

The Moral Ecology of Character Formation: Schools, Families and Translating Research into Practice in 10 Learning Communities in America

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The Importance of Schools

For a society that is as child-centered as ours, children get short shrift in serious academic research. It is true that, here and there, one can find scholarship in history, sociology, and psychology on the subject, but it is not a research concern that draws the regular attention of scholars in the top academic journals or intellectual opinion magazines. How often, for example, do you find a heated discussion in the *New York Review of Books* or the London Review of Books on the social, intellectual, and moral lives of children?

At the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, we take exception to this state of affairs. The premise of our Colloquy on Culture and Formation is the recognition that children, as such, are cherished members of the human community and not merely or primarily a market segment or a future political demographic; that the formation of children is finally about their well-being through the full stretch of their lives; and that the degree to which a community or society takes the formation of children seriously is the degree to which it is committed to the well-being of all its members. These commitments are all the more important in times of social, economic, and political change and unrest.

From time immemorial, parents have loved, cared for, sacrificed, and hoped for their children, longing for them to thrive and contribute to the well-being of others. And while this is undoubtedly a constant, how they have understood what it means to be a good child, what it means for their children to have good, virtuous, and meaningful lives, and what it takes for parents to bring those things about not only has been widely variable, but also has in itself changed the task of raising good kids enormously over the last several centuries. The same thing can be said for the children in their care: How these young people understand the world they are coming of age in and the various ways in which they understand their own paths to thriving have also changed dramatically.

In 2013, the Institute launched a multiyear study of the moral lives of young people today as a contribution to a better understanding of this group. We wanted not only to comprehend the current values, commitments, and priorities of the young, but even more, to try to grasp the array of “world pictures” they live within and the complex social and normative influences that shape their understanding of themselves and the world around them. We call this study “The Moral Ecology Project.”

What are Moral Ecologies

Every parent and every educator knows intuitively that what they say and do matters in shaping a child’s understanding of “the good.” They know that they are neither neutral nor indifferent functionaries in their children’s lives, but that in everything they say and do, they are shaping their children’s understanding of what it is to behave well or badly, to have a good or poor attitude, to be in a healthy or unhealthy relationship, to live a good and meaningful life, and to live in a good and just world. These messages are communicated all of the time, implicitly even more than explicitly.

It is because of this awareness that in the name of love and care, parents and educators work so hard to influence the choices children make, the friendships they form, the schools they go to, the activities they participate in, and the opportunities they have available to them. If

they and we didn't think these choices and friendships and so on mattered, these issues wouldn't be points of anxiety in the never-ending discussions about what it is to be a good parent or a good teacher.

Moral valuation and evaluation permeate every part of the project of raising children and, in the child's experience, of growing up. The world that surrounds a child—and how a child makes sense of it and engages it—becomes constitutive of their identity and character. This would seem to be entirely uncontroversial, and yet the leading theories for understanding and explaining children's development largely ignore the massively important contextual origins and influences upon their lives. These approaches tend to operate from a perspective that imagines a child creating, out of no other resources than his or her mind and emotions, the moral ends and moral justification to which he or she is committed.

These theories, in other words, generally seek to explain a child's growth, particularly of their moral orientation, as a process of internal self-development and self-actualization that can be abstracted across time and space. Young people growing up in places and communities as different as a small town in Appalachia and the urban landscape of Brooklyn, it is assumed, grow and develop through the same psychological dynamics and processes. Children, for all practical purposes, grow up outside of history and community, and the relevant moral orientation they develop is mostly, though not completely, void of moral content.

If children can just be “grittier,” or have more self-esteem, or have greater positivity, they'll have the resources they'll need to succeed, get along, and have a good life. So they say.

The problem is that this doesn't account for the way in which children actually grow up into adulthood. An approach that is more adequate to the challenge of understanding children will begin to take the complexity of the circumstances and influences of their lives seriously. This means that scholarship will have to take seriously the networks of relationships children have, the institutional influences upon them, the ethical traditions they are raised in, the economic circumstances they live in, their moment in history, and many other factors.

We call this approach the “moral ecology paradigm.”

Moral ecology, as an analytic perspective, refers to the web of ethical obligations, cultural meanings, social relationships, and, by implication, the institutional structures and influences in which all people, and thus all children, reside. Children, like all human beings, are embedded within these webs of moral obligation and expectation and the relationships, institutions, and symbolic environments in which they are found. Whatever else nature might have bestowed upon us through our DNA or brain chemistry, children, all of us—our identities, our purposes—are largely formed within and constituted by these moral ecologies. Because moral ecologies are, by their nature, historical and sociological, they vary widely and in different ways. They also are given to change over time.

A Caveat...

This paradigm represents a fundamentally new direction in the study of moral formation. The task ahead for scholarship, then, is to unearth the patterns that define different and various moral ecosystems. This is the work of a generation of scholarship and not just one

study. Analytically and statistically, then, the work of refining the tools for discerning these patterns lies ahead. Their application will be demonstrated in subsequent publications. In what follows here, however, we provide a glimpse into the usefulness of this approach.

Two Major Components of The Moral Ecology Project

The first, our school sector study, comprised a series of “mini-ethnographies” of high schools from around the country— research that in each case included archival investigation, interviews with faculty and senior administrators, focus groups with students, classroom observation, and participation in school events, such as all school service days, chapel services, and the like. Ten school sectors were chosen as research domains. We viewed these school sectors as proxies for different kinds of moral communities within which to educate the young. They included urban public, rural public, charter, prestigious independent, evangelical Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, “alternative-pedagogy,” and home schools. For each of the nine nonhome-school sectors, a purposive sample of at least six high schools from different parts of the country and with different socioeconomic profiles was chosen, yielding a total of 57 schools in all. Our research for the home-school sector involved 35 home-school families. The goal was to understand how different school communities constitute different ecosystems for moral and civic formation.

Complementing the qualitative research is this quantitative study, which we have called “The National Survey of Moral Formation.” Our goal in this survey was to achieve a nationally representative sample of parents and their teenage children that would speak as definitively as possible to the values, commitments, and priorities of young people today, and to the cultural contexts in which they are formed. Yet we were interested in much more than just another poll of teens.

Our teen questionnaire has 1,188,936 data points, complete responses from more than 3,000 teens, and 392 survey questions. As you will see from the questionnaires found in the appendices to this report, the survey is distinguished in both its depth and coverage. The size and length of the teen survey would have been an accomplishment in itself, but we pushed further by fielding an equally broad and lengthy survey of their parents, marking the first time ever that such an extensive, dyadic survey of American parents and their teenage children has been attempted.

What is more, to facilitate a conversation about the diversity of moral formation in America, we conducted a separate, “small-sector” parent-teen dyadic study of teens enrolled in school sectors other than the public school serving their neighborhoods. This yielded an additional group of hard-to-reach parent-teen pairs—224 in home schools, 166 in Catholic schools, 121 in evangelical Protestant schools, and 104 in nonreligious private schools. Adding these to the small-school-sector dyads already surveyed in our national sample yields approximately 200 total parent-teen completions each from public charter or magnet schools, nonreligious private schools, and evangelical Protestant schools; more than 300 from Catholic schools; and most strikingly, just over 400 responses from home-schooling parents and their teens. Data were collected from parents and their teen children, ages 13 to 19, by the Gallup Organization. The surveys were initially fielded on November 20, 2017, and data collection was completed on April 20, 2019.

For a variety of methodological reasons involving weighting and the definition of a “completion,” the final weighted data file was delivered to the Institute in November 2019. All materials were translated into English and Spanish. In the national survey, 3,033 parent-teen dyads completed the survey. In the small-sector survey, 632 parent-teen dyads completed the survey.

The Family as Moral Ecosystem

Although schools are important, the family is the starting place, and parents play an outside role. In looking to the role of parents and their relationship with their children, we are seeing the most elementary form of a moral ecosystem. The larger task is to explore how the moral ecology radiates from the family, but for now, what are the dynamics that play out among parents and their children?

In Chapter 1 of the full report of *The Context of Their Character*, Carl Bowman and I explored the difference between parents whose highest priority is to raise children whose lives reflect God’s will and purpose and those for whom raising such children is their least important priority—the difference, to use a short hand, between religious and secular parents. The first thing we notice is that the children of these parents are largely aligned with their parents. When presented with the statement, “I share my parents’ views of faith and religion,” 85 percent of the teens from the most religious families say they completely (52 percent), mostly (24 percent), or slightly (9 percent) agree. This compares with 44 percent of teens with the most secular parents.

When asked how important it is for them to become “a person of strong religious faith,” 72 percent of the teens with the most religious parents say it is “absolutely essential” or “very important,” compared with 10 percent of the teens with the most secular parents. This is echoed when teens are asked how important their religious beliefs are to them. Seventy percent (70 percent) of the teens from the religious families say it is “the most important thing in my life” or “very important,” compared with 8 percent of the teens from the more secular families. Six out of 10 teens from these religious families (61 percent) also agree that “my faith and spirituality have a big influence upon my daily thoughts and activities,” compared with 11 percent of the teenagers in the most secular families. While it is clear that the teenage children of religious parents tend to echo their parents’ religiosity, it is equally clear that the secularity of other teenagers aligns with the views of their parents.

Consider parents who rank raising “children whose lives will reflect God’s will and purpose” as their least important priority. Fully three-quarters (75 percent) of their teenage children also rank living according to God’s will and purpose as their least important priority, compared with only 15 percent of the children of the most religious parents who say the same. Similarly, 78 percent of teenagers raised by the most secular parents say that their own religious beliefs are not too important (17 percent) or not at all important (11 percent), or that they have no religious beliefs at all (51 percent). Only 13 percent of the children of the most religious parents give one of these three responses.

In the realm of religion, it is clear that faith begets faith and secularity begets secularity.

As we shall see, these alignments manifest themselves in both personal values and public ideals. Personal Values and Civic Ideals Consider the virtue of honesty. Six of every 10 teenagers from the most religious families (59 percent) claim that it is absolutely essential that they grow up to be honest, compared with four of every 10 (40 percent) from the most secular families.

* We see the same pattern with regard to the aspiration to become persons who have “strong moral character” (55 percent to 40 percent), who are “forgiving of others” (41 percent to 21 percent), and who “volunteer time to help others” (19 percent to 10 percent). Seventy percent (70 percent) of the teens from the most religious families also claim it is an absolutely essential or a very important responsibility to participate “in activities to help poor people in [their] community,” compared with 53 percent of teens from the most secular families. Teenagers with the most religious parents are also more likely to say that “being mean to another student either in words or actions” is “always wrong,” by a margin of 72 percent to 48 percent. Again, teens from more secular households are more likely to equivocate, to respond in less absolute terms.

* The numbers flatten out a bit when including those who respond that being honest is “very important.” Combined, 91 percent of the teenagers from the most religious families say it is absolutely essential or very important, compared with 80 percent of the teens from the most secular families. This difference in intensity—in the tendency to select the most extreme (or strongest) response—is something we see play out in other values as well.

Not surprisingly, the teenagers from the most religious families tend to hold more traditional personal values: eight times as likely as their peers from the most secular homes to say that “sex between unmarried adults” is always wrong, four times as likely to say that “cursing” is always wrong, two-and-a-half times as likely to say that “viewing pornography” is always wrong, and more than twice as likely to say that “drinking alcohol” and “using marijuana for recreational purposes” are always wrong. On the issue of tolerance, two-thirds (66 percent) of the teens from highly secular families say it is an “absolutely essential responsibility for all Americans” to treat “all people equally regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion,” compared with about half (54 percent) of the teens from religious families.

And nearly seven of 10 teens from the most secular families (68 percent) say it is “always wrong” to make “negative comments about gays and lesbians,” compared with half (50 percent) of the teens from the most religious families. Yet this evened out somewhat when the question turned to respect: Nine of 10 teens from highly religious families (89 percent) mostly or completely agree that everyone has a right to be treated with respect, compared with eight of 10 teens from highly secular homes (80 percent). But this is tolerance in principle. How does this play out when moving from abstract ideals to the concrete cases surrounding specific minorities? The background of political culture is key to answering this question.

Reproducing the Cleavages of the Culture War

Given the prominence of religion as a point of division on many moral issues, it is not surprising that it is also at the foundation of many civic and political issues. First, consider party identification and ideology. Clearly, most of the teenagers we surveyed are not eligible

to vote. But that doesn't stop them from identifying with a political party or thinking of their positions ideologically. Teenagers from highly religious families are 2.7 times more likely than their peers from highly secular families to identify as Republicans (44 percent to 16 percent). And conversely, teenagers from highly secular families are twice as likely as their peers from highly religious families to identify as Democrats (39 percent to 19 percent). These percentages mirror their parents closely: religious parents identifying as Republicans (48 percent) to secular parents (17 percent); secular parents identifying as Democrats (41 percent) to religious parents (12 percent).

What is more, six out of 10 teens (61 percent) whose parents identify as Republican also identify as Republican, while only 6 percent identify as Democrats. The same pattern holds for children of Democrats—over two-thirds (69 percent) of their teen children also identify as Democrats, while only 4 percent identify as Republicans. These patterns of moral transmission from parent to teen manifest themselves in many questions in our survey. Teenagers who come from the most religious families are three times as likely to identify themselves as “conservative” or “very conservative” as their secular peers (46 percent to 15 percent), and conversely, teenagers from the most secular families are three times as likely as their religious peers to identify as “liberal” or “very liberal” (41 percent to 13 percent). Here, too, the pattern mirrors their parents, but there is an even deeper cleavage in parental identification as a liberal or conservative: Religious parents are far more likely than secular parents to identify as conservative (66 percent to 14 percent); secular parents are far more likely than religious parents to identify as liberal (47 percent to 5 percent).

This pattern plays out dramatically on a range of public policy issues:

- **Abortion:** Teenagers from the most religious families are five times as likely as their secular peers to say that abortion is “always wrong” (63 percent to 11 percent; with parents, 57 percent to 7 percent).
- **Same-sex marriage:** Teens from the religious families are six times as likely to disagree completely or mostly with the statement that “gay couples—that is, couples of the same sex—should have the right to marry” (42 percent to 7 percent; with parents, 60 percent to 9 percent).
- **Immigration:** Should “children of undocumented (illegal) immigrants” have “the same opportunities in America as anyone else”? Seventy-five percent (75 percent) of the teens from secular families agree, compared with 58 percent of the teens from the religious families (secular parents, 65 percent; religious parents, 44 percent).
- **Race:** With the statement “blacks and whites are treated equally in today's society,” nearly six out of 10 (57 percent) of the teenagers from the secular families disagree completely or mostly, compared with nearly four out of 10 (38 percent) of their religious peers. With the parents, the gap is even more dramatic: 72 percent of secular parents, compared with 37 percent of religious parents.
- **Police bias:** In a similar way, 62 percent of the teens from the secular families agree completely or mostly that “police in America unfairly target African Americans,” compared with 41 percent of the teenagers from the religious families (secular parents,

57 percent; religious parents, 24 percent). What is more, it is not just that teens from highly religious families are less likely to agree that police unfairly target African Americans, but that such teens are much more likely than their secular peers to “completely disagree”—to reject the notion altogether.

- **Flying the Confederate flag:** Teenagers from the most secular families are more likely than their peers from the most religious families to say that flying the Confederate flag is always wrong, by a margin of 35 percent to 24 percent (secular parents, 39 percent; religious parents, 17 percent).
- **Capitalism and income inequality:** Nearly eight out of 10 (78 percent) of all kids from the secular families agree completely or mostly that “our economic system is rigged in favor of the wealthiest Americans,” compared with six out of 10 (60 percent) of the religious teens. (Parents mirror their children: 85 percent of secular parents, compared with 56 percent of religious parents.)

The Question of Prejudice and Tolerance

Consider race first: The overwhelming majority of teenagers from both religious and secular families believe it is wrong to make “negative comments about another race or ethnic group.” Within this group, 75 percent of the teens from the most religious families say it is always wrong, compared with 69 percent of teens from the most secular families. With parents, the comparison is about the same: 68 percent of the religious parents say it is always wrong, compared with 71 percent of the secular parents. At the same time, when asked how comfortable they would be in a room full of African Americans, about seven in 10 (69 percent) of both teenage groups say they would be at least “pretty comfortable.”

With attitudes toward gays and lesbians, the differences are much more pronounced. Teens from the most religious families are about eight times as likely as teens from the most secular families to say that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are always wrong (53 percent to 7 percent). In line with this, the teens from religious families are less likely to say that making negative statements about gays or lesbians is always wrong (50 percent to 68 percent).

In the American cultural context, it isn’t surprising that teens from the most religious families are more than three times as likely as their secular peers to say they would be “pretty” or “very” uncomfortable in a room of gay men (39 percent to 12 percent) or of lesbian women (37 percent to 8 percent). The religious teens are also two-and-a-half times as likely to feel the same degree of discomfort in a room of transgendered persons (42 percent to 16 percent).

Indeed, Mutual Discomfort

Teenagers from highly secular families are nearly twice as likely as those from the most religious families to feel the highest level of personal discomfort in a room full of conservative Republicans (33 percent to 17 percent), in a room full of gun rights advocates (21 percent to 13 percent), and in a room full of “rednecks” (22 percent to 13 percent). This disparity climbed to their being four times as likely to feel that discomfort in a room full of very religious people (29 percent to 7 percent).

By the same token, teenagers from highly religious families are about twice as likely as their secular peers to feel a great degree of personal discomfort in a room full of marijuana users (48 percent to 28 percent), about three times as likely to feel a similar level of discomfort in a room full of liberal Democrats (36 percent to 13 percent), and five times as likely to feel that discomfort in a room full of atheists (25 percent to 4 percent).

The Culture War as an Intergenerational Phenomenon

Although progressives will take some comfort in the ways that religious teenagers tend to be a bit more liberal in their political values than their parents, the political socialization of these teens—indeed, of all teenagers—is still a work in progress. The fact is that we don't know how and in what way they will develop as they grow older or how circumstances will evolve. What is clear from the evidence is that the cleavages of the culture war, to the extent that they are reflected in the attitudes and opinions of ordinary citizens, are largely transmitted to the next generation.

This suggests that however the culture war may evolve, it is not going away any time soon. Thick and Thin Within a moral ecosystem, families fit in prominently, but not only in the beliefs, attitudes, and opinions talked about. There are so many other factors—for example, how close parents and children are to one another; not all families have the same density of communication or emotional warmth. How much do parents oversee the activities of their kids? Do parents know their kid's friends or their kid's friends' parents? How many friends does a child have?

These are also factors in the moral ecosystem children are raised in. And beyond this, are the other institutions in a child's life—schools, clubs, sports, churches/synagogues/mosques, technology and entertainment, and the like—aligned with parents' interests or not? If a moral ecology is suggestive of a web of relationships, symbols, and institutions that surround a child and that all carry normative meaning, how do these vary? One way of talking about variation among these webs of meaning and relationship is by talking about their relative density. If a teenager has lots of friends and their parents know those friends, one could say that the social part of the ecosystem is “dense,” or, to use Michael Walzer's term, “thick.”

By contrast, if a teenager has few friends and the parents are disconnected from their kid's life, one could say that the social networks are loose or “thin.” Beyond that, relative density or thickness and thinness can be applied to the content of a child's moral tradition or to the institutional influences. And needless to say, these are not binaries, but continua. What follows here are analytic forays—exploratory efforts—to see how these various factors might come together to help examine the moral ecologies that young people grow up within and how pervasive is the influence of those ecologies.

Operationalizing Moral Ecology

As the analytic work moves forward on this project, measures will be elaborated, revised, and refined. But for the purposes of this exploratory operation, we combined several social and cultural indicators. These included (from the parents' survey) a measure of closeness with their teen, the parent's acquaintance with the parents of most of their teen's close friends, the importance of their religious beliefs, and how much disagreement they have with their

teen. From their responses, we created a simple binary between thickness and thinness which functioned as an independent variable. We then applied this to two issues, one relating to the teen's personal morality and the other to the teen's public ethics.

The Moral Ecology of Tolerance and Honesty

To derive a more comprehensive understanding of the teen's dispositions toward honesty, we combined several variables into a simple scale or index. They include a question dealing with how wrong it is a) to tell a small lie, b) to lie to their parents, and c) to cheat at something when they are absolutely sure no one is looking, as well as d) an affirmation of the statement "honesty is the best policy." Their collective responses were added together to reflect their overall level of honesty and then divided into quartiles and measured against the new moral ecology variable of thickness and thinness. The chart reveals that a thicker moral ecology—measured here in terms of greater closeness between parents and teens, a closer connection between parents and their teens' friendship networks, stronger religiosity, and less conflict at home—is related to higher levels of honesty and greater moral reticence toward various forms of dishonesty.

Following a similar logic, we developed a simple scale or index of tolerance. In this case, we combined survey questions measuring teen views of: the importance of treating all people equally regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion; how comfortable teens would feel in rooms full of Asian Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, or immigrants; how wrong it is to make negative comments about another race or ethnic group; whether America's increasing racial and ethnic diversity is a good or bad thing; and how important it is to become adults who are tolerant of persons unlike themselves. Their responses to these questions were again combined in a measure of their overall level of tolerance, and then divided into quartiles and measured against the moral ecology variable of thickness and thinness. In the case of tolerance, the moral ecology again influences teen attitudes, but the pattern is clearly more complicated. There are, we believe, intervening factors that help explain the variation in tolerance levels in addition to thickness and thinness. These will be explored as we move forward with the project.

The Moral Ecology of Grit

But what about "grit"? We haven't talked about grit in this report, but in the dominant academic models of moral formation, grit is the one concept that has achieved an almost salvific utility. The concept is nearly ubiquitous in educational reform circles. Its originator, Angela Duckworth, defines it as a passion and perseverance for long-term goals, a character trait related to the personality trait of conscientiousness. Grit, according to Duckworth, characterizes high-achievers. When it comes to life outcomes, grit is as important as IQ or socioeconomic status, or so it is claimed. The goal in educational practice is to cultivate a student's grit, the assumption being that cultivating grit will enhance the student's long-term performance and outcomes. The question in everyone's mind is, How much difference does grit make in a person's life? What is grit's impact? Those who have instead asked where grit comes from have largely focused upon genetic heritability, concluding from twin studies that

grit is highly heritable. A 2016 Brookings Institution report stated that notwithstanding the efforts of educators to create a grittier world, neither the family environment nor schools have any meaningful impact upon it. In a word, grit is not malleable by altering cultural or social circumstances.

So, say the experts.

The Institute's National Survey of Moral Formation offers a unique opportunity to make grit the dependent, rather than the predictor variable. By viewing it in this way, we see its social and cultural sources rather than just its consequences. In particular, we can ask whether the quality and density of a child's social and moral ecosystem have any bearing upon the "grit" with which they pursue their goals. In this analysis, we measure grit the way it is measured in the literature. The evidence suggests rather strongly that family income and parent's education—the classic family background variables—have little bearing upon a teen's grit. The impact of social class upon grit cannot be generalized. Yet when measured against the moral ecology variable, we see that grit increases where there is a more connected, coherent, and harmonious— that is, "thicker"—moral ecology. And grit decreases substantially as the moral ecology becomes "thinner."

The Moral Ecology of School Networks

The Institute's research matters to scholars, philanthropy, and leaders of faith-based and nonprofit organizations. It matters a lot to public and private school principals as well. But historically, we have not included them into our network.

This all changed in July 2021.

To bridge the gap between research and practice, the Institute hosted 20 school principals, one superintendent, and three researchers working with school leaders, at our headquarters in Charlottesville, VA to participate in a three-day event titled the "*Character Formation and Education Seminar*" (the Seminar - we hosted two). The goal of the Seminar was to bring together public school and private school leaders from across the country for an extended conversation about the theory and practice of character formation and the role Pre-K-12 schools play in it.

Included in the Seminar were school leaders from the following places: Connecticut, Georgia, Iowa, Minnesota, Mississippi, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Virginia, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin, Rhode Island, Washington, D.C., and the Virgin Islands.

Among the Seminar participants were winners of the state teacher of the year award, principal of the year award, the Milken Education Award, as well as a Fulbright teacher, a leader of the oldest black boarding school in the United States, and the leader of one of the oldest boarding schools in the nation. The group was diverse by race and gender, faith tradition, and time in a position of leadership.

As the entrepreneurial leader of a school, or a network of schools, a principal is an important asset to any conversation because of the valuable role each person's institution plays in the character formation of young people. But we know that schools are not the sole influencer of

character formation for young people. In fact, schools can be understood to be a key contributor to an *ecology of institutions*—including family, friendship networks, faith communities, neighborhoods, and other public and private entities.

With this in mind, the Seminar provided school leaders and opportunity to pose and explore a series of provocative questions such as these:

- *Why do schools matter in the formation of students?*
- *What is a moral ecology school of thought and what does it mean for school leadership?*
- *What can a reimagined paradigm of practice look like at your school(s)?*
- *Is there a role for an overlapping network of public and private stakeholders in this work?*
- *What role do race, equity, gender, and learning gaps play in discussions about the character formation of young people and the adults who teach them?*
- *How can a UVA-based research center use its resources to support the successes, challenges, and opportunities school leaders deal with each year?*

The Seminar was an overall success based on responses from an on-line and paper evaluation, and a request from participants for Institute staff to visit their schools in person during Fall 2021– which we have done.

So, now that we have hosted two Seminars and started a conversation with school leaders about the Institute’s research, where do we go from here?

Our immediate goal is ambitious: To build a network of a thousand schools that each endeavor to identify and improve their own moral ecology. This Thousand Schools Network (1KSN) would provide resources to schools and school leaders to become clear and consistent about their ethos and distinctive character so that as many aspects of instruction and school life as possible are able to contribute coherently to the formation of well-grounded young men and women. Toward this end, the 1KSN will be a repository for transformative practices and peer-to-peer collaboration, and an interactive network of school leaders and practitioners addressing contemporary challenges for the benefit of the holistic development of their students and their schools as communities. While a thousand schools would represent only a small portion of schools nationwide, they would serve as local models of what can be accomplished for the development of character and citizenship through schools anchored in a tradition of moral responsibility.

Closing Thought

As we acknowledge in the opening of this paper, for a society that is as child-centered as ours, children get short shrift in serious academic research. For this reason, the Institute is honored to play an important role in bringing academic insight into a research project of this nature.