

**CHARACTER
EDUCATION
SERIES**

DORAL COLLEGE CHARACTER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT

by Ginny Gentles



The R Street Institute's Character Education Series is a collection of case studies that highlight particular programs around the country that are finding unique ways to fuse character education into their curriculums and pedagogies. Although each of the programs is unique and has its own nuanced approach, in the aggregate, these studies show that the desire for schools—at all levels—to strive for excellence and to produce good people and citizens is alive and well—and growing.



Foreword

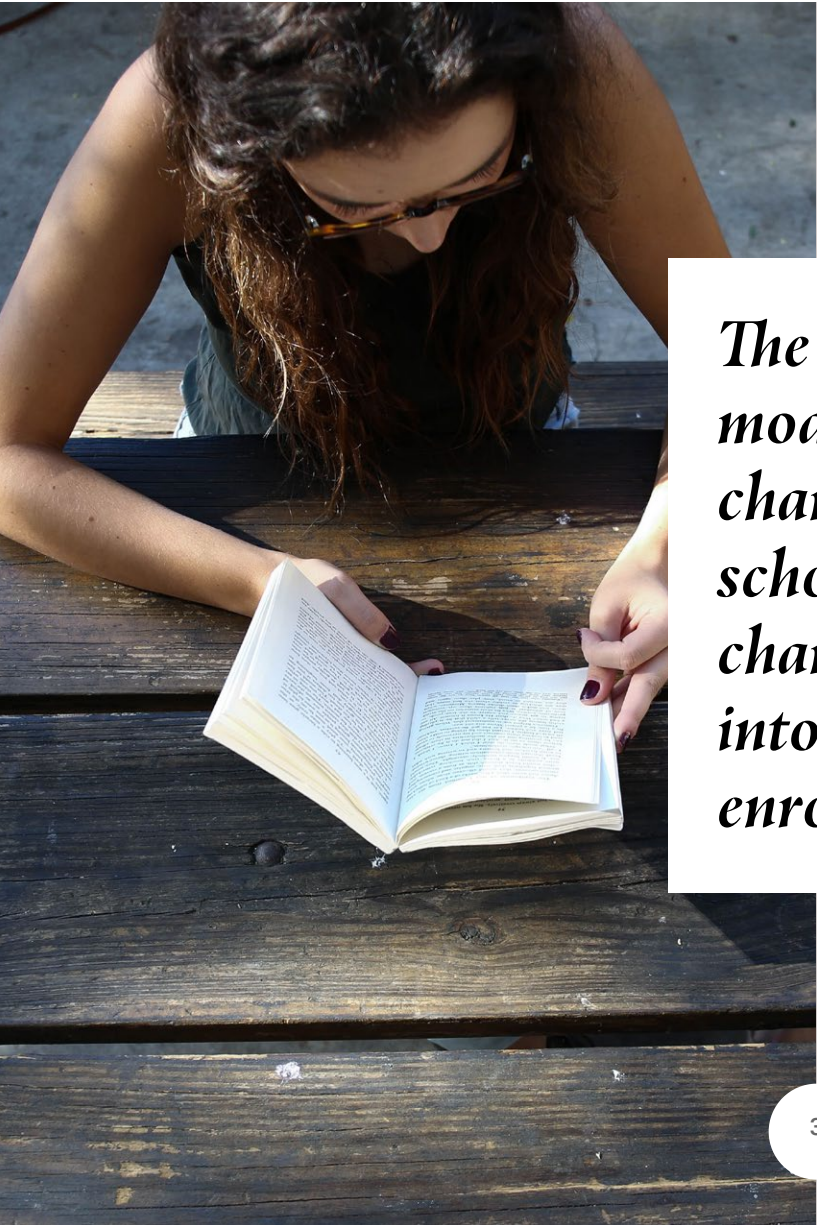
To say the least, Doral College does things differently. Consider just three points of distinction. First, it's a high school that now offers its students a dual-enrollment status that allows them to earn college credits and high school ones simultaneously. Second, in an era of soaring college prices, attending the program has no out-of-pocket cost for most students there. Finally, it strongly emphasizes character in nearly every aspect of its curriculum and, as an institution heavily reliant on fees paid by public schools, does so without any overt reference to religious faith. In this installment of R Street's series on character education, Virginia Gentles, explores how an institution this distinctive has grown and thrived.

Since opening its doors in 2011, Doral has served students also completing high school classes, one of a growing group of early enrollment colleges around the country. It takes all students that meet academic standards and serves a significant number from disadvantaged backgrounds. (All fees are paid by their school districts.) Given that such early college experience correlates strongly with college completion, this also gives these students a leg up. Historically, it has awarded mostly Associates' Degrees (some of them to people just 18 years old), as well as college credit for those finishing their studies at other institutions. Starting in 2020, it will begin to offer bachelor's degrees as well. The curriculum is infused with a strong dose of virtue ethics that draws on a number of not-explicitly-religious sources, most prominently the work of management theorist, Stephen Covey. The resulting institution does not just prepare students well academically, it also makes a strong effort to shape them into better human beings.

— Eli Lehrer,
President, R Street Institute

Introduction

After years of emphasizing character development in both courses and school culture, Doral College launched a formal character education initiative for dual-enrollment high school students in summer 2019. The school's educational model fosters the ethical and character education of high school students by embedding character formation lessons into the school's dual-enrollment curriculum. In addition, the affiliated Doral Leadership Institute (DLI)—a leadership program for educators aspiring to become instructional leaders—also embeds character education into the program curriculum.



The school's educational model fosters the ethical and character education of high school students by embedding character formation lessons into the school's dual-enrollment curriculum.



History of Doral College

Founded in 2011, Doral College offers a robust dual-enrollment program to over 2,000 high school students in multiple states. The student body is primarily students from 15 to 18 years old, who take college classes concurrently with their high school classes; a number of students graduate each year with both a high school diploma and an Associate in Arts (AA) degree. Located on the campus of Doral Academy Preparatory School in Doral, Florida, Doral College is an outgrowth of the Academica network of public charter schools. Academica is an education services organization founded in 1999 with schools located in South, Central and North Florida, Nevada, Colorado and Texas with expansions into additional states expected.¹

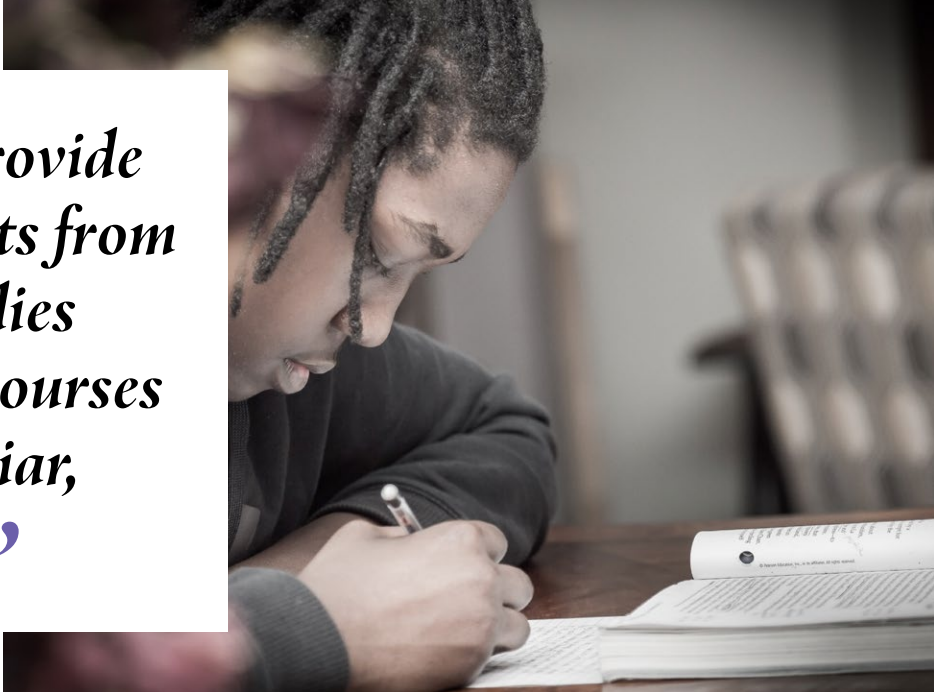
Many of the school's students are from low-income, minority households. The founders of Doral College created the school in order to reach students from "communities where people are not given the opportunity to reach their full potential," recalled instructor Ryan Kairalla.² Prior to the school's opening, students in the Miami area—which Doral College initially, exclusively served—were unable to access dual-enrollment programs or attend college full-time while in high school. According to Doral College president, Doug Rodriguez: "Research shows that students who start dual-enrollment early are more likely to finish college [...] We wanted to provide high school students from lower-income families with college-level courses provided in a familiar, academic setting."³

The school is licensed by the Florida Commission for Independent Education (CIE) and accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission to offer associate's degrees. The licensing and accreditation process took three years, likely because of the school's unprecedented model. The school has recently been licensed and accredited to offer a Bachelor of Science (BS) in Elementary Education. The program, launching in Fall 2020, will train teacher candidates to incorporate character education into their curriculum.

¹ "Educational Community," Academica, last accessed on Aug. 4, 2020.

² Author interview with Ryan Kairalla (Zoom), April 20, 2020.

³ Author interview with Doug Rodriguez (Zoom), April 7, 2020.



“ We wanted to provide high school students from lower-income families with college-level courses provided in a familiar, academic setting. ”

In order to enroll in Doral College’s dual-enrollment program, students must attend a high school that holds an educational services agreement with Doral College and meet academic standards, including an unweighted grade point average of at least 3.0 and acceptable college-readiness test scores. Once a student is enrolled in the dual-enrollment program, the cost per college credit is paid by the student’s original high school.⁴

Even before the coronavirus pandemic closed school buildings nationwide, Doral College had expanded into remote education, with over 70 percent of students participating in courses remotely. Students can take courses online or, prior to COVID-19 school closures, choose a blended learning approach combining in-person and online coursework. During the 2019-20 school year, students from over 25 high schools across Florida took Doral College courses and could receive college credit upon completion.

Students who successfully complete the requisite 60 credits of college coursework graduate with both a high school diploma and an associate’s degree. In spring 2020, the 136 graduates that comprised the school’s seventh graduating class joined the 360 total graduates of the dual-enrollment program. All Doral College graduates go on to attend four-year institutions, including: Harvard University, the University of Chicago, New York University, Cornell University, the University of Florida and the University of Miami.⁵

⁴ “Admissions Requirements: Application Policies and Procedures,” Doral College, last accessed on July 27, 2020.

⁵ See, e.g., “History of the College,” Doral College, last accessed on July 27, 2020.; Douglas Rodriguez, “A Word From President Douglas Rodriguez to the Class of 2020,” Doral College, May 15, 2020.



Purpose of Doral College's Character Education Program

Both Doral College and the Doral Leadership Institute (DLI) seek to develop people—young adults and future school leaders—ready to honorably lead and serve in their workplaces and communities. While previously serving as a principal at a traditional public high school in Miami, current Doral College president, Douglas Rodriguez, noticed that many students possessed an underdeveloped value system. Character traits such as honesty and integrity were weak, cheating was rampant and students were utterly unprepared for higher education.⁶

Rodriguez was not the only person to make this observation; leaders within the Academica network of high-performing charter schools began to analyze what made their schools successful as compared to district public schools that served students with similar backgrounds. According to Rodriguez, their analysis found that the Academica schools consistently focused on high expectations, caring for students and not allowing excuses to be an impediment to learning and excelling.⁷ Doral College was founded, in part, to infuse these values into a college curriculum for students from low-income backgrounds.

“ We knew that many students graduate from high school with technical skills, but struggle to work with others, be honest, collaborate and manage time. ”

Andrea Fuentes, Director of Online Learning

⁶ Rodriguez interview.

⁷ Ibid.

After founding Doral College to provide high school students with early access to college courses, the leadership team began developing a character education program to further prepare students for their future. Andrea Fuentes, Director of Online Learning explains: “We knew that many students graduate from high school with technical skills, but struggle to work with others, be honest, collaborate and manage time.”⁸ Fuentes and her colleagues wanted students to graduate as well-rounded members of society, possessing people skills, practical life skills and well-developed characters.

The school received funding from the Kern Family Foundation in 2018 to cultivate and launch a character development initiative. The Kern Family Foundation’s mission is to, “empower the rising generation of Americans to build flourishing lives anchored in strong character, inspired by quality education, driven by an entrepreneurial mindset, and guided by the desire to create value for others.”⁹ Doral College possesses a similar mission: to strengthen young adults’ character through education.¹⁰ As the cost to build the curriculum and expose students to guest speakers exceeds the per-credit cost the college receives, the foundation’s grant was essential for the program’s creation and implementation.



Doral College possesses a similar mission: to strengthen young adults’ character through education.

8 Author interview with Andrea Fuentes (telephone), April 15, 2020.

9 “About the Kern Family Foundation,” The Kern Family Foundation, last accessed on July 27, 2020.

10 Rodriguez interview.

Definition of Character

Doral College encourages the active development of a wide variety of virtues. In interviews with school leadership, virtues mentioned included: grit, honesty, leadership, perseverance, overcoming obstacles, caring and not allowing excuses despite students' challenging backgrounds.

As the program is housed in a public school, it does not draw on a religious tradition. School leaders do not espouse a tightly defined list of virtues—although, during interviews, they consistently cited Stephen R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* as inspiration for their program. Manny Diaz, of the DLI, shared that the school culture encourages students to believe that failure is not acceptable and that every student can excel.¹¹

The program expands beyond social-emotional learning, which often emphasizes emotional intelligence by fostering practical life skills such as time and financial management and effective online communication. Similarly, instruction and case studies frequently focus on ethical dilemmas and development.

... grit, honesty, leadership, perseverance, overcoming obstacles, caring and not allowing excuses despite students' challenging backgrounds.



¹¹ Author interview with Manny Diaz (telephone), April 16, 2020.

In an additional expression of Doral College's commitment to character development, the school recently added the following global citizenship objectives to the associate's degree program:



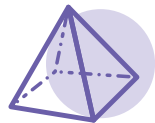
COMMUNICATION:

The student will demonstrate effective reading, writing and speaking skills.



HUMANITIES:

The student will demonstrate an understanding of the humanities, defining cultural trends throughout history by the study of art, literature, music, philosophy and other forms of artistic and creative expression.



MATHEMATICS:

The student will understand and apply mathematical principles and methods.



NATURAL SCIENCES:

The student will apply the methods, principles and concepts of the natural sciences.



SOCIAL SCIENCES:

The student will examine human behavior and institutions from political, economic, historical, psychological, business or sociological perspectives.



CRITICAL THINKING:

The student will apply reflection, analysis, synthesis, logical reasoning and evaluation to formulate judgments, reach decisions and solve problems.



INFORMATION LITERACY:

The student will find, evaluate, organize and use information accurately and effectively.



GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP:

The student will demonstrate an understanding of cultural, ethical, historical and technological issues on human society, including: cultural diversity, digital literacy, environmental awareness and ethical decision-making.¹²

¹² "Associate in Arts: Program of Study," Doral College, last accessed on July 27, 2020.



Curriculum & Instruction

While some schools introduce character education to students in the form of a particular course or seminar, Doral College embeds character development modules throughout the school's curriculum. The modules often draw from influential books such as Stephen R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and *Grit* by Angela Duckworth. Doral College applies Covey's 7 Habits by encouraging citizenship, responsibility, integrity, honesty, fairness, kindness, cooperation and the pursuit of excellence.

Character education modules are embedded into the dual-enrollment coursework in a variety of forms, including: case studies, readings, self-assessments, group activities, community-based projects and units focused on topics such as self-responsibility, academic integrity, empathy and resilience. While the courses offered at Doral College cover the wide range of subjects required for high school graduation and an associate's degree, they also encourage character development in a variety of ways. A more overt example can be found in a sample course syllabus stating that: "The course reinforces character education through emphasis on logical and responsible decision-making and individual, organizational, and societal needs."¹³

As the students Doral College serves are often the first members of their families to access college-level materials, the school's curriculum heavily emphasizes character development essential for college success. Students take a college success course in ninth grade with character modules that focus on academic integrity and the creation of a self-improvement plan. In addition, the school embeds college success modules into other dual-enrollment courses. School leadership shares the character modules with the entire Doral College faculty through Schoology—the school's learning management system. The module pages include student assignments and detailed lesson plans on practical topics such as writing a college essay, citation instruction and avoiding plagiarism.

Some Doral College courses are designed to significantly emphasize character. Two such courses are outlined in greater detail below.

¹³ Ryan A. Kairalla, "GEB 2430: Business Ethics," Course Syllabus, Spring 2020.



Service Learning

Although most of the school's character education components are embedded in regular dual-enrollment courses, Doral College students are required to take a three-credit, community-service course. To receive course credit, students complete 20 hours of service at a local community organization, complete written reflections on the experience and meet regularly with an assigned faculty member. According to the syllabus, the course: "gives the student the opportunity to grow academically, pre-professionally, personally, and civically through the participation in a service-learning experience."¹⁴ Ideally, students will connect the service project with their career goals, while learning about the community organization and the people it serves. Participating students write a research paper about service organizations and related societal issues and seven journal entries on their personal, pre-professional, academic and civic growth during their experience. At the conclusion of the course, students submit a final paper describing their awareness of civic responsibilities, their personal growth and skills they need for future service opportunities.

The syllabus also provides an example of the school's emphasis on academic integrity:

Students in the class must know, observe, and not compromise the principles of academic integrity. It is not permissible to cheat, fabricate, or falsify information, to submit the same academic work in more than one course without prior permission, to plagiarize, to receive unfair advantage, or to otherwise abuse accepted practices for handling and documenting information. The grade for this course includes the judgment that the student's work is free from academic dishonesty of any type. Violations or infractions will be reported to the Chief Student Affairs Officer and may lead to failure of the course and other sanctions imposed by the College.¹⁵

Doral College uses additional, precautionary measures to ensure that students adhere to the school's academic integrity standards, including utilizing plagiarism-identification tools such as Turnitin.¹⁶

¹⁴ Scott Wacholtz, "SLS 2940: Service Learning," Course Syllabus, Fall 2019.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Author interview with Clara Calavia (telephone), May 29, 2020.



Business Ethics

A small group of highly committed students—approximately eight to 15 each year—take a seminar course in business ethics. The seminar, which is taught entirely online, focuses on legal and ethical analysis of contemporary issues, primarily by using a case-study approach, but also drawing from the *Business Ethics* (2018) textbook.¹⁷ The course culminates with participation in the International Business Ethics and Case Competition (IBECC)—an intercollegiate ethics competition where college teams present a resolution to a real-world business ethics dilemma to judges who act as a company’s board of directors.¹⁸

To prepare for the competition, the seminar students review relevant laws, analyze companies’ financial statements and consider the political ramifications of policy decisions. The students build confidence through extensive research and preparation, in addition to the experience of speaking before important people in the business world (the panel of IBECC judges). Doral College’s Business Ethics Teams—despite being significantly younger than the other full-time college students in the competition—consistently perform well. In fact, Doral College teams received three first-place awards in the April 2020 competition for their approach to advising TikTok on how to create a more ethical content moderation policy.¹⁹

Ryan Kairalla, the creator and instructor of the business ethics course, built it on the premise that the way to become more ethical is to practice ethics, rather than just reading about them. The course does not focus on an academic or philosophical approach; instead, Kairalla challenges the students to become ethical people by actively confronting challenging issues. In so doing, he found that: “A lot of research shows that students who have to engage with ethical issues have more moral development, which is correlated with more ethical behavior.”²⁰

After competing in the IBECC competition against teams from some of the best colleges in the country, some of the business ethics students have been inspired to attend those schools. As Kairalla explains: “The kids at Doral are motivated and hungry to prove themselves [...] They want to show the world what they can do.”²¹


17 Stephen M. Byars and Kurt Stanberry, *Business Ethics* (12th Media Services, 2018).

18 Ryan Kairalla, “Doral College Ethics Class Creates Opportunities for Charter High School Students,” National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, last accessed July 27, 2020.

19 Doral College, “Doral College Wins Big at Annual IBECC Competition,” Press Release, April 29, 2020.

20 Author interview with Ryan Kairalla (Zoom), April 20, 2020.

21 Ibid.



The Student Experience and Program Assessment

Recent Doral College graduate, Clara Calavia, appreciated the program's courses that required higher-level thinking, such as sociology and psychology, and electives that encouraged personal development. Additionally, she found that many classes encouraged personal growth and college success. She credits the positive experience the school provides to the personal dedication of the students choosing to obtain an associate's degree while in high school, the extra-curricular opportunities and the staff's commitment.²² She chose Doral College's program, rather than Miami Dade College's, because: "It is more personal, caring and flexible [...] One of the best things with Doral College is that they're super helpful. It is so easy to email your advisor. She'll tell you exactly what you need and when you need it by. Professors are really there for you and accessible through email, Schoology, Zoom and phone."²³

Calavia, who served as student body president during the 2019-20 school year, plans to study political science and journalism at the University of Florida before pursuing a law degree.²⁴ After immigrating to the United States with her parents, she was inspired to become an immigration lawyer and help other immigrants.²⁵ In this way, Calavia embodies the ultimate expectation of Doral College's character development curriculum—that students will graduate prepared to complete college and serve their community.

²² Calavia Interview.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.



*“ We’re starting to see
the program bear fruit.”*

Kairalla, Doral College instructor

Doral College leaders recognize that their graduates have benefited from the dual-enrollment and character education program, while many people in their community have not had the same opportunities. Doral College instructor Kairalla reports that anecdotal evidence suggests that students graduate with a determination to serve their community, with graduates returning to their communities to serve on charter school boards, get involved with local nonprofit organizations and with the hope of running for elected office. According to Kairalla: “We’re starting to see the program bear fruit.”²⁶

As the program concludes its third grant year, school leaders are assessing how to meaningfully evaluate the impact of the program. The school already conducts annual student surveys, according to school administrator Andrea Fuentes, but may develop a survey for program graduates to gather additional insight.²⁷ The school leaders intend to probe further into how the students’ behavior and mindset were changed by the character development modules.²⁸

²⁶ Kairalla interview, April 20, 2020.

²⁷ Fuentes interview.

²⁸ Ibid.



Doral Leadership Institute

The DLI is a one-year training program for aspiring school leaders, principals and vice principals. It is closely affiliated with Doral College, but is a separate entity. Both organizations, as well as the K-12 charter schools affiliated with Academica, habitually share staff, best practices and ideas—an approach that encourages regular collaboration and continuous improvement. According to Carlos Alvarez, an Academica network high school principal and DLI instructor: “With vision, anything is possible. We constantly put energy toward solving problems and finding solutions.”²⁹ Both Doral College and the DLI are viewed by their leadership as an outgrowth of the Academica network’s collaborative culture.

DLI leadership candidates must participate in eight training sessions provided by high-performing school administrators and shadow sitting principals at two different schools. Training was provided in person before COVID-19 moved the entire program online; the DLI may transition to a blended-learning model in the future. The program initially provided basic operational modules on managing budgets, personnel and professional development. After receiving a Kern Family Foundation grant in 2019, the DLI expanded the training program’s scope by embedding character development topics into all of its training modules. The foundation’s grant enables the DLI to bring in guest speakers to speak to aspiring school leaders about topics such as grit and perseverance.

By transitioning from teaching leadership with an operational focus to focusing on character, the DLI hopes program graduates will leave prepared to make character the foundation of their future schools. The staff at the DLI believe that school leaders must be trained in character education so that they can then train their schools’ teachers and cultivate a culture that emphasizes values such as grit, honesty, courageous leadership and growth. The one-year leadership training program currently serves just over 100 participating future leaders. Many graduates of the DLI program are currently serving in leadership positions within the Academica network.³⁰

29 Author interview with Carlos Alvarez (telephone), May 28, 2020.

30 “News,” Doral Leadership Institute, last accessed Aug. 08, 2020.

The curriculum relies heavily on *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and Brené Brown’s *Dare to Lead*, in addition to articles from journals such as *Educational Leadership* and the trainers’ shared experiences. DLI instructors strongly believe in the value of the program and its emphasis on character education. According to Carmen Cangemi, a DLI instructor and principal: “Our team is extremely passionate about training leaders. We love being able to share ideas outside our own school.”³¹ Alvarez echoes the sentiment: “[The] DLI is a blessing. I’m so thankful for what I’m able to do. We believe so much in what we’re doing.”³²

While the DLI has not formally assessed the program’s impact, they expect graduates to introduce the content of the character development lessons to the school communities—staff and students—where they work. According to Diaz, the DLI’s executive director: “If you can get the leaders to get it right, it sets the tone and culture for the school.”³³ The DLI anticipates receiving an expanded Kern Family Foundation grant that will enable them to develop and offer character education modules for current school administrators, as well.



“Our team is extremely passionate about training leaders. We love being able to share ideas outside our own school.”

Carmen Cangemi, a DLI instructor and principal

31 Author interview with Carmen Cangemi (telephone), May 20, 2020.

32 Alvarez interview.


33 Diaz interview.



Public Policy Implications

As Doral College currently operates in partnership with a substantial charter school network, the program's curriculum already reaches a large number of students. The high percentage of courses already offered online, even before the COVID-19 school closures, position the school to grow significantly if the interest and opportunities exist. The college already serves students attending more than two dozen charter schools, and private schools have begun expressing interest in accessing the dual-enrollment program for their students. Policymakers may wish to monitor the program's growth and impact, and consider introducing a similar approach in other dual-enrollment programs or making the Doral College programs available to students in additional districts and states. If there are regulatory barriers that could prevent high school students outside Florida from accessing and receiving credit for Doral College's classes, states and districts could consider revising the credit-access laws and regulations.

After struggling to access and provide education online during the widespread COVID-19 school closures, students and schools recognize the value of high-quality, established remote learning opportunities. Doral College's smooth, rapid transition to online instruction should be used as a model for school districts struggling to create effective online instruction in preparation for future pandemic closures.

A photograph of a red plastic chair with a black metal frame, positioned in a classroom. The chair is the central focus, with its backrest and seat clearly visible. The background shows a wooden desk and a metal railing, suggesting a school environment. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on the chair's surface and deep shadows in the background.

[The] DLI is a blessing. I'm so thankful for what I'm able to do. We believe so much in what we're doing.

Carmen Cangemi, a DLI instructor and principal



Conclusion

The Doral College and the DLI staff interviewed for this case study were universally passionate about their work and the students they serve. Doral College staff credit president Douglas Rodriguez's consistent support for their ability to "run with a good idea." With strong vision and leadership, a fully committed staff and the Kern Family Foundation grants, both the college and the DLI anticipate significant growth in the near future.

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We work extensively on both state and national policy, focusing on issues that other groups tend to neglect. Our specialty is tackling issues that are complex, but do not necessarily grab major headlines. These are the areas where we think we can have a real impact. We believe free markets work better than the alternatives. At the same time, we recognize the legislative process calls out for practical responses to current problems. Toward that end, our motto is “Free markets. Real solutions.”

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