

Mass Appeal

Expanding The Scope of Positive Influence Beyond the Media

by Elaine Parke -Founder of Caring Habits

Our educational system now resides in a complex and fast-paced climate called the information age. Despite the call to come together as community to instill citizenship in our youth, there is a powerful community member that doesn't attend school conferences or sit on community task forces **called the mass media.**

The media appeal to the young teen group, particularly at the middle level, who often can be resistant to values messages delivered by adults in the classroom or at home. This non-resident can influence youth because they do not perceive the media as authoritarian.

Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian educator in mass communications who probed mass media, wrote in his 1967 book *The Medium Is the Message*;

The family circle has widened. The world pool of information fathered by electronic media far surpasses any possible influence mom and dad can now bring to bear. Character no longer is shaped by only two earnest, fumbling experts. Now all the world is the stage.

Mass media have transformed the dynamics of daily living. Adolescents are being taught by the media to think in images and sound bites as a result of spending three minutes per day in dialogue with parents and three hours in front of television or Internet screens. Stability, security, and a sense of caring have been replaced by tension, incivility, and isolation. It's no wonder that students can become morally lost or react with rebellion and violence. Educators and the community

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need to build a strategy to engage this powerful non-resident.

Integration is a current educational buzz word. It describes the common use of materials across educational disciplines; or, an integration of social objectives like service learning with educational objectives like math skills or social studies. Integrated educational messages and images, simultaneously delivered, can provoke thought and motivation. For years, educators have been using educational messages as a medium to support learning objectives, but they haven't used media principles to manage the overall influence of the messages. There is a BIG difference. Media can change behaviors and attitudes because when their principles are applied the messages are consistent and repetitive. Otherwise, media are confusing and fragmented. Look around a classroom or take a walk around your school. Write down the three or four main educational messages you see. Are your school's visual messages confusing or consistent? Are there definable visual messages?

Media experts believe it takes six imprints of a single message to embed a thought or idea into long-term memory. Media experts apply repetition and reinforcement techniques that educators use to teach the alphabet or the multiplication tables--

but the media electronically multiply their messages to teach millions.

Relevant definitions of medium from the American Heritage Dictionary are: 1. An agency by which something is accomplished, conveyed, or transferred.

2. A means of mass communication, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, or television.

3. A specific kind of artistic technique or means of expression as determined by the materials used or the creative methods involved.

4. A surrounding environment in which something functions and thrives.

How can educators use media to strengthen student citizenship and character? Consider the definitions of medium and then apply them to your school. For example, your classroom walls or hallway walls can be forms of mass communication because they can be an agency by which something is conveyed or transferred; they can also be a surrounding environment in which something functions and thrives.

Now mentally take that walk around your school again. Imagine a single citizenship trait that you want to instill in students, such as Be Responsible. Imagine that the hallways are lined with similar posters all containing variations of that same message, or with famous quotes, images of famous people, or artwork by students--all focused on the idea to Be Responsible.

With a consistent and rotating messaging plan, classroom walls and hallways will disseminate positive ideas that are consistent and repetitive instead of confusing and fragmented. This can't happen unless there is agreement at a broad level what the consistent plan of messages is. In the 10 years I have been working to integrate media principles into community-building and character education programming. I have discovered that the issue of agreement is the key to successful media integration into education.

One interesting point is the suitability of one month as a time frame for one rotation of one message. Psychologists say it takes approximately 21-30 days to convert a consistent thought or action into habit. This would mean that a school plan or character and citizenship development would include nine different messages, one for each month of the school year.



Many schools across America today are implementing citizenship and character development programs. In most cases, a character development program is selected or even custom-developed internally. This process encourages the enthusiasm and involvement of the stakeholders. Think about character development and citizenship programming in your school.

1. Do you have a programming in place or plans to adopt a program? What is your process?
2. Can you include a broad area of agreement about curriculum and values messages as one of your goals so expansion and media integration can be facilitated?
3. What are the areas of disagreement that are difficult to overcome?
4. How important are the reasons for different perspectives?
5. Can the disagreements be overcome for the sake of strengthening your program's influence on our youth?
6. How can you broaden your group of stakeholders to agree on a common set of character and

citizenship messages that can reach into homes and into our entire community?

In September 1998, with the generous support of Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield, a two-year pilot model of character development curriculum began at Aliquippa (Pa.) Middle School. This school was selected because it was one of six high-risk school districts on Governor Tom Ridge's statewide Watch List. On a student survey in April 1999 after the program was implemented, one student commented, I am now being nice to people I used to be mean to. Another said, I give my teachers more respect.

No matter what program you implement or what messengers you use, the success of a character or citizenship program in any school or community will rely primarily on the caring energy and sincerity driving it. The simplified definition of good character as adopted by the character education movement sums it all up; Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good and doing the good--habits of the mind, habits of the heart and habits of action. (Lickona 1991)

Inspiring our students to "desire the good" is the hard part. Without that, all the knowing in the world won't get us there.

Elaine Parke is the Founder and Executive Director of the Non-Profit, Caring Habit of the Month Adventure as well as a consultant and speaker. As a former corporate marketing professional, she developed the K-8 Caring Habit year-round multi-media model to improve overall school performance. Five University and independent studies have demonstrated that Caring Habits motivates improved academics and reduces school problems that detract from healthy learning and teaching environments.



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Reference

Lickona, T. 1991. Educating for character: How our schools can each respect and responsibility. New York: Bantam Books.

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