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A Kinder, Gentler Student Body

By Linda Jacobson

Atlanta

Monica Viega describes what went on in her classroom earlier in the school year as "Jerry Springer fights." Displays of anger and incivility among the 5th graders sometimes grew so intense that furniture would get tossed across the room.

But the scene in Ms. Viega's classroom no longer resembles a raucous daytime talk show. Every morning, her Blalock Elementary School students sit in a circle and discuss how they treat one another. They talk about what they see on the television news and about keeping drugs and violence out of their neighborhoods.

"This amazes me," Ms. Viega, a first-year teacher, said before the end of school this spring. "These are tough kids. I used to have to pull them apart."

She and other staff members credit the school's three-year involvement in a character education project with making Blalock a less hostile place. The 540-student school, part of the Atlanta school system, serves the Bankhead Courts housing project on this city's northwest side. It is one of 28 pilot sites in the state to receive

grants from the Georgia Humanities Council to develop a character education program. Blalock's program has received funding since 1996.

Training Center for Teachers

But the humanities council quickly decided that giving schools money wasn't enough: Teachers and parents also needed information and guidance on how to teach and demonstrate good character traits, such as compassion, honesty, and respect for others. So the council, together with the Georgia Department of Education and with some financial support from the Atlanta-based Georgia Power Foundation, has decided to start a center that will serve as a training headquarters for teachers and a clearinghouse for curricular materials.

Building Character

Georgia's new state law, the Improved Student Learning and Discipline Act of 1999, requires that character education programs include the following traits:

| | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| courage | self-control | school pride |
| patriotism | courtesy | respect for the creator |
| citizenship | compassion | cheerfulness |
| honesty | tolerance | patience |
| fairness | diligence | creativity |
| respect for others | generosity | sportsmanship |
| kindness | punctuality | loyalty |
| cooperation | cleanliness | perseverance |
| self-respect | respect for the environment | virtue |

Action in the state legislature this year has created an even greater sense of urgency to get the Character Education Center up and running.

In April, Gov. Roy Barnes, a first-term Democrat, signed into law a new measure that requires all districts to "implement a comprehensive character education program for all grade levels" by the 2000-01 school year. State school board policy had already had such a requirement.

"This accelerates everything," Paul Weimer, the center's director, said of the new law. Though the Atlanta center won't open until January, Mr. Weimer hopes to put its resources to work as soon as possible by disseminating information at some of the staff-development courses and seminars that teachers and administrators already participate in during the summer months.

Teachers Lack Training

Legislation, however, isn't the only reason why interest in character education is growing, both in Georgia and other states.

Tragedies such as the killings at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colo., in April and the shootings at Heritage High School near Conyers, Ga., in May have prompted some to view character education as a way to prevent violence.

But experts warn that focusing on values is only one way to make a school safer.

"Character education is not going to make evil go away," Mr. Weimer said, but it is a step that can help.

Mr. Weimer and other experts say the best way to train teachers in character education is to reach them before they ever get to the classroom.

"Teachers have never been trained to make this a part of what they do," said Esther F. Schaeffer, the executive director of the Character Education Partnership, a Washington-based coalition.

In fact, on the same day the killings at Columbine High School occurred, Ms. Schaeffer's group released the results of a survey showing that character education is not emphasized within most schools of education.

More than 90 percent of the deans and department chairs in teacher education programs who responded to the survey agreed that core values should be taught in school. But only 24.4 percent said character education was a high priority within their programs.

While Georgia's law might be worded a bit more strongly than most, character education is becoming a hot legislative issue, Ms. Schaeffer said.

Just this month, new character education laws took effect in Florida and Mississippi. And a character education requirement for elementary school students was passed this year in Virginia.

Ms. Schaeffer added that activities relating to character education--such as statewide training conferences--are going on in every state.

The federal government has also been supporting the development of pilot character education programs for the past four years through a competitive-grant program run by the U.S. Department of Education. The latest round of awards, which went to nine states--including Georgia--and totaled \$2.3 million, were announced in May.

Not Starting From Scratch

Overlooking the glistening gold dome of Georgia's state Capitol and other downtown Atlanta landmarks, the one-room Character Education Center, which is housed at the Georgia Humanities Council, is still at the moving-in stage.

On a recent day, boxes of books and other materials waiting to be shelved littered the floor. An intern was reporting for his first day of work. And telephone lines were still being installed.

While many teachers and administrators may feel overwhelmed by the demands of the new law, Mr. Weimer said most are not starting from scratch--whether they know it or not. Elements of character education, as well as some money for training and materials, already exist in such school-based programs as drug education and pregnancy prevention.

But the real message that experts in this field stress is that the curriculum itself is full of opportunities to discuss character traits.

Take the year 1776 for example. "You can get kids to answer the multiple choice questions," Mr. Weimer said. "But if a child can't write a few more lines about why we remember that date, all they've learned is a number."

Still, weaving desirable character traits into the curriculum is only one piece of a three-step process that schools should go through when they design a character education program, Mr. Weimer said.

In addition, he said, members of the community should be involved in setting some priorities for the program, and the climate of the school and the behavior of the faculty members should reflect good character traits.

'The Perfect Time'

Educators involved in such activities as school sports, service learning, and school-to-work transition programs are often the first to see a natural connection between character education and what schools already are doing, experts say. Others believe that teaching children lessons about such virtues as citizenship, patriotism, and tolerance is the role that schools and teachers have always played.

Ernestine Curry, a veteran 1st grade teacher at Blalock Elementary, is one of those people.

"When you're 6 years old, you're very selfish. This is the perfect time developmentally to focus on kindness," she said.

Most teachers agree that character education programs tend to be the easiest to implement at the elementary level. Young children respond with enthusiasm to songs and plays that incorporate words associated with character learning.

A "word of the week" approach--which might include displaying the word on the school marquee and spending a few minutes of class time discussing the word's definition--is predominantly used at that level. But Mr. Weimer and other character education advocates regard the approach as superficial or, at best, a starting point.

Finding effective strategies and useful teaching materials for middle school and high school students can be a more difficult, said Cathy Cochran, the executive director for educational leadership with the Cobb County, Ga., public schools, a suburban Atlanta district with more than 90,000 students.

But teachers at the district's Campbell High School are finding ways to slip important themes into everyday lessons.

On a recent day in Betsy Bunte's literature class, students--some on their stomachs with books open before them--discuss the lack of character shown by the central figure in a T.S. Eliot poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

And when some of her students refused to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, Tomeka Hart, a business teacher, used what could have been an awkward moment to encourage a class discussion about the American flag.

Another Fad?

Supporters of character education can be found at both ends of the political spectrum, but that doesn't mean problems don't arise.

For example, Mr. Weimer has found that teachers with the most experience are often the most skeptical of character education. "They see it as another fad, another burden," he said.

And Gordon Vessels, a social worker with the Atlanta schools who has worked extensively at Blalock Elementary and has written a handbook for teachers called "Character and Community Development," said that even though fighting at the school has dropped significantly, he senses indifference from top administrators.

Georgia's list of 27 character traits also includes one--"respect for the creator"--that Mr. Vessels and many others in the field see as posing a problem because of its religious connotations. (*See box, this page.*)

"Most public school systems and legislators are smart enough not to do that," Ms. Schaeffer said. "It's clearly a divider."

Georgia, however, has hoped to avoid controversy by defining this trait as a recognition of the unalienable rights that are granted not by the government, but by a higher authority.

"We've had no complaints about it," said John Roddy, the director of federal programs for the state education department, adding that he had consulted with such groups as the Anti-Defamation League on the issue.

When the Georgia Character Education Center opens, it will operate a World Wide Web site containing such features as lesson plans and a chat room. A newsletter that will highlight successful programs and announce upcoming conferences also will be distributed.

In the meantime, Mr. Weimer is surveying all the public schools in the state to find out what they are doing with character education.

"We don't want to open the doors officially," he said, "until we feel that what we have is what everybody wants and needs."