

**SUPERINTENDENT'S COMPANION GUIDE TO**

**A FRAMEWORK**  
for **CHARACTER**  
**EDUCATION**  
IN ALABAMA SCHOOLS



THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA®

PART OF THE  University of Alabama System

September 2021

# SUPERINTENDENT'S COMPANION GUIDE TO 'A FRAMEWORK FOR CHARACTER EDUCATION IN ALABAMA SCHOOLS'

## INTRODUCTION

A comprehensive approach to character education requires a culture in which everyone experiences partnership in exemplifying and promoting good character and understands that good character is an aspect of what students, teachers, and school leaders all need to live flourishing lives. Fostering such partnership and understanding for all stakeholders in the school community is the foundation of leadership in effective character education. A comprehensive approach offers far more benefit than character education 'programs' involving limited instructional add-ons. But how does a leader initiate a district approach that involves effort in all aspects of schooling? Where does one begin? This companion guide is designed to be read alongside the Framework for Character Education in Alabama Schools.

This document offers suggestions for getting started. Begin by:

- defining key terms
- asking yourself the right kinds of questions
- assessing your progress
- building on what you learn along the way

### Key Terms

(note: as your work progresses, you may improve these basic definitions)

**Character** - A set of personal traits or dispositions (e.g. a collection of virtues) that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct. (cf. Jubilee Centre framework p. 2).<sup>2</sup>

**Character education** - Includes all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop positive personal strengths called virtues. (Jubilee Centre Framework p. 2). This is not a single program and involves all interactions in a school where good character should be modelled.

**Flourishing** (sometimes called 'eudaimonia') - This is the pursuit in life of our potential as human beings. This can include pleasure and life satisfaction (subjective wellbeing), but these are fleeting and of less importance than objective wellbeing as moral purpose and meaning.

**Moral motivation** - A person who is truly virtuous or has good character is motivated towards doing good things and feels appropriately about moral matters. In this way they have moral motivation because they are motivated morally and not by other desires (e.g. a person gives to charity because they want to help rather than be seen to be giving to charity for their own ends).

**Just School Communities** - Based on the idea that students need to learn how to be a moral person through feeling that they belong to a group, have a shared commitment to ethical ideals and have a view that is heard.

**Practical wisdom** - Developed through experience, this master virtue is the intellectual wisdom needed to negotiate complex circumstances in life and professional work, appropriately focused on moral dimensions and aimed at human flourishing.

*Virtue* - Acquired through upbringing then by our repeated choices, these are stable patterns of the person: of their perception, emotions, desire, motivation, and behavior e.g. honesty, courage.

*Virtue ethics* - A philosophy that prioritizes character as the most important dimension of being a good person and doing good moral acts in the world. It matters as much why a person does something as what they do because for this philosophy, character is the source of all moral acts.

*School ethos* - The collective character or spirit of everyone in the school community; the demonstrated beliefs and aspirations of the school community.

*Self-determination theory* - A theory of motivation that is concerned with human flourishing. The theory claims that people have three psychological needs that need to be satisfied if they are to flourish as human beings. They need to belong, be connected to others and have sense of competence.

*Virtue ethics leadership* - A form of leadership that emphasizes the character of the leader as the most important asset for making good judgements and acting as a motivating force for ethical good. Rules and regulations only go so far in supporting leadership and so character and practical wisdom are essential for appropriate leadership that is responsive to real and unfolding circumstances.

*Virtuous identity* - This is when a person views themselves in moral or virtuous terms—morality or virtues is a key feature of how a person views themselves in the world.

*Virtuous self* - This is when virtues are incorporated through dispositions into the core of who a person is in the world. The self and virtue are inseparable.

## Consider the following

### Leadership in character education will involve:

- Leading with character and integrity
- Prioritizing character education
- Leading a collaborative process through which leaders, teachers, and other staff work together to:
  - Identify the virtues and ideals that will define the district
  - Take responsibility to exemplify and live by those virtues and ideals
  - Identify ways in which specific moral, intellectual, civic, and enabling virtues are important to students' progress and are already present—or should be present—in the curriculum, teaching, student advising, disciplinary policies, extracurricular activities, and other aspects of the school (or district).

### Questions **system leaders** should address:

- How will I use the UA Framework and related resources as starting points to develop my own focus on leading with integrity and strengthening my own judgment?
- How will I strengthen existing consultative, deliberative, and collaborative practices in my district or school—or create new ones—to inform decisions, solve problems, and lead my school or district with wisdom?
- What would be the best way to structure a building- or district-level collaborative process to define a value-focused district mission?
- How will we assess our progress and build on what we learn? How will my own self-assessment be part of this?

- What will it mean to treat comprehensive character education as no less important as academic learning?

## FACILITATING THE DISTRICT PLAN

- Identify a set of desired core ideals through a shared leadership approach with all stakeholder groups
- Consider how the ideals will permeate every aspect (board members, teachers, students, administrators, curriculum, discipline, human resources, transportation, sports, child nutrition, and building maintenance) of the district
- Develop a plan for explicitly communicating ideals and how they relate to virtues
- Discuss what the ideal and related virtues will look like in practice for each stakeholder group
- Model and practice the ideals so that the ideal and related virtues becomes an innate pattern of behavior for the district
- Define how each ideal will impact relationships within the stakeholder groups

- Expand opportunities for the stakeholder groups to implement ideals both within the district and outside the district
- Establish an ongoing assessment of character development within the district
- Offer character focused professional development

### Assess district readiness

Superintendents can assess their district’s readiness for leading a comprehensive approach to character education by completing the following School District Ideals Assessment to identify areas needing consideration.

Fulfillment of potential that embraces the value of things beyond oneself is the heart of a meaningful and flourishing life.

How will this be reflected in defining a school district’s mission?

School District Assessment of Ideals	Yes	No
Does the district have a defined mission?		
Does its mission address the needs of the community and society it serves?		
Is its mission focused on things of inherent value or only on students getting ahead?		
Does the district’s mission contribute to everyone’s ability to live meaningful lives?		
Does the district value inquiry, artistry, craftsmanship, and service as endeavors and traditions of practice that enrich lives and serve society?		
Do district leaders and staff function as a collaborative community devoted to the district mission and well-being of every member of the district community?		
Does the district leadership strive to involve everyone in the district in ways that create a sense of shared purpose?		
Does the district leadership’s devotion to its mission and collaborative approach inspire and enable schools in the district to devote themselves to the mission and succeed in it?		

## SCHOOL LEADERS

### Assess school readiness

School **leaders and teachers** can assess their school’s readiness for creating schools of character by completing the following School Ideals Assessment to identify areas needing consideration.

Fulfillment of potential that embraces the value of things beyond oneself is the heart of a meaningful and flourishing life.

How will this be reflected in defining a school’s mission?

### Offer character focused professional development

Building whole-school collaboration in character education involves both the collaborative development of an appropriate school mission and the promotion of virtue literacy. Begin with staff development in virtue literacy for all adults in the school, using the *Framework for Character Education in Alabama Schools*. A basic understanding of the following is essential:

Growing virtue literacy empowers a coordinated whole-school approach to character education.

- virtue concepts (pp. 6-11)
- the nature and development of virtuous motivation (pp.12-13)
- basic psychological needs, and their role in motivation and acquisition of values (pp. 12-13)

School Assessment of Ideals	Yes	No
Does the school community value inquiry, artistry, craftsmanship, and service as endeavors and traditions of practice that enrich lives and serve society in addition to learning knowledge and skills?		
Does the school nurture students’ growth in valuing inquiry, artistry, craftsmanship, and service?		
Do the adults in the school function as a community devoted to valuable traditions of inquiry, artistry, craftsmanship, and service, as well as the well-being of every member of the school community?		
Does the school have a mission?		
Does the school have a mission focused on something that is valuable beyond itself or only on students getting ahead?		
Does the school’s devotion to its mission inspire students to devote themselves to things that have value beyond themselves?		
Does the school’s mission contribute to students’ ability to live meaningful lives?		
Does the school strive to involve everyone in the school in ways that create a sense of shared purpose?		

- the concepts of needs-support and a just school community (pp. 12-13)
- key aspects of just school communities
  - valuing the worth and dignity of every person (pp. 12, 14)
  - valuing and feeling valued as the heart of positive relationships in a just community (pp. 13-15)
  - a problem-solving approach to discipline (pp. 14-15)
  - ethical inquiry as a shared commitment and foundation for promoting good judgment (pp. 16-17)
- Thought provoking stories, biographies, and movies that explore aspects of character, lives of devotion to things of value, hard choices, and the ways in which occupational and life contexts can make it difficult for good people to do the right thing. These can be excellent vehicles for examining the kinds of ethical complexities that people face in life.
- Character related materials that could potentially be integrated into the school's curriculum. For young children, the *Frog and Toad* stories are wonderful vehicles for engaging students in discussion of virtues such as courage and honesty. On the use of such stories in promoting ethical reflection, reasoning, and understanding of virtues, see Michael Pritchard, *Reasonable Children: Moral Education and Moral Reasoning* (Kansas, 1996). Materials for older children include longer age-appropriate readings of the kinds mentioned above, as well as very short items that can be used to stimulate reflection and discussion. In the latter category, many of the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips are delightfully pointed discussion prompts for aspects of character and values.

Create regular character-focused staff development activities for all adults in the school. These could take the form of periodic reading group meetings and movie nights with discussion. Suitable readings and movies would include:

- Writings about aspects of character, character development, and character education, such as those in the INSIGHT series of articles available online at the website of the University of Birmingham (UK) Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. These are written for practitioners and include references for further reading. Other relevant choices would be writings about the ethical lives of schools, such as Doris Santoro, *Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Educational Press, 2018).
- Works that combine narrative and background on aspects of institutions and human psychology that can lead people to make poor choices. A great example of this is Margaret Heffernan's book, *Willful Ignorance: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril* (Walker, 2011). Awareness of our own limitations and the challenges posed by common situations is an important aspect of good character.

These education-first and continuing education aspects of a comprehensive approach to character education should give teachers what they need to understand how they can model different virtues and strengthen the character-building aspects of their own teaching.

### Create just school communities

Every student must experience equal membership in a just school community, for character education to be successful. A just school community affirms the worth and dignity of every student.<sup>3</sup> It is equitable in nurturing the potential of all students.

Here are some questions to ask:

- It is common for teachers to prefer teaching higher-track classes. Is there tracking or ability grouping that places teachers in classrooms with more and less preferred groups of students? If so, how is that reflected in the quality of teacher-student relationships? A key predictor of students' success and experience of positive social connection is their answer to the question, "Does my teacher like me?" Feeling liked is an important aspect of how people experience validation of their worth, and it is important to be mindful of how structural features of schools may lead to particular groups of students feeling less valued.
- Does the school have transfer students? When teachers and school leaders greet students arriving at the start of the school day, are they tense and less welcoming when they greet transfer students? Do they speak less warmly to them?
- How well are teachers able to handle the prejudices and animosities that children may bring to school? Are they worn down by contempt shown by students of one group for members of another group? If so, how can that be addressed?
- Do schools focus their efforts on students who are perceived to be high achievers—students most likely to succeed in college or students who can most benefit from investments in their academic success? Do perceptions of students' families as the "right" kinds of families play a role in these judgments?
- How many students are alienated because there is no place of respect for them within the social world of the school?

### **Provide clear ethical expectations**

Expectations should be presented in ways that support student's self-integrative developmental processes. It is through these processes that

students "internalize" expectations and become self-regulating. Keep in mind that *reason giving* and a *need-supportive environment*—one that facilitates the satisfaction of basic psychological needs for competence, positive social connection, and autonomy (making decisions based on one's own values and goals)—are foundational to healthy integrative processes. Here are some questions to ask:

- How are expectations presented? Are expectations explained? Explaining expectations and supporting students' integration of the underlying ideals is basic to the success of character education.
- Do school leaders and teachers explain their own decisions in ways that refer to the school's guiding ideals?
- Do they engage students in ethical dialogue and inquiry – in a give and take of ethical reasons?
- When students offer good reasons or ethical insights do teachers and school leaders validate students' progress in virtue cognition? Do they ever do this by revising school rules or creating new ones when students present good ideas?
- In what ways does the school involve students in being spokespersons for ethical ideals?

### **Use a problem-solving approach to discipline.<sup>4</sup>**

A problem-solving approach to discipline is becoming more common in schools in the U.S. It treats most failures to meet behavioral expectations as similar (and often related) to failures to meet academic expectations. It involves a sympathetic ("I'm on your side.") conversation with the offending student to hear from them what is standing in the way of meeting expectations, encouraging self-examination, and working together to address the root of the problem. Problem-solving discipline coaches students in self-regulation as it seeks to address the root causes of behavioral problems.

Some questions:

- Does the school recognize that the development of self-regulatory capacities is a process that continues beyond the teenage years?
- What does the school do to promote the development of emotional self-regulation?
- What does it do to teach students how to think things through before acting?
- Does the school have a peer mediation program or involve students in restorative justice practices?
- What restorative justice processes does the school use to repair damage to its sense of community when serious violations of its norms occur?
- What restorative justice processes are used to require and enable students to make things right when their failures cause harm?

### **Provide a school community that is psychologically needs-supportive**

A just school community that is psychologically needs-supportive provides opportunities for positive social connection, it nurtures prudent self-determination, and it enables all its members to experience growing competence. It is essential to build meaningful personal relationships.

Some questions:

- How much continuity of friendly contact is there between teachers and students and within student cohorts?
- If the school is large, can it adopt a “house” system to achieve some of the social benefits of small school communities?
- Are only students who are above average academically or athletically able to experience

themselves as competent? How many ways does the school enable students to find something they are or can be good at, so everyone can experience competence?

- Are teaching and student evaluation structured and paced for optimal challenge—challenging enough to sustain interest and progress, but not so hard as to be frustrating and demotivating?
- In what ways can elements of structured choice be used throughout the school so that students make good choices but experience enough self-determination to not be unhappy or demotivated in their learning and participation in the school community?

### **Teach the language of ethics**

Questions:

- How can the language of virtue—moral, intellectual, civic, and enabling virtues—be infused across the curriculum?
- How can teachers’ growing virtue literacy enable this?

Teaching the language of ethics can help students be more perceptive in noticing the ethically important aspects of situations

### **Promote emotional self-regulation and thinking before acting.**

Consider using the *Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS)* curriculum<sup>5</sup>. The goal of this curriculum is to help children become more attuned to the emotional dynamics of social interactions and oriented to thinking before they act – thinking specifically about the social and emotional dynamics of situations they may face and the likely consequences of different choices. Self-awareness of one’s own emotional responses to situations is essential to having the ability to self-regulate or manage one’s emotions. This is a form of understanding and skill that is foundational to good character.

## Model Expectations

Learning to *stop and think before acting* has several parts: (1) basic self-regulation that

Students need models and standards of care in thinking things through and making good decisions. Provide guided practice in virtue cognition.

reduces emotional reactivity; (2) learning ways to think things through; (3) practice in thinking things through well enough to make *good decisions*.

Many school subjects, including science, technology, health, literature, art, social studies, and physical education can

play roles in teaching students *what it means to think things through with care*.

- What efforts are made in teaching these and other subjects to give students models and practice in careful thinking?

*Guided practice in making good decisions* can take many forms. Some may take advantage of teachable moments, such as when:

- students seek advice on how to ensure that everyone does their fair share of a group project
- students seek career guidance
- a student cannot decide whether it would be acceptable to exclude a specific peer from a birthday party
- students question how grading policies can accommodate pandemic-related obstacles to learning
- student government, newspapers, and clubs make decisions and update their policies.

Keep in mind:

- Teachers (and school leaders) should model ethical seriousness, open-mindedness, and

intellectual humility in discussing such matters with students.

- Ethical inquiry should be approached as a cooperative enterprise, acknowledging that even people of very good character and judgment have not had the opportunity to think through the complexities of every ethical question.
- *Critical thinking projects* can involve upper-elementary and more advanced students in writing reasoned essays and staging debates on matters they identify for themselves as ethically significant questions they want to address.

## Provide opportunities for practice

Good character is formed substantially through practice, so schools should provide opportunities for students to practice becoming a mature, reflective person.

Considering all the above, how can such opportunities be created within the context of your school?

## Cultivate students' autonomous valuing of what is valuable

A comprehensive approach to character education should aim to cultivate students' autonomous valuing of what is valuable. Autonomous valuing arises through self-integrative processes, mediated by reason-giving and the satisfaction of basic needs for autonomy, competence, and mutually affirming relationships.

Keep this in mind in every aspect of the school's operations:

- How is valuing of fellow citizens, civic institutions, the environment, and the community

modeled by all the adults in the school and in the school mission?

- How are students engaged in activities that embody such valuing?
- How do teaching and curriculum embody and promote valuing of the valuable human traditions that schools work to sustain?
- Do students experience choice, competence, and positive social connection as they encounter the valuable things the school has to offer?

### Focus on the intrinsic rewards of learning

Teachers should frame the value of schoolwork by reference to its intrinsic rewards, such as potential for personal satisfaction, fulfilling personal potential, or the intrinsic rewards of making good decisions.

This is important both as a supplement to what has just been said about the cultivation of valuing what is valuable and from a strictly motivational point of view. Attempting to motivate learning primarily through warnings about what is on tests tends to undermine sustained effort and deep conceptual learning.

### Value inquiry, excellence, and intellectual virtues

Teaching a subject with integrity involves modelling commitment to the forms of excellence or goodness inherent in the subject matter: the qualities of craftsmanship, artistry, careful reasoning and investigations, beauty and power of language, and deep understanding made possible by the disciplines.

This is a second important supplement to what has been said about cultivating true valuing of the valuable things the school has to offer. It is also quite important to cultivating the intellectual virtues and other virtues that are inherent in what we teach in schools.

### Focus on hiring leaders, teachers, and staff who are committed to making character a priority

Understand the importance of teachers' aspirations to do good work and avoid managerial practices that may undermine it. Practice moral leadership that creates alignment with teachers' own moral motivation.

Essential to comprehensive character education is hiring school personnel who are committed to enabling children to flourish and giving them the space and support to succeed and obtain the inherent rewards of this kind of work.

### Focus on informing and sustaining teachers' moral motivation

Keep in mind that teachers' and other adult staff members' growing virtue literacy enables them to:

Work to sustain a culture of character-oriented professional collaboration in serving students' developmental needs.

- participate in a coordinated whole-school approach to character education.
- accentuate the virtue relevance of their own roles and subject areas.

Good leadership ensures a healthy alignment between what the institution expects of adults in a school and what they expect of themselves as professionals for whom doing good work means helping students fulfill their potential.

Keep in mind that there is no adequate substitute for teachers' *moral motivation* to help students. This is all-the-more important in schools that are serious about character education. Teachers need to be virtuously motivated themselves in order to model it for students.

### Modeling what is expected

The virtues we want to see in our students must be present in the adult culture of the school if character education is to take root. This begins with school leaders and how they lead.

Keep in mind that the culture of the adults in a school is a powerful model for students of how individuals should interact with one another in mutually respectful, empowering, and productive ways. In prioritizing character education, educational leaders need to model judicious and conscientious commitment to the flourishing of a just school community.

Healthy organizations identify, acknowledge, and collectively address their problems and sustain progress in their missions. Doing so requires intellectual honesty, fairness, humility, open-mindedness, inquisitiveness, imagination, discernment, and judgment—all the intellectual virtues that educators need to model for students. Consider:

The modelling of good decision-making can be enhanced by creating deliberative forums in which collaborative problem-solving processes can be observable by students and may involve students as participants.

- What public forums does your school (or district) have for discussing issues and making decisions?

- Are there *shared decision-making* processes involving school leaders, teachers, and parents?
- Can students take part as participants or observers in shared decision making?

### Evaluating Progress

School leaders should collaborate with teachers in developing and using methods for evaluating the schools' progress in character education. There are many relevant sources of information, including changes in the frequency and severity of behavioral problems in the school, frequency of absences, teacher observations of student behaviors, quality of student engagement in service opportunities or requirements, students' autonomous use of virtue terms and reasoning, and quality of student virtue-related schoolwork and projects.

Evaluation efforts should be understood as *formative* whole-school *self-assessments*, not summative high-stakes evaluations. There are several reasons why high-stakes evaluations of teachers' and/or students' character are not compatible with the enterprise of nurturing the qualities of autonomous self-regulation that define good character.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This document was prepared by Prof. Randall Curren, of the University of Rochester, in collaboration with the University of Alabama Leadership for Character Team.

<sup>2</sup>The Jubilee Center Framework along with other character education resources is available at <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/527/character-education/framework>.

<sup>3</sup>See F. C. Power, “The Just Community Approach to Moral Education,” *Journal of Moral Education* 17(3) (1988): 195-208; F. C. Power, “The Moral Self in Community,” in D. K. Lapsley & D. Narvaez, eds., *Moral Development, Self, and Identity* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 47-64.

<sup>4</sup>F. C. Power & S. N. Hart, “The Way Forward to Constructive Child Discipline,” in S. N. Hart, ed., *Eliminating Corporal Punishment: The Way Forward to Constructive Child Discipline* (New York: UNESCO Educational Publications, 2005); R. W. Greene, “Transforming School Discipline: Shifting from Power and Control to Collaboration and Problem Solving,” *Childhood Education* 94(4) (2018): 22-27.

<sup>5</sup>See <http://www.channing-bete.com/prevention-programs/paths/paths.html> for details and footage of the program in use.