

Integrating Character and Citizenship Education in Co-curricular and Extracurricular Activities

Chapter 8

“A school should not be preparation for life. A school should be life.”

– Elbert Hubbard

Schools have the potential to be places of community that intentionally foster and encourage a culture of character and citizenship. Co-curricular and extracurricular activities act as valuable catalysts for schools to create this sense of community. They provide students opportunities to experience both independence and interdependence—two ways of being that are necessary components of community and democratic membership.

Participation in extracurricular activities is associated with lower levels of high school dropout rates. Extracurricular activities help students feel more connected to their school community.

Skills for Life

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities offer a forum beyond the daily classroom experience for students to develop, practise and demonstrate new attitudes and skills, and to work at becoming both independent and interdependent in a variety of different contexts. They are also crucial opportunities for staff, parents and the larger community to model traits of character and citizenship, including:¹

- critical thinking, reasoning and problem-solving skills
- responsibility and the ability to apply ethical principles
- adaptability and flexibility
- critical interpersonal skills, including speaking, listening and the ability to be part of a team
- self-discipline, respect for the value of effort and understanding of the need for individual contributions
- excitement about life, and ability to set and assess goals for the future
- ability to make a commitment and persevere, even through challenges



Chapter 8

- understanding and respect for those not like oneself, including insights into diversity and the need for international perspective
- ability and willingness to empathize with the experiences and feelings of others
- conflict-resolution and negotiation skills
- honesty, integrity and belief in the “golden rule”
- ability to take responsibility for one’s actions.

In addition to supporting character and citizenship development, these skills and attitudes are identified by researchers as necessary for success in the workforce. The key is making activities integral to the larger school culture with character and citizenship education at the heart.

Sharing Stories

There are a wide range and variety of co-curricular and extracurricular activities that support character and citizenship education. Consider the following stories that schools and jurisdictions shared about their extracurricular efforts to support and enhance positive school culture.

Models of excellence

“Last year we asked our students to brainstorm examples of strong Canadians, beyond the school, who had achieved excellence in a variety of fields. In addition to having numbers on our classroom doors, every classroom now also bears the name of an individual ... the Roberta Bondar room, the Pierre Trudeau room, the Wayne Gretzky room, the Bryan Adams room, and so forth. We want our students to be surrounded by reminders of excellence as a way to inspire them to become contributing members of society.”

Inspiring goal setting

“We really encourage our students to set goals; to choose a direction, and then to plan and follow through. Twice each school year we host guest speakers—people who have set significant goals for themselves and persevered through a variety of hardships and obstacles in order to achieve them. Speakers have included a mountain climber, a long distance canoeist, an astronaut and a cancer survivor. All of their stories have been very inspirational for our students, staff and parents.”

Everyday heroes

“We have an ‘honor wall’ at the front foyer of our school. We hang our plaques for academic achievement there, and they date back almost 40 years. We also have similar records for our citizenship and sports awards so that our students get a sense of a long history of what is important to us.

We also have a section of the wall titled, ‘Everyday Heroes.’ We make special slips of paper available to staff and students so that they can make note of those who have made particular contributions to the school or wider community. It’s a nice way to celebrate character!”

Reflecting on values

“At our school we know reflection deepens learning so this September we began schoolwide character and citizenship education journals. Once a week all students spend fifteen minutes writing in their character education journal about the core value or skill we are working on. Students share their reflections in small groups and selected entries are read over the school’s public address system as part of daily announcements.

These reflections show that students are gaining an understanding of the core values and are seeing how these values and traits relate to their own behaviour and interactions with others. For example:

Perseverance

I showed perseverance on my last day of swimming lessons. We were teamed up to race. It was at Mill Woods Rec Centre. We swam in the deep end. When it was my turn I swam as fast as I could and on my way back I was so tired but I didn’t give up. I didn’t want to let my team down. So I didn’t stop and I made it.

– Grade 4 student

Fairness

I was fair when I was at the park. My friends and I were playing on the swings. I was on the swings for a long time. Other kids wanted to play on the swings too. I thought about it for awhile and said in my head, “I was on the swings for a long time already, besides there was other stuff to play at the park.” So I got off the swing and asked this little girl if she wanted to go on the swings and she did. I was fair when I let someone have a turn on the swings. Sometimes I’m fair and sometimes I’m not.

– Grade 4 student

Friendship

I helped my friend when she was on the low bar and I helped her down.”

– Grade 2 student

Chapter 8

Language of character

“At our elementary school, we believe that participation in extracurricular activities contributes to the total development of students. As a condition of participation, students are expected to demonstrate cooperation, respect, diligence, responsibility, fairness and generosity. We use the language from our character education in these extracurricular activities. For example, how can you show respect for the other soccer players both on your team and on the opposing team? Students that participate in our extracurricular activities contribute to a sense of community within the school.”

Running with kindness

“Our running club displays a kindness banner at all our meets and participants can earn kindness medals. When we are reinforcing the trait of sportsmanship, we remind students what it means to be a good sport and award a certificate to students who skillfully demonstrate this trait.”

Learning from the game

“As a team coach, you become an important part of many students’ lives. We see these students ten to 15 hours a week. Everyday that we see these students gives us an opportunity to talk about what character and citizenship means. Talking to them about being respectful will help them with their opponents, referees and spectators at a game. When the opportunity arises, be it a game, practice or team meeting, we take those teachable moments to reinforce character and citizenship. We read articles about character building, goal setting and responsibility and then discuss them with students. The resources *Value of the Game* by Bill Bradley and *Coaching to Change Lives* really help with the “mental part” of the game. We find that ideas from these resources help students improve their attitudes, communicate more effectively and contribute to team unity. Integrating character education into our team sports program allows students to experience what the game can teach us about becoming better citizens.”

Welcoming newcomers

“The student population in our school has traditionally been fairly stable and homogeneous. In recent years, however, we have seen newcomers from other parts of the globe, many of whom have had to flee their strife-ridden homelands because of war and unrest. The transition to a new way of life far from all that is familiar is an exciting yet difficult journey for them.

(continued)

Welcoming newcomers (continued)

In order to help students and their families adapt, the entire Francophone school community has stepped in to help. The school board has hired liaison workers to help families navigate the education system and to link them with other social agencies in the city. The school introduces new pupils at assemblies and student council has a buddy system in place for them as well. Our parent society pays for speakers from the home countries to speak to all students about their traditions and history.

We know these efforts to make a difficult adjustment somewhat easier have been appreciated. In return, new students and their families organize a day where they share elements of their culture, such as dance, food, music and clothing, with the whole school. Just as society at large grows richer and more diverse when people from all over the world choose to immigrate here, so are we privileged when they choose to join our Francophone community.”

Community service

“Our school’s industrial arts program took a special turn three years ago when the teacher decided to make the students’ yearlong assignment the construction of a house. With a loan backed by the local business association, they built the house from scratch on a vacant lot that belonged to the town. At the end of the year, the house was sold to a family in need for the cost of materials. That generated the funds to build the next house the following year. It’s amazing how much time and energy the students donate to the project outside of class time. They see just how important their contribution is—and we started way before reality television used the same idea!”

Cross-age partnerships

“There is real power in bringing together groups of students to learn from one another. I experienced this when I planned a service learning project that brought my class of grades 2, 3 and 4 students together with students from a hospital kindergarten program for students with severe special needs. What started as an opportunity for my students to read to students from another school on a one-time basis grew into a yearlong learning experience centred around respecting others and their differences. The students benefited from the relationships with their new young friends, and so did we teachers as we watched the interactions between our students. The volunteers who came along and assisted with our visits left with a new perspective on learning and the role of peers in that process. It is an experience that my students still remember, as do I, whenever I reflect on highlights in my career.”

Chapter 8

Developing a global perspective

“One of my goals as a teacher has always been to instill in my students a global perspective, a view of the world as being bigger than the school, home and community in which they live their lives. I want them to know that they can, in their own small way, make a difference for other children and communities, both locally and far away. A friend, teaching in Nicaragua, provided an opportunity to bring this point home. “We could use more books for the students to read,” she mentioned in one of our e-mails. The comment sparked an idea and I took it to my class. Before I knew it, we were writing letters to parents, members of the community and booksellers explaining our idea and asking if they would be willing to donate books. While we waited for the books to come in (and they did), we read about Nicaragua, talked about the education system there, and came up with questions to ask our two Nicaraguan guests who heard about our project and asked if they could come and speak with the students. A local service organization agreed to help us with the logistics and costs of shipping the 20 boxes of books we collected, and everyone was excited the day we travelled to the airport to help load the boxes onto the plane that would take them to Nicaragua. There was a sense of accomplishment and a recognition that they had made a difference in the lives of other students.”

Celebrating literature

“My Grade 4 students spend time each week reading in French to children from the daycare housed in our Francophone school. The young ones get a chance to connect in their own language with other members of their community. My students can celebrate French literature and share their talents with an appreciative audience. We all look forward to our special time together.”

Music connections

“Our school board’s commitment to French language programming includes providing authentic cultural experiences for our students with the local Francophone community. As such, we invited several Francophone high school bands to perform a concert for their peers in our French as a Second Language and French Immersion programs. Our students’ familiarity with French music was limited to traditional genres and its use as a language-learning tool. Imagine their surprise and delight to hear the music they listen to in their everyday world—ska, punk, rock—in French! Through music, both student communities were able to connect with the important reality that their commonalities are far more important than their differences.”

Celebrating languages

“Ours is a school that offers French Immersion and English-only streams, a dual identity we strive to honour in our school culture. During assemblies, students host in our two official languages, French and English. This practice publicly validates and celebrates both program choices within the larger school community.”

Sharing across the grades

“Every year the Division 2 students in our French as a Second Language program organize a schoolwide winter celebration in the spirit of a “cabane à sucre.” Part of the preparation involves visiting the younger classes to inform them of the delights of “la tire” and to teach them some fitting French vocabulary; “s’il vous plaît,” “merci,” “délicieux” and “bravo!” among them. Celebration days ring with voices small and large trying out their new words!”

Recognizing gifts

“Aboriginal people have always believed that differences in people are actually gifts from the Creator and that it is up to the community to guide each person in finding his or her gift and its value. To ensure that all our students are valued for their individual gifts as contributing members of our school community, all elementary students are placed on one of four teams. Each team consists of a mix of every grade and ability. The teams are named after a bird: the Condors, the Falcons, the Eagles, the Hawks. At noon hour, students have opportunities to play games and accumulate points for their team. This builds a sense of belonging, team camaraderie and value for each team member regardless of age, grade or ability.”

Celebrating the seasons

“At our school, each of the four seasons is celebrated with an Aboriginal feast. Invited Elders sit at the top of the circle, bless the food and share words of wisdom with the students. Students are encouraged to bring a feast bag, which consists of utensils and a bowl. This reinforces respect for Mother Earth as it discourages the use of nonbiodegradable products. Males sit on one side of the gym and females sit on the other side to complete the circle. Students recognize that males and females have different but equal roles, and these differences are acknowledged by having a special side on which to sit. Students also learn to wait patiently and listen to their Elders. Food is served but cannot be eaten until the blessing is complete. Students learn by watching and listening. The students learn the virtues of patience, respect, humbleness and gratefulness through feasts.”

Chapter 8

Sharing with gratitude

“At our school, morning prayers in both Cree and English are said over the intercom by different grades each week. This builds a sense of belonging to the school community, reinforces the importance of one’s language, and starts the day by appropriately thanking the Creator. The virtues of respect for one’s language, humbleness in the face of the Creator and sharing responsibility for schoolwide activities are learned through this simple daily ritual.”

Small school with a big heart

“We began the year in our small school by each class identifying a job they would do all year to make our school a more safe and caring place for all students.

- The Kindergarten students chose to look after the school’s lost and found box. Their special job was hanging found mittens on the clothes line above the box so students could more easily find their lost mittens.
- The Grade 1 students combined their school job with learning about the calendar in math class. They charted the birthdays of all students in the school. In small groups they made daily visits to other classrooms to sing “Happy Birthday” and deliver a birthday pencil.
- The Grade 2 students took on the responsibility of being the door holders at recesses and lunch times. They had noticed how the heavy doors of our older building often caused difficulties for smaller children. After two weeks on the job, they added “Greeter” to their title of door holders and began offering “Hellos” and “Have a good day” to individual students entering the building.
- The Grade 3 students took on the job of keeping the boot racks tidy and organized. They made signs for each class about where to stow their boots, and they offered friendly reminders to individual students to put their boots on the rack (after using role-plays to practise this). After noticing that some of the problems in this area were caused by overcrowded shelves, they successfully lobbied for the purchase of additional shelving.
- The Grade 4 students adopted the library area and they took turns reshelving books, changing displays and joining the Grade 1 class for shared reading sessions.
- Students in grades 5 and 6 looked after the bins of play equipment at recess. These students traditionally assume a leadership role in the school and they also made it their job to support and encourage the younger students. All grades worked together to show that our school may be small but it truly has a big heart!”



Student leadership

“Our school values leadership. We believe that leadership is not about us leading the students, but rather about the students leading. Three years ago, we decided to walk the walk and established a leadership program at our school. It was open to Grade 9 students who were interested in taking more of a leadership role and who wanted to make a difference in the school.

We started with a small and powerful group of students and it quickly became apparent that not only did they want to make a difference in our school, but they wanted to make a difference in their community, their city and beyond.

Much of our work with the leadership students, including a day-long retreat to kick off the school year, is centred around exploring the qualities of a good leader, including respect for the ideas of others, honesty, responsibility and courage to take a stand and try new things. Through the activities our students plan and carry out, from a schoolwide run to raise funds for cancer research, to serving a meal at a local inner-city soup kitchen, our leadership group models these traits for the students in the school and encourages them to reflect these traits in their daily lives as well.

What started as a small group of enthusiastic students three years ago has grown to a senior leadership group and a junior leadership group. Together they form a dynamic team that is making a difference in the lives of the students and other members of our school community.”

Celebrating community

“At our elementary school we use Halloween and Valentine’s Day as opportunities for cooperative learning activities with a character and citizenship focus. Rather than individual classroom parties, we organize cross-grade groupings of 12–16 students. Within each group younger students are paired with older buddies. Staff and parent volunteers set up a series of centres and students move from activity to activity with their group.

At Halloween we focus on global citizenship and use materials from UNICEF to create cooperative activities. The focus of Valentine’s Day is friendship and includes a variety of activities such as role-playing friendship skills, reading stories about good friends and learning new games to share with friends at recess.

Working cooperatively in cross-age groups creates opportunities for students to get to know students from other grades. We believe it fosters a stronger sense of community.”

Chapter 8

Mission-driven service

“In Catholic schools our service projects are mission-driven rather than task-oriented; meaning service is rooted in personal responsibility and centres around the question “What does this mean for the world?” Such projects include the Terry Fox Run in the fall and collecting food donations for the local food bank at Thanksgiving. One class organized Coats for Kids; over 125 coats were collected and donated to inner city children.

In the new year, our projects will include a snow shoveling blitz for the elderly and infirm in the neighbourhood and our students reading to inner city primary school children. There is a great pride at our school at how our staff and students have entered into the spirit and practice of service to others.

Each project is celebrated within the context of a liturgical prayer celebration. The service encourages actions from the students that promoted social responsibility, human solidarity and common good. In other words, students not only contribute financial support and goods to those less fortunate but they also prayerfully reflect on hope, peace and justice. In loving and serving others, students live the gospel values of faith, hope and love.”

Beginning and ending with prayer

“In a faith-based school, prayer begins and ends the day. The language of prayer is woven throughout all the events and curriculum facets of the school day.”

Cultural Consideration

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities are important venues for expressing and strengthening school culture. These activities provide rich opportunities for developing elements of culture including artifacts, ceremonies, traditions, celebrations, heroes, symbols, language and stories. The following questions may guide planning for activities that promote a culture of character and citizenship.



- Which values and traits are to be promoted and rewarded through extracurricular and co-curricular activities? How will their importance be communicated and modelled for common understanding among students, teachers, parents and the community?
- What symbols signal what is valued, promoted and rewarded in the culture (e.g., trophies, certificates, photographs, artworks)? How will these be displayed? How will their importance be communicated?

- Who are the heroes and what is significant about their achievements? How will the extracurricular and co-curricular activities teach about these heroes? How will they encourage students, staff, parents and community members to embody the qualities of the heroes, or to become heroes themselves?
- What traditions, ceremonies and other events are celebrated? How is their significance shared for common understanding? How do these events promote character and citizenship?
- What stories are told to illustrate, uphold and advance the goals of character and citizenship development? Who tells the stories? What opportunities exist for new stories to become part of the school's history?
- How will opportunities be created and presented that will allow students to experience both independence and interdependence?
- How will this activity further broaden goals of the school in relation to character and citizenship development?

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities provide opportunities for students to demonstrate, in a real world context, what they have learned about character and citizenship. If educators are clear about what they wish to see and hear, how they will recognize and reward positive demonstrations, and how these activities will enhance the school's culture, then these activities are much more likely to have a positive impact in terms of character and citizenship growth.

Endnotes

1. Uchida with Cetron and McKenzie 1996.

