

Key to school improvement: Reading, writing, arithmetic ... and character?

December 30 2011

A study of 20 elementary schools in Hawaii has found that a focused program to build social, emotional and character skills resulted in significantly improved overall quality of education, as evaluated by teachers, parents and students.

The concept includes organized activities to build character that go beyond more traditional rules or policies to control or punish [problem behaviors](#). But it still takes only about an hour a week away from traditional education, and previous research has documented much lower numbers of suspensions, lower [absenteeism](#), and better reading and [math scores](#) on [standardized tests](#).

The latest study, being published by researchers from Oregon State University in the *Journal of [School Health](#)*, found for the first time that teachers believed this approach improved "overall school quality" by 21 percent, with parents and students agreeing in slightly smaller numbers. It was based on findings from racially and ethnically diverse schools, half using the program and half that did not.

"Improved social and character skills leave more time for teachers to teach, and students to learn and be more motivated," said Brian Flay, an OSU professor in the School of Social and Behavioral Health Sciences. "What we're finding now is that we can really address some of the concerns in our schools by focusing more on character in the classroom.

"These are not new concepts, they're the kind of things that have always

been discussed in families, church and social groups," Flay said. "A third-grade lesson, for instance, might be helping kids to understand how other people feel, to learn about empathy. That may seem simple, but in terms of educational performance it's important."

School quality, as defined in this research, includes a safe environment, involvement and satisfaction among individuals, student support, continuous improvement, standards-based learning and other features.

Past policies to curtail substance abuse, [violent behavior](#) and other problems have shown only limited results, researchers said in the study, in part because they don't address underlying issues such as student's sense of self and social attachment. The new trend being explored is what they call social-emotional and character development.

The program used in this research includes K-12 classroom curricula, a school-wide climate development component, teacher and staff training, parent and community involvement, continued positive reinforcement and other techniques.

Lessons include topics related to self-concept, physical and intellectual actions, managing oneself responsibly, getting along with others, being honest, and self-improvement.

The results have been impressive. Previously published results showed 72 percent fewer suspensions, 15 percent less absenteeism, and much better reading and math skills based on state tests. National tests showed a 9 percent improvement in these academic subjects.

"The current research supports the hypothesis that these programs can generate whole-school change and improve school safety and quality," the researchers wrote in their report. "The present study shows improvements in school quality were made by relatively

underperforming schools."

The findings suggest that schools, districts, states and the federal government should consider policies and funding directed toward social and character programs of this type, the researchers said.

Provided by Oregon State University

Citation: Key to school improvement: Reading, writing, arithmetic ... and character? (2011, December 30) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-12-key-school-arithmetic-character.html>

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