Making Caring Common School Campaign
Actions to Promote Ethical Development: Inspiring Students’ Concern for Others and the Common Good

Making Caring Common’s national campaign seeks to mobilize high schools and middle schools to prepare young people to be constructive citizens who create a better world. Learn more about the campaign at highschools.makingcaringcommon.org.

To join the campaign, schools must commit to take action to advance one or more of the following goals: 1) deepen students’ care for others and their communities; 2) increase equity and access for all students in the college admissions process; and 3) reduce excessive achievement pressure. These goals align with and build on our successful Turning the Tide initiative that has engaged more than 175 college admissions offices nationwide.

This document offers high school leaders the opportunity to take the lead in this work by committing to a significant step to promote students’ ethical character, especially their concern for others and their communities. (Our campaign’s other goals—increasing equity and access for all students and reducing excessive achievement pressure—are taken up in separate documents).

Why ethical development?

These days, it is especially critical to prepare young people to invest in others, including those different from them, and to take responsibility for their communities. Given the fractures and antagonisms in our common life, we need young people who focus on our collective well-being, and who are able to build strong, inclusive communities and a healthy, resilient democracy. High schools are vital in preparing young people to be caring, constructive citizens.

How can high schools take the lead?

The following is a menu of concrete steps that you might take to develop students’ ethical character and advance this cause. Please don’t feel confined by the list. You might generate your own step. What’s important is that the step is significant enough to meaningfully increase many of your students’ sense of responsibility for each other and for larger communities.

We are specifically interested in new changes that schools adopt rather than actions that have already been taken. If you are committed to making a change aligned with this effort, we hope to include your school among a group of schools taking the lead to make a difference,
which we expect will attract significant media attention. We know that certain changes can take time, and commitments to make changes to be implemented in the future are entirely sufficient at this point.

If your high school is committed to making any of the following changes, please let us know by emailing highschools@makingcaringcommon.org.

We have talked with scores of high school leaders and counselors, parents, and admissions deans over the last few years and one lesson has been clear: individuals and single institutions alone cannot correct the current problems with college admissions, create a healthier balance between concerns about achievement and concerns about others among students, or provide greater access to large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. We need to act collectively.

Your school’s commitments

_We, ___________________________ [name of school], commit to the following (please indicate to us which of these steps your school is committed to taking):_

- **Build a caring, inclusive community via data.** Students’ ethical capacities, including their concern for others, are far more likely to develop in communities that support these capacities and model and express them in daily relationships. That makes it vital that schools assess school culture and the quality of relationships in the school building. What gets assessed gets addressed. Schools can assess student, staff, and parent perceptions of the school environment with low-burden, anonymous, brief school climate surveys 1-2 times per year that determine whether the school is safe and supportive for all students. These surveys can help determine, for example, the quality of relationships between students and staff, levels of bias and discrimination based on gender, race, and class, and the prevalence of various forms of bullying and cruelty in the school community. Schools should develop a school leadership committee that can utilize this data to implement solutions as part of a continuous improvement process. (For more information, please see Making Caring Common at www.makingcaringcommon.org and National School Climate Center at www.schoolclimate.org.)

- **Engage students in regular activities that enable students to “talk across the aisle.”** Schools can regularly utilize various activities and strategies that guide students in listening respectfully and constructively to those who don’t share their political views, and in identifying common ethical values across political views. These activities might include structured debates that require students to take opposing political views or partnerships with schools in other parts of the country in which students with opposing political views
are guided in engaging one another constructively. Schools should monitor the effectiveness of these activities via brief surveys as part of a continuous improvement process. (For more information, please see Facing History and Ourselves at www.facinghistory.org, Teaching Tolerance www.tolerance.org, and Making Caring Common at www.makingcaringcommon.org.)

- **Implement an evidence-based social and emotional learning or character education program.** Evaluation evidence suggests that several character education and social emotional learning programs are effective in building empathy, social awareness, self-regulation, and other capacities at the core of caring for others and taking responsibility for one’s communities. (A list of evidence-based programs can be found via CASEL at http://www.casel.org/guide/.)

- **Leverage the power of student leaders to create more welcoming, inclusive, and caring school environments.** Students themselves are likely to have a much deeper understanding than school adults of student peer dynamics—e.g., what cliques and hierarchies exist, which students are regularly ostracized, where and when bullying and cruelty occurs—as well as a deeper understanding of the levers that will change these dynamics. Schools can create and support student-led initiatives and activities that are focused on developing caring, inclusive communities. These activities should be powerful enough to have a substantial impact on school climate and a wide range of students. This work might take the form of a contest in which groups of students submit ideas. It’s important that schools monitor the effectiveness of these efforts via brief surveys. (See, for example, Making Caring Common and The KIND Foundation’s KIND Schools Challenge at www.kindchallenge.makingcaringcommon.org.)

- **Engage students regularly in meaningful, low-burden, and fun activities in the school and classroom that promote empathy and build community.** Schools can consistently utilize and thoughtfully sequence over the course of the school year a variety of activities that build empathy, including empathy for those different from oneself, and that strengthen bonds between students and between students and teachers. Many organizations provide such strategies, including Facing History and Ourselves, National School Climate Center, and Making Caring Common. Schools should monitor the effectiveness of these activities and strategies via brief surveys.

  *Note: Making Caring Common is looking for middle and high schools to help pilot new, engaging low-burden strategies that develop students’ empathy and caring. Contact research@makingcaringcommon.org if you are interested in participating in the pilot.*

- **Develop a youth capstone exercise focused on ethical engagement.** Students are not likely to develop greater concern for others as a result of brief, one-off projects. Schools can work
with students to complete long-term projects that inspire and teach them to think and care
about others in their communities, pursue justice, and stand up for important principles.
One type of project is a semester- or year-long capstone exercise in which youth provide
some type of service to their communities while reflecting with a mentor and peers about
their obligations to others and their communities. (For an example of a youth capstone
exercise, please contact Making Caring Common.)

- **Support high-quality, sustained community service.** All high school students should be
required for a substantial period of time to focus on and contribute to others. It’s vital,
though, to give students choices among service opportunities and to define services
broadly. Helping out regularly in the school, such as assisting the custodian after school or
tutoring younger children, for example, should count as service. So should regularly taking
care of a sick relative or working to provide needed income for one’s family. Schools should
also pay close attention to the quality of service. In general, research suggests that service is
far more likely to be meaningful if it is sustained, includes skilled mentoring/facilitation, is
connected to coursework, and provides opportunities for personal or group reflection.
Whenever possible, it’s similarly important to create service opportunities that enable
students to conduct service with diverse peers rather than providing service for those from
different backgrounds. These diverse groups might include peers of different races,
cultures, economic backgrounds, identities, religions, and political and religious beliefs.

- **Collaborating with parents to promote ethical development.** While children’s ethical
color character is shaped by many factors, there’s no question that the primary influence on their
ethical character is parents. Schools are far more likely to be effective in cultivating
children’s concern for others if they can find useful ways to partner with parents. These
partnerships might take the form of regularly sharing strategies for building children’s
concern for others and their communities or creating a compact with parents that defines
their role and the school’s role in promoting children’s care for others and the school
community. It’s important that schools monitor the effectiveness of these strategies via
brief surveys.

Whichever of these options you choose—or if you choose another approach—consider
supplementing that approach with meaningful feedback to students. That feedback might
include providing thoughtful feedback on report cards on whether students are caring,
respectful, inclusive, and contribute to their classroom and school community. Or it might take
the form of routinely recognizing students who are decent and contribute to the community in
ways that are meaningful to these students and that positively motivate other students.
Students might, for example, give monthly “shout outs” to other students who have been
helpful to them or others.
We would be thrilled to have you join us in this exciting campaign. Please consider taking one of these steps—or generate an idea of your own! Ready to commit to an action? Click here or email highschoows@makingcaringcommon.org.