



Senate Fiscal Agency
P. O. Box 30036
Lansing, Michigan 48909-7536

BILL ANALYSIS



Telephone: (517) 373-5383
Fax: (517) 373-1986
TDD: (517) 373-0543

Senate Bill 93 (as passed by the Senate)
Sponsor: Senator Valde Garcia
Committee: Education

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RATIONALE

Parents and other visitors to schools sometimes complain about the lack of decorum students display in the hallways or in class. Students may swear, talk back to their teachers, and verbally abuse each other. Teachers also report that some students lie and cheat, bully each other, or display an apathetic, defeatist attitude. Schools' attempts to address these problems vary widely. Some implement stronger disciplinary measures, while others clean up, restore, and brighten the school building to create a climate less conducive to violence and disrespect. In elementary schools, some teachers hold class meetings in which students develop class goals and ground rules for behavior. Middle and high schools may divide their students and faculty into smaller units ("teams" or "houses") to lessen the anonymity that can contribute to students' disrespectful behavior.

Other schools, however, have implemented character education programs. According to the Character Education Partnership (CEP), the goal of character education is to "create a total school culture in which all people in the school...treat one another with kindness and respect" (*Education Week*, 9-12-01). The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) has developed a model character education program with Federal funds, and has piloted this curriculum in six secondary schools. It has been suggested that the MDE should make this model character development program, or similar programs, available to all school districts, and schools should be encouraged to adopt and implement it.

CONTENT

The bill would amend the Revised School Code to require the Michigan Department of Education, for the 2008-2009 school year and succeeding school years, to develop and make available to school districts and public school academies one or more model character development programs that the districts and academies could adopt and implement. A school board or the board of directors of a public school academy would be encouraged to provide a comprehensive character development program for pupils in each grade level it operated.

The character development program would have to be similar to the Michigan model for comprehensive school health education character education curriculum, the character counts program, the character first: education series, or the character unlimited program.

All of the following would apply to the character development program:

- It would have to be secular and research-based and have documented effectiveness.
- It would have to teach core ethical values and character qualities such as honesty, fairness, kindness, courtesy, compassion, acceptance, responsibility, respect for self and others, respect for the property of others, and service to others and to the community.
- It would have to be designed to encourage each pupil to become a responsible, contributing member of society.
- It "should" be incorporated, as much as possible, into each school's regular curriculum and classroom instruction.

-- It "should" be integrated into each school's procedures and environment to develop a school climate that promoted positive character traits.

The Department's obligation to develop the program and make it available would be limited to the amount of funds the Department had available to fulfill its duties under the bill.

The bill would take effect on October 1, 2007.

Proposed MCL 380.1163

ARGUMENTS

(Please note: The arguments contained in this analysis originate from sources outside the Senate Fiscal Agency. The Senate Fiscal Agency neither supports nor opposes legislation.)

Supporting Argument

According to CNN.com (April 5, 2002), a national survey by Rutgers' Management Education Center found that 75% of high school students had engaged in serious cheating, and that more than half had plagiarized work they found on the internet. Many students reported that they cheated to get ahead, to save time and energy, or to pass a class, according to the CNN article. More disturbing, many students found little wrong with cheating and plagiarizing, and were quick to rationalize their behavior.

A successful character education program allows for an open discussion about the prevalence of cheating, and, rather than preaching or telling students not to break the rules, challenges students' assumptions, behaviors, and choices. Here, character education departs from "values clarification", a popular educational movement of the 1970s, which taught students to identify their values, but shied away from challenging those values against societal standards. As a result, students learned to focus on themselves, and teachers avoided having to take a stand, since every issue could be reduced to how one *felt* about an issue. Character education also departs from the teaching of manners, from praising and rewarding students for good behavior, and from motivational assemblies.

According to the website Good Character.com, a resource for character educators, the following principles guide

many character development programs: 1) One's character is defined by one's actions, not by what one says or believes; 2) every choice defines a person; 3) good character requires doing the right thing, even when it is costly or risky; 4) one can choose to be better than the worst behavior of others; 5) what one does matters, and one person can make a big difference; and 6) the payoff for a good character is that it makes one a better person and makes the world a better place. According to the CEP, character education goes beyond teaching compliance with rules and hanging banners promoting the value of the day. A successful character education program engages a student's mind, heart, and conscience in an attempt to create a more humane and healthy society.

The bill would encourage the adoption of one of four comprehensive model character education programs to assist schools with launching their own programs. The model programs advocate the teaching of the core ethical values listed in the bill: honesty, fairness, kindness, courtesy, compassion, acceptance, responsibility, respect for self and others, respect for the property of others, and service to others and to the community.

Opposing Argument

One of the model character education programs suggested in the bill, "Character First!", promotes values that may be out of synch with those held by many, if not most, Americans. The program's author, Bill Gothard, is an evangelical Christian minister and founder of the Institute of Basic Life Principles. Both the Institute and the "Character First!" program promote Gothard's belief in a universal "chain of command", which holds that authority figures represent God; therefore, wives must obey husbands, workers their employers, and citizens their politicians. The Character First! curriculum reflects this belief in its emphasis on marching, orderliness, and class recitations. This type of character education has no place in a public school classroom.

Response: The bill does not require any school to adopt a character education program, and only mentions "Character First!" as one of four available models. If a school finds that a program's philosophy does not jibe with that of community members, then the school is free to choose another program, or none at all.

Opposing Argument

The State should leave character education up to parents. Schools have enough of a challenge attempting to teach students how to read, write, and understand math. Children can learn values in their home and through their religious upbringing. If schools go beyond their basic curricula, perhaps they should focus on teaching conflict resolution.

Response: It is precisely because many students do not receive an education in good character at home that schools need to pick up the slack. Not all parents are good role models and not all children are involved in a faith community.

Legislative Analyst: Claire Layman

FISCAL IMPACT

To develop a character development program under this legislation, the Department of Education would face increased costs. Specifically, the Department would see increased labor costs for those employees necessary to develop and disseminate a character development curriculum, and there would be associated research, development, and distribution costs. However, if the Department had no available funds to devote to this program development, then that obligation would be removed.

Fiscal Analyst: Kathryn Summers-Coty

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This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan Senate staff for use by the Senate in its deliberations and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.