

# Statement on Character and the Pandemic

This Statement responds to the call by the Children's Commissioner by proposing what 'building back better' in the wake of the pandemic could mean from the perspective of character education.

*'As we come out of the pandemic there is a desperate need to build back better for children. As part of this, I believe we should launch a year of opportunity once the virus has been suppressed.'*

*'Enabling every child, from whatever background, not just to learn in the classroom, but also to develop their own interests at weekends and in the holidays. Finding joy in finding out, with confidence and resilience by forging their own path.'*

Leaving address of Ms Anne Longfield OBE  
Children's Commissioner for England – February 2021

As we move further along the government's roadmap, it is more vital than ever that character is placed at the forefront of education. Since the easing of lockdown restrictions began, attention has shifted to how society – including schools – responds to the impact of the pandemic. Understandably, conversation on educational responses has been largely focussed on addressing the academic impact of pupils' time spent out of the classroom. More problematically, the academic impact has been frequently cast in narrow terms of progress in Maths and English, with pupils viewed as being 'behind' and needing to 'catch up'. Alongside this, in addition to

needing to 'catch up' academically, pupils' mental health has suffered during lockdown and may continue to do so owing to the stresses of their return to classrooms. Missing from these debates is any national attention to the impact on character development.

Many have expressed the view that social development and well-being should be at the heart of the recovery initiatives. Indeed, Sir Kevan Collins noted the importance of addressing attainment divides through 'social skills' and the 'broader needs of child development', not just cognitive skills.

As Anne Longfield notes above, this is the time to build back better, together. **The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues<sup>1</sup> believes that now is an appropriate moment to broadcast a call for character to all involved in the education of young people.** Good education cannot exist without good character education, a fact known to many teachers and recognised by the Department for Education, with the Character Education Framework (2019a) and the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (2019b), Section 28.

Aristotle reminds us that a community is made up of human relationships. Living together with others and forming positive relationships can help us to lead richer, more meaningful, and more fulfilling lives. In Aristotelian terms we have, during the pandemic, become ‘unknown to each other’ – spending much less time in one another’s company, and with teaching for most having taken place virtually. This is particularly the case for those relationships that exist between pupils and teachers and between pupils and their peers. Over the last year, this absence of togetherness has separated children from one another, fracturing and fragmenting their friendships and relationships. Whether they be with immediate peers or more distant connections to others in their communities, most of the relationships that sustain pupils

have been, at best, limited or suspended and, at worst, cut off altogether.

Good and effective character education cannot be taught in a vacuum. It needs to be meaningful, intentional and reflective. The Jubilee Centre has worked with the UK Government, foreign governments, Ofsted, politicians, and with many third-sector organisations to establish a richer appreciation of the importance of character, weaving it through many successful education initiatives. Among these successes has been the founding of the unique, character-led University of Birmingham School<sup>2</sup> and the publication of *Teaching Character Through Subjects* (Jubilee Centre, 2016) (an innovative suite of resources that consider how character can be taught through and within 14 secondary subjects, developed for the Department for Education by the Jubilee Centre in 2016.)

The fragmented social context of this last year will have an impact on everyone, but will be particularly felt by the younger generations as they work to find their places in the world. The language used by UK Government and in the press in the lead up to pupils returning to schools has been from a place of deficit. Young people notice the negative public rhetoric used about them.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.jubileecentre.ac.uk](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> See [uobschool.org.uk](http://uobschool.org.uk)

Parents and teachers know that character education has never been more important. Character education has provided pupils with invaluable positive experiences and reflective opportunities. It allows pupils to develop positive character traits such as resilience, a sense of service, honesty, compassion, and community awareness. This character focus has been almost wholly absent from policy and press attention.

and the opportunities to thrive, character provides a language for young people to act with purpose and fulfil their potential. We must support young people by helping them to learn in creative ways, together with others, enabling them and those around them to build back stronger, toward a shared flourishing future.



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We must rethink learning, focussing on service to others, by framing the catch up curriculum as opportunity for adventure and by emphasising reconnection with community and the rekindling of relationships. Polls have shown that we can harness the sense of compassion and community spirit established (Jubilee Centre, 2020a) in the face of a shared peril, while proving unfounded the fear of many (Jubilee Centre, 2020b) that we might miss the chance to practise and celebrate being of service to others.

Taught in classrooms, caught in communities and sought by pupils who have benefited from positive role models

## References and Further Reading

Department For Education, (2019a) *Character Education Framework*, [Online], Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/character-education-framework> [Accessed: 18 March 2021].

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Jubilee Centre For Character and Virtues, (2020a) *Polling shows British Public value protecting lives over economic prosperity during COVID-19 pandemic*, [Online], Available at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/latest/2020/04/british-public-value-protecting-lives-over-economic-prosperity-during-covid-19-pandemic.aspx> [Accessed: 18 March 2021].

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## Contact

W: [www.jubileecentre.ac.uk](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk)

E: [jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk)

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



THE JUBILEE CENTRE  
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES