

Certification in Character Education Provides a Unifying Force for Districts

CHARACTERplus® is celebrating the 20th anniversary of the nation's largest community-wide initiative in character education. As the organization has grown, so has the need for professional development that grounds educators in the dynamics of character development, current research, effective methods, and CHARACTERplus's "Ten Essentials" of comprehensive, long-lasting integration. These important components are explored in three separate Certification courses offered by CHARACTERplus. The series of courses leads to Basic Certification in Character Education. Advanced Certification is also offered for administrators who graduate from the yearlong Leadership Academy in Character Education (L.A.C.E.) and complete the "Ten Essentials" workshop.

The brainchild of collaborators at CHARACTERplus and the Center for Citizenship and Character at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, the Certification series was established in 2004. More than 190 have earned Basic Certification and 51 have earned Advanced Certification.

However, those numbers will increase significantly this year. Enrollment in the certification courses has more than doubled to surpass 300. It was necessary to open additional sessions to accommodate the demand, which has increased as the complexity and the efficacy of character education has become better understood.

The Certification series and L.A.C.E. program are offered at no cost to CHARACTERplus member districts. More than 45 districts, in 11 counties in Missouri and Illinois, and involving the leadership of more than 520 schools pay an annual fee, which is matched by community contributions, to CHARACTERplus.

Complexity and Efficacy

"It is rocket science," Dr. Marvin Berkowitz asserts, referencing character education. Berkowitz is the Sanford M. McDonnell Endowed Chair of Character Education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, a founder of the Center for Citizenship and Character, and director of the L.A.C.E. Program. He presents two of the three courses in the Certification series, while Diane Stirling, coordinator of member services for CHARACTERplus, and CHARACTERplus coaches presents the "Ten Essentials" workshop.

"It is also clear that character education works," Stirling adds. Two scientific studies validate the impact of the CHARACTERplus process on its own merits and in conjunction with the national Caring School Community™ model, a model that combines class meetings, strong home-school connections and academically-based buddy programs. Significant positive changes in office referrals, parent relations and school leadership were noted in the four-year studies, completed in September 2006. When correlated with academic achievement, results showed an increase in communication arts scores of as much as 17 percent with the CHARACTERplus process and as much as 47 percent when combined with Caring School Community™ components.

A Unifying Force

Certification through CHARACTERplus also works to unify a district. "Supported by the solid research implications of its effectiveness in education, I am able to speak to my board of education and community about the integral importance of character education for Bayless, and how it fits hand in hand with our academic goals," says Dr. Maureen Clancy-May, superintendent of the Bayless School District. "I am encouraging at least two members of each of our schools to receive their certification in character education each year. Since this commitment, I have seen exponential growth in our district as a caring school community."

One of the key goals of character education is increased student autonomy, and with that in mind, Clancy-May created a Superintendent's Advisory Council of students from elementary, middle and high schools that meets with her on a quarterly basis.

CHARACTERplus considers all the key stakeholders of a district to be eligible for its professional development. Parents, school board members and community partners have accessed its courses. Heather Buettner, parent of elementary and middle school students, serves on the Lindbergh District Character Education team and completed certification this year.

"Not only do I have a deeper understanding of how character education can lead to academic success and the ongoing process that is involved, but I also realize the importance of my role as a parent as well as a partner in education so our children can grow into responsible, competent, caring adults," Buettner says.

For more information, contact Diane Stirling with CHARACTERplus at 314.692.9722 or dstirling@csd.org

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Basic Certification in Character Education

- Ten Essentials of the CHARACTERplus Process
- Character Development & Education
- Effective Methods in Character Education

These one-day courses are offered 2 or 3 times in the school year. See www.characterplus.org.