

Can Virtue be Measured?

Bill Kurtz, CEO

DSST Public Schools

*Prepared for the Education Reform Character Conference sponsored by
The Kern Family Foundation, March 11-12, 2014*

Can virtue be measured? The answer is “Yes – imperfectly, but it can be measured.” Furthermore, it must be measured for schools to play an increasingly important role in character development. The measurement of virtue is not an end, but a means to more deeply develop virtue in young people in our schools. Measuring virtue creates the context for educators to have meaningful conversations about virtue, and ultimately, do the work that develops this characteristic in students.

Development of virtue is a critical outcome for successful schools

Character education has long been viewed as the parent’s responsibility in our society, and, ultimately, the parent is the best teacher of virtue. But in today’s reality, children spend most of their formative years in school, occupied with school-related work, and in after-school activities outside the home. Additionally, in a fragmented and busy society where work consumes adult lives and economic realities require long work hours, the development of virtue has increasingly become a team effort of institutions such as family, church, school, after-school programs, and mentors. Schools have an opportunity to play the larger role in this effort – and they must.

The role of an institution instilling virtue in young people, however, differs from the role of a parent. A teacher-student relationship can be meaningful, but remains fundamentally different from the relationship a parent has with a child. The same is true of a school’s relationship to a student, especially given the growing size of schools and classrooms. Relationships are

typically less personal, deep, and care-focused in schools, and tend to be more extrinsic than in families. School relationships tend to emphasize performance rather than development. Within this school context, measurement of virtue is a necessity to bridge this relational gap. Measurement can also lead to the greater development of virtue by providing a means to building deeper “familiar” relationships between teacher and student. Schools are an environment where measurement confers importance – by not measuring virtue, schools send clear messages to teachers, students, and families that it is not valued.

Measurement of virtue is imperfect, but necessary

Virtue is not the same as static knowledge or skills. It reflects how one chooses to conduct oneself in a variety of settings and circumstances. Virtue is often described as how a person behaves when no one looking. It is tested by how a person responds when a challenge arises, when he or she is confronted by hard choices with real consequences, when an individual’s self-interest seems to conflict with the “right thing” to do. As result, measuring virtue is challenging. The development of virtue is continually “tested” by how a person behaves in the next moment, opportunity, or context. Thus, there is never an end point to the measurement of virtue, or a simple “assessment” that fully measures integrity in the same way that one can test a student’s mastery of multiplication. In many cases, measurement of a virtue is left to the observations of others. People perceive that someone is virtuous – or not – through observations and experience. As a result, measuring virtue is an imperfect science marked by limitations.

That said, an imperfect measurement of virtue in a school setting is better than no measurement at all. How can virtue be measured in a school setting?

- A school can measure student virtues through a normed evaluation by educators who closely monitor how well students live these virtues day in and day out – in the classroom, hallways, lunchroom, during extracurricular activities, and before and after school.
- Students can self-evaluate how well they demonstrate these virtues and report their self-assessment to their teachers and parents.
- Virtues can be scored and then aggregated to celebrate students who score a high degree of virtue – providing reference points for students and faculty to strive for.

As described above, these measures can be flawed in myriad ways, including perception bias, incomplete experience, or the simple fact that a student may be virtuous only when others are looking. That being said, by in large, these measures have yielded, in a non-scientific way, relatively good assessments of students' virtue at DSST Public Schools. Agreement on a student's "core values scores" is typically reached by student, parent, and teachers alike. Disagreements on these scores occur, but are not the norm. In order to achieve meaningful results, several key conditions must be in place:

- School staff must be more committed to living and developing virtues in themselves than the students. Staff commitment will lead to better and more accurate measurement.
- The virtues of the school must be clear, universal, and widely accepted as important by the entire school community.
- Student-teacher relationships must be at the center of the school culture – where a mutual respect is present.
- Students must be known by educators – through small group settings like student advisory groups and taught by a common set of teachers who get to know a common group of students. This greatly enhances the ability to measure virtue.

Measurement of virtue leads to the development of virtue

If the above conditions are in place, the imperfect measurement of virtue can lead to a robust culture of virtue development. How so?

- Measurement signals to everyone in the community that the development of virtuous qualities is important.
- It creates a context for teachers to routinely broach conversations with students about the development of virtue. Through these conversations, relationships can deepen, goals can be set, and both teacher and student can regularly track progress.
- Measurement leads to important conversations about a student's virtue at parent report card conferences – thus bridging the school-home gap on virtue development.
- Virtues can be celebrated at school-wide gatherings, including weekly student morning meetings, award ceremonies, and graduations. Measurement creates a framework to celebrate these virtues and a forum to discuss what excellence means in living out these virtues.

Conclusion

Despite the intense and justified focus in American public education on academic outcomes and high accountability on test scores, helping develop the character of our young people continues to be one of the most important responsibilities of our schools. The opportunity to develop virtue is implicit in every human interaction. Schools can take advantage of this or ignore it. Embracing the development of student character is an opportunity that our country cannot afford to miss. Measuring virtue is an imperfect but key strategy for successfully building character in our young people.