1. What is Character?

I have been working with students, parents, school administrators and faculty for many years. I have found that the character of a student is not only a reflection of the parent; at times, it can also be a reflection of the administration and culture within a school.

Character is what makes us who we are. It can determine one's success—good, bad or indifferent. It is essential to make a conscious effort to understand our students' characters and the people and environments that shape them.

2. Are we products of our environment?

While environment is not all that makes us who we are, I believe that it plays an important role. The animated movie, "The Jungle Book," is an example I often use to explain this concept to students in the character-building classes. Mowgli is a child being raised by wolves in the jungle. Why is it that Mowgli acts or behaves as a wolf does? The answer, of course, is that wolves are teaching and showing him how to live.

Like Mowgli, one may not know any better. An adolescent may not know that the environment in which he or she lives, works, socializes, or volunteers will determine his or her overall outlook on life. Today we see single parent families, absent fathers or absent mothers, grandparents who have replaced parents, and an economy that is teetering on disaster. We ask our children to be respectful while they witness a lack of respect for the President of the United States of America. We ask our kids to have character while witnessing a lack of character from our esteemed politicians in Washington, DC and local governments. Yet, we still expect the best behaviors and tendencies from our children.

3. What does character education mean? What should be included?

All educators should be positive role models. As a mentor and educator, it is critical that I push the students out of their comfort zones—expose the students to new trains of thought and new ideas and encourage them to aspire to reachable goals and ambitions. Our goal in the TCP is not to change a child, but to change an attitude or a behavior and to improve communication. We seek and find the potential in the students in order to help lead them toward success and positive young adulthood.
As a mentor, I encourage objective thinking so students can recognize the powerful effects of the media and other environmental variables on their own lives. We often tell them: "If you are not accomplishing the results that you are looking for, it may be due to the environment that you are in, have put yourself in, or allowed yourself to stay in and be a part of." Could this be why we witness very few changes in our students’ way of thinking when this kind of education is not prioritized?

As mentors and educators, we are also obligated to teach our youth about structure. Structure encourages character. Students who have been schooled in structure will most likely have developed patience, self control, loyalty, love for one another, and respect for authority figures. From the TCP perspective, they are also less likely to be truant.

4. Many parents and others feel that character-building should be taught at home. But what if it's not? Should it be the school's responsibility? Should it be taught to all students as part of the regular school curriculum?

Mentors and educators are not the primary source for building character in our youth, but, in some cases, we are all they have. Educators often spend more time with the students than their parents do. So, parents, mentors, educators, and administrators must find a way to come together. In the TCP character-building classes, we try to work with parents, teachers, and administrators to paint pictures of reality, encourage students to strive for great outcomes in life, and combine this knowledge with the importance of attending school. The TCP provides a springboard for cultivating hope and determination among participating students so that they can realize their potential. I believe that if you can change one child, then you can change the world, and it can have a major impact on your school, community, city, state, and country.

Through the TCP, I know that character education can influence a number of school variables, including attendance, bullying, and academic success. It can affect students in the classroom, the school recreation center, and everywhere in between. As I said at the top, character can determine one's life outcomes, and if we believe that education should be a foundation for success in life, shouldn't character education be an important piece of that foundation? While schools and school-based programs should not be a replacement for character education in the home, educators and mentors can work within their own environments, where youth spend much of their time, and ensure that students have the opportunity to reach their potential.

How would you answer these four questions?