

# CHARACTER COMPASS

How Powerful School Culture Can Point  
Students Toward Success

SCOTT SEIDER

FOREWORD BY **HOWARD GARDNER**



# Introduction

Character development has been a goal of the American education system since its inception.<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson cited the development of children's civic character as a key motivation for the establishment of public schools in the United States. John and Elizabeth Phillips founded New Hampshire's Phillips Exeter Academy in 1781 to promote both the "minds and morals of the youth under their charge." Horace Mann, one of the founding fathers of universal public education, argued that public schools could instill in unruly children the values, such as respect and self-discipline, necessary for a productive adulthood. More recent incarnations of character education have included Lawrence Kohlberg's just community schools and William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past decade, however, the intensive focus upon high-stakes testing ushered in by the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 has pushed character education to the back burner of many American schools.<sup>3</sup> With both students and educators facing significant pressure to demonstrate that students are achieving "adequate yearly progress" in core subject areas such as reading and mathematics, many school leaders have reluctantly given short shrift to character education as well as art, music, health education, and even history and science.

While the pressure from high-stakes testing has not abated, several key players in the education reform movement have begun to put their own mark on character education. Rather than viewing character development as a goal distinct from student achievement, these educators have come to see character education as a tool for facilitating students' pathways to and through college. Journalist Paul Tough's recent cover story in the *New York Times Magazine*—entitled "What if the Secret to Success Is Failure?"—

profiled two New York City schools on opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum that are both utilizing character education to promote student achievement.<sup>4</sup>

The century-old Riverdale Country Day School serves elite New York families who can afford the school's annual \$38,000 tuition. Just a few miles away, 92 percent of the children attending the KIPP Infinity Middle School in Harlem qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Yet both schools have come to believe that supporting their students' success in college and beyond entails bolstering students' self-discipline, optimism, curiosity, and a number of other character strengths. KIPP Infinity—one of 109 charter schools operated across the United States by the Knowledge Is Power Program—even issues to students a character report card designed to provide feedback to students and their families on eight different dimensions of students' character development that range from gratitude to grit to self-control.

Riverdale Country Day and KIPP Infinity are by no means the only stakeholders in the education reform movement utilizing character education to support student success.<sup>5</sup> Younger charter school networks such as Uncommon Schools and Achievement First have incorporated character development goals into their mission statements, mottoes, and teacher evaluation systems. Teacher training organizations such as the New Teacher Project are adding character education workshops to their professional development offerings. The Relay Graduate School of Education—the newest school of education in the United States—cites a mission of training teachers who can develop in students the academic skills and character strengths necessary to be successful in school and life. Teach For America explicitly seeks out corps members who demonstrate high levels of “grit.”

This resurgence of interest in character education has focused primarily upon what is referred to as *performance character*. Performance character can be defined as the qualities necessary to achieve one's potential in endeavors ranging from art to academics to athletics.<sup>6</sup> Examples of performance character strengths include perseverance, ingenuity, and optimism. In his *New York Times Magazine* profile of Riverdale Country Day and

KIPP Infinity, Tough observed that the character strengths emphasized at both schools lean “heavily toward performance 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> In other words, the latest iteration of character education seeks to foster in students the qualities possessed by entrepreneurs and politicians rather than activists or moral exemplars.

There are several reasons for this focus on performance character development. First, an important series of research studies by University of Pennsylvania psychologists Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman have found performance character strengths such as self-discipline to be stronger predictors than IQ of middle school students’ academic grades, school attendance, hours spent doing homework, and acceptance into highly competitive high schools.<sup>8</sup> Self-discipline refers to a student’s ability to persevere in the attainment of a higher goal rather than being distracted by opportunities for immediate gratification. For example, it requires self-discipline to prioritize doing one’s homework over watching television or to persevere on a challenging long-term assignment despite boredom and frustration.

A related line of research by Duckworth and University of Michigan psychologist Christopher Peterson has focused on a character strength they refer to as “grit” and define as one’s “perseverance and passion for long-term goals.”<sup>9</sup> These scholars found that undergraduates at an elite university with high levels of grit earned better grade point averages than their peers, even when controlling for IQ scores. They also found that grit was the strongest predictor of West Point students’ ability to persevere through Cadet Basic Training as well as the likelihood of adolescent participants in the Scripps National Spelling Bee advancing to the final rounds of the competition.

These findings by Duckworth, Seligman, and Peterson are only the latest in a long line of research that has found an individual’s ability to engage in deliberate and sustained practice to be highly predictive of his or her success in a particular endeavor.<sup>10</sup> The current emphasis, then, within

the education reform movement upon students' performance character development is supported by a robust body of scholarship demonstrating a strong relationship between student achievement and performance character strengths such as perseverance, self-discipline, and grit.

Of course, the current emphasis upon performance character development at schools such as Riverdale Country Day and KIPP Infinity is also reinforced by an American educational system that places a heavy emphasis upon students' test scores. For elite private schools such as Riverdale Country Day, increasing students' SAT scores, Advanced Placement results, and acceptance rates into prestigious universities raises the school's ranking within the independent school world and in the eyes of prospective students and parents. Likewise, urban public schools such as KIPP Infinity must demonstrate students' continued improvement on state standardized tests in order for their charters to be renewed by the city or state departments of education. Over the past decade, more than one hundred public schools in New York City alone have been closed due to poor performance on state tests, and the current chancellor of the New York City schools has signaled a willingness to shutter schools achieving even mediocre results.<sup>11</sup> In short, school leaders and other stakeholders interested in character education have strong incentives to favor curriculum and practices designed to bolster students' performance character strengths—qualities that have been shown to have a direct effect upon student achievement as measured by standardized tests.

The character education practices currently being implemented at KIPP Infinity and Riverdale Country Day are worthy of all the attention they have received. However, it would be a mistake for educators, parents, or policy makers to perceive performance character development as the sole "character foundation" upon which students' success can be built. *Character Compass* seeks to broaden the current dialogue about character education through portraits of three high performing schools in Boston, Massachusetts. All three schools have made character education central to their mission of supporting student achievement, yet they have done so in three very different ways. Namely, Boston Prep has focused its character education efforts on *moral* character development; Roxbury Prep empha-

sizes *performance* character development; and Pacific Rim privileges *civic* character development.

The three schools portrayed in *Character Compass* are charter schools—publicly funded primary and secondary schools supervised by the state board of education—but they were not selected *because* they are charter schools.<sup>12</sup> The three schools are also urban schools serving primarily low-income youth of color, but neither were they selected for their location or student demographics. Rather, the three schools featured in *Character Compass* are schools that have built powerful and productive cultures atop three very different character foundations. All three schools cite success in college as a primary goal for students, but their distinctive approaches to character development equip their respective student bodies with different sets of tools for achieving this goal. In highlighting these distinctive approaches, as well as their differential effects, *Character Compass* seeks to offer useful insights to educators, parents, and policy makers across a wide range of schools and communities about the *different* ways in which character education can form the foundation of students' success.

Can an investigation of character education practices at three urban charter schools be relevant to the work of educators at traditional public schools, suburban public schools, or independent schools? We believe the short answer is “yes,” and in fact, one of our research team's newest projects involves an elite independent school in California whose stakeholders found the character education efforts of these three East Coast charter schools to be highly instructive to their own goals for students' character development. Of course, that does not mean there are no differences between different types of schools.

Certainly there are descriptions and findings in *Character Compass* that will ring particularly true to stakeholders affiliated with charter schools similar to the three profiled here. Moreover, the relative autonomy enjoyed by charter schools may facilitate these stakeholders' efforts to implement or refine character education programming in their own school contexts. That said, *Character Compass* may be of greatest value to precisely those stakeholders who face more significant hurdles in “making the case” for character education to a district superintendent, school committee, or

state department of education. Through quantitative survey data, qualitative interview data, and field notes from school observations, *Character Compass* demonstrates the role of character development in promoting student success and offers a conceptual framework for stakeholders committed to refining character education practices in their own school contexts. In so doing, *Character Compass* provides robust support to parents, educators, and policy makers committed to making the case that character development is a sturdy foundation upon which a student's success can be built.

## THE THREE SCHOOLS

Boston Preparatory Charter Public School (Boston Prep) and Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter Public School (Pacific Rim) are located around the corner from each other in Boston's Hyde Park neighborhood. Roxbury Preparatory Charter School (Roxbury Prep) sits just a few miles away in nearby Roxbury. All three began as middle schools, though Boston Prep and Pacific Rim quickly expanded to offer grades nine through twelve, and Roxbury Prep recently decided to expand to the high school grades as well. All three schools are open to youth from any neighborhood in Boston, and places are awarded to students through a public lottery. Nearly 90 percent of the students attending the three schools identify as black or Latino, and two-thirds qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. This means that two-thirds of the students come from households supporting the equivalent of a family of four on less than \$40,000 a year.<sup>13</sup>

What draws scores of visitors each year to Boston Prep, Roxbury Prep, and Pacific Rim is that their students' test scores are competitive with those of youth from some of the wealthiest communities in the state. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is considered one of the most rigorous high-stakes testing systems in the country.<sup>14</sup> On the 2011 MCAS, only 60 percent of eighth graders in the city of Boston scored advanced or proficient on the English assessment, and only 34 percent of eighth graders scored likewise on the mathematics assessment. In contrast, 93 percent of Roxbury Prep eighth graders scored advanced or proficient

on the 2011 English assessment, and 84 percent scored likewise on the mathematics assessment.<sup>15</sup> These scores placed Roxbury Prep—a school at which three-fourths of the student body qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch—in the company of the Wellesley Public Schools and Newton Public Schools, two of the wealthiest communities in Massachusetts, with median family incomes approaching \$140,000 per year.<sup>16</sup>

The results were similar at Boston Prep and Pacific Rim. One hundred percent of Boston Prep tenth graders scored advanced or proficient on the 2011 Math MCAS, and 98 percent scored likewise on the English assessment. These scores rank Boston Prep—a school at which 73 percent of the student body qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch—as one of the highest-achieving high schools in the state. Directly *behind* Boston Prep was Dover-Sherborn High School—the public high school serving two Boston suburbs with median family incomes of approximately \$170,000 per year.<sup>17</sup>

Tenth graders at Pacific Rim scored right on the heels of their Boston Prep counterparts. Specifically, on the 2011 MCAS, 97 percent of Pacific Rim tenth graders scored advanced or proficient on the English assessment, and 91 percent scored likewise on the mathematics assessment. These scores, as well, placed Pacific Rim in the company of well-heeled Massachusetts school districts such as Wellesley, Newton, and Dover-Sherborn.

Of course, success on high-stakes tests is not the ultimate objective of Boston Prep, Roxbury Prep, or Pacific Rim. Rather, all three schools make clear their unequivocal goal of preparing students to enter, succeed in, and graduate from college. Leaders at all three schools say that this intensive focus on college readiness informs nearly every one of their decisions about curriculum, culture, and school practices. Even the classrooms at all three schools are named after universities and decorated with that university's pennants, posters, colors, and mascot.

Boston Prep—which was founded in 2004—graduated its first senior class in June 2011. One hundred percent of the senior class received college acceptance letters from four-year universities that included Emerson College, Howard University, Providence College, and St. John's University.

Additionally, Boston Prep seniors earned nearly three-quarters of a million dollars in scholarship funding to support their college aspirations.

Pacific Rim graduated its ninth cohort of seniors in 2011, and 95 percent of the students in these graduating classes have matriculated to four-year universities (with 85 percent persisting beyond the first year of college). Graduates from the class of 2011 are now attending schools such as Brown University, Bryn Mawr, College of the Holy Cross, Johns Hopkins, and Syracuse University. And while Roxbury Prep only began the process in 2011 of expanding into the high school grades, its alumni are currently attending universities such as Bowdoin, Howard, Tufts, and Vanderbilt.

As a result of the success of their students, Boston Prep, Roxbury Prep, and Pacific Rim have all been recognized and celebrated as among the highest performing urban public schools in the United States.<sup>18</sup> Faculty, students, and parents at all three schools cite character development as the foundation upon which their students' success is built. Yet, the types of character education occurring at the three schools are actually quite distinct from one another.

*Character Compass* reports on a year spent exploring the distinctive character education practices—and their effects—at Boston Prep, Roxbury Prep, and Pacific Rim. My research team and I began the 2010–2011 school year by surveying the nearly one thousand students in grades six through twelve across the three schools. Our surveys contained measures of the various character strengths that one or more of the schools cited as critical to fulfilling their college preparatory missions. These qualities included integrity, perseverance, courage, compassion, social responsibility, community connectedness, and respect. Students completed this confidential survey in September 2010 and then completed a similar survey again during the final weeks of the academic year. By pairing students' responses on these pre- and post-intervention surveys, we were able to compare students' changes on the various character measures over the course of the school year, and across the three schools. These comparisons allowed us to determine whether students at one of the schools were demonstrating significantly different shifts in integrity, perseverance, or one of the other character measures than their peers at the other two schools.<sup>19</sup>

Our survey data offered insight into the nature of students' character development at each of the three schools, but quantitative surveys provide little sense of *why* or *how* this character development took place. For this reason, we spent the months in between our initial and follow-up surveys conducting interviews with ninety-three students, teachers, administrators, and parents across the three schools. The purpose of carrying out these interviews was to learn more about how students described and understood the impact of their respective schools upon their own character development as well as to gain the perspective of parents and teachers. We also conducted more than one hundred observations of community meetings, ethics classes, character education classes, advisory lessons, and enrichment activities across the three schools. Our detailed field notes from these observations deepened our understanding as well of the distinctive character education practices taking place across the three schools.

In the chapters that follow, we draw on our survey data, interview data, and field notes to portray the character development occurring at Boston Prep, Roxbury Prep, and Pacific Rim as well as the curricular and pedagogical strategies contributing to this development. The portraits of the three schools are bookended by a brief review of the research literature on character development and character education in chapter 1, and a discussion of the implications for the education reform movement in chapter 8. The literature review in chapter 1 establishes a theoretical framework for interpreting the portraits that follow, and the concluding discussion in chapter 8 guides parents, educators, and policy makers in reflection upon the relevance of these different models of character development for their own work with students. In so doing, *Character Compass* seeks to contribute to the current wave of interest in character education by expanding the dialogue about the *different* ways in which character education can contribute to student success.

From *Character Compass* by Scott Seider, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013), pp.1-9.

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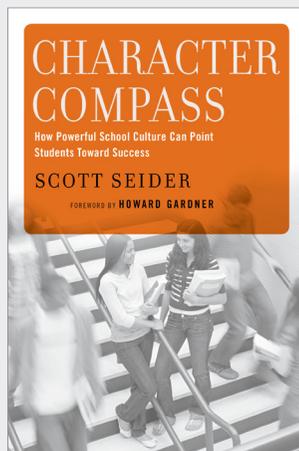
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