*"Be more concerned with your character than with your reputation,
because your character is what you really are, while your
reputation is what others think you are."*

– John Wooden

A Character Crisis?

The word "character" can be defined in a variety of ways. Some define it as "the inward values that determine outward actions" (*CharacterFirst*). Others define it as "a pattern of behavior, thoughts and feelings based on universal principles, moral strength, and integrity – plus the guts to live by those principles every day" (CITRS). Underlying these slightly different definitions is a consensus that **character is the mental and moral framework that guides a person's behavior**.

Today, however, the character values that have long defined us appear to be increasingly at risk. Honesty. Integrity. Responsibility. Accountability. Self control. Respect for self and others. Respect for the law. An understanding of the difference between right and wrong. Fairness. Compassion. Gratitude.

In fact, a landslide of evidence suggests that we are facing a "character crisis" unimaginable even one generation ago. Consider the following.

- ❖ ***Lack of individual integrity.*** Students today often think they have good character, or at least understand its importance, even while they are being dishonest. In a recent survey by the Josephson Institute, which developed the CHARACTER COUNTS! program, *91 percent of the students surveyed said that they were satisfied with their own ethics and character, and 97 percent said it is important to be a person of good character. Yet 70 percent admitted they cheat in school.* This suggests a lack of personal accountability and a "rules don't apply to me" mentality that can be corrosive to society.

  Today, most students in the U.S. are not intentionally and systematically taught in schools to make honest and ethical choices. Instead, they are taught to maximize their performance – to achieve good grades, high test scores, and athletics wins – without the balance of moral character instruction. These students then go to college and into the work world believing that being successful is more important than how the success is achieved. Eventually, this leads to many of the ethical breakdowns we have seen across major industries in America over the past decade.

- ❖ ***Early arrests.*** A report released in January 2014 by the journal *Crime & Delinquency* found that by age 23, *nearly half of black males, 44 percent of Hispanic males, and 38 percent of white males have been arrested*. By that same age, arrest rates are 20 percent for white females and 18 percent and 16 percent for Hispanic and black females, respectively. Although these arrest statistics include traffic crimes and other less serious charges, the study found that when young adults have criminal histories, they are far less likely to find work, go to school, and fully

participate in their communities. It is often extremely difficult to recover from this type of setback and find a healthy, productive path to adulthood.

❖ **Violence.** *Sixteen million U.S. adolescents – including 70-95 percent of children in our inner cities – have witnessed some form of violent assault, including robbery, stabbing, shooting, murder or domestic abuse*. The entertainment and media culture exploit this reality: The typical American child views 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on TV and in the movies before they even finish elementary school.

Although rates of youth homicide have declined substantially since the mid-1990s, *homicide remains a leading cause of death among U.S. youth aged 10-24 years.* Violence is also a major cause of nonfatal injuries among youth. In 2011, more than 700,000 young people aged 10-24 years were treated in emergency rooms for nonfatal injuries sustained from assaults. No state or community is immune to the devastating impact of youth violence. Ironically, the Josephson Institute reports, the character trait "respect" – or, more likely, disrespect – is often misused in our culture as the justification for violence.

❖ **Drinking, drugs, depression, and other warning signs.** *Binge drinking* – consuming five or more alcoholic beverages in a row in the past two weeks – *was experienced by more than one in five 12th graders* in 2013, according to the Center for Disease Control's annual youth risk behavior survey. Nearly a fourth of students nationwide reported using marijuana in the past 30 days, and 22 percent were offered, sold, or given an illegal drug by someone on school property during the past year. One in five students in the U.S. reported having been bullied on school property at some point during the past year; 10 percent of students had been hit, slammed or injured with a weapon while on a date; and 7 percent of students were forced to have sex when they did not want to do so. Thirty percent of high school students in 9th-12th grade reported signs of hopelessness and depression, and *17 percent had seriously considered suicide.*

❖ **Teen sexuality.** Although teen pregnancy rates have declined in the U.S., *our nation still has the highest rates of teen pregnancy, birth, and abortion in the industrialized world*. In fact, the U.S. teen pregnancy and birth rates are nearly double Canada's, more than four times those of France and Germany, and at least eight times that of Japan. Children of teen mothers are 50 percent more likely to repeat a grade, perform worse on standardized tests and, ultimately, are less likely to complete high school than children of mothers who waited to have a baby.

Research abundantly proves that children's life outcomes – measured by education, employment, and life stability – are better if they grow up in homes with two parents. But this is rapidly becoming the exception, not the norm, for an entire generation of American children, so it is more important than ever before to have schools and after school programs that can meet this need.

These are not just abstract statistics. They describe the world our children are growing up in and the behaviors they are exhibiting. Today, there are approximately 73.7 million American children between the ages of 0 and 17. Over the next 10 to 20 years, these young people will grow up to become the next leaders of our nation's schools, businesses, churches, and governments. They will become teachers and parents. They will provide our medical care, manage our investments, make our laws, police our streets, build our bridges, and fight our wars. The young people of today will be called upon to create employment, care for the poor and elderly, cure diseases, solve global problems, and give of their time and money to create healthy communities. The question is, ***will they have the moral and ethical framework to assume these responsibilities?***

Some people make poor life choices – dishonest business practices, affairs, abandoned families, drunk driving, drug use, gangs, murder, or simply cheating on tests – that harm themselves, their families, and their communities. Yet others in similar circumstances remain strong and courageous, choosing to live trustworthy lives of honesty, integrity, dependability and self-control. *We have the ability to influence outcomes by helping our children learn and adopt positive character traits from the earliest age.*

<h3 style="text-align:center; color:red">Character education is a game changer – and a life changer.</h3>

Across America, a variety of foundations, universities and research institutions, nonprofits, schools, philanthropic leaders, and respected youth programs have demonstrated that when children and youth embrace and exhibit a set of values and behaviors loosely bundled under the term "character," their life outcomes improve and society can benefit significantly as a result. In fact, there is empirical evidence that by embracing these moral principles and behaviors and holding up positive character traits as desirable, a social group can halt or reverse some of the more destructive trends at play in America today.

> *"Promoting social-emotional and character development of children is the best opportunity for innovation in education. It is accessible, feasible, sensible, cost-effective, within our grasp and supported by evidence."*
>
> **Maurice Elias**
> Professor at Rutgers University
> Lead Investigator, *Developing Safe & Civic Schools Initiative*

The question, therefore, is *how can we advance character education?* Several organizations in the United States have implemented systematic character education programs that are achieving significant and dramatic results, as evidenced by improved academic achievement and reduced negative behaviors and attitudes.

Respected researchers, such as Dr. Richard Lerner of Tufts University, are also gaining a much clearer understanding of how young people develop good character across time and through families and organizational interactions. This understanding – resulting from a collaborative partnership with numerous educational and nonprofit institutions – will lead to even stronger evidence-based character development programs in the near future.

<h3 style="text-align:center; color:red">Schools have a powerful role to play ...</h3>

Because of the amount of time children play in school and the strong influence that teachers, principals, and peers have on children during the school day, schools with positive, character-building cultures can make a dramatic impact on children. Some of the most effective school initiatives are described below.

The **Character Education Partnership** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nonsectarian coalition of organizations and individuals committed to fostering effective character education in our nation's schools. Through educational opportunities and through its National Schools of Character assessment and recognition program, CEP helps create safe, caring and respectful schools where students flourish academically and do the right thing. Comprehensive character education can be effective in any school setting, as the CEP's National Schools of Character demonstrate.

Positive Action, launched more than 30 years ago, is an educational program that promotes students' interest in learning and encourages cooperation. It works by teaching and

reinforcing the intuitive philosophy that you feel good about yourself when you do positive actions. Research studies have shown that the effects of the Positive Action program include increased academic achievement as well as dramatic reductions in problem behaviors, such as suspensions and absenteeism. These results have been replicated in diverse settings and feature the most rigorous efficacy study designs available.

Another successful character education concept that has spread across the nation since 1994 has been promoted by the **Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)**, a network of character-focused charter schools that serve 50,000 students in 141 schools in 20 states (plus D.C.). It began with the idea of creating a classroom that helped children develop the knowledge, skills, character, and habits necessary to succeed in college and build a better tomorrow for their communities. The school system's motto, instilled and reinforced relentlessly, is: "Work hard. Be nice."

The KIPP approach is rooted in the research of **Dr. Martin Seligman** (University of Pennsylvania) and Dr. Chris Peterson (University of Michigan), which identifies 24 character strengths as leading to engaged, meaningful, and purposeful lives. At KIPP, opportunities to develop character are infused throughout the school day. Building on a research partnership between KIPP NYC and **Dr. Angela Duckworth** (University of Pennsylvania), KIPP is now focused on seven predictive strengths: *zest, grit, self-control, optimism, gratitude, social intelligence and curiosity.* KIPP schools across the country are developing ways to integrate a more structured and measurable approach to character development.
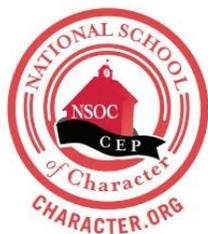
National Schools of Character
In Schools of Character, adults play a key role in modeling character for students. Teachers work together, and with parents and community members as partners, to positively shape students' social, emotional, and character development. Because the students in these schools feel safe, respected and connected to those around them, they thrive academically and socially and are motivated to give back to their communities.

Bullying is rare in Schools of Character, cheating and discipline problems decline, test scores, grades and homework completion go up, attendance and graduation rates are high, dropout rates are low, achievement gaps are narrowed, teacher retention and satisfaction are high, parent satisfaction and engagement are high, and student engagement is high. Schools of Character are impacting 695,000 students-plus annually through 248 Schools of Character and 18 National Districts of Character.

Perhaps the most widely implemented approach to character education, **CHARACTER COUNTS!**, is administered through the nonprofit Josephson Institute's Center for Youth Ethics.

A coalition of 850 member organizations and thousands of affiliated schools are engaged with this approach to character education, which involves training, materials, and consultation. The institute reports that it has positively impacted millions of youth through its framework of Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.

... and after-school programs can reach children in profound ways also.

Another highly effective opportunity for character development occurs when the school day ends. After-school programs bring children together with caring adults – Scout leaders, coaches, and many other volunteers and professionals who can make a tremendous impact on young lives. How many adults, when asked about those who made an impression on them during their growing up years, will instantly remember one of these exceptional people?

A few of the most effective after-school organizations include the following.

The Boy Scouts of America is one of the nation's largest and most prominent values-based youth development organizations. Today there are 2.7 million youth members and more than 1 million adult volunteers involved in scouting in the United States. BSA provides a program for young people that builds character, trains them in the responsibilities of participating citizenship, and develops physical fitness.

It is dedicated to helping build future leaders by combining educational activities with fun – and is focused on the premise that helping youth is the key to building a more conscientious, responsible, and productive society. Long regarded as the foundation program for the training of leadership and character to youth, the Boy Scouts live the Scout Law of being trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

Similarly, the **Girl Scouts of America** is dedicated to building girls of courage, confidence, and character who make the world a better place. By bringing girls together for fun and friendship, the Girl Scouts offer a wide variety of enriching experiences that include field trips, sports skill-building clinics, community service projects, cultural exchanges, and environmental activities.

Girl Scouting helps girls develop their individual potential, relate to others with skill and respect, develop values to guide their actions and provide a foundation for sound decision-making and improve society through their own abilities and cooperating with others. Today there are 2.9 million Girl Scouts in the United States – and 890,000 volunteer adults who work with them, primarily as volunteers.

Another newer, but very powerful after-school character education forum, the **Positive Coaching Alliance**, is a national nonprofit focused on youth sports and capitalizes on the tremendous power that coaches and parents can have in their interactions with children in sports.

With more than 40 million young athletes and 4 million adult volunteer coaches already involved, the opportunity to overlay teaching moments during practice and competition is great. PCA embraces this opportunity by striving to develop *better athletes and better people.* It focuses on providing all youth and high school athletes a positive, character-building sports experience – and works with parents, coaches, and young athletes to bring this about.

4-H is the largest youth development and empowerment organization in the United States, reaching more than 7 million 4-H youth in urban neighborhoods, suburban schoolyards, and rural farming communities. Through this engaging organization, children have rich and abundant opportunities for hands-on learning activities in the areas of science, healthy living, and food security.

4-H is dedicated to learning and understanding how its programs help youth become responsible citizens leading healthy and productive lives. Research shows that 4-H'ers are nearly 4 times more likely to contribute in positive ways to their communities – and exhibit similarly strong behaviors in areas such as healthy living, civic engagement, and academic achievement.

Can we make character education a national priority?

The United States was founded on principles that we still believe define what it means to be American. Yet these founding principles – and our role as a global powerhouse – are at risk of slipping away unless we look with clear eyes on the attitudes and behaviors that we are exhibiting as a nation today. Too many children are growing up without the role models who once held up strong character as the ideal and then reinforced its importance through their words and deeds.

There are many reasons for this. Perhaps the most profound reason is that the American family, which was the place where children learned positive values and behaviors, has changed so dramatically. In the 21st century, we therefore need to find new ways to raise children who understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values such as diligence, compassion, self-control, integrity, and fairness. Whereas these values may have been instilled at home in generations past, today it falls to schools and nonprofit organizations to nurture them in the children and young adults of America.

The initiatives described here have demonstrated the positive impact that character education can make in the lives of children from the earliest age. We must bring these and other initiatives to scale if we want to ensure that Americans will once again be defined by their grit, compassion, integrity, respect, curiosity, and self-control – and then translate these behaviors into their personal and professional lives. Although we can work through public sector institutions like school systems, the impetus for this change will almost certainly come from the independent sector, with the support of philanthropists who believe in the transformative potential a national character movement could make on the lives of 73.7 million children – and millions more who will be born or immigrate to the United States in the years to come.

Please join us.

The Hamlin Family Foundation founded **CITRS** *(Character, Integrity, Trust, Relationships and Success)* as a nonprofit, nondenominational organization to deliver customized, comprehensive character education programs and training in public, charter, and private schools, as well as after-school and out-of-school education organizations and other youth organizations. CITRS "teaches the teachers" how to teach character most effectively. *http://www.citrs.org/*

The **John Templeton Foundation** supports a broad range of programs, publications, and studies focused on the universal truths of character development from childhood through young adulthood and beyond. The qualities of character emphasized by Sir John in the Foundation's charter include awe, creativity, curiosity, diligence, entrepreneurialism, forgiveness, future-mindedness, generosity, gratitude, honesty, humility, joy, love, purpose, reliability, and thrift. The Foundation remains open to other possibilities for extending its activities in the area of character development, especially projects that deal with the relationship between culture (as expressed in beliefs, values, and worldview) and behavior. As Sir John emphasized in the "Laws of Life" that he saw as the key to character development: "When you rule your mind, you rule your world." http://www.templeton.org/

The Rebirth and Retooling of Character Education in America (Russell J. Sojourner, Director, Schools of Character)
While it is no doubt true that the American educational system was originally focused just as much (or more) on the development of student morality, virtue and citizenship as it was on improving student acumen in reading, writing and arithmetic, it is also true that by the middle of the 20th century, schools deliberately chose to back away from the traditional role as character educators. The full story of this shift is still being written, but there is little disagreement that moral deficiencies, destructive youth behavior and wasted potential are real and damage the welfare of our young and society as a whole. http://www.character.org/wp-content/uploads/Character-Education.pdf

Character Education, Prevention and Positive Youth Development (Victor Battistich, University of Missouri, St. Louis)
Schools today face enormous challenges in educating all of the young people in their charge. In addition to providing youth with basic academic knowledge and skills, and promoting their character development, schools have increasingly been called upon to play a primary role in helping to solve a variety of social problems among youth. http://www.character.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/White_Paper_Battistich.pdf

Character Development During the College Years: Why It's Crucial and How It Can Be Fostered
This position paper makes the case for intentional college level character development as the most promising way to achieve that goal. The paper cites examples of higher education institutions that are currently taking deliberate steps to prepare their graduates not only to flourish in the workplace but also to contribute effectively as ethical citizens of their communities, nation, and world.

Dr. Martin Seligman, a leading researcher in positive psychology and the author of ***Learned Optimism,*** espouses a theory that optimism is vital for a student's success in learning. He has incorporated this theory into two evidence-based classroom curriculums:

- ***The Penn Resiliency Project:*** This curriculum helps students develop the skills to think about their daily problems in a way that makes them possible to overcome. Teachers focus on the importance of slowing down the problem-solving process and considering the various ways that problems can be solved. Studies have shown this program to result in increased optimistic thinking patterns and decreased risk of depression and anxiety. http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/prpsum.htm

- ***Positive Psychology Center:*** This program helps students identify their strengths, and encourages them to use these skills as much as possible in their daily lives and to help others. Exercises include writing down good things that happen every day for a week and discussing why and how these events happened. Outcomes showed student improvement in social skills, strengths related to learning, school engagement, and self-control. http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/


Harvard's **Making Caring Common Project** seeks to help educators, parents, and communities raise children who are caring, respectful, and responsible toward others and their communities. The program hopes to encourage "these values to live and breathe in the day-to-day interactions of every school and home. We're working to make caring common." The website provides a variety of publications, resources, tips, and tools to help families and educational leaders promote social and emotional learning, prevent bullying and other forms of cruelty, and create cultures of caring and respect in schools.
http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=making_caring_common&tabgroupid=icb.tabgroup18192 4

America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2013 is a compendium of indicators depicting the promises and challenges in confronting our nation's young people. This report, the 16th in an ongoing series, presents 41 key indicators on important aspects of children's lives. These key indicators represent seven domains: family and social environment, economic circumstances, health care, physical environment and safety, behavior, education, and health. The indicators are based on substantial research and are measured regularly to show trends over time. *http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/*
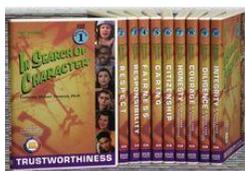
In Search of Character™ is a 10-video series for grades 6-12 that focuses on the 10 virtues most commonly named by parents, educators, and community groups concerned with character education. As the program description explains, "While each of these words evokes its own meaning, what counts most, like colors on a canvas, is the way they interact to paint a complete picture. In Search of Character™ is not about teaching individual virtues, it's about helping young people construct a vision of themselves as good people and then live up to that vision. It's about showing them that, in a world where poor character is so commonplace, they can choose to be better than that." Produced by Live Wire Media; 30 minutes each. http://www.livewiremedia.com/InSearchofCharacter