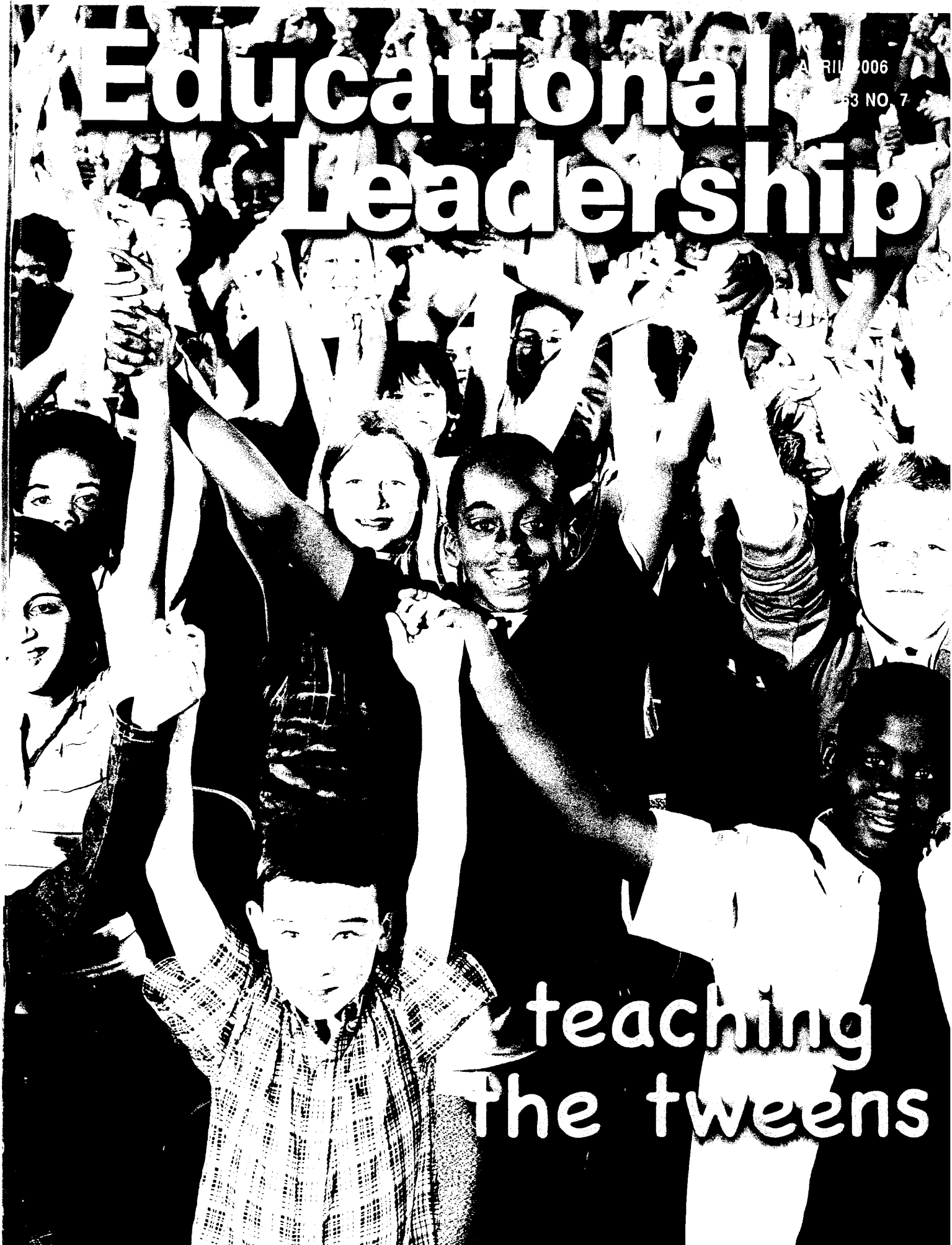


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Promoting Adolescents' Prosocial Behavior

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Saying a kind word to a classmate, acknowledging other students' feelings, sharing books and advice, defending a victim of bullying—these are just a few of the prosocial behaviors that can enhance students' social and academic lives at school. Because we know that children do not develop social values in a vacuum, educators, policymakers, and researchers are increasingly emphasizing the importance of the school's role in building students' prosocial skills.

What We Know

The term *prosocial behavior* means positive actions that benefit others, prompted by empathy, moral values, and a sense of personal responsibility rather than a desire for personal gain. Research on child development suggests that one of the most effective ways in which schools can encourage prosocial behavior is through schoolwide programs designed to teach and model social skills.

All infants are born with some empathetic ability that enables them to connect emotionally with other human beings (Sagi & Hoffman, 1994). As children grow up, however, the development of this innate empathy depends on their relationships with others. For example, children whose parents express warmth and responsiveness to their needs are more likely to develop prosocial behaviors (Zhou et al., 2002). As students transition from childhood to adolescence, they become increasingly dependent on social relationships with peers (Hartup, 1996). Adolescents whose best friends display prosocial behaviors also tend to engage in such behaviors themselves (Barry & Wentzel, 2006).

The importance of personal relationships for all children, along with the increased significance of peer relationships for early adolescents, suggests that educators can have a tremendous influence on students' social growth by creating a

schoolwide culture in which each student has opportunities to see prosocial behaviors modeled by other students and by adults. In such a culture, the way teachers treat students and the way students treat one another is a part of their learning experience (Lickona, 1997).



What You Can Do

Research suggests that the following three schoolwide approaches can promote prosocial behavior in schools.

- *Train teachers to integrate values instruction into classroom management.*

The classroom provides an excellent setting in which to practice social skills. For example, allowing students to participate in class decision making can promote understanding of democratic values, respect for others' opinions, and social responsibility. Encouraging cooperative behavior by assigning academic tasks in the classroom to pairs or small groups of students may promote the students' ability to

work together toward common goals. The Responsive Classroom (www.responsiveclassroom.org), a program for K–8 classrooms developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children, emphasizes classroom organization and management strategies that foster helpful behavior, responsibility, and motivation for learning. An evaluation of the Responsive Classroom's effects on students in one elementary school found that this approach positively affected students' prosocial skills as well as their academic achievement (Elliott, 1999).

- *Foster a caring community throughout the school.* Many adults inside the school, including teachers, school adminis-

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trators, cafeteria workers, and school bus drivers, can model caring and respectful behavior. Such programs as the Developmental Studies Center's Caring School Community (www.devstu.org/csc) aim to build a schoolwide sense of community and to strengthen students' connection with the school. The Caring School Community includes multiple components, such as an in-class curriculum, pairing of older with younger students for tutoring and "buddy" activities, and parental involvement. Two separate evaluations of this program reported decreases in students' problem behaviors and

program can improve students' behavior and academic performance (Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005; Metzler, Biglan, Rusby, & Sprague, 2001).

Educators Take Note

Although research on child development supports the rationale for schoolwide approaches to building social skills, the research base on the effectiveness of specific programs to promote prosocial behavior is much smaller than the research base on programs to reduce antisocial behavior (such as violence and drug abuse). We need

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increases in prosocial behavior in the classroom, compared with schools not using the program (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000; Solomon, Watson, Delucchi, Schaps, & Battistich, 1988).

■ *Use positive discipline practices.* Threats, punishments, and extrinsic rewards might keep a lid on negative behavior but will not necessarily promote prosocial behavior. Schools can best encourage prosocial behavior by using consistent positive disciplinary practices that include clear expectations, discussions, and modeling. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (www.pbis.org), a program distributed by the U.S. Department of Education, is an example of this approach. The primary prevention component of this approach is teaching and encouraging expected prosocial behavior among all students, across all school settings, and by all staff members. Research has shown that implementation of the

more studies to assess the effectiveness of approaches such as those discussed here. In addition, we need more research demonstrating the applicability of the different programs to students from different ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Education leaders considering the implementation of any schoolwide approaches should plan for a large investment of time and resources. In addition, because these programs depend on teachers' ability to display empathic and caring behavior, schools should not implement such a program unless staff members are motivated to support the program and receive the training they need to implement it (Osher, Dwyer, & Jackson, 2004). **EL**

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