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Why Schools Fail: Reclaiming the Moral Dimension in Education

By William A. Donohue

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
U.S.A.
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WHY THE SCHOOLS FAIL: RECLAIMING THE MORAL DIMENSION IN EDUCATION

By William A. Donohue

THE PROBLEM

There is by now abundant evidence that the schools are in trouble. In the 1980s one report after another has been issued detailing the poor condition of the public schools. From the much celebrated report "A Nation At Risk," we learned that American students ranked last among 21 industrial nations on seven of nineteen academic tests. Some 13 percent of all 17-year olds, and better than 40 percent of minority youth, are functionally illiterate. Illiteracy in mathematics and science is particularly bad, and when the subject switches to history and literature, the results don't get any better. Knowledge of elementary geography is so bad that James Vining, director of the National Council for Geographic Education, has said "We have a situation where Johnny not only doesn't know how to read or add, he doesn't even know where he is."[1]

That's not all of it. The decline in academic performance has been accompanied by a decline in manners and morals, as the incidence of teenage pregnancy and violence in the schools makes clear. Reports of teachers, as well as students, who have been beaten, robbed, and raped — while not a daily occurrence — are nonetheless more prevalent now than at any time in our history, making some schools no more safe than the streets on which they are situated. Drugs are commonplace, in rich as well as poor neighborhoods, and the data on alcohol abuse are not encouraging. To top it off, the number of incompetent teachers, as judged by the easiest of tests, is shocking, and the quality of college graduates going into the education profession is a disgrace.

Reversing the Tide. The recommendations of the many reports issued on the schools have centered on matters of curricula and teacher effectiveness. The National Commission on Excellence in Education said that "the rising tide of mediocrity" that threatens American education can be reversed by doing such things as tightening standards, developing a core curriculum of academic courses for all students, assigning more homework, and raising teacher salaries. The Twentieth Century Fund Task Force focused on the establishment of a Master Teacher program, one which would financially reward excellence in teaching; it also recommended that mastery of English be given priority, arguing that federal funds for bilingual programs be used only for teaching English to non-English speaking students.

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1 Quoted by Solveig Eggerz, "Emphasis on Social Studies Leaves Students Ignorant of History and Geography," *Human Events*, June 21, 1986, p. 12.

William A. Donohue is Professor of Sociology at La Roche College, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

He spoke on June 23, 1988, during his appointment as a Bradley Resident Scholar at The Heritage Foundation.

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The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, under the leadership of Ernest Boyer, has turned out three reports, one on secondary education, one on higher education, and one on the status of urban schools. High schools, Boyer said, need to clarify their goals, pay more attention to English, develop a core of academic courses, lighten teacher loads, and reward teacher excellence. He urged colleges and universities to rethink the emphasis on careerism and restructure curricula toward a more defined liberal arts orientation. These ideas found support from such authorities as the National Institute of Education and the Association of American Colleges.

The problem with the urban schools, Boyer contended, was that they were largely untouched by the reform movement of the early 1980s. He urged greater accountability and, reflecting the influence of an earlier report by John Goodlad, called for building smaller schools, capping enrollment around 500 students; the anonymity of large schools has clearly had a negative effect on academic achievement and discipline.

A report issued by education specialist Theodore Sizer stressed basic skills, teacher autonomy, and greater teacher accountability for the performance of their students. Once high school students have proved to be literate in English and math, Sizer concluded, they should no longer be required to stay in school. Philosopher Mortimer Adler's Paideia Group called for extensive reform, with all students assigned to a single track, allowing of no electives (save choice of foreign language); courses should be selected from the traditional liberal arts areas. Adler's contribution is perhaps the most tightly woven proposal of all the reports on the schools.

THE ROLE OF CHARACTER IN SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

The common assumption that undergirds these recommendations is that the key to better education is more student exposure to quality educational opportunities. It assumes that test scores, as well as other measures of educational success, will increase once a core group of traditional academic courses is offered by highly trained and motivated teachers. The focus, then, is on improving teachers and curricula. This is what may be called the cognitive approach to better schools, emphasizing as it does the faculties of the mind.

The fundamental problem with the cognitive approach to better schools is that it undervalues the independent role of the student in determining academic excellence. To be specific, the reports on the schools give due consideration to inadequate teachers, salaries, curricula, facilities, textbooks, and the like, but sorely neglect to mention the inadequacy of the student. All of the reports cast the student in a passive light, denying to him any active role in determining educational outcomes. He is seen as a dependent variable, a subject that is acted upon, but never acts on his own. This perspective sees the student as a person who spends his time responding to stimuli; there is nothing dynamic about him.

The point is that good teachers and good courses can only have a marginal effect in improving the schools, and that is because the cognitive approach is bent on doing something *to* the student and not something *about* him. The reports on the schools are right to conclude that today's students are underprepared, but what they fail to mention is that

the source of underpreparation is flawed character development, i.e., it is the lack of certain personal attributes that best explains why students are underprepared academically.

Stressing Character Development. Better curricula and better teachers do not, by themselves, make for better students. Curricula and teachers are to education what game plans and coaches are to sports: they constitute program development, properties which are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for success. For success to be achieved, something must be done to insure that the individuals who are subjected to quality programs are themselves able and willing to benefit from these opportunities. And that means that character development must be stressed as much as program development: If the requisite personal traits that make for success are lacking, all the techniques and instructors in the world will not make a young person a good student or a good athlete.

The kinds of personal traits that are necessary for success in school are the same ones necessary for success in any endeavor, be it on the playing field or in the office: hard work, determination, sustained effort, practice, and so on. Yet as obvious as this should be, many educators still undervalue the role which character development plays in determining academic achievement. That is why they concentrate their time on program development, concocting new teaching techniques and the like. It is as if the recipient of their innovations, namely the student, will somehow take to whatever it is he is offered. But as we should have learned by now, if students don't possess the kinds of character qualities that allow for progress, it is not likely that being exposed to even the most effective pedagogical resources will make much of a difference.

There are some educators, like Secretary of Education William Bennett, who clearly understand the relationship between character development and academic achievement. Bennett has consistently emphasized the importance of "the three C's," namely content, character and choice [of schools]. It needs to be said that good personal skills are not only critical to learning, they are important to the maintenance of discipline in the classroom as well. Indeed the problems of the schools in general – poor academic performance, teenage pregnancy, violence, and drugs – are ultimately a reflection of flawed character development. It is to this aspect of education that attention must be given if progress is to be achieved.

High Standards. The really good schools, and there are many of them, play close attention to character development. A good school can be defined, in part, as a place where the values of self-discipline and hard work are consistently nurtured by both teachers and administrators. Studying is not possible without sustained effort, and that is not a quality that most of us just happen to possess. It needs to be demanded of us regularly, and induced through daily routines. Experience shows that holding students to high standards is perhaps the best way to inculcate desirable character traits. The evidence is pretty clear on this matter, as a look at the best schools in the country supports. Not surprisingly, the same traits appear in Japanese schools, arguably the best in the world.

We have known since the 1960s that money, teacher credentials, quality of learning facilities, and student-teacher ratio are not the key variables explaining academic achievement. That was one of the major findings of the Coleman Report (formally known as "Equality of Educational Opportunity"), a comprehensive study of the schools conducted

by a team of researchers, led by University of Chicago sociologist James S. Coleman. The evidence collected since that time is supportive of Coleman. For example, between 1960 and 1980, the amount of money spent per student each year more than doubled in constant dollars. The average class size shrank considerably, and the percentage of teachers with master's degrees rose from one-quarter to one-half. Yet SAT scores dropped by 85 points during those years.

Money *vs.* Results. Further support for the Coleman Report's findings can be ascertained from educational data collected by the states. New Hampshire typically has the highest average SAT scores of any state, yet ranks in the bottom half in expenditures per pupil. In terms of graduation rates, a state like South Dakota, which ranks eighth on this measure, is forty-second in expenditures per pupil and dead last in average teacher salary. On the other hand, the District of Columbia has the worst graduation rate in the country, but is near the top of the chart on both expenditures per pupil (second only to Alaska) and teacher salaries (fourth overall). Money, then, is not the great elixir.

The Coleman Report's basic conclusion was that the quality of the family that a child was raised in proved to be a major determinant of educational success. In other words, it was the resources that a child took with him to school, and not what he acquired in the classroom, that seemed to matter most. Other researchers later to came to similar conclusions, including those who, like Christopher Jencks, were not ideologically disposed to accepting such findings.

Primacy of the Family. And what individual traits seemed to matter most? Coleman found that the strongest single determinant of academic achievement was self-responsibility. Those students who took responsibility for their performance, while more burdened than those who did not, were also more autonomous and more successful.[2] Obviously, those schools that actively sought to develop self-responsibility had a better track record than those that did not. But as good as a particular school might be, nothing could quite substitute for the primacy of the family.

Twenty years after the Coleman Report was issued, the Department of Education released a study entitled *What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning.* It underscored Coleman's emphasis on the family, maintaining even further that it was not the income level of the family that mattered most, it was what parents actually did to help their children academically that was of unsurpassed significance. Schools did matter, the report said, and those that did the most effective job were the ones that had a safe and orderly environment, stressed daily homework, had high expectations of students, and held them to rigorous standards of accountability.[3]

In 1987 the Department of Education issued a sequel to its *What Works* report, this time focusing on the needs of disadvantaged students. Its recommendations included such things as building character and instilling the values of hard work, self-discipline, and

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2 James S. Coleman, "Equal Schools or Equal Students?" *The Public Interest*, Summer 1966, p. 75.

3 *What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning*, U.S. Department of Education, 1986.

self-responsibility. Building character and teaching values, the report stressed, is every teacher's business, not just those assigned to teach specialized courses. By doing such things as giving students responsibilities and insisting on daily homework, teachers help to develop in students such habits as persistence and self-control, thus enabling them to do better in school and ultimately in life. Accountability is critical, for when students are trained to assess the future consequences of their behavior, such problems as teenage pregnancy, drugs, and dropping out of school are minimized.[4]

Parochial School Demands. Many of the same conclusions are evident when comparisons are made between private and public schools. As sociologists like Andrew Greeley and others have long maintained, the relative success of Catholic schools, especially when compared to their public school counterparts in ghetto neighborhoods, is largely a function of the demands that parochial schools place on their students. A 1981 study published by the National Center for Education Statistics confirmed Greeley's research. On the basis of data from tests given to nearly 60,000 high school students in over 1,000 schools, the report, conducted by James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, found that the reason why the average public school did not do as good a job as the average private school (many of them Catholic) was due to the lack of an orderly environment, relatively easy demands placed on students, and absence of school spirit.

With regard to Catholic schools in particular, Coleman found that students did better than their public school peers in math, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Catholic schools also insisted on more discipline, and dispensed it in a fairer manner than was true of public schools. The overall level of problems, as reported either by students or principals, was much less in the Catholic schools. This clearly accounts for the dramatic increase of non-Catholic enrollment in Catholic schools in recent years, especially in ghetto areas. In fact in many of the Catholic schools in ghetto neighborhoods the majority of the students are now non-Catholic. Parents are investing in better education and stricter discipline.[5]

Surviving on Bingo. There is no mystery as to why Catholic school students do better: a) more is demanded of them and b) the overall climate of discipline is conducive to learning. Indeed as anyone who has ever attended Catholic school will confirm, as compared to the average public school, teachers typically have less credentials, classes are larger, facilities are inferior, and the amount of money spent per pupil is small. With regard to finances, in fact, if it weren't for candle and cookie sales, bingo, and the like, many would simply not survive at all. As Coleman found, good schools, whether they be public or private, have in common what good Catholic schools have: "Schools which impose strong academic demands, schools which make demands on attendance and on behavior of students while

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4 *Schools That Work: Educating Disadvantaged Children,* U.S. Department of Education, 1987. See especially recommendation 3, "Building Character," p. 23.

5 See Hilary Stout, "More Non-Catholics Using Catholic Schools," *The New York Times*, November 28, 1987, p. 25.

they are in school are, according to these results, schools which bring about higher achievement."[6]

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the study done by Coleman and his associates was the analysis of the data by Amitai Etzioni, a distinguished sociologist at George Washington University. Etzioni secured access to the computer tapes of the Coleman study and, after careful analysis, concluded that self-discipline was the variable that most prominently figured in accounting for academic success. It was the internal attitudes and motivations of students, Etzioni said, that best explained school performance. That is why he recommended that more homework be given to students: it nurtured self-discipline. Just as important, Etzioni said, was prompt and detailed feedback on homework assignments; teachers, as well as students, need to be held accountable.[7]

Hard Work Variable. What all this boils down to is what Barbara Lerner aptly calls "the hard work variable." To be exact, Lerner says that an analysis of the research literature consistently reveals that four factors are central to good school performance: amount of homework; amount of class time spent directly on relevant school work; frequency of class attendance; and textbook demand levels.[8]

None of these factors, it should be noted, costs a great deal of money to implement. It is commitment, not money, that spells the difference.

Further proof that "the hard work variable" is the key to academic achievement can be found by studying the tremendous success of Japanese education. Merry White, in her splendid book *The Japanese Educational Challenge: A Commitment to Children*, details the role which hard work and character development play in accounting for the unparalleled success of Japanese education. Mothers are dedicated to instilling the value of self-discipline in their children and do not hesitate to place strong demands on them. Mothers typically work at home, attending to their children's needs, offering "quality time" all day long, and not just for half an hour after supper. Moreover, the culture supports the kinds of constraints that allow for success and reinforces self-discipline through a variety of social techniques.

The Japanese schools are goal-oriented. In the lower grades, White reports, children learn to bear hardships and to behave unselfishly. Once in the middle grades, they learn to persist to the end with patience and to live a life of moderation. Learning to be steadfast and to live an orderly life is emphasized in the upper grades. This is part of the moral education program that all Japanese children experience. Hardship, White informs, is not

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6 James S. Coleman, "Private Schools, Public Schools, and the Public Interest," *The Public Interest*, Summer 1981, p. 25.

7 Edward B. Fiske, "Etzioni Wants to Shift Focus to the Students," *The New York Times*, November 1, 1983, p. C1.

8 Barbara Lerner, "American Education: How Are We Doing?" *The Public Interest*, Fall 1982, p. 72.

only acceptable to Japanese culture, its virtues are extolled: "Hardship builds character, which is not innate, and anyone, the Japanese believe, can acquire the habit and virtue of self-discipline."[9]

THE ROLE OF THE NEW FREEDOM

It should be obvious by now that self-discipline and "the hard work variable" are strongly related to academic achievement. It should be equally obvious why American schools are in trouble: our culture nourishes habits and values which are directly contradictory to the very qualities that make for success. Quite simply, American culture embraces a concept of liberty without limits, a go-for-broke, no holds barred conception of freedom that disables individuals as well as institutions.

This new freedom appeal to self-indulgence works to undermine the social basis of academic excellence in many ways. It is just not possible to import the value of sustained effort in a culture hell-bent on immediate gratification and the abandonment of constraint. By fixing our eyes exclusively on the merits of unburdening the individual, we find it culturally impossible to comprehend the Japanese celebration of hardship. We pay a heavy social price for our idea of freedom, one that short-changes us in many ways.

It was the education elite, not parents, principals, or teachers, who adopted the ethos of the new freedom and turned the schools upside down. What makes the story so tragic is that the radical reforms which took place in the 1960s were so unnecessary. In the two decades that followed World War II, SAT scores and other measures of academic achievement improved steadily. Elementary codes of conduct were regularly followed and problems of drugs and violence were mild compared to the near out of control situation that exists in many schools today. Then, about midway through the decade, a series of untested assumptions and unrealistic theories were put into practice, devastating the progress that had been made and turning the clock backwards on an entire generation of students.

Progressive Education, Regressive Results. The score is in on this one: progressive education, as interpreted since the 1960s, has yielded regressive results. Traditional education, with its emphasis on daily homework, structured learning, and discipline in the classroom, has delivered far more progress than progressive education ever hoped to achieve. As if further proof is needed, consider the results of an Abt survey conducted in 1977 for the U.S. Office of Education. A total of 9,200 third graders were divided into two groups: one was taught the traditional way, with highly structured lessons and lots of homework, and the other was subjected to the progressive ideal of "informal and innovative" techniques, representative of the "open classroom" ideal. Tested after three years, the traditional approach won hands down, and at a lower cost than its progressive rival.

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9 Merry White, *The Japanese Educational Challenge: A Commitment to Children* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), pp. 17 and 30.

It is results like this that have prompted educators like Theodore Black to sound the alarm on the liabilities of progressive education. Black, an eleven-year veteran of the New York State Board of Regents, the last as its Chancellor, has seen first-hand the different outcomes that the two opposing strategies yield. For him, the results of the Abt survey only prove what should be common knowledge among educators, but sadly is not: competition, self-restraint, and accomplishment produce better educated students than egalitarianism, self-expression, and test-bashing. "Modernism," he says, has typically led to a deterioration in quality wherever it has succeeded in supplanting traditional education.[10]

Attacking Authority. What has happened, as Joseph Adelson has said, is that both civility and competence declined once authority was attacked. "The loss of authority is felt most strongly," he says, "at the secondary-school level, and its effects are seen most clearly in the area of discipline." But the effects, he adds, go even deeper than this: "The weakened authority of teachers and principals also led to a weakening of academic demands."[11] And we have seen what happens when "the hard work principle" is not in force.

It was the radical reformers of the 1960s who junked "the hard work principle" and led the attack on authority. Those who brought the new freedom to the schools were the proud intellectual descendants of John Dewey. The highly structured approach that the traditional education model espouses was declared — without supporting evidence — to be unfit. Following Dewey, the new freedom advocates sought to usher in a neo-progressive agenda, one featuring "open education" and undirected learning. But in fairness to Dewey, the education gurus of the 1960s went far beyond anything he counseled. They took his ideas to extremes and thereby corrupted any value they might have had.

Revolutionary Politics. Dewey fairly criticized the often taut and anti-individualistic approach of traditional education. By concentrating so heavily on structure, the methodology of traditional education helped to stifle individual creativity and bore many students, especially the brighter ones. Dewey sought to open things up a bit and move away from the mechanical skills approach so commonly employed. Throughout his work, he maintained a serious, realistic stance, quite unlike the utopian visionaries of the 1960s. Dewey was content to be a reformer, while his new freedom heirs wanted nothing less than revolutionary politics, played out in the theater of the nation's classrooms.

Perhaps the most important difference between Dewey and the radical reformers of the 1960s was the way in which they defined freedom. For Dewey, "freedom from restriction... is to be prized only as a means to a freedom which is power: power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences which will result from acting upon them; power to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation." As to the proper meaning of freedom, Dewey said "The only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised

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10 Theodore M. Black, *Straight Talk About American Education* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

11 Joseph Adelson, "How the Schools Were Ruined," *Commentary*, July 1983, p. 46.

in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worth while." And the purpose of education was clear: "The ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control."[12]

Nihilistic Approach. Not only were none of these ideals shared by new freedom educators, they explicitly rejected such thoughts and actively worked against them in practice. For them, freedom from external constraint was not a means to an end, it was an end in itself.

The new freedom approach to education was essentially nihilistic, and that is why very few of the self-styled radical reformers had much interest in promoting a conception of freedom that served inherently good purposes. And it was self-expression, not self-control, that they valued.

One of the most tenaciously held beliefs of the radical reformers was, and still is for many new freedom educators, the conviction that the schools are oppressive institutions. Charles Silberman, one the most respected new freedom students of education, helped set the tone of the discussion by maintaining that most Americans were ignorant as to the despotic quality of the public schools. He lampooned them for failing to appreciate "what grim, joyless places most American schools are, how oppressive and petty are the rules by which they are governed." What was it that he found so offensive? The answer: the practice of insisting on peace and quiet in the classroom. Silberman berated teachers for being "obsessed" with peace and quiet, charging that such concerns were "unnatural."[13]

Charles Reich came to the same conclusion as Silberman, arguing that the sheer existence of classroom rules proved that teacher authority was "in the purest sense lawless." He said students were no more free than prisoners in a penitentiary, and maintained that "An examination or test is a form of violence."[14]

Unthinkable Comparison. Jonathan Kozol, the well-known social critic and former teacher, opined that all students were subjected to a certain "intellectual and custodial Hell within the public schools." Kozol called for change, sponsoring the Free School movement, but was quick to warn that reform should not be limited to white rich kids from rural areas, likening such a prospect as being "a great deal too much like a sandbox for the children of the SS Guards at Auschwitz."[15] It is this kind of hysteria that makes any comparison with Dewey unthinkable.

The ideas of the new freedom — that anything that constrains is necessarily bad — permeated the writings of the radical reformers. Their vision of reality was so affected by new freedom consciousness that had the average person actually read what they said, the most logical conclusion would have been that these people are delirious. For example, most people believe in compulsory education, on the grounds that if a child is deprived of

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12 John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), pp. 69, 74, and 75.

13 Charles Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 10 and 90.

14 Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 136-137.

15 Jonathan Kozol, *Free Schools* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), pp. 11 and 118.

schooling by neglectful parents, he will forever be disabled. But educator John Holt concluded that this was the same as saying "if you don't go to school, we are going to put you in jail – a real jail with bars on it." Yes, he thought the analogy was just that close.

Most people understand that in the course of going to school, a selection process of sorts takes place, as young men and women find a match between their abilities and aspirations. For Holt, this quite natural process is nothing more than "meat stamping." What about the perfectly normal practice of teaching students values, including the value of patriotism? Holt objects, screaming "indoctrination."[16] In other words, such perennial functions of the schools as socialization, selection and allocation of human resources, and social control, are all seen as being hostile to freedom and destructive to the mission of education.

So what should we do? According to Free School enthusiast Allen Graubard, we need to develop a "libertarian pedagogy," one that will contribute to the larger process of building "a truly humane and liberating social order."[17] And where should we look for inspiration? To the work of English educator A.S. Neill. Neill's Summerhill school was widely touted by new freedom thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s as a place where freedom without repression reigned. Neill hated authority of any kind, and that is why he insisted on participatory democracy in his school, holding, for example, that if students wanted to use profanity, they had a perfect right to do so. Reflecting the sentimentalism of the times, Neill believed that love was all that children needed to set them free.

Quixotic Picture. One of the working assumptions of these writers is the belief that everyone quite naturally wants to learn, and were it not for the methods of traditional education, everyone would. Psychologist Carl Rogers, for instance, spoke for many when he confessed "I become very irritated with the notion that students must be 'motivated.' The young human being is intrinsically motivated to a high degree."[18] Ergo, there is no good reason why a student should ever be bored or dislike school. If such a situation does arise, it is proof not of any defect in the student, but in the teacher or the school. The whole notion of self-directed learning assumes this to be true, holding as it does to a quixotic picture of the human condition.

Some of the most specific suggestions to overhaul the schools came from Herbert Kohl. Kohl developed a guide for teachers, instructing them on the merits of the "open classroom." His how-to approach includes such advice as doing away with the practice of assigning seats to students, allowing school kids to hang their coats wherever they choose to, abolishing the requirement that students should raise their hand before asking a question, ending the tradition of lining up before entering or exiting the building, and doing away with prohibitions against talking in class, chewing gum, and wearing sloppy clothes. As far as instruction was concerned, Kohl said that students should be taught such things as

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16 John Holt, *Freedom and Beyond* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972), pp. 243, 247, and 251.

17 Allen Graubard, *Free the Children* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. xi and 10.

18 Carl Rogers, *Freedom to Learn* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969), p. 131.

"conventional" spelling, but that "Once they know about the rules of uniform spelling, they should be free to accept or modify them as they please."[19]

Subverting Traditional Education. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner implored teachers to openly subvert the tenets of traditional education, and even offered ways in which this goal might be achieved. Included in their recipe for action were such nuggets of advice as: teaching without textbooks; having students learn from teachers not trained in the field they are teaching in; fining teachers 25 cents if they used more than three declarative sentences per class; limiting teachers to asking only those questions they know they cannot answer; making every class an elective; requiring all graffiti accumulated in school toilets to be reproduced on large paper and hung in the school halls; and banning the use of such words as teach, syllabus, I.Q., makeup, test, disadvantaged, gifted, accelerated, course, grade, score, human nature, and dumb.[20]

It might be objected that such absurd notions as these would never be taken seriously by educators. Wrong. The praise heaped on these savants came from the most respected, mainstream institutions and critics in the country. From the experts at Ivy League colleges to the education specialists at the *New York Times*, heaps of praise were generously extended to writers like Kohl and Postman. No, most schools did not implement some of the sillier proposals that were made, but collectively the new freedom educators had the effect of discrediting the value of traditional education and substituting in its place some ersatz version of their own offerings.

Contempt for American Society. All of the reform efforts, be they called "free school," "open classroom," "alternative education," or the "deschooling movement," had in common certain presuppositions governing the worth and value of American society. "None of these movements," writes Diane Ravitch, "was isolated from the others; they shared certain assumptions about the failure of the existing public schools, the corruptness of American society, and the need to adopt radical changes in school and society."[21] Ravitch is exactly correct: it is impossible to understand the mentality of those who wrecked the schools without referencing the profound contempt they had for American society. It was alienation from society, coupled with utopian visions of a new social order, that energized their thoughts and fueled the movement.

If there was one flaw that both Dewey and the new freedom educators of the 1960s and 1970s had in common it was their unwarranted assumption that most students came equipped with a minimum level of self-discipline. Dewey's oversight was somewhat more understandable, given the many social and cultural inducements to self-discipline that existed in the first half of the century; it was more natural that he would take self-discipline for granted. But the radical reformers in the second half of the century should have known better: a "libertarian pedagogy," if it can work at all, must have as a base a society wherein

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19 Herbert Kohl, *The Open Classroom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), pp. 22-30, 111, and 112.

20 Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 137-140.

21 Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983), p. 238.

self-discipline is carefully nurtured. The 1960s was not such a time, as should have been evident to everyone.

The curriculum reformers not only took self-discipline for granted, they did much to undermine its development. But it was the other wing of new freedom educators – the ones dedicated to students' rights – that made discipline of any kind almost impossible to achieve. Much, though certainly not all, of the breakdown in discipline in the schools is an outgrowth of moving the rights movement into the classroom.

STUDENTS' RIGHTS

Beginning in the 1960s, proponents of children's rights made the seemingly innocuous case that students are human beings like everyone else, and are therefore entitled to the entire panoply of rights extended under the Constitution. Rights advocates worked hard to remove what they saw as the second-class status of students, and found cause for celebration in *Tinker v. Des Moines*. It was in that 1969 decision that the Supreme Court proclaimed that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." Though the high court has more recently taken a less expansive interpretation of the Constitution as it applies to students, it cannot easily undo the social effects of decisions like *Tinker*, *Gault*, *Winship*, and *Goss*, cases which in one way or another extended due process rights to students.

Depriving Students of Freedom of Speech. The fundamental problem with extending rights to students is that it inevitably becomes a zero-sum operation, since every gain in students' rights must result in a proportionate loss of rights to principals and teachers. The net social effect of this redistribution of rights is a decline in both teacher authority and principal autonomy. This outcome is not lost on students, as many begin to sense that teachers have limited rule, meaning, naturally, that the cost for misbehavior diminishes with every new round of court-awarded rights. But if it can be said that this is a zero-sum exercise in rights distribution, it surely is a net overall loss to the goals of education, as both students and teachers lose. And no one loses more than students.

No student can learn without a modicum of order in the classroom, and for this to be achieved, teachers must have the authority to maintain it. It is not easy to see how this can be done when the right to punish a student for misbehavior has been called into question, subjected to scrutiny by the court, and ultimately made into a rebuttable presumption. The greatest irony of all is that in the name of rights, students have a hard time learning anything, including learning how to read and write at a minimal level, thereby depriving them of taking full advantage of their First Amendment right to freedom of speech.

A California study demonstrates the changing nature of discipline problems in the schools. In the 1940s, the most common complaints centered on such things as talking, chewing gum, running in the hallways, getting out of place in line, and not putting paper in the wastebaskets. In the 1980s, the most common complaints centered on such things as

drug abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery, and assault.[22] The difference: in the 1940s, students came to school more well behaved than they do today, the authority of teachers was more widely respected, and principals had more control over disciplinary procedures. The new freedom changed all that, relaxing constraints on young people and stripping authority and autonomy from teachers and principals.

Gerald Grant, a sociologist who has conducted his own field studies in this area, maintains that "the new adversarial and legalistic character of urban public schools" would be the most noticeable change "to an observer who had not visited a public school since the mid-1960s." The bottom line he says is "a shift of profound dimensions" as "adult authority is increasingly defined by what will stand up in court."[23] Again, students are not unaware that the tide has shifted their way, and that is why the most reckless among them exploit their "rights" to the hilt.

By teaching students they have rights but not responsibilities, new freedom lawyers, judges, and educators have literally perfected a blueprint for flawed character development. To give one instance, beginning in 1980, students in the Boston public schools received a twenty-five page pamphlet called "The Book." In it they learned all about their rights, culled from such sources as the ACLU, but practically nothing about their responsibilities (there were eleven lines of type devoted to this side).[24] Now young people being young people, what lesson in morality are they likely to draw from "The Book"? Have they been given an incentive to conform to the rules of classroom decorum, or have they been presented with a case for challenging those rules that strike them as disagreeable?

MORAL EDUCATION

The problem of discipline in the schools is not wholly the result of the rights without responsibilities craze. It is due to something much larger: it is due to the new freedom's fixation on moral neutrality as the governing ethos in society. It reflects, at bottom, a crisis of confidence, an uneasiness with the defense of the dominant norms and values of American society. The problem is many new freedom educators have psychologically divorced themselves from American society, thus making it impossible to endorse programs designed to defend the moral worth of the social order. The consequences of this alienation are still with us, and show no signs of abating.

It would be wrong to suggest that most of today's teachers and administrators are alienated from society, or that they are not committed to its defense. But it is nonetheless true that most of them are still reluctant to accept their duty as moral educators, influenced as they have been, by new freedom thinkers. Yet from the ancient Greeks down to recent times, it has been a staple of the schools to provide moral education.

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22 Reported in "Getting Tough," *Time*, February 1, 1988.

23 Quoted by Bruce Hafen, "Developing Student Expression Through Institutional Authority: Public Schools As Mediating Institutions," *Ohio State Law Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 3, 1987, pp. 685-686.

24 Gerald Grant, "Children's Rights and Adult Confusions," *The Public Interest*, Fall 1982, p. 91.

The notion that a young person should not be trained for citizenship — to accept his obligations to the community — is an outgrowth of 1960s excess, an idea so bizarre as to be outside the historical parameters of discourse on education. The purpose of the schools has always been, first and foremost, instruction in morality. A school which turned out academically prepared, but morally underdeveloped, students, would historically have been judged a failure. Until the advent of the new freedom, that is.

Teachers Supporting Parents. Whether or not virtue can be taught is still debatable, but what is not debatable is that most people think it should be. Traditionally it has been true that most parents want the schools to teach virtue, with the expectation that what is being taught in the classroom is consistent with what is being taught at home. No one contends that the schools can be an adequate substitute for the authority of the family, but few will deny that teachers can play a supporting role to that of parents. At the center of the controversy is not whether teachers can assist in teaching virtue, it is the proposition that they should refrain from doing so altogether.

"To suggest that a society lacks the right to teach children the basic morality on which its very existence depends," notes philosopher Andrew Oldenquist, "is tantamount to suggesting that it has no right to exist."[25] How true. Oldenquist reminds us that there is nothing exceptional about a people teaching its morality and culture to its young. Indeed quite the contrary: it is the exception to the rule — in defiance of all the anthropological literature — to find a society determined to deprive its members of its heritage and mores. Yet this is what new freedom educators have sought to do. They do not want to allow the schools to act as cultural depositories of American norms and values.

The standard new freedom response to the question of teaching values in the schools is that not everyone agrees on what values should be taught, therefore all that should be done is to allow teachers to facilitate students in the clarification of their values. But to insist on a standard of unanimity is to obscure the issue. There is a consensus, a general agreement, on what values should be taught, and that is all that is needed. How many people, for example, would protest that it is wrong to teach students the values of hard work, self-discipline, honesty, fidelity, and so on? Not many, as even those who dissent must admit.

Asserting Without Proof. Those who insist on the "value neutral" approach hold a deep-seated hostility to traditional authority. They assert, without offering any proof, that traditional religious and cultural norms and values have proved to be unsatisfactory in modern societies. Of course the same people who commonly make such pronouncements think it a good thing that it is illegal for teachers to lead their students in prayer. So what do they offer? A "value neutral" approach which seeks to help students clarify their values.

Should teachers begin a class in values clarification by informing their students that the Judaeo-Christian tradition, of which they are a part, holds to a core set of moral values, or should teachers just allow the boys and girls to state whatever values come to mind, and then help them to clarify those values? The latter is the prescribed course of action. What

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25 Andrew Oldenquist, "'Indoctrination' and Societal Suicide," *The Public Interest*, Spring 1981, p. 86.

if students ask for help by asking their teachers what values they hold? According to the Sidney Simon school of values, the teacher should say nothing, unless such questions come at the end of the exercise. At that point, "The teacher should present himself as a person with values (and often with values confusion) of his own."[26] He can then share his values, confusion and all, with his students, making sure, however, to state that his values are no better than anyone else's.

It would be interesting to see how these students, indoctrinated as they have been with the doctrine of moral neutrality, would respond to the same teacher who, in a history class, were to say that slavery is evil. To begin with, would a teacher who taught the Simon method be likely to make such a "value judgment" in the first place? If so, what moral authority could he summon if a student challenged him? Having just told the students in a values clarification class that all values are morally equal, how could he now start by making exceptions? More important, why should anyone bother to listen?

The new freedom emphasis on individual rights is also evident in the value neutral approach. Lawrence Kohlberg, in particular, was quite fond of insisting that moral claims could be impartially resolved by considering individual rights. Like Simon, Kohlberg came to the question of values formation and maturation from a decidedly asocial position. The traditional figures of authority – parents, teachers, priests, and policemen – carried no special weight with Kohlberg. What Kohlberg tried to do was to assess the merit of moral claims wholly outside the real world context of social roles and status groupings. Whatever the philosophical value of such a method, it is sociologically suspect, thereby renting it of useful purposes.

Teaching Moral Neutrality. To get an appreciation for how the values clarification approach plays itself out in real life, consider its application in sex education classes. Ever since values clarification became the predominant orientation in sex education, there has been no shortage of textbooks and teachers' guides aimed at teaching moral neutrality. As Jacqueline Kasun's analysis of the literature shows,[27] one of the most popularly used books explicitly states that "we must finish the contemporary sex revolution. . . our society must strive to sanction and support various forms of intimacy between members of the same sex." Another widely used text advises first-grade teachers to lead their students on a mixed-group "bathroom tour," the purpose of which is to acquaint boys and girls with the proper names for male and female genital parts.

Other exercises favored by the values clarification approach to sex education include dividing the class into boy-girl pairs so that they can work on "physiology definition sheets." In this session, high school students are instructed to define such terms as "foreplay," "erection," "ejaculation," and so on. Included in the curriculum is the recommendation that teachers should encourage students to discuss whether they are satisfied with the size of

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26 Sidney Simon, Leland Howe, and Howard Kirschenbaum, *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students* (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1972), p. 26.

27 Jacqueline Kasun, "Our Erogenous Zones," *Crisis*, March 1988, pp. 30-34. An earlier edition of this article, entitled "Turning Children into Sex Experts," appeared in *The Public Interest*, Spring 1979, pp. 3-14.