

## CORE KNOWLEDGE: A CONTENT FOUNDATION FOR CIVIC VIRTUE?

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Over the past three years we have been involved in the Core Knowledge elementary school reform movement. The following article includes a summary of the philosophy underlying Core Knowledge. Also provided are a general description of the Core Knowledge curriculum sequence; an examination of elements of the history and language arts Core Knowledge curricula that can serve to foster civic virtue in young people; an examination of the relationship between Core Knowledge and character/civic education; and a brief description of one program developed by a former Core Knowledge school principal that focuses upon character and civic education.

### The Philosophy of Core Knowledge

While today the movement encompasses students, teachers, and parents at the more than one thousand Core Knowledge schools throughout the United States, Core Knowledge was originally the brain-child of one man, University of Virginia Professor E. D. Hirsch. Hirsch first articulated the general idea behind Core Knowledge in his 1987 book, *Cultural Literacy*. In that work Hirsch argues that genuine literacy is not simply the ability to decode or sound out words on a page, but involves familiarity with a broad range of common cultural knowledge that a particular printed word represents—knowledge that enables a person to understand a variety of related information. For example, if a person has learned about the Camelot of Arthurian legends, he or she is much better positioned to understand the ambiance of the early days of the Kennedy administration's Camelot—or more fully understand the concept of idealism in general.

Hirsch's original arguments were not simply opinions, but were based upon widely accepted psychological research. Recently, according to Hirsch, psychologists have published further studies indicating a high correlation between general academic and economic success and the basic essential knowledge he outlined in *Cultural Literacy*. In summarizing the supporting psychological research, Hirsch makes the point, "No one

would claim that possession of mainstream cultural knowledge is a sufficient condition for intellectual ability and financial prosperity, but it may often be a necessary condition for them.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the basic cognitive premise described above, Hirsch drew upon examples of other nations who employed common curricula for all young children, with more successful educational results (on average) than in the United States. As a political liberal, Hirsch very early on contended that American elementary school curricular chaos particularly hurt poor and migrant children, whose parents were often not well-educated enough to make up for public school deficiencies.

Moving directly from the realm of educational theory to that of educational policy, Hirsch assembled a group of teachers, administrators, and scholars who developed a Core Knowledge curriculum sequence. In 1990, Three Oaks School in Fort Myers, Florida, (a large elementary school with a heterogeneous student population) became the nation’s first Core Knowledge school. Three Oaks was successful both in terms of academic achievement and in the amount of media attention it attracted. Shortly afterward, the transformation of another elementary school in the South Bronx to Core Knowledge, with attendant success, stimulated more and more elementary schools throughout the United States to adopt this content-rich K-8 liberal arts curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

#### Summary Description of the *Core Knowledge Sequence*

The *Core Knowledge Curriculum Sequence* is the outgrowth of an educational reform movement based on the idea that “a grade-by-grade core of common learnings is necessary to ensure a sound and fair elementary education.”<sup>3</sup> The Core Knowledge program offers a sequential, logical curriculum which incorporates values and moral virtue in the content it presents. The sequential nature of the Core Knowledge Curriculum not only builds on initial understanding in the early grades, but also provides an opportunity to revisit topics and expand knowledge further and deeper in later grades.

The first Core Knowledge school developed a curriculum by following the research presented by E. D. Hirsch in his book *Cultural Literacy*. The effort and planning involved in creating this sequence provided the first version of what ultimately evolved into the *Core Knowledge Sequence*, the content guidelines for grades K–8. This document has undergone several revisions in response to feedback from educators who recognized that organizing the material in a cumulative manner gives students the opportunity to acquire in-depth knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Close scrutiny of the *Core Knowledge Sequence* reveals a rich, deep curriculum which introduces concepts and content at early elementary levels and addresses those same broad topics in more depth at later elementary and middle grades.

## Core Virtues Program

“The Core Virtues program is based on the assumption that while virtue cannot be ‘taught,’ it can perhaps be ‘caught.’ Rich and moving stories allow us to lift our hearts and light lamps for young spirits, to awaken in children a love of the good.”<sup>5</sup> This summary of the main goal of this program perhaps best describes the impact the curriculum is designed to have on the students who study this body of knowledge. Correlated with the *Core Knowledge Sequence*, the Core Virtues Program was developed and implemented by Mary Beth Klee, former head of Crossroads Academy in Lyme, New Hampshire. The Core Virtues curriculum incorporates K–6 character education through a daily program of reading and discussion. Its goals are the cultivation of character through such virtues as respect, courage, diligence, patience, responsibility, compassion, perseverance, faithfulness, and more.

### Civic Virtue and the Core Knowledge History and Geography Curriculum

In the National Council for the Social Studies Position Statement on Civic Virtue and Character Education, civic virtue is defined as “a commitment to democratic principles and values that manifests itself in the everyday lives of citizens.”<sup>6</sup> The authors of the position paper contend that a combination of content and affective education is vital in the development of civic virtue. Core Knowledge theoreticians and practitioners, based on our understanding of this educational reform movement, would agree with both of these assertions. However, the authors of the same position paper go on to recommend that primary school teachers should focus on children developing basic social skills and habits such as civility and that in secondary school “there should be an increasing emphasis on the development of a mature understanding of the fundamental principles of our shared civic life and their history....”<sup>7</sup>

The implicit but clear assumption behind this latter point is that young children are not developmentally ready to understand either the story of our republic or the democratic principles that undergird it. Hirsch labels this kind of developmentalist thinking a “naturalistic fallacy” and makes a strong research-based argument in support of his contention that the developmentalism of such assertions as that of the position paper authors is, indeed, misguided.<sup>8</sup> The history and geography sections of the *Core Knowledge Sequence* reflect Hirsch’s repudiation of developmentalism. Beginning in kindergarten, children in Core Knowledge schools study specific elements of history and geography content conducive to the development of civic virtue. In kindergarten through sixth grade there are two separate strands, American and World, in the history and geography section of the Sequence. At each grade level in the Sequence, approximately equal amounts of time are given to the

World and American strands. Because these strands merge chronologically in sixth grade, the two are unified in the seventh and eighth grades. The authors of the Sequence include extensive U.S. Government content in the history section. The following is a specific description of civic-virtue related content in the K-8 American history strand of the Sequence.<sup>9</sup>

Grade Level	History
Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lifestyles, beliefs, and current status of at least one Native American tribe/nation.</li> <li>• Voyage of Columbus</li> <li>• Pilgrims</li> <li>• Government concepts</li> <li>• July 4th, democracy</li> <li>• Presidents, Past and Present—Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, T. Roosevelt</li> <li>• American Flag, Statue of Liberty, Mount Rushmore, the White House</li> </ul>
First Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slavery</li> <li>• Pilgrims (expanded), Massachusetts Bay Colony</li> <li>• Southern Colonies</li> <li>• Original Thirteen Colonies</li> <li>• American Revolution</li> <li>• Declaration of Independence and Thomas Jefferson</li> <li>• Liberty Bell, American Flag, Boston Tea Party, Paul Revere's Ride, Minutemen, Redcoats, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Betsy Ross, American Eagle</li> <li>• President—Current</li> </ul>
Second Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The U.S. Constitution and James Madison</li> <li>• War of 1812</li> <li>• Westward Expansion</li> <li>• Civil War</li> <li>• Emancipation Proclamation</li> <li>• Immigration and Citizenship—Ellis Island, Statue of Liberty</li> <li>• Civil Rights—Susan B. Anthony, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary McLeod Bethune, Jackie Robinson, Rosa Park, Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez.</li> </ul>

Third Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The Thirteen Colonies—Life and Times Before the Revolution”</li> <li>• Mayflower Compact</li> <li>• Religious conflicts</li> <li>• Slavery—the middle passage</li> </ul>
Fourth Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• American Revolution—Benedict Arnold, Molly Pitcher, John Paul Jones, Thomas Paine, Nathan Hale</li> <li>• Declaration of Independence</li> <li>• Articles of Confederation</li> <li>• Constitutional Convention and the U.S. Constitution—Preamble, Separation of Powers, Bill of Rights</li> <li>• Early Presidents and Politics</li> <li>• Pre-Civil War Reformers—Abolitionists, Dorothea Dix, Horace Mann</li> <li>• American civic symbols—“The Spirit of ’76,” White House, Capitol Building, Great Seal of the United States.</li> </ul>
Fifth Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Westward Expansion pre- and post-Civil War</li> <li>• Civil War</li> <li>• Settlers vs. Native Americans</li> <li>• Manifest Destiny</li> <li>• Slave life and rebellions</li> <li>• Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe</li> <li>• “Buffalo Soldiers”</li> </ul>
Sixth Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industrialization</li> <li>• Immigration</li> <li>• Populist Era</li> <li>• Melting Pot</li> <li>• Gilded Age</li> <li>• Reformers—Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, Jane Adams, Jacob Riis, Ida Wells, Booker T. Washington</li> <li>• Women’s Suffrage—19th Amendment, Susan B. Anthony</li> </ul>

Seventh Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 19th Century Imperialism</li> <li>• World War I</li> <li>• The U.S. in the 1920s</li> <li>• The Great Depression</li> <li>• The New Deal</li> <li>• World War II—fascism, communism</li> <li>• The United Nations</li> </ul>
Eighth Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Cold War</li> <li>• African-American Civil Rights Movements</li> <li>• Vietnam War</li> <li>• Social and Environmental Activism</li> <li>• U.S. Constitution</li> </ul>

There is, of course, no guarantee that young people who complete a study of the curriculum outlined in the *Core Knowledge Sequence* will possess high levels of civic virtue. However, the authors have examined no state or district history curriculum that offers the two major advantages of the Sequence: the opportunity for all students to acquire, through the history curriculum, a shared body of civic knowledge; and, the carefully thought-out sequencing of the content. The English section of the Sequence, is also, in our opinion, a medium for the acquisition of content and attitudes that can promote civic virtue.

### Civic Virtue and the Core Knowledge Language Arts Curriculum

Although the Core Knowledge Language Arts Curriculum includes grammar, writing, and reading, the primary focus of the overview which follows addresses the literature comprising this part of the *Core Knowledge Sequence*. The language arts component incorporates different works of many authors at several grade levels, an arrangement which allows the student to become familiar with the style of the writer and to recognize recurring themes and issues presented by that individual as his/her literary works are studied in various grades. For example, students study poetry beginning at the kindergarten level as they listen to simple, well-known rhymes and fairy tales. Upper elementary and middle grades students also read poetry, but the selections included are more mature and of greater variety and difficulty. Likewise, pieces of literature which are included mirror the lifestyles and struggles of the people from the time period in which they were written. The essays of early American authors reflect the difficulties and obstacles people encountered as they attempted to make a

life for themselves in a harsh, new land. The works of other writers demonstrated the conflicts and decisions faced by characters portrayed during other time periods both in America and in other lands around the world. The following is a description of the content included in the K–8 literature strand of the Sequence.<sup>10</sup>

Grade Level	Literature
Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mother Goose and traditional verses</li> <li>• Poetry—Langston Hughes, A.A. Milne, Robert Louis Stevenson</li> <li>• Fables and folktales—<i>Cinderella, The Hare and the Tortoise, The Velveteen Rabbit, Johnny Appleseed</i></li> <li>• Proverbs and phrases</li> </ul>
First Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poetry—Langston Hughes, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edward Lear, Lois Lenski, Jack Prelutsky, Robert Frost</li> <li>• Fables and folktales—<i>Rapunzel, Hansel and Gretel, It Could be Worse, Why the Owl Has Big Eyes, The Boy Who Cried Wolf, The Fox and the Grapes, Lon Po Po, Little Red Riding Hood</i></li> <li>• Proverbs and phrases</li> </ul>
Second Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poetry—Emily Dickinson, Carl Sandburg, Gwendolyn Brooks, Shel Silverstein</li> <li>• Mythology—Greek</li> <li>• Folktales—<i>Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Pecos Bill</i></li> <li>• Proverbs and phrases</li> </ul>
Third Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poetry—Lewis Carroll, Joyce Kilmer, Ogden Nash</li> <li>• Fables and folktales—<i>Alice in Wonderland, The Little Match Girl, The Hunting of the Great Bear</i></li> <li>• Mythology—Norse, Greek, Roman</li> <li>• Proverbs and phrases</li> </ul>

Fourth Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poetry—Maya Angelou, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Makepeace Thackeray</li> <li>• Fables, folktales, and legends—<i>Pollyanna</i>, <i>Robin Hood</i>, <i>Treasure Island</i>, <i>The Legend of Sleepy Hollow</i>, <i>The Fire on the Mountain</i></li> <li>• Mythology and mythical characters—King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table</li> <li>• Speeches—Patrick Henry, Sojourner Truth</li> <li>• Proverbs and phrases, including some from foreign languages</li> </ul>
Fifth Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poetry—Julia Ward Howe, Ernest Lawrence Thayer, Langston Hughes, Robert Frost</li> <li>• Biographies</li> <li>• Drama—<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i></li> <li>• Novels—<i>Don Quixote</i>, <i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i>, <i>The Red-Headed League</i></li> <li>• Mythology—Japanese, Plains Indian, American Indian</li> <li>• Speeches—<i>The Gettysburg Address</i>, "I will fight no more forever"</li> <li>• Proverbs and phrases, including some from foreign languages</li> </ul>
Sixth Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poetry—Rudyard Kipling, Edgar Allan Poe, Paul Laurence Dunbar, George Gordon Byron, Epic poetry (<i>The Illiad</i>, <i>The Odyssey</i>)</li> <li>• Drama—<i>Julius Caesar</i></li> <li>• Novels—<i>The Prince and the Pauper</i></li> <li>• Mythology—Greek, Roman</li> <li>• Proverbs and phrases, including some from foreign languages</li> </ul>
Seventh Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poetry—William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, Countee Cullen, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Frost</li> <li>• Short Stories—<i>The Gift of the Magi</i>, <i>The Necklace</i>, <i>The Tell-Tale Heart</i></li> <li>• Essays/Speeches—<i>Shooting an Elephant</i>, <i>Declaration of War on Japan</i></li> <li>• Autobiographies—<i>Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl</i></li> <li>• Novels—<i>The Call of the Wild</i>, <i>Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde</i></li> <li>• Proverbs and phrases—Latin</li> </ul>

Eighth Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poetry—e.e. cummings, Dylan Thomas, Edward Arlington Robinson</li> <li>• Short Stories</li> <li>• Novels—<i>The Good Earth, Animal Farm</i></li> <li>• Essays/Speeches</li> <li>• Autobiography</li> <li>• Drama</li> <li>• Proverbs and phrases—French</li> </ul>
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### Core Knowledge and Character/Civic Education

Core Knowledge is, simply put, the latest American educational program where there is an attempt to impart to all citizens a common body of shared knowledge. Hirsch, like Thomas Jefferson and Noah Webster, believes that it is the duty of common schools in a democracy to educate all students to their highest potential. While there is no explicit “character or civic virtue” component within the *Core Knowledge Sequence*, the emphasis in both history and English upon real life and fictional heroes and villains, famous speeches, and political and social controversy and reform systematically calls the student’s attention to the hard choices individuals make that either benefit or harm society.

As one educator very much involved in integrating Core Knowledge and character education has pointed out, the very richness of the *Core Knowledge Sequence* makes it impossible for teachers to ignore affective questions that have civic implications. For example, in the world history section of the *Core Knowledge Sequence* children learn of Hammurabi’s Code and one law that specified that thieves were punished by having their hands cut off. Is it possible for a first grade teacher to cite the latter fact without discussion? Second graders study about the Chinese emperor who began work on the Great Wall by forcing the labor of millions of people. It is highly doubtful this would simply be taught as fact with no discussion of the moral ramifications of such an action.<sup>11</sup>

The connection between Core Knowledge and character/civic education is also apparent through examination of the program for the most recent annual National Core Knowledge Conference. At each Core Knowledge National Conference, one full day is allocated to elementary teachers who present sessions on how they teach elements of the Sequence. Consider the affective/civic/character education ramifications of the following session titles based on session names and descriptions which the authors examined (but did not include in this article):<sup>12</sup>

- Abraham Lincoln: Man of Integrity*
- And the Moral is...*
- Teaching Religions in the First Grade Classroom*
- Life’s Lessons: Aesop’s Fables*

*Civil Rights: All Men (and Women!) Are Created Equal*  
*Vikings: Vicious or Victorious?*  
*The Holocaust and You*  
*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*  
*Vietnam and Social Activism*  
*Heroes are Value "able"*  
*Introducing Local Heroes to Children*  
*Second Helping of Wit and Wisdom*

### Summary

All educators with whom we have interacted in Core Knowledge schools deal with issues of civic and character education in the course of teaching the *Core Knowledge Sequence*. However, one former Core Knowledge school principal, Mary Beth Klee, who has now developed and published a character education program, *Core Virtues*, expanded that effort. Her *Core Virtues* program first formulates a list of consensus virtues in three domains: moral, intellectual, and civic. The consensus civic virtues Klee identifies include civility, courtesy, respect for the rights of others, loyalty, willingness to moderate desires and defer gratification, and a general concern for justice. If we reflect again upon the NCSS definition of civic virtue as "a commitment to democratic principles and values that manifests itself in the everyday lives of citizens," Klee's virtues appear to be building blocks for the commitment the NCSS advocates.<sup>13</sup>

The Core Virtues Program is designed for children in grades K–6 while Core Knowledge offers a sequential curriculum for grades K–8. The guide's author describes *Core Virtues* as a program that can be tied to the *Core Knowledge Sequence* or used independently. *Core Virtues* includes a well-written rationale for teachers, the establishment of a plan where virtues of the month are highlighted with accompanying morning gatherings where fiction or non-fiction is read in order to reinforce the values, and a section in which (at every grade,) readings, topics, and individuals in the sequence are correlated with the particular value. An extensive annotated bibliography (64 pages in the 167 page guide) is also included in *Core Virtues* where suggested stories and books are classified with particular virtues such as compassion, diligence, and faithfulness used as subheadings.<sup>14</sup>

Although it may be possible to help pupils attain the desired academic achievement without emphasizing virtue, the desired "habits of diligence, perseverance, attention to detail, open-mindedness, fairness, and intellectual honesty" are directly related to the intellectual virtues which lead to good scholarship.<sup>15</sup> The development of students who are able to think critically demands that educators provide these young people with a sound moral background to accompany the knowledge base which will make them successful academically. Students must have a set of moral

beliefs which provides a context for their understanding and a direction for their actions. Virtues, both intellectual and moral, are vital if a society hopes to be fruitful and thrive in the future.

## NOTES

1. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 12.
2. *Ibid.*, 13.
3. *Core Knowledge Sequence: Content Guidelines for Grades K-8* (Charlottesville, VA: Core Knowledge Foundation, 1998).
4. *Ibid.*
5. Mary Beth Klee, *About Core Virtues: A K-6 Literature Based Program in Character Education for Core Knowledge Schools and Others Who Care*. [cited 12 May 2000]; available from <http://www.linkinstitute.org/moreAboutCore.html>; INTERNET.
6. Charles Haynes et al., *NCSS Position Statement-Fostering Civic Virtue: Character Education in the Social Studies*. (Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 1996), 1.
7. *Ibid.*, 3
8. Hirsch, 79.
9. *Core Knowledge Sequence*.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Mary Beth Klee, "The Content of Our Character" (paper presented at the Core Knowledge Annual Conference, Anaheim, CA, 2000).
12. *Ninth Core Knowledge National Conference Program*, Core Knowledge Annual Conference, Anaheim, CA, March 16-18, 2000.
13. Haynes et al., 1.
14. Mary Beth Klee, *Core Virtues: A Literature-Based Program in Character Education K-6*. 2000: (Redwood City, CA: The Link Institute, 2000).
15. Mary Beth Klee, "The Content of Our Character."

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