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In Nationally Recognized South Dakota Project: Character Counts!

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In nationally recognized South Dakota project:

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CHARACTER COUNTS!™

Respect
Caring
Fairness
Trustworthiness
Citizenship
Responsibility

Of the 85,000 South Dakota youth in the 4-H program Character Counts!, a good number of them are less likely to lie, cheat, drink alcohol, steal, and vandalize than they once did.

This is no idle boast.

It is documented by surveys over the past 3 years that show a noticeable improvement in the character decisions of South Dakota youth after participating in the program.

A sample of over 7,000 youth from six counties, representing rural, urban, and reservation populations, were evaluated as part of a 10-year commitment to determine the program's effectiveness.

Rachelle Vetter, former state Character Counts! project leader, said the South Dakota project is so successful that other states and organizations nationwide have adopted the evaluation materials.

The Josephson Institute of Ethics, JIE, the non-profit organization initiating the Character Counts! concept, calls the survey results "the most thorough, scientific study yet" of Character Counts! The program is conducted in 40 states.

"The Institute has incorporated South Dakota's evaluations into a portion of their National Character Development Seminars. Individuals throughout the nation are hearing about our evaluation processes," Vetter said.

"Our evaluations are the most effective middle and high school tools in the country and are used as examples by other Character Counts! trainers."

Character Counts! began in South Dakota in 1996 under the direction of Cooperative Extension Service (CES) Youth Development/4-H. The partnership of CES/4-H and the South Dakota 4-H Foundation brings Character Counts! to communities and schools. Local coalitions carry out the program.

Four years earlier, JIE's founder, Michael Josephson, gathered a national coalition of youth professionals, ethicists, and educators to formulate Character Counts! Their charter:

"Character is built on the consensus that no matter how diverse opinions, personalities, or backgrounds, there are ethical principles that clearly define people at their best, because they are the very foundation of a free and democratic society."

Recognizing that character is not hereditary and not formed automatically without the active participation of the individual, the group built an educational framework based on six universal pillars that would strengthen youth character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

Gary Heusel, South Dakota's 4-H project leader at the time and one of the original Aspen coalition members, brought the program to South Dakota. South Dakota was one of



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Character Counts! may have started in 4-H programs, but it has been supported by schools and citizen and faith groups. Parades, poster displays in store and bank windows, and table tents in restaurants remind youth and adults alike that Character Counts!

the first states to adopt Character Counts! into 4-H and Extension use and 2 years later was first to analyze the program's impact through evaluations.

Extension educators in all 67 of South Dakota's counties work with the program in some way, and over 2,500 adults and 700 youth have been trained to incorporate Character Counts! into youth and adult settings.

Character Counts! uses tried-and-true successful teaching methods—discussion groups, role playing, art projects, and more—to introduce the six pillars in classes ranging from elementary to high schools. The language of Character Counts! is consistent and repeated throughout all grades; repetition is a proven learning method.

Seventeen counties currently have Character Counts! coalitions, and through the work of three regional coordinators, Character Counts! is now branching out into the community.

CES/4-H leaders bring together school teachers and administrators, parents, guardians, after-school and youth groups, faith communities, child-care providers, and other citizen partners to deliver Character Counts!

To measure the impact of the program, baseline data—a sort of pre-test of middle and high school youth—had to be collected before the project even started. The surveys were funded by the South Dakota 4-H Foundation and developed by scientists in the SDSU Rural Sociology Department.

The pre-test survey showed:

- 83% of youth lied to their parents,
- 50% drank alcohol, 23% used illegal drugs,
- 84% allowed someone to copy their work,
- 12% broke into homes or property,
- 54% believed in today's world, lying and cheating are necessary to succeed,
- 49% believed they have no ethical obligation to help others, and

- 60% believed that people who take ethical shortcuts are more likely to succeed.

As similar questions are asked in successive surveys—they are self-reported and remain anonymous to encourage honesty in answering—the changes over the years “provide information about which attitudes and behaviors may need more concentration, which behaviors are changing, and the level of need for the Character Counts! program,” Vetterm said.

“The results from these surveys provide us with a snapshot of student behaviors and attitudes at a given time,” added Marcey Moss, CC! evaluator. “Over the past 3 years we have been able to describe trends in those behaviors and attitudes that are consistent with the six pillars of character.”

Separate surveys are also conducted with grades 1-6 and 7-12 teachers who use Character Counts! on a regular basis.

	1998	2000
Students improved their character after 3 years in the program.		
"I told a lie to a parent."	93%	70%
"I told a lie to a teacher."	52%	34%
"I drank an alcoholic beverage."	49%	33%
"I let someone copy my work."	84%	62%
"I broke into another's home or property."	11%	6%
"I teased someone because of their race, ethnicity, or religion."	19%	11%

Although it is still early in the evaluation process, comparisons can be made and evaluators believe that the progression in results and behavior change are encouraging.

The numbers show the program is successful, but there is still room for improvement.

“We’ve found that there still needs to be more focus on training teachers, bringing parents and community businesses into the program, bringing the program to reservation communities, and suiting the curriculum to high school students,” said Vetter.

In third-year evaluation results, there were also some “red alert” areas.

On the question, ‘It’s okay to do whatever it takes to succeed as long as you don’t hurt other people,’ third-year results were closer to baseline data than in the second year.

On the question, ‘In today’s world, people often have to lie or cheat to succeed,’ fewer students disagreed with the statement than in the 2 previous years. The aim of the

program is for more students to disagree each year, so improvement is needed in this area as well.

Over 500 Native American children on South Dakota’s reservations participated in Character Counts! this last year.

The year began with a statewide Native American youth educator training in La Plant on the Cheyenne River Reservation. Educators from Pine Ridge, Rosebud, and Standing Rock reservations also attended. As a result, over 200 other individuals were additionally trained at sessions in Kyle and Flandreau.

Implementation of the program with Native American audiences was assisted by grants from the Bush Foundation; Children, Youth and Families At-Risk (CYFAR); the Knight Foundation; and by CES grants.

CES has hired two Native American curriculum writers to work with regional

Character Counts! coordinators, Extension educators, and community volunteers from South Dakota’s nine reservations. They will weave together Native American values and the six pillars of character for youth ages 4-18. The pillars have already been translated into traditional Dakota and Lakota language.

Avital part in the success of the program is the involvement of schools, citizen groups, and faith communities throughout the state. “A lot of communities really buy into the program. There has been such warm reception of Character Counts! right from the beginning,” said Vetter.

In the CES North 1 Field Education Unit (FEU) (Moody, Miner, McCook, Lake, Kingsbury, and Brookings counties), over 20 area schools, their after-school programs, and numerous other pre-school and 4-H clubs participate in Character Counts!

Extension educators in the N-1 FEU estimate that, just in their six-county area alone, over 5,000 youth experienced Character Counts this

The six pillars of character have been translated into Dakota and Lakota. The program is being presented on South Dakota’s nine reservations.



Six pillars of character

1. **Trustworthiness.** It includes the behavioral qualities of honesty, integrity, reliability, and loyalty. Not lying or deceiving is not enough.
2. **Respect.** Our moral obligation is to treat everyone with respect, whether the respect is deserved or not, not because the other people are human beings, but because we are. Respect includes civility, courtesy, dignity, tolerance, and acceptance.
3. **Responsibility.** We are answerable for our behavior. Responsibility includes accountability, pursuit of excellence, and self control.
4. **Fairness.** Fairness is a process; it is how we arrive at a judgment. It involves impartiality and an open mind in decision making. The decision itself will probably always be unfair to somebody, but that is not the issue.
5. **Caring.** Ethics is, in the end, about our responsibilities toward others. Caring for "humanity" is easy; but caring for an individual you don't agree with is what counts.
6. **Citizenship.** The good citizen obeys the laws, volunteers, cooperates, stays informed, protects the environment.

Abstracted from Josephson Institute of Ethics Character Counts! web pages. The JIE describes itself as a nonpartisan, nonsectarian coalition of schools, communities, and nonprofit organizations working to advance character education by teaching the Six Pillars of Character. See <http://www.charactercounts.org>

For more information on becoming involved with youth and Character Counts!, call 605-688-4946 or the National Character Counts! Coalition at 1-800-711-2670.



Entertainer Phil Baker helped introduce Character Counts! to 1,300 students in three counties.

past year, in addition to 80 4-H club leaders, who meet once a month to talk about the impact of character.

"Training the trainer" is an important part of the program, Vetter said. "Once trainers learn the curriculum, the message spreads even more widely." She says this is particularly valuable when teens become involved with teaching the Character Counts! curriculum to youth.

A hundred teens from N-1 were trained in the Character Counts! curriculum, and have taught it to elementary and pre-school children. Teens comment that they are more aware of their own actions when younger kids are watching, because they know they need to set good examples.

According to one teacher, "The whole school is speaking the language of character everywhere: in the classroom, on the playground, and in sports."

"The behavior on the playground has improved since Character Counts! has come to our school," said a play-

ground supervisor. "The kids are policing themselves. Character Counts! has made my job easier."

The program is also affecting adults. Community businesses display the "pillar of the month" in offices and restaurants in all six N-1 counties.

Last year, 1,300 students in the CES North 2 FEU (Beadle, Hand, and Spink counties) joined entertainer Phil Baker in Character Counts! kick-offs in Huron, Miller, and Mellette. Baker blended music and the pillars, leaving educators, school officials and community leaders pleased with the event and the Character Counts! program.

After the event, one teacher said, "It's a fantastic program everyone can benefit from, even adults. I like having a common vocabulary with all the other grades. When I comment about an aspect of character, such as trustworthiness, everyone knows what I am talking about no matter what context it is in."

The Miller school administration requested continuing programming for upcoming years, and several schools have asked how to become more involved with Character Counts!.

"Character Counts! youth are on the right track toward to the future," Vetter said. "As Character Counts! founder Michael Josephson says, 'Kids are 27 percent of our population, but 100 percent of our future. Which way they go depends on us.'

"Character Counts!, with the partnership of South Dakota CES and 4-H, is helping our youth build character that will last a lifetime."◆

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