EL Education

Building Character: A Different Approach

The EL Education model is built upon two traditions: Outward Bound's focus on challenge, teamwork, service, and compassion, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education's focus on active inquiry-based learning. Since our inception at the Harvard Outward Bound Center twenty years ago, we have placed student character at the center of our work in schools. The high achievement of our students is the result of an unusual degree of engagement and work ethic engendered by our approach to academics coupled with relentless, purposeful instruction in Habits of Scholarship (i.e., academic mindsets and learning strategies). These factors combine to support the success of students from all backgrounds in college, career and life.

Student achievement in EL schools is fostered in three dimensions: traditional measures of achievement (e.g., state tests, college acceptance); the creation of high-quality work that aspires to professional standards; and the cultivation of character strengths to achieve a successful, fulfilling and virtuous life. The mountain our students climb is a metaphoric mountain that leads to academic success—rather than the mountain of rock and ice faced by students on Outward Bound wilderness courses—but the same ethic prevails: all students must support and compel each other to reach the summit and to achieve more than they thought possible.

Character Growth and Academic Growth: Two Sides of the Same Coin

We believe that character is built *through* academic work that challenges and engages students, and that academic success is built *through* strong character that allows students to work together, persist, and do their best work. In EL schools, character is not something that is merely discussed or acknowledged on special occasions or assessed at the end of the term. Instead it is woven into the fabric of daily life in our classrooms. We build student character through a comprehensive, whole-school approach that comprises:

- *Curriculum* that gives students significant responsibility for taking on individual and group challenge and become agents of change, through case studies, real-world research, and projects that contribute beyond the classroom
- *Instruction* that requires students to work actively and collaboratively on complex tasks, engage in critique, practice habits of scholarship, and produce work of unusually high quality
- *Assessment* that develops student ownership of learning and is anchored by the use of student-friendly "learning targets" (explicit goals), clear success criteria, and ongoing feedback
- *School Culture* centered on character values that guide the actions and relationships of everyone in the school community, and are represented in the school's structures and practices

A Focus on Both Performance and Relational Character

There is a synergistic relationship between *performance character* (i.e., perseverance and responsibility) and *relational character* (i.e., ethical integrity, shown in habits such as compassion and respect). In our schools, performance character strengths are distinctly held in a school's Habits of Scholarship—a set of academic mindsets and learning strategies that are assessed separately from academic content and skill mastery.

Performance character is prioritized in the Common Core State Standards (e.g., the Standards for Mathematical Practice; College and Career Readiness Literacy Standards) and there is promising recent research that suggests that a school focus on performance character strengths correlates with academic and life success.

We also believe that our focus on relational character— building good citizens and virtuous people— has a profound positive effect on student motivation and success. Our model puts students on a mission to contribute to a better world— "to get smart in order to do good"—and we have found that students study harder, work together more productively, and push themselves further when inspired by an altruistic vision for their learning. To cite a concrete example, EL high school students in Dubuque, Iowa authored a professionally published book to honor their city's contribution to WWII, based on interviews that celebrated local veterans. Students worked with unparalleled commitment to learn their WWII history and improve their writing skills because there was an authentic and meaningful reason to do so. We believe that the college acceptance rate of graduates in our high schools— often 100%— is fueled by this kind of commitment.

Building a Culture of Respect and Achievement
Students entering a school strive to find a place to fit; they observe the student culture around them and adjust their behavior to be accepted by their peers. In a school where the "cool kids" demonstrate positive performance character, this becomes the standard to emulate. Success in academics becomes cool. If a student transfers to a new school and finds that everyone else is taking Habits of Scholarship seriously— working hard on classwork and homework, speaking up with ideas and questions—then to fit in in this school means to care about school and to care about learning. For whatever the school or district says about working hard for success, it is the cue of peer culture that lets students know how hard they should work and how much they should show that they care.

In the same way, if almost all students are treating each other respectfully, then to fit in means to treat others well. No matter what a policy says regarding respect and tolerance, students immediately pick up on the reality of the student environment. They take note of how students treat each other when adults are not present, across races, ages, gender, and all types of difference. The safer the environment, the more students are free to blossom as individuals, and to push each other constructively to grow and succeed.

EL uses a web of structures to create a culture of respect and achievement:
- *Character values* that are visible in hallways and classrooms—not just as posters, but as behaviors and as topics of daily discussion, even when such discussions are difficult
- *Staff norms* that align with the character values, which adults model whether or not students are present
- *Crew meetings* that give students a small, stable group of peers to connect with and support around both character and academic progress (in secondary schools crew meetings are small, daily advisory groups of students with a staff crew leader; in elementary schools crew meetings are intentional meetings with the whole class that open and close each day)
- *Community meetings* that bring together the whole school, grade bands, or a grade level, in which students have a lead voice to honor academic, artistic, and character achievements, and deal with difficult issues
- *Student-led conferences* that require students to present their growth, achievement, and challenges to their families and teacher

- *Passage presentations* that require students to present a portfolio of their growth and accomplishments over multiple years to a panel of educators and community members
- *Celebrations of learning* that involve the community in understanding and supporting the work of the school and its standards for academics, arts, and character (bringing out the crowds that typically come out only for sports or holiday concerts)
- *Galleries of quality work* in hallways, common spaces and classrooms—beautiful, accurate and sophisticated work that sends a message that this is a school where quality is expected of everyone
- *Adventure in learning* in which students are pushed beyond their comfort zone, whether out of school in the community or nature, or in school through challenging work, performances and presentations—the shared success of overcoming fears creates a bond among students of all kinds

Building Character in Teachers

Building teacher capacity is at the center of our work. We believe in a growth mindset with teacher learning, just as we do with student learning. Teachers at all points in their careers can become stronger across the range of their professional practice. Because we work in a wide range of settings —with both new and existing public schools, urban, rural and suburban, district and charter schools, with all grade levels PK-12— we support teacher growth across the spectrum.

The starting point for all of our work with schools is a focus on the professional culture and mindsets of the faculty. Whether the school is a brand new high school with primarily young teachers or a struggling, turnaround elementary school with a veteran faculty, the focus is the same. If the faculty does not have a growth mindset and believe in the capacity of all learners—students and colleagues—to continually improve, then there is little hope of building a culture of success. If the faculty and staff do not model the school's mindsets and values, there is little hope that students will adopt those mindsets and values.

In professional learning settings we explicitly model and label the character values we espouse. We work with teachers to unpack the structures and strategies that build character, and we collaborate with them to co-construct frameworks that they can incorporate into their classrooms and schools.

A Bright Line Connecting Character and Student Achievement in School: A Brief Case Study

Springfield Renaissance School, Springfield, MA, is a public district school that serves approximately 700 6-12 students, 60% low income students, primarily Hispanic and African American.
- Every single student in its first three graduating classes was accepted to college
- Over 30% of graduates were named Adams Scholars—full tuition to MA colleges and universities
- High school students exceeded district and state proficiency in every subject

Founding principal, Dr. Stephen R. Mahoney, attributes Renaissance's success to its school culture and Habits of Scholarship (called "Habits of Work" at Renaissance). Dr. Mahoney describes his thinking here in a document for families:

"At the core of the school's culture is the belief that *smart* is something you become, not something you are. Intelligence is not a fixed resource, it is a dynamic asset—one that grows in proportion to the effort an individual puts into their work. This belief holds for teachers and students, principals and secretaries, and it is

an absolutely critical component to the school's success at test scores, graduation rates, college acceptance and matriculation rates, and to the intangibles that make our school culture palpably optimistic.

We support, guide, and measure student effort through our five Habits of Work (*I come to class ready to learn; I actively and respectfully participate in class; I assess and revise my own work; I contribute to the success of group work; I complete daily homework*). We believe and know that when our students are meeting or exceeding the standard on each of these habits, they will meet or exceed the content and skill learning targets for their courses. Each year we analyze the relationship between Habit of Work scores and Learning Target scores, and each year the data reveals a direct correlation between the two (see the graph below). The key message is this: While we cannot control how our brains are hardwired for solving spatial relationship problems or short-term memory or decoding speed, we can control the behaviors found in the Habits of Work. If we are successful in these relatively simple tasks, we can be successful at the more academic challenges found in our courses. (It is important to note that Habits of Work are the sole basis for the school's honor roll.)

Along with this message of self-efficacy, we also share with students and families the knowledge that our Habits of Work are just as valued in the work world as they are at Renaissance. Three years ago, the school received a Catalyst School award from the Nellie Mae Foundation. Speaking at the recognition and award ceremony, Intel's human resources director revealed that only 40% of their hiring decisions are based upon technical knowledge and skills. The majority of the decision is based upon the soft skills captured by our Habits of Work (ability to work within groups, to ask good questions, to continually revisit and improve current systems and products, etc.). Good habits of work are not just about good grades, they are about good jobs and professional and personal fulfillment…"

Are habits of work predictive of Learning Target performance?