FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

THE EFFECTIVENESS AND EVALUATION OF THE LEARNING FOR LIFE CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM IN LEON AND GADSDEN COUNTIES, TALLAHASSEE, FL

AN ACTION REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

REUBIN O’D. ASKEW SCHOOL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND POLICY

BY PORTIA MAURICIO DIÑOSO

TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA AUGUST 2005
Executive Summary

The report evaluates Learning for Life in two Florida counties. Learning for Life is a national character education program that serves more than 1.4 million youths and is present in more than 20,000 schools in the U.S. (Learning for Life, 2005). Character education has gone through an evolutionary change. It has existed as long as the institution of education, beginning with the Bible as a source for moral and religious education. Today, the purpose of character education is to facilitate to students an understanding of ethical and moral conduct, and inculcate such character traits as respect and honesty. The ultimate outcome is to form attitudes and actions necessary to the preservation of a thriving and successful democratic society.

In the State of Florida, Learning for Life supports schools and other youth-serving organizations’ efforts to increase students’ self-confidence, motivation, and self-worth. The program is curriculum-based, consisting of sixty-one, age-appropriate and grade-specific lesson plans designed to develop pupils’ social and life skills, to mold character development, and to assist students in building positive, personal values. In addition, the program assists teachers in administering benchmarks as required by the State of Florida. (Learning for Life, 2005).

In Leon County, FL and Gadsden County, FL, the effectiveness of the Learning for Life character education program is assessed through pre-program and post-program questionnaires given to students (in 2nd thru 5th grade levels) in schools that participate in the Learning for Life program. Optimal effectiveness is evaluated on the following criteria: 1) Improve student academic achievement, behavior and overall school preparedness; 2) To raise the level of participation of low performing schools; and 3) To enhance participating students’ character traits of respect, responsibility, honesty, caring, perseverance, self-discipline, and courage. To further assess, a control group of students who are not participating in the Program needs to complete the pre-program and post-program questionnaires for comparison purposes.
The pre-program and post-program questionnaires administered during the 2004-2005 academic school year show that there was significant improvement in students’ development and understanding of character traits. This was true in both Leon County and Gadsden County.

Although the Learning for Life program was effective, improvement in program administration is needed in the Learning for Life program for the Suwannee River Area Council. Problems arose in part as a result of loss of funding and support that took place in the middle of the 2003-2004 school year in Leon County – an extenuating circumstance beyond the organization’s control. As a consequence, a lapse occurred in gathering evaluation data from the previous academic school year; the program was temporarily halted; and extensive staff turnover occurred right as personnel were developing knowledge in program basics. The local Learning for Life organization needs to reorganize its structure to better serve local elementary schools, students, and educators; increase communication throughout the organization; and develop a calendar timeline to assure that program effectiveness is assessed completely in compliance with the State of Florida’s grant guidelines.
# Table of Contents

I. Problem Statement ...........................................................................................................5

II. Background and Literature Review .................................................................................6

III. Research Methodology and Evaluative Criteria ..............................................................14

IV. Management Policy Options ............................................................................................18

V. Recommendation for Action ............................................................................................20

VI. References ........................................................................................................................22

Appendix A: Memorandum of Understanding and Enrollment Form

Appendix B: Leon County’s Request for Proposal (RFP) for the State of Florida

Appendix C: Gadsden County’s Request for Proposal (RFP) for the State of Florida

Appendix D: Example of Learning for Life Pre-Program and Post-Program Questionnaires for grade levels 2 thru 5

Appendix E: Learning for Life District Summary Report for Leon County, FL (Pre-Program and Post-Program)

Appendix F: Learning for Life District by Grade Report for Leon County, FL (Pre-Program and Post-Program)

Appendix G: Learning for Life District Summary Report for Gadsden County, FL (Pre-Program and Post-Program)

Appendix H: Learning for Life District by Grade Report for Gadsden County, FL (Pre-Program and Post-Program)
Problem Statement

The Learning for Life character education program is designed to address character development and form a foundation of basic values in elementary-age children (in kindergarten through fifth grades) through repetitive practice techniques and integrated academic learning. The ultimate effect of the program is to combat social ills, such as drug abuse, violence, moral decay and divorce, and to infuse young minds with strong, basic moral character, life skills, and the confidence to make positive decisions. “Young people these days are thrown into a hothouse of competition and social change that tests their decision-making skills” (Learning for Life, 2005, ¶ 3). Thus, Learning for Life’s mission is “to enable young people to become responsible individuals by teaching positive character traits, career development, leadership, and life skills so they can make moral choices and achieve their full potential” (Learning for Life, 2005, ¶ 8).

The program is in demand and expanding nationwide. It is utilized in more than 20,000 schools and organizations and serves more than 1.4 million youths in the U.S. (Learning for Life, 2005).

The Learning for Life program supports schools and other youth-serving organizations’ efforts to increase students’ self-confidence, motivation, and self-worth. More specifically, the program has developed a curriculum consisting of sixty-one, age-appropriate and grade-specific lesson plans designed to develop pupils’ social and life skills, to mold character development, and to assist students in building positive, personal values. Learning for Life is intended to enhance teacher capacity and to increase youth learning. (Learning for Life, 2005).

Learning for Life’s lessons emulate real-life situations that allow students to act constructively, thereby creating mock situations that they may encounter sometime in their life. In addition to interacting with fellow peers, take-home assignments expand learning beyond the classroom setting to include parents and guardians in the role of mentorship. The hope of the
Learning for Life program is to achieve the following outcomes: (1) youths will gain an invaluable understanding of real life experiences; (2) they will understand how their personal choices will impact their personal lives and society; and (3) they will gain a greater sense of confidence and the capability to make a positive contribution to the community (Learning for Life, 2005). In addition, students’ exposure to the Learning for Life curriculum will have a positive influence over a participating school’s referral rate. Over time, the lessons learned from the Learning for Life program will help to curb crime rate in localities where the program is present and continuous.

In the State of Florida, the Learning for Life program has been used in many of the educational institutions for about the past 10 years. In the middle of the 2003-2004 academic school year, the program was in jeopardy with state funding discontinued – a devastation to Learning for Life’s mission and a failure to participants in the program.

In the following 2004-2005 academic year, the Learning for Life character education program was reinstated in the state budget for education under the mentorship initiative and received a state grant of $2 million. Of those funds, Leon County, FL was allocated $80,000 and Gadsden County, FL received $16,000. And while the Learning for Life program will continue to receive state funding and support in the upcoming 2005-2006 academic year, the negative impact of funding cuts from the previous 2003-2004 academic year still ensues. It has led to turnover in staff; educators questioning the reliability of the program and staff; the struggle to increase elementary school participation; changes in organization structure; and changes in how the program is administered and serviced.

**Background and Literature Review**

Character education addresses ethical and moral conduct, and inculcates such character traits as respect and honesty.
In the past, American society was built on family and family values. There was a time when the traditional household was the norm – the father/husband worked to financially support his family and the mother/wife stayed home to take care of and raise the children. It was in the home where children were taught how to behave properly, how to conduct themselves in public, and how to respect their peers and one another.

The advent of radio and television in the industrial age led to public concern that the content of broadcasted shows had a negative impact on the youth.

Modern society has changed much in the past century. Advances in technology, electronics, and communication have shepherd in the information age. Many households have a television and computer in every room of their home. And while parents rely on these electronic babysitters to occupy children, children are occupied with graphic violence, nudity, and sex. The indecency of the airwaves is not just disturbing to children; many adults are also distressed.

Our family structures have also changed. Many families are two-income households, where both parents must be employed to cover their daily living expenses. There are also many households with single-parents who barely enough money to support their households. With most parents working, children lack parental guidance and family support to develop sound morals and firm moral habits.

Since students spend a great portion of their time in the classroom, parents depend increasingly on educators and schoolteachers to assist them with this task. In addition to teaching the required educational state standards and benchmarks, teachers are even more burdened with the task of teaching their pupils moral and ethical standards and habits. To address this need, the United States Congress ratified the Partnerships in Character Education Program in 1994. The “No Child Left Behind Act” of 2001 renews and provides greater support for this effort (Character Education…Our Shared Responsibility, n.d.).
Cicero stated, “Within the character of the citizen lies the welfare of the nation” (Character Education…Our Shared Responsibility, n.d.). Character education has always been necessary to freedom and democracy. One of the aims of character education is to enable students to understand the value of civic virtue, citizenship, and justice. In a report conducted during the 1999-2000 school year, approximately 54 percent of public schools reported taking serious disciplinary action. Of these, “83% were suspensions that lasted 5 days or more; 11% were removals with no services, such as expulsions; and 7% were transfers to specialized schools” (Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2004, n.d.). It was also found that “71% of public schools reported violent incidents and 46% reported thefts” (Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2004, n.d.).

Learning for Life is a character education program that addresses teachers’ and students’ needs and concerns. The program assists teachers by providing guidebooks that tie lessons to state benchmarks. In the State of Florida, Learning for Life is allocated by the state government and is even noted as a line item in the State’s budget. In Leon and Gadsden counties, Learning for Life is being utilized in the kindergarten through fifth-grade levels. The program’s effectiveness will be evaluated by measuring student improvement in ethical decision-making, moral insight, and related character traits. At the end of the academic school year, a report on the program’s performance will be compiled and presented to the State of Florida, the Leon County school board, the Gadsden County school board, local educators, and members of the community.

Most of the published research available on character education goes into depth in defining character education, the need to have a character education curriculum present in schools, and instruction for teachers on how to administer such a program. While character education is meant to positively affect moral and ethical behavior, researchers and educators
question how character education and academic learning are related and how character education can help increase standardized test scores. Educators, government, and society may receive immediate gratification in looking at overall standardized tests scores but it will take a period of time and an analysis of crime rate to determine if pupils’ moral and ethical behavior have improved.

There are a multiplicity of organizations that offer character education curriculum and programs to educational institutions today. Organizations that offer and work with character education programs function in a complicated system that not only involves educational institutions but also includes relationships with local, state, and federal governments and following laws respective to that state. More research needs to focus on the public administration of character education programs.

Much of the research and literature on character education cites historical context as a foundational emphasis; it tries to define character education; and it explains its importance in present society.

In “The Return of Character Education,” Thomas Lickona states, “Down through history, education has had two great goals: to help people become smart and to help them become good” (Lickona, 1993, ¶ 11). Thus, character education has existed alongside the rudiments of traditional education, beginning with the Bible as being the ultimate source for moral and religious instruction.

When controversy ensued over which Bible to use and what doctrines should be taught, William McGuffey published his McGuffey Readers in 1836 (Lickona, 1993). These were a standardized set of schoolbooks used to teach reading and moral principles. The books emphasized religious, moral, and ethical standards (McGuffey Readers, n.d.). It also contained
The Effectiveness of the Learning for Life Character Education Program

stories of various themes, such as Biblical stories, poems and heroic tales - items pleasing to young pupils (Lickona, 1993).

But John Dewey and the Progressives scorned the McGuffey Readers’ rigid piety. Instead, they encouraged a child-centered style of learning, liberating the child’s own questioning nature. Eventually, the idea of developing intelligence became superior to developing character (Traub, 2005).

In the twentieth century, character education fell into decline. For example, Darwinian ideas and evolution theory led people to question the definition of morality. The philosophy of logical positivism, which stemmed from European universities, “asserted a radical distinction between facts (which could be scientifically proven) and values (which positivism held were mere expressions of feeling, not objective truth” (Lickona, 1993, ¶ 15). As a result, logical positivism argued that people are free to make “a personal ‘value judgment’” of morality (Lickona, 1993, ¶ 15).

In the 1960s, personalism stressed individual rights and freedom above responsibility. The author notes, “Personalism rightly protested societal oppression and injustice, but it also delegitimized moral authority, eroded belief in objective moral norms, turned people inward toward self-fulfillment, weakened social commitments (for example, marriage and parenting), and fueled the socially destabilizing sexual revolution” (Lickona, 1993, ¶ 16).

There was a revival of values education in the 1970s. Values education programs reflect the notion that values should not be imposed; students need to develop their moral reasoning skills and the ability to choose personal values (Lickona, 1993).

As a result of the changing times, the latter half of the twentieth century experienced the decline of the family, moral decay, and negative trends in youth character. For example, “the U.S. has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates, the highest teen abortion rate, and the highest
level of drug use among young people in the developed world” (Lickona, 1993, ¶ 35). Ill parenting and poor adult role models, peer pressure, and sex and violence portrayed in mass media all contribute to a hostile moral environment that leads to an increase in youth violence, dishonesty, disrespect for authority figures, waning civic responsibility, and sexual precocity (Lickona, 1993).

As a result, the decade of the 1990s was the beginning of a new era in the character education movement. But still, historical perspective still leaves present-day society perplexed as to whose values should be taught and will teaching those lessons violate the separation of church and state (Lickona, 1993). Furthermore, Vernon Jones’ research about the burgeoning of character education in the 1930s discusses the fact that the definition of character education and the objectives of character education programs were not in sync (Jones, 1935). Past and present research is still trying to tackle this inconsistency (Lickona, 1993).

In 1988, Ivor Pritchard of the U.S. Department of Education released his study, “Character Education: Research Prospects and Problems.” He defined character education as being a set curriculum that is emphasized to students. The purpose of character education is to influence behavior by forming strong minds and ideals, increasing pupils’ knowledge of the consequences of their actions, and encouraging them to be confident in the decision-making skills. The results of achievement tests attest to the claim that good and effective character education is linked to improved academic performance (Pritchard, 1988).

Unfortunately, there is not one set definition of character. For example, the American Institute for Character Education (AICE) defines the term “character” to encompass the following characteristics: courage, conviction, generosity, honesty, justice, tolerance, good citizenship, etc. The State of Maryland’s Values Education Commission has listed “character objectives” to define the term. For example, it includes such items as: “1) Personal integrity and
honesty rooted in respect for the truth, intellectual curiosity, and love of learning; 2) A sense of
duty of self-family, school, and community; 3) Self-esteem rooted in the recognition of one’s
potential” and so forth (Pritchard, 1988, p. 472).

Pritchard states that a clear, concise definition is necessary in order to justify the
objectives of any character education program and curriculum. In order to do so, authorities must
agree on a definition and elements of character. Character education programs should abide by
an endorsed list of values. And particular values should be neither neglected nor chosen; rather,
entire moral theories must be analyzed to establish a common core component (Pritchard, 1988).

The ultimate value of implementing a character education program is to promote social
well-being and to deter the rise of social problems, such as drug abuse, suicide, homicide, and
out-of-wedlock pregnancy (Pritchard, 1988). Even research from the 1930s support the fact that
the most effective character education program is one that is able to prevent or reduce an
individual’s moral dilemma and emotional conflict (Jones, 1935).

For example, researchers at South Dakota University completed a study of 8,419 students
who were exposed to the Character Counts! program in participating schools. The study
concluded that the number of reported acts of cheating, stealing, drinking, drug abuse, and class
cutting dropped significantly between 1998 and 2000 (Traub, 2005).

A good character education program should not be vulnerable to criticisms about
indoctrination. It should function to provide straightforward information and a set of values that
remain impartial or neutral so that pupils can remain confident in the choices that they make.
However, due to age and nature of the audience, critics argue that it is still appropriate that
teachers and educators provide instruction to students regarding values. Pritchard notes,

Such instruction must occur with an eye toward the day when children mature
to the point where their critical capacities become available, and so the teacher
must always seek to convey that his or her authority is merely provisional, that
is, subject to rational critical scrutiny, even before the students are actually
capable of doing the scrutinizing (Pritchard, 1988, p. 477).

This idea also leads to the importance of plural responsibility. Virtue cannot be cultivated
with an individual acting as the sole educator. Legislators, parents, family, and friends are all
responsible for molding the young individual and creating an atmosphere conducive to character
building (Pritchard, 1988).

In administering a character education program, it is difficult to measure a program’s
effectiveness and to assess if students have developed their character and values. As in any social
science research, the following problems are standard: 1) the design of the research; 2) pragmatic
and ethical constraints; and 3) biases of researchers and subjects. Furthermore, it is difficult to
scientifically investigate the phenomenon of character because subjects are exposed to a variety
of factors, such as other people and peers, the media, genetic inheritance, personality,
technology, and environment. This is why the assessment of character entails and requires a
long-term analysis. Pritchard goes on to make another important observation:

The behavioral orientation of character education imposes further limitations
on research strategies such as paper-and-pencil survey questionnaires: Even if
one could trust the subjects’ testimony regarding their sincerely held beliefs,
as long as the phenomenon of akrasia exists, that is, of knowing what is right
but doing otherwise, even those who report the right moral convictions may
fail to display good character. At the same time, moral action does require the
intention to do the good, and thus the simple observation of someone’s doing
the right thing is also insufficient evidence of the possession of character
(Pritchard, 1988, p. 482).
Research Methodology and Evaluative Criteria

Procedure.

In order to measure the effectiveness of the Learning for Life program in Gadsden and Leon Counties, pre-program and post-program questionnaire surveys were given to teachers to administer to students in participating Learning for Life schools.

An elementary school is considered a participant in the Learning for Life program when the principal enrolls the respective institution in the program by completing and signing the enrollment form and the Memorandum of Understanding.

Methods.

At the beginning of each academic school year, the State of Florida requires that a Request for Proposal (RFP) be submitted. The RFP is the state’s project application, which outlines how the state-awarded grant is to be utilized and spent. It also includes an accountability report from the previous academic school year; a narrative questionnaire and summary, including the needs that the program addresses, project design and management, marketing plan, and evaluation plan; an allocation schedule; and a budget narrative.

Pre-program and post-program questionnaires are administered to students in the second thru fifth grade levels. Pre-program questionnaires are to be administered at the very beginning of the academic school year, most notably in August or September. Post-program questionnaires are to be administered at the end of the school year after all required state tests have been administered, such as the beginning of April or May.

The purpose of the questionnaires is to measure the effectiveness of the program. Based on the population information supplied by school principals on the enrollment forms, Learning

---

1 See Appendix A.
2 See Appendix B and Appendix C for Gadsden County’s and Leon County’s RFP, respectively.
3 See Appendix D for an example of questionnaires for second thru fifth grade levels.
The Effectiveness of the Learning for Life Character Education Program

for Life program representatives distribute questionnaires to school teachers. A memo is sent and addressed to teachers instructing them on how to administer the questionnaires to students and how questionnaires should be coded. Once the questionnaires have been completed, teachers notify Learning for Life program representatives that questionnaires are ready for pick-up.

In addition, a control group of students not participating in the Learning for Life character education program should participate in the pre-program and post-program questionnaire survey for further measure of effectiveness.

Once Learning for Life representatives receive the pre-program and post-program questionnaires, they must ensure that the school code and district code are properly coded.

After all survey questionnaires have been properly checked, they are organized by grade and school. It is then sent to an outside vendor, who scans the questionnaires and sends the data file to the Learning for Life representative via email.

The national Learning for Life organization supplies the local organizations with a special program that reads the data file and automatically generates reports for analysis.

Basic Assumptions.

There should be a percent increase of correct answers from the pre-program questionnaire as compared to the post-program questionnaire. This provides evidence that students who are regularly exposed to the Learning for Life character education program will acquire greater knowledge in all areas of academic learning and will put into practice moral and ethical traits.

Furthermore, lessons will contribute to improved scores on aptitude tests and will decrease the referral rate in schools.

---

4 This includes the school code and district code.
5 In order to distinguish between the Leon and Gadsden Counties, a county code has been substituted for the district code.
Evaluative Criteria.

Learning for Life program representatives of the Suwannee River Area Council worked closely with the Program Monitoring Department of the Leon County School Board to create a manageable, yet robust evaluation procedure (see charts listed on the next following pages).

In addition, the following evaluation procedure was created to measure the effectiveness of other areas of the Learning for Life program as requested by the State of Florida. The outcomes of the Learning for Life pre-program and post-program questionnaire survey data do not specifically measure other criteria, such as academic improvement.

Due to extenuating circumstances beyond the control of the Suwannee River Area Council and Leon county schools, the program experienced a lapse in evaluation data on the program for the preceding 2003-2004 school year in Leon County. The evaluation plan that will be completed at the end of the 2004-2005 academic school year will serve as a basis and comparative model for future program evaluations.

Since the Learning for Life character education program was implemented in three of Gadsden County’s elementary schools for the first time in the 2004-2005 academic school year, the same evaluation plan will be used to measure effectiveness.
Criteria 1: Improve student academic achievement, behavior and overall school preparedness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective 1.1: improve letter grades of participating student</td>
<td>K-5 students participating in program more than or equal to 90 days</td>
<td>Report card grades K-1 2-5 Social studies Lang. Arts Reading Writing Listening Viewing</td>
<td>Sample 30 students in one class per school regardless of grade level</td>
<td>In May 2005: Percent improved in letter grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 1.2: improve school behavior</td>
<td>K-5 students participating in program more than or equal to 90 days</td>
<td>Report cards</td>
<td>School year quarterly</td>
<td>In May 2005: Percent improved in letter grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 1.3: improve average daily attendance</td>
<td>K-5 students participating in program more than or equal to 90 days</td>
<td>Report cards</td>
<td>School year quarterly</td>
<td>In May 2005: Percent improved in letter grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 1.4: improve general attitude about schooling</td>
<td>K-5 students participating in program more than or equal to 90 days</td>
<td>LFL Questionnaire Survey</td>
<td>November 30 (Pre-test) May 30 (Post-test)</td>
<td>*Compare pre- and post-test *Compare with national results from previous year *Both between and among schools *Aggregate overall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 1.5: improve school preparedness</td>
<td>K-5 students participating in program more than or equal to 90 days</td>
<td>Report card work/study skills</td>
<td>School year quarterly</td>
<td>In May 2005: Percent improved in work/study skills evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Need research request with parental consent

Criteria 2: To raise the level of participation of low performing schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Time Data Collected</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective 2.1: The Learning for Life Program will maintain existing schools and recruit new schools with an emphasis on attracting schools with a grade of C, D, or F.</td>
<td>All schools in Leon County and Gadsden County</td>
<td>Learning for Life Representatives</td>
<td>May 30th, 2005</td>
<td>*Total number of schools *Number of schools designated as low performing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Need research request with parental consent
Criteria 3: To enhance participating students’ character traits of respect, responsibility, honesty, caring, perseverance, self-discipline, and courage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Time Data Collected</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Objective 3.1: Students will demonstrate an average improvement in 7 character traits of 2% as measured by pre-test and post-test Learning for Life survey. | K-5 students participating in program more than 90 days | LFL Pre-Program Questionnaire, LFL Post-Program Questionnaire | November 30 (Pre-test) By May 30 (Post-test)       | *Compare pre- and post-program questionnaires
*Compare with national results from previous year
*Both between and among schools
*Aggregate overall                             |

*Need research request with parental consent

Management Policy Options

Option 1: Should the Learning for Life character education program continue to be used in Leon County and Gadsden County elementary schools?

Based on the criteria of enhancing participating students’ character traits, students who took part in Learning for Life lessons and curriculum showed statistically significant overall gains in appropriate responses from the pre-program to the post-program questionnaire survey.

Participating Learning for Life elementary schools in Leon County experienced a 7 point increase in correct responses on post-program survey in comparison to the pre-program survey.

Participating Learning for Life elementary schools in Gadsden County experienced a 12 point increase in correct responses on post-program survey in comparison to the pre-program survey.

Scores from the pre-program and post-program questionnaires showed that participating students demonstrated enhancements in their character traits of respect, responsibility, honesty, caring, perseverance, self-discipline, and courage. For example, second-graders in Leon County

---

6 See Appendix E: Learning for Life District Summary Report: Leon County (pre-program and post-program questionnaire survey); and Appendix F: Learning for Life District by Grade Report: Leon County (second thru fifth grades)

7 See Appendix G: Learning for Life District Summary Report: Gadsden County (pre-program and post-program questionnaire survey); and Appendix H: Learning for Life District by Grade Report: Gadsden County (second thru fifth grades)
made the most significant growth in enhancing their character traits. Overall, in Gadsden County, students achieved significant growth in areas of self-discipline, courage, and citizenship.

Assuming that scores are reflected in behavior, the results of this study strongly suggest that the Learning for Life character education program is making a positive, significant difference in the lives of children who have the opportunity to participate in this character-building program. The program not only stresses moral and character development but lessons emphasize academic learning and support state benchmarks. In the long term, it is the hope of the Learning for Life program to help deter the nation’s crime rate and to help produce upstanding, moral citizens.

Option 2: Should the Learning for Life character education program be discontinued in Leon County and Gadsden County elementary schools?

Discontinuing the Learning for Life program in Leon and Gadsden County elementary schools would have an adverse effect on participating schools and respective communities. First, lessons assist teachers in fulfilling state benchmarks. Teachers are provided with a list of Learning for Life lessons that correlate to state benchmarks\(^8\) – thus, allowing them with the ease to fulfill their duties and to spend more time educating students.

Second, Learning for Life also fulfills the federal government’s “No Child Left Behind” Act of 2001 and is listed in the State of Florida’s budget. If local elementary schools cease use of the Learning for Life character education program then it would renege its commitment to the local community, voters and citizens, and the State.

Finally, Learning for Life is unique. Learning for Life representatives support teachers and educators by supplying them with curriculum guides. The program also provides a value-

\(^8\) See Appendix I
added incentive, such as scheduling speakers from the community and rewarding fifth-grade students with a day of Character Camp at the end of the year.

Disallowing the Learning for Life program would impact the progress of character education in Florida. Issues, such as the breakdown of the traditional family, media portrayal of violence and sex, and the lack of good, positive role models, make it necessary to create an environment conducive to developing a foundation of morals and academic learning within the school and classroom (Pritchard, 1988).

Option 3: Should the Learning for Life character education program be revised?

The administration of the Learning for Life character education program has had a positive effect and has positively influenced students in participating Learning for Life schools in Leon and Gadsden Counties. The program should continue, but it could be improved with revisions.

Recommendation for Action

Although the Learning for Life character education program of the Suwannee River Area Council experienced success in achieving its mission during the 2004-2005 academic school year, the program must revise its administration techniques.

The affect of extenuating circumstances were a result of the loss of funding and support that took place in the middle of the 2003-2004 school year in Leon County. Aside from a lapse in gathering evaluation data from the previous academic school year, the Learning for Life program of the Suwannee River Area Council experienced a turnover in staff. Although the main goal of Learning for Life in the 2004-2005 school year was to reintroduce the program back into the schools and to target the program towards schools with ratings of “C,” “D,” and “F,” the
program lacked timeliness, full execution of a strategic plan, and complete data gathering from all participating schools.

The Program needs to reorganize its organizational structure for ultimate effectiveness and administration of the program by the Learning for Life representative. The new turnover in staff included two part-time program specialists to oversee implementation of the Learning for Life program in both Leon and Gadsden Counties and to report to the executive director of the Suwannee River Area Council. On the part of the two part-time specialists, there was a lack of communication, a lack of information sharing, and miscommunication. Consequently, not all pre-program and post-program questionnaires were collected in a timely manner. It also resulted in the questionnaires not being properly coded.

The program would better benefit with at least one full time staff person reporting to the executive director; a board representative from the Suwannee River Area Council; and volunteers, such as school PTA groups, concerned parents, and student teacher associations, to create greater visibility of the Learning for Life program and to assist in group activities. A calendar of the current school year’s events and Learning for Life events must be strictly adhered.

More time needs to be allocated in gathering data to measure program effectiveness, especially if continuous state and public support in the near future is to be guaranteed. It is even more important to ensure that all facets of data collection and analysis be performed, especially since controlling research and decreasing bias in research is difficult.
References:


