



December 22, 2008

Mr. Ian Bassin
Education Policy Working Group
Obama-Biden Presidential Transition Project

Dear Ian,

Thank you for the kind offer to submit recommendations to the Education Policy Working Group, after Parag shared with you a copy of my letter to President-elect Obama. Please know that I realize all of you are very busy yet fully committed to reforming education in our nation.

I also know that our new President will take swift and bold action in several important areas to improve schools. Toward that end, I applaud the direction he is headed—recruiting, retaining and rewarding good teachers, reforming NCLB, stressing academic achievement and supporting high-quality schools.

In addition to these important steps, I urge the new administration to develop strategies to improve school culture and student pro-social behavior. The problems are serious and must be addressed. Every day 60,000 students skip school out of fear of getting beat up...50% of high school and 25% of middle school students report the use or sale of drugs at their schools...64% of high school students admit to cheating...every 26-seconds, a young man or woman drops out of school. The list goes on. Yikes!

One strategy that addresses these areas, and more, is comprehensive character education. We know this to be true from over a decade of managing the National Schools of Character program. Consider these examples of great schools that stress core ethical values like respect, honesty and responsibility, as part of their fundamental missions:

- Newport Mill Middle School in MD dramatically narrowed its achievement gap. The number of African American students who scored proficient in math went from 34% to 76% in 2 years.
- Ridgewood Middle School in MO went from one of the worst performing schools in the state to one of the top 10 most improved. Disciplinary referrals went down by 70%, attendance rose to 95%, failure rates dropped to zero, parent conference attendance went from 44% to 75%.
- Hinsdale Central High School in IL lowered bullying and harassment incidents from 50-60 per year to about 10 per year and reduced vandalism incidents by 92%. This school, which stresses civic engagement and service, was recently named one of the top 5 high schools in Illinois.
- Wilton Manors Elementary School in FL raised its state rating from “D” to “A.” Their disciplinary referrals for aggressive behavior decreased by 80%, from 211 in 2002-03 to just 14 last year.
- Waterloo Middle School in NY increased passing scores on their state’s math exam by 49% and decreased serious offenses by 79% from school year 2004-2005 to 2006-2007.



We could cite numerous other examples from the many schools we have recognized for excellence in character development. For years, our organization has seen how a strong commitment to competence and character, coupled with good leadership, leads to a school environment where students and teachers flourish. All important indices move in the right direction, which is what our new President (and everyone else), wants from our nation's schools. Therefore, making character development a component of your broader plan will help achieve his goal to positively transform education.

The impact goes even deeper in support of our President-elect. He has rightly stated that we must restore America's moral standing. Nothing he does will have a greater, long-term, positive impact for our future. Every day, we hear and read about ethical failures and breaches of integrity. It is no wonder that Americans, and others across the world, have lost faith and confidence in our government. Bold Presidential leadership and strong emphasis on integrity will help restore trust in our government and improve our moral standing in the world. Emphasizing character as a core mission of schools directly supports that much broader and important strategic goal.

And, finally, the most important reason for doing what I've suggested is because it is the right thing to do. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education." President Teddy Roosevelt stated, "To educate a person in mind but not in morals is to education a menace to society." I believe President-elect Obama would agree with both respected leaders. We must graduate smart, and good, students from our schools—people who are more apt to become ethical and compassionate citizens, competent and honest employees, and trustworthy leaders of our communities, nation and world.

On behalf of the constituents I represent, thank you again for the opportunity to provide input to your policy group. In summary, making character education an important component of our new President's overarching plans for education will improve school culture and climate, allowing students and teachers to flourish. It will also help the President achieve all of his goals for transforming education. It supports his more important strategic goal to improve America's moral standing. And, it is the right thing to do.

All of us at CEP wish you, your working group and the new administration great success. If I can provide additional information on the above recommendation, feel free to contact me at (202) 296-7743 or at jmazzola@character.org. My staff and I stand ready to meet with you in person at any time to provide additional input on change that all Americans will genuinely believe in and support.

"The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next."

-- Abraham Lincoln

Sincerely,

Joseph W. Mazzola
Executive Director