

# MASSACHUSETTS CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## BEST PRACTICES IN CHARACTER EDUCATION

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**PIONEER INSTITUTE**  
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH

**White Paper No. 149**  
June 2016

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How to best equip children with the predispositions, habits, and skills that comprise “good character” is a question with which educators have wrestled since the inception of the common school. While definitions of character have broadened over time (for example many practitioners now understand character to include not only moral values but also the habits of mind that enable students to persevere and succeed academically), the “how” of character education remains a mystery to many. Decades of studies of character education show mixed results: some character education curricula and initiatives have been shown to have little or no impact while others aid in the reduction of anti-social behaviors, such as school violence, bullying, and even chronic absenteeism. When implemented well, studies find, well-conceived initiatives can also promote pro-social behaviors, such as helping and supporting peers or learning from failure.

In the current outcomes-oriented K-12 education culture, the performance aspect of character (having an achievement orientation, persisting through and learning from failure, or what some call “grit”) receives ample attention. Some high-performing charter schools, especially, have been highlighted in the national media for their emphasis on helping students to cultivate these qualities in themselves. But this renewed focus on what Davidson and Lickona have called “performance character” is narrow. It fails to acknowledge the ways in which these schools are enhancing their overall character education curricula, curricula that also focus on helping students to become kind, caring, and contributing members of their communities.

As part of a series of papers highlighting best practices in the charter sector, this paper looks at two high performing Massachusetts charter public schools: Abbey Kelley Foster Charter School in Worcester, MA and the Brooke Charter School Network of Boston, MA. Both organizations take different approaches

to character education, but each is explicit: students know what faculty and staff consider “good character” and they are asked to think about it, talk about it, write about it, and display it every single day. Furthermore, each school understands that students’ character education needs evolve over time—a kindergartner may need to learn about fairness or sharing, whereas a fifth-grader may need to think about how to become a positive, contributing member of a wider community. For this reason, each has a curriculum that honors how students “grow” into different aspects of character. Finally, both schools understand that educating for character is an “all hands on deck” endeavor. From administrators, to faculty, to staff, the adults in these schools have a shared understanding of the kind of students they want to graduate, even if individual adults have the liberty to experiment with the “how” of character education.

Drawing from observations, interviews, and analyses of school documents and student data, this paper describes not only how these two schools attempt to strike a balance between educating for “moral character” and for “performance character,” but also the impacts that each school’s character education initiatives have had on its students and communities. From higher parent and student engagement to lower suspension rates, the two schools profiled in the following pages can be valuable models for other schools—charter and traditional public alike—hoping to rethink or simply refresh how they educate for character.

## INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS CHARACTER EDUCATION AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Despite overwhelming evidence of their success, charter schools remain a controversial education reform in Massachusetts: whether to lift the cap on charter schools in low-performing school districts is the topic of an ongoing, heated debate. The concept of character education also generates controversy in some corners. Although most parents and educators agree that schools should help to form upstanding citizens—young people who are persistent and display behaviors associated with high moral character—the idea that schools should explicitly “teach” character prompts questions, such as “whose idea of character should we teach?” and “to what extent does teaching character intersect with the teaching of religious ideals?”

Aside from being controversial, charter schools and character education intersect in other ways. First, many charter schools—in Massachusetts and beyond—distinguish themselves based on a specific approach to character education. Several years ago, Boston University Professor Scott Seider dedicated an entire book to describing what different approaches to the teaching of character look like in three high-performing Boston charter schools.<sup>1</sup>

Second, some charter schools, namely KIPP and other “no excuses” charters, have become known for an explicit approach to teaching “performance character,” or “values and virtues that foster persistence, academic excellence, and an overall work ethic that helps students to succeed.” Paul Tough described this approach in his very successful 2011 book “How Children Succeed.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the reasons that charter schools have become associated with character education is that, by definition, these schools must offer a distinctive approach to education. In Massachusetts especially, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) (the sole charter authorizer) requires charter

applicants to outline a clear mission and vision that will serve as the basis of every charter’s proposed educational approach.<sup>3</sup> Many charter schools choose to incorporate a specific vision of the type of person they would like to graduate—a plan for how it will form people of character can be a central part of a founding school board’s application.

Why should a charter school authorizer or a school board care about character education? Especially in an era where an emphasis on academic results lends urgency to the often grinding day-to-day work of schools, it can be difficult to argue that the explicit teaching of character should be front of mind. For many schools, it is not. In his introduction to Seider’s book, *Character Compass*, Howard Gardner notes:

Except for mission statements, the character of young people—their behavioral, ethical, and moral facets—is not and has not been on the national radar screen. The formation of good character receives little more than lip service in the educational institutions our youth attend, the admissions tests and folders they present, the grades they receive in university or graduate school, and the hurdles they face as they ascend the institutional or corporate ladder . . . it is high time to direct our focus elsewhere—to a educational system that places at its center the development of good character.<sup>4</sup>

What Gardner understands and Seider goes on to explain is that the “development of good character can have benefits for students that extend far beyond their school experience, impacting academic and life outcomes for years to come.” Character education researchers Marvin Berkowitz and Melinda Bier<sup>5</sup> explain those outcomes, describing that effective character education

has been demonstrated to be associated with academic motivations and aspirations, academic achievement, pro-social behavior, bonding to school, pro-social and democratic values, conflict-resolution skills, moral reasoning maturity, responsibility, respect, self-efficacy, self-control, self-esteem, social skills, and trust in and respect for teachers. Furthermore, effective character education has been demonstrated to reduce

absenteeism, discipline referrals, pregnancy, school failure, suspensions, school anxiety, and substance use.

These impacts of effective character education have been confirmed by several studies of different character education initiatives. Studying a character education initiative called “Positive Action,” Oregon State University researchers found that participating students achieved “as much as 10 percent higher on national standardized math and reading tests.” They also found that suspensions among these students dropped by 70 percent and absenteeism fell by 15 percent. A separate evaluation of another initiative, the “Resolving Conflict Creatively Program” found that “of those participating in the program, 64 percent of teachers reported less physical violence, 75 percent reported an increase in student cooperation, and 92 percent of students reported that they felt better about themselves.” Finally, another study of a “character education intervention” published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that negative behaviors such as “substance use, low self-confidence, violence, and sexual activity” were significantly reduced for participating students.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, character education is only effective if, as Gardner notes, it is actually implemented. Character education works when it is well executed and integrated into the overall school experience. Character education cannot be an add-on or a one-off proposition, though all too often it is. One expert notes that parents “often see character education as fluff, because that’s often how it is taught—posters and worksheets.”<sup>7</sup> When character education doesn’t work, it is at best stilted and at worse meaningless. When it does work, it can cultivate predispositions and behaviors that provide the foundation for a successful life.

An unbalanced approach to character education can also be risky. Researchers Matthew Davidson and Thomas Lickona define character along two dimensions. One is performance character, mentioned above, which they define

as a “mastery orientation,” consisting of qualities such as “diligence, perseverance, a strong work ethic, a positive attitude, ingenuity, and self-discipline.” They define the second dimension, “moral character,” as a “relational orientation,” consisting of qualities such as “integrity, justice, caring, respect, and cooperation— qualities needed for “successful interpersonal relationships and moral conduct.”<sup>8</sup>

Davidson and Lickona argue that these two types of character are interdependent. When schools foster one to the exclusion or diminution of the other, they run the risk of cultivating citizens that are not well rounded. In one scenario, students who have experienced a heavy emphasis on performance character might believe in achievement at any cost, even if they have to do unethical things to get ahead. On the other hand, young people who live by a sound moral code but who are “unable to execute” their values in practice because they are disorganized or unable to persevere could be suffering from an education that emphasized moral character to the exclusion of cultivating a performance ethic.<sup>9</sup>

When character education is unbalanced, it is evident in not only a school’s outcomes but its structures as well. In the midst of the recent politicized debate over the charter school cap, some Massachusetts charters have been the topics of negative press about high suspension rates and discipline systems that have been compared to a “prisons.”<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that high suspension rates and disciplinary structures that rely upon stringent, codified expectations for behavior are not exclusive to the charter world. It is also likely true that schools of all types are relying too heavily upon disciplinary structures that support a performance ethic. Failing to “fit” a consequence to an infraction in a way that helps students to understand why what they did was wrong can result in an unbalanced approach to character formation.

As a way to share best practices, this report profiles two academically successful charter schools that place a high value on character



education and are taking an integrated and balanced approach to the work. This paper is part of a series on high-performing Massachusetts charter schools that are doing interesting things that have a positive impact on students and communities. These case studies were conducted with an eye to sharing best practices within and beyond the charter sector in Massachusetts.

The information included in this report comes from focus groups and interviews with school leaders, teachers, staff, and parents, classroom observations, and publicly available school documents.

### ABBY KELLEY FOSTER CHARTER SCHOOL

Abby Kelley Foster Charter Public School opened as a K-5 school in 1998. It has since grown to serve students in grades K-12, and remains one of only two charter public school options in Worcester. From the beginning, developing students of character who also achieve great academic results has been part of the school’s mission. The school’s curriculum emphasizes “self-respect, basic moral values such as honestly and integrity, and commitment to family and community.”<sup>11</sup> In recent years, students at Abby Kelley Foster (AKF) have kept pace with and, in some subjects, outperformed their peers in the sending district of Worcester on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) examination.<sup>12</sup>

In comparison to the Worcester Public Schools, AKF has more African-American students but fewer economically disadvantaged students, Hispanic students, and English language learners. General statistics on English language learners (ELLs), however, mask a comparatively dramatic increase in this population over time. In 2011, less than 2 percent of AKF’s students were classified as First Language Not English (FLNE) or English language learner (ELL). By 2015, those numbers had risen to 26.4 percent and 7.5 percent respectively.<sup>13</sup> The Worcester Public Schools have also seen an increase in these populations, though the overall increase at AKF has been slightly more dramatic.

AKF’s strong curriculum and academic results have made it attractive to Worcester families. As of FY 2016, the school had a waitlist of 538 students; once waitlisted at AFS, access isn’t easy for families. The school has a low overall attrition rate of 3.3 percent, which is about half that of the Worcester Public Schools (6.4 percent).<sup>14</sup>

The best practices in character education captured in the pages that follow specifically describe curriculum and practices at AKF elementary school (grades K-5). The organization began as an elementary school, and it is in these critical grades that it lays the foundations for moral and academic character that the organization believes help students succeed academically and in life.

### AN EXPLICIT APPROACH TO INTEGRATING CHARACTER

AKF’s elementary school is a looming presence. Housed in a converted factory building, it is located off a busy Worcester street, abutting a train track. Inside, the school is bright and light. It is covered with student work and reminders of what the school values. Ten core virtues are posted on various walls throughout the school. In some cases they are listed on posters and in many others they are captured in student handwriting or demonstrated through student work.

Character formation is such an important part of the school’s mission that AKF has

**TABLE 1. ABBY KELLEY FOSTER, AT A GLANCE, 2015-2016**

Total Enrollment (K-6)	143
% First Language Not English	26%
% Students with Disabilities	10%
% High Needs/Economically Disadvantaged	83%
Attrition Rate (All Students)	3%
Families on Waitlist (All Grades)	538
MCAS Student Growth Percentiles (Grade 4)	English 56% Math 33%

All data from: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, School and District Profiles: <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=04450105&orgtypecode=6&leftNavId=300&>



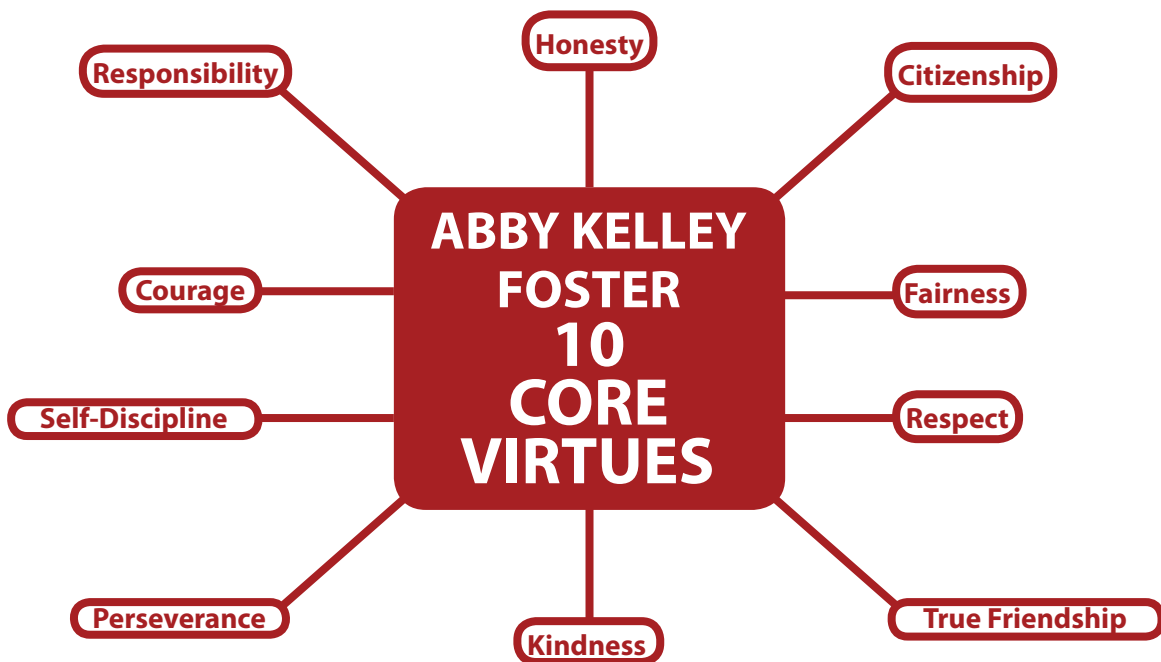
devoted significant resources to this aspect of its curriculum—resources that go far beyond investments in books and posters. The school has a faculty member, a character education teacher, whose only job is to integrate character education into the broader curriculum. It also has two guidance counselors dedicated to supporting students and staff in creating a school culture reflective of the virtues that the school teaches.<sup>15</sup>

Character education teacher Ginger Ferraro has worked with staff to develop a homegrown character education curriculum designed to meet student needs. She meets with students in grades K-4 every six days to “teach” about the school’s 10 core virtues in a manner that is aligned with what students are working on with their classroom teachers. The approach she takes is “literacy-based” and can include everything from conducting a “read-aloud” to evaluating essays on the core virtues with the support of classroom teachers.<sup>16</sup> When writing is a part of the character education lesson, the rubric on which students are graded is aligned with rubrics used for academic assignments. This approach to character education is representative of the school’s emphasis on integrating Ferraro’s curriculum with the academic curriculum

that students experience every day. The idea, notes second-grade teacher Kayla Harshaw, is that everyone in the school speaks a “common language” around character and academics. This common language, she says, has become “an expectation.”<sup>17</sup>

Beyond having dedicated time with students and collaborating with classroom teachers, Ginger Ferraro also takes the lead on creating opportunities for students to demonstrate the core virtues in action. During March, for example, students might focus on kindness, and teachers will help them record every time they have “filled a friend’s bucket” by doing a good deed.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, students might talk about perseverance in gym class or be asked to explain the connections between respect and caring for library books. With such an integrated approach, according to teachers, it becomes easy to help students draw parallels between their academic pursuits, their behavior as a member of the school community, and the behaviors through which they can display traits of performance and moral character. AKF librarian JoAnne Wiggins believes “there is always something to reinforce” for students.<sup>19</sup>

FIGURE 1



In one of the second-grade classrooms observed for this case study, students demonstrated responsibility and self-discipline in a manner that can be difficult for students of any age. Working alone, reading and writing, while some of their peers were in small groups or working with a teacher, the individual students demonstrated self-discipline by staying on task. When asked, they were able to cogently explain what they were working on and why. One student, when prompted, even took the time to explain why she likes her character education class and what a “virtue” is. “We learn about friendship in character ed,” the student said. “Virtue is like having respect and being honest.”<sup>20</sup>

Equipping students with such language around the core virtues is intentional on the part of the faculty as a whole. Teachers see it as a great boon to the school community when it has to navigate issues that arise in most schools. In the first grade, according to Principal Amy Emma, teachers might use the language of respect to help students understand why it is necessary to “keep our bodies to ourselves.” Older students, on the other hand, might use the language of friendship, kindness, or community to explore and better understand issues of bullying, for example.<sup>21</sup> To foster self-regulation, teachers walk even younger students through tough situations by asking them to “reason it out” for themselves. Notes teacher Kayla Harshaw, “we want students to be able to answer questions like ‘what does bullying look like? What does it mean to be a bystander when someone is bullied?’ Being able to put language to such situations, helps students understand the implications of their behavior beyond simply thinking about ‘What did this person do to me’ or ‘what did I do?’”<sup>22</sup>

The language students learn around character is not lost on parents. One AKF parent notes that her kindergarten son’s understanding of what it means to include others in play has become much more sophisticated since school started. Her son recognized, she says, that his friend couldn’t yet join the “club” of students who have lost a tooth. Even though he was happy to be a

part of that club, he didn’t think it fair that his friend couldn’t join, saying “the club is fun, but I can have fun playing with Matthew, too.” The parent attributes this remark and others to the approach to character education that AKF takes, one that she feels well acquainted with because of the substantial amount of parent outreach in which the school engages.<sup>23</sup> From monthly newsletters highlighting character virtues in action, to “positive” phone calls home at the start of each school year, the school believes parents are a “first line” in the school community, and it is “constantly working to have parents involved in the curriculum and the life of the school.”<sup>24</sup>

These examples of how AKF integrates character education into the lives of students and families are both intentional and tactical. According to Principal Emma, when students can speak the language of moral character, they are more able to solve problems when they arise. In recent years, as the school has invested time, energy, and resources into making character education part of the overall curriculum, discipline referrals have dramatically decreased. Perhaps more impressive is that the school’s suspension rate has been cut by 80-90 percent. “We’ve been able to do this,” Emma says, “because teachers and students know how to problem solve.” Fewer discipline referrals and suspensions means much more time in the classroom for students with behavior challenges and much less disruption during the school day for all students.<sup>25</sup>

**TABLE 2. ABBY KELLEY FOSTER, OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION RATES OVER TIME (ALL STUDENTS)**

2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
5.5%	2.4%	1.9%

All data from: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, School and District Profiles: <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=04450105&orgtypecode=6&leftNavId=300&>

Implementing structures for character education in a way that so profoundly affects students’ academic experience is one compelling argument

for explicitly teaching character in schools. But the structures in place at AKF seem to be so effective in part because they were borne of a philosophical shift in how the school thinks about student needs and supporting students with diverse experiences and challenges. “On a very basic level,” notes one teacher, faculty and staff have come to understand that students learn best when they “experience logical consequences for an action.” “It can be as simple as ‘you break it, you fix it,’” she says.<sup>26</sup> This thinking about the intersection of character and discipline in schools is rooted in the idea that when children are given a detention or taken out of class for misbehavior, they often do not realize why the offense they committed was wrong or somehow negative for the school community. “When an infraction occurs,” says Principal Emma, “we take the approach of figuring out an appropriate solution and address the specific behavior until the student understands and gets it right.”<sup>27</sup>

School leaders have come to believe so strongly in the effectiveness of the “logical consequences” approach, that they have invested additional human capital in making it work. The job of guidance counselor is something that is usually associated with high schools, but AKF has two guidance counselors to serve students in grades K-5. These counselors support teachers in implementing a “Responsive Classroom” curriculum and guiding students appropriately when discipline is necessary.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, when students have specific or ongoing behavioral challenges, the guidance counselors can provide one-on-one or small group supports. “If students are making bad decisions throughout the day that are negatively impacting a class,” says counselor Patrick Biggins, “I might take him or her for a walk to release some of that negative energy and discuss the behavior.” In other cases, the counselors might meet with small groups of students or even whole classes to help students work on ‘soft skills’, such as emotional regulation or appropriate social interactions, both of which are important aspects of performance character.<sup>29</sup>

Guidance counselor Kate Stockwell views her interactions with students as a support that deepens their learning and fosters academic success. Students must realize that “if you aren’t going to be safe in the classroom you can’t be in the classroom . . . and what are you going to learn if you aren’t in school tomorrow?” “These are such young children,” Stockwell says, “every difficult situation a learning opportunity.”<sup>30</sup>

Abby Kelley Foster Elementary has taken advantage of many of its own learning opportunities. Currently, it is a clear example of what Lickona and others would likely call character education that works. AKF’s approach to character education seems to work for three important reasons:

1. The school’s approach to character is clear, balanced, and linked to specific outcomes. In other words, the character education curriculum is explicit, and students understand how it can positively impact their lives.
2. The school has prioritized integrating character education into its overall approach. Teaching character is not an add-on at AKF, it is an integral component of an overall approach that seeks to cultivate young people who are both “smart and good.”
3. The school has chosen to invest in character development in a meaningful way: From human capital to curricular resources to creating intentional links with families and the broader community, AKF elementary has devoted substantial resources to character formation.

With its explicit and integrated approach to character education, AKF elementary has fulfilled that part of its charter related to character formation. It has also become a model for other schools seeking to align academics with the ‘softer’ aspects of student development—those that encompass both moral and performance values.

## BROOKE CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Brooke Charter Schools are well known to Boston families. The network has grown from one to four schools since the Commonwealth lifted the charter cap for low-performing school districts in 2010. Its three K-8 schools are consistently cited for high student achievement and student growth. In 2014, 7<sup>th</sup> graders at Brooke’s Mattapan campus had the highest growth on MCAS (math and ELA combined) of any school in Massachusetts. In the fall of 2016, Brooke plans to open its fourth school, a high school.<sup>31</sup>

In the Commonwealth’s eyes, Brooke has earned the right to replicate, and there are many factors that contribute to the organization’s success. Leading educational think tanks such as the *Education Trust*, for example, have profiled Brooke’s commitment to excellent teaching.<sup>32</sup> Cultivating and supporting excellent teachers is, however, just one part of an overall approach that helps to make Brooke successful. The content teachers deliver to students is another.

As any public school, Brooke is accountable for teaching to the state curriculum frameworks and preparing students for required assessments. But there are other homegrown aspects of Brooke’s curriculum that make it distinctive, including a clearly delineated and well-integrated character education curriculum.

## AN EVOLVING APPROACH TO CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Brooke Co-Director Jon Clark explains that when Brooke’s first middle school opened in 2002 there was no formal curriculum for or approach to character education. “We knew that we wanted to instill students with certain habits—we wanted to teach them how to carry themselves—but there was nothing documented or formal.” However, when Clark’s co-director for academics, Kimberly Steadman, opened the first elementary school in 2006, she developed character education standards that all teachers would know and integrate into their teaching.<sup>33</sup>

Brooke’s character education standards are anchored by the schools’ core values, which are focus, integrity, respect, self-determination, and teamwork.<sup>34</sup> The standards represent habits and ways of being that are associated with each core value. The standards are written in the first person, for children to understand, and they account for the developmental challenges children face at each stage of elementary and middle school.

The standards are also vertically aligned; as children progress in age and ability, so do expectations for their character development. In kindergarten, for example, the standards are very clearly focused on micro-behaviors that help young children to acculturate to the school

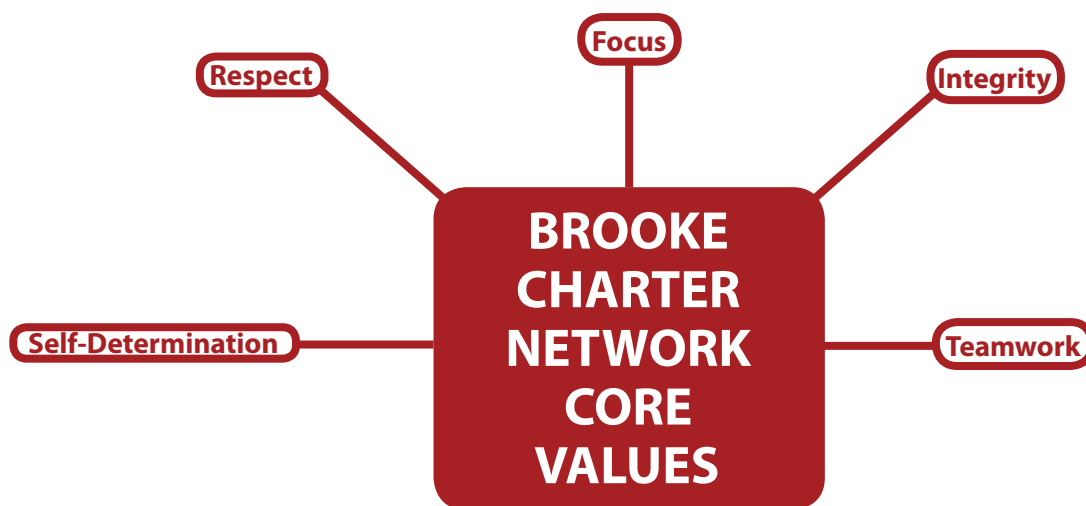
**TABLE 3. EDWARD BROOKE CHARTER NETWORK, AT A GLANCE, 2015-16**

	East Boston Campus	Mattapan Campus	Roslindale Campus
Total Enrollment (K-6)	500	488	510
% First Language Not English	71%	38%	17%
% Students with Disabilities	8%	10%	7%
% High Needs/Economically Disadvantaged	100%	100%	85%
Attrition Rate (All Students)	3%	2%	5%
Families on Waitlist (All Grades)	1,277	1,941	2,183
PARCC Student Growth Percentiles*	Grade 5 ELA: 86% Math: 89%	Grade 4 ELA: 65% Math: 89%	Grade 4 ELA: 59% Math: 72%

\*Students on Brooke campuses took PARCC instead of MCAS, the SGP provided is the MADESE translation.

All data from: Massachusetts Department of Education, School and District Profiles: <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/general.aspx?topNavId=1&orgcode=04570000&orgtypecode=5&>

FIGURE 2



environment (“I keep my body still during learning,” “I throw away my own trash at the right time,” “I talk to and play with everyone”). In the sixth and seventh grades, the standards help students to understand their relationship to the larger community and what it means to live by a moral code (“I do not get involved in gossip or drama, even when my friends do.” “I can articulate my fundamental beliefs and values.” “My code of ethics addresses the fact that I am part of a larger community.”) By the time students reach the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and are preparing to enter high school, the standards are still focused on aspects of self-control and respect, but for a more mature person (“I allocate my time in a way that aligns with my long term priorities.” “I am an effective team member when working on group projects.” “I regulate my own behavior and don’t depend on external rewards or punishments to do so.”).<sup>35</sup>

Brooke’s character education standards skew toward an emphasis on performance character, and the organization has reasons for this. First, as it has grown to serve more and older students, administrators and teachers have recognized the need to refine standards in a way that specifically addresses the needs of the student population.<sup>36</sup> Second, aspects of performance character are, arguably, easier to see and measure—and Brooke teachers do measure and provide feedback to

students about whether they are meeting the school’s expectations for character development. Clark points out, “standards and lessons are important, but they are only effective if they are taken to heart by teachers.”<sup>37</sup>

Observations at Brooke’s Roslindale campus revealed that character education is indeed taken to heart by the school’s faculty. During observations and interviews, teachers also spoke about the delicate balance between moral and performance character and different ways in which the balance can be achieved, some of which aren’t obvious at first to a casual observer.

Brooke students are explicitly reminded of the school’s character values on a daily basis, when they begin the day with a “morning motivation.” Morning motivation is a chance for the entire school community to come together, share information, and voice its goals and support for one another.<sup>38</sup> An increasing number of schools of all types are using these types of meetings as tools for building and maintaining a strong school culture. At Brooke, morning motivation helps reinforce the core values and allows students to recognize what they look like in action.

Operations Manager Elena Thurman explains that students might give “shout outs” to one another during morning motivation for doing



a good deed or getting a good grade. “Students and teachers recognize one another for academic and social accomplishments,” she notes, “and one of the best things is to see students react in a supportive way when one of their peers has done something well.” When teachers give morning motivation shout outs they often describe how they have seen one or more of the core values in action in a student’s behavior.<sup>39</sup>

Recognition of the positive choices students make and the positive impact those choices have on the community are explicit character education practices that carry over into the classroom. In one kindergarten classroom observed for this study, 14 children were using a mini basketball to do simple multiplication (“if each shot is worth two points and you made six shots, how many points do you have?”): as one student went up to take his turn at the basket, several others stood to cheer him on shouting “you can get it this time,” and then “we knew you could do it!” when he solved the math fact.

In a classroom of older students (sixth graders), the school’s character education standards came to life in the form of a chart on the wall called the professionalism scale. Teachers of older students can use the professionalism scale to give ongoing feedback to students about how their behaviors are perceived: Talking over others in the middle of a lesson might cause the teacher to move a student to “U” on the professionalism scale, for unprofessional. Being proactive about an assignment or deadline could cause a teacher to move the same student to “P” on the scale, for professional. On the day of observation most students were in the “N”, or neutral, category. This is because, Scott Knox, Brooke’s Chief Development Officer, explained, earning a “P” is taken very seriously. “When a student consistently shows professional behavior, he or she can earn a Brooke band (colored bracelet) that students like to wear in recognition of their performance.”<sup>40</sup>

As an explicit tool for the development of performance character, the professionalism scale

is a form of formative feedback for students. The ability for students to rectify unprofessional behavior and move to different parts of the scale speaks to the idea that Brooke’s teachers view character development as a process akin to academic development—students need to cultivate the ability to learn from failure, reset, and try again another time.

This culture of feedback is pervasive at Brooke, and it is easily seen in the emphasis Brooke places on teacher development. In two classrooms observed for this study (both on the same day), administrators were observing teachers to provide feedback on their lessons. A “growth mindset” is something Brooke attempts to screen for upon hiring teachers,<sup>41</sup> and not only because teachers who are willing to develop themselves help students produce better academic results. When students observe teachers working on themselves, trying new things, and getting better, they also observe some of the character traits the school wants to cultivate in them.

At the Roslindale campus, teachers’ attempts to refine the structure of classrooms have resulted in a major shift in the school’s practice. Seventh grade teacher Paul Freidman explains that he and his colleagues observed that Brooke’s seventh graders needed to work on relationship building and working in teams: “middle schoolers need to be known,” he says, “they like to feel a part of a tight-knit community.”<sup>42</sup> These observations led the seventh grade teachers to suggest to administrators that seventh graders spend most of their time in “semi-self-contained classrooms” receiving the majority of instruction with the same group of students and from a smaller number of adults. This structure runs counter to a more common middle school arrangement, where students switch from classroom to classroom and teacher to teacher each period.

The model itself is in some ways costly to the school. Notes Friedman, “it’s hard to find someone who can teach and who wants to teach both math and science, and it can be a struggle to find people and to train people to work with this

approach.” But the results of the semi-contained model, according to Freidman, have so far been promising.<sup>43</sup>

“It allows us to have the students work in smaller groups more consistently,” he notes, which allows not only for the right mix of students to do the right academic work together, but also for the students to learn how to regulate themselves and function as a part of a team. The semi-self-contained environment also allows teachers to forge very strong bonds with one small group of students, which can in turn allow teachers to explore more deeply with students issues of character that present themselves at this stage in cognitive development.

The kids are now like a big family, so when there is an issue we can just close the door and confront it. Right now, we are observing a lot of ‘catty’ behavior—students can confront one another and teachers can intervene from a hermetically sealed room. Addressing the issues head-on, in the moment, allows us to solve the problem before it takes away too much academic time.<sup>44</sup>

In part because this group of Brooke teachers was given the autonomy to try the semi-self-contained model, additional questions around how best to cultivate student character have come to the fore.<sup>45</sup> As Friedman and his colleagues have spent more concentrated time with students, they’ve observed that the students desire to have more freedom at school. Acknowledging that Brooke is a highly structured environment, teachers have begun to wonder what would happen if they gave students more freedom to make academic and social decisions, thus the content and practice of character development at Brooke continues to evolve.<sup>46</sup>

The evolution of the organizational approach to character at Edward Brooke, much like at Abby Kelley, has helped the organization realize improvements in some areas. For example, suspension rates at Brooke have gone down over time, something that the organization attributes to better messaging and acculturation.

Families expect a physically and psychologically safe environment for their children, and

suspending students is a necessary part of providing that. Over time, however, we’ve come to realize that if parents and students understand our values, structures, and systems up front then acclimation is easier. We realized that when students weren’t adjusting to our highly structured environment, we needed to do a better job of clearly communicating our behavioral expectations to them and to parents.<sup>47</sup>

Better parent communication is just one thing Jon Clark cites as an area for growth for the organization. Perhaps most pressing is how Brooke will transition its first class of high-school students from the middle school environment. The challenge, he notes, is maintaining the same “relational feel” that Brooke’s middle schools have achieved but gradually releasing students as they grow into adulthood to function with fewer structures and systems dictating their actions and consequences for their actions. It’s about holding kids to our standards but also letting them know that they have to hold themselves to their own.”<sup>48</sup>

**TABLE 4. BROOKE CHARTER SCHOOLS, OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION RATES OVER TIME (ALL STUDENTS)**

	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
East Boston	23.9%	13.8%	9.1%
Mattapan	20.3%	18.9%	9.2%
Roslindale	24.2%	19%	15%

All data from: Massachusetts Department of Education, School and District Profiles: <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/general.aspx?topNavId=1&orgcode=04570000&orgtypecode=5&>

Brooke’s approach to character education is structured, explicit, and evolving. It works because character development is not just something the organization “does.” Developing character in students is part of the Brooke ethos and everyone in the organization (and, increasingly, in students’ families) shares an understanding of what character development should and can look like. Additionally, Brooke ensures that character development is successfully executed for the following reasons:

1. The organization believes that quality teaching is the main driver of student



growth. It also believes that character development is an important way in which students grow. By placing a premium on recruiting teachers who share in Brooke’s vision for students, and by developing those teachers and giving them a reasonable amount of autonomy to meet student needs, Brooke is leveraging teacher talent to benefit students.

2. The organization is explicit and steadfast in what it values for students, but also nimble enough to encourage some experimentation with the teaching and modeling of those values. Because it values teachers as the people in the organization who knows students best, the organization looks to teachers to better understand how it can implement effective practices network-wide, including effective practices for character education.
3. The organization understands that character education is most effective when parents and caregivers have an understanding of character development goals for students and can support the development of specific habits in the home. Brooke’s current efforts to increase family engagement, especially when students first start attending school, are evidence of the organization’s desire that a deep understanding of its mission extend beyond school walls and into the wider community.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM ABBY KELLEY FOSTER AND BROOKE**

The schools highlighted in this report are just two examples of character development efforts that are well aligned with research-based best practices in the field. Both Abby Kelley Foster and Brooke are realizing the benefits of strong character education programs in the outcomes they are helping students achieve. The two organizations have strong academic results, have seen increases in pro-social behavior (and corresponding decreases in suspension rates),

and report that their students are developing important “non-cognitive skills,” such as conflict-resolution skills, self-control, and self-esteem. These are all characteristics that research associates with effective character education programs.

There are examples of many schools—traditional public and charter alike—that are successfully implementing and integrating character education curricula. The two cases profiled in this report provide evidence that character development efforts need not look exactly the same to be successful. There are, however, commonalities between the schools’ approaches, and it is through these commonalities that schools looking to implement a more robust approach to character education can learn. The following are recommendations for those schools.

#### **CHARACTER EDUCATION INITIATIVES SHOULD BE ALIGNED TO THE NEEDS OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

Both Abby Kelley Foster and Brooke have created curricula that they feel meet the needs of their respective student populations. While both schools have core values that drive their understanding of how they would like to develop character in students, they have remained flexible enough to allow their curricula to evolve over time. They have also paid careful attention to the habits and skills students need to develop at each stage of growth and enabled faculty and staff to be responsive in addressing those needs through the character education curricula.

#### **CHARACTER EDUCATION SHOULD BE AN INTEGRATED PART OF THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE**

While Abby Kelley Foster and Brooke have dedicated different resources to character education and chosen to implement their curricula in different ways, in each school, character development is part of the overall experience, rather than an add-on. From a specific character education course that has links to the curricula students experience in other subjects, to the use of tools such as the

professionalism scale in individual classrooms, the values that each school seeks to instill in students are present throughout each and every school day.

#### **CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IS A COMMUNITY ENDEAVOR**

In both schools, faculty, staff, and even parents expressed a shared understanding of organizational goals for character development. Ensuring that all stakeholders are “on the same page” with regard to their vision for students means students receive a consistent message about expectations for the habits, skills, behaviors, and pre-dispositions they should develop. For character development to truly be a community endeavor, the curriculum must be explicit and implemented during every part of the school day in every corner of the school, from the classroom to the front office to the lunchroom.

#### **INVESTING IN TEACHERS IS AN INVESTMENT IN CHARACTER EDUCATION**

Hiring people who share a school’s vision and supporting and developing them as they execute that vision in the classroom and beyond are key components of any strong character education initiative. Students understand the content of their teachers’ character, and they look to model the habits of good teachers. Aside from parents, teachers are often the adults who know students best. When good teachers have the support and autonomy necessary to meet student needs, they are better able to make character education meaningful and to achieve measurable results.

#### **VIEW CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND DISCIPLINE STRUCTURES AS INTERRELATED**

When character education works, students exhibit pro-social behaviors and detention and suspension rates decline. Both the schools profiled here view character education not only as an attempt to create “good people” but also as an effort to equip students with habits that will make them successful in life. While those habits include aspects of performance character, such as a strong work ethic and the ability to learn

from failure, they also include the capacity to self-reflect and evaluate one’s relationship to and impact upon the wider community.

Both the schools profiled in this report have recently made attempts to help students reflect upon anti-social behaviors in a way that helps them understand the consequences of behaviors beyond simply acknowledging “I will be punished.” When a student knows that consistently talking out of turn in class distracts from the learning experience of his or her peers, he or she may be more likely to engage in pro-social behaviors in the future. When character development is seen as part of an overall approach to help students better relate to the wider community, the need for highly structured discipline systems may decline.



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*The Reckless Cost of MBTA Financial Derivatives*, Policy Brief, February 2016

*Fordham Institute’s Pretend Research*, Policy Brief, February 2016



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