

Symposium

U.S. Schools Rediscover the Virtue of Virtues

By Amitai Etzioni



Amitai Etzioni

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On Character Education:
As more parents fail to teach moral values to their children, schools increasingly are stepping in to teach character, and so they should, says Amitai Etzioni. Not so fast, replies Samuel Blumenfeld, arguing that schools first should master the task of teaching reading and writing before they shoulder the weightier tasks of teaching character.



Samuel L. Blumenfeld

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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

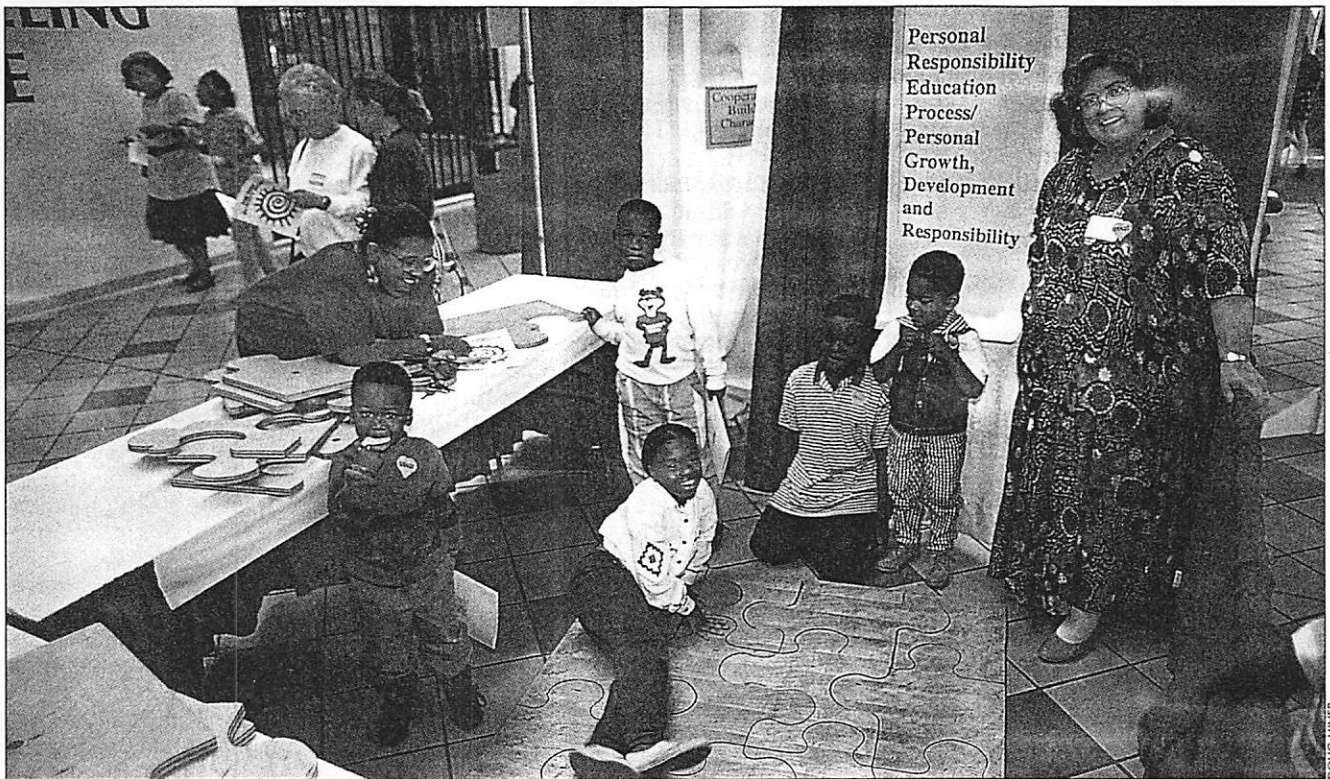
Brzezinski, national security adviser during the Carter administration; Barbara Bush; and William Howell, chairman of J.C. Penney Co. CEP has as its goal basic reforms in the curricula of 75 percent of public schools by the end of the century.

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



An education fair at a St. Louis shopping mall celebrates the success of character-education programs in city schools.

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.

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

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. •

Give Kids the Three R's, Not Character 'R Us

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Should public schools begin teaching character education when they can't even teach children to read? The answer to that one is an obvious no!

Academic incompetence, for which our public schools are notorious, strongly suggests that our teachers not be given even more difficult tasks for which they are unprepared. Reading is a technical skill that actually can be taught. Character, on the other hand, is the result of moral upbringing and parental discipline which usually develop into self-discipline or self-restraint, an instilled sense of responsibility, an obedience and reverence for moral law (better known as "fear of God") and an absolute sense of right and wrong.

But many children do not get that moral upbringing, and they attend schools that do even more damage to their spirit through faulty teaching. We know, for example, that a strong correlation exists between academic failure and delinquency. Michael Brunner, in his book *Retarding Amer-*

ica: The Imprisonment of Potential, points out that frustration caused by reading failure can and often does result in antisocial aggression. Yet the schools persist in using teaching methods that cause that frustration and failure. Psychologist Kurt Lewin proved through experiments on children that frustration, in many cases, causes serious intellectual regression as well as violent behavior. Thus, to expect schools that actually create behavioral problems then to teach character education is to expect failure upon failure.

And what is even more annoying, if not irrational, are the lengths to which public educators will go to avoid mentioning the obvious connection between morality and religion. The simple notion of God is carefully circumvented, and no one mentions the Ten Commandments, which have provided the simplest and clearest guide to character education in America for many generations.

Chuck Colson, the former special counsel to President Nixon who went



Colson: *We are taking away spiritual elements and abandoning morality.*

to jail for his role in the Watergate cover-up, underwent a religious conversion that changed his life. In 1993, he gave a lecture titled, "Can We Be Good Without God?" He said: "What we fail to realize is that rejecting transcendental truth is tantamount to committing national suicide. A secular state cannot cultivate virtue.... We are taking away the spiritual element and abandoning morality based on religious truth, counting instead on our heads and our subjective feelings to make us do what is right."

And that is exactly what the proponents of character education are doing. They talk about universal values, basic values and common values as if 3,000 years of Judeo-Christian values are totally irrelevant or never existed. We even have the sad spectacle of Sanford McDonnell, the retired chairman of McDonnell Douglas who has embarked upon a personal crusade for character education through his Character Education Partnership (which gets many of its character values right out of the Boy Scout oath.), strongly denying that teaching generally accepted values is an attempt to inject religious beliefs into schools. Apparently, that's the only way the public educators even will consider taking McDonnell's Character Education Partnership seriously.

And that is why all of the secular character-education programs being advocated are doomed to limited success or to no success at all. Their proponents mistakenly believe that true moral education is possible without religion and that humanist situational ethics can substitute for moral absolutes to create a moral society.

But our Founding Fathers knew otherwise, or else we would not have had our Declaration of Independence or our Constitution as the basis of our government. The Declaration declares that we are "endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable Rights...." It was quite clear to the Founders that this nation was conceived under God, and for public schools to avoid this central fact of history is a form of self-inflicted blindness.

At age 15, George Washington copied in his own handwriting 110 "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation." Rule 108 stated: "When you speak of God, or His attributes, let it be seriously and with reverence. Honor and obey your natural parents although they be poor." How about distributing that book among American school children!

Abigail Adams wrote to her son Quincy Adams in 1780: "The only sure and permanent foundation of virtue is religion. Let this important truth be engraved upon your heart.... Justice, humanity and benevolence are the duties you owe to society in general. To your country the same duties are incumbent upon you with the additional obligation of sacrificing ease, pleasure, wealth and life itself for its defense and security."

How easy it was to instill notions of virtue and morality in the young when their adult mentors believed in the religion of the Bible. But today's moral imperatives seem to have more to do with saving the ozone layer, hugging trees and protecting snail darters than

with the moral absolutes that formed the original ethical foundation of American society.

Let today's children read what the Founding Fathers had to say about character and morals. It will teach them history, if nothing else. But is it not preposterous that American schoolchildren may not be permitted to read the words of the Founding Fathers because there are too many references to God and religion in what they wrote?

In a speech Republican Rep. Newt Gingrich of Georgia delivered at the Heritage Foundation several weeks before the 1994 election, he said: "I do have a vision of an America in which a belief in the Creator is once again at the center of defining being an American, and that is a radically different vision of America than the secular antireligious view of the left.... Frankly, history is an ongoing rebuke to secular left-wing values. They can't afford to teach history, because it would destroy the core vision of a hedonistic, existentialist America in which there is no past and there is no future."

In other words, if American schoolchildren simply were taught the history of this nation, they would get all the character education they need, for the larger-than-life models are there: George Washington, John Adams, Noah Webster, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison and, yes, even Thomas Jefferson, the deist. Even though Jefferson differed with orthodox Calvinists in theological matters, he considered himself to be a devout Christian.



Washington at prayer: *Give due credit to Founder's faith, says Blumenfeld.*

Jefferson's own seal bears the inscription, "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."

Meanwhile, our schools struggle with behavioral problems that no longer can be ignored. Drug trafficking, rapes, assaults, cheating, extortion, robberies and murders are everyday occurrences in American schools. Thousands of students carry guns and other weapons to school. Teenagers, made functionally illiterate by their psychoeducators and segregated from the rest of productive society by compulsory school-attendance laws, form gangs to gain a sense of importance and belonging. And what do these gangs do? Engage in delinquent, anti-social, criminal behavior. We have created the fertile ground for a youth culture that has become the slave of a debauched entertainment industry. All one has to do to confirm this is peruse the merchandise in a big record store to see what the young people are listening to and reading: the occult, the sexually perverse, the nihilistic. And what do the schools offer? Condoms. Every facet of our popular culture encourages unrestrained addiction to pleasure and depravity, despite the death threat of the AIDS epidemic.

How can educators who believe condom distribution is the answer to the AIDS crisis be entrusted with any kind of character education? How can schools that have been teaching sex education all these years with the evidence that such education encourages sexual experimentation be expected to teach abstinence? In fact, some educators consider abstinence to be a religious idea and therefore inappropriate for the public school. As Barbara Risman and Richard Kane, two educators in Wake County, N.C., stated in a letter in the *News & Observer* of Raleigh in June, "We do not want a public school teacher or anyone else teaching our daughter that she should remain a virgin until marriage." The Wake County Board of Education had dared consider teaching "values," including one called "self-discipline," which suggested "choosing abstinence from premarital sex." And this was enough to evoke the parental outburst.

Yet, promiscuous premarital sex probably is the cause of more social problems in America than any other teenage activity. It has given us widespread unwed motherhood and children living in poverty and on welfare, an epidemic of venereal diseases affecting millions of young people, a high rate of abortion, increased unhappiness and depression caused by failed romances, physical abuse of women by

boyfriends, abandonment by lovers, infidelity, empty and degrading sexual affairs and jealousy-driven teenage murders. Neither the schools nor the government will launch a campaign against premarital sex as they have against smoking. Yet, which form of activity has been more destructive of the social fabric? Premarital sex or smoking?

One cannot fault the public schools for at least trying to inculcate decent moral values. There is broad consensus about the importance of such "core values" as honesty, courage, kindness, generosity, honor, self-esteem, tolerance, loyalty, cleanliness, politeness, perseverance, respect, compassion, discretion, democracy, integrity, hard work, responsibility, self-discipline, courtesy, trustworthiness, fairness, justice and caring — the values most often mentioned as appropriate for the schools. But this list is a veritable smorgasbord of moral choices! How long will it be before the politically cor-

How can educators who believe condom distribution is the answer to AIDS be entrusted with any kind of character education?

rect multiculturalists get their hands on character education, particularly if there are federal dollars to be had?

Too fresh in the minds of conservatives is the disastrous way educators ventured into values clarification and sensitivity training without realizing that nondirective, nonjudgmental psychological "therapy" produced more negative behavioral problems than it cured. As William Kilpatrick writes in *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong*, "When teachers carefully preface each discussion with caution that there are no right or wrong answers, that is the distinct impression students come away with."

And that is why many conservatives oppose character education in the schools. As Republican Rep. Dick Armey of Texas exclaimed at an Education and Labor Committee hearing when liberal Democrat George Miller of California wanted to add character education to the elementary- and secondary-education bill: "I, for one, would not tolerate anybody having the presumption to dare think they should define who my children are, what their

values are, what their ethics are and who ... they will be in this world. The fact is these people don't know my children and the fact is they don't love my children. And the fact is they don't care about my children, and the further fact is they accept no responsibility for the outcome ... and they ought to, by God, leave my kids alone."

And apparently the new Republican-controlled Congress will have little stomach for new federal education programs. The *Boston Globe* of Nov. 18 reported that Rep. Bill Goodling of Pennsylvania, a Republican who probably will become chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, has announced that all federal education programs will be reviewed to see whether they should be retained, consolidated or scrapped. Which means that any sort of character education in the public schools will have to be initiated and funded locally.

If schools really want to teach character values, they can do so quite simply by giving their students inspiring books to read. For a starter, I would recommend that every student in America read *Beyond All Hope*, the prison memoirs of Armando Valadares, a young Cuban who spent 22 years in Fidel Castro's prisons for daring to oppose Communism. He refused to have his spirit broken by prolonged brutality and torture that almost killed him. It was his Christian faith that permitted him to survive until an international campaign of protest got him released.

Then there is the story of Mother Teresa, who has spent her life caring for the least fortunate of human beings. And there is the great epic of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who spent years in the gulags of the Soviet Union but was able to emerge morally triumphant and do much to bring down the entire despotic empire that persecuted him. These are the truly heroic human beings of our time who demonstrate what character is all about.

It is my firm belief that there can be no moral revival in America without a true return to biblical religion, and I believe that government schools that cannot acknowledge the existence of God ought not to exist. The taxpayer should not be required to subsidize atheism, which is detrimental to the moral health of millions of American children.

Meanwhile, I shall place my confidence in those private schools where in God is honored and in the home schools where parents are rearing moral children with the help of their Bibles. ●