American schools have had from their inception a moral mandate. Moral authority, once vested firmly in both our schools and teachers, has receded dramatically over the past few decades. While many teachers are valiantly working to promote good character in their classrooms, many are receiving mixed and confusing messages. Attempts made to restore values and ethics to the school curriculum through values clarification, situational ethics, and discussion of moral dilemmas have proven both weak and ephemeral, failing to strengthen the character and behavior of our young people. Still our schools too often champion rights at the expense of responsibility and self-esteem at the expense of self-discipline.

Distressed by the increasing rates of violence, adolescent suicide, premature sexual activity, and a host of other pathological and social ills assaulting American youth, we propose that schools and teachers reassert their responsibility as educators of character. Schools cannot, however, assume this responsibility alone; families, neighborhoods and faith communities must share in this task together. We maintain that authentic educational reform in this nation begins with our response to the call for character. True character education is the hinge upon which academic excellence, personal achievement, and true citizenship depend. It calls forth the very best from our students, faculty, staff and parents. We, the undersigned, believe the following guiding principles ought to be at the heart of this educational reform:

**Principle 1: Education is an Inescapable Moral Enterprise**

Education in its fullest sense is inescapably a moral enterprise – a continuous and conscious effort to guide students to know and pursue what is good and what is worthwhile.

**Principle 2: Parents**

We strongly affirm parents as the primary moral educators of their children and believe schools should build a partnership with the home. Consequently, all schools have the obligation to foster in their students personal and civic virtues such as integrity, courage, responsibility, diligence, service, and respect for the dignity of all persons.

**Principle 3: Virtue**

Character education is about developing virtues – good habits and dispositions which lead students to responsible and mature adulthood.

Virtue ought to be our foremost concern in educating for character. Character education is not about acquiring the right views – currently accepted attitudes about ecology, prayer in school, gender, school uniforms, politics, or ideologically charged issues.
**Principle 4: Teachers, Principals, Staff**

The teacher and the school principal are central to this enterprise and must be educated, selected, and encouraged with this mission in mind. In truth, all of the adults in the school must embody and reflect the moral authority which has been invested in them by the parents and the community.

**Principle 5: Community**

Character education is not a single course, a quick-fix program, or a slogan posted on the wall; it is an integral part of school life. The school must become a community of virtue in which responsibility, hard work, honesty, and kindness are modeled, taught, expected, celebrated, and continually practiced. From the classroom to the playground, from the cafeteria to the faculty room, the formation of good character must be the central concern.

**Principle 6: Curriculum**

The human community has a reservoir of moral wisdom, much of which exists in our great stories, works of art, literature, history, and biography. Teachers and students must together draw from this reservoir both within and beyond the academic curriculum.

**Principle 7: Students**

Finally, young people need to realize that forging their own characters is an essential and demanding life task. And the sum of their school experiences – in successes and failures, academic and athletic, intellectual and social – provides much of the raw material for this personal undertaking.

Character education is not merely an educational trend or the school’s latest fad; it is a fundamental dimension of good teaching, an abiding respect for the intellect and spirit of the individual. We need to re-engage the hearts, minds, and hands of our children in forming their own characters, helping them "to know the good, love the good, and do the good." That done, we will truly be a nation of character, securing "liberty and justice for all."

Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character

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