



"Happiness is not the end of life; character is."
—Henry Ward Beecher

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Public Schools and Teaching Character

At an October 2002 Hillsdale College seminar, former Secretary of Education, Drug Czar, and *The Book of Virtues* author William J. Bennett related a Detroit judge's experience: "When I ask young men today, 'Didn't anyone ever teach you the difference between right and wrong?' they answer, 'No, sir.' And you know, Mr. Bennett, I believe them. It is a moral vacuum out there."

Mr. Bennett has been on a values crusade for more than a decade. He does not himself advocate teaching values classes in public schools, but the idea is gaining ground across America and has even been implemented here and there. However, though the intention is noble, public school character education is a bad idea.

This nation's public schools are failing almost everywhere. Taxes keep rising to pay for public education—around \$10,000 per pupil per year in some places—and test scores show no appreciable rise, and in fact, are dropping relative to fixed standards of yesteryear. Good teachers are fleeing public schools for private sector jobs, reducing teacher competency by an alarming rate. Paul Craig Roberts recently reported in an editorial titled "The Union That Killed Education":

Sara Boyd, a recipient of many awards and accolades during her teaching career, experienced difficulty passing a mathematics competency test. She sued the state of California, claiming the test was racially discriminatory. But at her deposition she was unable to answer the question: "What percent of 80 is 8?"

Homeschooling has become the most viable alternative to public education over the past several years. Concerned parents, watching standards—scholastic, moral, and cultural—tumble in their local schools, are turning to traditional curricula taught in the home by a parent to give their children a better education and environment. Whereas homeschooling used to be equated with liberal, hippie, granola-munching types, the movement is now predominantly conservative and Christian.

Adding values education to a hemorrhaging public school system is a last-ditch tourniquet, a triage procedure to save a wounded and dying institution. It may staunch the flow, but it will not keep the patient from expiring. Why? The answer is simple: A person, group, or institution cannot teach what it does not possess. At best, the public schools should be reinforcing values that have already been taught.

Character education must be taught in the home. If a child riding the bus on his first day of school does not already possess the basic values of right and wrong, he is already set up for failure. A five- or six-year-old child should already know and practice such fundamental values as respect for authority, courtesy, honesty, respect for property, respect for life, responsibility, etc. They are not difficult for a child to understand, especially if they are reinforced by their parents' examples. The Bible is full of exhortations and examples to parents to guide their children (see [Deuteronomy 6:4-9](#); [I Kings 1:1-6](#); [Proverbs 22:6](#); [Ephesians 6:1-4](#); etc.)

The parents should be supported in their responsibilities by the churches. However, this is happening too infrequently in this country. American mainstream churches are so busy doing "outreach," "political action," and other time- and resource-wasting activities that they are neglecting to teach Bible-based character from their pulpits. In attempting to include groups the Bible wholeheartedly rejects unless repentant, they have watered down

Christian virtue into one word: tolerance. I challenge pastors and preachers across America to find that word in the Bible. [God](#) is never happy when religious leaders shirk their duties (see [Malachi 2:1-9](#); [Jeremiah 2:8-13](#); [5:30-31](#); II Peter 2; etc.).

As with all matters of morality and character, change must begin with the individual, and from there it spreads to the family and beyond. It cannot begin in a liberal public school system that will not recognize God, truth, biblical standards, or even this nation's founding virtues. As the song says, "Let it begin with me."

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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