

What is 'character education' and how much does it cost?

Between 2006 and 2007, the Ministry of Education spent over \$3 million on *Character Education*. But not everyone is clear about its purpose or its necessity.

Character Education or *Character Development* – an initiative first developed in the U.S. – came to Ontario via the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in 2006. The Ontario program was launched by Premier Dalton McGuinty at a 2006 conference with the then Minister of Education, along with Justin Trudeau, Craig Keilburger and speakers from the Washington-based Character Education Partnership. Since then, opinions about the initiative have been mixed – some have lauded the focus on character, while others have raised concerns about the amount of money, time and resources devoted to a separate program.

Following the 2006 conference, eight Character Development Resource Teams were struck, each with a leader responsible for a group of school boards, and consultations were held. Every school board was then required to hold local consultations to develop a list of their top 10 "character attributes."

In June 2008, the Ministry of Education released a document, *Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K-12*. In it, Character Education and Development is described as a way to develop critical and analytical thinking skills, self-awareness and self-discipline, and a method of preparing students for their role in society as engaged, productive and responsible participants. The document says that character development is:

- the primary responsibility of parents and families
- the cornerstone of a civil, just and democratic society
- the foundation of our publicly funded education system.

Every board is now required to have their own Character Development Plan and to "ensure that their character development initiative is aligned with and becomes an integral part of Board and School Improvement Plans." Boards must also report to the province annually on their progress.

Documents obtained through Access to Information show that the province spent over \$3 million on the initiative in 2006 and 2007. Figures are not available for this school year, but it appears that the program costs over \$1.7 million per year.

Some parents and teachers have raised concerns about Character Education as a separate program. Consultations and surveys to come up with the top ten character attributes were time-consuming and, according to some, the results are inevitably the same. Teachers and curriculum leaders have said it may be more effective to focus resources and policy on existing courses such as Civics and Careers, Social Studies and Family Studies, thus ensuring that all students have access to courses that may prepare them to be engaged and responsible citizens.

More information about Character Education is available at:
http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacy_numeracy/character.html

Parent involvement: What works?

Parent involvement is the latest trend sweeping Ontario education. It is a priority in most of our schools, making demands on time, energy and resources. But what does the research say about parent involvement? What really works? Where should we be focusing our efforts for the greatest impact on student achievement?

We examined a number of studies, from Canada, the U.S. and the U.K., and overall, the research indicates that parental involvement at home has more of an impact on student achievement than parental involvement in school-based activities. Having high expectations of your child is the most significant contributor to their academic achievement. The next most important types of parental involvement are reading with your children and communicating with them about school. Surprisingly, the research showed that checking homework had no impact on children's academic achievement.

What this means is that the less conspicuous aspects of parental involvement may have more of an impact

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than we have tended to believe. And getting involved in your children’s education in a way that improves their chances for success in school may be as simple as creating an educationally oriented atmosphere at home.

School-based parent involvement programs that tend to be the most successful are programs that are built on a philosophical foundation of partnership. These include programming for both parents and children, programs that target the home as well as the school, and those programs that have a focus on involvement that is specifically linked to achievement. Programs and interventions work best when they include strategies that respect the needs of families and address barriers to involvement such as childcare, transportation, and scheduling conflicts. Furthermore, for culturally diverse families, programs that recognize, respect, and address cultural and class differences are more effective. When programs are reflective in this way, parents are more likely to participate.

While the research proves that there is a direct benefit for students when their parents are involved in their education, there are also side benefits for parents themselves – they learn more about public education in Ontario, they become part of a school community, and they are engaged as citizens.

In the new year, People for Education will release a full report on parental involvement in education. The research cited in the report and this article is available on our website at:

www.peopleforeducation.com/parent/research



Are some special ed students shortchanged?

As a parent chair of the Ottawa DSB Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), Nancy Myers learned an enormous amount over the years about how students’ needs are being met, or not. Although she has recently relinquished her duties as SEAC chair, she has not lost her passion for helping students in need.

Lately, she has become very concerned about a group of students who don’t always fit into any of the specific categories in special education. They don’t necessarily have specific Learning Disabilities, nor do they always meet the Ministry of Education’s criteria for Mild Intellectual Disability (MID). In the past these “borderline” students would have been called “slow learners”, and Nancy Myers says they are falling between the cracks. “These students have no curriculum and no textbooks, and their learning conditions are sometimes destroying their self-esteem and their lives. The situation for these students has a huge impact on classrooms and on society.”

Dr. Steven Shaw, school psychologist and researcher at McGill University, agrees.

“Fourteen per cent of the general population falls in this category – more than all of the children in all special education categories combined.”

While the Ministry of Education has an overall definition of MID, a quick scan of boards’ websites shows that individual boards’ specific definitions are not consistent province-wide. One board may define a student with MID as one who is usually delayed by two or more years in academic, social, language and cognitive areas when compared to

students of the same age. While another describes the criteria for identifying MID as being typically based on intellectual and achievement results within the lowest 17 percentage points of the population. Most of those criteria would exclude those borderline students who struggle to learn or who may learn less quickly than other students.

Nancy Myers worries that “If most kids ‘learn’ at 80 KPH, how can teachers possibly accommodate those who ‘learn’ at 20 KPH in the same room? Teachers cannot and should not push a ‘pause’ button for the kids ready to move ahead. And once a child starts falling behind, they lose self-esteem, cannot help but compare themselves to the kids around them who are working on page 90 while they are on page 20, or even working in an entirely different blue book when all the other kids have a red book. It’s humiliating and sometimes the situation becomes even more difficult in high school.”



Early identification and intensive supports are critical. Boards now have trouble recruiting and retaining Psychologists, Speech Language Pathologists (SLP), Educational

Assistants, Occupational Therapists and Physio-therapists, in large part because of the lack of job security year to year, as well as funding for adequate salaries. Nancy would like to see the Ministry provincially mandate and fund these specialists by enrolment (e.g., 1 SLP for every 2000 students).

She sums it up: “It’s an undisputed fact that spending \$1 on education now saves \$7 in future social costs. The need is real.”

people for Education

BECAUSE EDUCATION MATTERS MOST

The People for Education Newsletter

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People for Education is an independent parents’ group working to support public education in Ontario’s English, French and Catholic schools.

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Taking charge of Canada's future

According to Glen Murray, chair of the Canadian National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, Canada's future will depend, in great part, on what happens in our schools. He says Canada is at a crossroads. Our population, our economy and our environment are experiencing a seismic shift – and it's going to take more than being good at reading and math to thrive in the 21st century.

On October 27, People for Education and the Canadian Education Association held a forum at the CBC's Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto. Educators, parents, students and civic and community leaders from across the country debated the merits of fundamental changes that may be needed in our public education systems. They began

to plan the next steps to encourage a new national conversation about the role of schools in shaping the Canada we need in the 21st century.

Among the questions they addressed:

- Are our schools teaching students the right things?
- If the "new economy" is going to rely more on creativity and innovation and less on manufacturing and resources, should we be re-thinking our schools?
- Should our schools be teaching values? If so, whose?
- How can schools do a better job of harnessing the power of diversity?
- How can we ensure our students are prepared to be the citizens of tomorrow?

Join the discussion on our website.

A place for parents at government policy tables

The Ministry of Education consults with stakeholders and develops new education policy in a number of "working tables" – some of them ongoing, some of them focused on one specific issue and many of them parent-friendly.

All the teachers' federations, school board, principal, student trustee and directors' associations are represented, as well the province's four main parent associations: Parents Partenaires en Education (PPE), the Ontario Federation of Home and School Associations (OFHSA), the Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education (OAPCE), and People for Education. Last year, for the first time, representatives from the Provincial Parent Board were added.

The Ministry of Education Partnership Table meets about four times per year. At that table a wide range of education policies are discussed – everything from funding, to the role of principal, to teacher training.

Learning to 18 is an ongoing working table that focuses on student success in high school.



The **Literacy and Numeracy** Secretariat also has an ongoing working table that keeps representatives up-to-date on its programs.

The **Healthy Schools** working table includes reps from public health, and physical and health education specialists and agencies. It considers physical activity, nutrition and health promotion in schools.

Another way for parents to be involved is in the province's regular reviews of **Kindergarten to Grade 12 curriculum**. Parents can be nominated to participate. (If you're interested in these reviews, let People for Education know.) This year, the province is in the process of reviewing the curriculum for K-12 Health and Physical Education, Arts, and French as a Second Language. They will also be reviewing Grades 9-12 Canadian and World Studies and Social Sciences and Humanities, and K-8 Social Studies, History and Geography. The province also has a Curriculum Council which will soon be reviewing the entire elementary school curriculum.

\$61 Million Cut from School Maintenance Budgets

Economic downturn affects education budget for the 2008/09 school year

School boards got bad news from the province on October 23. They are losing \$60 million this year from their budgets for long-term maintenance and renewal of school buildings. The money had been promised in the 2008/09 school funding announcements.

The cuts will affect rural schools, small schools and urban schools alike because it is an overall cut to the funding "benchmark." Previously, elementary and secondary schools that were less than 20 years old were to receive \$7.03 per square metre for school renewal. That has been cut to \$5.62. Schools that were more than 20 years old were to receive \$10.54 per square metre, which has been cut to \$8.43.

There is a huge backlog in maintenance, renewal and repair in the province, and the funding cut will further delay those upgrades. Funding for new schools and schools that have already been declared "prohibitive to repair" was not affected in the announcement.

While the economic update from the province only affected this year's education budget, the Premier and the Minister of Finance both warned that there may be more cuts to come.

Examples of cuts in individual boards

Algoma DSB	-\$571,427
Bluewater DSB	-\$643,766
CSD catholique du Centre-Est	-\$575,536
Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB	-\$1,963,328
Hamilton-Wentworth DSB	-\$1,544,994
Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB	-\$1,086,528
Niagara Catholic DSB	-\$715,137
Peel DSB	-\$3,776,047
Thames Valley DSB	-\$1,972,133
Toronto Catholic DSB	-\$2,854,870
Toronto DSB	-\$8,588,162
Upper Canada DSB	-\$1,297,585
York Catholic DSB	-\$1,106,296
York Region DSB	-\$2,711,834

The complete list is available on our website:
www.peopleforeducation.com/maintenancecuts08

In October, the **Rainy River District School Board** hosted an aboriginal elders' session for senior administration, principals, vice-principals, and program support personnel. Four elders, a cultural coordinator, and two language teachers provided the cultural teachings session. The intent was to begin to draw on the experiences and knowledge of the local first nation elders, and to give the RRDSB leadership an opportunity to understand first nation culture and traditions. A better understanding of the richness of first nation culture will better support the success of first nation students. Feedback from participants was very positive. The plan is to expand these sessions to schools within the board, and make them part of annual board activities.



The **Ottawa-Carleton Catholic District School Board**, with the help of parents and community agencies, has developed a program to increase parent engagement, called *Parents as Partners in Education*. This program features a series of 15 workshops aimed at helping parents and guardians with literacy and language barriers better help their children succeed in school. The workshops meet the needs of all parents, but are especially valuable for those with literacy challenges or who are new to Canada. They are in plain language, and encourage greater involvement of hard-to-reach parents.

The *Parents as Partners* program can be used by any school board or community agency, and includes guidebooks and great tips and resources. It was funded by The National Literacy Secretariat and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. To learn more, contact Joanne MacEwan, jmacewan@sympatico.ca.

The Ontario government has released a video, *Eating Well Looks Good on You*, in partnership with David Rocco, a celebrity chef on the Food Network. The video shows Rocco preparing a lunch from fresh, Ontario-grown ingredients with help from high school students. It's part of a pilot project promoting the value of healthy cooking and eating to students in Ontario. It also provides recipes using fresh, locally grown food. Secondary schools across Ontario have received a copy but you can see it online at www.ontario.ca/healthyschools.

Nominations are open for the **Premier's Awards for Teaching Excellence**. Parents, students, educators and community members can nominate an outstanding educator or support staff member for an award. There are six award categories: the year's best teacher, new teacher, support staff, education leader, teaching team, and for lifetime achievement. The nomination deadline is January 31, 2009. Over the last two years, more

than 2,000 nominations have been received and more than thirty educators and support staff have been recognized with this prestigious award. Make your nomination at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/teachingawards/howtonominate.html>.

Lakehead Public Schools hosted its second "School Council Kick-off" evening in October, jointly supported and planned by the Parent Involvement Committee and the Council of School Council Chairs. Information sessions covered new fundraising policies, parent engagement, and school council challenges, and included many opportunities for networking. With almost 200 people in attendance, the learning, dialogue, and sharing was amazing!

For parents of post-secondary students, the province is giving college and university students a **\$150 textbook rebate**. Ontario's annual Textbook and Technology Grant (TTG) helps full-time community college and university students pay for textbooks and computer costs. In the 2008-09 academic year, this grant is \$150 per student. The amount of the annual grant will increase to \$300 a year when fully implemented. Students receiving OSAP loans will get the rebate automatically; everyone else must apply online. To apply for the rebate, go to: <https://osap.gov.on.ca/cgi-bin/lansaweb?procfun+proc0809+au10809+OSP+eng>

Questions about school? Give us a call! People for Education Parent Support Line: 1-888-534-3944

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Together, we can make public education in Ontario great!

When you become a member you will:

- receive a subscription to the People for Education Newsletter (5 issues), and first notice of People for Education events.
- receive information about Ontario's publicly funded schools, new education policy, and the latest education research.
- join a dynamic organization with ten years experience advocating for strong public education in Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools.
- help bring parents' voices to government education policy tables.

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