

“A Lesson of Value” - A Joint Statement on Moral Education in the Public Schools

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American public schools feel inhibited about teaching moral values, yet we are losing our children.

Drug addiction, depression, suicide, promiscuity, crime, alienation, AIDS, academic failure, emotional illness, teen pregnancy, alcoholism, intolerance, violence -- the litany of problems besetting American youth seems to have no end.

Why?

What have we done -- or failed to do -- that has brought this plague upon our children? What must we do to fight it?

Obviously, there are no simple answers. But from our perspective as religious leaders, these maladies are only symptoms of a deeper and more basic problem: a lack of fundamental values.

These values, like honesty, compassion, integrity, tolerance, loyalty, and belief in human worth and dignity, are embedded in our respective religious traditions and in the civic fabric of our society. They are the very underpinnings of our lives.

There is broad consensus among Americans, regardless of religion and cultural background, concerning these values.

In a world where short-term gratification is pressed upon children by their peers, the media, and many adults, to raise a young person without a basic value system is to cast him or her adrift. Yet we persist in cheating our children of this critically important education -- necessary if they are to grow to respect, cherish and care for themselves and others.

Traditionally, the family, the church or synagogue, the school, and the government have worked to educate children in basic values. But in recent years, there has been a growing reluctance to teach values in our public educational system out of fear that children might be indoctrinated with a specific religious belief.

All major religions advocate these values, as do the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, much of the world's greatest literature, and ethical business practices as well. We are convinced that even apart from the context of a specific faith, it is possible to teach these shared values.

In fact, public schools do teach values all the time -- but they are not necessarily the core moral values. Indeed by deliberately excluding these shared moral values from the curriculum, the

educational system actually undermines them. Children naturally look to the school to provide them with important knowledge. It is all too easy for children to assume that information not taught in school cannot be very important.

To raise a generation without an understanding of values is to assure disaster. Children are the future. The specter of a nation with an amoral citizenry is terrible to contemplate. The damage would be irreversible. If we cannot teach our children values, who will teach their children values?

We recognize that parents have a responsibility to teach values. Indeed, in such a morally apathetic environment, that so many parents have instilled strongly grounded values in their children is testimony to the unique role parents have in shaping their children's lives. (In fact, these children are important resources both as role models to their peers and in values education.)

But in our society parents can use all the help they can get. Therefore it is urgent that there be a national effort to implement moral public education in our schools, integrated into the total curriculum, and corresponding to student needs and community consensus.

There is a groundswell of support from parents, teachers and government, religious and community leaders who are struggling for a renewed moral vision within the public schools, grounded in the common bond of humanity that links all races and religions. They realize that our country is more than a land; it is a people -- a people historically admired for its biblically based values and religious traditions.

In some parts of the country, major strides have been made in the herculean struggle to develop our schools into moral communities. Many school systems have developed excellent values education programs. We recognize and praise the efforts of these dedicated parents and teachers who have fought the paralyzing fear that prevents values education. Yet, substantial even drastic systemic change is still necessary if we as a nation are to salvage the moral fiber of our children.

To bring about that basic change, we urge that:

1. Those responsible for schooling at the local, state, and national levels convene the administrators, teachers, parents, students, and citizens to address the moral educational needs of children and young people. We call for state governors and legislative leadership to create committees to promote values education in the public schools.
2. Public schools introduce moral education into their curricula; that the schools use text books, resources and teaching methodologies that emphasize basic civic and personal values. (We repeat that this can be done apart from teaching a specific religious faith.)

We call on school boards to state clearly the values they will teach and how they will teach them.

3. All faiths work together to bring about systemic change and to encourage the teaching of values in public schools. To facilitate this effort we will strongly recommend a joint commission to meet quarterly to evaluate matters pending in the courts and before the Congress that will affect the promotion of values education in America.
4. Foundations underwrite values education programs in public schools.
5. The media, especially television, promote civic and personal values in their programming.
6. For our part we will:
 - a. Establish within our Consultation an ad hoc committee to discuss this issue and make recommendations on the substance of value-based curricula and teaching methodologies. We will assist in providing teaching materials and guides reflecting our shared moral values.
 - b. Ask that Catholics and Jews begin a widespread dialogue about moral education in the public schools; we ask that this dialogue take place in state Jewish Councils, Catholic Conferences, and ministerial associations.
 - c. Support educational opportunities to teach values -- and values teaching -- to parents.
 - d. Within our own educational institutions, emphasize anew our commitment to moral values which come ultimately, from divine revelation.

Children are not born with values any more than they are born with math and reading skills. In a nation that spends billions of dollars to influence youth as to which cars to buy and which clothes to wear, it is a national disgrace to fail to teach basic values in the public schools.

Our children need those values. Our society requires them. We, as a nation, can teach them. We must teach them now -- before we lose our children.