

PROFILE

Character Lab

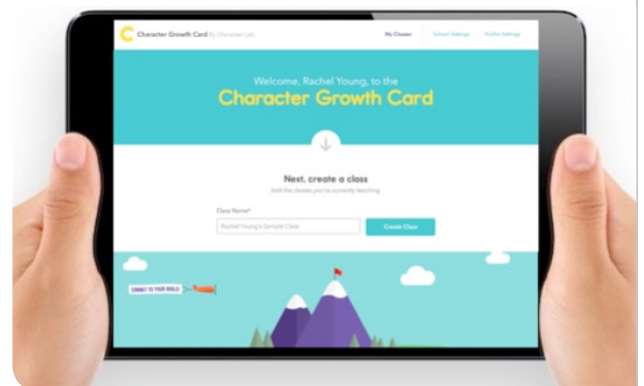
What they are doing:

Character Lab is grounded in the belief that all children will be better prepared and more likely to thrive in the world if they are explicitly encouraged to develop character skills and strengths while in school. These strengths include curiosity, grit (the tendency to sustain interest in and effort towards long-term goals), optimism, gratitude, and self-control. Accordingly, this early-stage nonprofit develops and disseminates research-based approaches for helping educators teach character strengths in the classroom and in the overall school environment.

The organization was founded by Angela Duckworth, associate professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania; Dave Levin, cofounder and board member of the KIPP Charter Public Schools; and Dominic Randolph, headmaster of Riverdale Country School, an independent PreK-12 school in New York City. Early conversations among these three revealed their shared goal, which served as the basis for Character Lab’s vision: “a future where using evidence-based strategies to teach character skills at school is an expected and fully integrated component of what it means to be an educator.” Their model centers on accelerating the creation and adoption of evidence-based, well-designed practices and products as they move from theory to product to scale. They pursue their objective with an approach that involves intervention research, product design, and implementation support.

Intervention Research: Character Lab seeks to better understand the ways in which character strengths are malleable and to apply that understanding when developing practices and tools—interventions—to help students develop those strengths. To that end, the organization administers RFPs to surface ideas from teachers and academic researchers on an ongoing basis and then co-designs, funds, and guides its grantees through intensive “intervention research projects.”

For academic innovators, the organization provides a school-matching service, pairing



The Character Growth Card offers teachers an opportunity to provide feedback to students about their character strengths via a web-based application.

research teams with schools that express interest in trying innovations. Character Lab also helps academic researchers learn the ropes of testing and designing with the school setting in mind to ensure that projects are anchored in the realities of the classroom and ultimately replicable by other teachers.

For teacher innovators, the organization provides technical assistance with experimental study design and data analysis. An example of this assistance is their [Teacher Innovation Grant](#), which awards \$10,000 to seven teachers for their best, most scalable ideas for building character strengths in the classroom. In its first year, the Teacher Innovation Grant RFP drew over 250 educator driven proposals from a diverse group of applicants with respect to geography, school type, pedagogical approach, grade level, subject area, years of teaching experience (the median was nine), and character strength of interest. Finalists get a description of their research concept posted on the Character Lab website for public voting to select winners and raise awareness about the role educators can play in research-based efforts to improve student character skills.

Product Design: Character Lab tracks the results of the ideas being tested in the classroom by tracking data on the construct measures defined by its research partners as well as the academic outcomes traditionally documented at school. When Character Lab is satisfied that the evidence suggests that an intervention will be both powerful and scalable, it works to develop corresponding tools and training so that educators can integrate it successfully in their schools.

One example of this work is the Character Growth Card, originally a downloadable paper-based tool for teachers, used to provide feedback to students about their character strengths. Teachers, for example, can use the growth card to enable students to reflect on their own strengths and areas for growth, and to have a formative, rather than summative, conversation with the student about where they may want to focus in the next quarter or semester. The Character Growth Card was piloted as a web-based application in 20 different schools in the fall of 2014.

A second example is the organization's collaboration with Dr. Gabriele Oettingen, professor of psychology at New York University. Character Lab's staff worked with Oettingen to design materials and training for teachers who wish to build student self-control using Oettingen's [motivation and goal-setting strategy](#), called "WOOP." These products were developed through prototyping cycles with users and modified to meet educator needs and demand. In subsequent years, Character Lab plans to roll tools like WOOP out to larger populations, continuously conducting research to determine their impact, while adding customization options and refining as needed.

Character Lab makes products for teachers to use; it doesn't charge for products or services. And the organization's experiences in its first year-plus of operation have served to reinforce the founders' expectations that it is important to have teachers involved from start to finish in the research as well as the design work (whether they are serving as research leaders or in partnership with academic

researchers). The results of the research and development are much more likely to result in successful intervention techniques if it's clear from the outset how a teacher would use a certain practice, tool, or strategy in the classroom.

Implementation Support: Character Lab continues to explore different mediums and channels for teacher professional development and knowledge transfer to determine the most effective method of delivering the products, tools, and training that educators need to develop their students. Examples of this work to date include a [massive, open, online course \(MOOC\)](#), which they created with [Relay GSE](#), that was accessed by more than 75,000 users worldwide; in-person trainings at the district and school levels across a variety of settings; a downloadable professional development guidebook for school leaders to use with faculty; and sharable “Talks for Teachers” videos hosted on Character Lab’s website. Feedback on these endeavors, along with feedback on the supports the organization provides to educators, reveal opportunities—and barriers—that then inform Character Lab’s research agenda and activities.

At Character Lab, each of these three core activities informs and is informed by the others, representing an intentional break from traditional approaches where such work streams typically operate in isolation. Ultimately Character Lab aims to build an interdisciplinary community of designers, researchers, educators, families, technologists, and others working toward the same goal.

In January 2015, Character Lab entered its second full year. For educators and the students they serve, the organization and staff seek to be a trusted bridge between science and the classroom. Over time, they aspire to provide educators with a suite of tools and materials that help them bring evidence-based, innovative, and well-designed learning experiences to all students.

What they are learning:

- **Teachers intuitively support the idea that developing character skills is valuable, and they are eager to have simple, actionable interventions that can be easily infused into their daily work.** Character Lab regularly hears from teachers and administrators who are looking for guides, tools, and training to help them work with students on developing strong, positive, resilient character skills. Currently, the demand for such tools and material far outweighs Character Lab’s supply.
- **Many top researchers have not had the opportunity to work in schools, but would if they had support and funding.** Character Lab’s RFP process yielded many more applicants than the organization could fund. It is clear that top researchers in psychology, neuroscience, and the behavioral sciences are eager to get involved in education, but require the appropriate supports to do so responsibly and expeditiously.
- **There is a clear need for an organization that connects schools and researchers.** Even great researchers can stumble when they work in school

settings, and even schools with a great interest in doing experimental research don't always make the necessary accommodations for researchers. Having an entity to serve as a bridge is a useful—and often necessary—part of successful research projects, particularly those that require additional work when the research is complete to translate findings into real-world relevant products.

This profile is one of a series of profiles on organizations focused on developing effective learners.

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