

**Effects of the
Changing Lives Character Education Program
Upon the Behaviors and Perceptions of
Students, Teachers, and Parents:
Evidence of Transformations in the School Climate**



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ABSTRACT

The *Changing Lives Character Education* (CL) programs established under the leadership of Rodolfo S. Bernardo have been associated with positive changes identified in surveys of students, teachers, and parents. Students report more positive attitudes and behaviors and an increased desire to learn. Responses from teachers and parents corroborate these findings. Furthermore, teachers indicate that strong administrative support and school-wide consensus on goals involving desirable social relationships and academic achievements enhance their feelings of effectiveness.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rodolfo S. Bernardo established his first character education program at the Allen Academy Elementary School, Dayton, Ohio in 1989. Using the principles and procedures of the *Changing Lives Character Education Program*, Allen Academy rose from a rank of 28th of 33 schools on the California Abilities Test to 1st of 33 schools six years later. Positive changes in student and teacher attitudes and behaviors also attest to the effectiveness of this program.

Bernardo implemented his character education program as a first-year principal at the Broadmoor Academy Elementary School in Trotwood, Ohio, at the beginning of the 1996-97 school year. Evaluation research was initiated immediately. Surveys involved students, teachers, and parents at Broadmoor Academy and their counterparts at three other schools, carefully selected for comparison purposes. One comparison school adopted the character education program in January of the 1997-98 school year. The other schools did not adopt the program.

The *Changing Lives Character Education Program* appears to have influenced students, teachers, and parents. Broadmoor Academy students reported fewer unruly behaviors and they felt more strongly than did their counterparts at the comparison schools that teachers expected them to behave in positive ways. Teachers at the schools with character education reported less frequent negative student behaviors and there were fewer disciplinary actions taken at these schools than at the two comparison schools. Parents were more likely to attend activities at the schools with character education, and they rated these schools more positively.

Perhaps the strongest findings indicating beneficial effects of character education are derived from pretest-posttest comparisons. For example, at Broadmoor Academy, which had the most advanced and well-established character education program, students reported a low level of negative interpersonal behavior at both the beginning and end of the school year. At the school in which character education was fully adopted in the middle of the year, negative interpersonal behaviors declined from the beginning to the end of the school year. In contrast, negative behaviors increased significantly during the year in the schools without a character education program.



Survey responses of students, teachers, and parents associated with Broadmoor Academy in the 1998-99 school year were compared with those of their counterparts at 19 other Ohio schools that had adopted a character education program and with four comparison schools without such programs.

Broadmoor students felt more strongly than did their counterparts at other schools that character education improved their motivation to learn, helped make school a more pleasant place to learn, helped them become more cooperative, helped improve their ability to learn, and helped them become a better student. In addition, Broadmoor students rated their classmates' citizenship, teacher support, classroom order, adult expectations, pro-social behaviors, and inclusiveness higher than did students at other schools.

In addition, Broadmoor teachers rated opportunities for professional development, student recognition for positive attitudes and behaviors, and students' academic initiative higher than did teachers at other schools. They also felt more strongly than did their counterparts at other schools that character education helps make school a more pleasant place to learn, helps improve students' behaviors, helps increase students' motivation to learn, and helps improve their effectiveness as teachers.

Finally, parents at Broadmoor Academy reported stronger beliefs than did their counterparts at other schools that character education helps make school a more pleasant place to learn, helps improve students' behaviors, and helps increase students' motivation to learn.

An effective elementary school character education program can promote a more positive school climate that has enduring effects. As students are encouraged to respect one another and are provided with support, guidance, and recognition of their developing competencies, their commitment to education and school involvement might have also increased. Consequently, their reports of having been helped to become a better student might portend sustained academic achievement and positive peer relations that preclude potential negative influences common in the middle/junior high and high school years.

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This report describes three separate evaluations of programs developed according to principles of character education articulated by author Rodolfo S. Bernardo.¹ First, there were extensive assessments in the early '90's of the program that he developed as principal of Allen Academy Elementary School in Dayton, Ohio. Secondly, in 1997-98, the character education program that Bernardo brought to Broadmoor Academy in the Trotwood-Madison City Schools in Ohio was assessed in comparison with two other area schools. The comparison schools were similar to Broadmoor except that their character education programs were (1) implemented later, (2) partially implemented, or (3) non-existent. Finally, the program at Broadmoor Academy was evaluated in the 1998-99 school year along with other character education programs from eighteen other Ohio school districts. (Several of these were established with the help of Bernardo's consultation and training.) To our knowledge, the character education programs developed at Allen Academy and Broadmoor Academy Elementary Schools have been objectively evaluated more than any comparable education program.

SUMMARY OF THE 1990-95 RESULTS FROM ALLEN ACADEMY

Factors that present challenges to educators (such as large classes) or are considered risks to students (such as single parent homes and/or low-income families) remained present throughout the evaluation of Allen Academy Elementary School from 1989 to 1995. In fact, the percent of single parent families and families receiving Aid to Dependent Children *increased* from the year before the character education program began (1989) to the last year recorded (1995). Hence, given the continued presence of variables said to be related to low academic achievement or undesirable behaviors, positive changes in academic outcomes, attitudes, and students' conduct associated with the implementation of character education at Allen Academy appear even more impressive.

Changes in California Abilities Test scores were evaluated relative to the appropriate normative group, elementary schools in the Dayton City Schools. The change in rank from 28th of 33 schools before the program began to 1st of 33 schools six years later is strong evidence for the academic benefits of the program led by Bernardo.

¹ Bernardo's principles and procedures are now embodied in the *Changing Lives Character Education Program*.

The other changes gathered from objective school records kept at the school, the district, and/or the state level show the strong attitudinal and behavioral benefits of this initial program. The percentage of students submitting homework, the number of students suspended, and the number of inappropriate behavior interruptions indicates substantial positive changes in students' conduct. Furthermore, the rankings of teacher morale and teacher absentee rates indicate positive changes in teachers' attitudes and behaviors.

SUMMARY OF A 1997-98 EVALUATION OF THE *CHANGING LIVES* CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM AT BROADMOOR ACADEMY

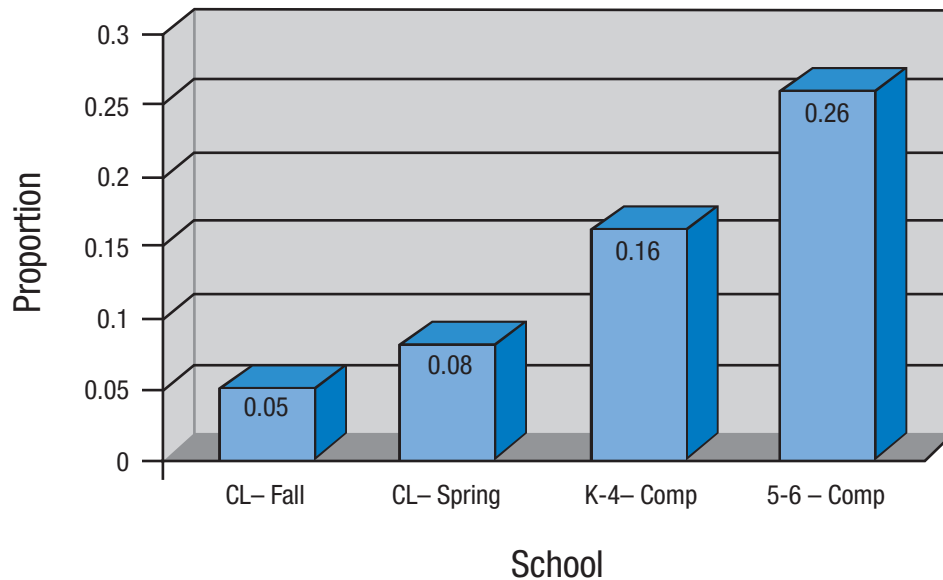
We recently compared information collected from three different programs: (1) the program at Broadmoor Academy, which Bernardo implemented at the beginning of the 1996-97 school year as a first-year principal; (2) a school which had the "Word of the Week" component of character education at the beginning of the year but whose teachers and staff completed character education training in January of the school year, and (3) two schools, at which there was no provision for teachers to learn and adopt character education activities. (One of these schools was comprised of kindergarten through fourth grades, while the other had fifth and sixth grade students. Only the Word of the Week component was administered in kindergarten through fourth grade.) Hence, an attempt was made to include schools with varying degrees of experience with character education (CE) to provide the most useful comparisons of the effects of such programs. In the following discussion, the first school described above will be referred to as the "CL-Fall School," the second school as the "CL-Spring School," and the third and fourth schools as the "K-4 and 5-6 Comparison Schools."

Results on the monthly behavioral records provide evidence that the character education programs at the CL-Fall School and the CL-Spring School positively influenced teacher attendance, the number of disciplinary incidents, the number of school visitors, and the attendance of parents at parent-teacher conferences and other school activities. For example, Figure 1 illustrates a representative finding pertaining to the proportion of students at each school who were the subject of a disciplinary action during the year. As can be seen from inspection of this figure, the two character education schools had a significantly lower rate² of disciplinary actions than the two comparison schools where character education was minimally adopted (K-4 Comparison) or not adopted at all (5-6 Comparison). While it should be remembered that the students at the 5-6 Comparison School were fifth and sixth graders and older children are more likely to get in trouble, both the CL-Fall and CL-Spring Schools also had fifth and sixth graders. Therefore, the pattern of results indicates that character education might reduce disciplinary problems.

Opinions of students, teachers, and parents about aspects of their school-related experiences during the 1996-97 school year were obtained in the Fall 1997. These scores provide the baseline, "before" (or "pre-test") measures of an assessment of character education programs in the schools. We also conducted surveys with students, parents, and teachers toward the end of the school year for the "after" (or "post-test") measures, and these will be described in a subsequent section.

² All differences mentioned throughout this report are statistically reliable at the 5% level of significance, which means that the probability of obtaining such results by chance are relatively low ($p < .05$).

Figure 1. Proportion of Disciplinary Actions at the Four Schools.



While questionnaire forms were administered to students and teachers, information from parents was obtained through phone interviews. Information about each of the questionnaire forms and telephone interviews are provided below.

INITIAL (“PRE-TEST”) SURVEYS

Parent Interviews

The parent interviews were conducted by telephone from the University of Dayton. Trained student interviewers were prompted by an interview protocol, which appeared on a screen in front of them. They recorded and stored answers in a computer as they conducted the interview.

There are 26 primary items about the past year’s school experiences of their children. The interviews lasted from five to ten minutes, and respondents’ confidentiality was maintained. A total of 482 parents or guardians were included in the initial parent survey.



Teacher Questionnaires

The teacher questionnaires had 50 items about the school, the teachers, the principal, and **communication** and **interaction patterns** among them. An additional 13 items asked about the frequencies of **positive** and **negative student behaviors** occurring at the school. All of these ratings were explicitly about behaviors and relations at school during the past school year. Twenty-five teachers from the four schools completed these forms.

Student Questionnaires

The student questionnaires were completed in the school classrooms. Students were asked to respond to items according to opinions about conditions and conduct at the school the previous year. There were 18 items about the school's **expectations of students** in terms of respect for others, honesty, completing work on time, kindness to others, etc. There were 21 other items about how the student rated his/her **own behavior** last year in terms of respect for others, honesty, completing work on time, kindness to others, etc. On a separate form there were 26 questions about how often the student reported that he or she **initiated** or was the **recipient** of specific **positive** and **negative behaviors**. A total of 526 third-, fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students from the four schools completed the surveys.

SUMMARY OF PRE-TEST SURVEY RESULTS

Parents

We combined the 26 parent interview items about their child's school last year into one overall rating. The analysis and Figure 2 show that parents/guardians whose children attended the CL-Fall School rated their child's school more positively overall than did the remaining parents. These results provide evidence that the advanced and earlier established character education program at the CL-Fall School positively influenced parents' opinions about the school.

Teachers

Figure 3 presents the overall findings for the 50 items that pertain to teachers' perceptions about their school. As can be seen from inspection of this figure, teachers at the CL-Fall School rated conditions at school during the 1996-97 academic year higher than did their counterparts at the other schools. This finding, obtained at the beginning of the 1997-98 school year, could represent positive attitudes of teachers at the CL-Fall School toward the advanced level of character education established at their school.

No significant differences between schools were obtained from teachers' ratings of the frequency of positive behaviors of students during the 1996-97 school year. However, CL-Fall teachers rated negative student behavior as less frequent than did the CL-Spring and Comparison teachers. These differences, which are depicted in Figure 4, provide evidence that character education had reduced the incidence of negative student behaviors.



Figure 2. Parent Ratings of Child's School as Experienced in Previous Year

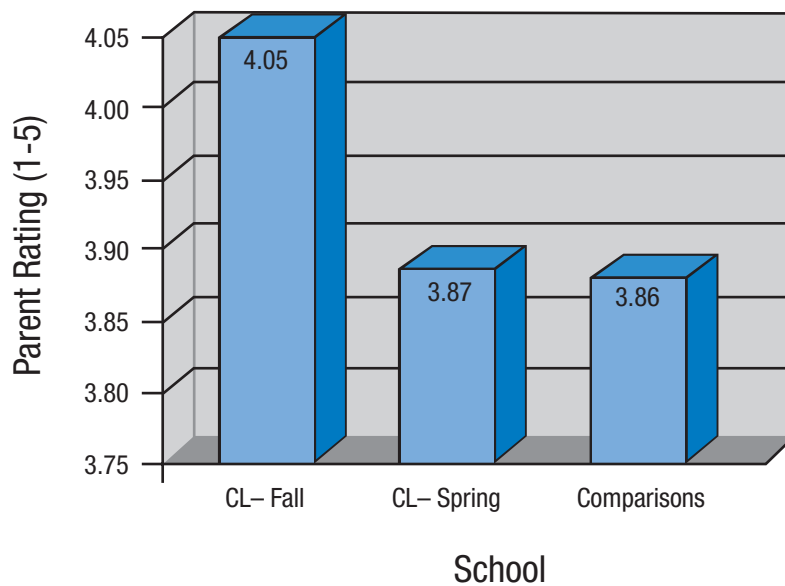


Figure 3. Overall Positivity Ratings by Teachers of School Characteristics in the Past Year

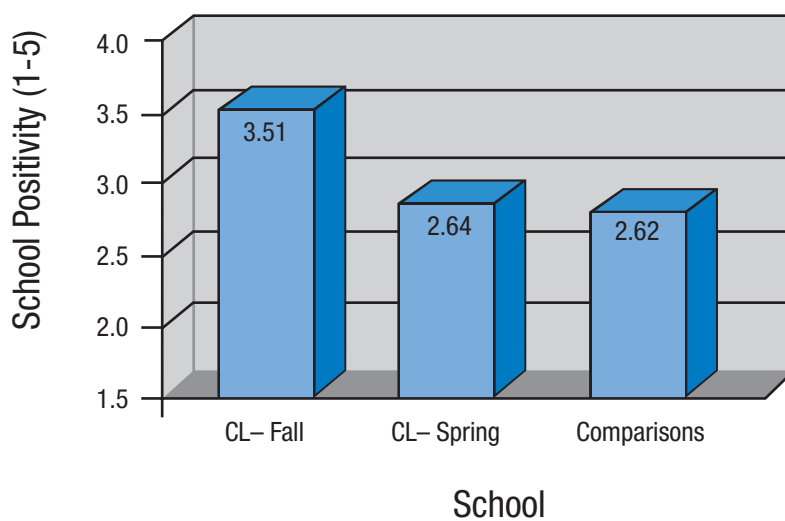
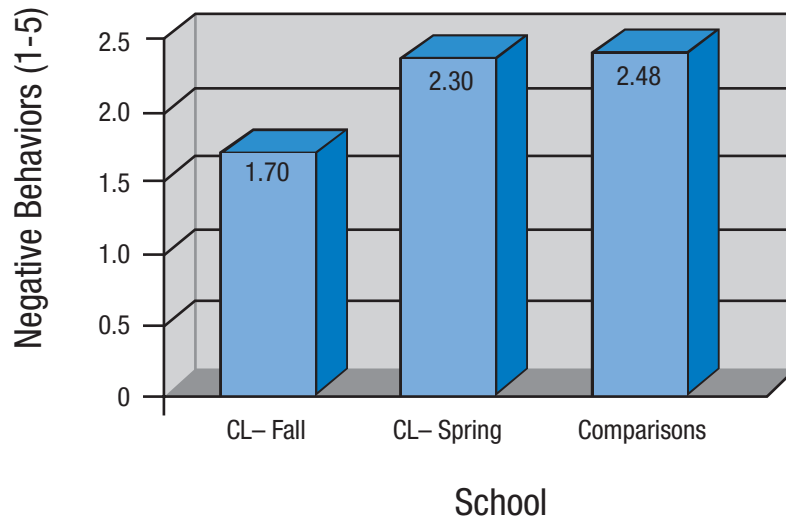


Figure 4. Teacher Ratings of the Frequency of Negative Student Behaviors in the Past Year



Students

On items requiring students to rate the extent to which their school staff expected them to behave in a positive manner, responses obtained at the CL-Fall School were more positive than those obtained at the other schools. (The lighter-colored bars in Figure 5 depict this finding.) The same figure shows that CL-Fall students rated their own, responsible behaviors more favorably than did the other students. (See the darker-colored bars.) It should be noted that staff training in character education at the CL-Spring School began after this initial, pre-test, survey had been completed.

Students' responses to the remaining 21 items were combined into measures of frequency of positive behaviors directed toward others, positive behaviors received from others, negative behaviors directed toward others, and negative behaviors received from others. There were no differences among schools on either of the positive behavior measures. Overall, the average ratings of positive behaviors initiated by self (3.62 out of 5.00) and positive behaviors initiated by others (3.22 out of 5.00) were moderately high.

Figure 6 illustrates significant differences among schools on the negative behavior measures. Students at the CL-Spring and Comparison Schools indicated that they had directed more negative behaviors toward their peers during the past year than did CL-Fall students. Compared to reports by the CL-Fall students, the CL-Spring and Comparison students also indicated more frequent occurrences of poor treatment by their schoolmates in the past year. These results seem to reflect character education effects on the reduction of potentially disruptive or harmful student behaviors.

Figure 5. Students' Ratings of School's Expectations About Behavior and Positivity of Own Behavior

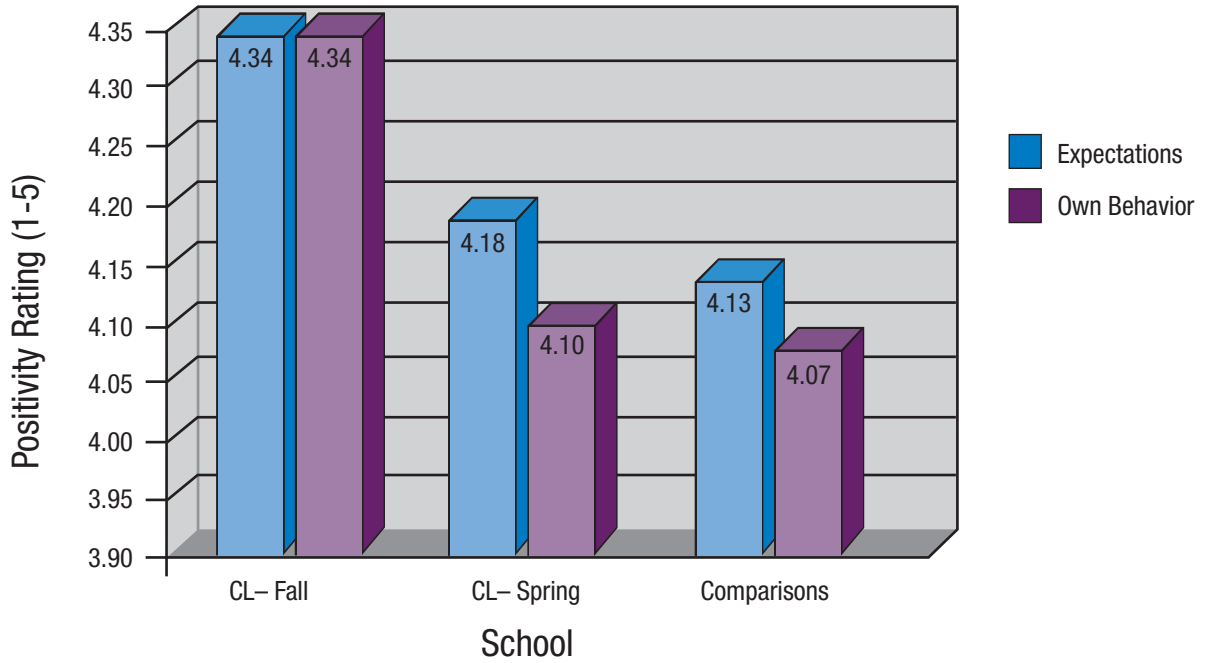
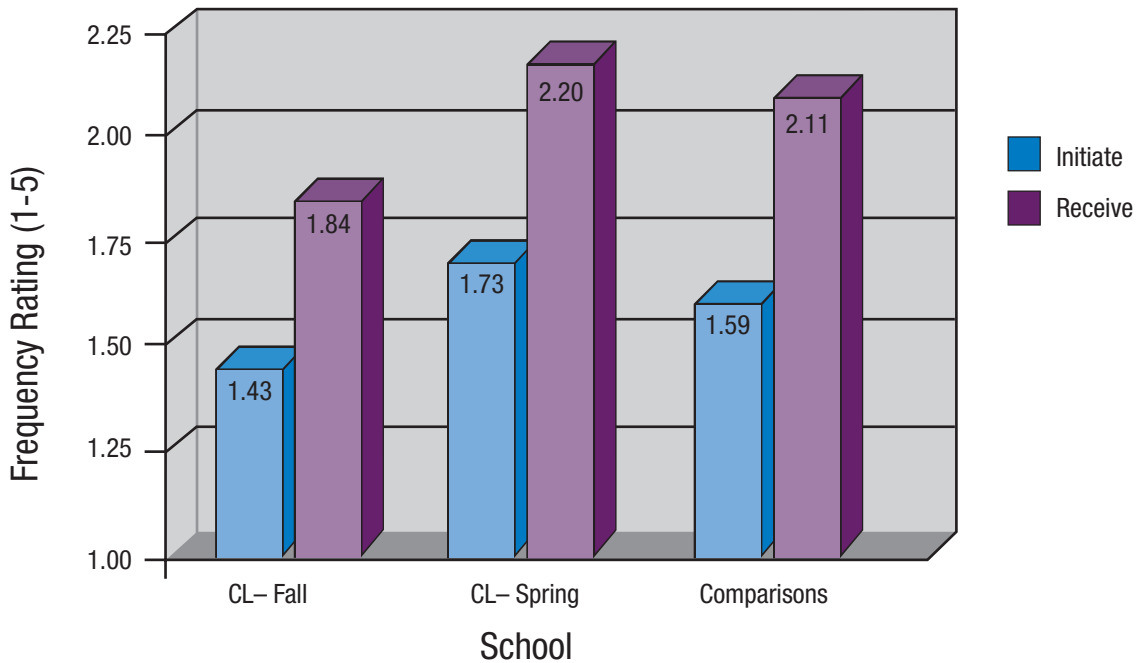


Figure 6. Students' Ratings of the Frequencies of Initiating and Receiving Negative Behavior



END-OF-YEAR (“POST-TEST”) SURVEYS

Teachers

The school climate survey for teachers was re-administered at the end of the school year. The same questions were asked about many facets of school life: the learning environment, the principal’s and teachers’ communication and working relationships, and students’ positive and negative social behaviors toward each other. At the beginning of the school year teachers were asked to respond to questions about the past (1996-97) school year. However, at the end of the school year they answered questions about their current (1997-98) school year.

Students

The post-test student surveys were also administered near the end of the school year. One set of items again asked students about expectations concerning honesty, respect, responsibility in completing work, etc., that are communicated at their school. A second set of items asked students how well they had lived up to these positive expectations. A third set of questions asked students if they had initiated positive and negative social behaviors toward other students and whether they had received such treatment from others. All of these questions were aimed at assessing important matters of conduct and behavior which character education programs are designed to improve. The first two groups of items were worded so that students indicated whether the conditions were “Much Worse,” “Worse,” “About the Same,” “Better,” or “Much Better” “this year than last year,” thus yielding 1 to 5 scales. It is important to remember that these items asked students to give a relative judgment rather than an absolute judgment about conditions at school. Therefore, because the ratings among students at the CL-Fall School were higher than those from students at other schools at the beginning of the year, “About the Same” is actually better there than at the other schools. For these sets of items, it is appropriate to present the post-test results alone because they represent a longitudinal comparison by themselves.

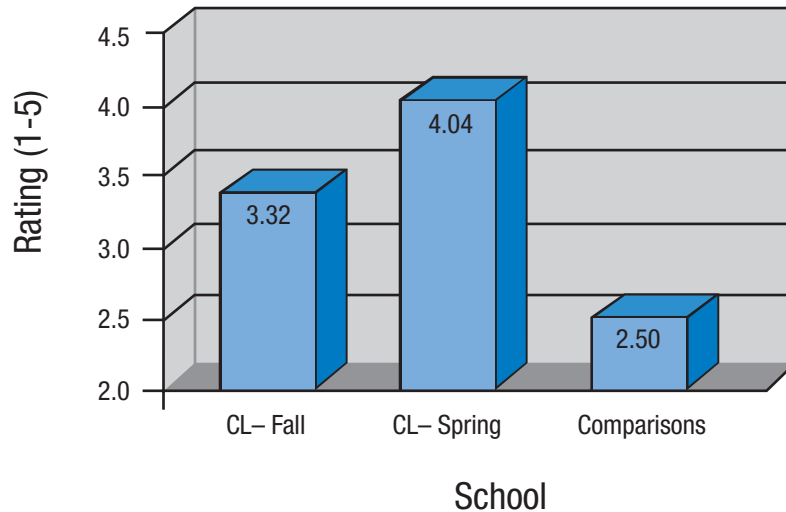
The third set of items, requiring judgments of positive and negative behaviors, were worded the same on the pre-test and post-test. Comparisons of pre-test and post-test responses on these items provide the most compelling evidence of longitudinal changes.

SUMMARY OF POST-TEST SURVEY RESULTS

Teachers

Relatively few significant results were obtained from the post-test teachers’ survey because only 17 teachers over the four schools completed the survey. However, CL-Spring teachers perceived the most improvement in their school’s climate. This finding, which is the only one that is statistically significant, is presented in Figure 7. This figure shows that ratings obtained from CL-Spring teachers were more positive than those from Comparison teachers.

Figure7. Teachers' Ratings of Overall Positivity of School Climate Compared to Previous Year



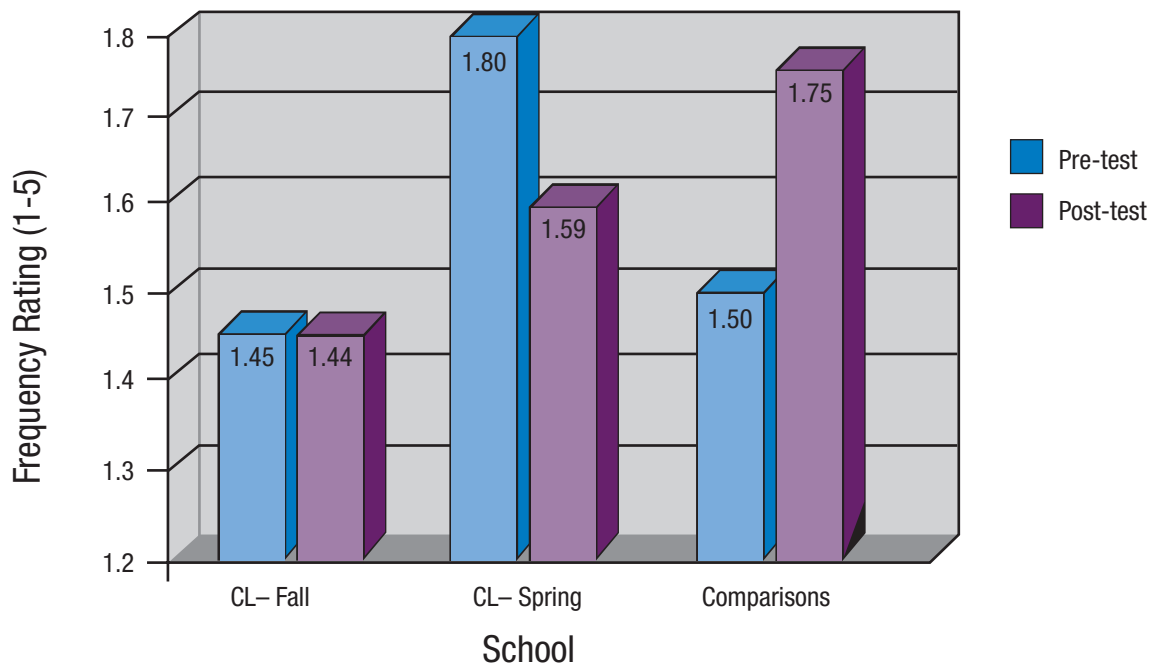
Students

There were no significant differences between the schools on the students' rated frequency of positive interpersonal behaviors in the first or the second surveys. However, their ratings of negative interpersonal behaviors varied according to both school and test (pre- vs. post-test). Figure 8 shows the students' responses about the frequency of negative interpersonal behaviors at the CL-Fall, CL-Spring, and Comparison Schools (combined) at the beginning and the end of the year.

It is apparent from inspection of Figure 8 that negative conduct at the CL-Fall School was relatively low at both the beginning and end of the school year. In contrast, negative conduct was initially high at the CL-Spring School, but it improved by the end of the year. In contrast, undesirable behaviors were initially low at the Comparison Schools, but they had escalated by the end of the school year. The pattern of results is consistent with character education program development at the schools. That is, at the school with the most advanced and well-established character education program, the relatively low level of negative interpersonal behavior at the beginning of the school year continued through the end of the year. At the school in which character education was fully adopted in the middle of the year, negative interpersonal behaviors apparently declined through the school year. In contrast, negative behaviors increased significantly during the year in the schools without a character education program.



Figure8. Pretest and Posttest Frequency Ratings of Own Negative Behaviors



SUMMARY OF A 1998-99 EVALUATION OF THE CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM AT BROADMOOR ACADEMY

The following summary describes an evaluation of the character education program at Broadmoor Elementary School (B-CL) in the 1998-99 school year, and provides comparisons with the same evaluations conducted at 19 other Ohio schools with character education programs (Other-CE)³ and with four comparison schools without such programs (No-CE). Students in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades of these schools, teachers at all grades (K-6th), and parents of children at all grades (K-6th) were surveyed. In addition to general questions about the school climate, respondents associated with character education programs were also asked if they felt that character education had specific beneficial effects.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A post-test design was used to compare B-CL, Other-CE, and No-CE respondents. These comparisons were made for questionnaire responses from students, teachers, and parents.

³ The Other-CE Ohio schools are those that recently adopted a character education program and are members of the Federally funded pilot project, Partnership in Character Education.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Students

The major results from students are presented in Table 1. Broadmoor students rated items within all factors,⁴ including classmates' citizenship, teacher support, classroom order, adult expectations, pro-social behaviors, and inclusiveness higher than did their Other-CE and No-CE counterparts.

Items comprising the factor labeled "Classroom Order/Self-Control" appear particularly important in assessing possible effects of character education upon future behaviors, such as resistance to alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. The items in this factor include questions such as (1) "Do you..." (or "Do your classmates...") "...push or hit others when angry?," (2) "...say mean things to others when angry with them?," and (3) "...treat the teacher with respect?" Interestingly, similar items that were included in a survey of middle school/junior high school and high school students (e.g., "Do students in your class..." (1) "...act violently toward classmates or staff?," (2) "...tell lies about another student?," and (3) "...disrupt class?" elicited responses that are significantly correlated with perceptions of drug and alcohol use.

The items listed above all appear to measure an underlying dimension referred to as "Classroom Order/Self-Control," which might be common to both elementary school students and older students in middle/junior high school and high school. Perhaps students' resistance to violence and treatment of their teacher and classmates with respect indicate the internalization of school values that support a positive school climate in which students are encouraged to respect one another and are provided guidance in the development of their individual competencies. The association between these attributes of a school environment and the frequency of drug, tobacco, and alcohol use among middle/junior high and high school students might be understood in terms of the provision of "protective" factors that strengthen young people's resistance to negative peer influences. That is, identification with school values that emphasize personal responsibility, development of social skills as well as general competencies, and community service could help ensure a commitment to education and school involvement and a corresponding resistance to negative influences, such as drug use, that might jeopardize attainment of such goals.

Ratings of specific perceived benefits of character education were obtained using a 1 to 5 scale, with higher values representing stronger effects. Broadmoor students felt more strongly than did their counterparts at other schools that character education improved their motivation to learn, helped make school a more pleasant place to learn, helped them become more cooperative, helped improve their ability to learn, and helped them become a better student. These results are depicted in Figure 9.

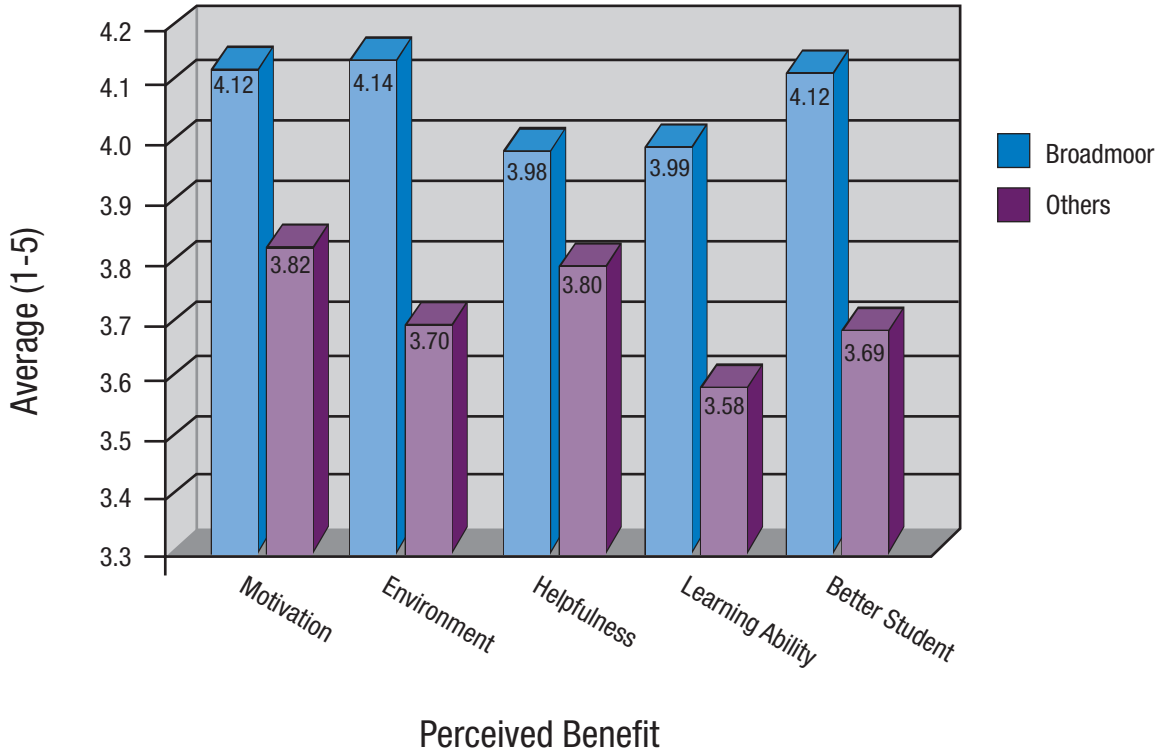
⁴ A factor is comprised of a set of questions to which responses are highly correlated with one another. That is, responses to items within a factor are similar. Furthermore, correlations between items across different factors are relatively low.

Table 1. Average Student Ratings (1-5) of Various Aspects of the School Environment

Type of Question (i.e., Factor)	Respondent Group		
	B-CL	Other-CE	No-CE
Classmate Citizenship (e.g., Your classmates try to do their best in school.)	3.62	3.40	3.44
Teacher Support (e.g., Your teacher helps you when you need it.)	4.57	4.38	4.43
Classroom Order/Control (e.g., You/your classmates push or hit when angry.***)	4.11	3.92	3.96
Adult Expectations (e.g., Your teacher expects you to learn a lot.)	4.86	4.78	4.78
Pro-social Behaviors (e.g., You/your classmates do helpful things for others in class)	3.63	3.51	3.48
Inclusives (e.g., You/your classmates leave some students out when doing an activity.*)	3.85	3.64	3.53

*Note: The scale is reversed on this item. Hence, higher scores represent more desirable responses.

Figure 9. Perceived Benefits of Character Education by Students at Broadmoor and Other Elementary Schools in Ohio



Teachers

Questionnaire responses were obtained from 16 teachers at Broadmoor Elementary School, 228 teachers at Other-CE schools, and 47 teachers at No-CE schools. As can be seen from inspection of Table 2, the average rating among Broadmoor teachers was higher than corresponding ratings from Other-CE and No-CE teachers on each of three factors, Professional Development (e.g., “Are you encouraged to develop your knowledge and teaching skills?”), Student Recognition (e.g., “Are students regularly recognized for positive attitudes and behaviors”), and Student Academic Initiative (e.g., “Do your students provide support for others in the class who need help with their work?”).

These results indicate that Broadmoor teachers might feel that the character education program at their school has broad implications. If, for example, the program is said to promote administrator support for teachers and encourage teachers to provide more effective student recognition, both for positive attitudes and social interactions and for academic achievement, then effects upon student behaviors would be expected to follow. Consequences could include a strengthening of students’ commitment to their school and increasing their motivation for continued learning and achievement. Furthermore, through clear communication of standards of behavior, a climate encouraging good peer relations and precluding negative peer or societal influences might have developed.

Table 2. Average Teacher Ratings (1-5) of Various Aspects of the School Environment

Type of Question (i.e., Factor)	Respondent Group		
	B-CL	Other-CE	No-CE
Student Recognition (e.g., Are students regularly recognized for positive attitudes and behaviors?)	4.80	4.08	4.12
Professional Development (e.g., Are you encouraged to develop your knowledge and teaching skills?)	4.64	4.30	4.38
Student Academic Initiative (e.g., Do your students view homework as an opportunity to show what they have learned?)	3.75	3.42	3.36

Consistent with this reasoning, teachers at Broadmoor Elementary School felt more strongly than Other-CE teachers that character education helps make school a more pleasant place to learn, helps improve students’ behaviors, helps increase students’ motivation to learn, and helps improve their effectiveness as teachers. These results are depicted in Figure 10.

Parents

Parents at Broadmoor Academy also believe more strongly than do their counterparts at Other-CE schools that character education helps make school a more pleasant place to learn, helps improve students’ behaviors, and helps increase students’ motivation to learn. These results are depicted in Figure 11.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One of the important findings obtained from the statewide, first-year evaluation of the Ohio Partners in Character Education is that the most successful character education programs are those in which a large majority of teachers are involved in character education activities on a regular (e.g., weekly) basis. Approximately 90% of teachers at Broadmoor Academy report such activity. This finding might represent the result of a successful consensus building process, during which teachers and staff identify and work toward attaining shared goals for the benefit of their students.

Figure 10. Perceived Benefits of Character Education by Teachers at Broadmoor and Other Elementary Schools in Ohio

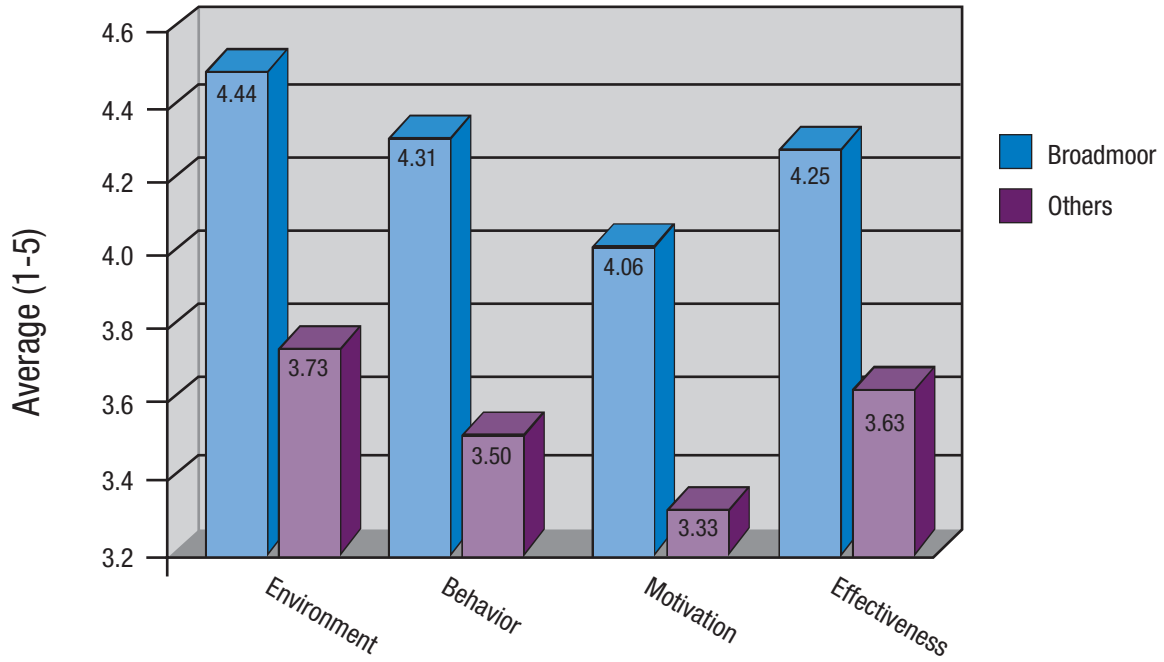
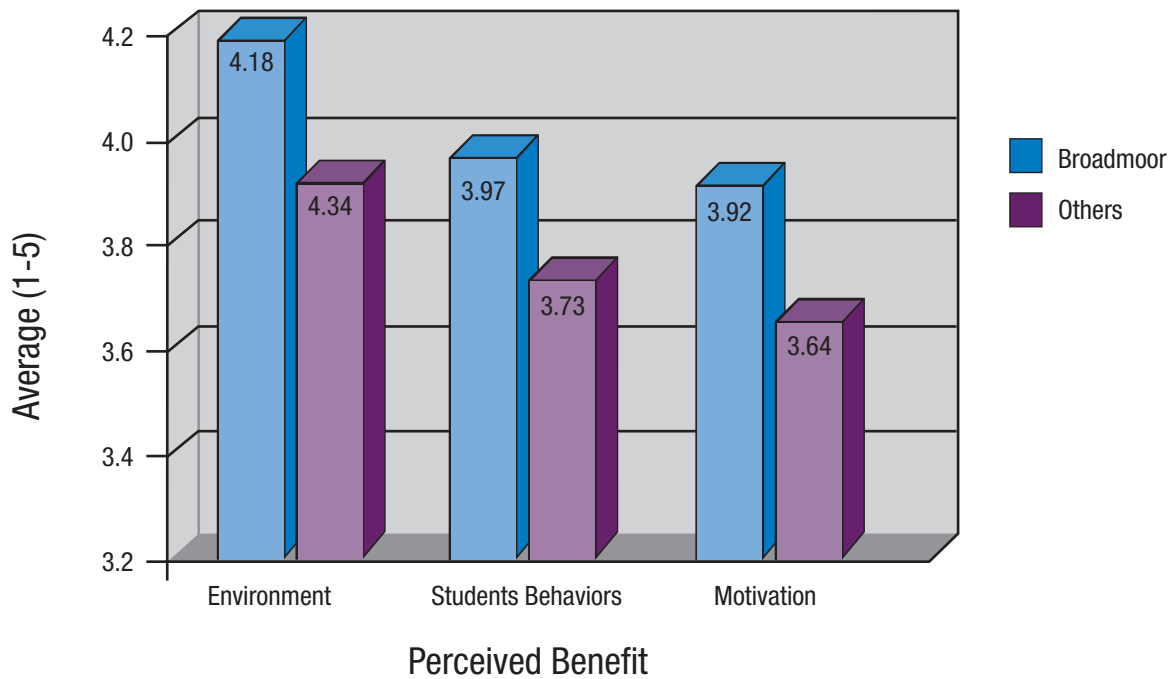


Figure 11. Perceived Benefits of Character Education by Parents at Broadmoor and Other Elementary Schools in Ohio





Since originating the character education program at Allen Academy Elementary School in Dayton in the early 1990's, Rodolfo S. Bernardo has been one of the leading character educators in the country. The character education programs that he has helped establish throughout the country include several innovative components, including "Word of the Week" character concepts, a mission statement for the school, banners and posters in the halls about character education, books and readings, journal writing, a lunchroom with place settings and tablecloths to induce courtesy and consideration in an attractive and peaceful setting, and focused activities that facilitate student, teacher, parent, and community involvement in the character education process.