

The following is an article written by Willard R. Daggett, Ed.D., President of the International Center for Leadership in Education, Inc. in New York. Dr. Daggett is a recognized leader in the field of character-centered teaching.

PART IV. ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF CHARACTER

The development of a child's character and appropriate behavior is first and foremost the responsibility of the American family. Schools should assume a supporting or secondary role, unlike in the development of a child's academic skills where schools have the primary responsibility. Furthermore, schools should not do anything to impinge upon a family's responsibility and ability to develop character and appropriate behavior in children. In today's society, however, families are no longer islands in and of themselves. Children are exposed to many influences outside of home and spend a good deal of time away from their families. Families need the support of schools and the community in their efforts to develop the qualities of good character in their children.

Many Americans want schools to take direct and immediate action to address the growing behavioral problems in this country. They believe that unless schools try to do so, they will be unable to even fulfill their primary responsibility, which is to develop students' intellectual capacity. From this group, leadership has emerged to create a variety of programs to address the problem of poor behavior in schools. There is another group that disagrees, however. They do not trust schools to effectively deal with the character issue. These people fear that school personnel will impose values and beliefs on their children that may conflict with family ideologies.

The people who oppose having schools address behavior have led to some highly emotional and explosive debates regarding the role of schools. As a result, schools in America have increasingly moved away from programs that deal with behavioral and character issues. While these groups remain at an impasse, disruptive behavior in school and degeneration of our culture continues. Escalating gang activity, illicit drug use, firearms and other deadly weapons, teen pregnancy rates, etc., are all the proof we need to see the very real and ever-increasing problem in our schools today, and in society overall.

Despite the difficulty of determining how to support families on those issues, we must find a role for schools in developing good character and behavior in young people. This paper uses findings from historical and contemporary research to lay the groundwork on how to gain parental and community support for character education in American schools.

Defining Our Terms

Character and behavior have different definitions among various groups. It is important to clearly define what is meant by *character* and *behavior* in order for schools to move forward. For the purpose of this paper, character and behavior are related, but are defined differently:

- Character - those attributes (positive or negative) that a person possesses, such as being trustworthy, courageous, dishonest or irresponsible.

- Behavior - the action(s) taken by a person, such as being courteous, completing work on time, hitting another person, or being verbally abusive.

The character attributes a person possesses become the foundation of that person's behavior. Schools and society in general, tend to focus on and deal with behaviors, which are the symptoms of deeper problems that stem from one's character.

Debates over character education in American schools have typically occurred in connection with specific programs, such as sex, drugs, AIDS education, or values clarification programs. Such programs often touch on morally debatable behaviors and should not be the thrust of character development education. This is not to say that these moral issues should be avoided, but rather that schools need not address them in their character education programs. A more basic need, which is the focus of this discussion and should be the focus of schools' character education programs, is to create acceptable characteristics in children which result in behaviors that will ultimately lead to civility in our nation. The attributes of good character are referred to in this paper as *guiding principles*.

Identifying Guiding Principles

How does a school district determine what guiding principles to emphasize so that it can assist families in ensuring that their children develop the qualities that contribute positively to society? The International Center has come to the conclusion, based upon the research and study of successful programs, that what schools need to address is, ironically, that which is not being discussed. Most groups and communities typically spend little time discussing their commonly held, or core beliefs. These beliefs are so generally accepted and understood that the people feel no discussion is necessary. What is debated are those beliefs and behaviors in which there is no agreement.

This paper will show that there are, in fact, commonly held principles such as respect, responsibility, honesty and perseverance that can and should be the focus of schools' character development initiatives. While these principles are not being discussed and therefore assumed to be both accepted and understood, this report will also show that the American people, particularly children, are increasingly lacking these guiding principles. Schools can and should assume more responsibility in assisting families in their development. The best way to do this, by far, is to continually involve parents in the process, starting immediately. Individuals view the guiding principles differently, therefore, educators must not assume they can determine the best methods of teaching the guiding principles. The combined involvement of parents, the public, and educators is essential to best educate students.

Abraham Lincoln once said that the values we teach to one generation of young Americans will become the principles of the next generation's government. The values and behaviors that our young people see exhibited in the media and in society today - violence, materialism, lack of respect for authority, selfishness, etc. - are not the qualities of a civilized nation.

Whether we look at the basic characteristics of good citizenship from a democratic, religious, cultural or socioeconomic perspective, the same set of guiding principles keeps manifesting itself. Respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, loyalty, honesty, compassion, perseverance, courage, deliberateness, initiative, optimism, and adaptability are all important qualities regardless of a person's gender or political, racial and religious convictions. We must not allow

varying opinions on issues to hinder the instruction of the guiding principles which we, in society as a whole, agree is of utmost importance.

To succeed, we must approach the issue in a systematic way. The first step is to decide how to gain community agreement on the guiding principles identified. How do we then teach the guiding principles? Do we do it by simply informing students of our expectations, or do we have to become more involved in the formation of the principles? This paper will describe how local school districts and communities can bring parents and a broad representation of the public together to identify the guiding principles that schools should assist families in developing in children and how they go about teaching them. Let us first review the history of character education in America and its relation to society.

A Historical Perspective

Teaching guiding principles to children is hardly a new concept. Throughout history, the purpose of education has been to help young people to become good citizens as well as to develop their intellect. In addition to providing knowledge and literacy, schools have, from the beginning, taught character and virtue.

Unlike other nations, which are comprised of homogeneous populations, the United States is a nation of many diverse cultures and religions and, therefore, many differing beliefs. The pluralistic nature of our society means that we must approach the teaching of guiding principles to children differently than do other nations. Due to the unifying force that religion plays in many other nations, character education is frequently linked to religion. The United States, on the other hand, does not have a national religion, although United States citizens have religious roots. It is, therefore, possible to teach guiding principles using common values and virtues without impinging upon or promoting specific religious beliefs.

Since the time of Plato, people have realized that intellectual development and good behavior are not the same. Teaching guiding principles, therefore, has long been an important component of schooling. Many of Plato's dialogues question which moral standards should be taught to Athenian youth; questions about issues not unlike those that are present in America today.

The debates between Plato and Aristotle offer compelling methods of teaching guiding principles. Plato felt that by teaching students about the principles and concepts of good character, they would then exhibit good character. The idea of teaching concepts relates to the International Center's push for rigorous academic standards. In contrast, Aristotle preached that to develop good character traits, students must practice these characteristics through experience. This reflects the International Center's call for relevancy in what is taught in schools. Rigor and relevance need to exist in unison as they relate to teaching students guiding principles and not be viewed as an either/or situation.

The debates on how to teach guiding principles did not end with Plato and Aristotle. In 1847, Horace Mann, argued that public schools should help students develop both reason and conscience. Mann viewed the child as a lump of clay that could be shaped for the future. During this time, moral education for most people meant religious instruction. Since character education had to be linked with religious doctrines, education leaders such as Mann constantly struggled with how to blend religion and character education into school teachings. There was always the risk of being labeled anti-religious if they did not advocate a moral education based on religious foundations.

Education in colonial times emphasized teaching respect for authority and maintaining social and religious order. Reading and writing were taught to ensure that individuals could read the Bible as well as be good citizens who understood the laws of society. The requirement of schools to link education with character issues was mandated in the Massachusetts Law of 1642; this was the first law regarding education in America,

The importance of the family in developing good character in their children can be seen as early back as the 19th century when Washington Gladden expressed concern about the stability of the family. He described the family as the “oldest of the institutions of society, and the most-sacred.” Gladden believed, as the International Center does, that the family is the most important educator of children. However, since many parents were unable to fulfill the obligation due to their own lack of education or for some other circumstance, teachers needed to complement or reinforce the values that parents were to pass on to their kids (Cremin 23).

In 1885, Reverend Josiah Strong focused on the emerging problems of metropolitan America. As people were leaving rural America for the cities, the demands of urbanization placed new burdens on education. In addition to teaching specialized knowledge, schools now had to instruct the social discipline essential to life in crowded conditions. With mass urbanization, the structure of many families began to change from an extended family to just the mother and father raising the children. Since a primary responsibility of most parents in early times was to raise children to abide by religious doctrine, they had the dual obligation of caring for their child’s physical needs as well as their spiritual. Almshouses, orphan asylums, and reformatories were established for many children not fortunate enough to have families, or those who had families but were failed by them.

Modern American Times

A shift in the focus of character education from family and religion to issues of citizenship occurred early in this century when women, minorities, and people without property first became eligible to vote. Not only did American schools become responsible for educating the entire population of young people, curricula had to be expanded to include subjects that would give students a sense of their role as citizens. The explosion of immigration to the United States only increased the pressure on schools to fulfill their responsibilities. The once homogeneous society in America was vanishing rapidly, giving way to an increasingly diverse, heterogeneous population.

These circumstances, along with the urbanization of the United States, had a tremendous impact on education. The large numbers of people living so close together required the formulation of many rules and regulations to govern the communities. Schools were asked to unite the diverse student population. Teachers were expected to serve as role models of good health, good intellect, worthy home membership, citizenship, and ethical character.

The availability of the automobile in the 1920s provided a means of mobility that never before existed. To many educators and parents, the automobile represented the catalyst for the decline in morality that emerged soon after. The invention of movies and radio were also thought to impact character in a negative way. Educators were quick to point out the detrimental impact that the mass media was having on children. The movie and broadcasting industries even attempted to become educators in their own right. In 1922, the newly formed Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) sought “to establish and maintain the highest possible moral and artistic standards in motion picture production.” By the 1930s, the MPPDA

had enforced a self-regulatory code that shaped the moral, social, and political content of American films. Motion pictures were to have educational as well as entertainment value. During this time period, the values contained in the movie code coincided with and reinforced those being taught in schools (Spring 285-286).

Following WW II, the value of an education soared as it was viewed as the means to a better standard of living. Every state in America passed school reform regulations between 1949 and 1951. Schools continued to teach citizenship, but the focus shifted radically to preparing students for higher education. This resulted in a de-emphasis on character issues. During this time, the Darwinian theory of biological life being the product of evolution led people to see things, including morality, as evolving rather than being fixed and certain. Furthermore, some viewed Einstein's theory of relativity as pertaining to moral behavior rather than simply the behavior of physical matter. The idea arose from these theories that whether something was right or wrong was relative to one's point of view (Lickona 7). This led to "personalism" in the 1960s which some believed emphasized rights more than responsibility and freedom more than commitment. The focus was on the individual rather than how the individual related to institutions such as the family, church, the community or country. The prevailing attitude of children at the time was to rebel against authority. In many cases, teachers and parents were reluctant to exercise their legitimate authority. The personalism of the 1960s and 1970s started the foundation of the "values clarification" approach (Lickona 30).

With values clarification, instead of trying to teach specific values, the teacher's role is to help students learn how to identify and understand their own specific values. Using this approach, adults do not directly instruct children in right and wrong or try to influence their values by suggesting that some values are better or worse than others. An individual's values are not evaluated against a standard, and no distinction is made between right and wrong behavior (Lickona 11).

In today's technological/information age, where most entry-level jobs require higher skill levels than most high school graduates possess, business also emphasizes the need for prospective employees to have character traits such as honesty, responsibility, and loyalty, along with strong communication and people skills. The definition of good character, as defined by business, is different from how good character is defined in the context of citizenship or by the church or family. Businesses value the competitive spirit, while churches and families have always preached compassion. For example, compassion and respect for the environment have not always been important qualities to business. This example is one of many that contributes to the hindrance of character education initiatives. It is time to bring all parties to the table to start discussing character issues, agree or disagree accordingly, and move on from there.

Today's Problems

During the past 50 years, major changes have occurred at every level of American society. These changes have had a significant impact on the family, the church, and the workplace. The structure and role of the family has changed, as has the economy and the types of jobs available. The mass media disseminates endless viewpoints on all aspects of society, and instantaneous communication through worldwide networks places an abundance of information in the hand of people, including children. The mounting cost of health care, education, government, and production of goods has created a "bottom-line" mentality in many areas of society, causing tremendous stress in Americans.

While many of the problems we face today are not new, they are becoming magnified. The breakdown of the family structure, for example, has been a concern since the beginning of urbanization. The typical family, years ago, was comprised of a male breadwinner, children, and a stay-at-home wife and/or mother. Today, however, this represents only about 7 percent of all U.S. families. Social and economic reform has pulled more women into the workplace, and the number of single-parent homes has increased. As a result, schools have to assume many of the responsibilities once owned by the family.

Concern about the influence of the media on children has continued to grow due to both the pervasiveness of the media in our lives, and because it no longer serves as an integrating force in our culture. Technology continues to present new challenges, especially in respect to what children see and hear. The following is a brief discussion of a few of the contemporary problems that hinder the development of guiding principles in children.

The Media. America, in 1950, had seven weekly magazines and three television networks, which had to appeal to all sectors of the population. During this time, one could say that the media homogenized America – everybody read the same articles, watched the same shows and heard the same radio reports. In the early days of television, the majority of households had one television. Numerous sitcoms portraying the "nuclear family" were watched regularly by all family members. The nuclear family replaced the extended family and the values of such were transmitted through this programming. Today, there are more than 40,000 magazines and newsletters. Most homes have access to over 50 television channels on multiple sets, allowing people to watch the shows that suit their own interests. The massive variety of media present in so many different forms today has caused the de-homogenization of society. People now listen to radio or music through personal audio players with headphones, tune into select television and radio shows, and read an innumerable volume of articles or journals that play to very segmented audiences.

The impact of the media had transformed the extended family of the early 1900s into the nuclear family of the 1950s, which then mutated into what it is today - the dysfunctional family. Today, television glorifies the polar opposite of what families were like at the turn of the century. Network executives say they are reacting to forces of the marketplace and insist that parents need to take responsibility for what their children watch. However, the networks target audiences between the ages of 18 and 49 because they are the key consumers who also watch the most TV. The presence of multiple TV sets in the home, along with parents not being around when children get home from school, has resulted in more unsupervised television viewing than ever before. Television programming today glorifies ill behavior by promoting gratuitous violence, gang activity, drug abuse and drinking, rather than stressing commendable traits such as honesty, respect, etc. Is there any question of the reason for declining character in America's kids today?

Cyberspace and Technology. In addition to the influence of the media on our youth, a growing concern is cyberspace. A very powerful generation of search programs has the ability to index the entire Internet, making it possible to find information on almost everything, including the recipe for manufacturing bombs. Cyberspace is a great leap forward technologically, but how we incorporate it into society and use it responsibly has not yet been defined. Our young people must be taught to deal with the vast amount of accessible information independent of adult supervision. If they lack guiding principles, they are more likely to be led astray.

Cyberspace is just one example of how technology continues to change our lives and have a profound effect on children. Another example is video-on-demand, a technology that will be available in homes over the next few years because of fiberoptic capacity. Video-on-demand will offer an variety of programming options-sporting events, sitcoms, news, movies, performing arts, etc. Therefore, parents will need to be actively involved in making decisions about what their children watch.

The Role of Parents. Although parents ultimately have the central responsibility in guiding their children to be of good character, it appears to most American educators that many parents believe either (1) the bad behavior and lack of guiding principles are indeed a problem, but the problem stems from other children's parents, or (2) that if their children are a part of the problem, they abdicate their responsibility to the school. Parents who take either of these positions are oftentimes the most serious part of the problem. These parents must face the reality of the situation and accept responsibility for their children's behavior,

Unfortunately, parents often do not demonstrate appropriate behavior or live up to their commitments. They may discuss guiding principles with their children, but some become hypocritical when they don't exhibit appropriate behavior themselves. If the parents are not part of the solution, then they are part of the problem. Apathy is a major concern as well. Some parents place their needs ahead of their child's. When schools have open houses or parent-teacher conferences, oftentimes parents of the children who are having trouble do not attend. Although there may be valid reasons for their absence, the fact remains that the schools are without the valuable support they need in helping these students.

Peer Pressure, Gangs and Other Problems of Youth. Indifference among students is also a big concern. Since many students do not see the relationship between achievement in school and success in life, they are not motivated to live up to their full potential, Schoolwork seems unrelated to the rest of their lives. Making school relevant to the real world, which is a large part of the International Center's philosophy of rigor and relevance in education, would help dispel the students' apathy. Peer pressure can also cause those students who are working hard and achieving in school lose their motivation.

Young people want to be part of a comfortable group. With family structures disintegrating, some are turning to gangs to find the friendship, support, protection, respect and general sense of belonging they need. Gangs are not new. The first gang appeared in New York City in 1826, but gangs were typically confined to large cities, until recently. The market for drugs exists throughout the country and gangs, being very much involved, will willingly move to anywhere there are customers, including rural communities and small towns across America. Since gang members believe that the best way to get what they want is through aggressive behavior, violence is a way of life for them, and serious crimes committed by gangs are on the rise (Goldentyer). Breakdowns of family and community structures undoubtedly make some children more apt to join gangs, than others. Since children from low-income families lack recreational opportunities, have difficulty finding jobs, and are oftentimes on their own, many of these kids have little to do but hang out on the streets. However, gangs have also been forming in prosperous areas as a result of some youths feeling alienated from family and friends or simply being bored.

Gangs are far from being the only problem. Alcohol and drug abuse by young people of all socioeconomic groups and academic abilities, high incidences of teenage pregnancies,

extraordinarily high rates of violent crimes by teenagers, a general lack of respect for authority, and other peoples' property, are other examples. While these problems may be more extreme in poorer communities, children from all areas are affected.

Impacts of a Changing Economy. Adding to problems in society, and in many young adults' lives, is the fundamental transformation of our economic system, and the graduates' lack of preparation to function in the workplace setting. For the first time in history, we have people in their twenties who were successful in school, yet have trouble finding good jobs after graduation. This group, known as Generation X, achieved in school but are finding themselves functionally unemployable and are looking at a future that does not look too bright. The disillusionment these young adults are experiencing increasingly disengages them from society, causing extreme cynicism as to the "rules" of society. Behavior problems can result as an outgrowth of these attitudes. No changes have yet been made to keep students who are currently in school from experiencing the same feelings.

Underlying Causes. Powerful and all-encompassing changes throughout our society have resulted in stresses on individuals and the family. Significant mistrust of employers, law enforcement officials, the courts, health-care providers, and politicians is prevalent in America today, It seems that all too often people are trying to escape the pressures of daily life through drugs and alcohol. Meanwhile, the American political system is in gridlock. Terrifying stories in the papers and nightly news relay the sad events and statistics that often influence the behavior of people.

What can we do to make things better for our country, our families and our children? Although the problems of poverty, homelessness, violence, crime, etc., are extremely complex and may seem overwhelming, schools can and should make a difference by focusing on each individual child. After all, it is really the behavior of individuals, which is ultimately reflected in those disturbing statistics. As educators, parents, and community members, we must seek to understand the issues confronting our children. Only by looking at the problems and understanding what is happening at the individual as well as the societal level can we begin to develop programs that address these very serious issues.

Summary – Part IV

For most of this century, the media contributed to the mass 'enculturation' of American society. Also, many people worked in large factories or companies, which had an agreed-upon culture and set of rules. Most important, strong nuclear and extended families passed the guiding principles of the culture on to their children.

Today, the large factories and the strong nuclear and extended families are extinct. The media contributes to a de-homogenization of our society. These happenings have led us to a point where there appears to be little common culture being transmitted to today's youth. Without a common culture, a nation lacks the unifying guiding principles needed to bond it together. Schools are in a position to serve as a unifying cultural force for young people today. They can support parents in developing guiding principles in students and should do so for the necessary good of our youth and of our society.