Teaching Civic and Social Responsibility

Some of the United States’ most treasured historical documents, including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, make reference to the importance of tolerance and respecting basic human rights.

History also reminds us that the promise of equality is often broken. Our nation, our "great land of liberty," could also be called a land of many –isms: ruthless colonialism, racism, separatism, and sexism. For many U.S. citizens, there have been—and continue to be—numerous threats to personal freedom and opportunity.

Still, the ideals of our founding fathers—of "liberty and justice for all"—continue to inspire individual and collective quests for a just and civil society. And schools can play a huge role in preparing students to participate in those endeavors.

Developing Citizenship Skills

Diversity has contributed to the vitality and creativity of the United States by increasing the range of viewpoints, ideas, customs, and choices available to each individual in almost every aspect of life. The key to reducing conflict and discrimination is to help people understand the benefits—and the costs—of diversity.

Research suggests that there is a danger in spending too much time reaching our reading and math goals if that means we drop our emphasis on developing citizenship skills. Richard Rothstein and Rebecca Jacobsen (2009) emphasize that we cannot advance “the equity goals of U.S. education” if we create a climate in which teachers cannot emphasize issues of social responsibility (p. 16).
Character Education

A critical part of a student’s civic education is an exploration of character. As author Charles Haynes (1995, 2001) points out, it’s important to help students understand that, while we must respect diversity, there are widely shared and important core values—such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others—that transcend race, class, and cultural differences.

Social and Emotional Learning as Conflict Prevention

Proponents of social and emotional learning and character education believe that education in character and social-emotional skills belong alongside reading and math education (Novick, Kress, & Elias, 2002). When social and emotional factors, including conflict, at home or school, overwhelm students, they are unable to learn in the classroom.

There are five areas of emotional intelligence that must be addressed at school:

- Self-awareness
- Management of emotions
- Self-motivation and performance
- Empathy and perspective taking
- Social skills (Novick, Kress, & Elias, 2002)

For schools to support the emotional intelligence of all students, Novick, Kress, and Elias (2002) recommend the following steps:

1. Establish a school climate articulating specific themes, character elements, or values.
2. Increase explicit instruction in social-emotional skills.

3. Increase explicit instruction in health-promotion and problem-prevention skills.

4. Set up systems to enhance coping skills and social support for transitions, crises, and resolving conflicts.

Create widespread, systematic opportunities for positive, contributory service.

Teaching Core Values

How do we teach these core values? Thomas Likona (1993) offers an approach in his article "The Return of Character Education." First, schools, teachers, and students must know that good character “consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good” (p. 9). The role of the school is to help students make these shared values their own.

Once a comprehensive concept of character has been established, there must be a comprehensive approach to developing it. Likona (1993) explains, "This approach tells schools to look at themselves through a moral lens and consider how virtually everything that goes on there affects the values and character of students. Then, plan how to use all phases of classroom and school life as deliberate tools of character development" (p. 10). In Likona’s model, teachers must, among other things

- **Act as caregivers, models, and mentors.** Teachers must treat students with love and respect, set a good example, support positive social behavior, and correct hurtful actions through one-on-one guidance and whole-class discussion.
- **Create a moral community.** Teachers must help students know one another as people; learn to respect and care about one another; and feel valued membership in, and responsibility to, the group.

- **Practice moral discipline.** Teachers must use the creation and enforcement of rules as opportunities to foster moral reasoning, voluntary compliance with rules, and a respect for others.

- **Create a democratic classroom environment.** Students must be involved in decision-making and know that they have a responsibility for making the classroom a good place to be and learn.

- **Use cooperative learning.** When students work together, they develop an appreciation of others and for different points of view. They also develop the ability to work with others toward common goals.

Experts also point out that teachers can help students develop positive character traits by teaching students how to think, giving them meaningful literature, and providing service learning opportunities.
Developing Community and Character

Character-building teaching practices don’t work in isolation. Instead, they must be woven into the fabric of a school’s very culture.

Spencer Kagan (2001) explains in the article “Teaching for Character and Community” that character education in the classroom makes classrooms more caring, respectful, and inclusive. He also explains that the most effective approach to character education includes not only what teachers teach, but also the way that they do it. For example, when a teacher embeds respect for other people into a classroom’s culture, students listen to each other discuss literature or plan an art project.

Using Diversity in the Classroom to Build Civic Character

In her article “Teaching with Controversy,” author Susan Graseck (2009) explains the value of tackling controversial topics in the classroom, where students can learn to “wrestle collectively” with important issues of the day (p. 46). Students who are able and willing to engage with controversial public issues develop important civic skills. When a group of students come from a variety of backgrounds, they will necessarily have different views on important public issues such as freedom, immigration, and war. What better place to explore these ideas than with a group of people who have a variety of ideas?

Graseck (2009) provides advice on how to study controversial issues in the classroom: “Students should be actively analyzing multiple perspectives in light of solid information and learning to wrestle respectfully with competing values to come to their own considered judgment on the issue” (p. 48).