

Overview of Character Education in the Austin Independent School District

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A core belief in AISD is that that effort creates ability. Sustained effort in an instructional environment that is rich in rigor, relevance and positive relationships results in achievement at high levels. However, students who are absent from the core instruction due to truancy and misbehaviors resulting in serious discipline or inappropriate referrals to special education cannot sustain the effort required for achievement at high levels. Minimizing these distracters to student effort requires campus wide involvement in actively teaching, reinforcing and modeling character skills in a positive learning environment.

The Board of Trustees RESULTS Policy #6: Personal Development requires the active teaching of the district Touchstone character skills: Caring, Courage, Fairness, Honesty, Integrity, Perseverance, Respect, Responsibility, Self-Discipline, Trustworthiness. These character skills make up the district character education Touchstone. The performance measures in this RESULTS Policy include the expectation that all campuses implement comprehensive character education and decrease the incidents of disruptive behaviors requiring serious discipline.

Most Frequent Student Discipline Offenses in 2003-04

High School

Offense	Number of Students Disciplined	Per Cent of All Students Enrolled
Failure to Follow Instructions	1,457	7.9%
Disruption of Educational Process	1,103	5.98%
Class Cutting	755	4.09%
Inappropriate Language or Gestures to Adult	728	3.94%
Fighting/Mutual Combat	630	3.41%

Middle School

Offense	Number of Students Disciplined	Per Cent of All Students Enrolled
Failure to Follow Instructions	2,203	14.09%
Disruption of Educational Process	1,763	11.28%
Physical Aggression Towards Students	1,288	8.24%
Fighting/Mutual Combat	1,190	7.61%
Inappropriate Language or Gestures to Adult	966	6.18%

Elementary School

Offense	Number of Students Disciplined	Per Cent of All Students Enrolled
Physical Aggression Against Students	516	1.21%
Fighting/Mutual Combat	363	0.85%
Disruption of Educational Process	244	0.74%
Inappropriate Language or Gestures to Adult	199	0.47%
Failure to Follow Instructions	189	0.38%

With the formation of the district’s Community Safety Task Force in the spring of 2003, campus safety became a major focus during the 2003-04 school year. This Task Force studied and analyzed district data, policies, and systems related to campus safety. Included in this analysis were several meetings and focus groups with students, parents, teachers, principals and community members. The Task Force presented the following general recommendations for improving campus safety:

1. Review and Revise District Policies to Align with Positive Behavior Support Principles
2. Improve Control, Surveillance and Supervision of Facilities Through Passage of Safety and Security Related Bond Proposals
3. Implement Positive Behavior Support Systems to Improve Campus Learning Environments
4. Provide a Continuum of Care for Students and Families

The Superintendent also identified three “Outstanding Issues” for immediate attention:

- Dress Code of Students and Staff
- Closed High School Campuses
- Character Education

District regulations requiring dress codes for students and staff and formalizing procedures for allowing only high school seniors to leave campus during lunch were made effective with the start of the 2004-05 school year. The Department of Student Support Services was reorganized in 2003-04 to provide more intensive support for the implementation of positive behavior support systems and character education. A team of Student Support Services staff, in collaboration with the Region XIII Educational Service Center, is providing training and support for implementation of positive behavior support systems at sixteen campuses this school year. Other campuses will be added to this cohort next year. This team has also developed a plan for district wide implementation of character education beginning with the 2005-06 school year.

PLAN

Goal

Sustain student effort in the core curriculum through comprehensive character education provided in positive learning environments.

Performance Goals

1. Increase average daily attendance to equal or exceed the state average (State Average = 95%) by 2005-06.

	2003-04 ADA	2004-05 Goal	2005-06 Goal
High School	89.8%	92.5%	95.0%
Middle School	94.2%	95.0%	97.0%
Elementary School	96.2%	97.0%	98.0%

2. Reduce the number of students suspended or removed for disruptive behaviors by 10% annually over the next two years.

National Definition of Character Education

“Character education holds, as a starting philosophical principle, that there are widely shared, pivotally important core theoretical values that form the basis of good character. A school committed to character education explicitly names and publicly stands for these values; promulgates them to all members of the school community; defines them in terms of behaviors that can be observed in the life of the school; models these values; studies and discusses them; upholds them by making all school members accountable to standards of conduct consistent with the core values. Good character consists of understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values”.

Principles of Character Education

The district character education Touchstone (set of character skills to be taught) supports positive relationships among student, teachers and staff through the implementation of eleven nationally recognized Principles of Character Education.

1. *Promote core ethical values as the basis of good character.*
2. *Define “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.*
3. *Use comprehensive, intentional, proactive and effective approaches to character development.*
4. *Create a caring school community.*
5. *Provide students with opportunities for moral action.*
6. *Include a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.*
7. *Strive to foster students’ self-motivation.*
8. *Engage the school staff as a learning and moral community that shares responsibility for character education and attempts to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of the students.*
9. *Foster shared moral leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative.*
10. *Engage families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.*
11. *Evaluate the character of the school, the school staff’s functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students manifest good character.*

These concepts have been incorporated into rubrics for the implementation of character education and positive behavior support systems on campuses.¹

¹ Source: The National Character Education Definition and Principles of Character Education are from “*Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education*” by Thomas Likona, Eric Schaps, and Catherine Lewis in the Education Partnership at www.character.org.

Key Features of the District Plan

- Five Touchstone character skills will be taught, reinforced and modeled district wide each year according to the following schedule:

Months	2007-08	2008-09
August/September	Respect	Responsibility
October/November	Courage	Self-Discipline
December/January	Caring	Fairness
February/March	Honesty	Integrity
April/May	Perseverance	Trustworthiness

- Support will be provided for implementation of three levels of character education activities, such as:
 - *District Wide & Community Level Activities:*
 - Superintendent Monthly Announcements
 - Speakers Bureau
 - Celebrity Character of the Month
 - Public Service Announcements & Banners
 - *School Wide Activities*
 - Development of Behavioral Descriptions of Character Traits
 - Campus Slogans & Mottos
 - Morning Announcements
 - *Student Classroom & Group Activities*
 - Student Essays & Journals
 - Readings & Discussions
 - Service Learning Activities
- Training for Campus Administrators Responsible for Implementation of Character Education
 - Each campus will send at least one administrator to a three hour training on the implementation of character education on their campus.
 - A campus "Character Education Toolkit" will be provided at this training.

Implementation Milestones and Timeline

- ✓ October 25, 2004 -----Cabinet Review and Approval of the Draft Plan
- ✓ November – December-----Principals & Community Focus Group Review and Comment
- ✓ February 2, 2005-----Presentation of Final Plan at General Administrators' Meeting
- ✓ February – March-----Training for Campus Staff
- ✓ August-----Begin Implementation
- ✓ November Principals & Community Focus Group Feedback