



2075 Lookout Drive  
North Mankato, MN 56003

507-389-2461  
507-389-1772  
synergy@synergyexchange.org

## Testimony Summary for Minnesota Senate E-12 Finance Committee — March 7, 2018

Barb Bergseth, program administrator, Synergy & Leadership Exchange, bbergseth@synergyexchange.org

### Who are we?

Synergy & Leadership Exchange is a nonprofit organization committed to providing resources and recognition for effective character education programs and practices in Minnesota schools:

- **Sponsor of the Schools of Character program in Minnesota** through a recommendation by the Minnesota Department of Education in 2008 and partnership with Character.org.
- **Administrator of the Minnesota Character Council**, a leadership group of volunteers convening quarterly to advise, assist and advocate for programs and activities in Minnesota that promote and celebrate positive character and ethical leadership development.
- **Sponsor of Character Recognition Awards** celebrating schools and community programs with exemplary character and ethical leadership development.

### What is the request?

Approve \$500,000 in funding for character development education in schools per Minnesota Statutes Section 120B.232. Support is requested to scale up the Minnesota Schools of Character program, expand MASSP innovation resource platform, and develop a need- and/or merit-based character development education grant program for schools.

### How does the Schools of Character program support character development education?

- Research- and evidence-based program, developed by leading researchers and Character.org.
- 11 Principles: proven framework, based on practices of effective schools, foundation of program.
- Process for continuous improvement utilizing self-assessment, professional feedback, models of excellence, training and the opportunity for certification and recognition.
- Reported improvements in academics, behavior and climate; trends over last three years:
  - 80% with reading scores on the rise; 86% with math scores on rise.
  - 92% with decline in suspension rate; 90% with decline in discipline referrals.
  - 89% of teachers and students respect each other. Strong connections lead to a positive climate which improves morale, reduces staff turnover and increases student success.
- 117 Minnesota schools and districts engaged through training and recognition.
- 82 Minnesota Promising Practice; listed on website to inspire innovation and/or replication.
- Complementary to approaches such as whole child development and social-emotional learning.
- Implementation honors unique needs of schools/districts.
- Creates safe and caring learning environment.

### Other key points:

- Minnesota has a vested interest in seeing the next generation of leaders and workers develop into ethical, responsible, respectful and contributing members of society.
- Character skills must be modeled and developed; first through the family and reinforced in school.
- Students spend a significant amount of time in school each year; schools offer a critically important opportunity for character development.

### More information:

- Synergy website: [www.synergyexchange.org](http://www.synergyexchange.org)
- Minnesota Schools of Character: [www.synergyexchange.org/Celebrate/MNSOC.aspx](http://www.synergyexchange.org/Celebrate/MNSOC.aspx). Download a free electronic copy of the 11 Principles Guidebook.
- Character.org: [www.character.org](http://www.character.org)



## 11 Principles of Effective Character Education

These principles serve as guideposts for schools to examine current practices, identify short- and long-term objectives, and develop or strengthen a strategic plan for continuous improvement. Schools embracing this process see positive results in academics, student behavior, climate and culture.

### 1. Promotes core ethical and performance values as the foundation for good character

- Inclusive stakeholder group has input into identifying core values
- Core values guide every aspect of school life
- Core values articulated through visible reminders and statements

### 2. Defines “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling and doing

- Students learn what core values mean in everyday behaviors
- Students have time to reflect on core values
- Students practice core values so that they become habitual

### 3. Uses a comprehensive, intentional and proactive approach to character development

- Character development addressed at all grade levels
- Character education is integrated into academic content and instruction
- Character education is evident in how teachers conduct their classes
- Character education is infused throughout the day in classes, activities and meetings

### 4. Creates a caring community

- Develops caring attachments between students and staff
- Helps students form caring attachments to each other
- Takes steps to prevent and deal effectively with peer cruelty and violence
- Fosters caring attachments between adults

### 5. Provides students with opportunities for moral action

- Sets clear expectations for student engagement
- Provides students with character building opportunities within the school and larger community

### 6. Offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character and helps them succeed

- Provides all students with meaningful and appropriate challenges
- Identifies, understands and accommodates the diverse needs of all students
- Promotes development of performance character traits that support student growth

### 7. Fosters students’ self-motivation

- Focus is on intrinsic motivation
- Uses behavior management as opportunity to teach and reinforce character

### 8. Staff is an ethical learning community that shares the responsibility for character initiative

- Staff models core values
- Staff involved in planning and implementing character initiative
- School makes time for staff to plan for and reflect on character education

### 9. Fosters shared leadership and long-range support for character initiative

- Initiative has leaders, including the principal, who champion the effort
- Leadership team inclusive of all stakeholders guides the planning and implementation
- Students involved in leadership roles that contribute to character initiative

### 10. Engages families and community members as partners in character-building effort

- Engages families in character education initiative
- Communicates with families, provides ideas for reinforcing at home, survey families
- Recruits help of the wider community

### 11. Assesses culture and climate as well as student and staff character growth

- School sets goals and regularly assesses (both quantitatively and qualitatively) its culture, climate and functioning as an ethical learning community
- Staff reflects and discusses character implementation and individual growth