

**NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY**

Moral Education in Public Schools and the Church:

Building Bridges

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### Abstract

In recent decades, public schools have been challenged to integrate student character development with academics. This challenge requires a reallocation of school resources that have been previously devoted only to academics. However, with current academic standards demanding more resources than many schools can supply, incorporating character development becomes extremely difficult. The goal of this paper is to open the door for discussion regarding the possibility that public schools and local churches can have a mutually beneficial relationship for the purpose of enhancing student character development to promote both academic and spiritual excellence. To establish background about the school's role in moral development, the church's relationship to public schools, and the key components of effective character education, a review of literature was conducted. An analysis of character frameworks revealed the alignment of key character components as identified by both public schools and the church. These findings show that a reciprocal relationship is possible, therefore preserving valuable school resources such that academic excellence can be maintained as a priority.

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Over the last three decades, education in the United States has seen serious reform. Schools not only have been put under the microscope to see where they can be made better to raise the bar on academic achievement, but they have also been pushed to be better at understanding students psychologically. Also, the reform of public perception concerning how schools should address moral and ethical development has sparked the development of educational morals and ethics programs such as CHARACTER<sup>plus</sup><sup>®</sup> and CHARACTER COUNTS!<sup>®</sup> to be used in reforming schools in order to develop morals and ethics in students with the added bonus of improving academic achievement.

Although the implementation of these kinds of programs is making significant change in the ethical and moral development of students, the question begs to be asked, “Why reinvent the wheel?” There are religious organizations that exist in the same communities as schools that specialize in the implementation of moral and ethical values into the lives of students. Although they are oriented toward their religious agenda, for the purpose of this paper the focus will be on Christian Churches. Many churches across the United States run after-school programs and/or weekly or bi-weekly youth programs that serve the purpose of nurturing students’ growth in ethics and morals. Is it possible that schools can take advantage of these kinds of resources embedded into their respective communities to help them accomplish their goals in both academic achievement and moral development?

The goal of this review is to open the door for discussion regarding the possibility that public schools and local churches can have a mutually beneficial relationship for the purpose of enhancing student character development to promote both academic and spiritual excellence. In

this review, I will be examining currently published literature to provide background and insights, and then I will compare two secular works on character with two Christian works on character and morals. From this analysis, the potential for a relationship between schools and local churches can be examined and further explored by future research.

### **The Review Process**

In order find insight into moral and ethical development in students for this review of literature, the keywords *character*, *development*, and *students* were entered using three electronic databases: Academic Search Complete, ERIC, and Professional Development Collection. The search yielded 253 citations for the years 1986 through 2013. A review of the 253 abstracts suggested 40 articles that might be focused enough on moral and ethical development in students in a school context. Next, the 40 articles were read to confirm that each could be of use for the purposes of this article. During this phase, 20 articles were dropped from the review. The collected literature allows for the breakdown of moral and ethics education into three main categories: (1) the role of the school in moral and ethical development, (2) education and the church, and (3) elements of effective moral and ethics education.

## **Background**

### **Role of the School in Moral and Ethical Development**

Besides the home, it can be said that “the school is the second major habitat that the [student] encounters, since he or she typically spends thirteen years—from childhood to young adulthood— in a school” (Ozoliņš, 2010). That being said, schools have a large role to play in the development of students not only academically, but also morally and ethically. “Historically, one of public education’s purposes in America has been the development of moral citizens” (Brimi, 2009). To understand how the school can and does support moral and ethical

development in students, it is helpful to understand three different facets of what gives morals and ethics their environment to thrive.

**Teachers.** Teachers are the first and main component of how morals and ethics are nurtured in schools. According to a study done in 1987, teachers gave little to no attention to how moral and ethical values were being shaped in the classroom (Blumenfeld, Pintrich, & Hamilton, 1987). However, in the current age of intense education reform, the call of the teacher to be first on the line of duty has been refocused. Brimi (2009) writes that besides families, teachers may be the only thing left between students and “life-devastating decisions”. If one observes the amount of time a child typically spends at school throughout the week, the potential that a school can have on a student’s life is astounding! Given a typical 112-waking-hour week (a 168-hour week minus the recommended eight hours per night sleep) and a seven-hour school day, a student will spend almost one third of their weekly lives in school (assuming perfect attendance)!

In his article *Soul-Filled Teaching and Learning*, Van Bockern (2006) takes time to address what it looks like to be a teacher that is genuinely interested in not just what happens in relation to their respective subject, but what is constantly happening within a student’s soul. Van Bockern makes the claim that modern-day teaching is missing this key aspect of daily guidance and instruction and makes it a point to call teachers to a place of intimate knowledge of not just their students’ brains, but their hearts as well.

This is a great calling for teachers, however the literature suggests a major roadblock in the way of making this ideal into reality. Brimi (2009) describes this in a clever anecdote:

You are a high school English teacher. The quality of your work is measured by your students’ performance on county and state standardized tests. Do you spend time on

moral education? Or do you, in the words of a colleague, “imagine that your students all go home after school, read the Bible, drink milk, and go to bed before ten o’clock” (p. 126)?

As Brimi continues, the answer from the powers that be is usually a strong “no!” on the subject of teaching morality, leading to the decision of the later option in the anecdote. After all, morality cannot be measured (Brimi, 2009). And if a teacher spends time teaching morals and ethics in the classroom, that is valuable class time taken away from teaching the subject that they are there to teach in the first place.

“Some teachers may doubt whether they should really be the ones held responsible for, or entrusted with, the development of values—in the moral and ethical area—in individuals, since that is sometimes thought to be the responsibility of parents or of religious communities, and these other parties may indeed claim the responsibility for themselves.” (Haydon, 2004, p. 126)

*Comment.* There are two sides to this coin of moral and ethics education. On one hand, teachers are being called to step up in a large way, to become more in touch with the more qualitative nature of the inner workings of students. However, there is only so much that teachers can do in addition to what they already do on a daily basis for the sake of their students’ success. So, for the purpose of this study, the question is raised: “To what other resources can schools turn to effectively encourage moral and ethical development?”

***The education environment.*** The education environment as a whole serves as the greenhouse in which moral and ethical development thrive. And just as one would look at a physical biological environment, how it needs to be taken care of, gardened, so does the ethical and moral environment (Haydon, 2004). Teachers in this certain view function as the individual

gardeners, but it also takes a bigger picture perspective to grasp at the large idea of the ethical and moral education environment. Instead of integrating moral and ethics education into individual classrooms and curricula, morals and ethics function as the overarching atmosphere in which experience and learning happen (Wardekker, 2004). When the school puts morals and ethics as an overarching atmosphere it creates “a particular kind of community that provides the opportunity for the inculcation of moral habits” (Ozoliņš, 2010, p. 415).

*The school’s respective community.* The school’s respective community also plays a major role in forming the environment in which morals and ethic development is encouraged to surge within students. The community is the entity that establishes the shared moral and ethical norms that the school supports (Marshall, Caldwell, & Foster, 2011). Maybe even more importantly, community provides the outlet into which the morally and ethically developed student gives back. The same community that created the moral environment will also be the one affected by what is produced by those morally developed individuals. These effects can be seen through “introduction to cultural and societal practices” (Wardekker, 2004, p. 190) such as community service (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006).

There are two things that are happening here. On one hand, students are able to utilize the community to learn. They are equipped with experiences that help them become more morally and ethically developed citizens. On the other hand, by the very process of learning within the community, students are able to promote the very same values they are just at that point learning about! So, in order for moral and ethical education to even produce fruit, a strong morals and ethics oriented community must be in place in order for morals and ethics to thrive.

*Comment.* Although the schools are a great source of moral development, they do not remain the only players on the community field. For the sake of fulfilling the purpose of this

study, the local church and its involvement with moral and ethical education will also be examined to further the discussion on the possibility of the schools utilizing this very readily available community resource to further encourage the effective moral and ethical development of their students.

### **Education and the Church**

Although the American public has long seen the local church as incompatible with the local school, Christianity has quite a deep relationship with American Education. This relationship will be explored to see Christianity's historical relationship with American schools and also what it adds to the discussion on moral and ethical education.

*A deep history.* The deep history of the intimate relationship between Christianity and American education is well kept (Burke & Segall, 2011). Brimi (2009) briefly recounts the history of American education and reveals deep Christian roots without that even being his main intention. Shortly after the birth of American public education in the nineteenth century, “[Christianity] was clearly the basis for the values it wanted to instill” (Brimi, 2009, p. 127) even though religious doctrine was not its goal. Even after new laws passed in the 1870's affected how schools were funded and even after the Bible was taken out of schools, this same theme continued. Even educational philosophical debates going on today have some of their contesters grounding some of their logic in God and Christian thinking (Bergman, 2004). It is difficult to ignore the roots, especially when they are so profoundly foundational.

Not only have the values of the schools remained something of a deep Christian origin, but also the things that one may not immediately think of when it comes to the school day have deep Christian roots. Burke and Segall (2011) look systematically through the American public education legacy and bring to light many sense-filled conjectures about the roots of the many

things about school that Americans may take for granted. For instance, the school classroom (traditionally) was set up to be modeled after the church sanctuary with all students facing the front, much like a church service. The symbolism of the apple being equated with knowledge goes back to the age-old story of Adam and Eve. Also, the calendar is situated around Christian holidays, and even the words we use to describe school related things such as “dean”, “discipline”, and “colloquy” (just to name a few) is deeply rooted in Christian tradition. Lastly on that same note, even the way that a school looks at, considers, and values children is a very deeply rooted Christian perspective.

It is very interesting to consider the implications of such a deep and rich heritage. What kinds of things are being lost by slowly drifting away from these roots on the outside while still being deeply connected with them on the inside? It continues to be an interesting phenomenon in how a vast majority of schoolteachers today are Christians (Burke & Segall, 2011). So, it is safe to say that opinions aside, there is no debate on whether or not Christianity is intimately intertwined with education; it very truly is (Burke & Segall, 2011).

*Christian perspectives on moral development.* Even though some scholars agree that Christianity is intertwined with the American public education system (Wilhelm & Firmin, 2008; Bergman, 2004; Burke & Segall, 2011), that does not necessarily mean that after all the education reform happening since the 1960’s (Brimi, 2009) that Christianity and mainstream thought line up. This is where Christian perspectives on moral development will be observed.

Wilhelm and Formin (2008) claim “the secular philosophy of character education and the understanding or morality are strongly tied to Christianity’s doctrine of the nature of man and the nature of God.” They also go on to say ask that if Christianity is not then used as the standard for morals, what is the standard? Who gets to decide what is right and wrong? After studying

the famous Christian author and scholar C.S. Lewis, they saw “he found common values including kindness, honesty, justice, mercy, courage, loyalty to parents, spouses and family members, an obligation to help the poor, the sick, and the less fortunate, and the right to private property” as similarities to all ethics schema no matter what the background (Wilhelm & Firmin, 2008). In other words, if someone were looking for something that aligns with the core values of mainstream ethics and morality, Christianity would be a prime candidate. In order to start the discussion about how the public schools and local churches can start to seek out a relationship, we must take a look at what the main values of moral education are in order to put Wilhelm and Formin’s argument to the test.

### **Elements of Effective Moral and Ethics Education**

Three key elements of effective moral and ethics education were gleaned from the previous review of the literature. These key elements are role modeling, dialogue, and experiences.

***Role modeling.*** It is noted in the field of character education that teachers are “supposed to act as role models” (Wardekker, 2004, p. 188). But, what kind of ethical and moral value does that bring to the discussion? Ideally, role models are a very effective way to encourage a considerable amount of learning as students are able to see behaviors, attitudes, values and beliefs that others hold that they may want to emulate (Sanderse, 2013). With the amount of influence that teachers have on students during the day, being a role model for students becomes inevitable (Kristjansson, 2006).

Although role modeling is a very effective way to influence character development, it does not come without its drawbacks (Sanderse, 2013; Kristjansson, 2006). Usually, when role modeling is thought of in the context of character development, emphasis is usually put on the

person as a whole and not the specific character traits that the student would want to emulate.

When framed in this way, it is usually only in retrospect that the student will identify a specific person as a role model when thinking only about them as a person as a whole (Sanderse, The meaning of role modeling in moral and character education, 2013).

Also, with the mainstream expectation of teachers being excellent role models rising, the lack of role models outside of teachers also increases. There are a few suggested ways of addressing this issue. Parents should also actively be involved in being role models for not only their own students, but also others (Wilhelm & Fermin, 2008; Sanderse, 2013). Also, using stories to focus on moral and ethical principles can also be used as a role-modeling tool (Leming, 2000; Ellenwood, 2006). But ultimately, role modeling should involve everyone in the student's community (Wilhelm & Firmin, 2008)! The motivation to get involved stems from when anyone "recognizes the powerful role he or she plays as one of the most influential of the 'authors' of the script that is the student's ethical self" (Bergman, 2004, p. 156).

***Dialogue.*** Having dialogue amongst students about moral and ethical issues also serves as a very effective tool for moral and ethical development. "Before an individual can make responsible moral judgments, he or she needs to identify real life moral dilemmas in different contexts" (Tirri, 2011, p. 60). As previously discussed, role models are the first on the line of responsibility when it comes to dialogue (Sanderse, 2013). If no dialogue is started amongst students, they cannot come to moral decisions (Wardekker, 2004). Moreover, if a student does not have the chance to grapple with a moral or ethical dilemma and have time to have a dialogue with their own self in order to make a step forward in their moral and ethical convictions (Piper, 2004). Because having an intentional dialogue is so that social morals and ethics get discussed in the community (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006), then if discussions don't happen, there is no way

to move forward in cultivating the kind of ethical educational environment that needs to be present for effective moral and ethical development to take place. Using literature texts in order to discuss complex moral and ethical dilemmas have proven to be effective in engaging students in deep meaningful dialogue that supports their continued development (Ellenwood, 2006). It is important to remember that “as for dialogue, if they are truly living words, children’s words will bring responses not only from one another but also from their teachers, who will begin to reconsider teaching philosophy, materials and methods in the light of what the children say—and then test their revised ideas in ongoing cycles of practice, consultation and reflection” (O’Grady, 2006, p. 316).

*Experiences.* There is nothing more effective in moral and ethical development than personal experiences. There are countless ways to get involved in one’s community! Each opportunity provides a unique experience from any of the others, and allows students to choose which kinds of opportunities align with what they believe (Naravez, Gleason, & Mitchell, 2010). “The educational process should incorporate experiences that engage students in developing decision filters that enhance their ability to make sound judgments” (Stiff-Williams, 2010, p. 116). When a student rolls up his or her sleeves and gets their hands dirty into an issue through their own experience, it allows them to start putting themselves in situations where they need to make their own moral and ethical decisions (Naravez, Gleason, & Mitchell, 2010). By being put in their own experiences, they are pushed to own their choices. They must rationally be able to understand and express why they believe in a certain moral or ethical choice, not just because “my teacher said so” or something of the like. Experiences such as service learning provides an opportunity to engage in this kind of constructive behavior, but also enables students to have deep meaningful discussion about their service experiences (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006).

Experiences tie in with having discussions because students, especially when they share in experiences and are able to talk about moral and ethical topics together.

*Comment.* Now that the depths of moral and ethical education have been plumbed, it is time to directly address the research question. Is there potential for the public school to have a relationship with local churches so that they can be more effective at moral and ethical development in students?

### **Character Framework Comparison**

#### **A Question of Compatibility**

The purpose of this research is to open up discussion for the possibility of the local church and local public school working together for the purpose of moral and character development in students. The question is, are local churches and local public schools compatible in regards to their moral and ethical framework, thus creating the possibility of establishing a mutually beneficial relationship? By analyzing mainstream character education and Christian character development literature, an answer may be possible. In this section, strong works in both the secular and Christian realms of character development will be analyzed to explore the possibility of relationship between public schools and the church.

This analysis will discuss each of the “six pillars of character” defined by Michael Josephson (2002) of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, the creators of CHARACTER COUNTS!<sup>®</sup>. The Christian literature that will also be analyzed is *Right From Wrong: What You Need to Know to Help Youth Make Right Choices* by Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, and *The Pillars of Christian Character* by John F. MacArthur. The six pillars of character (Josephson, 2002) that will be used to structure this analysis are (1) trustworthiness, (2) respect, (3) responsibility, (4) fairness, (5) caring, and (6) citizenship.

***Trustworthiness.*** Because Josephson (2002) regards this as such an important piece of character, there is a lot to be discussed on the topic of trustworthiness. Josephson (2002) breaks down trustworthiness into *honesty, integrity, reliability, and loyalty*. These four moral principles give trustworthiness a multidimensional personality. Trustworthiness allows someone to believe in someone else and hold him or her to a higher standard, thus pushing him or her more toward a place of honorable reputation.

*Honesty*, according to Josephson (2002), is broken down into three parts. The first is truthfulness. Communicating true information is the first part of being an honest person. Truthfulness does not mean that someone can't make mistakes in thinking that the information they give is accurate, but it does require that a person is concerned about their speech and actions being truthful. Sincerity is the second facet of honesty, and brings with it the absence of deceit or trickery. A person is to not distort the truth, give a half-truth, or does not remain silent when truth is being threatened. Candor is the third piece of honesty and deals with how honesty is played out in relationships and personal interactions with peers. Candor can be something like saying something to someone that may be hard to say, but is an honest truth that should be told them for their own benefit.

In comparison, honesty, according to Christian values is very similar and complimentary to what Josephson describes. Christian viewpoints highly regard honesty as one of if not the most important element of character development. In his book, *The Pillars of Christian Character*, John F. MacArthur (1998) describes the Christian perspective of honesty as an athlete playing by the rules of their given sport. They exercise truthfulness by being rightfully aware of the rules and being truthful when confessing that they did something that was against them. The honest Athlete also exercises sincerity by the actions of physically playing by the correct rules

without pushing the envelope, and making the official aware that rules are broken. Candor can be seen in that the honest athlete would be quick to lovingly confront a fellow team member concerning their lack of following the rules of the game. However, even though the athlete in this illustration is an honest one, that does not stop them from playing competitively and giving their one hundred and ten percent each and every game. Honesty is the way in which they become successful in what they do! An athlete can win by either cheating their way to the top, or by playing honestly. The Christian perspective says to choose the honest way each and every time.

Although they also have a similar definition of honesty, well-known Christian pastor and author Josh McDowell along with Bob Hostetler (1994) write about the blessings that honesty brings into the life of a child as well as what it protects them from. Honesty provides the opportunity for a clear conscience, a sense of accomplishment, a reputation for integrity, and trusting relationships; while at the same time protecting them from guilt, shame, a cycle of deceit, and ruined relationships. (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994) Although Josephson (2002) and MacArthur (1998) both define honesty in a very precise way, their definitions of that particular character quality go hand in hand. McDowell and Hostetler (1994) provide an even more in-depth understanding of the benefits of having honesty at the forefront of a student's development. Instead of allowing students to think of honesty as a tool that can bring them success and relieve themselves of unwanted pressure, student influencers (those who influence students in some way) are to show them how dishonesty only brings in a mess of things that students wouldn't want to deal with in the first place, and how honesty gives them what they really want out of their situations (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994).

*Integrity* is the glue that holds trustworthiness together. A person who has integrity does not sway on their decisions. They make consistent decisions and other people can rely on them for precision every time. In order for a person to be completely trustworthy, they need to be consistent no matter if they are at home, school, or at a party. Trustworthy people eliminate guesswork. “What you see is what you get.” (Josephson, 2002, p. 9) In regards to integrity, MacArthur (1998) writes that it is a necessary part of how a Christian goes about living out their faith. In every situation, there are choices that need to be made with regard to whether or not to remain consistent in faith-based values. It is integrity that is the sort of self-discipline that keeps a Christian continuing down the correct path and provides evidence for an effective witness of faith.

*Reliability* is another key component of trustworthiness. “When we make promises or other commitments that create a legitimate basis for another person to rely upon us, we undertake special moral duties. We accept the responsibility of making all reasonable efforts to fulfill our commitments.” (Josephson, 2002, p. 9) This has huge implications for a Christian! To a Christian, God is reliability. God is known throughout scripture to be the ultimate promise keeper and Christians are called to emulate that kind of characteristic (MacArthur, 1998).

Josephson (2002) defines *loyalty* as “a responsibility to promote the interests of certain people, organizations or affiliations” (p. 10). Although all people have loyalties to all sorts of different relationships, Christians have an overarching loyalty to God. In Christianity, faith plays a large part in reliability as well as loyalty. Just as people have to make choices in real time whether or not to remain loyal in some way, Christians have to make that same decision in regards to God. The apostle Paul from the Bible is looked to by Christians as a prime example of loyalty to God in the midst of any kinds of times, whether they be good or bad times of life

(MacArthur, 1998). Understanding that both the secular world and the church holds loyalty to such a high degree helps keep hope for the discussion of a common ground between school and church.

**Respect.** Respect is very important in public schools today. Students need to have respect for teachers, administrators, and others in positions of authority. It is very interesting that the way that respect is summed up “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Josephson, 2002, p. 11) comes directly out of the Bible. Unfortunately, we see respect decline in how many people want to give respect, and a rise in how many want to receive it (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994). McDowell and Hostetler (1994) also dive into what respect offers to youth, and also what it protects them from. Respect provides students with self-esteem, healthy relationships, attractiveness, and praise. By having respect, students also become respected by their leaders, resulting in those kinds of benefits. It also protects them from self-disparagement, harmful relationships, offense, and condemnation. These are the things that would come about if a student lacked respect; people would not respect them (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994).

**Responsibility.** Responsibility means being in charge of one’s choices. It also means recognizing that one is accountable for their actions and that it is mandatory to handle the consequences of those actions (Josephson, 2002). Josephson also breaks down responsibility into three different facets, each that are addressed by Christian principles. These three facets are *accountability*, *pursuit of excellence*, and *self-restraint* (Josephson, 2002).

*Accountability*, as defined by Josephson (2002), is displayed by someone who takes ownership of consequences. They carefully analyze choices, and once they make that choice, they are in it until the end taking responsibility the entire way through. They are also ready to hold others accountable to moral values (Josephson, 2002). From a Christian perspective,

accountability serves much the same purpose. For a Christian who claims that they uphold certain values and standards based upon biblical principles, accountability is the main tool that helps keep them aligned to those values and standards. Accountability allows for someone to get in someone else's face about something they have shown that is contrary to what they have claimed that they hold of high value (MacArthur, 1998).

*A pursuit of excellence* is needed in order to be fully responsible. If someone is relying on another for information or to complete a task, there is a mandate that the information be accurate and the task to be done well (Josephson, 2002). The most beneficial way for a Christian to practice pursuing excellence in their personal faith is through the study of the Bible. Through dedicated pursuit, Christians uncover increasingly more moral and ethical principles to apply to all areas of their lives (MacArthur, 1998). Christians are responsible for upholding the moral standards and values put in place by scripture, and thus are called to pursue excellence in upholding those standards and values. Through this particular pursuit of excellence, Christians are more ready and equipped to pursue excellence in the other moral areas discussed in this analysis.

*Self-restraint*, or self-control, is defined by Josephson (2002) as putting desires, passions, and appetites on hold so that one can develop better understanding for judgment in the future. People who practice self-restraint do so with careful intention with prospect of self-improvement. Self-discipline, stems from self-control, and is one of the essential elements of Christian character (MacArthur, 1998). Self-control from a Christian perspective has to do with controlling one's urges to travel outside of the values and standards that make up Christian morals (MacArthur, 1998). This can affect other areas of character. Self-restraint allows someone to develop the "ability to regulate one's conduct by principle and sound judgment

rather than by impulse, desire, or social custom” (MacArthur, 1998, p. 183). Just as with other pillars of character, there are things that self-restraint (or self-control) provide for students and also protect them from. Self-control provides students with enjoyment, respect, and self-esteem for students. It protects them from excess, contempt, and self-doubt (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994). When students practice self-control, they are able to indulge in the things that this world has to offer, such as food and fun for example, in a balanced and beneficial way. Lack of self-control can lead to overindulgence. Overindulgence can lead to contempt if peers look down upon overindulgence, and contempt from others can lead to self-esteem being damaged (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994).

***Fairness.*** Fairness “implies adherence to a balanced standard of justice without reference to one’s own biases or interests” (Josephson, 2002, p. 12). The Christian perspective provides a very balanced standard of justice; to sum it up, “treating everyone fairly” (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994, p. 214). Justice provides students with a clear conscience, peace, and honor, while protecting them from revenge, guilt, and dishonor (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994). Doing someone an injustice can provide room for someone to take revenge on them. Also, injustice can create guilt in a student’s heart while giving them a dishonorable reputation of being unjust. Conversely, justice in a student’s character can grant them respect and honor from others because of their fairness in interacting with others (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994).

***Caring.*** Caring “is the heart of ethics and decision making” (Josephson, 2002, p. 13). Caring is also best characterized by love, even though love is a form of caring. Josephson (2002) says that sometimes caring involves hurting someone, but one must make sure that they only cause the amount of hurt that is specifically required by the act of caring for the other. The Christian perspective puts another level at the base of caring, and that is sacrificial love. Jesus

gives a pattern of love that is defined by sacrificially meeting the needs of others. This still holds even when the recipients of this sacrificial love are unresponsive to it or ungrateful (MacArthur, 1998). This kind of sacrificial love is not just doing something nice when one may not really want to, but it is the intentional reordering of priorities. The Christian perspective of sacrificial love is literally putting the needs of someone else before the needs of oneself. Love (and thus caring) provides students with peace, fulfillment, and spiritual blessing. Love also protects students from strife, self-centeredness, and spiritual barrenness (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994). By loving sacrificially, there comes peace between the student and others because others notice the student's love for them. A person who loves sacrificially develops an interest in the interests of others and often finds joy in showing love to someone else (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994)!

***Citizenship.*** Citizenship is the way that morals and ethics are vitalized within a community. As has been previously touched on, it is essential that the community is one that allows for morals and ethics to be upheld within its own context (Marshall, Caldwell, & Foster, 2011). The way that values and standards are upheld in a community is through the character quality of citizenship. "Citizenship includes civic virtues and duties that prescribe how [citizens] ought to behave as part of a community" (Josephson, 2002, p. 14). Citizens that possess the character quality of citizenship are those whom not only know the community's values and uphold them, but go above and beyond to contribute to the community environment as a whole. They take values and standards seriously and go out of their way to ensure that they are upheld (Josephson, 2002). McDowell and Hostetler (1994) recommend, from a Christian perspective, some practical ways for a citizen to uphold moral values in their community.

Firstly, it is important for a citizen to understand which moral issues to speak out on. If a citizen speaks out on every single issue that comes up, then they could gain a reputation that

could effect the way that they are seen when they continue to speak out on more moral issues. Other citizens may lose trust in their opinion, and then it becomes harder for that particular citizen to continue to be one that practices citizenship. The second is to work with other people that share the same beliefs. There is strength in numbers, thus it is much easier to practice citizenship in a group rather than trying to fly solo. Third, understanding the reasons why something is wrong or worth being discussed is very important in creating a grounds for a moral understanding to be heard. Many citizens that do not practice citizenship speak out on issues while remaining uneducated on what the fundamentals of the issue are. There is no way that productive moral and ethical reform can take place without citizens being fully understanding about what they are reforming. A fourth way is to be prepared for opposition. There will always be someone who opposes the moral standard that someone else is trying to push forward. It is not wise for a citizen to directly seek out opposition, but they should not be surprised when it occurs. The last thing that is important for one who is practicing good citizenship to remember is to speak out against principles and not people (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994). Many times citizens get caught up in associating a moral wrong with the actual person who is responsible for that moral wrong. “A humble, non-combative spirit that stands firmly for principles will often win out over a belligerent fighter who fights fire with fire” (McDowell & Hostetler, 1994, p. 247).

These are encouraging things for citizens to think about if they want to accomplish their passionate purpose when all is said and done. Christian principles help shape the character quality of citizenship into something that is just a stand alone quality, but a process through which a community can go about moral reform.

### **Discussion**

In light of what has been discussed about the individual character frameworks of both public schools and the church being aligned with one another, the possibility of common ground between the two institutions becomes clearer. The actions of the church could possibly be used to help directly influence student character in the context of the school day. Although the school and church remain separate, it is an irrefutable fact that both entities hold character development in students at high priority, and have the best interests of students at heart when giving instruction. This review has shown that the public school provides one of the most impactful opportunities for students to experience rich character growth.

However, although schools do their very best to ensure that students get the highest quality of character education, there remains constraints on what can be provided to students that stem from the current limitations of the schools. One portion of these constraints is simply the hours in the day. Schools already have their hands full with teaching the correct amount of content in the classroom over the course of the school year. With curricula to follow and standards to meet, adding character development into the mix simply adds to the most often already overbearing workload. An additional facet of the limitations of the schools is the diversity of the student population. Schools continually spend extra time and energy to ensure that all students from any kind of background get the same kind of character education that fits their individual needs. Schools are challenged with incorporating programs that are standardized enough to cover a large diverse body of students, while still needing connection to individual student needs. No curriculum, no matter how stalwart, can address intimate needs of students. Therefore teachers bear the responsibility of bridging the gap in this regard, which adds to their educational responsibilities.

In the last part of the review I brought to light three necessary elements of effective character education. Although schools remain one of the most influential places for a student's character development, it seems that it simply does not have the capacity to uphold academic excellence and rich moral development concurrently. I will highlight these elements again to address what can be done so that schools can manage their tasks in regards to academic excellence in students while still reaping the benefits of morally and ethically educated students. Because the church does not have the responsibility of academic education, opportunities for rich character education are plentiful.

### **Role Modeling**

The first element of rich character education is role modeling. As discussed in the review, it is difficult for a teacher to fulfill both roles of instruction and role modeling concurrently. The church already provides role modeling to students in two different ways. Youth leaders are volunteers or church staff who are heavily invested in students' lives. Through youth group events and student outreach, the church is able to provide students with meaningful connections to adult role models. These role models are present in the church for the sole purpose of student character education, although religious in nature, and therefore are able to dedicate their complete efforts for that purpose. This does not necessarily make them more qualified than teachers to give moral and ethical instruction; it just means that they are not faced with the same juggling act that teachers are faced with.

Another side of role modeling is that of moral and ethical story telling. The Bible is used in the church as a rich and diverse catalogue of moral and ethical role models that have impacted students' character development throughout generations. Through involvement in church activities, students are able to be introduced to very real and applicable moral and ethical

dilemmas and are also able to wrestle with thinking about what they would have done in the situation that the character they are focused on was in. Christian role models and church leadership are very focused on getting students to discuss the implications of these moral and ethical stories in students' every day lives, which leads to the next important point.

### **Dialogue**

Dialogue is also a vital piece of effective character education. With lessons to teach and tests to take, it is difficult for schools to implement consistent rich discussion into the classroom alongside academic teaching. Seeking partnership with the local church allows for students to have opportunities to engage in enriching discussion amongst their peers through youth programs where students are guided by adult role models through a student-lead discussion concerning the moral and ethical implications of the topic being discussed. This allows for teachers to continue excelling at teaching academic material while still having students who exemplify the fruits of effective character education.

### **Experiences**

The final main element of rich character education is the incorporation of hands-on experiences that allow students to be toe-to-toe with current contextual moral and ethical questions. The church has a very long history of doing things just like this! Whether it be serving soup to the homeless, or volunteering at the local nursing home, churches are all about community impact and experiential character education and development. Although churches may only have a few organizations that they partner with or events they put on, schools often have connections to entities that the local church may not. A partnership can open doors for the local church to continue reaching out to the community in a larger way by public school students participating in already existing opportunities for experiences. On another note, if the church

itself does not have enough opportunity to get all students involved, the connections that the schools have in the community provide additional and sufficient opportunities to ensure that all students are allowed an equal opportunity to experience character education by getting their hands dirty in a project or event! Schools can partner with local churches to provide both students and outlets through which churches can organize and run experiential character education events. This puts schools at a more actively supportive role instead of being directly responsible for planning, coordinating, and funding events. Community outreach is something that the church has been doing since the beginning of its existence. Why not partner with an organization that does an exemplary job at doing exactly what schools are interested in doing with their students? With schools stepping into a supportive role in this regard, they have more resources to dedicate to ensuring an equal and exemplary academic education to all students.

It is easy to get distracted by the ominous history that the church and school has, but it is important to remember the analysis previously explored that shows that the character framework that defines both the school's goals and the church's goals align! Therefore the primary responsibilities of both the church and school need to be considered within that context. Essentially, it can be said that the school has a primary responsibility to academic education with a secondary responsibility to character education. On the other hand, the church has a primary responsibility to character education while having very little to no responsibility to academic education. It seems, in this time in United States history, that the institution responsible for the academic education of youth, the school, is now shifting to also take on the same responsibility of character education that has long been held by the church.

My primary recommendation is that rather than trying to carry the responsibilities of two separate institutions, the school should reach out to their community coworker that has already

been upholding the responsibility they hold so dear. This is the local church. Just as school teachers are encouraged to collaborate on how to better educate their students in a given subject area, the school and church within a community should work with one another to create a community in which students are both academically excellent, and morally and ethically exemplary.

### **Limitations**

The aim of this review was to establish a framework for future research. Additional studies might investigate specific dimensions of the topic of the schools reaching out to local churches. What this research has not touched on are the social, systemic, and religious implications of this kind of relationship.

Future research should explore specific social implications that may arise from the schools and churches having this kind of beneficial relationship. Implementing this kind of cooperation could spark some cultural and political push back since it is very counter-cultural at this point in time. Future research should explore the possibilities of this relationship existing in the current cultural and political environment, and what kind of social and political environment would be necessary for this kind of relationship to thrive.

There may also be some systemic implications on the school in regards to how the system is set up and running. Research should explore the actual practicality of having this kind of relationship exist in the context of how the school system operates. Systemic issues that could be explored may include things like the length of the school day, the fact that teachers are only contracted for certain days of the week, budgeting in the school district, and so forth. It may well be that even though the school and church are similar in their character development expectations, they could be systemically incompatible at this point in time. Or, it could be found

that both systems could work seamlessly together. The results of this topic of research could potentially be huge for furthering the conclusion reached by this research.

An additional implication is one that impacts the church directly. I suggest that future research explore the effect that a close relationship with the school would have on churches in regards to the religious structure. Because they are working so closely with an organization that has wanted very clear severed ties, will there be any negative effect on the church?

Finally, as these kinds of implications are explored, it will be necessary to address the opposite direction of the argument posed. This review and analysis has addressed whether the schools can reach out to the local church, but can the church benefit from reaching out to the schools? The main purpose of this research is to open doors for discussion on these topics. I have addressed only a portion of the full picture.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this review is to open the door for discussion regarding the possibility that public schools and local churches can have a mutually beneficial relationship for the purpose of enhancing student character development to promote both academic and spiritual excellence. By examining the role of the school in character development, the history of the church and the school, and the essential elements of effective character education, a context for the analysis of the school and church's core character education framework was created. It has been shown that schools and the church have the same principles at the forefront of their philosophy. Although schools and churches are coming at character development from slightly different angles, it is obvious that they are both working towards the same goals.

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# **HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT THESIS SUBMISSION FORM**

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent decades, public schools have been challenged to integrate student character development with academics. This challenge requires a reallocation of school resources that have been previously devoted only to academics. However, with current academic standards demanding more resources than many schools can supply, incorporating character development becomes extremely difficult. The goal of this paper is to open the door for discussion regarding the possibility that public schools and local churches can have a mutually beneficial relationship for the purpose of enhancing student character development to promote both academic and spiritual excellence. To establish background about the school's role in moral development, the church's relationship to public schools, and the key components of effective character education, a review of literature was conducted. An analysis of character frameworks revealed the alignment of key character components as identified by both public schools and the church. These findings show that a reciprocal relationship is possible, therefore preserving valuable school resources such that academic excellence can be maintained as a priority.

University Honors Program

Capstone Approval Page

Capstone Title

Moral Education in Public Schools and the Church:  
Building Bridges

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