

Price Laboratory School Elementary Citizenship Program:
A Laboratory for Democracy
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Introduction

Character education has now become as familiar to many educators as reading and math. Character education is the fastest growing reform movement in Pre-K –12 education today (Williams, 2000). Although there is much ongoing discussion and debate about the academic standards established in No Child Left Behind (2001), it is important to acknowledge that this legislation also calls for support of character education. Character education has received increasing recognition among state governments, boards of education, and professional organizations (Milson, 2000).

In the 2004 Iowa legislative session, legislation was proposed to ensure schools would implement character education efforts to counter the rising tide of bullying, harassment, and hazing in schools. Although this legislation was not passed, Governor Thomas Vilsack and Lt. Governor Sally Pederson sent a letter to all public and private school Districts in May of 2004 in Iowa stating their concerns about this lack of respect, civility, and safety in Iowa schools. Their letter contained these alarming statistics from the 2002 Iowa Youth Survey.

- 72% reported that class was stopped at some point in the last three weeks to deal with a major behavioral disruption
- 44% said students in their schools do not treat each other with respect
- 17% feel like there is no one at their school they can turn to in a time of need
- 17% do not feel safe at school

In 2005, the Iowa State Department of Education developed and began implementing the Learning Supports for Iowa Students initiative in response to these concerns. This plan supports schools in creating learning environments that are safe, supportive, and conducive to learning for Iowa's children and youth (Vilsack & Pederson, 2002).

A Long Term Model of Character Education

In 1993, the elementary faculty at Price Laboratory School (PLS) at the University of Northern Iowa expressed concerns about students not transferring the level of respect they demonstrated in the classrooms to the more unstructured areas such as recess, lunchtime, and before and after school. They decided to move forward with a proactive response to these civility concerns. This school-wide character education initiative was titled the PLS Elementary Citizenship Program. This program is rooted in a strong developmental and preventative philosophy. Its main goal is to develop and maintain a cohesive community of learners who value and respect each other.

Two staples of this sustained character education program are the monthly citizenship themes and the monthly all-school assemblies held on the last Friday of each month. The monthly themes are determined each year with student, teacher, and parent input. At each citizenship assembly that particular month's theme is reviewed and the next month's theme is introduced. Music, drama, and other creative approaches are incorporated into these assemblies

that makes them an invigorating and learning experience for all participants. Another constant at these assemblies is the leadership role the PLS Elementary Student Council members take by leading the Pledge of Allegiance and the PLS Pledge and reporting on the service-learning project they worked on during that particular month. Also, teachers incorporate the monthly citizenship themes in their classrooms by creating and teaching lessons about the particular themes and designing and displaying bulletin boards and other visuals about the particular themes.

During this program's existence, it has partnered with the College of Education at the University of Northern Iowa, the Iowa State Department of Education, and the Institute for Character Development at Drake University in grant writing, conference planning, and consultation about character education. Price Laboratory School received a 2005 Iowa Character Award from the Institute for Character Development for its integration of the Six Pillars of Character Counts! (Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, Citizenship) into its Elementary Citizenship Program (Character Counts! Coalition, 1999).

Thirteen years later, this student-centered character education program continues to evolve and be shaped according to the current needs and interests. However, the founding principles of building a caring community and nurturing positive and contributing citizens are a constant (Miller & Struck, 1996). More information on this program can be found at www.pls.uni.edu/citizenship.

First Amendment Schools: Educating for Freedom and Responsibility

In 2005, Price Laboratory School was one of the five schools in the United States selected to receive the First Amendment Project Schools Award. These five schools joined a network of sixteen other schools previously selected to be in this project that is sponsored by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). First Amendment Schools (FAS) is a national reform initiative that is dedicated to the teaching and practice of the rights and responsibilities of freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of religion, freedom to petition, and freedom to assemble. First Amendment Schools are shaped by four guiding principles: democratic freedom, rights and responsibilities, community engagement, and active citizenship (Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson, Hudson & Thomas, 2003). Price Laboratory School's Elementary Citizenship Program was a natural fit to integrate the First Amendment Schools' initiative. More information can be found at www.firstamendmentschools.org.

The First Amendment in Action

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise therefore; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. --First Amendment, United States Constitution

The Price Laboratory School Elementary Citizenship Program took each of these rights and showcased them as individual monthly themes. The monthly citizenship assemblies initially taught and reviewed each freedom. This content can be found on the PLS Citizenship Web site at www.pls.uni.edu/citizenship. The teachers followed up and personalized the instruction in their classrooms.

The first theme, **Freedom of Speech**, is at the heart of the First Amendment in schools. Students need to be empowered to have a voice that is heard. Encouraging students to share their opinions in a safe classroom community is a philosophy and process not just a one-time lesson. Teachers need to believe this and practice it daily. Still, this freedom is controversial. Teachers are concerned that it means saying anything you want to say even if it is offensive. The First Amendment Schools' (FAS) initiative emphasizes that with rights comes responsibilities. For example, students have the right to say they don't want homework, but it has to be done in a respectful way. Conflict resolution skills were included so that students understood that it's not so important what you debate, but how to debate.

The second theme, **Freedom of Religion**, was the quest of many of our forefathers. Schools have become paranoid about any talk of religion. Still, it is possible to teach about religion in ways that are constitutionally permissible and educationally sound (Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson, Hudson & Thomas, 2003). Religion needs to be approached academically and not devotionally. As long as it pertains to a learning objective and remains neutral and fair, religion can be discussed in school. For example, students were free to talk about their religion in a heritage report assigned by the third grade teacher. Religion doesn't need to be a taboo topic in school.

The third theme, **Freedom of the Press**, has been one of our country's check and balance systems. The public has the right to know the truth about what is happening. School newspapers or other publications do have the right to print the truth keeping in mind the ethics of journalism. For example, a first and second grade classroom wrote a letter to the editor of a local newspaper stating their concerns about junk and garbage being dropped off at the local recycling centers. The manager of the recycling center was impressed with the students' understanding of recycling and concern for their community.

The fourth theme, **Freedom to Assemble**, was taught through examples of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who practiced peaceful assembly. The kindergarten class modeled this at an assembly. They had raised the concern of garbage on the playground. Through class discussions, they decided that having garbage cans outside could solve the problem. They also made signs and assembled to convey their ideas of stopping the litter on the playground. This highlights civic engagement even in the lower grades.

The fifth theme, **Freedom to Petition**, came alive for the fifth grade boys. They were faced with the embarrassing situation in their bathroom of no doors on the bathroom stalls. They voiced their concern to their classroom teacher who guided them in writing and presenting a petition. Two boys were selected to present their concerns to each of the elementary classrooms and solicit signatures for the petition. They were amazed to find that even the girls supported their concern. Finally, the petition was shared with the principal and action was taken to put doors back on the stalls. The students were reminded that with the right to have doors comes the responsibility of taking care of them.

After the First Amendment Rights were taught, Protecting the Rights of Others was selected to pull them all together. This theme emphasized the civic responsibility that every citizen has to guard the rights of others. The fourth grade class had completed a curriculum written by the school guidance counselors entitled, *Be A Buddy, Not A Bully!* (See www.pls.uni.edu/citizenship for information on this curriculum.) In order to apply what was learned, the elementary guidance counselor connected the fourth graders with buddies at a school for students with severe disabilities. Many of the buddies with severe disabilities couldn't talk,

write, or walk and this inhibited their basic freedoms. As citizens, these fourth grade students helped protect their rights. In return, they learned important lessons like the ones expressed by the following fourth grade student at the citizenship assembly:

You shouldn't make fun of someone because they have a disability or different qualities. You have to help them. This experience helped me learn about disabilities. As a leader, I had to make sure that no one made fun of them, called them names, or made them sad.

Conclusion

The current trends in educational research indicated that character education has become a prominent educational reform movement (Leming, 1996; Cornett & Chant, 2000). Unfortunately, the support of character education in NCLB lies in the shadow of the intense debate and discussion about the academic accountability measures. This has resulted in significant tensions between national and state control (Cornett, 2004).

However, important fundamental and philosophical questions are emerging from the NCLB era such as: What are the proper aims of education? How do public schools serve a democratic society? What does it mean to educate the whole child (Noddings, 2005)?

Today, the need to sustain and expand our experiment in liberty is made more urgent by the challenge of living with our deepest differences in a diverse and complex society. The key place to address this challenge is in our schools, the institutions most responsible for transmitting civic principles and virtues (Chaltain & McCloskey, 2004). From its inception, Price Laboratory School's Elementary Citizenship Program has realized that children are moral beings and contributing citizens with rights and responsibilities. With the support of allied resources such as the Iowa State Department of Education, the College of Education at the University of Northern Iowa, the Institute for Character Development, and the First Amendment Schools' initiative this character education model remains committed to the never-ending process of responding to these important questions. The problem isn't that students have too much freedom; it's that they have too few opportunities to exercise their freedom with responsibility.

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