

# AEI PROGRAM ON American Citizenship

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## Counting on Character:

National Heritage Academies and Civic Education

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*This policy brief is the second in a series of in-depth case studies exploring how top-performing charter schools have incorporated civic learning in their school curriculum and school culture. For more information about AEI's Program on American Citizenship, visit [www.citizenship-aei.org](http://www.citizenship-aei.org).*

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America," chant the students of Ridge Park Elementary School in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "And to the Republic for which it stands . . ."

In the back of the room, a dozen parents stand with their hands over their hearts. Some are US citizens by birth, others by naturalization, and some by aspiration. Their children recite: "One nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all."

A National Heritage Academies (NHA) charter school, Ridge Park starts every day with the Pledge of Allegiance, the Star-Spangled Banner, and the school creed: "I am a Ridge Park scholar. I strive to achieve academic excellence. I exemplify high moral character. I work diligently to prepare for the future . . ."

Character education is ubiquitous and relentless at NHA schools. Each month is assigned a "moral focus" or virtue, which teachers are supposed to weave into their lessons and students write about from kindergarten through eighth grade. Signs in classrooms and hallways honor examples of virtue.

Like other charter schools, NHA promises parents to teach a rigorous curriculum that will prepare their children for success in college. It also promises a moral education imbued with traditional values such as love of country and family. Good character is not just a private asset, NHA leaders believe. It leads to good citizenship.

At a weekly (or daily, in some NHA schools) moral focus assembly, students are honored for their character as well as their academic accomplishments. In mid-September, wisdom is the assembly's theme. Parents are encouraged to attend assemblies and to visit the school

whenever they please. At Ridge Park, several dozen parents, some with preschoolers in tow, have come, knowing that medallions will be awarded for top performance in math.

A fourth-grade teacher reads his students' reflections about wisdom. "It is wise to eat carrots, exercise, care for friends, do homework, and go to the moon," his students have written. "It is not wise to talk to strangers, play in class, gossip, steal, bully, or pet strange dogs."

"Wisdom is to be careful to do what is right," the teacher concludes.

Then, it is time for Principal John Brillhart to call the math whizzes up to the front of the gym. Parents leap off the bleachers to photograph their children.

Brillhart concludes the assembly with what he calls the magic two words: "Stop bullying." After a recent assembly on standing up to bullies, Ridge Park parents came in with an antibullying pledge, which Brillhart asked students to adapt. He reads the students' version of the pledge:

I won't watch someone being bullied.  
I'm a do-something person.  
I can be a leader.  
In my world, there are no bullies allowed.

Students troop out of the gym to start their day.

### Moral Values Are Profitable

National Heritage Academies, a for-profit charter management company, runs 74 schools in Michigan and eight

other states, making it the second largest charter network in the country. Nationwide, 12 percent of charter schools, with almost 20 percent of charter students, are run by for-profit organizations like NHA, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.<sup>1</sup> While a nonprofit board holds the charter at each school, NHA hires and pays the principal, teachers, and other staff, provides the curriculum, and owns the no-frills school building. NHA keeps nearly all the revenue; a small percentage goes to the nonprofit board for discretionary expenses. When the cost of the building is paid off—typically in 10 years, the company says—NHA turns a profit. Although it keeps its finances private, NHA is profitable, unlike some of its competitors. Profits are plowed into new school buildings, allowing NHA to grow rapidly.

J. C. Huizenga, a Grand Rapids businessman, founded what became National Heritage Academies in 1995. Huizenga had studied libertarian economist Milton Friedman’s writings on education reform as a student at Hope College, a Christian liberal arts school in Holland, Michigan. In a 2005 interview, Huizenga explained that he learned from Friedman the “need to introduce privatization if we want to see true reform in education because privatization always does two things: It drives up quality and it drives down cost.”<sup>2</sup>

Recruited by a friend who was troubled by Detroit’s failing public school system, Huizenga joined the TEACH Michigan Education Fund, an organization that helped pass a charter school law in 1994. That same year, his first son was born, and Huizenga started thinking about how he would want his son educated. A donor to religious schools in the region, Michigan’s version of the Bible Belt, Huizenga was asked to help finance a charter school by David Koetje, superintendent of 11 Christian schools in Grand Rapids. Koetje gave up on the idea when he realized that charters, as public schools, could not promote religion.

But Huizenga decided to go forward and found a school of his own, one that would emphasize secular values rather than explicit Christian teaching. Drawing on Plato’s cardinal virtues—prudence (wisdom), temperance (self-control), fortitude (courage), and justice—Huizenga created the “moral focus” curriculum as a way to provide a values-centered school that would not violate the ban against mixing church and state.

“Great schools develop both a student’s heart and mind,” NHA tells parents on its website. The moral focus curriculum is designed to “support [the] parents’ efforts to teach character at home,” and “creat[e] an environment that is not just physically safe, but also emotionally safe. Students are taught to respect their classmates, to

make smart decisions and to resolve disputes in a manner that displays strong character.”<sup>3</sup>

Teachers are expected to model each month’s dedicated virtues (derived from the four cardinal virtues) and weave moral ideas into lessons. For example, a kindergarten teacher reading the story of Goldilocks in August or September might ask students about the wisdom of walking into a stranger’s home. In October, she could ask if it shows respect to eat someone else’s porridge and break their furniture. Goldilocks might be considered deficient in gratitude (November) for complaining about the porridge being too hot or cold. Her self-control (December) and integrity (May) seem elastic as well, though she may win points for perseverance (January) or courage (February). (In March, students focus on encouragement, and in April, compassion.)

## Strong morals and patriotic spirit may be popular, but not if they come with low test scores.

Huizenga’s first school, Excel Charter Academy, opened in Grand Rapids in 1995, proved to be popular, drawing students from the city’s Christian and public schools. By 1999, NHA was running 22 schools. Todd McKee, NHA’s vice president of school quality, credits the moral focus curriculum for NHA’s growth. “It’s one of the things parents say they really like about us. They choose us for character education.”

In Ridge Park’s parents’ room—all NHA schools set aside a room for parents—two mothers agree. “We like the moral focus emphasis,” one mother says. “We would have liked to send our kids to a Christian school, but we couldn’t afford it. This school has values.” Children internalize the moral themes and language, another mother says. “My daughter was having trouble with an assignment. She said, ‘Mom, I’ve got to persevere.’ I liked that.”

However, NHA has not escaped controversy. Its early success rankled Christian school leaders, who complained that NHA was poaching students. “We’re like the auto industry in Detroit when the Japanese came in,” Mark Muller, chairman of the Grand Rapids Christian Schools, told the *Wall Street Journal* in 1999.<sup>4</sup>

That same year, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and three families sued NHA’s Vanguard Charter Academy in the city of Wyoming, Michigan. Parents—including a father who had once chaired the

school's moral focus committee—complained the school allowed a Moms' Prayer Group to meet at the school, let parent volunteers hand out religious literature, gave a Baptist church rent-free use of the building in the evenings, and invited a minister to speak at a staff training session. In addition, the ACLU alleged that NHA recruited nearly half its teachers at evangelical Christian colleges. A judge dismissed the lawsuit in 2000.<sup>5</sup> The parents did not appeal, saying they were satisfied by Vanguard's new policies clarifying when and how religion would be discussed. The Baptist church lost its rent-free deal.

Other charters have sidestepped such debate by making "performance character" the focus of their character education efforts.<sup>6</sup> No-excuses charters like KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) aim to develop the habits and skills students need to succeed in high school and college, such as persistence and self-discipline. In his 2012 book, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, reporter Paul Tough explains that the character strengths emphasized at schools like KIPP "lean much more heavily toward performance character [than moral character]: while they do have a moral component, strengths like zest, optimism, social intelligence, and curiosity aren't particularly heroic; they make you think of Steve Jobs or Bill Clinton more than the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. or Gandhi."<sup>7</sup>

As a for-profit charter network, NHA must sell its schools to parents who want their children to do well in school and go on to college. Many NHA charters' contracts emphasize the connection between good character and academic success: "Individual responsibility, integrity, personal character, and effort are important contributors to success in school and life."<sup>8</sup> But NHA's moral focus curriculum is not just about helping students get ahead. Its core values also support the development of moral character-related qualities like gratitude and integrity that help students "be [their] ethical best in relationships and roles as citizens."<sup>9</sup>

Performance and moral character have plenty of overlap, but they are not identical. In the short run, at least, cheaters may prosper, while integrity may handicap the ambitious.

## Do Know Much about History

NHA schools focus intensely on building strong foundations in the four core subjects—English language arts, math, science, and social studies—while also teaching electives like art, music, physical education, and technology. They are traditional in their approach to teaching,

but adopt some student-centered teaching ideas. "There's less whole-group instruction and more focus on meeting individual needs," says McKee. Still, NHA schools have an old-fashioned feel: NHA teachers do not talk about being a "guide on the side," a goal popular at many public schools. NHA offers a more structured, teacher-directed, "sage on the stage" style of education.

Although NHA schools offer only K–8 education, the focus is on preparing students for college. Parents of eighth graders get help selecting a high school from public and private alternatives. Overall, NHA students outscore their local districts in 74 percent of subjects and grades tested, according to NHA data. The average academic growth rate is 133 percent, an extra three months of progress each school year. On surveys, 69 percent of NHA parents give their children's school an *A* grade, and 93 percent say their school provides one of the best academic programs in the area.<sup>10</sup>

The first NHA schools used the Core Knowledge curriculum, which stresses the importance of content knowledge in enabling students to understand what they read, analyze new information, and solve problems. "Academic excellence, educational equity and fairness demand a strong foundation of knowledge for all learners," writes E. D. Hirsch Jr., founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation and professor emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia.<sup>11</sup>

The patriotic spirit of Hirsch's US history and civics curriculum fit NHA's philosophy. "The ideals that created the United States were glorious," writes Hirsch in *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools*. "Patriotic glorifications are very much to be encouraged in the early grades, so long as they retain a firm connection with truth."<sup>12</sup> While US history and civics are not wrapped in the flag, says Nick Paradiso, vice president of government relations and partner services for the charter management company, "the basic idea is that America is a great country that learns from its mistakes. We need to embrace our country's history."

In the mid-2000s, NHA developed its own curriculum, using the ACT's college-readiness standards as a guide at each grade level. Preparing students for college had become a higher priority, says McKee. In addition, NHA wanted to ensure its curriculum matched up with state tests, enabling high scores that would build the schools' reputations. Consultant Robert J. Marzano helped NHA create what he calls a "guaranteed" and "viable" curriculum, which ensures that all students are taught what they are expected to know and that teachers will have time to teach it. The Core Knowledge curriculum, which spans ancient civilizations and US history, simply

covered too much, NHA administrators found. And state tests do not ask about Mesopotamia.

Still, particularly in the early grades, NHA's US history and civics curriculum shows its Core Knowledge roots. "A strong emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of the history of the United States and the people who shaped this great country," NHA states in its charter applications. "Teachers model a respect for America and her heritage."<sup>13</sup> Starting in kindergarten, children learn about the Native Americans, Christopher Columbus, the Pilgrims, and the meaning of *independence* and *democracy*. They describe how past presidents and the current president exemplify moral focus concepts. First graders delve into the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence while second graders get their first look at the US Constitution and study immigration and citizenship.

**NHA schools are unabashedly America-centric—and confident that parents and students agree.**

All current NHA schools are located in one of the 46 states that have adopted the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which set out K–12 learning goals in English language arts and math. Since NHA students will take state tests aligned to these standards, NHA is creating new units of instruction at each grade level. The Common Core standards do not include separate social studies standards, but the English language arts standards also cover "literacy in History/Social Studies and Science." Under the standards, elementary teachers are expected to spend more time teaching students to read informational, nonfiction texts. In secondary school, social studies and science teachers will spend more time building students' vocabulary and reading skills in their subject areas.<sup>14</sup>

In practice, CCSS adoption could mean more time spent on history in elementary school and more social studies time spent on reading in middle and high school. For NHA schools, which have made history and government a higher priority than most K–8 schools, that is not a radical change. When the assessments aligned to the CCSS are released—two versions are now in the works—schools will have a clearer picture of what is expected.

As schools of choice, NHA schools must give parents what they want. Strong morals and patriotic spirit may be popular, but not if they come with low test scores.

## America-centric Education

At some public schools, educators worry about imposing the dominant culture on students. NHA schools are unabashedly America-centric—and confident that parents and students agree.

Democracy requires "virtuous, civic-minded citizens," writes Hirsch in *The Making of Americans*. Schools transform a collection of "tribes" into one nation, teaching "common knowledge, virtues, ideals, language, and commitments."<sup>15</sup> That is the challenge at Ridge Park, which may be NHA's most diverse school. Students come from 40 different countries and speak 30 different languages at home. The school's "hallway of flags" shows how many students hail from places as disparate as Kenya, Morocco, Sudan, Guatemala, South Korea, the Philippines, Bosnia, Iraq, and the Dominican Republic.

NHA schools attract parents with traditional values, whether they are Christians, Muslims, or just people who want a safe, orderly college-prep education for their children. The imams of two nearby mosques send their children to Ridge Park and recommend it to their congregants, says Brillhart. "A girl can wear her head covered here and not be teased."

Some parents choose Ridge Park for its diversity, but it is not easy to turn *e pluribus* into *unum*. One-quarter of students speak English as a second language. Three-quarters come from families that qualify for a subsidized lunch. Sixty percent are black, 11 percent are Hispanic, 24 percent are white, 4 percent are Asian, and 1 percent are American Indian/Alaskan native.<sup>16</sup>

Some of his students come from countries that do not have democratic governments, Brillhart observes. "They don't have Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, or Ben Franklin in their cultures." Still, they are eager to learn about America. "They know citizenship is important," says Faith Williams, who teaches English as a second language to children from immigrant families. Some of the African students' families spent years in refugee camps waiting for a chance to start over in the United States, and many pupils have parents who are studying for the citizenship exam. "We talk about differences in government between where they came from and the US."

Ridge Park does not just teach the values that underlie good citizenship. Whether they are born in Grand Rapids or in a refugee camp, students need to know American history and traditions, says Brillhart, who brings his collection of Civil War memorabilia to school to show students. In the hallways and on classroom walls, students can see framed copies of the US Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and a drawing of the

first prayer in Congress. Brillhart offers free ice cream to students who memorize the preamble to the Constitution. When students study the Civil War, their teachers may use an activity developed by an NHA teacher. Students “adopt” a soldier who served in the Third Regiment Michigan Volunteer Infantry, which was recruited from the Grand Rapids area. Students follow the regiment from Bull Run to Gettysburg to the New York draft riots to Spotsylvania. They may be assigned to write to their soldier, create journal entries, reflect on a Civil War photo, and choose from activities such as singing a period song, cooking a recipe, darning a sock, or writing a poem.

NHA schools are forthright about teaching patriotism and celebrating American culture and ideals. Yet NHA is quick to differentiate patriotism from jingoistic, uncritical self-praise: “Patriotism is more than waving a flag or marching in a parade,” instructs a teachers’ guide posted at NHA’s online Curriculum Center. “Being patriotic means caring enough about our country to think of ways we can help it to be a healthy democracy and a good place to live.” The guide encourages respect for diversity: “Being patriotic means we can be proud of our country, but we also need to respect people who are different from ourselves.” In one suggested exercise, students must match a list of patriotic actions—including serving in the military, learning American history, voting, and writing letters to the editor—with the reason each is considered patriotic. To complete the lesson, they must also identify the unpatriotic act in the list: outlawing the speaking of any language but English.<sup>17</sup>

## Core Democratic Values

Unlike some charter networks, NHA is not specifically designed to educate low-income black and Hispanic students. NHA schools are in both urban and suburban areas, which serve a mix of students. Still, in a majority of NHA schools, at least 70 percent of students are eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch, the standard measure of economic disadvantage. New students in grades two through eight score in the 26th percentile in math and reading, according to NHA.<sup>18</sup>

Knapp Charter Academy, another Grand Rapids school, borders a middle-class suburban district with high-scoring schools but draws most of its students from the city, where scores are lower. Sixty-four percent of Knapp students are white, 22 percent black, 7 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Asian, and 2 percent American Indian.<sup>19</sup> Parents—more than half from low- or moderate-income households—choose the school for its strong academic

scores and for the environment created by the moral focus emphasis, says Heather Guerra, assistant principal at the school.

Parents are “partners” at NHA schools, which rely on volunteers to help teachers in the classroom and support their children’s learning at home. Parents make up the moral focus committee, which brings in speakers for assemblies and plans activities. Knapp parents also organize a family picnic with a scavenger hunt in which participants win a prize if they identify enough items expressing moral virtues or democratic values. Men who volunteer are Knapp’s “Watch DOGS” (Dads of Great Students). With many children growing up without a father in the home, Watch DOGS serve as male role models. “The dads love it,” Guerra says. One father devoted his entire two-week vacation to Watch DOG duty.

In the parents’ room, Regan Johnson says she picked Knapp for her three children for its location, curriculum, and challenging academic environment. “We didn’t know a lot about moral focus, but my kids love that,” she says. “Their dad tries to take what they’re learning and apply it in their home life.” He also volunteers as a Watch DOG. She is the Booster Club president.

In addition to moral focus themes, each Knapp classroom proclaims the “core democratic values” of popular sovereignty, freedom, the pursuit of happiness, life and liberty, patriotism, equality and the common good, justice, truth, and diversity. When students read a story or discuss history, they are encouraged to explain “what core democratic value supports this decision,” Guerra explains.

Why stress these values? Guerra models truthfulness by admitting they are on Michigan’s state test at the start of sixth grade. Knapp teaches the values in every grade, not just in fifth, to ensure students will be prepared to write a core democratic values essay on the test. Teachers are expected to integrate the core democratic values in their daily interactions with students in kindergarten through fourth grade. The NHA Curriculum Center’s guide provides simple definitions for younger students:

*Common good:* Help others at home and school.

*Justice:* Take turns and be fair to others.

*Liberty:* Follow your beliefs and let others follow theirs.

*Popular sovereignty:* Majority rules.

*Life:* Rules keep you safe, follow them.

*Equality:* Give everyone an equal chance.

*Diversity:* Work and play with everyone.

*Pursuit of happiness:* Have fun but follow the rules at home and school.

*Truth:* Tell the truth.

*Patriotism:* Use the core democratic values at home and school.

*Rule of law:* Rules are made for everyone to follow.<sup>20</sup>

In grades five through eight, students learn “core democratic values are the fundamental beliefs and constitutional principles of American society which unite all Americans. These values are expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution and other significant documents, speeches, and writings of the nation.”<sup>21</sup> The definitions for older students are more sophisticated:

*Common good:* People should work together for the good of all. The government should make laws that are good for everyone.

*Justice:* All people should be treated fairly in getting the advantages and disadvantages of our country. No group or person should be favored.

*Liberty:* Liberty includes the freedom to believe what you want, freedom to choose your own friends, and to have your own ideas and opinions, to express your ideas in public, the right for people to meet in groups, and the right to have any lawful job or business.

*Popular sovereignty:* The power of the government comes from the people.

*Life:* Each person has the right to the protection of their life.

*Equality:* Everyone should get the same treatment regardless of where your parents or grandparents were born, your race or religion, or how much money you have. All people have political, social, and economic equality.

*Diversity:* Differences in language, dress, food, where parents or grandparents were born, race, and religion are not only allowed but accepted as important.

*Pursuit of happiness:* Each person can find happiness in their own way, so long as they do not step on the rights of others.

*Truth:* The government and citizens should not lie.

*Patriotism:* A devotion to our country, and the core democratic values in word and deed.

*Rule of law:* Both the government and the people must obey the law.<sup>22</sup>

The Curriculum Center guide encourages fifth-grade teachers to discuss an issue in class and then ask students to take one side, supporting their stand by citing democratic values. Students should be able to write a persuasive essay citing data, their knowledge of the issue, and core

democratic values. Under the heading “Civic Virtue in Action,” the guide instructs teachers to lead a discussion of a public policy issue, analyzing graphs or other data, and then have students write a persuasive letter to a public official proposing or opposing a new policy or law. For example, should the school board require school uniforms? Should the park commission open a city park reserved for small children to all ages?

As with the moral values, the core democratic values are posted in each Knapp classroom. Each month, a student is honored for a strong work ethic and citizenship, always tied to the core democratic values. In September, a student was honored for turning in lunch money he had found on the playground. “We try to teach responsible decision-making: How am I affecting others?” says Guerra. “Be the positive change. It’s about doing the right thing when others aren’t looking, helping your neighbors, being part of the community. Be leaders. Take pride in yourself and your work.”

Knapp’s halls are lined with students’ art and writing on moral and democratic values. Asked to “explain why rules and laws are important to have in a community,” kindergartners came up with:

Call 911 when there is a fire.

No climbing up the slide on the playground.

No playing in the street.

Never let strangers in my house.

The school library—including William Bennett’s *Children’s Book of Virtues*—lines a long hallway. A portrait of George Washington hangs on the wall. First graders write:

I show wisdom by halpen peopole wen they fele doon.

I can show wisdom by lisining.

I can show wisdom wen my mom is sike by making my mom brekfist.

Aimee Dykstra teaches history to seventh and eighth graders. Her classroom is decorated with a Rosie the Riveter poster proclaiming “We Can Do It,” and historic headlines (“FDR ASKS WAR!”). Signs point out the virtues of famous men:

Washington, shown crossing the Delaware, exemplifies leadership: “By George We Did It.”

Lincoln shows persistence: “Failed, failed, failed and then . . .”

Einstein represents confidence: “As a student, he was no Einstein.”

Students discuss how Native Americans in different parts of the country used natural resources for food, clothing, and shelter. They debate the ethics of using the prehistoric skeletal remains of the “Kennewick Man” for research when Native Americans have asked to bury the remains untouched. Most want to let scientists do the research and then return the remains, but Dykstra reminds them it is not that easy. Researchers need to break bones to analyze radioactive decay. “The tribes have a big problem with that,” she points out.

It is not always easy to weave moral themes into lessons, says Dykstra. However, teachers take pride in their students’ presentations for the moral focus assemblies. Her class wrote and performed a skit on using discernment—the middle-school version of “wisdom”—to decide when to intervene to stop bullying and when to tell an adult. Doing nothing was not an option.

## The Social Contract

In every NHA classroom, teachers and students agree on a “social contract” for classroom behavior that is posted for easy reference. In a kindergarten class at Knapp, the social contract is simple:

nice  
 respectful (treat others as we like to be treated)  
 praise for job well done  
 good listeners  
 helpful  
 responsible  
 follow directions  
 safe  
 no putdowns

Ashley Luthanen, a fifth-grade teacher, uses the color system. Alongside inspirational posters celebrating “moral focus” heroes like Helen Keller (“She could only see possibilities”), Luthanen’s behavior chart reads:

Green: I am following Mrs. L’s directions.  
 Yellow: I need to make better choices.  
 Blue: I need to turn my day around.  
 Red: I need to plan for a better day tomorrow.

Students who misbehave spend 10 minutes in detention and must fill out a “think plan.” One student writes, “I was out of line. which means I was not responsible or respectful. Next time: I will be in line when I’m supost to.”

Although NHA schools all teach the moral focus curriculum, core academics are aligned to state standards, and electives are developed at the school level. At Ridge Park, teachers started a new Literacy and Life Skills elective for eighth graders after an embarrassing field trip to Lake Superior State University, which charters the school. The students used street language, pushed, shoved, and littered. Sitting in on a college class, a student complained loudly of boredom. Never again, teachers decided. They would teach manners.

Doing good works does not push students out of their comfort zones or force them to confront controversial social issues.

Literacy and Life Skills explicitly teaches the behaviors and attitudes that will help students navigate the larger world as they move through high school, college, and the professional workplace, says Julie Lenhart, who also teaches seventh and eighth grade English. Texts include *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, by Sean Covey (son of the author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*), and *Emily Post’s Etiquette*.

Students need to learn “their actions have consequences at school—and elsewhere,” says Lenhart. “As a citizen, I can choose to comply with the law or not. There are consequences if I don’t. As a student, I can be removed from classroom society, just like in the real world.” Her classroom’s social contract reminds students:

Exercise self-control.  
 You are responsible for your actions, choices and work.  
 No put downs or profanity.  
 Come to class prepared.  
 Put forth effort.

Eighty percent of her students want to be professional athletes, rappers, or hip-hop dancers, Lenhart says. Her classes discuss current events and analyze political ads to broaden students’ understanding of the world. On a September day, students talk about what Covey means by “proactive” and “reactive.”

“A reactive person explodes,” says a girl.  
 “A proactive person can handle things,” says a boy.

“Martin Luther King and Oprah are proactive,” says another boy. “Hitler was reactive.”

In *Click*, a 2006 Adam Sandler comedy popular with students, the main character uses a magic remote control to rewind events. Lenhart asks: “If you had a remote that controlled reality, would you give the remote to someone else? Wouldn’t you want to be the one in control?”

Lenhart urges teens to listen to their language. “That’s me. That’s just the way I am,” is a way of ducking responsibility, she points out, citing Covey’s text. Instead, say, “I can do better.” In place of “I’ll try,” say, “I’ll do it.”

One boy gets the idea. “When I say I’ll try to do my homework, it means I’ll get home and I won’t do it. If I say I’ll do it, then I’ll get right to work.”

“What would have happened in history if Martin Luther King had said, ‘I can’t make a difference?’” Lenhart asks her class, which is nearly all black.

“We’d still be drinking out of separate water fountains,” a girl replies. “We wouldn’t have freedom.”

“Obama wouldn’t be president,” a boy says. “Rosa Parks wouldn’t have had the courage to stay in her seat.”

## From Good Kids to Good Citizens?

Some schools use service learning—volunteer work linked to classroom teaching—to engage students in community issues. While NHA schools try to develop students’ civic virtue, knowledge, and patriotism, students are not required to perform service. Students are not asked to petition, protest, or volunteer for a campaign.

Electives that include community service tend to focus on helping the poor, not on changing society. Each year, after studying third-world micro-entrepreneurship, Knapp

## Stand Up for What Is Right

Every year, NHA publishes a moral focus anthology called *Minds in Motion* featuring student writing and art on moral issues. Some excerpts:

Courage means to help your community become a better place by standing up for what is right. You can show courage by standing and giving a speech like Dr. Martin Luther King. You should show courage so you can be a great leader and help people get along. You should also show courage to be brave like the people in the military who keep our country safe.

—*First-grade student at Andrew J. Brown Academy (Indianapolis)*

Courage is a fire  
 Telling you to keep going  
 When you fall.

Courage is the little baby’s  
 Fight to stay alive.

Courage is the smiles through  
 The tears, the truth through  
 The lies, the love through  
 The death.

Courage is the mountain you’re  
 Climbing. And even when you  
 Stumble you have to have  
 The courage to get back up.

—*Eighth-grade student at Landmark Academy (Port Huron, Michigan)*

Perseverance is why  
 I keep my limits toward the sky.

Perseverance is so great  
 It really makes me concentrate.

Even when I give up and I’m sighing  
 Perseverance says keep on trying.

Sometimes when I try to stop  
 Perseverance says NO don’t flop.

When you don’t know what to do  
 Perseverance is good for you.

When you really are in need  
 Keep on trying and you’ll succeed.  
 —*Third-grade student at Queens Grant Community School (Mint Hill, North Carolina)*

I am going to show respect in school by keeping my hands to myself and tracking my teacher and helping my friends. If I am at home I am going to practice respect by listening to my mommy. I show respect by having manners. I say please and thank you and I am sorry when I hurt someone.

—*Kindergarten student at Brooklyn Scholars Charter School (New York City)*

sixth graders create a business, such as making key chains, and donate their profits to charity. Most years, they pick Olivia's Gift, which helps disabled children. Some sixth graders visit every month to clean the facility. Knapp students also have demonstrated gratitude by making gift boxes for soldiers serving overseas and buying gifts for poor children through Angel Tree, another local charity.

At Cross Creek Charter Academy, a predominantly middle-class NHA school south of Grand Rapids, kindergarteners collect broken or worn-down crayons, which are sorted by sixth graders and donated to a charity, Women at Risk (WAR) International. Melted down and reshaped into new crayons, they are sold to fund an orphanage in Ghana. Students learn a bit about Africa and demonstrate compassion, one of the monthly virtues.

Doing good works does not push students out of their comfort zones or force them to confront controversial social issues. That is not what most parents want.

Will NHA create the active citizens a vibrant democracy needs?

Good character leads to good citizenship, NHA leaders believe. Aristotle disagreed. "It is not always the same thing to be a good man and a good citizen," wrote the Greek philosopher.

The challenge for NHA schools is to remind students that personal virtue should be a step to civic virtue—not just a route to college and prosperity.

A picture by a seventh grader at Achieve Charter Academy in Canton, Michigan, shows a youth climbing steps named for virtues—encouragement, perseverance, compassion, integrity, self-control, courage, wisdom, gratitude, and respect—to reach a US flag marked "Good character, prosperity, success." On the other side of the steps, another youth is sliding down the steep slope of "disrespect, selfishness, carelessness, and discouragement."

The challenge for NHA schools is to remind students that personal virtue should be a step to civic virtue—not just a route to college and prosperity. A traditional, adults-in-charge structure may not encourage students to "fight the power" or occupy anything more controversial than a church pew or a voting booth. The schools'

culture is stronger on respect and responsibility than political activism.

Still, a young person who has studied our nation's history and system of government, respects our heritage, and has practiced being a responsible member of a school community has a strong start on good citizenship. "Within the character of the citizen lies the welfare of the nation," said Cicero.

### Author Biography

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### Notes

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8. See, for example, Schedule 7-2 of the contract with Knapp Charter Academy, 2012–13, Grand Valley State University, June 22, 2012, [www.gvsu.edu/cms3/assets/8D75A61E-920B-A470-F74EFFF5D49C6AC0/schoolcontracts/knapp\\_6e\\_contract.pdf](http://www.gvsu.edu/cms3/assets/8D75A61E-920B-A470-F74EFFF5D49C6AC0/schoolcontracts/knapp_6e_contract.pdf).
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12. E. D. Hirsch, *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 75.
13. Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School, "A Proposal to Create a Commonwealth Charter School," submitted to the Massachusetts Department of Education, November 15, 2005, 5, [www.doe.mass.edu/charter/finalists/05/emdhcs.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/finalists/05/emdhcs.pdf).
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16. Great Schools, “Ridge Park Charter Academy Test Scores and Stats,” [www.greatschools.org/cgi-bin/mi/other/229#students](http://www.greatschools.org/cgi-bin/mi/other/229#students).

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18. Information provided to author by NHA.

19. Great Schools, “Knapp Charter Academy Test Scores and Stats,” [www.greatschools.org/cgi-bin/mi/other/172#toc](http://www.greatschools.org/cgi-bin/mi/other/172#toc).

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22. *Ibid.*, 2.

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