

Civic and Character Education in Utah Charter Schools 2011-2012

Civic and character education are fundamental elements of the Utah public education system's core mission. Utah's legislature recognizes that the cultivation of a continuing understanding and appreciation of a constitutional republic and principles of representative democracy in Utah and the United States among succeeding generations of educated and responsible citizens is important to the nation and state. Though the primary responsibility for the education of children within the state resides with their parents, public education has the role to support and assist parents in fulfilling that responsibility. Utah charter schools fulfill a vital purpose in the preparation of future generations of informed and responsible citizens who are deeply attached to essential democratic values and institutions.

Civic and character education begins in the kindergarten classroom and continues in every grade. Utah curriculum, approved by the Utah State Board of Education, is rich with concepts that support civic and character education, helping to develop the moral and intellectual growth of Utah students.

The State Charter School Board and staff visit most charter schools annually and informally observe the civic and character education practices of the school. Many thanks to Utah's 88 charter schools and over 50,000 students for allowing us to visit and observe how they met their statutory responsibility of preparing students to be upright, productive, and well-informed participants in our compound constitutional republic. It is with great pleasure that we share these observations with the Utah Commission on Civic and Character Education.

During the 2011-2012 school year, we observed the following civic and character activities at Utah charter schools: Academic Service Learning; Community of caring or other service learning; History fairs; Law-related education; Legislators in the school and classroom; Mock elections; Mock trials; Partnerships with civic or service organizations; Student government; School service clubs; Senate youth; Special civic or character education assemblies; and We the People. Specifically, we saw school symposiums that included civic leaders speaking to the student body, student visits to the legislature and meetings with Utah representatives and senators, legislator presentations in the classroom, student council elections and meetings, mock trials, and student government in action.

We were most impressed with Utah charter schools which clearly incorporated civic and character education into all aspects of the school rather than isolating it to the legislative session or social studies classes. Several charter schools are shining examples of teaching character education lessons in all classrooms, choosing related character building themes for each month of the school year and having related activities to support the selected theme, displaying related student projects in the school building, empowering the student government, and requiring service learning for graduation. However, to keep this report succinct and still meaningful, we selected four outstanding charter school examples to share in more detail.

American Leadership Academy has a five year leadership plan in place which includes civic education, character education, and leadership skills, which is integrated school-wide into the curriculum. Similar to many other charter schools, American Leadership Academy concentrates on one value for each month of the school year. This value is integrated in all grades K – 12 in the classroom and at a monthly leadership assembly. Multiple lessons and school-wide activities reinforce the monthly value, which are values taught in the home such as virtue and excellence. The school's student government is run as a true democratic process, providing a real-world experience to students in both leadership and citizen capacities who must willingly subordinate their self-interest to the greater common good.

Noah Webster Academy's integrates character education and The Leader in Me program into every aspect of their school. Teachers weave the school values, as well as the seven habits, into all subjects. The Scholar Council, peer-elected student leaders, meets weekly as a group and regularly with the school administration to discuss scholar initiatives. Weekly focus habits are selected by the Scholar Council and focused on during morning announcements, which give students ideas on how to better utilize habits both in and out of school.

Ogden Preparatory Academy expects its students to be aware of community needs and give back to their community, and they recognize the students' efforts at a quarterly assembly. Parents and families are involved in identifying community needs, participating in the service learning project, and recognition of a job well done. A recent example is the project the students did at the Ogden River Parkway with Ogden City workers. They started with a ground clean-up activity, but then went on to perform water studies and monitor water quality of the Ogden River.

Thomas Edison Charter Schools emphasize patriotism, courtesy, respect, decency, civility, honesty, and the meaning of citizenship. In an effort to ensure personal and social responsibility are taught school-wide, the school implemented this goal as one of its accreditation DRSLs (Desired Results for Student Learning). Included in the DRSW were the expectations that students would take responsibility for personal actions, respect themselves and others, act as responsible citizens in the community, state, and nation, and act ethically. This DRSL was taught during the school's morning greeting and during classes, where it was also practiced and evaluated with a school-wide rubric.

As this is the first year this report has been required of the State Charter School Board, we look forward to feedback from the Utah Commission on Civic and Character Education.