

Center aims to shed light on character education research

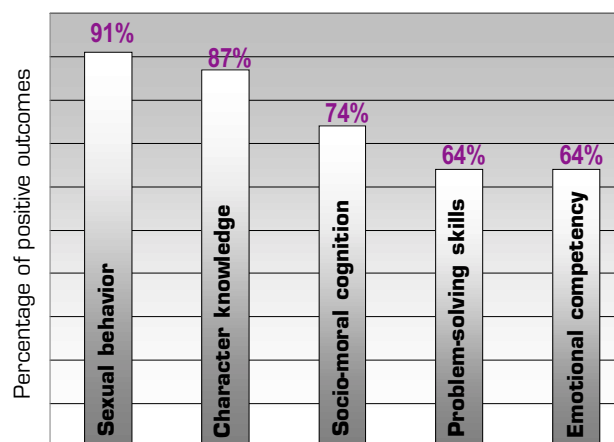
A quick Internet search reveals the nearly overwhelming wealth of information available on character education — from nonprofits and free resources to consulting firms and packaged programs that promise research-based results.

Most educators won't argue about the value of having students learn and display positive character traits. But deciding the ideal way to go about teaching character can be anything but easy. Your best bet is to focus on using character education as part of a comprehensive school reform effort. Only when a school's culture changes does character education have a true impact on student achievement. "Otherwise you're putting makeup on something really ugly," said **Marvin Berkowitz**, Sanford N. McDonnell Professor of Character Education at the **University of Missouri-St. Louis**.

Berkowitz said educators should avoid superficial strategies or single-approach programs. For example, programs that use daily announcements or inspirational quotes are not a bad thing, but when used in isolation, they're not really effective.

Thanks to UMSL's newly formed **Center for Character and Citizenship**, you'll have one more tool for separating feel-good strategies from those that actually change the culture and policies within a school. The center will act as a think tank and clearinghouse for research about character education. Its primary goals will be to provide practitioners with up-to-date research so educators can choose and implement effective approaches. The center's staff will include nine faculty members who specialize in the area of character education. "It's the greatest concentration of expertise in this area of any university," Berkowitz said.

The center will search for strong, robust character-education research studies, and Berkowitz hopes center staff will find an increasing number of studies that focus on the connection between character education and academics.



Source: *What Works in Character Education*.

He said the field also is in need of more long-term research and analyses that focus on particular components of programs. Many character education programs use multiple strategies, including literature that teaches character traits and class meetings. Character education research is often bundled, meaning that a study looks at the overall effectiveness of a program and not its individual components. To really know what works in character education, researchers must specifically study the impact of individual strategies within programs, Berkowitz said.

Another challenge facing character education researchers is that there are so many definitions about what character education is. Research synthesis is one way to get around the semantics of differing definitions and find the similarities among successful programs and which strategies work the best.

Educators should also keep in mind that some programs effectively teach character traits yet don't even bill themselves as character education programs, and others claim to teach character, but don't really. "I can call my dog 'character education' but that doesn't make

Guide uncovers what works

Below are highlights from *What Works in Character Education: A Research-Driven Guide for Educators*, which was written by **Marvin Berkowitz** and **Melinda Bier** at the **University of Missouri-St. Louis**.

□ The authors found 33 programs that had studies backing their effectiveness. Only those studies that met the scientifically based research standard set by the **No Child Left Behind Act** were considered. The guide explains that there are likely a number of other effective programs available, but those included were the only ones that could be linked to solid studies. Some programs haven't been researched yet or are backed by studies that don't meet NCLB's research standards.

□ Programs often use a variety of strategies and typically, studies don't independently test strategies, so it's impossible to know which strategies within a

program work best or whether some aren't really effective all.

□ In terms of program content, programs fell into one of three categories: 1) explicit character education; 2) social and emotional curriculum; or 3) integration into the academic curriculum.

□ In terms of pedagogical strategies, programs tended to use some of the following strategies: 1) direct teaching of character traits; 2) peer interactive teaching/learning strategies; 3) classroom/behavior management strategies; 4) schoolwide or institutional organization; 5) modeling/mentoring; 6) family/community participation; 7) community service/service learning; and 8) professional development.

For more information or to request a copy of the guide, e-mail Marvin Berkowitz at berkowitz@umsl.edu. The guide can also be downloaded from the "Resources" page at www.character.org. ■

it such," Berkowitz said. "You have to look at what is done." Pay attention to how a program addresses changes to relationships, practices and policies within a school.

"Many people engage in practice based on hunches," he said. "You can end up with an ineffective and some-

times even harmful program. If the point of character education is to impact kids' character development, we need to use practices that actually do that. We need to know what works or doesn't."

For more information on the Center for Character and Citizenship, e-mail Marvin Berkowitz at berkowitz@umsl.edu. ■