

2025 - 2026

 **Character.org**
powered by CharacterPlus®

APPLYING TO BECOME A NATIONAL SCHOOL OF CHARACTER





WELCOME

On behalf of the entire team of the newly combined Character.org and CharacterPlus, I am excited to welcome you to the Schools of Character family. We're so glad you are here!

Whether your school is just beginning its character journey or has been committed to embedding character into all you do for many years, you are part of a network of schools working to ensure every student understands, cares about, and consistently practices the core values that will help them flourish in school, in relationships, and as citizens.

Over 350 volunteers are involved with the Schools of Character program; most have been through this process with their own schools. Our volunteers do this work because earlier volunteers helped them on their school's character journey; this is their opportunity to pay it forward.

The process of becoming a School of Character is built on *The 11 Principles Framework: Cultivating a Culture of Character*. The framework is designed to provide schools with a comprehensive process that, when implemented with fidelity, transforms the culture of your school.

Please note: The latest version of the *11 Principles*, which the application is based on, was released in November 2023. New guidebooks can be purchased on the Character.org website.

The Character.org and CharacterPlus teams are here to support your school—wherever you are in the world—in implementing your character development initiative. Please don't hesitate to reach out with questions. We look forward to working with you!

IMPORTANT APPLICATION CHANGES TO NOTE:

The 2026 evaluation cycle has been modified from years past. A full description of the evaluation process can be found on page 3, but the most important changes to note are:

- ★ There is only one evaluation cycle per year.
- ★ Schools will only pay one application fee.
- ★ Previously, State School of Character was both an evaluation cycle and a designation for schools. Now, when you see State School of Character, it is only a designation.



Nicole Diehl
Executive Director
Schools of Character
nicole@character.org

APPLICATION TIMELINE

The 2026 Application will open in mid-July on our website. Please make sure you have a copy of the *NEW 11 Principles Framework* before creating your narratives and artifacts in your application.

- ★ July 2025: School of Character application opens on the Character.org website.
- ★ Friday, November 7, 2025: School of Character applications due. The first phase of the application cycle, the Expert Reader phase, begins.
- ★ Friday, January 15, 2026: Schools will be notified if their application contained enough evidence of implementation to advance to the Schools of Character Evaluation phase. Those schools not advancing will receive their designation and detailed feedback report.
- ★ Wednesday, April 15, 2026: School of Character designation announcement made.

Please contact Nicole Diehl, Executive Director of Schools of Character, with any questions. nicole@character.org

WHO CAN APPLY?

All Pre-K through 12th grade US and international schools—public, private, religious, independent, charter—are eligible to apply for Schools of Character certification.

WHAT IS THE COST?

The application fee for schools is **\$450**. District fees are based on the number of schools in the district (see Information for Districts section on page 4).



THE EVALUATION CYCLE

There is one evaluation cycle per year, with two distinct phases. Schools must complete the first phase to be evaluated for recognition as a School of Character.

THE EXPERT READER PHASE

Your application will be evaluated by a member of the Expert Reader team. Expert Readers have been vetted and are determined to have a deep understanding of the 11 Principles, as well as years of experience with the Schools of Character process.

- ★ Applications demonstrating strong alignment with the 11 Principles Framework will move forward to the full Schools of Character Evaluation Cycle.
- ★ Applications lacking sufficient evidence will be scored by the Expert Reader and receive a designation of Emerging or Honorable Mention, along with a detailed feedback report.

SCHOOLS OF CHARACTER EVALUATION PHASE

Applications that advance are assigned to a two-person volunteer evaluation team. Volunteer evaluators have also been trained by Character.org and have been through the Schools of Character process. This evaluation phase includes a Zoom site visit with several stakeholder groups to gather additional insight into the school's culture and practices.

Evaluators collaboratively develop a feedback report and recommend one of the following designations:

- ★ Honorable Mention
- ★ State School of Character (SSOC)
- ★ National School of Character (NSOC)

DESIGNATION	SCORE
Emerging	2.6 and below
Honorable Mention	2.7–3.2
SSOC	3.30-4.0
NSOC (will also be given SSOC designation concurrently)	3.3-4.0 AND no 2s in any key indicators

DESIGNATIONS

National School (or District) of Character is the highest distinction awarded by Character.org. The designation lasts five years, and then schools are encouraged to apply again to recertify and keep their designation current.

State School of Character designation is also valid for five years, and schools with this designation are eligible to apply for National certification during each year's application period during those five years.

The application and evaluation processes are designed to support a school's growth. Reflecting on scores and feedback provided in the report is critical to a school's continuous improvement in the implementation of the *11 Principles*. All schools, no matter their designation, are encouraged to use their feedback to guide conversations, training, and practices aligned with the framework to continually deepen their implementation.



PAYMENT

You will receive a receipt (if you use a credit card) or an invoice (if you use a purchase order) from Character.org within 14 business days after submitting your application. Purchase order payments are not required until you receive an invoice from Character.org. Purchase orders are considered a promise of a payment, and you may submit your application.

CHILD FAMILY CENTER
2024 National School
of Character



HOW DO WE PREPARE FOR THE VIRTUAL SITE VISIT?

The Zoom site visit happens as part of the second phase of evaluation, the Schools of Character Evaluation phase. The purpose of the Zoom site visit is for School or District of Character evaluators to have conversations with members of your school community to determine how deeply character and the *11 Principles* are embedded in all aspects of your school. It should never feel like a “gotcha,” but rather an opportunity to speak more about what you are doing at your school.

If you are eligible for the Schools of Character evaluation phase, your evaluators will contact you to schedule a site visit between the end of January and middle of March. They will work with you to find a mutually agreed-upon date, but please do your best to schedule as soon as possible to ensure there are no delays in the process.

No formal preparation is necessary for the Zoom site visit. Plan for approximately 2.5-3 hours for your visit. Your evaluation team will send details but know that they will want to meet for about 25 minutes with various stakeholder groups: members of your administrative team; representatives from the character committee; teaching and support staff; students; and parents/community members. The school is responsible for providing 4-6 members from each group and making sure they are all able to join the site visit via Zoom, either from their classrooms, homes, or in small groups at school.

WE RECEIVED OUR DESIGNATION...NOW WHAT?

No matter your designation, your feedback is important and should help guide your next steps as a school.

Emerging and Honorable Mention schools and districts should use the feedback provided to help their school implement components of the *11 Principles* that were not strong enough to be scored 3 or 4. To reach State School of Character designation, a school needs to be scored 3.3 on their application, and to be a National School of Character, they must score a 3.3 AND have no 2s on any key indicators in their scoresheet. Emerging and Honorable Mention schools should reapply when they have more fully aligned their initiative to the *11 Principles Framework*.

State Schools and Districts of Character should also use their feedback to strengthen their implementation and apply for National certification sometime in the five-year period after their designation as a State School of Character. The application for a current State School of Character goes directly to the Schools of Character Evaluation phase (bypassing the Expert Reader phase) if done within the five years their SSOC recognition is valid.

National Schools and Districts of Character should also use their feedback to reflect on their implementation and look for areas to grow. National School of Character is a recognition of the hard work a school has invested in character development; it's not a destination!

Schools are encouraged to reach out to Character.org/CharacterPlus with questions or for implementation or training needs.

RECERTIFICATION FOR NATIONAL SCHOOLS OF CHARACTER

National Schools and Districts of Character apply for recertification in the fall of their fourth year of certification to avoid a lapse in status. For example, schools certified in 2022 would submit an application in the fall of 2026 for recertification in 2027.

Recertifying schools must complete and submit a new application and provide examples of their current implementation. They should also reflect on how they have used their previous feedback to shape their current initiative. Evaluators are looking for growth in the years since previously certified.

Outreach is a requirement when a school or district is looking to renew its designation after five years, so National Schools and Districts of Character should be looking for ways to share what they know about the *11 Principles* with others as soon as they receive their designation. There are various ways for schools to do outreach, but the primary ask is that at least one person from each National School of Character becomes an evaluator for the process. It is one of the best ways a school can give back. Other outreach includes sharing your story with colleagues at the community, state, or national level, speaking at conferences about your character initiative, or writing papers or articles that promote character development.

Recertification applications are reviewed with the same level of rigor as newly applying schools.

Schools that are not ready or are unable to apply in their recertification year but wish to be recertified in a subsequent year should contact Nicole Diehl at Nicole@character.org. Character.org does not “revoke” certification from a school that has received it just because more than five years have passed; a school can always say that it was a School of Character in their year they received their designation. However, their certification won’t be considered current.



INFORMATION FOR DISTRICTS

Districts are eligible for certification if 51% or more of their individual schools are certified as State or National Schools of Character. They must have proportional representation from elementary and secondary schools. The 51% includes individual schools applying for certification the same year as the district. If the district has only one high school, that high school must have been recognized as a State or National School of Character.

District applicants follow the same process as schools and, in addition, will be asked to provide a list of all schools; the year(s) each school was recognized as a State or National School of Character; and evidence that shows non-certified schools are making progress toward their own School of Character designation. All non-certified schools must have representatives complete the *11 Principles* self-assessment portion of the application.

If the district reaches the second phase of evaluation, the Schools and Districts of Character Evaluation, they will receive guidance about a Zoom site visit. The Zoom site visit will include interviews with various groups of stakeholders from both the recognized Schools of Character and those that are still working toward the designation.

To show successful implementation of the *11 Principles*, district applicants will be asked to provide evidence of how the district is supporting the vision of building a culture of character, including leadership engagement; character development work embedded in strategic planning; resources (monetary and human) dedicated to district-wide training; assessment and data collection; and outreach to the community.

The application fee for districts is based on the number of schools. The fee schedule is [available here](#).

Schools that do not meet the 51% threshold but believe they should be considered for certification should contact the Executive Director of the Schools of Character process.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

International schools follow the same process as U.S. schools. Applications must be submitted in English, and they will go through the same two phases of review. Designations are the same, with the only difference being the name given to the designation (see chart below).

DESIGNATION	SCORE
Emerging	2.6 and below
Honorable Mention	2.7–3.2
(City Name) School of Character	3.30-4.0
(Country Name) School of Character	3.3-4.0 AND no 2s in any key indicators



THE MOCK AUDIT

The Mock Audit is one option for schools that may not be ready for certification but would like professional feedback on their progress. Schools complete a Schools of Character application as a Mock Audit and receive written feedback with a score sheet, but they DO NOT receive a designation. The Mock Audit is available year-round with feedback provided on a rolling basis. Applicants can expect to receive feedback within six to eight weeks. The fee for a Mock Audit is \$350.

Because Mock Audits are intended to help schools grow their initiative, which takes implementation time, schools may not submit a School of Character application in the same school year as a Mock Audit.

Besides the Mock Audit, CharacterPlus has a variety of other methods to help schools determine their readiness for applying for Schools of Character.

Please contact Dr. Kristen Pelster, CharacterPlus Chief Programming Officer, at kpelster@characterplus.org for more information.



APPLICATION TOOLS AND RESOURCES

The new *11 Principles Guidebook* is available for purchase on our website. It is recommended that schools have at least one copy on hand for their team to reference. If you are a recertifying school, make sure you are using the newest version of the *11 Principles* before you begin filling out your application.

The School of Character application is available as a PDF, year-round, for reference and staff development. There are links to Questions to Consider and Suggested Types of Evidence for each Principle. You can download the application PDF from our website. If you would like a Google doc template of the application so that your leadership team can work together on the application, please email Nicole Diehl at nicole@character.org.

The Scoring Guide, Self-Assessment, and score sheet used by evaluators to measure a school's implementation are available as a download here on our website.

An online version of the self-assessment, which provides you with a report summary of everyone's responses, can be used with your entire staff. Each staff member simply needs a device to take the self-assessment, which takes approximately 15 minutes. The fee for this service is \$50. To request this service, please contact Nicole Diehl at nicole@character.org.

We encourage you to gather all the information you need prior to filling out the application online. One way to do this is to collaborate with teammates on the Google template mentioned above. PLEASE save copies of all your narratives and artifacts on your own computer. This helps you in case of technical difficulties, and it helps those who come after you find information about your application history.

IMPORTANT: If you start an application in our system but do not submit it by the November 7, 2025, deadline, the information will not be saved in our system.

Applicants will be asked to provide:

- ★ A narrative of your school's character journey, and, if reapplying or recertifying, evidence of how you've addressed previous feedback.
- ★ Your school's core values (character strengths that are moral/performance/intellectual/civic; NOT outcomes, beliefs, mission or vision statements).
- ★ Your school's demographic data.
- ★ A narrative of your school's implementation of each of the 11 Principles.
- ★ 11 Principles self-assessments from several people in each stakeholder group.
- ★ Examples and artifacts that clearly and fully demonstrate implementation of each Principle.
- ★ Five years of academic, behavioral, and school culture and climate data. You need to make a strong effort to provide this information. If you cannot, make sure you provide other evidence that shows your character initiative is working.
- ★ Testimonials from one stakeholder from each of the following groups: teachers, non-teaching staff members, students, parents, and community members.

COMPLETING AND SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION

Please note: The information below is also provided on the application.

This application requires original responses to reflect your school's character journey. Therefore, please do not use any AI-generated text or content.

Make sure your primary contact and payment information are correct before selecting "Start Application." You will not be able to modify this information later.

The application fee is \$450 (fees for districts vary). There is an additional \$25 administrative fee for purchase orders. If paying by credit card, please provide the name of the person as it appears on the credit card. You will pay **AFTER** you submit your application.

As you fill out your application, save your progress. We recommend you do so after each section/page you complete, and before you end a writing session.

Uploads are saved when you see the filled in trashcan icon. Do not go to the next page until you see the icon.

The application will "time out" if no activity is detected within 30 minutes. If the application times out before you save your progress, you may lose your uploads.

Use all available uploads to help tell your school's story. Use different artifacts/evidence for each upload and choose artifacts that are the most compelling and clearly demonstrate implementation of the principle.

Artifacts need to be uploaded as a PDF or Word document. Note: We discourage you from using photos as evidence as it is difficult for evaluators to know what is going on in a photo. Photos with captions may be included in the last section of the application.

Please follow the guidelines for how many artifacts to submit. For Principle 1-10, you may submit six pages **ONLY**. For Principle 11, you may submit 12 pages.

Videos may be used if they clearly demonstrate the principle in action. Copy and paste the URL link into your narrative, and make sure the link works.

In sections with a (+) sign, please enter your first response and select (+) to add any additional responses.

Please provide five years of data for test scores, referrals, suspensions, and school culture and climate survey data. (If you do not have data, enter "n/a" or "yes/no" on the application and provide other evidence that shows your character initiative is working.)

Please make sure your stakeholders answer the question asked in the testimonial section of the application.

Once you have filled out all sections of the application, select "Preview Final Application" to receive a draft PDF for your team to review. If you are happy with your application, select "Approve Application." You will be asked to confirm this selection. If you need to make changes after reviewing, select "Revise Application" and log back into your account to edit your application. After editing, select "Preview Final Application" again to receive an updated PDF. Select "Approve Application" when you are ready to submit.

Your application is not complete until you have both selected "Approve Application" and provided payment.

Applications cannot be edited once submitted. You will receive an email confirmation that your application has been received.

PROMISING PRACTICES

WHO CAN APPLY?

All Pre-K through 12th grade U.S. and international schools and districts are eligible to submit Promising Practices. Organizations, sports teams, community partners, and businesses are also eligible.

WHAT IS A PROMISING PRACTICE?

Promising Practices are effective and replicable practices that both inspire “goodness in action” and contribute to the field of character development. The practice must be aligned with at least one of the 11 Principles.

Promising Practices are important first steps or stepping stones for Emerging or Honorable Mention schools or those just beginning their character journey. Receiving recognition for a Promising Practice is an exciting and important indicator to staff, students, families, and the community that the character work being done at the schools is intentional and has an impact on the school community.

Promising Practices are also an excellent way to for current State and National Schools of Character to maintain momentum and continue to deepen their character initiative.

The application is brief and simple to fill out. The fee to apply is \$125 if you use a credit card, and \$150 if you use a purchase order.

More information about Promising Practices can be found on our website.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

When does the application open, and when is it due?

It opens on our website on July 14, 2025, and it is due on November 7, 2025, at 11:59pm EST.

When will I know if my school receives certification?

Schools not moving past the first phase of the process will find out on January 15. Schools that go through phase two, the Schools of Character phase, will learn their designation on April 15.

How long does the certification last?

Both State and National Schools of Character hold their designation for five years.

What if we miss the deadline?

We cannot accept application after the deadline. We recommend you save a copy of all documents and continue to work on your character initiative so you can apply the following November. If you miss the deadline but still want feedback on your application, consider submitting a Mock Audit, which is open year-round. You will not receive a Schools of Character designation. The fee for a Mock Audit is \$350.

How do we know if we're ready to submit an application?

Becoming a School of Character is a process. Each school is different, but typically, character leadership teams work to implement the *11 Principles* with intentionality for three to five years before being recognized. Some schools require longer, some less. CharacterPlus offers a variety of services to help you determine your readiness. Contact Dr. Kristen Pelster at kpelster@characterplus.org for more information.

Do we need to be a member or partner of Character.org or CharacterPlus or use your training services to submit an application?

There is no Character.org membership, and you do not need to be a partner school or district with CharacterPlus to apply. CharacterPlus partner districts or schools that use professional development services are not given priority in their applications. All applicants will be required to create an account to access the application. A great way to stay connected to the work we're doing is to sign up for the FREE Character.org newsletter. We regularly share useful information about character development and celebrate Schools of Character and Promising Practices.

Should my school use a particular character or SEL program?

Character.org does not endorse any particular character program or approach. Schools can, and do, use a variety of teaching strategies, instructional practices, and curriculum resources. The *11 Principles Framework* is designed to help schools develop a comprehensive character initiative that best suits the needs of their students, staff, families, and community. Schools of Character are evaluated on their implementation of the *11 Principles*.

Should I purchase a new *11 Principles* Guidebook?

Absolutely! We strongly recommend schools purchase at least one guidebook to have on hand to reference as teams implement and write the application, as this is the only location to find the complete language of the framework. Guidebooks can be purchased on our website.

Are there examples to view?

You can hear Schools of Character talk about their implementation at our *11 Principles* in Action page.

Is there professional development to help with implementation?

Yes! We work directly with schools to who want to deepen their understanding of the *11 Principles*. The newly merged organizations have more options than ever for your school to build a strong character process before applying for recognition.

What if our school is not happy with the outcome of our evaluation?

The application and evaluation process is designed to support a school's growth. All evaluators are educators, trained by Character.org, and each application is ready by an Expert Reader (and two evaluators if the school advances to the Schools of Character Evaluation phase). Requests for an appeal should be sent to Character.org's Executive Director at nicole@character.org within seven days of receiving the feedback report.

How are schools celebrated for their designation?

All schools and districts that achieve State or National School of Character are listed by name on our website and in our press release, receive a certificate by email, and a digital badge/logo to use on school materials. Character.org creates a digital yearbook celebrating National Schools of Character, and it is shared with all schools in our network. Schools may purchase a banner from our website to display at their school. In some states, the State Coordinator and affiliate sponsors work with schools to plan local recognition. When a Forum conference is held, previous Schools of Character are celebrated.



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