

The Un-Common Core Curriculum: Character Education and Patriotism in Today's Schools: Article 7 of 8 in Series

“The liberties of our country, the freedom of our civil Constitution, are worth defending at all hazards; and it is our duty to defend them against all attacks. We have received them as a fair inheritance from our worthy ancestors: they purchased them for us with toil and danger and expense of treasure and blood, and transmitted them to us with care and diligence. It will bring an everlasting mark of infamy on the present generation, enlightened as it is, if we should suffer them to be wrested from us by violence without a struggle, or to be cheated out of them by the artifices of false and designing men.” Samuel Adams

I had the opportunity to travel to Washington D.C. a few years ago with prior colleagues to accept the highest honor bestowed upon a school in America, The National Blue Ribbon School Award, presented by the US Department of Education. During the ceremony, the microphone was opened to the floor and I had the chance to directly ask the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, the following question:

“One of the greatest responsibilities of public schools is to instill in our children a quality moral character. In the age of accountability, schools are held responsible by the federal and state governments for achievement in math and language arts, but not for achievement in character education or patriotism. Will there ever be a time in which the federal or state governments hold schools accountable for teaching our children the core character of our country?”

My question was in response to something I noticed during the awards presentation. In the application process for the Blue Ribbon award, each school was able to self-select an additional area of achievement within the school to highlight. I was not surprised to hear over and over and over again, a common underlying theme. Among the highest performing schools in the nation, a quality character education program was highlighted in nearly every school. Unfortunately, the Secretary's response was vague and discouraging. Since that time, I have asked the same question to the Missouri Commissioner of Education, and received a similar answer. I believe both individuals recognize the importance, of character education, but neither have presented a solution. Perhaps this is due to a lack of funding. Maybe it is absent due to a lack of support, or no sense of urgency among parents and citizens. The sad reality is, character education is on the back burner at the federal and state levels, and it is left up to the local school district leadership to move it to the front.

This year, West Platte has taken action to actively support the development of patriotism and character education within our students via two initiatives. This year, we adopted the theme, West Platte-An All American School. To kick off the year, we planned activities on the first day of school centered on this theme. Members of the Armed Forces were posted in uniform beside Humvees at the school entrances to welcome students back to school. Teachers donned faculty shirts reading “All American School” and planned activities focused on patriotism. Since that time, West Platte Students have participated in a number of service learning activities, none of which was more touching than the breakfast they prepared for our Veterans called, “In Praise of Age” on Veterans Day. Our choir and band performed a number of songs during our Veterans Day assembly in honor of past, present, and future service. Most recently West Platte students provided a Christmas Meal to local patrons at the Weston Masonic Lodge (among many less formal activities.) Altogether, West Platte is making continued efforts to ensure our students internalize patriotism, character education, and service beyond self.

The second of the two initiatives by West Platte this year is the implementation of a comprehensive character education program. West Platte has recently joined 80 Missouri schools and over 600 schools across the nation in the implementation of the CHARACTER*plus* model. This program, which originated in St. Louis, works to advance the cause of character education and sustain its impact on the lives of educators and students by:

designing, promoting and facilitating processes and best practices; serving educators and enhancing their commitment to character education; actively recruiting and developing community support; and continually evaluating the impact of our programs and services.

CHARACTER*plus* helps schools build a consensus about what values and character traits we teach and which approaches to use. Using the CHARACTER*plus* process, each school develops a character education curriculum and program that meets the unique needs of the school and community. Currently, a leadership team for character education is in the process of planning the implementation of this program during the Spring 2013 semester, and beyond.

Character education is the plate upon which all other pieces of the curriculum ought to be served, not just at West Platte, but at every school across our country. I am pleased that the West Platte Board of Education has identified character education and culture as being of utmost importance, and that the Board has directed our district toward continuous improvement in this area. I look forward to sharing more information about this program in the future and I invite you to join us in making this part of your focus at home. For more information on CHARACTER*plus*, visit characterplus.org.

Character education and patriotism have little to do with the Common Core State Standards Initiative of the 21st Century. However, character education and patriotism had everything to do with the Common Core State Standards of the 18th Century. At West Platte, we plan to address both for our students and community.

Seeking a World Class Education,
Jerrod Wheeler, Ed. D., Superintendent of Schools