The Institute for Excellence & Ethics (IEE) presents:

Developing the Culture and Competencies of Excellence & Ethics
Needed for Success in School, Work, and Beyond

A White Paper
Acknowledgements

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Digital copies are available upon request: info@excellenceandethics.org.
Background

The Institute for Excellence & Ethics (IEE) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the development and dissemination of research-based tools and strategies for building intentional cultures of excellence and ethics. We develop teaching and learning resources, conduct professional development, design and deliver assessment tools and services, and provide organizational consulting. To date we have primarily worked with administrators, educators, students, and parents in K-12 schools (including public, private, Catholic, & charter; urban, rural, and suburban, large and small). We have also increasingly used our knowledge and tools to assist teams, businesses, and other organizations outside the field of education interested in enhanced realization of their goals through the creation of a more intense and intentional culture of excellence and ethics.

The work described in this article is an outgrowth of more than a decade of prior work, primarily rooted in the fields of moral psychology, human ecology and sociology, and evaluation. Our work builds on the work of Lickona (1991), which integrates applied theory and social science into practical and accessible strategies for implementation. The Smart & Good Schools research (Lickona and Davidson, 2005) reflected our evolving quest to synthesize theory and research with sound recommendations for implementation—especially in contexts where intentional development of character and culture is not widely practiced, like high schools. The Culture of Excellence & Ethics framework that we describe in this white paper reflects three years of field testing with over 50 schools and other clients of an approach to developing character and culture that balances theoretical and practical fidelity with theoretical and practical convenience.

The evolution of our approach has been driven by a belief in the power of character and culture as an essential catalytic force in the realization of organizational goals. However, our unaltering belief in the power of character and culture does
not mean that the individuals within the organizations we serve see or believe in the power of character and culture. On the contrary, we are often working with individuals that are stretched, stressed, and skeptical. Sizer & Sizer (1999) argue “schools have long had three core tasks: to prepare young people for the world of work; to prepare them to use their minds well, to think deeply and in an informed way; and to prepare them to be thoughtful citizens and decent human beings” (p. 10). This essential vision hasn’t changed much since it was written. However, the economic and educational climate for those in education has changed dramatically.

School administrators face acute pressure to link their school improvement plans to alignment and adherence with federal, state, and/or district policy requirements including: (1) general learning standards, special education standards, and other state and national academic achievement benchmarks, (2) teacher preparation and retention, and overall staff development objectives, (3) theoretical and reform frameworks and requirements, such as Response to Intervention (RTI), Social & Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards, and 21st Century Skills, (4) student retention (dropout prevention), (5) school safety and overall climate (including bullying prevention), and (6) post-secondary readiness and work force preparation guidelines. These are priority issues for school administrators, deemed worthy of time and money, since failure to demonstrate alignment and adherence to these requirements results in lost economic support and other sanctions or consequences.

Whereas administrators feel the pinch at the macro level, classroom teachers feel ground level pressure from students and their families—especially from those that they are struggling to reach or teach. Thus, student engagement and grappling (Sizer and Sizer, 1999)—that is, active interest and authentic involvement—are still the most pressing need felt by teachers. Teachers are generally passionate about and educated in their content; but content knowledge is only
one element of effective education. As one headmaster put it, effective education requires “teachers ready to teach; students ready to learn; and something important to teach and learn” (Lickona and Davidson, 2005). Effective teachers have a with-it-ness that goes beyond content knowledge. Teacher with-it-ness (i.e., that intangible “it” in teachers that leads to student engagement and growth that separates impactful educators from content conveyors) is not simply a function of sage-like content knowledge; nor is it an “eyes in the back of your head” über-awareness. Teacher with-it-ness is really about a teacher’s ability to intentionally shape the cultural norms of moral and performance character needed to support teaching and learning of the curriculum. This culture of excellence and ethics that great teachers create provides the catalyst for learning.

Engagement and efficacy are the essential needs of student customers. They want and need to be known and needed, safe and cared for; and have an active role in shaping their learning. A safe and supportive climate is a prerequisite, but is itself insufficient for flourishing. Students also want and need to be engaged learners, and they want to know how to develop their talents and abilities so that they might “get good” (efficacy) at something (Cushman, 2010). As Berger (2003) has argued, “work of excellence is transformational.” Students who are just “doing school” (Pope, 2001) are not transformed in any meaningful way—too often they figure out how to do the minimum, get by, and put on a good show. Many who can’t or won’t play the game drop out from high school; just as many who play the game are ill-prepared for post-secondary challenges presented by work and school (cf., Conference Board, 2009).

Families desire to have their children prepared to succeed in school, work, beyond, but feel pressured to support student learning at home amid their own increasingly busy and time-stretched lives—often without the academic expertise to assist struggling children with the new and evolving curriculum. They understand that educational success is an
important predictor of success in life, but often struggle to translate that into a clear and consistent home-school approach that supports student engagement (Epstein, 2001). Communication to parents about school vision is critical, but still fails to provide the all-important knowledge about what exactly parents are expected to do in support of student learning.

School administrators, staff, students, and families are often jointly impacted by the acute challenges that detract from teaching and learning: cheating, bullying, unsafe climate, disciplinary problems; lack of collegiality, trust, and professionalism; lack of parent participation and support of learning at home and school. The Culture of Excellence & Ethics framework seeks to meet the needs of schools through contextualization and alignment—both of which focus on the needs of the whole spectrum of stake-holders as identified above, and through balancing convenience and fidelity of implementation delivery methods and materials.

Through contextualization, the Culture of Excellence & Ethics framework focuses on developing the culture and competencies of excellence and ethics needed for holistic teaching and learning, believing that only in and through such learning experience students develop the skills and dispositions essential for ongoing growth in their post-secondary education, in their future careers, and for civic engagement and democratic participation. Contextualization says as much about what we don’t do, as what we do. It means that if the core mission of school context is teaching and learning, then that’s where the time and materials of core programming must be directed. Developing the culture and competencies of excellence and ethics needed for teaching and learning thus becomes our overriding focus in the school context.

The Culture of Excellence & Ethics framework aligns itself to assist organizations in meeting their existing policies and initiatives, thus demonstrating a value-added proposition—as opposed to a net-loss proposition. The question thus moves
from “do we have time and money to spend on developing character and culture?” to “is there a more time- and cost-effective strategy for building the culture and competencies of excellence and ethics needed for reaching our mission, goals, and prevailing policies?”. As part of our applied work with organizations, we have refined and revised our “8 Strengths of Character” (Lickona & Davidson, 2005) into the following eight areas of focus, which in our experience most closely align with the areas of greatest interest and need for most organizations we serve:

![Diagram of 8 Focus Areas]

The eight focus areas are not used as specific developmental outcomes, but rather as a heuristic mapping of the areas drawn from our applied research and most often identified in policy initiatives as contributing to or detracting from success in school, work, and beyond.

Figure 1: 8 Focus Areas
The Culture of Excellence & Ethics framework is based on the belief that the development of character and competencies occurs through the impact of an intentional organizational culture, which is facilitated by teaching and learning standards and strategies that target important aspects of the core organizational mission, have theoretical fidelity, and are convenient to implement with fidelity. Herein lies what we see as essential condition needed for scaleable interventions: finding the ideal balance between fidelity and convenience.

Drawing on the work of Maney (2009), we recognize that organizations we serve are forced to make a tradeoff between fidelity and convenience. At the simplest level fidelity refers to the rigor, depth, and overall quality; which often operates in tension with convenience, or how fast, easy, and user-friendly the intervention is. Figure 2 represents four types of convenience-fidelity propositions. Sustainability and enduring impact are derived from a balance of implementation convenience and implementation fidelity that matches organizational need and capacity.
The Culture of Excellence & Ethics approach seeks to achieve a balance of implementation convenience and implementation fidelity that matches organizational need and capacity. What follows are five operating principles behind the approach.

1. **Identify and develop discrete competencies of excellence and ethics.**

A culture of excellence and ethics must by definition include a focus on both excellence and ethics, on doing our work well and operating according to the norms of justice and care. Developing a “conscience of craft” (Green, 1984) becomes as essential for organizational thriving as developing an ethical conscience about issues of right and wrong. What we presented to the field of education was a paradigm shift (cf., Lickona & Davidson, 2005, Davidson, Khmel-
kov, and Lickona, 2008) from an exclusive focus on moral character (ethics) to a focus on both performance character and moral character (excellence and ethics). We define performance character as a mastery orientation. Performance character values, such as diligence, work ethic, positive attitude, perseverance, grit, etc., are needed to realize one’s potential for excellence. Moral character is a relational orientation. Moral character values such as integrity, justice, caring, respect, and responsibility are needed for successful interpersonal relationships and ethical behavior. Both moral and performance character are needed for human and organizational flourishing. These two dimensions of character operate in integrated an interconnected way in individuals or organizations defined by excellence and ethics.

The practical development of moral and performance character in organizations requires distilling complex, multifaceted performance character and moral character values into their more discrete competencies. Competencies are process skills that bridge awareness and sensitivity to reasoning and judgment to behavior. For positive behavior to take place, one must recognize the need for specific positive action, to process the contextual requirements, to reason about what action to take, and finally to take action. When skills for each of these processes are fully developed and become automatic, cognition and action become intertwined and an individual consistently engages in positive behavior (see, for example, review of related research in Narvaez, 2006).

Table 1 “Culture of Excellence & Ethics Competencies” represents units of competencies clustered around our eight areas of focus for which we have built teaching and learning tools, professional development, and curricular materials that we continue to field-test in over 50 schools and athletic teams (drawn primarily from the educational environment, they can be easily transferred and expanded for other contexts).
**Focus Area 1**  
**Developing Positive and Productive Relationships**

**Unit 1.1 Consider the Perspective of Others**

| Use communication and social skills to effectively interact with others | Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships | Exercise flexibility and willingness to make necessary compromises to accomplish a common goal | Recognize feelings and perspectives of others |

**Focus Area 2**  
**Communicating and Collaborating with Efficiency and Effectiveness**

**Unit 2.1 Assume Shared Responsibility for Collaborative Work and Value Contributions Made by Each Team Member**

| Collaborate with others | Use effective communication strategies in diverse contexts and settings | Understand, negotiate, and balance diverse views and beliefs to reach workable solutions | Work creatively with others |

**Focus Area 3**  
**Managing Priorities and Reducing Stress**

**Unit 3.1 Utilize Time and Manage Workload Effectively**

| Understand the principles of effective time management | Identify essential drivers and preventers | Use a systematic approach to time and task management | Monitor, define, prioritize and complete tasks without direct oversight |

**Unit 3.2 Use Productive Strategies for Reducing Stress and Anxiety**

| Identify and respond to stressors | Use productive strategies for reducing stress | View failure as an opportunity to learn | Know how and when to ask for help |

**Focus Area 4**  
**Committing to High Standards and Continuous Improvement**

**Unit 4.1 Develop the Habits for Excellence**

| Set internal standards for excellence | Go beyond basic mastery of skills to expand your learning | Commit to hard work and motivate yourself when things are not easy | Seek external support and incorporate feedback effectively |

*Table 1: Culture of Excellence & Ethics Competencies*
**Unit 4.2 Utilize Effective Goal Achievement Strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmark current state (baseline starting point) and desired state (end goal)</th>
<th>Balance tactical (short-term) and strategic (long-term) goals</th>
<th>Apply strategies to overcome obstacles to goal achievement</th>
<th>Develop the attitude and effort needed to revise and continuously improve</th>
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**Focus Area 5**

**Demonstrating Emotional Intelligence, Integrity, and Responsibility**

**Unit 5.1 Stand Up to Peer Pressure**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts</th>
<th>Demonstrate moral competence (&quot;know-how&quot;)</th>
<th>Develop an active conscience</th>
<th>Develop an ethical code of conduct</th>
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</thead>
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**Focus Area 6**

**Exhibiting Creativity and Innovation, Critical Thinking and Effective Problem Solving**

**Unit 6.1 Solve Problems Efficiently and Effectively**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Think creatively</th>
<th>Be open and responsive to new and diverse perspectives</th>
<th>Solve problems efficiently and effectively</th>
<th>Leverage individual and group differences to create new ideas and increase innovation and quality of work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Focus Area 7**

**Leading and Serving Others**

**Unit 7.1 Demonstrate Personal and Collective Responsibility**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Use your talents and skills to serve the good of the group/team</th>
<th>Use interpersonal and problem-solving skills to influence and guide others toward a goal</th>
<th>Hold self and others accountable</th>
<th>Act responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind</th>
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**Focus Area 8**

**Living a Balanced, Purposeful, and Healthy Life**

**Unit 8.1 Identify and Pursue Broad Life Goals**

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<th>Develop short- and long-term goals and aspirations</th>
<th>Identify and stand up for beliefs, ideas, and inspirations</th>
<th>Know your character strengths and weaknesses</th>
<th>Communicate your passion and perspective in a concise and memorable way</th>
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*Table 1: Culture of Excellence & Ethics Competencies (continued)*
2. *Establish an organizational culture characterized by intentional and pervasive teaching and learning norms, rituals, procedures, and habits.*

Berger (2003) argues that “excellence is born from a culture.” But how, exactly, does that happen? Pick a classroom, family, team, or organization that stands out to you for its exceptionality, and you will invariably find great intentionality regarding their organizational habits—they do things a very specific way, for a very specific reason. There is also intensity: deliberate guided education and practice promotes fidelity. Institutional buy-in and commitment of resources (especially time) ensures that the norms, habits, and behaviors are pervasive throughout the organization—not relegated to “pockets of excellence.”

In our experience there are precious few homes, schools, teams, or organizations that are intense and intentional about the development of character and culture. Few are able to identify and describe their “signature practices”—those strategies, norms, or organizational habits that render on its members the “distinguishing marks” (i.e., character) of the organization. Organizations may provide a list of things they do (we eat together, we have an awards ceremony, we go away together, etc.), but they often struggle to identify the practices that are practiced with intensity and consistency that result in a set of shared ideas, beliefs, and habits that define the organization—no clear sense that “doing this, this way, is what makes us who we are.”

Intense and intentional cultures leave a mark on the individual; as the sociologist Gerald Grant (1985) described it, these are cultures that “imprint.” It’s not just that they technically or functionally fulfill their core mission, but rather that the organizational habits—how they fulfill their core mission—are done with such intensity and intentionality that a distinctive organization mark is transferred onto the individual, which is evident in their personal habits (i.e., character). For example, a school culture that imprints certainly fulfills its
core mission to transfer knowledge from teachers to students; but, in an intentional culture of excellence and ethics there is significant attention paid to developing the character and culture needed for the general philosophy and specific pedagogy, paying as much attention to how we do things, as to what we do.

An effective culture does not happen by chance, it happens by intentional design. The Culture of Excellence & Ethics framework is built on the belief that character is shaped by the culture we create: this is how we articulate the mechanism for the impact of our approach. To have an impact, the culture needs to be direct and intentional: it needs to be focused on worthy goals (e.g., pursuit of excellence and ethics), evident in shared norms about how we do business (e.g., use of consistent tools and practices linked to moral and performance character), and continuously lived through actions (e.g., frequent and pervasive leadership/teaching practices and member/learning behaviors). In other words, an intentional culture of excellence and ethics is comprised of teaching practices and learning behaviors that develop the targeted skills and competencies, which all stakeholders use consistently over time.

3. Facilitate intentional culture through explicit implementation standards, tools, and “good enough” rubrics.

The Culture of Excellence & Ethics tools and resources seek to bridge the gap between theory and research on the one hand and the reality of actual day-to-day implementation practices on the other hand. This discovery in our own work is supported in the work of Heath and Heath (2010) who argue that “what looks like resistance is often lack of clarity” and that to get past so-called “resistance” or failure to change “crystal-clear direction” must be provided (p. 16-17). Theory and research must be distilled into teaching and
learning tools that can be understood, remembered, and used.

This lead to the creation of a battery of Culture of Excellence & Ethics Tools that compress the theoretical fidelity of the existing research into convenient (i.e., simple, concrete, memorable, action-oriented) norms for behavior. They provide “good enough heuristics” to guide behavior (Narvaez, 2006). For example, through our field research process we created a Culture of Excellence & Ethics Attitude-Effort-Improvement Rubric (see Figure 4).

Developed in alignment with the research base on achievement motivation and talent development (e.g., Dweck, 2006; Pink, 2009; Colvin, 2008; Ericsson et al., 2006), it provides what is simple (improvement in attitude + improvement in effort = improvement towards your desired goal)
and memorable (defining the attitude and effort anchors in concrete, observable terms). It is simple, but not simplistic—and certainly not easy. Faithful use of this tool over time is required for it to become an operational cultural norm, and for those operating in that culture to develop the actual competencies. How long it takes for changes in character and culture obviously depends on the frequency, pervasiveness, and overall quality of the implementation practices. These “tools” provide implementation standards, intentional norms guiding action and reflection; consistent and pervasive operation according to these norms define a school’s way (i.e., culture), which in term shapes the character of those operating according to that way. Or, as Narvaez states: “heuristics are intuitions built from repeated experiences which are retained in implicit memory systems” (2006, p. 12).

The Culture of Excellence & Ethics Integrity-in-Action Checklist (Figure 5) is a second example demonstrating another tool for the intentional shaping of culture and character, this time focusing on ethical decision making—an important topic given the prevalence of cheating (c.f., McCabe, 2001; Callahan, 2004) and the pernicious way that cheating undermines the culture of excellence and ethics. The Culture of Excellence & Ethics Integrity-in-Action Checklist features nine dichotomous tests that provide a template for putting integrity in action.

Thus, the Culture of Excellence & Ethics approach facilitates the shaping of the culture, as well as teaching and learning experiences, by providing teaching and learning tools and strategies that:

1) help introduce the required skills in (a) stand-alone course and/or (b) integrated into normal activities;

2) allow instructors/leaders to continuously return to the practice of the skill/competency in an ongoing way (repeated practice over time) or in new and different
context contexts (repeated practice through application to different situations);

3) allow for continuous practice of the skill/competency;

4) can also be used by others in the organization to reinforce the practice of the skill/competency (guidance of practice by others).

The Culture of Excellence & Ethics tools are designed to be used multiple times in multiple contexts by multiple stakeholders, resulting in intentional and pervasive practices that over time begin to characterize the school culture. For a teaching/learning framework to be adopted and sustained over time, it needs, in turn, to balance convenience and fidelity to match organizational need and capacity.
4. **Initiation, maintenance, and overall sustainability of intervention must be convenient.**

Adding, changing or revising organizational initiatives is commonplace in any organization. Every change, addition, or revision is initiated for its presumed value-add; however, as important for consideration is the associated (but often hidden) cost. This is especially true of new programs or mandates. There is often organizational cynicism around new initiatives, since they often arrive with great fanfare and at great cost of time and money, only to be replaced shortly thereafter with a new program or priority. New mandates and initiatives are also often viewed as knee-jerk, as motivated by public relations, and response to crisis. On the other hand, new initiatives and mandates are often doomed before they begin because of insufficient conditions for success: insufficient money, time, support, and accountability to name a few.

Regardless of our belief in its overall importance to achieving an organization’s goals, the development of character and culture must be understood as the catalyst to core mission, not the core mission. It will take precious resources to build an intense and intentional culture of excellence and ethics—resources that come with a real cost to the organization. Therefore, efforts to develop the culture and competencies must not duplicate, distract, or conflict with core programs, goals, and objectives. The time and money proactively spent must be time and money saved from reactive response and from collateral damage to and/or distraction from the core organizational mission. The essential buy-in results when individuals believe that the benefits of doing things a particular way outweigh cost of doing them another way (or not doing it at all).

Developing the culture and competencies of excellence and ethics needed for teaching and learning thus becomes our overriding focus when we work in the school context. Cooperation, communication, collaboration, negotiation, integ-
rity, grit, work ethic, effort and attitude—these are needed for learning today, this afternoon, for this particular activity or context. A contextualized view allows us to approach each situation as having its own challenges and requisite skills. A math teacher or science teacher must understand that teaching math well involves habits for learning—work ethic, attitude, effort, willingness to revise, give and receive feedback, etc. There is content knowledge to be gained, but also how one learns math develops habits of the mind, or character habits. One needs both for learning; one will develop both from learning.

There are two important dimensions within our notion of convenience: theoretical convenience and practical convenience. Theoretical convenience is the extent to which programming is designed to support the core mission of the organization. The theoretical convenience of our approach in school context is the programming’s utility for meeting pressing student challenges (e.g., discipline problems, hard to reach students, etc.) and for addressing pressing policy requirements. For example, in a K-12 public school context, school administrators face acute pressure to link their school improvement plans to alignment and adherence with federal, state, and/or district policy requirements. Focus on building shared norms and practices that combat these acute challenges is at the core of theoretical convenience of the tools and strategies IEE delivers.

Implementation convenience means the total feasibility with which programming can be acquired and used. Implementation convenience represents a ratio of the following major elements: (a) financial cost and human/time cost, (e.g., to be trained, to prepare for delivery of lessons/materials, for actual delivery of lessons/materials, including management, etc.), relative to (b) time recovered (e.g., from better strategies for handling persistent problems, from better strategies and implementation guidance, etc.) and ease and satisfaction for stake-holders (e.g., easy to teach, useful and effective by implementers).
5. *Convenience must be balanced with theoretical & implementation fidelity.*

Whereas convenience is often the prevailing concern at the implementation level, concerns for fidelity are no less important. Who cares whether it’s fast, flexible, and easy, if it’s ineffective. Thus, concerns with convenience must be balanced with concerns for fidelity.

Theoretical fidelity means that there is theoretical and empirical depth and rigor behind the approach, as well as behind each teaching and learning standard and strategy. Does a poster on the wall have theoretical fidelity? Not if it’s a pretty picture and an inspirational motto, since there is no theoretical or empirical basis to suggest that slogans, mantras, and inspirational posters define culture or change character. But there is theoretical fidelity if that poster, for example, is a tool that is linked to the theory and science of achievement motivation and the development of expertise, and if that poster promotes replicable strategies that become consistently and pervasively used.

Theoretical fidelity of our approach is enhanced through ongoing collection of formative feedback and a continuous cycle of continuous improvement to build tools that connect the most persistent challenges to the most effective research-based intervention strategies.

Implementation fidelity refers to the consistent and effective use of programming, including the following major elements:

1) frequency of use (e.g., how frequently are the tools used—generally, and in relation to the situations where the tool should/could be used);

2) pervasiveness (e.g., what percentage of stakeholders are using the tools and strategies);
3) quality (e.g., how close to its recommended or intended use is the tool actually being used).

The Culture of Excellence & Ethics framework strives to offer a convenience-fidelity proposition that leads to sustainability and enduring impact. The convenience-fidelity balance is achieved through flexible implementation approaches for delivery of the concrete teaching and learning tools, multiple possible insertion points, and varied options for combining the components of the framework to match the needs and resources of the organization.
REFERENCES


