

## Character education must be core of Texas schools

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Why do some students thrive in the classroom while others do not? We have all read countless theories about academic success. Many of them are validly linked to instructor quality, student demographics, facilities, technology and class size, among others.

I'd like to introduce character into the mix.

Albert Einstein once said: "Most people say that it is the intellect which makes a great scientist. They are wrong; It is character."

There is an established segment of behavioral psychology that upholds character education — the infusion of traits such as self-discipline, persistence, gratitude, optimism and hope, kindness, honesty and courage — as the No. 1 predictor of a child's academic and long-term success.

A study conducted by Oregon State University and documented by [character.org](http://character.org), a nonprofit organization that works to educate, inspire and empower youths to be ethical and engaged citizens, found that teaching social and emotional skills and character development to elementary school children yielded powerful results:

Scores improved as much as 10 percent on national standardized math and reading tests.

Scores improved 21 percent on state reading tests.

Scores improved 51 percent on state math tests.

Suspensions dropped by 70 percent.

Absenteeism fell by 15 percent.

Can character be taught? Indeed it can, and it must be taught in both homes and schools if we want all students — especially those facing challenges of language barriers, fragmented family structures and poverty — to flourish.

Teachers can most effectively produce classrooms of successful learners when parents lay foundations that encourage children to learn and to embrace the challenges and opportunities in our schools. However, unlike disciplines such as English, math and science, character should not be viewed as "one more subject" to teach in an already packed school day. It is not a competing slice of the academic pie; rather, it is the plate upon which the entire pie must rest.

Character must become a common thread that is actively, intentionally and boldly woven into all subjects — like the parallel of a double helix. Character in schools must be foundational, infusing the traits mentioned above (although some may argue for more or fewer) that behavioral science suggests are the core of all cultures and help motivate people to become accomplished individuals.

Each character trait should be fully integrated into discussions that take place in literature, history, social studies and other classes — all aspects of school life for that matter. From kindergarten through 12th grade, building character traits must become a part of lesson plans, worksheets and homework assignments every school day.

By intentionally incorporating character in our instruction, we can efficiently and effectively prepare students for learning and, more importantly, life. It does not cost a great deal of money, but it does require effort. And effort, especially from parents, is the most precious gift we can give our children.

I have previously spoken of a paradigm shift that I believe is essential to changing the academic success rate of a particularly challenging student segment often labeled as economically disadvan-

taged. I have advocated for a new education business model based on five fundamental pillars:

— A culture of high expectations, including character immersion.

— A relentless focus on a new mission statement that measures all campus and district strategies against the goal of having all students enter a technical school, two-year college or four-year university.

— Strong campus leadership and powerful teacher collaboration.

— Parent commitment.

— Extended learning time.

Of these, character immersion is probably the most important, outside of parent commitment.

The rewards of teaching character will benefit students, families, schools and the state of Texas in immeasurable ways. The return on investment for passionately pursuing this strategy is happy, healthy, safe, high-performing schools. The cost of not investing in the effort will inevitably be seen in schools that continue to be low-performing.

In the words of Jessica Lahey, an English teacher and a regular contributor to *The New York Times*, "Character education is not old-fashioned, and it's not about bringing religion into the classroom. Character is the 'X factor' that experts in parenting and education have deemed integral to success."

Time is ticking, but we can do this.

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