

U.S. Schools Rediscover the Virtue of Virtues

By Amitai Etzioni

In St. Louis, 183,000 school-age children participate in an educational program aimed at the character of students. The goal of the program, for students from kindergarten through grade 12, is to emphasize thirty core values, including "honesty, responsibility, cooperation and commitment."

St. Louis educators are cautious about calling the program a success, but half of the 1,000 area teachers surveyed reported that the program had improved student behavior or academic achievement, and 86 percent of the principals queried concluded that the program had had a positive impact.

They are not alone. Character-education programs are sprouting around the country, many too new to be truly evaluated or to have their efforts firmly recorded. School administrators say that many children no longer learn basic values at home or in the community, so the task has been left to the schools.

To assist them in the task, several national groups have sprung up which argue that character education can be achieved by focusing on agreed sets of virtues. Character Counts! is an organization launched by Michael Josephson, head of the Los Angeles-based Josephson Institute of Ethics. It calls for schools to promote six character traits upon which our society presumably can agree: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. Another group is the Character Education Partnership, or CEP. Led by educators Diane Berreth, John Martin and retired McDonnell Douglas Chief Executive Sanford McDonnell, CEP seeks to transform several active programs from cities such as St. Louis, Miami, San Francisco and Louisville, Ky., into a national movement. Begun in 1988, the program encompasses 23 St. Louis-area school districts and 183,000 students. The national partnership boasts some heavy hitters, including Zbigniew

Brzezinski, national security adviser during the Carter administration; Barbara Bush; and William Howell, chairman of J.C. Penney Co. CEP has as its goal basic reforms in the curricula of 75 percent of public schools by the end of the century.

The White House is listening. In July it hosted a national conference on Character Building for a Democratic, Civil Society, organized by The Communitarian Network, a membership organization that has been campaigning for character education for four years. The conference drew 250 leaders in the field of character education — educators, academics, policymakers, representatives of religious organizations, business executives, heads of labor unions and other community leaders.

Meanwhile, Capitol Hill has been slow to join in the enthusiasm. Early this year, Rep. Tony Hall, an Ohio Democrat, sponsored a modest amendment calling for a national conference and demonstration grants to promote the teaching of values such as honesty, responsibility and caring. In February, after heated debate in the Education and Labor Committee, the measure was soundly defeated, 22-6. That vote marked the fourth time that character-education legislation sponsored by Hall failed to make it through Congress.

"Politicians are the last ones to get the message on this issue," Hall told the *Wall Street Journal*. He said he was amazed at how little his colleagues knew about the character-education movement. However, in a rare bipartisan moment, Congress passed a resolution this year calling for a Character Education Week.

There is more in the rising popularity of character education than meets the eye. The public and the media are preoccupied with highly charged issues when it comes to values education. Tough questions are raised: Who should decide what is to be taught

in this touchy area, parents or boards of education? Are books that try to legitimate homosexuality to be allowed into schools' libraries, let alone into the curriculum? Should creationism be taught, and if yes — as a science? And are schools going to be subjected to national standards on value issues?

Educators would do well to focus on character education as a matter of inner-personality traits rather than abstract values. This requires that we revisit a rather elementary question: What does it take to form a person who first can be a civil student and later a morally upright member of the community?

Our starting point is the newborn infant. If one looks at infants objectively, one realizes that their behavior is rather like that of animals: They take in food, expel waste and shriek. More importantly, they command no inborn moral or social values, and they do not develop such virtues on their own. Even such basic human features as walking on two feet rather than on all fours and being able to communicate with symbols need to be taught. We are born with a potential to do these things, but they are not actualized unless someone takes the time to teach us. These elementary facts are the historical-sociological reason that families (nuclear and extended) were entrusted with humanizing and civilizing these little creatures.

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Unfortunately, probably half of our families no longer discharge this duty in a satisfactory manner. Society's most urgent goal is to figure out how to encourage and enable parents to reassume this most elemental responsibility. Meanwhile, the task of socializing many children falls by default to educators. The schools, working closely with communities and with as much parent involvement as can be mustered, must not shrink from this challenge. Private schools should have no undue difficulties putting character education in their curricula, but public schools, still entrusted with 88 percent of America's youngsters, face hurdle after hurdle in attempting to broach what is widely considered "values education."

Some argue that the great difficulties public schools face when they attempt to address moral issues would be handled best by instituting a school-choice program allowing parents to transfer their children to private academies. But a significant national move toward school choice seems unlikely in the near future. For now, public schools must grapple with the question of whether they can and should provide for the character of the new generation. Tough questions immediately fly to mind: Will public schools distribute condoms? Will they condemn abortion? Teaching values in a society embroiled in a passionate argument

about how to define its values seems impossible.

The Communitarian Network and quite a few educators stress that the experiences schools generate are much more character-forming than any ethics lectures delivered by teachers. If school parking lots are danger zones, corridors confrontational and cafeterias wild, children learn that whoever pushes hardest in their uncivilized world carries the day.

On the other hand, if students are kept orderly by patrols of faculty and students, they learn the value of civility. Similarly, if A's and B's are handed out easily to encourage those lacking in self-esteem, students learn that work doesn't pay. On the other hand, if high grades are allotted according to rigorous standards, students learn that dedication to work is rewarding. Constructive school environments can do what certain extracurricular activities (sports, in particular) long have been acknowledged to do — form character. Schools would conduct annual retreats to examine the moral and social lessons generated by the *experiences* they impart, compared with the values they seek to transmit. If the messages are out of step, they should be realigned.

At the core of this approach is the development of personality traits that enable people to act civilly and morally, instead of focusing on the content of

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the values that schools should embrace. First among these traits is the capacity to control one's impulses. The underlying assumption is that aggressive and other antisocial impulses cannot be extinguished; a mature person must learn to recognize urges such as murderous anger and acquire ways to curb them or channel them toward socially constructive outlets. Second, a well-formed person must have what Adam Smith called "sympathy": roughly, the ability to see one's self in the other person's shoes, what is widely known today as empathy. Without this quality, there is little likelihood that children will develop charity, fairness, respect or the other virtues present in a moral and civil person.

Only when a person possesses these twin capacities is it possible for him or her to make commitments to other values. What those values also should be is less controversial than it may seem at first glance, because basic values are shared widely. No one seriously maintains that lying is morally superior to telling the truth; no one defends rape or theft as morally appropriate; and killing is universally condemned (except in special circumstances, such as self-defense). Similarly, while there are considerable disagreements about what constitutes sexual harassment or racial discrimination, few people hold, when such conduct truly occurs, that it is morally appropriate.

We urge educators to start by deliberately recognizing these shared values. They then may wish to acknowledge that on other moral issues there are deep differences, and they might urge youngsters to rely on private institutions to learn more about these issues.

Some educators favor teaching values cafeteria-style (antiabortion beliefs in column A and pro-choice beliefs in column B, for example). I fear that such an approach will foster relativism. These values should be communicated with the full fervor of those who hold them, and this is best achieved outside public schools. As Charles Haynes, from the First Liberty Institute, put it: "Students [should] be encouraged to consult their parents and religious leaders for a fuller understanding of how their tradition addresses moral questions." We should not try to pack all values into public schools; schools should be a place for those values we all share and a place to recognize the importance of other values.

In a similar vein, we urge that public schools should not ignore the

important role of religion in American history. Rather, public schools should teach about religion without lapsing into teaching any particular religious dogma.

Finally, educators must address the challenging question of whether schools should abide by the views of the community they serve or those imposed from the outside. Should schools distribute condoms or teach first graders about homosexuality if the community is adamantly opposed to doing either? A good rule of thumb is that the values of the local community should take precedence in all matters, except those that violate the societywide values reflected in the Constitution and its Bill of Rights. Schools thus should teach the value of free speech and defend it, even when it results in airing viewpoints that parents of students abhor (expressed, say, in the student newspaper). On the other hand, schools should refrain from sex education when this is the

parents' collective preference. (If the parents are divided, they should be permitted to excuse their children from such classes.) Schools should teach that democracy is the preferred form of government even if most parents in a given neighborhood believe that authoritarian or tribal government is superior, but they should not require children to read Marx if that makes parents see red.

Encouragingly, Character Counts!, the Character Education Partnership and The Communitarian Network have attracted a great deal of interest in the educational community and a following among parents. The enthusiasm of some Republican lawmakers for a school prayer amendment — whether one favors it or not — is only the most recent sign of rising public concern about the moral education of the young, and it bodes well for the likelihood of character education moving up on the public-education agenda. It is not coming a moment too soon. ●