

*Dr Philip SA Cummins and Bradley Adams*  
*Essential Learnings from Character Education in Schools for Boys*

**1. We are called to excellence in developing character:** We believe that it is possible to converge our research-based understandings about what comprises an excellent education, the character of an education, and an education for character. What is clear to us now is that what makes an education for boys excellent is the quality and consistency of the education for 21C character and competency that underpins it. In other words, when the character of an education is defined by and aligned with a community's aspirations for its graduates, then we begin to see what an education can really do. It's more than just a series of learning activities pursued for their own sake – our research seems to show that the fundamental purpose of an excellent education should be the development of the whole character of the learner.

**2. The character of an excellent education for 21C character and competency:** We believe that schools should apply their beliefs about an education for civic, performance, and moral character in a deliberate, targeted, and intentional fashion. Education for character should be the result of a designed landscape of learning that flows from the heart of a school's ethos into every place of learning. It's too important to be anything else, especially when we consider that it occurs in everything we do in schools. It cannot simply be contained in a box of a specific program or activity, even if this activity is important as a beacon for a community in terms of expectations and the lived experiences of character education. We don't do character for 40 minutes a week or two weeks a year. We do it all the time. And when we implement a well-designed education, we must measure what we do along the way. We need to identify and measure the impact of our work on the character, competencies, and graduate outcomes of students, and the efficacy of our character education program in respect of these, as we would with any other aspect of our curriculum.

**3. The character of character:** We believe that the values, ethos, and associated cultures of a school community are essential for its sense of identity and drive the development of its maturity as a school of character. The strategy by which it goes about selecting and working towards its preferred future is likewise very important in helping that school to be the best version of itself that it can possibly become. Evidence of learning within a community of inquiry and practice is also an essential component of a successful school. Finally, if character is the whole work of a school, we believe that when it comes to the shaping of the school's purpose, nothing is more critical to a school's understanding of its purpose than its conception and experience in all respects of its fundamental preferred outcomes for the character of its graduates, the virtues in which this is displayed, and the competencies that surround this whole understanding: what the students know, can do, feel, believe and are disposed towards. In other words, it is when the quality and consistency of character education drives the attainment of the desired graduate outcomes of a school that we might reasonably consider it to be a school of character.

**4. Character is why we do school:** The development of whole young people of character who wrestle with their own sense of who they should be ("realization") and what people expect of them ("replication") in order to belong fully to their civic institutions, fulfil their potential, and live with the integrity of a set of beliefs about what is good and right is the most fundamental reason for any school to exist. It is the purpose of school.

**5. Realization and replication:** We believe that students learn about character through both of these sometimes competing and sometimes complementary processes of realization and replication, and (at the same time) try to locate and express their voices in their emerging adolescence and adulthood. This is the foundation of an understanding of how we educate for character and all associated practice flows from this.

**6. The journey from "me" to "we":** We believe that the past decade of testimony from educators in our research and consulting work warrants respect for language that speaks of the best adults as those who emerge from the self-centeredness of childhood into an adulthood that is focused on serving others. At the same time, we keep hearing that the best schools should and do shape their education according to this inherent norm of the development of a disposition towards servanthood. This is particularly important when we consider how we might best measure both the development of character and also the quality and consistency of an education for character.

**7. Understanding 21C character and competency:** We believe that six corridors form the essential knowledge architecture of 21C character education. Through them, we can track (in the first instance) the realization of graduate outcomes in key qualities and competencies grounded in the four integrated dimensions of knowledge, skills, character, and learning habits. A good person of integrity exercises character competency. A future builder uses communication competency to navigate and interpret complexity. A continuous learner and unlearner who is focused on growth has mastery of change readiness competency. The direction of a solution architect is revealed by the use of creative and critical thinking competency. The competency of a local, regional and global citizen allows the balancing of the competing demands of these different communities with perspective. The team creator demonstrates relationality most tangibly through collaboration competency.

**8. What teachers think about character matters:** What teachers think and feel about character and its relationship to their educational purpose shapes and directs the development, attainment, and measurement of 21C civic, performance, and moral character competencies and the expression of these in a set of desired graduate outcomes in a school.

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**9. The things we call “character”:** We believe that definitions of both character and character competency should be deliberately designed to be inclusive, allowing for as many as possible to situate their beliefs within a broad community of practice. In other words, while there may be some common ground on what character may or may not be, it is up to individual communities and their members to identify those specific words that genuinely speak to them and, therefore, have most meaning in the process of education of their children. Communities may choose to adopt a particular framework of ideas that they import into this vocabulary, but they do not need to do this, per se. Character comes from within the heart of a community in our contemporary world; it must be modelled and exemplified by leaders, but it is not handed down from on high.

**10. The rationales for character education:** We believe that a healthy school community should encourage a full range of views on the purpose of an education for good character so as to reflect more closely the diversity of views held in the societies that these schools serve. Preparing students to be fit for purpose in 21C requires the capacity to see, understand and harness multiple perspectives. Schools, by their nature, which are too singular in outlook promote a type of thinking that seems to be of less relevance to the world to be inhabited by their students. Open-mindedness and a capacity to recognize what others see and feel are qualities that need to be embedded in any school that seeks to prepare students to thrive in their world.

**11. A curriculum for character learning:** We believe that what our teachers think, feel, and understand about character shapes the output of the work we do as a school in educating our graduates. Their perspectives of, intentions towards, and understanding of the notion of character deeply influence their responses towards the importance, function, and, most significantly, the purpose of character education so that these become more fully aligned with the mission of the school and the deeper practice of the profession. At the same time, this individual practice must operate within a consistent and evidence-based system of language, curricular intent, and professional interaction that ensures that what is being done in terms of character education brings the greatest benefit to the greatest number of learners. The work of the individual educator, therefore, needs to be situated particularly within an agreed curriculum for character learning that is buoyed by a shared language. And any individual and collective perspectives on character education need to be grounded in evidence.

**12. Character is the whole work of a school:** How we think about our character practice and connect this to the context, design, and experiences of character learning across all aspects of a school helps us to locate and assess our work through a coherent model of character education that describes how learning occurs within a community of inquiry and practice that is dedicated to the attainment of a clear set of desired graduate outcomes based on 21C civic, performance, and moral character competencies.

**13. A model of character education:** We believe that it is important to understand how what we do individually in character education can be situated within a model of what we do collectively. We believe that the operation of character education in a school can be best understood through a model that situates broad theory within specific learning contexts, design principles and experiences, as well as the exemplary character practice that occurs in them.

**14. Measuring character development and character education:** We believe that we can use a model for the acquisition of character competency that traces the journey from “me” to “you” to “us”. A competency is the capacity of students to demonstrate how they have grown in an educational process that asks them deliberately and simultaneously to know, to do, to be, and to learn. Character competency is the cultivation and demonstration of those strengths, qualities, and outcomes that are aligned with the values, dispositions, and actions that are associated with civic character, performance character, and moral character: a sense of belonging developed in response to their meeting civic obligations, the fulfilment of potential through the increasing attainment of performance standards, and the capacity to reflect on what is good and right for them to do in their lives, especially in the light of their ongoing moral challenges. This can be measured on a developmental continuum that moves from the expression of self-interest, to awareness, to intent, to judgment, to coherence, and finally to competence. We believe that character education is the articulation and application of school’s whole program of education to build capacity in character competency through the development of rigor in character practice, expertise in character apprenticeship, depth in character leadership, and richness in character capital. We can measure the success of a school’s overall whole program of character education according to six key markers that show us the critical components for success in character education: resilience of consensus around ethos, effective and engaging communication and reporting, robustness and consistency of standards, tangible outcomes for students and programs that meet expectations, strategic clarity and connection, and a focused and committed community of inquiry and practice. We can measure these markers according to their observable consistency and quality of execution across a school, especially across three dimensions of character learning (contexts, design and experiences).

**15. Character learning in theory and practice:** So our Model for Character Education describes how an education for character might operate in any school. Individual schools may well choose to develop their own models or to tailor this particular model to suit their own contexts. Nonetheless, a model around which shared understanding and, eventually, a community of inquiry and practice might be built, is both desirable and possible. This model must show how character education occurs in every part of the school, is built through relationship, refined through specific pedagogies, and propelled by the culture of the school. An education for 21C character and competency must be built according to design

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principles that encourage educators to plan, share, coach, measure, listen for, live, grow, and defend it. And through a blend of explicit and implicit, deliberate and spontaneous learning, it must seek above all to grow the whole person.

**16. Character development relies on relationship:** The quality of character learning in a school is largely the product of both specific learning relationships of character apprenticeship in which competency is crafted and also the way that those relationships bring together all learners in a community of inquiry and practice that is sharply focused on improving delivery of the school's graduate outcomes.

**17. Character apprenticeship:** We believe that a flexible adaptation of the "cognitive apprenticeship model" should be the basis for an overarching pedagogy for character education. We see character apprenticeship as a progression from articulation to reflection to exploration as a novice, then from modeling to coaching to scaffolding as an expert. It is a strong and yet non-judgmental way of explaining how a student learns about character in relationship with others. Our model of character apprenticeship emphasizes the importance of teaching and leading others on the road to mastery of character competency as a feature of character education itself. In other words, there must be a deliberate pedagogical shift in the power dynamic of the learning relationship as the expert hands over the opportunity to teach others to those who were once their novices and are now experts in their own right. We also think that the movement from novice to expert is not necessarily linear, nor does it preclude a learner being both simultaneously. We see from the evidence of our study that many supposed experts still regard themselves as being learners who are also benefiting from being in relationship with those whom they consider to be greater experts.

**18. Relationality in the student community of inquiry and practice:** We believe that students currently reveal themselves to be strong character education practitioners in at least four ways:

1. Students are intentional, reflective, and engaged in the whole work of a school: By and large, the students who participated in this exercise show an unusual degree of reflective capacity. They show a high degree of character literacy. Agency is important to them.
2. Students are relational: So much of student character learning is situated learning – forged through the vital relationships provided by their peers as well as their teachers in the school environment. This situated learning happens everywhere in the school. It happens largely in the social influences and interactions of the school, more so than in formal direct instruction or formal programs .
3. Students have their own important situated community of inquiry and practice: Students in their schools participate in a community of inquiry and practice in character development. As the evidence makes abundantly clear, within the school environment, they rely on each other and indeed need one another to bear witness, to practice and to try out.
4. Character development in students is intimately tied to processes of maturity and identity formation: While this is not a novel observation, it is important to remind ourselves that the values and character strengths the students tended to identify and experience are tied to the processes of maturity and identity formation. Further, this may be a valuable lens by which to understand how students engage with character education, and how they reflect on and direct their own character development.

**19. Professionalism in the teacher community of inquiry and practice:** We believe that teachers currently reveal themselves to be strong character educators in the following four ways:

1. Character educators are intentional, reflective, and engaged in the whole work of a school: Expert teachers think deeply about their vocation as educators for character, especially of boys, and are able to articulate their purpose and approach. They are also able to identify the core character strengths and values they seek to nurture in their students. These are most often specific to individual teacher, and they show a range of robust engagement with what matters in the character development of their students. These teachers recognize that character education happens all the time, anywhere and all the time across their professional responsibilities and multiple presences in the school.
2. Character educators are relational: They most often refer to their relational connection to students as the richest pathway for their impact as educators for character. They are able to describe how this relationship-building, while an end in itself, is always used to engage them in their character development. They stress the importance of this relational connectedness – deploying a range of relational gestures, role modeling positive character traits, and being and being seen as authentic – as especially powerful and impactful for boys. This relational connectedness is not vague and mysterious; these teachers see it as a practical skill. So much of this involves a high degree of situational judgment.
3. The most effective character educators are organized and evidence-based in approach: They are able to identify, describe and evaluate specific practices for pedagogy, curriculum design and classroom management that they considered to be especially effective for boys' character growth. They see shaping the culture of their classroom – routines and norms of the everyday teaching environment – as impactful. They are able to identify many forms of assessment, especially in the realm of informal and formative assessment, that could be used to provide feedback. Very few think that that learning in character educational cannot be "measured" or evaluated in authentic and appropriate ways but most are not yet confident in how to do this.

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4. Character educators largely operate as sole practitioners: Generally speaking, these teachers have become good at character education by reflection on their own maturing practice and teaching, and through the influence of other exemplary colleagues and leaders. A minority draw on the ethos of the school, on the explicit programs, or the strategic emphasis on character education. For some teachers in some of these schools, these are powerful. In its current state in schools, there is a hidden and tacit world of professional expertise in character education that needs to be made explicit. There needs to be an organized and evidence-based community of inquiry practice at the center of character education.

**20. Character education works best when it's deliberate, targeted and intentional:** The consistency of character learning in a school is a reflection of a school's willingness to embrace the need for strategic educational development that embeds 21C character and competencies into every facet of school life in a deliberate, targeted and intentional way. This requires the adoption of a strategic approach to building the right learning culture, as well as the collaborative development of a conceptual and documentary framework for education that will help a school move beyond being just intentional to becoming a school of character in every respect.

**21. Asking the right questions:** We believe that as a community of inquiry and practice, the preparation of the strategic educational approach required to embed 21C character and competency within a school begins with asking the right questions. Strengths and gaps need to be identified. The commitment of all members of the school community to base future educational development activity on the evidence gained in response to these questions is essential. Prevailing assumptions and existing habits need to be interrogated for their continuing relevance. In other words, a community of inquiry and practice must be prepared to inquire, to dig deep, and to confront the challenge of relevance when the natural inclination of many will be to default to a status quo.

**22. A documented Framework for Education:** We believe that building an agreed and documented Framework for Education needs to be recognized as the important first step of a whole community of inquiry and practice that aspires to deliver an excellent 21C education. A Framework provides the direction and structure required to make real the intentionality of most schools to prepare their students to thrive in their world. It needs to flow from agreed graduate outcomes for character and competency that the community most wants to see as the essential product of their educational program. Educational activity that operationalizes this strategic intent all needs to be aligned to this purpose and its associated language. In this way, a school can begin to think even more deeply about (and pursue with greater rigor) what it is trying to achieve for its students beyond externally-mandated curricula and other activities. In this way, it might create a deliberate, targeted, and intentional program of character learning that is coherent, supported by evidence-based practice, and more likely to achieve better outcomes for more learners.

**23. Standards for character education:** We believe that we have reached the point now where we might successfully assemble the six corridors of a set of standards that can help a school to identify, understand, and agree on a shared vision and Framework for Education that is aligned to desired graduate outcomes based on 21C civic, performance, and moral character competencies. Nonetheless, these proposed standards are probably best seen as a useful starting point for a school to consider what it most wants to achieve. Most (if not all) schools should want some point of reference to what might be considered an industry standard. Yet, we have already seen that it is preferable for schools to work through what they want the qualities and capabilities of their graduates to be and how they want this to work through into the learning of their students along the pathway towards graduation. Each school has its own context and heritage that will influence the priorities that their community will wish to afford certain aspects of the character for a 21C life and the nuances of how this will play out in their own educational space. Off-the-shelf, in this respect, is neither wanted nor preferred. This will mean that schools will need to develop their own approaches to formulating both the content and course of an education for character.

**24. School leaders show the way forward:** School leaders build character capital in a school community through their character labor, especially through role modeling and development of character competency; character education efficacy results from their will and their capacity to embed a shared commitment to "what we want, why we want it and how we do" it in character education.

**25. Building character capital:** We believe that character capital relates particularly to the value of the feelings and perceptions held by the school and wider communities about the character purpose and character strengths of a school. It is, therefore, inherently moral in nature. It externalizes the shared purpose of relationships. It also builds personal value in terms of the level of positive, focused energy about character and character education that leaders invest at work and in their personal life. It also internalizes the alignment of hearts and heads. The value of families' character commitments is held in the hearts of the people within a school. It can be seen in the energy and enthusiasm that people bring to support and act upon the values and character strengths of the school.

**26. Character leadership in practice:** We believe that currently character leaders in schools typically have a clear picture of the daily character work, and that the nature of this work should correspond to how the work of other character educators is located within their schools. Nonetheless, there seems little opportunity for them to reflect on how this work

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can be situated within a model or series of models that allow for the development of a cogent theory of character leadership. Such modeling at a theoretical is essential for them to build a consistent, high quality culture of practice in character leadership throughout their school.

**27. Character leadership in theory:** We believe that character leadership is currently envisaged more in the daily doing, perhaps itself a by-product of the busy-ness to which most leaders would point, if they had the time to comment! If character leaders do find the time to reflect and develop a model of practice, any model that they construct for themselves about their leadership, therefore, might benefit from a clear alignment to the strategic educational intent of being a fit for purpose 21C school of character, and operational soundness in implementation of a plan to attain this intent. It must include the development and promulgation of a compelling narrative that helps school members to understand where the journey is taking them and why it is necessary for them to join in to the collective enterprise. Part of this narrative needs to model change in perspective and growth in capability for all. This needs to encourage the contribution of all to the evidence-based community of inquiry and practice that will act as the knowledge engine for the school moving forwards. Finally, it requires leadership by example that is connected to the core of the school's ethos and a willingness to undergo scrutiny of the effectiveness of this example.

**28. A good school focuses on the whole education of the whole person; a great school assembles the ingredients of high-performance culture in delivering this education:** A great school, a school of character, identifies the "secret sauce" of aspirations, a sense of kinship, and pathways to success, and applies this to a culture of inspiration, challenge, and support. This culture fosters both the pursuit of excellence by young people of character, and the sense of belonging to and engagement in school. It keeps them in their groove and holds them to the educational purpose of desired graduate outcomes based on 21C civic, performance and moral character competencies.

**29. The experience of schooling:** We believe, therefore that school becomes, therefore, a wide field in which we inspire, challenge, and support students to rehearse for their adulthood by providing many diverse encounters with and experiences of competency within deliberately incremental and immersive learning. Like the medieval tales of old and the computer games students play now, the challenges must become harder and more important as the quest goes on. In this way, the experience of school is about becoming someone else, accompanied as it often is by a reluctance to let go of the child who once was (something which poorly informed and utilized cultures of tradition can unwittingly abet) and the process of gaining expertise through character apprenticeship that shows us where our future might lie. This process sees meaning develop into understanding, authenticity shape identity, transformation aided by reflection, an emphasis on survival and sustainability progresses towards one which is more concentrated on results, an awareness of service become the generation of true purpose, and immediate relationships giving some ground to the need to appreciate a broader context and a wider world. This journey of becoming is, therefore, also the experience of gaining the mastery of our essential competencies based on civic, performance, and moral character, as well as the attainment of the learning habits of self-efficacy and adaptive expertise required to thrive in 21C.

**30. A good school and a great school:** We believe, therefore, that a great school, should track, gather evidence about, and evaluate its organizational maturity as a fit for purpose school of character. It should school conduct this measurement of its high performance both in terms of the learning experiences and graduate outcomes of its students, as well as in its operation as a learning organization. To do this, it should interrogate a set of key factors in our six corridors of an excellent 21C education that point to the character, climate and culture of the school, leadership of the educational programs, the effectiveness of teachers in growing the "whole person", the effectiveness of student educational experiences and outcomes, the alignment of strategy and operations with respect to character education, and the nature of teacher professionalism in a community of practice dedicated to the attainment of its desired graduate outcomes based on 21C civic, performance, and moral character competencies. In other words, a school of character is one that consistently demonstrates an increasing propensity towards inspiring, challenging, and supporting students to fulfill their potential to be young people of character and competency. To do this well, it needs to function as an authentic, mature, and high performing community of inquiry and practice.

**31. The warranting of practice:** The final element of a great school, a school of character, is its disposition towards testing the integrity of its practice. This includes the quality and consistency of the delivery of graduates outcomes based in 21C character and competency, as well as the essential processes by which a school might attain them, including the depth of investigation into the idea of character, the immersion of character leadership in every part of the school, the richness of character apprenticeship as the key pedagogy for the learning experience, the shared discipline in delivering excellence in learning experience and outcomes, the success in cultivating emerging student voice and agency, and the rigor of teacher professionalism. How teachers and leaders build a case for and warrant their practice in respect of these provides the critical accountability for ensuring the continuing presence and evolving nature of the "secret sauce" of high-performance culture.