

Legislative Analysis



CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

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Senate Bill 222 (as passed by the Senate)

Sponsor: Sen. Valde Garcia

House Committee: Education (Motion to Discharge)

Senate Committee: Education

First Analysis (12-8-04)

BRIEF SUMMARY: The bill would require the Michigan Department of Education to develop and make available to school districts model character development programs for the 2004-2005 school year. A school board or charter school board of directors would be encouraged to provide a comprehensive character development program for students in each grade level at the school.

FISCAL IMPACT: The Department of Education would face increased costs due to this legislation. Specifically, the department would see increased labor costs for those employees necessary to develop and disseminate a character development curriculum, and there would be associated research, development, and distribution costs.

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Parents and other visitors to schools sometimes complain about the lack of decorum students display in the hallways or in class. Students may swear, talk back to their teachers, and verbally abuse each other. Teachers also report that some students lie and cheat, bully each other, or display an apathetic, defeatist attitude. Schools' attempts to address these problems vary widely. Some implement stronger disciplinary measures, while others clean-up, restore, and brighten the school building to create a climate less conducive to violence and disrespect. In elementary schools, some teachers hold class meetings in which students develop class goals and ground-rules for behavior. Middle and high schools may divide their students and faculty into smaller units ("teams" or "houses") to lessen the anonymity that can contribute to students' disrespectful behavior.

Other schools, however, have implemented character education programs. According to the Character Education Partnership (CEP), the goal of character education is to "create a total school culture in which all people in the school...treat one another with kindness and respect" (*Education Week* 9-12-01).

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) has developed a model character education program with federal funds, and has piloted this curriculum both in Grand Rapids, and in four schools in the Macomb Intermediate School District. It has been suggested that the MDE make this model character development program, or similar programs, available to all school districts, and encourage school officials to adopt and implement them.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would amend the Revised School Code to require the Michigan Department of Education to develop and make available to school districts and public school academies one or more model character development programs for the 2004-2005 school year and succeeding school years. A school board or the board of directors of a public school academy would be encouraged to provide a comprehensive character development program for pupils in each grade level it operated.

The character development program would have to meet all of the following requirements:

- Be similar to the Michigan Model for Comprehensive School Health Education Character Education Curriculum, the Character Counts Program, the Character First! Education Series, or the Character Unlimited Program.
- Be secular and research-based, and have documented effectiveness.
- Be based on the principles of effective character education published by the National Character Education Partnership.
- Teach core ethical values and character qualities such as honesty, fairness, kindness, courtesy, compassion, acceptance, responsibility, respect for self and others, respect for the property of others, and service to others and to the community.
- Be designed to encourage each pupil to become a responsible, contributing member of society.

In addition, the bill specifies that the program should be incorporated, as much as possible, into each school's regular curriculum and classroom instruction, and should be integrated into each school's procedures and environment to develop a school climate that promoted positive character traits.

MCL 380.1163

HOUSE COMMITTEE ACTION:

The members of the House Education Committee did not act on Senate Bill 222. A motion of intent to discharge the committee was given to the House on December 7, 2004. **The Information in this analysis is derived from the Senate Fiscal Agency's analysis dated 3-30-04.**

ARGUMENTS:

For:

According to CNN.com (April 5, 2002), a national survey by Rutgers' Management Education Center found that 75 percent of high school students had engaged in serious cheating, and that more than half had plagiarized work they found on the Internet. Many students reported that they cheated to get ahead, to save time and energy, or to pass a class, according to the CNN article. More disturbing, many students found little wrong with cheating and plagiarizing, and were quick to rationalize their behavior.

A successful character education program allows for an open discussion about the prevalence of cheating, and, rather than preaching or telling students not to break the rules, challenges students' assumptions, behaviors, and choices. Here, character education departs from "values clarification", a popular educational movement of the 1970s, which taught students to identify their values, but shied away from challenging those values against societal standards. As a result, students learned to focus on themselves, and teachers avoided having to take a stand, since every issue could be reduced to how one felt about an issue. Character education also departs from the teaching of manners, from praising and rewarding students for good behavior, and from motivational assemblies.

According to the website Good Character.com, a resource for character educators, the following principles guide many character development programs: 1) one's character is defined by one's actions, not by what one says or believes; 2) every choice defines a person; 3) good character requires doing the right thing, even when it is costly or risky; 4) one can choose to be better than the worst behavior of others; 5) what one does matters, and one person can make a big difference; and 6) the payoff for a good character is that it makes one a better person and makes the world a better place. According to the CEP, character education goes beyond teaching compliance to rules and hanging banners promoting the value of the day. A successful character education program engages a student's mind, heart, and conscience in an attempt to create a more humane and healthy society.

The bill would promote three comprehensive model character education programs to assist schools with launching their own programs. The model programs advocate the teaching of the core ethical values listed in the bill: honesty, fairness, kindness, courtesy, compassion, acceptance, responsibility, respect for self and others, respect for the property of others, and service to others and to the community.

Against:

Character education should begin in the home, and be taught primarily by a child's parents. Values are, after all, subjective, and to entrust their teaching to numerous school personnel would inevitably lead to conflict over their meaning. For example, behavior that is praised as independence by one teacher might be condemned by another as rebellious. Further, a school's primary mission is to educate students in academics. Schools already are bogged down with enough requirements, and it would not be fair to ask them to take on one more responsibility outside of the core subject areas. Last,

teachers are the best educators of character when they behave in a way that sets an example for their students, not when they are verbally promoting fairness, compassion, justice, or any other number of abstract concepts.

Response:

The bill proposes clear criteria for any character education program the Department of Education would offer to local districts, including requirements that it be integrated into the school's regular curriculum and classroom instruction, be research-based, and have documented effectiveness. An effective program, according to the numerous organizations that promote character education, recognizes that actions are more important than words. These programs advocate service learning, where students volunteer in their communities, and teach students how to stand up for what they believe in. While molding a child's character does begin (or should) in the home, it does not end there. Children spend a good deal of their lives in school, and it is important that there they continue to learn how to get along with one another, be honest and trustworthy, and, ultimately, improve their lives and their world. Further, instead of threatening academics, character education may increase student performance in academic subjects. According to the Character Education Partnership, teachers report that literature, social studies, and science become more interesting to students when they are taught to examine the social and ethical issues embedded in the subject matter.

POSITIONS:

There are no positions at present.

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