Comprehensive Character Education - Define the Goal of Education

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At the beginning of a school year, it is prudent to define the goal of education, especially for preschool to 8th grade students. All parents want their children to be intelligent and to succeed academically. But more important we want good, caring, respectful and responsible children. Such is the goal of character education.

The great religions have emphasized that every human being is precious. In Judaism and Christianity the Bible states that we are all created in "the image of God". What this suggests is that everyone has the potential to exhibit great intelligence and love. As our nation celebrates the 50th anniversary of the moon landing, we are reminded of the extraordinary intelligence, creativity, and desire for humans to accomplish this goal.

Psychology has taught us that each child has potential strengths that need to be drawn out (educare: to draw out) empathy, compassion, creativity, and curiosity, for example. Professor Martin Seligman, the "father of positive psychology", identifies 24 core strengths that exist potentially in each child. These are often identified as the virtues that religions teach.

The goal of character education, in the language of Professor Thomas Lickona, is "to know the good, desire the good, and do the good." We want children to develop their intellect so that they can identify the moral issues in complex situations, in literature, for example. Further, we want students to understand how to manage their emotions. And, we need to provide situations where students can participate in service to others.

Actually, everything within a school offers opportunities to exhibit virtuous behavior. Every day we can do simple acts of kindness with a morning greeting or a warm smile. Students can learn to build positive relationships while collaborating with others on science projects. Teachers can model the care and respect that they demand from the students.

Since parents make the greatest impact on student's lives, the school needs to work closely with parents in helping children develop their character. In addition, the school needs to collaborate with service organizations where children can learn about and participate in genuine good work for the community.

The school community, then, should be a model for the larger society. What greater need does our nation have besides intelligent, ethical, caring citizens seeking to serve the common good? The character education school provides the foundation for strong families, public civility, constructive dialogue, and the ideals of justice and love. They can be developed every day in a classroom.