

# **The Real Philadelphia Experiment: How Benjamin Franklin's 13 Virtues can Save a School from Itself**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**With a decline in public confidence in schools, principals must work to ensure that teachers and students on their campuses strive for continuous self development. A model for the implementation of Benjamin Franklin's 13 Virtues as a professional development tool for teachers and character education program for students will provide both teacher and student stakeholders with a framework for self examination and self improvement. The school's long-term commitment to the implementation of the 13 Virtues will communicate a school's willingness and ability to improve and ultimately increase community support for public school initiatives.**

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## **Introduction**

The profession of teaching is under attack. In what has become an all too familiar scene, teachers are arrested and accused of moral turpitude and lewd acts, exposed for a lack of credentials, and charged with the crime of robbing America's youth of a quality education. Worse yet, top levels of administration have not fared much better. Financial

mismanagement, bureaucracy, and declining test scores have contributed to a lack of confidence in some of our nation's public school districts. In a recent survey conducted by the Phi Delta Kappan to determine the public's opinion of the state of public school education, the following findings were recorded:

- Only 21% of persons polled classified their child's school as earning an A or B rating
- Of teachers exiting the profession, 89% of those polled cited lack of respect for the teaching profession as one of their primary reasons for leaving
- A majority of respondents concluded that students in their local schools do not work hard enough during school hours or on homework outside of school
- Perhaps the most significant finding is that 37% of respondents say that the **No Child Left Behind Act** has made no difference in the performance of schools in the community. Twenty-one percent say the law has hurt schools, and only 26% say it has helped. (Rose & Gallup, 2006, p. 41)

With over 51 million students nationwide enrolled in public schools (The National Center for Education Reform, 2008), the task of educating America's youth is one which we cannot fail. As a high school principal, it is incumbent upon me to develop a response to the recent negative publicity that education has garnered. As a campus, we will develop a model of continuous improvement based upon the examination and implementation of Benjamin Franklin's 13 Virtues.

### **Purpose of the Article**

The purpose of this article is to outline a teacher-centered professional development model for implementation of Benjamin Franklin's 13 Virtues that would serve as a framework for a student-centered character education program for use with high school students through Adult Advocacy. Critical questions for examination would include:

- How would our faculty utilize the study of the 13 Virtues to inform our practice of teaching and learning?
- Is there a link between implementation of the 13 Virtues (as a character education program) and student performance (academic and social)?
- What relevance does Benjamin Franklin's 13 Virtues have to modern educational philosophy? (To establish justification for its implementation)
- How would we as a faculty communicate our progress to the public?

### **Administrative Considerations**

Prior to any major implementation or paradigm shift within a school, the principal must undertake a careful analysis of the material that he or she will soon expect a faculty to “buy into”, or embrace. By examining Benjamin Franklin’s 13 Virtues from a philosophical standpoint, an educational litmus test can be applied:

1) **How will a study of Benjamin Franklin’s 13 Virtues address our faculty and student needs from an ethical standpoint?**

Implementation of the 13 Virtues would encourage morally right living by compelling the subject (teacher or student) to examine their current habits and eschew negative or poor moral conduct.

2) **How will a study of Benjamin Franklin’s 13 Virtues address our faculty and student needs from a logical standpoint?**

The 13 Virtues are written in a progressive succession, designed to gradually moderate and improve the life of the subject. Further, the 13 Virtues require introspection and reflection, a key to effective thinking and decision making.

3) **How will a study of Benjamin Franklin’s 13 Virtues address our faculty and student needs from an epistemological standpoint?**

The use of faculty groups throughout the study would permit teachers to not only reflect critically upon their experience with each virtue, but would also expose them to various viewpoints of knowledge and reflection, in turn creating new meanings for each of the participants.

4) **How will a study of Benjamin Franklin’s 13 Virtues address our faculty and student needs from a metaphysical standpoint?**

The 13 Virtues enable us as a group to explore our very nature and perhaps the purpose that lies behind each of our actions. By delving into each virtue, teachers can examine who they are, why they behave or adopt certain characteristics, and how their metaphysical being can be altered or transformed at will.

5) **How will a study of Benjamin Franklin’s 13 Virtues address our faculty and student needs from an axiological standpoint?**

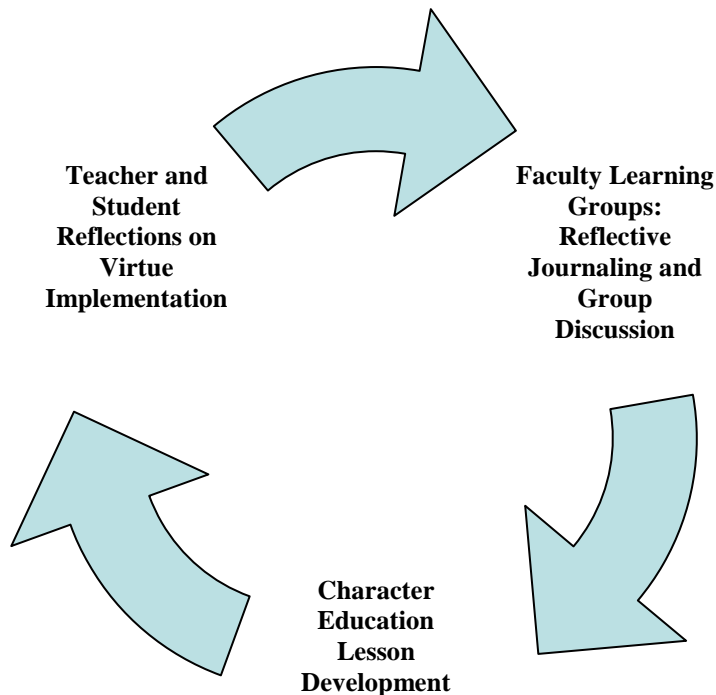
As educators, the 13 Virtues represent a return to our values system. A moral slippage has occurred within the profession, and a resurgence of “proper conduct” is needed to restore dignity to the educational craft (Kritsonis, 2002, p. 100).

### Building the Case for Change

With any new idea or concept that is introduced to a diverse group of people designed to improve them in some way, skepticism will abound, particularly if the group is the last to realize that change is actually needed. In my professional opinion, educators could be one of the most difficult groups to sway, as constant “innovation” without long-term implementation has left many of us jaded and cynical. The North Wind Theory of Management posits that “the idea of resistance to a particular change can be reduced or avoided by creating a desire for that change” (Hook, 2000, p. 31). As a precursor to the 13 Virtues professional development, teachers would engage in a close examination of education-related current events, with an emphasis on the negative attention public schools have most recently received. Teachers would be asked to reflect on the public perception of their craft, and more specifically what we as a campus could do to enhance our professional image. Further, a parallel would be drawn between the image of our student population and how, in reshaping our image as educators, we can work to inculcate a values system in our students. The introduction of Benjamin Franklin’s 13 Virtues would provide a format for a cycle of improvement, beginning with teacher personal reflection and culminating with a corresponding student character education unit delivered through Adult Advocacy.

Figure 1

#### Morgan & Kritsonis Model for Implementation of Benjamin Franklin’s 13 Virtues for Professional Development



As teachers develop the capacity for change, the 13 Virtues Professional Development series unfolds into a specific protocol. Dependent upon the size of the faculty, teachers would be divided into “faculty groups” consisting of 3-5 participants using random selection (to encourage new working relationships and divergent thinking). The concept of faculty groups would serve to greater personalize the change experience for teachers, as a full faculty exercise may disengage some teachers. Campus administration would also participate in teacher groups. As principal, I would lead the faculty groups in an examination of each stated virtue by using the following protocol:

- Faculty groups would examine the stated virtue and “share out” with their peers what the virtue means to them (beginning of the week).
- During the week, teachers document their progress with the virtue throughout the process.
- At the close of each week, faculty groups share with their peers on how they each implemented the stated virtue. A reflection journal must be maintained throughout the weekly process.
- As a part of the weekly debriefing, faculty groups develop a character education lesson centered on the (previously acquired) virtue for implementation with the students during Adult Advocacy time. Teachers are encouraged to share personal reflections with students to build trust among teachers and students.
- Administration monitors character education implementation and maintains data to examine potential links between professional development application and student progress.

### **Long-Term Evidence of Change**

At the close of the weekly study of the 13 Virtues, principals must identify a culminating activity or activities to not only validate the work of the teachers and students, but to also establish a sense of permanency for the newly-adopted virtues. The following are a sample of activities that schools can undertake to communicate their commitment to change:

- **Creation of a personal project** – Advocacy teachers and students would collaborate to create a visual record of learning for campus wide display
- **Realignment of campus mission, vision, and goals statement** (using the 13 Virtues)
- **Incorporation of 13 Virtues into school improvement planning** (all future decision making would be aligned to 13 Virtues)
- **Additional professional development** exploring the 13 Virtues more in-depth
- **Data reporting** – The link between implementation of the 13 Virtues and student improvement (academic and social) could be documented and supported with evidence

By demonstrating a serious commitment to sustainable improvement, each of these strategies could be shared with the external stakeholders (parents, community members, taxpayers, school district supervisors) to improve support and confidence in public schools.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, the 13 Virtues of Benjamin Franklin possess the potential to improve a campus through self-reflection and purposeful change. Principals must be mindful to lay a foundation for change and maintain the constancy of purpose for the remainder of the school year and beyond. In doing so, schools can create a positive image from within, empowering its key stakeholders (teachers and students) with the critical attributes of self-reflection and change.

### **References**

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