the skill of "self-awareness" with Grades 6-8, ages 11-13. There are seven activities that should be learned and practiced. I have selected three to share.

- ▪ *Describe how different thoughts, situations, and behaviors affect your feelings and emotions.*
- ▪ *Recognize the times when you exaggerate the severity or consequences of mistakes, embarrassing moments, failures, rejections and other negative events (e.g., "I can never face them again." "Everyone thinks I'm stupid.")*
- ▪ *List and explain the different external supports you have used when feeling stressed or anxious (e.g., family, friends, teachers, neighbors).*

In Section 5, the authors wrote in summary:

*"We believe the SEL skills enable and support a young person's determination and commitment to be a person of character. The SEL skills help students consistently be honest and trustworthy, caring and compassionate, self-disciplined, intellectually curious, fair, and respectful. The CSED Model Standards provide school leaders with a **unifying vehicle** that will bring the staff together toward a shared goal and purpose: supporting students as they strive to become young people of character who will flourish in school, in relationships, in the workplace, and as citizens."*

As a postscript to this report and to satisfy my curiosity, I wondered how others identify "character strengths." Here are three examples.

From T. Lickona and M. Davidson, *Smart & Good High Schools: Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work, and Beyond* (July, 2005) (www.cortland.edu/character).

8 STRENGTHS OF CHARACTER:

1. Lifelong learner and critical thinker.
2. Diligent and capable performer.
3. Socially and emotionally skilled person.
4. Ethical thinker.
5. Respectful and responsible moral agent, committed to consistent moral action.
6. Self-disciplined person who pursues a healthy lifestyle.
7. Contributing community member and democratic citizen.
8. Spiritual person crafting a life of noble purpose.

From the perspective of positive psychology: The Values in Action (VIA) Project – a starting point for the systematic scientific study of good character. The VIA Classification consists of 24 widely-valued character strengths, organized under six broad virtues:

1. Wisdom and Knowledge
2. Courage
3. Humanity
4. Justice
5. Temperance
6. Transcendence

(Park & Peterson, 2006b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

From the North Carolina State Board of Education's Character and Civic Education Handbook and Guide:
Respect – Trustworthiness – Responsibility – Fairness – Caring - Citizenship – Accountability – Integrity.

Character education is the component of social and emotional learning that promotes core virtues, moral sensitivity, moral commitment, ethical reasoning, and personal growth aspirations.
> – Yael Kidron, Director of Character Education, Santa Clara University

Ed DeRoche, Director, Character Education Resource Center
University of San Diego, BLOG, September 2020