Free markets. Real solutions.

CHARACTER MATTERS:
An R Street Q&A Series on Character Education

1. Do you have a go-to, straightforward definition for "character" and/or "virtue"? If not, can you provide some rough outlines for those terms that might be helpful for educators and education-policy experts interested in helping form students?

2. Do our public schools really need to focus on teaching character? Can't we trust that educators will pass along lessons of character—things like honesty, diligence, public-spiritedness—naturally as part of their day-to-day teaching?

3. Assuming there are at least some legitimate differences of opinion about what constitutes character or virtue (or which aspects of character should be prioritized), shouldn't we decentralize this area of education and allow districts and schools decide what to do? That way, different communities can choose for themselves how their students should be formed. Or, is there a role for something more standardized at the state level?

4. It's one thing to measure reading or math proficiency—standardized tests can do much of that. But, how do we measure (and therefore hold teachers, schools or school networks accountable for transmitting) character and virtue? Or, said another way, how can we tell if we are successfully developing students of character?

5. A critic might say that "character" is nothing more than the norms of the dominant group. If that's the case, families who don't identify as part of that group—whether because of income, race, religion, heritage or something else—might always take issue with aspects of democratically developed character education. What should we make of that?

6. Is there a meaningful difference in your mind between character education and today's more popular "social-emotional learning"? For example, does your preferred vision of character education add something that SEL lacks—or maybe you believe SEL helps us avoid problems caused by character education?

7. Should we think about character as something that is taught or something that is modeled? In other words, if we care about character, should we focus on standards and curriculum, or should we focus on developing educators who embody key virtues?

8. Public school systems can be wary of engaging in anything that seems like instruction about morality because morality brushes up against faith traditions, the First Amendment, different conceptions of the "good life," and so on. How can a school have a robust approach to forming student character and avoid the charge that it is veering toward religious instruction?

9. Some scholars differentiate "intellectual," "moral," "civic" and "performance" virtues. Do you find that framework helpful, especially as it relates to what schools ought to prioritize in their instruction?

10. How do you respond to the argument that public schools should focus on knowledge and skills and leave the formation of character to families and voluntary associations?