

Character LAB

ANNUAL LETTER

August 1, 2017

Character Lab was created to advance the science and practice of character development. How are we doing?

In this first annual letter to our stakeholders, I want to answer that question, take stock of last year's progress in particular, and identify milestones for the next few years. Most important, I want to paint a clear picture of what success looks like for this organization.

We've made a promising start.

For example, our research demonstrated that character is plural, encompassing a multitude of strengths that are organized into three dimensions: *Interpersonal strengths*, like gratitude, enable harmonious relationships with other people; *intrapersonal strengths*, like grit and self-control, enable achievement; and *intellectual strengths*, like curiosity, enable a fertile and free life of the mind. When we speak about character, we speak about helping students become givers, doers, and thinkers. We speak of strengths of heart, will, and mind. This insight helps teachers balance how they teach character.

Several of our sponsored experiments generated important findings published in top research journals. One of our funded scientists—Professor Ethan Kross at the University of Michigan—fell in love with working with kids. Ethan is now helping Character Lab develop a suite of resources for teaching self-control strategies to middle and high school students.

We prototyped our first research-based, educator-informed tool for teachers and students and started five others.

We connected dozens of scientists with hundreds of teachers, enabling them to collaborate throughout the year as well as at our annual Educator Summit. Our 2017 Educator Summit speakers included *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, former U.S. Secretary of Education John King Jr., leading scientists, and award-winning educators.

And we learned a lot.

We discovered just how hard it is for researchers to collect data in schools. In particular, we became acquainted with the numerous logistical, technological, regulatory, and political obstacles that make research on character development such a time-consuming and expensive endeavor. We learned that there is enormous demand among teachers for help translating scientific research on character into

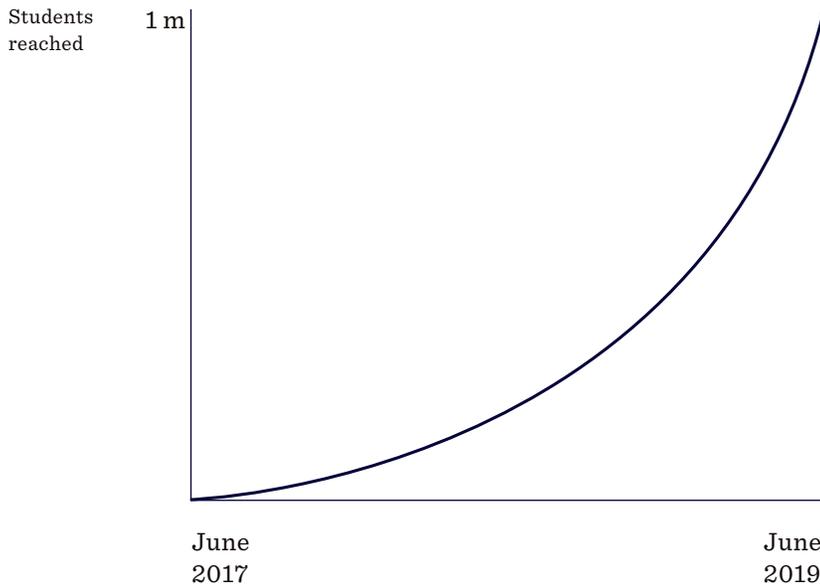
everyday classroom practice. We learned how much time and energy it takes to create novel measures of character that are appreciably better than what is already available.

Still, our early progress suggested that there was so much more that we can do.

In November 2015, I stepped off the Board of Directors to assume a more direct leadership role at Character Lab and invited veteran educator Donald Kamentz to be our Executive Director. In parallel, the entire operation moved from midtown Manhattan to our current office at the edge of the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. Together, Donald and I grew the team to its current size of 16, clarified our legal and fiscal independence from the university where I continue to serve as a faculty member, and most important, crafted a three-year strategic plan that was approved by the Board in February 2016.

So where are we now?

This past year, our greatest accomplishment has been a clarification of our priorities. We are now committed to the following goal: By June 2019, we aim to help at least one million middle and high school students improve an aspect of their character.



To make this dream a reality, we're tightening our focus. Our most important work is to create radically awesome Character Lab Playbooks that translate scientific research on character development into daily classroom practice. Our second priority is to make scientific research on character development fast and frictionless via the Character Lab Research Network, a consortium of middle and high schools around the country connected to leading psychological scientists via a digital platform.

CHARACTER LAB PLAYBOOKS

We will publish Playbooks that help teachers and their students develop strengths of heart, will, and mind.

Each Playbook will:

- communicate essential scientific facts with clarity
- provide strategies that make exercising the strength easier and more rewarding
- structure opportunities to practice strategies with feedback
- invite teachers into a community of practice where they can ask and answer questions
- encourage teachers to benefit personally before helping their students.

What makes our Playbooks unique? Several features distinguish them from existing resources to develop character:

- co-created by world-class scientists and world-class educators, with input from students
- informed by an iterative process employing best practices in design thinking
- composed with *New Yorker*-quality writing
- infused with beauty and delight
- aligned with basic human motives to exercise choice, develop competence, connect with other people, and help others
- digitally-delivered
- provided free of charge.

CHARACTER LAB RESEARCH NETWORK

We will reduce the time and cost of conducting research on character in schools by at least ten-fold.

We've learned the hard way that it takes at least a full year for a scientist to begin collecting data for a single school-based research study. Researchers first have to find and develop a relationship with school partners, then obtain written parental consent and approval from university research institutional review boards in order to access identifiable student data, next arrange to administer study protocols during school hours, and finally secure report card grades and other data from schools.

We have a solution: The Character Lab Research Network is a first-in-the-world digital platform connecting scientists with students.

The Research Network combines three elements that collectively make research in schools fast and frictionless:

- Secure data collection, enabled by Qualtrics, the online platform used most by university researchers
- Legal expertise, allowing Character Lab to work on behalf of schools to de-identify data for researchers, thus mitigating compliance concerns
- Strong partnerships with district, charter, parochial, and independent schools.

We think the future is bright.

We look forward to the future with unfettered optimism. Why?
Three reasons: a great idea, a great team, and a great culture.

Character development—quite literally, behavior change for good—is a *great idea*. Aristotle was right when he observed that excellence is not a single act but, rather, a habit. The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed unprecedented progress in manufacturing and information technology. The challenge of our generation is to understand, and thus make the best use of, human nature itself.

We have a *great team* of educators, scientists, and designers. Each of our disciplinary traditions has its own advantages and limitations, its own priorities and aesthetics, its own lingo, and its own assumptions. We all recognize that we are stronger and smarter together.

We have nurtured a *great culture*. We do things the Character Lab way.

Two of our core values are an expression of interpersonal character:

- *Kids First*. Our bottom-line is, simply, have we measurably improved kids' lives?
- *Excessive Generosity*. We give without asking. We assume the best of others.

Two of our core values are intrapersonal:

- *Grit*. We work with passion and with perseverance. Our work is our calling. Told “You can’t do it,” we say, “We’ll show you!”
- *Kaizen*. We are never satisfied. We are committed to continuous improvement. At every opportunity, we ask for feedback. “Next time try...” What’s more, we turn these lessons into our standard work—we ritualize efficiency and excellence.

And, finally, we embrace intellectual character, particularly:

- *Uncompromising Honesty*. We argue like we’re right and listen like we’re wrong. We take strong positions but hold them weakly, privileging evidence and reason over ego.

Aristotle 2.0

I believe that Character Lab will make radical progress on the age-old challenge of character development. Such an ambition may seem naive. Are we flying too close to the sun? What might we do that Aristotle could not?

It is often said that from those to whom much has been given, much is expected. So much has been given to Character Lab: A visionary founding board of directors. The generosity of philanthropists committed to our mission. The power of design thinking. The scalpel of the scientific method.

From Character Lab, rightly so, much is now expected.

With grit and gratitude,



Angela Duckworth
Founder & CEO, Character Lab