



THE KENAN  
INSTITUTE FOR ETHICS  
at Duke University

# MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

The Kenan Institute for Ethics' Middle School Visions  
Character Education Program

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This paper discusses the successes and lessons learned from Middle School Visions, a character education program implemented by Duke University's Kenan Institute for Ethics in five North Carolina middle schools between 2005 and 2008. A number of the program's components aligned with "best practices" as defined in the character education and youth development literature. Program components that focused on building relationships between students, staff, and community members met with high anecdotal success among teachers and principals. This paper discusses the strengths and weaknesses in program design and implementation, the measurement of "success" in the character education literature, and the challenges of school-based research. It also considers examples of less individualistic and more community-based approaches to the moral development of youth.

## Key Points

- Middle School Visions is a curriculum designed to positively influence middle school environments by instilling a sense of individual personal responsibility and encouraging student civic engagement. Program components that focused on building relationships between students, staff, and community members met with high anecdotal success among teachers and principals. Quantitative outcomes were difficult to assess due to the scale of the initiative and changes over time in program implementation and measurement.
- The K-12 operating environment is characterized by tight budgets and time pressures to prepare students for standardized tests. Character education programs are seen as burdensome curricular add-ons unless the program objectives are tied to existing school goals. MSV, like all other school-based character education programs, faced myriad tactical challenges as a result of these conditions.
- The majority of character education programs are unable to demonstrate statistically significant improvements in quantitative outcomes (behavioral or attitudinal) and therefore fall short of “evidence-based” standards. The programs that do qualify as “evidence-based” combine and implement a number of initiatives simultaneously, obscuring which program component was a catalyst in success. In addition, programs sharing many of the same components may meet with varying outcomes because of the context in which they are implemented.
- The fields of character education, social-emotional learning, service learning, and a host of other sub-areas in the developmental literatures have become intertwined both in terms of program strategies and outcome measures. Because “best practices” are derived from projects across these various fields that were successful in accomplishing very narrow goals (e.g., reducing teen pregnancy), they cannot be solely relied upon to accomplish moral development in youth more broadly.
- Future moral development efforts should focus on a community-based approach rather than the current use of individual-based program initiatives. A community-based approach 1) begins with the idea that schools are both communities in themselves and partners in the wider community and 2) focuses on building relationships and a common sense of moral purpose where daily living provides opportunities for moral engagement. This approach has greater potential to promote academic achievement, civic engagement, and an ethical sensibility that will travel with students beyond the bounds of the school.

Middle School Visions (MSV) is a 6th-8th grade curriculum designed to positively influence middle school environments by instilling a sense of individual personal responsibility and encouraging student civic engagement. The Kenan Institute for Ethics (KIE) at Duke University implemented MSV activities in five North Carolina middle schools between 2005 and 2008. This paper summarizes an external evaluation of the effectiveness of MSV in achieving its stated goals (Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation 2008), reflects on the lessons learned from this initiative, and considers promising new directions in character education and moral development more broadly.

## Middle School Visions: Program Goals and Achievements

MSV was designed with the broadly defined goals of facilitating character development and civic engagement in middle school students. Via participation in MSV programs (listed in Table 1), students would become more invested in their education and more engaged in their communities, make more beneficial life choices, and influence their peers more positively. Exposure to the program’s components would facilitate the development of moral and ethical values, personal resilience, and pro-social behaviors. Measures of the effectiveness of the program, described more fully below, were based on pre- and post-program student attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors between schools that participated in the program and those that did not.

**Table 1. Middle School Visions (MSV) Program Components**

<i>Character Matters to Me</i> – 6 <sup>th</sup> graders write a personal Code of Character, set goals, and evaluate their progress and revise their goals through 8 <sup>th</sup> grade.
<i>Employing Character</i> – 8 <sup>th</sup> graders engage in lessons that discuss careers and the character traits needed for specific jobs.
<i>Media Makers</i> – 7 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> graders use technology to promote MSV activities and projects in their school.
<i>Profiles</i> – 6 <sup>th</sup> graders interview school personnel and create school displays.
<i>Civic Missions</i> – 6 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> graders identify, design, and carry out a service project to address an issue.
<i>Parent Connections</i> – for all programs, students have homework assignments in which they share information about MSV activities with parents.

The MSV initiative used a two-pronged strategy, combining both direct and indirect approaches to facilitating moral development. Direct learning strategies consisted of teacher-led discussions of desirable character traits within the context of students’ current conduct (*Character Matters to Me*) and future selves (*Employing Character*) and school activities centered on the promotion of these traits (*Media Makers*). Indirect learning strategies provided students with opportunities to forge community connections within their school (*Profiles*) and in the broader community (*Civic Missions*). To promote the diffusion of lesson content and experiences across the boundary of school into home and community, as well as to garner additional support for students’ work, students were directed to share information on program activities with their parents (*Parent Connections*).

MSV relied on surveys completed by students before, during, and at the end of the school year to measure program effects. Because character-related outcomes are difficult to measure directly, MSV, in line with other character education initiatives, relied on indirect measures of psychological constructs believed to be related to moral development. Student self-reports consisted of sets of questions that were designed by MSV staff or drawn from existing psychological scales. Positive change in the measured constructs would then indicate program effectiveness. The following constructs were assessed: respect, responsibility, caring, honesty, moral courage, community service, reflective decision-making, resisting peer pressure, cooperation, self-reflection about character, school bonding, school values, inter-group relations, academic expectations, and student involvement.

MSV program components correspond to several of the recognized best practices in character education programming as detailed in Table 2. These practices are derived from recent reviews of successful programs (Berkowitz and Bier 2004; PIRE 2008). Of these best practices, MSV incorporated interactive learning strategies (e.g., students engaged in cooperative learning when designing service-learning projects for the *Civic Missions* initiative), promoted skills training (e.g., students practiced self reflection skills when they made connections between personal character traits and characters in literature), provided adult role models (e.g., students had the opportunity to talk with school staff for the *Profiles* interviews), and worked to ensure program fidelity (e.g., KIE program staff met monthly with teachers to guide program implementation). The MSV initiatives also sought to affect moral development at different levels (Table 2, item #8) – with some involvement by the school, family, and community.

**Table 2. Characteristics of Effective Character Education Programs (based on Berkowitz and Bier 2004; Berkowitz, Sherblom, Bier and Battistich 2006; PIRE 2008)**

Effective character education programs do the following:
1. Incorporate interactive teaching strategies such as peer discussion, role-playing, and cooperative learning.
2. Utilize direct teaching strategies to embed character initiatives in the academic curricula rather than in stand alone “character education” classes.
3. Include training in specific socio-emotional skills, such as anger management and peer mediation.
4. Provide ongoing professional development and training for teachers and other staff involved in character initiatives.
5. Articulate to the participants the nature of initiatives as being grounded in the development of character, morality, and ethical decision-making.
6. Have a modeling or mentoring component to provide adult or peer role models.
7. Include family and/or community partners in the initiatives as partners in implementation or as consumers of the program.
8. Operate on multiple levels of the social-ecological framework – classroom, school, family, and community.

Interviews with MSV teachers and principals underscored some of the more popular program features, with one principal specifically noting that the *Profiles* activity promoted “true connectivity” within the school and that the relationship-building facilitated by *Profiles* smoothed the transition for 6<sup>th</sup> graders as they entered middle school. Teachers and principals also endorsed *Civic Connections*, noting approvingly that the program gave students “a chance to learn about and appreciate others.” When asked to think about the parts of the program that they thought were most successful, teachers and principals more often noted those initiatives that supported relationship-building among students and staff and engendered empathy by students for others in their community.

Although MSV aligned with a number of the best practices associated with successful programs, there were gaps in both program design and in the implementation of the program as a research endeavor. In program design, there was insufficient family and community involvement, with teachers not involved in the construction of lessons, parent involvement limited to children bringing home their MSV-related homework, and a lack of ongoing professional development for teachers. The strong emphasis on the *Character Matters to Me* programming, which served as the basis for all MSV activities, was likely misguided; unlike other components of character education programs that have been connected to the achievement of measurable outcomes (see Berkowitz and Bier 2004), there is no empirical evidence that a program based on student-selected character traits is an effective character-building strategy.

There were also weaknesses in program implementation. Due to budget constraints, MSV data were not collected and/or not processed for all schools and all years. Sample sizes were also too small to permit the detection of statistically significant differences among intervention and control schools. MSV was initially designed with the intention of having random assignment and both valid and reliable measurements for outcomes. During the three-year time span of MSV implementation, however, schools entered and left the program and the timing of outcome measurement and the methods used to measure outcomes changed. In some cases, these changes were responses to feedback from teachers and students and were designed to enhance the effectiveness of the initiative. Yet such efforts by MSV and other multi-year character education programs ironically reduce the chances that programs can be considered as “evidence-based” and used as models upon which other practitioners rely (this point is discussed in more detail below).

Several MSV program components were considered effective by teachers and administrators and can be characterized as successful on the basis of their alignment with other effective evidence-based programs. Yet weaknesses in program design and implementation prevent MSV from being considered successful on the basis of actual demonstrated effectiveness. To adequately and appropriately assess the effectiveness of an MSV program initiative in line with “evidence-based” standards, MSV would have needed 44 schools (22 participating in MSV programming and 22 control schools), with individual outcomes measured for at least 50-100 students per school (PIRE 2008: 25). That MSV was unable to reach the bar of evidence-based programs is the norm, rather than the exception, among character education programs. For example, the What Works Clearinghouse noted in its review of character education studies (2008) that only seven out of 93 published studies on character education programs could be considered “research-based.”

Because most character education programs are not implemented in a format that qualifies them as evidence-based, it is instructive to take a moment to consider the process by which the hundreds of character education initiatives are distilled into a set of “successful” programs that then define “best practices.” Identified “best practices” have broad implications for the future of moral development and programming as they influence the adoption of character education practices by schools and channel research efforts in particular directions.

## Measuring Success in Character Education

Lists of the characteristics of effective character education programs, such as those in Table 2, derive from a screening process that begins with the hundreds of initiatives that are implemented by schools each year. These initiatives are chosen for consideration by a reviewer based on criteria and assumptions that severely limit the range of programs that eventually underlie lists of “best practices.” Therefore, before we define what is considered to be a “success” in evidence-based character education programs, we must examine this process of program selection.

First, to make it into the population of programs considered for review, a description of the program must be available in a format that was accessible to the reviewer and can be cited and thus made accessible to readers. Second, either the program’s stated objectives or stated outcomes must in some way touch upon “character education.” It is widely recognized that a variety of research fields (and their associated school-based program initiatives) overlap in both goals and strategies with character education. These fields include youth development, social and emotional learning, service-learning, and public health programs.<sup>1</sup> All utilize direct and indirect strategies to foster the development of positive behaviors and attitudes. A third criterion of selection into the initial pool is that

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<sup>1</sup> As an example of this overlap, half of the 16 middle-school character education programs reviewed by PIRE (2008) are primarily violence prevention and substance-abuse-prevention programs.

at least some of the outcomes must be quantitatively measurable. This is a criterion because, otherwise, the program is not considered “empirical” and thus cannot be judged as “evidence-based.”

The pool of studies generated by this process, therefore, creates a subset of studies for review that have the following characteristics: quantifiable outcome measures conducive to statistical analysis, implementation through random or quasi-randomized design, and goals or strategies designed to foster positive behaviors and attitudes. The second step in the process of defining “best practices” then differentiates the successful from the unsuccessful. “Success” is defined quite simply at this stage as having achieved statistically significant improvements in at least one of the specified outcomes.

There are unintended consequences that result from this selection process. Foremost, it is unclear if the “best practices” are related to moral development at all. Indeed, identified best practices may be based on studies that were successful in reducing drug use and teenage pregnancy, rather than in influencing children’s ethical sensibilities. Whether these distinctions are important is a matter of significant debate. Some working in the field of youth studies contend that any kind of initiative that improves the lives of youth is desirable and that there is so much overlap in youth programming that the exact moniker is unimportant. Based on this presumption, it has been suggested that character education and all other fields that share similar goals and strategies should be subsumed under the single field of “youth development” (Berkowitz, Sherblom, Bier, and Battistich 2006). One downside to this approach, however, is that youth development is often interpreted using a “deficit perspective” or “prevention frame,” whereby narrow initiatives are designed to attack particular problem behaviors. The unique position of youth moral development and the need for explicit reference to community values that underlie behavioral norms are lost in the push to address deviant social behaviors (Lapsley and Narvaez 2006).

One challenge to demonstrating success among moral development program initiatives lies in identifying exactly what kind of program initiative results in exactly what kind of behavior or attitude. Most evidence-based programs combine and implement a number of initiatives simultaneously. A program designed primarily for raising academic achievement may make use of social behavioral techniques that improve classroom management and at the same time promote the use of cooperative learning. If academic achievement increases, it is unclear which of the strategies led to the outcome. As a result, the effectiveness of select evidence-based programs reflect the influence of the programs as a whole, which both obscures which program component (or combination of program components) was a catalyst in success and neglects the impact of contextual influences on outcomes. Indeed, because the program screening and selection only results in examination of effective programs, it may be the case that “ineffective” programs share many of the same critical components but fail to be effective because of the context in which they are implemented. This context contains both structural and cultural features that underlie environments for moral learning and expression. If we believe that moral action takes place at the intersection of moral judgment and environment (Hart and Carlo 2005; Hart, Atkins and Ford 1998; Hunter 2000; Powers 2004; Thomson and Holland 2002), then ideally research programs should employ single initiatives across multiple school contexts.

In addition to finding corresponding sets of moral development initiatives and moral behaviors and attitudes, researchers and practitioners face the challenge of operationalizing morality. Over the past two decades, researchers in moral development have moved away from outcome measures that purport to measure change in the sophistication of moral reasoning and moral judgment. This has primarily occurred due to findings that moral actions did not necessarily accompany improvements in quantified measurements of moral judgment (see Haidt 2001, Lapsley and Narvaez 2004, and chapters in Killen and Smetna 2006 on the influence of emotion, culture, and context on moral action). Outcome measures are now most often psychological constructs, as noted above in the case of MSV, self-reports or school-wide incident counts for particular behaviors, and self-reported attitudes (e.g., measures of bullying or suspensions in school, individual self-reports of drug use, volunteerism, attitudes

toward community service). Although the relationship between morality and these measurements remains unclear, researchers and practitioners are under pressure by government and funding agencies to quantify results. For example, No Child Left Behind legislation specifies that federal funding for school-based intervention programs be limited to those demonstrating scientifically-measured effectiveness.

Our observations in this section should not be construed as a claim that lists of “best practices” are misleading or unhelpful: these practices have proven valuable in reducing deviant behaviors in schools and increasing academic achievement. We suggest, however, that the current directions taken in character education, which lead to support for particular individual-focused program initiatives, may be leading us astray from more community-based approaches that have greater potential to inculcate a sense of moral purpose into the lives of youth. In the final section of this paper we consider this approach and provide several example initiatives. Before moving to this topic, however, we briefly consider the tactical challenges that MSV faced, challenges that are confronted by all school reform efforts.

## **Tactical Challenges in Implementing Character Education**

The K-12 operating environment is characterized by tight budgets and high expectations to meet testing benchmarks as defined by No Child Left Behind. Structural conditions, including limits on funding and instructional time and conflicting goals of schools and researchers, contribute to the challenges of school-based character education research. Teachers and administrators are pressured to concentrate existing resources on narrow academic objectives and may view character education initiatives as distractions from meeting academic goals (although programs that included character education strategies or goals have been linked to higher academic achievement).

For MSV, teachers who were interviewed noted the challenge of adding programming to an already full day and of finding the time needed to figure out how to integrate MSV learning activities into the existing academic curricula. Many teachers agreed that most MSV activities required too much paperwork and time. One principal noted that asking teachers to implement MSV in a school with a 70% free and reduced lunch population, a constantly changing student body, and five years of poor End-of-Grade test scores was “asking teachers to do too much.” These sentiments reflect a need for additional funding and personnel to carry out character education initiatives, as well as a need to make the connection between implementation of initiatives and desirable outcomes (such as academic achievement) more transparent. The less support that teachers and school leaders give, the less likely that initiatives are implemented as intended, and the less likely they remain once program support staff leave. It appears unlikely that MSV programs would have been implemented without the substantial time support of KIE staff. This finding is certainly not unusual for similar efforts.

Challenges faced by schools – high teacher-student ratios, stringent testing standards, and a weak buy-in among teachers and staff – stymie character education efforts. In addition, even when the motivation to incorporate character and ethical learning exists, we know that teachers are often unprepared to carry out programs and to ensure program fidelity. For example, we know that cooperative learning strategies have positive effects on achievement (Roseth, Johnson and Johnson 2008) and that after-school programs with substantial student leadership are associated with greater civic engagement in adulthood (Kahne and Sporte 2008). Yet teacher training programs often do not incorporate these strategies and do not associate these strategies with academic or behavioral improvements or the promotion of an ethical sensibility among students (Narvaez and Lapsley 2008; Nucci 2008a, 2008b). One-day or week-long training programs are an ineffective means to create ethical learning environments that can be sustained over time (Nucci 2008a). Intensive and on-going training for teachers is needed both to disseminate class management techniques and learning strategies (e.g., cooperative learning) that manifest moral

sensibilities and to underscore the importance of providing a strong moral dimension in classroom management and content.

## **Toward a Community Approach to Character Education: Building Relationships and a Sense of Moral Purpose**

In the final section of this paper, we widen the lens of moral development to consider schools as one of many institutions in the lives of youth and one where institutional systemic change can go farther in developing moral sensibilities than narrower curricular or programmatic add-ons. Here we step back and look at schools from an institutional and community perspective – with schools both as communities in themselves and as institutions linked to the wider community. The focus shifts from the curricular changes that affect individual behaviors to the institutional changes that affect school climate and culture. While MSV sought to affect the broader school climate, it was also essentially an individual-level initiative, where interventions were largely based on curricular lessons incorporated by individual teachers in their classrooms. The conceptual foundation was based upon altering individual student sensibilities largely through exposure to character lessons. In this section we draw on the idea that a school can take particular actions to create a “moral community,” defined as “a group that shares an explicit commitment to a common life characterized by norms embodying high moral ideals” (Powers 2004: 50).

By suggesting that schools should be examined as one of multiple institutions affecting individuals and community life, we bring the environment back as a major element in the study of moral development. We focus on two facets of community/institution-building that appear the most promising in the creation of a moral community for youth: (1) the promotion of dense relationships between students and adults acting as moral agents and (2) the creation of multiple opportunities for students to develop moral purpose. Examples of programs that accomplish these goals are discussed below.

*Establishing a behavioral foundation.* Practitioners agree that it is difficult to implement any kind of school-based initiative, character education or otherwise, without a behavioral foundation in the classroom. Positive Behavior and Interventions Support (PBIS), an initiative housed in the U.S. Office of Special Education, establishes a self-maintaining behavioral system which supports relationship-building and cooperative goal-setting throughout the school community.<sup>2</sup> Using PBIS, teachers and administrators identify a small set of basic rules for conduct (e.g., be safe, be responsible, be respectful). Behavioral expectations are agreed upon by staff, and rules and expectations are articulated to students as well as all staff – from the principal to bus drivers. PBIS provides a community sensibility built around a common ethos, where this ethos is a set of behavioral norms reinforced through the actions of all community members. Mutual respect and supportive relationships have a greater opportunity to take hold in this environment.

*Facilitating connections to caring adults.* Schools can facilitate youth connections to the community via nonprofit or faith-based organizations, where caring adults acting as moral agents lead youth in the practice of behaviors consistent with an ethical sensibility. The Community Partnership Office of the Youngstown, Ohio, school district, for example, forges links between community and school by recruiting adults and community partners to organize extracurricular activities, including service projects.<sup>3</sup> To promote stronger adult-student relationships within the school, Character Education Coaches funded by the district provide on-going training to help teachers, who

<sup>2</sup> PBIS, <http://www.pbis.org>

<sup>3</sup> Youngstown City Schools Character Education Partnership, <http://www.cetac.org/resources/currentabstract.cfm?ca=oh3.cfm>, program contact is Dawd Abdullah, [you\\_dwa@access-K12.org](mailto:you_dwa@access-K12.org)

are primarily white, create opportunities for relationship building with their students, who are primarily black and Latino.

*Yo: Durham*, a faith-based initiative implemented by Durham Congregations in Action in Durham, North Carolina, links at-risk youth to adult mentors in the community and to work opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Although none of the stated goals are explicitly moral or ethical (*Yo: Durham* goals are to increase the rate of high school graduation and enrollment in post-secondary education, to increase workplace preparedness, and to decrease the number of students appearing in the criminal justice system), the *strategies* implemented to achieve these goals fit a community model where relationship-building and provision of opportunities to enact moral commitments are central. Youth are mentored by caring adults who model moral and pro-social behavior and are then given the opportunities to enact these behaviors in job internships. The program draws strength from a coalition of faith-based organizations. Similar mentoring initiatives could rely on other community strengths and interests, including the environment, neighborhood improvement, or the arts. Relationships built around these interests can foster a sense of collective responsibility, creating a sense of moral purpose through the lived experience of community.

*Professional learning communities for teachers.* In a prior section we noted the importance of ongoing professional development and support for teachers in their roles as moral agents (see also Weissbourd 2003; Narvaez and Lapsley 2008). The Orange County Department of Education, for instance, operates an Institute for Character Education to train teachers and administrators in strategies to “infuse character development into every aspect of the school culture and curriculum” with the goal that the school itself becomes “a microcosm of a civil, caring and just society.”<sup>5</sup> Activities of the Institute are funded by school districts, which provide \$2000 stipends for teachers who undergo the year-long training. Training is also available for individual parents and for adults who lead after-school programs. The amount of training and post-training support creates a dense and ongoing network of individuals committed to creating ethical school cultures. The Developmental Studies Center and other nonprofit organizations are a helpful source of information for schools seeking to establish professional learning communities that revolve around the goals of character education.<sup>6</sup>

*Building relationships across the school-home divide.* Achieving meaningful and productive communication across the school-home divide is a basic step in building relationships, trust, and a sense of community that sets the stage for moral development. Yet the “essential conversations” between parents and teachers remain strained and infrequent (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003). Numerous structural and cultural conditions impede relationship-building, including lack of transportation for parents or their inability to leave work to meet with teachers or volunteer during school hours; teacher reluctance to use precious class time meeting with parents; and tension and misunderstandings that arise from differences in beliefs about what “good” parents or “good” teachers should be doing. Because of the diversity of school populations, forging parent-teacher communication in differing community contexts will likely depend heavily on the individual leadership of school principals who recognize the need to make frequent and quality contact with parents (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, and Closson 2005).

Home visiting programs are an ambitious strategy to create deeper and more equal-status connections and to open the lines of communication between teachers and parents. The Sacramento Parent Teacher Home Visit Project is one of the oldest and most successful of these programs.<sup>7</sup> In operation since 1998, the nonprofit which runs the program has representation from the Sacramento teachers union, the local school district, and a faith-based community organization. Harvard University recently adopted the Sacramento model as a major part of its *Three to Third*

<sup>4</sup> Yo: Durham, <http://www.dcia.org/yody/>

<sup>5</sup> Orange County Institute of Character Education, <http://charactered.ocde.us/Home.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Developmental Studies Center, <http://www.devstu.org>

<sup>7</sup> Sacramento Parent Teacher Home Visit Project, <http://www.pthvp.org>

initiative to improve early education.<sup>8</sup> *Three to Third* – a collaboration between Harvard, the mayor’s office, and Boston Public Schools – was designed as a means for the university to engage with and contribute to the surrounding community. As in the Sacramento model, teachers are compensated for home visits, and the Harvard program gives stipends to lead teachers who act as liaisons between schools and program staff.

*Orienting themes and community connections.* Schools that focus daily activities on a central theme supply a powerful sense of moral purpose for staff and students. Beyond an individual-based academic focus (e.g. health careers, technology, the arts), schools can orient learning and cooperative goals around more community-based themes. Examples include “green schools,” where the organizing principle of the school is centered around environmental concerns (e.g., Common Ground High School, New Haven, Connecticut)<sup>9</sup> or schools where the responsibilities of citizenship are used as an organizing principle (e.g., Raleigh Charter High School, Raleigh, North Carolina).<sup>10</sup> Themed schools promote deeper connections among students and between students and staff based on common goals. School themes can be tailored to draw on the culture and asset-base of the wider community. Students and teachers can partner with neighborhood non-profits to provide additional opportunities for students to connect with caring adults and practice moral commitments in a variety of settings.

*Business and university connections.* Community organizations provide one opportunity for schools to connect youth to mentors and to opportunities to be civically engaged. The emergence of social responsibility and community-related divisions in business and higher education offers additional opportunities for partnering and funding. Corporate foundations support community endeavors, including character education grants to schools. In 2007, Sprint Corporation’s Sprint Foundation awarded \$600,000 to schools and school districts to support character education initiatives.<sup>11</sup> These included a Positive Behavior Support program, training for a mentoring program between high school and elementary school children, and the purchase of a web-based volunteer application to allow students to go online to find volunteer opportunities and post comments and reflections about their community service. Local businesses can also be tapped for mentors and work opportunities, as noted above in the case of *Yo: Durham*.

Over the past decade a number of universities have reasserted their role in civil society through greater engagement in surrounding communities (Alperovitz and Howard 2005; Ostrander 2004). Volunteer service programs linking students and faculty with schools and other community institutions manifest in various forms. At the University of Maryland College Park, dorms are designated as learning communities where students and faculty partner with community organizations to design and implement grassroots initiatives to tackle community-identified problems.<sup>12</sup> At the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, community engagement is structured around courses that include academically-based community service.<sup>13</sup> For example, undergraduate courses offered through the Moelis Access Science program engage faculty, students, and K-12 teachers to collaborate on the development of hands-on activities for high school science and math students.<sup>14</sup> These activities are then taken into the schools by University of Pennsylvania students. As part of the Duke University DukeEngage initiative, community organizations partnered with university arts staff and students to create public art as a

<sup>8</sup> Three to Third, program contact: Julie Wood, woodju@gse.harvard.edu

<sup>9</sup> Common Ground High School, [http://www.nhep.com/highschool\\_overview.php](http://www.nhep.com/highschool_overview.php).

<sup>10</sup> Raleigh Charter High School, <http://www.raleighcharterhs.org/aboutus/index.asp>.

<sup>11</sup> Sprint Foundation. “Sprint Foundation Helps Students and Teachers with Character-Education Grants to Schools and School Districts Nationwide.” Downloaded August 15, 2008: <http://www.csrwire.com/News/12710.html>.

<sup>12</sup> University of Maryland at College Park: <http://www.csl.umd.edu/>

<sup>13</sup> University of Pennsylvania Netter Center for Community Partnerships: <http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/abscourses/academically-based-community-service.html>

<sup>14</sup> Moelis Access Science, <http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/access-science/home.html>

cooperative goal.<sup>15</sup> Nonprofit organizations and foundations document and disseminate information on various university-community partnerships and provide funding to facilitate partnership initiatives.<sup>16</sup>

## Future Directions

Between 1993 and 2004, 23 states passed laws related to moral and civic education in public schools (Glanzar and Milson 2006). Most of these focused on lists of individual character virtues, with only three states addressing the importance of integrating moral and civic education into the school culture and thus into everyday practice. The examples given above point to an alternative path, where lived experiences in communities – within the school and between the school and other community institutions – support dense relationships and opportunities to enact moral commitments.

Creating ethical school cultures presents challenges as formidable as those faced by more individualistic curricular-based programs. Design, implementation, and evaluation of community-based approaches are complex and require stronger and ongoing support from more numerous partners, including parents, teachers, administrators, and those in the community. As always, significant obstacles remain in measuring program success, linking particular outcomes to particular initiatives, and carrying out research initiatives in school settings. The potential for generating a self-perpetuating ethical system, however, appears more likely with a “moral community” approach than with more individualistic alternatives.

The objectives of a community/institutional approach to moral development are not far afield from the way researchers and practitioners would describe the goals of character education: to guide youth in developing a moral sensibility and in acting upon this sensibility. MSV shared these goals and some of the strategies of community building advocated in the examples above. Future efforts should focus on building relationships and a community-grounded sense of moral purpose, where daily living in communities provides opportunities for moral engagement. The benefits of working to create a moral community should be made explicit to community members (i.e., teachers, students, principals). The sense of collective responsibility resulting from these efforts will contribute to higher academic achievement, increased civic engagement, and an ethical sensibility that will travel with students beyond the bounds of the school.

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<sup>15</sup> DukeEngage, *Face Up: Telling Stories of Community Life*, is a documentary/public art project that grows out of local conversations about neighborhood goals in Southwest Central Durham, North Carolina. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqW3EAXaHUc>

<sup>16</sup> See The Templeton Foundation, <http://www.templeton.org>; <http://www.collegeandcharacter.org>

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