



The Virtues Project's Gifts of Character Initiative

Introduction and Context

The 5 Strategies of **The Virtues Project's Gifts of Character Initiative** is a restorative protocol that creates a climate of empowerment where students, staff, families and the community thrive. Classroom communities are strengthened providing the space for all learners to be seen, heard and valued, discipline referrals and suspensions are decreased allowing students to spend more time engaged in learning, educators experience more joy, meaning and purpose leading to higher job satisfaction, less compassion fatigue and decreased teacher attrition, both students and staff strengthen their social emotional character development which helps them to maximize their potential in and outside of the classroom. It is personal, professional and organizational development all wrapped into one addressing the needs of the Whole Child and Whole Adult.

The Virtues Project is in over 120 countries and was honored by The United Nations as a model global program for all cultures. It is endorsed by The Dalai Lama and Oprah said of *The Family Virtues Guide*, "Parents are always saying children don't come with a guide book. This is one. This helps you get them on the right track for leading a good life." It is being used in families, schools, businesses, communities and prisons around the world. The entire island of Fiji has embraced it to create a more peaceful, joyful and unified culture. The Virtues Project's Gifts of Character Initiative is a simple, yet powerful way to end the school to prison pipeline and to empower individuals know their inherent value.

Teachers spend substantial amounts of classroom time that could be used for instruction on discipline and classroom management. The Virtues Project's Gifts of Character Initiative in Schools (GCS) is trauma and culturally responsive and is designed to train teachers to identify and reinforce positive student behaviors that emphasize positive character traits and contribute to an engaged and constructive classroom and school environment. An improved classroom climate leads to greater learning, reduced discipline problems, improved student achievement and lower teacher turnover.

GCS is also designed to strengthen individual positive character traits among young people to better prepare them for productive adulthoods in which they rely on their character strengths to support their families and communities.

What is unique about GCS is that it also empowers all of the adults in the school community to identify and strengthen their own character qualities and communication skills. Unlike many other restorative practices approaches, GCS has Social Emotional Character Development (SECD) embedded within the 5 strategies. Additionally, it was created by therapists and it is strength based and trauma responsive. It is not an add on curriculum, it is designed to be seamlessly integrated through authentic interactions in and among students and staff, as well as into daily routines, rituals and lessons because it relies on the combined and systematic use of five strategies. It can be used to enhance other initiatives, such as PBIS, Conscious Discipline, Responsive Classroom and IIRP's continuum of Restorative Practices.

The Virtues Project's Gifts of Character Initiative in Schools is widely used around the world. Testimonials have demonstrated how the five simple strategies of The Virtues Project bring out the best in both students and educators. Attendance increases because students feel safe, valued and connected. Student achievement increases because students embrace 21st Century Skills, have higher self-esteem and are more confident in learning. Discipline referrals decrease because students feel heard and do not need to act out for attention. Bullies are often transformed into leaders using power along with responsibility. The overall climate of the school is more peaceful and joyful, resulting in less stress for everyone and allowing staff and students to thrive.

Anecdotal evidence from GCS schools worldwide suggests that GCS reduces behavior problems and increases positive behaviors. One elementary school in New Zealand reported a drop in lunch time detentions to zero by the end of the first year implementing GCS; the principal of an Australian elementary school implementing GCS noted that bullying, violence and disrespect for authority have disappeared, while student and parent engagement has improved by the end of the first year of implementation. Three schools in Baltimore County Maryland have been honored as National Schools of Character, by Character.org, due to the transformations at their schools.

Recent studies of restorative practices, character education, school climate and teacher attrition indicate a pressing need for a holistic, restorative approach that is trauma and culturally responsive, with SECD embedded within the approach to address the needs of the Whole Child. Additionally, due to time and budget constraints, it needs to be intentional without being an add-on.

Despite a substantial increase in the percentage of schools that employ restorative practices, SEL and character education, most schools have not chosen to or been able to provide this important focus and many students have not developed character strengths or the 21st Century skills necessary for academic success or college and workplace readiness (L. Lippman, Atienza, Rivers, & Keith, 2008). In a national sample of 148,189 students in grades six through twelve, only 29% to 45% of surveyed students reported that they had social competencies such as empathy, decision making, and conflict resolution skills. Only 29% indicated that their school provided a caring, encouraging environment (Benson, 2006). Data from the 2009 Indicators of School Crime and Safety Survey indicate that peer conflict is not uncommon and contributes to poor school climate. Nearly one third of students ages 12-18 reported being bullied during the 2008-09 school year (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009). The cumulative effects of student misbehavior and poor student relationships have been found to have considerable indirect effect on increasing teacher attrition and burnout through reducing the amount of class time teachers spend on instruction and lowering teachers' perceived efficacy in classroom management (Chang, 2009; Otero Lopez, et al., 2008; Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010).

In addition, the vast majority of rigorously evaluated character education and SEL approaches include add-on lessons or other strategies that require alterations to existing curricula. Nearly all of the 33 character education programs examined in Berkowitz and Bier's meta-analysis of rigorously evaluated character education programs included some type of add-on lessons to existing practices. Much of the add-on curricula or other modifications to existing curricula involved direct teaching strategies, including lectures, guest speakers or in-class demonstrations of character strengths (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Person, et al., 2009). Some of these strategies supplement direct lecturing with interactive teaching strategies such as role-playing activities or meetings.

In order to convey the lessons of character education, many character education approaches cast teachers (or less often community figures) as role models. This may take several forms, including a teacher explicitly explaining how they employ certain character strengths or avoid risk behavior in their daily lives, or simply training providing professional development that emphasizes or discourages specific behavior. This also may take the form of studying an inspirational figure from the past or present who embodies the type of behavior or character strengths that the program emphasizes (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Payton, et al., 2008; Person, et al., 2009). While these strategies—particularly interactive teaching strategies and role modeling—can be effective ways to modify and shape student behaviors, and in fact, are

integral to GCS's approach, GCS is distinctly different from typical Social Emotional Character Development and Restorative Practices initiatives.

How GCS Differs from Existing Restorative Practices and Social Emotional Character Development Initiatives

GCS differs from other restorative practices and social emotional character development initiatives in its content, structure and implementation. First, GCS fosters a wide array of character strengths that Linda Kavelin-Popov, John Kavelin and Dr. Dan Popov, the founders of The Virtues Project, identified as common across cultures. Thus, this program is culturally relevant across diverse student bodies, and more comprehensive than other programs, such as *Second Step* or *Character Counts*, which tend to focus on a small number of character-based outcomes, such as problem solving or respect.

Second, GCS takes minimal time away from classroom instruction. Unlike other initiatives which require the use of scripted lessons, GCS trains educators in evidence-informed strategies for encouraging positive character development, relationship building and problem solving without requiring that they alter their lesson plans. It provides ongoing support for educators in developing skills in using the strategies. In addition, it does not require an abundance of materials.

Third, GCS involves all school staff. In contrast to other school-wide approaches which primarily involve teachers in the delivery of the intervention, this intervention trains all school staff to employ the strategies of GCS – meaning that it may be implemented in school settings outside of the classroom. It also encourages better relationships among staff. Teachers' behaviors with other school staff are intended to be positive examples for students, thus reinforcing the work that teachers do directly with students.

Fourth, GCS strategies can be used in many different settings and with different populations, both inside and outside of the classroom. This expands the opportunities that educators have to integrate the strategies into their teaching and non-teaching time with students, whereas other programs focus on specific behaviors and situations. It also eliminates the problem of seeming irrelevant to students faced by other programs. In addition, the professional development that is offered to the entire adult school community empowers educators to strengthen their own virtues so that they are living examples of good character as opposed to simply teaching students about character strengths. As a restorative protocol, when students are asked to reflect on their reason for doing what they have done, which may have resulted in creating harm, they are guided to identify the teachable moment and virtue that is

needed to strengthen so that they do not create the same harm in the future. Additionally, they are given the opportunity to make an amends and be fully brought back into community quickly, maximizing time for learning.

Instead of relying on specific lessons, CGS trains educators in a set of positive interactive strategies that can be used frequently in daily interaction with students, thus fostering supportive relationships with teachers and caring adults, which has been found to reduce risk for academic failure and problem behaviors (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). Consistent with the Social Development Model (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996), when children receive positive messages from teachers and school personnel, they are likely to form a greater attachment to them and become more engaged and committed to school. A supportive school environment (one that is safe and orderly, has positive student-teacher relationships, and supports parent involvement) has been found to promote academic resilience in low SES students (Borman & Rachuba, 2001). GCS provides teachers with a rich vocabulary of positive character traits, such as integrity, perseverance, and kindness. By defining virtues and creating common understandings in the school, teachers, school staff and, ultimately students, create a common frame of reference through which to emphasize a range of positive behaviors. This enables school staff to reinforce positive behaviors through repetition; it also decreases attention to negative behaviors.

The five strategies of GCS help educators manage their classrooms more effectively by preventing negative behaviors (through the use of modeling, using positive reinforcement, acknowledging character strengths, developing positive relationships with their students and recognizing teachable moments instead of shaming and blaming) and using restorative, culturally and trauma responsive strategies that can be applied quickly in ways that allow teachers to avoid time-consuming power struggles with students.

Overview of The Gifts of Character in Schools Initiative

There are a variety of ways that educators can learn the 5 strategies of The Virtues Project. They include participating in face to face and online workshops, book studies of The Virtues Project Educators Guide and The Heart of Education, listening to podcasts and recordings by the founders of the project, and watching the 13 part TV series about the project.

Though all of the above are options, the most comprehensive way is through The Virtues Project's Gifts of Character approach which is outlined below:

- an all-staff 2 day introductory training
- a 3 day facilitator training for a heterogeneous group of stakeholders to empower job embedded coaching and sustainability

- student, family and community workshops
- face to face virtues connections and webinars to review and deepen in the learning and application
- ongoing mentoring through a global online forum
- coaching and strategic planning

An alternative approach is to have cohorts of heterogeneous teams participate in the 2 day Introduction to The Virtues Project Workshop and spend an additional day planning for implementation at their local school. These teams would help lead the work at their schools and would do job embedded training and coaching. Cohorts would connect throughout the year to deepen in their understanding, share ideas and resources, as well as problem solve and celebrate successes. They could also participate in the 3 day Facilitator Training Workshop.

The 5 Strategies of The Virtues Project

Strategy 1: Speaking the Language of Virtues. This strategy uses the language of virtues to acknowledge, guide and correct student behavior and improve educators' communication with students, one another and families. It emphasizes the necessity of speaking with others in a way that is consistent with the notion that all individuals are worthy of respect. Unlike a compliment or praise, which is a form of extrinsic motivation that research shows is ineffective over the long haul (Pink, 2009), the language of virtue identifies the character quality and evidence where it is demonstrated and/or needed. In order to speak the language of virtues, the speaker explicitly links the behavior that has occurred and the virtue to which the behavior relates, whether the statement serves to acknowledge or thank, to guide, or to correct. For example, if a speaker wants to acknowledge a student for their determination, instead of saying, "good job" which often leaves the student wondering what exactly was good, it is more empowering to say, "I see your determination in the way you worked through that hard problem without giving up." It sends a message to the student that they have determination in them. Next time a student is not working up to their potential, instead of shaming a student and calling them, "lazy" a teacher can ask, "What will help you use your determination to complete this with excellence?" This question is an example of a virtues guidance statement. Over time, the more a virtue is authentically acknowledged, the stronger it is developed and internalized in students, thus it becomes a transferable skill.

Strategy 2: Recognizing Teachable Moments. This strategy helps students and educators build resiliency and develop authentic self-awareness because it reinforces positive behavior and corrects negative behavior throughout the

school day rather than as an add-on to the curriculum or specific class. When a teachable moment has been identified, the speaker uses the first strategy of speaking the language of virtues in order to replace shaming a student for doing something wrong with naming a virtue that needs to be called upon to clear up mistakes. This strategy also supports educators from escalating students when challenges behaviors arise.

The Act with Tact Positivity Sandwich is a very useful tool in giving feedback to children and adults, in addressing goals or behavior. It is a tool used by administrators to give performance feedback to staff, parents and educators in giving feedback to children.

1. First, tell the individual about qualities and behaviors in them that you APPRECIATE, naming their Strength Virtues.

“We appreciate your reliability coming to meetings on time. You are creative in developing meaningful lesson ideas and excellent at implementing them with your students.”

2. Then, tell the person what you feel needs to CHANGE or be CORRECTED, naming their Growth Virtues.

“It would be helpful for you to work on your sense of unity with other team members, to openly share your ideas and plan with your colleagues.”

3. Finally, save some of the best for last by THANKING them for what you most appreciate. End on the positive!

“Thank you for the passion and enthusiasm you bring to school each day!”

Strategy 3: Setting Clear Boundaries Based on Restorative Justice. Respect for persons is the cornerstone of this strategy. Instances of disrespect become a criterion for recognizing a teachable moment. This strategy uses four steps of restorative justice – 1) students take responsibility for what they do, in order to 2) make restitution, which results in 3) reconciliation, which 4) restores the relationship and restores the offender to the community. Consequences are educative, not punitive. This strategy has four steps: First, the educator learns what happened in a nonjudgmental fashion, including asking “how” and “what”, rather than “why” questions. Next, s/he asks both parties what virtue was missing that might have created the conflict and then asks what the outcome would have looked like had the virtue been employed. Finally, the educator asks how the individuals can make amends. By giving the opportunity to make amends, it restores justice not just to the person who is harmed, but also to the person who created the harm because it allows them to learn from their choice and not walk around carrying the burden of shame.

With practice, students begin resolving more conflicts on their own using these four steps. This strategy is also powerful to use with adults.

Strategy 4: Honoring the Spirit. This strategy is at the heart of being trauma and culturally responsive. It helps to inspire group unity and respects individuals through modeling and reinforcing respect, and trust. This strategy makes explicit the recognition of the inherent worth of every individual who then contributes their unique gifts to benefit the whole. Activities that honor the spirit includes circles where students are encouraged to share personal stories and celebrate special life events, celebrations (including celebrating diverse cultural traditions), traditions, the arts, nature, service learning, servant leadership and time for general reflection.

Strategy 5: Companioning. This counseling technique relies on active listening to help others find clarity and develop their own solutions. It is extremely powerful for adults and students alike to be heard and empowered to solve their own problems without anyone giving them advice. Instead of sending students down to the counselor's office, all staff (and even students) are skilled at this strategy. The listener elicits conversation when appropriate by asking, "What's happening?" and then offers receptive silence while the speaker relays events. The listener then asks questions such as, "What was the hardest part?" which help the speaker articulate his/her difficulty with the event and identify the cause of distress. The listener asks the speaker to reflect on virtues that may help the speaker deal with the problem (i.e., "What would give you the courage...?"). Finally, the listener asks the speaker to reflect on the conversation to identify whether closure has been achieved, or whether they are able see with more clarity as a result of the conversation. As applicable, the speaker acknowledges the virtues that have been demonstrated by the speaker by speaking the language of virtues (e.g., "I hear your honesty in reflecting on the situation").

The Virtues Project's Gifts of Character approach is an easy-to-use, empowering, and affordable way to address issues that are relevant to schools today – challenging behavior problems due to trauma, high levels of staff burnout/compassion fatigue and staff turnover, and poor academic performance. It reaches multiple populations (principals, teachers, practitioners, school counselors, students and families) with a minimal investment of resources. It may be implemented as part of the normal school schedule. Teachers engage in simple techniques such as reading a virtues card from a deck of "character strengths" at the beginning of each day, modeling the strength, and acknowledging this strength in their students during the course of the day. Staff and students identify their strength virtues and how they are helpful as well as virtues they are committed to growing stronger and how that will be helpful in their lives. The GCS initiative equips educators with

strategies to assist them in managing classroom disruptions and addressing peer conflicts rather than relying on the school principal or school counselor to intervene.

Finally, the cost of this intervention is lower than other restorative practices and SECD initiatives. The main investment schools must make is a commitment to participate in an all-staff workshop (a total of 16 hours) as a professional development opportunity supported by the use of professional development time. Two to three people would be trained to serve as facilitators and would play a key role in the longevity of the project. Many of the materials for the project are free online such as Reflection Cards, Educator's Cards, Kinder Kids, Safer Schools and Raising Kind Kids booklets, downloadable podcasts, or materials cost a nominal fee such as The Virtues Project Educator's Guide and can be used by an unlimited number of people throughout the school. The Heart of Education audio book can be accessed free online <https://darafeldman.bandcamp.com/releases> Virtues cards iPhone and Android apps can be purchased for individual, school and system-wide use as well <http://www.virtuescards.org/>.

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FREE RESOURCES

For free downloads of Kinder Kids, Safer Schools go to <http://www.darafeldman.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/EDUDF.pdf>

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To do an educator's virtues pick visit <http://www.virtuesproject.com/education.html>