

F O U R

Schooling

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Every society, from the most primitive to the exquisitely sophisticated, has devised mechanisms for teaching its young what they must know to enter successfully into that society as adults. This preparation-and-induction process typically includes the society's essential skills, rules, and mores as well as the core values that the culture honors.

In America, as in other advanced countries, this process takes numerous forms and engages myriad formal institutions and informal structures. These include family, neighborhood and church, a host of other civil-society organizations, and—our present focus—the schools.

Schooling in the United States is typically compulsory for ten to twelve years of a youngster's life, usually from age five or six through sixteen or seventeen. Further education is widely available at low cost (to the consumer, at least) for as many more years as anyone might want. During the compulsory period—essentially first grade through high school—the main provider is government,

ordinarily in the form of state government operating through local education agencies, underwritten by a mix of state and local tax funding and overlaid by sundry federal programs, regulations, and subsidies.

Relying primarily on government as the chief source of schooling creates an instant paradox when it comes to educating the children of a liberal society in values, virtues, and citizenship. Because we cherish freedom as a core value and insist that the state is the creature of its citizens, we are loath to allow state-run institutions to instruct tomorrow's citizens in how to think, how to conduct themselves, and what to believe. Because a free society is not self-maintaining, however, because its citizens must know something about democracy and individual rights and responsibilities, and because they must also learn how to behave in a law-abiding way that generally conforms to basic societal norms and values, it is the obligation of all educational institutions, including primary and secondary schools, to assist in the transmission of these core ideas, habits, and skills. Indeed, we fret when we learn of schools that *neglect* this role, even private schools. One of the more effective debating points scored against voucher plans, for example, is the allegation that "Klan schools," "witchcraft schools," and "madrasas" (fundamentalist Islamic schools) will qualify for public subsidy even as they impart malign values to their pupils. But should government define which values are sound? A paradox indeed. We want good citizens to emerge from all our schools, yet we don't want schools that operate as arms of the state to dictate their values and virtues. And we don't want privately operated schools to instill the wrong values in them.

Lurking behind that paradox is a darker possibility: that today's schools are not just ambivalent and skittish when it comes to values and virtues and hence are doing a lackluster job of transmitting them to the young, but that these institutions may actually be

causing harm in this domain. Some schools and educators are flirting with worrisome values such as moral relativism, atheism, agnosticism toward democracy, excessive deference to the “pluribus” at the expense of the “unum,” discomfort with patriotism, cynicism toward established cultural conventions and civic institutions. Transmitting such values to children will, over time, erode the foundations of a free society. We must now contemplate the disturbing possibility that the schools we once counted upon to promote values that support freedom may in fact be doing the opposite.

Schooling in the United States

Like most developed societies, America requires its children to attend school but does not force them to enroll in government-operated schools. That’s been clear since the Supreme Court’s *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* decision in 1925. “The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose,” ruled the justices, “excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only.” At the same time, however, the high court affirmed the state’s authority to ensure that all of its children receive an education from acceptable schools—schools that, the justices never doubted, would include the formation of good citizens among their purposes:

No question is raised concerning the power of the state reasonably to regulate all schools, to inspect, supervise, and examine them, their teachers, and pupils; to require that all children of proper age attend some school, that teachers shall be of good moral character and patriotic disposition, that certain studies plainly essential to good citizenship must be taught, and that

nothing be taught which is manifestly inimical to the public welfare.¹

A debate has raged forever among economists and theoreticians as to whether the benefits of education are predominately public (accruing to the society) or largely private (adding to the prosperity and life prospects of individuals receiving it). That there's no debate victor in sight attests to the fact that the right answer is surely "yes": Education confers both types of benefits, which is also why its control, financing, and delivery are shared between public and private sectors. The Court's *Pierce* decision recognized the balancing of interests that typifies America's approach to primary-secondary schooling whereby, in addition to government schools, families may opt for privately operated schools, home schooling, and, of late, such variants as charter schools, even cyberschools. Many hybrids exist today, and more will exist tomorrow. The options are numerous—but not the option of shunning education altogether. Government does require that all youngsters get some form of schooling and makes its version freely available to all comers, courtesy of the taxpayers, whereas most others charge tuition or fees. No wonder government schooling has captured the lion's share of the education market.

The complexities grow more tangled when we observe that at least three levels of government are engaged in the funding and regulation (and, to a degree, the delivery) of "public" education in America. Primary constitutional responsibility is vested in the fifty states, but they (except for Hawaii) have opted to delegate much of the heavy lifting to local education agencies, which usually (but not always) correspond to town or county borders but which are often independent, in whole or in part, from the mayors, city councils, aldermen, and county commissioners who run the police

1. *Pierce v. Society of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary*, 268 U.S. 510 (1925).

department and ensure that the trash gets collected. About ninety-three cents of the average public school budget dollar come from a blend of state and local tax revenues—a blend that varies greatly from place to place—with Washington contributing the rest. Essential policy decisions—such as who will teach, who is qualified to lead schools, will there be kindergarten, at what age may youngsters leave school, who selects textbooks—are similarly complex, with all three (and sometimes more) levels of government involved. Moreover, the tradition in some parts of the country (for example, Colorado) is for “local control” to predominate in K–12 schooling while in other places (for example, New York), the state sets most of the rules.

When it comes to the *content* of schooling, including both the explicit academic curriculum and the teaching of values and character, it has not been many years since most such decisions were made locally—at the town level, in the principal’s office, even in the individual classroom. The states generally discharged their self-imposed education responsibility by enacting and (more or less) enforcing “compulsory attendance” laws and furnishing free public schools wherein those laws could be obeyed. Though school resources and operations were governed by hundreds of laws and regulations, the state said relatively little about what pupils would actually learn in school. Though most states gradually introduced certain academic requirements, for decades these consisted mainly of a student’s obligation to earn enough “Carnegie units” to graduate from high school by being able to show on his transcript that he had completed a specified number of courses in designated fields.

With the passage of time, some states went further, mandating particular courses that all pupils must take. (A year of U.S. history during high school was perhaps the most common of these requirements.) And a few jurisdictions grew much more specific. The public schools of California and Texas, for example, could only

use (at state expense, anyway) textbooks that state agents had vetted and approved. New York's powerful Board of Regents, via its legendary "Regents exams," spelled out the actual content of particular courses, at least at the secondary level. For the most part, however, curricular decisions still remained in the hands of locally run school systems, individual schools, and teachers. The state had little to say about them, although a high degree of uniformity crept in via professional norms within the education field (for example, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics' view of middle school math, the International Reading Association's approach to primary reading), ubiquitous college entrance requirements (for example, fluency in a foreign language), the academic priorities of private organizations that administer widely used national tests (for example, the SAT and Advanced Placement exams), and by the remarkably homogeneous thoughtworld (to use E. G. Hirsch's term) that dominates what is taught and learned in the education colleges where most American educators are trained.

The State's Role Grows

During the 1970s, America awakened to the troubling facts that some of its high school graduates could barely read and many were ill-prepared for college and the workforce. One by one, state governments responded by enacting "minimum competency" tests that young people had to pass as part of demonstrating their fitness for a diploma. This had the effect of intruding the state directly into the specification of academic skills that all students must learn—and show that they possessed. It had the further effect of beginning to centralize and standardize such decisions, which previously had been handled in disparate ways by local school boards, even individual teachers.

Nor did the centralizing stop there. After the National Com-

mission on Excellence in Education informed us in 1983 that the nation was at risk due to the weak academic attainments of our students, states and, increasingly, the federal government began to get much more concrete about what pupils must learn at various grade levels. The “excellence movement,” as some termed it, evolved into what is now called “standards-based reform,” wherein (typically) the state prescribes a body of skills and knowledge that all schools are supposed to teach and all children are supposed to learn; administers tests designed to give everyone feedback on how well those standards are being met; and imposes rewards and sanctions intended to prod children and educators into doing better. Under recent federal law, all states must set academic standards for their public schools in three core subjects; give annual tests to see how well those standards are being attained; and devise “accountability” systems that seek, through a combination of carrots and sticks, to alter the behavior of students, teachers, and schools so as to foster the attainment of these standards. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) gives every state twelve years to get *all* its students achieving at a “proficient” level vis-à-vis the state’s own academic standards.

These standards normally apply to all public schools within state boundaries, including both those run by local school systems and those that operate as charter schools. Rarely, though, do they apply to private schools or home schoolers—yet another accommodation to the awkward, yet quintessentially American, balancing of public and private interests in the education sector. Moreover, the federal requirements bear only on reading, math, and science, deferring to states and communities to shape the remainder of their own standards and curricula. It’s common, however, for states to add “social studies” to their standards, and often art and literature, too. Further muddying the waters, even as states set new standards for academic outcomes, a number of old input-style graduation requirements also linger on the statute

books, such as the tradition of everyone taking U.S. history in eleventh grade. Also present in many states are curricular prescriptions in health, physical education, home economics, and other subjects that, at some point, a legislature or board of education deemed so important as to mandate for all schools.

Teaching Values, Preparing Citizens

Today's statewide standards may or may not extend explicitly into values education and character formation. Most schools, however, find themselves enmeshed in these domains for several reasons, beginning with the fact that they consider themselves charged with developing good citizens, not just people who can read, write, cipher, get into college, and earn a living. Indeed, when Americans are asked what are the earmarks of a decently educated person at the conclusion of compulsory schooling, most place citizenship high on the list. An overwhelming majority believes that it's "very important" for all schools to prepare young people to be "responsible citizens."² Yet we also harbor grave doubts that government should dictate the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that comprise such citizenship.

How have U.S. schools sought to square this circle? First, when developing standards and curricula in social studies, they generally accompany the traditional disciplinary content of history, geography, economics, and government with some direct attention to citizenship, social norms, and the like. This may or may not include overt "character education," but it nearly always incorporates civic values, rights, responsibilities, and participation, at least in its statement of aspirations. Here, for example, is the opening paragraph of New Jersey's description of its "core curriculum content standards for social studies":

2. Annual Kappan/Gallup survey, including 1996. See note 21, David E. Campbell, for specifics.

Citizen participation in government is essential in forming this nation's democracy and is vital in sustaining it. Social studies education promotes loyalty and love of country, and it prepares students to participate intelligently in public affairs. Its component disciplines foster in students the knowledge and skills needed to make sense of current political and social issues. By studying history, geography, American government and politics, and other nations, students can learn to contribute to national, state and local decision making. They will also develop an understanding of the American constitutional system, an active awareness and commitment to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, a tolerance for those with whom they disagree, and an understanding of the world beyond the borders of the United States.³

The school's formal curriculum is the most obvious place to augment "book learning" with a suitable concern for citizenship. When this succeeds, children come to understand how the government works and what it means to live in a democracy, while also learning how to behave in the public square (obey the traffic laws, pay your taxes, vote, wait your turn for the bus, engage in volunteer work, and so on.)

As one's conception of citizenship expands from understanding to participating, however, the formal curriculum's inherent limits become manifest. For example, a recent report, "The Civic Mission of Schools" by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, offers four goals for civic education, all denominated in terms of "competent and responsible citizens" whose development is the main point. The first of those goals says that such citizens are "informed and thoughtful," which can mesh with a classically curricular view of the school's role. But the other three—"participate in their communities," "act politically," and "have moral and

3. State of New Jersey Web site, <http://www.state.nj.us/njded/cccs/11socintro.html>.

civic virtues”—are harder to instill through conventional books and teaching.⁴

Some of these subtler and more behavioral civics lessons may be embedded in the pedagogies and classroom methods that are prescribed or assumed in state standards for various subjects, including some that range far beyond social studies and that often carry controversies of their own. These may involve learning “cooperatively” (which critics see as destructive of American individualism, even as fostering socialist ways) and engaging in “critical thinking” (which can be quite upsetting to followers of traditional faith-based religions). Even when such lessons are not spelled out in formal state standards, they are apt to turn up in classrooms and schools because they hew to the pedagogical dispositions of many educators. When they do turn up, unfortunately, we begin both to see disgruntled parents and to glimpse some of the ways that today’s schools can end up weakening the base of a free society.

There was a time, primarily in the 1980s, when a number of states poked into students’ values and, especially, behavior. Known as “outcomes-based” education, this began as a logical response to the era’s new focus on schooling’s discernible results rather than simply its inputs and requirements. In some jurisdictions, however, it led to a focus on pupil attitudes and actions, such as “respecting diversity” and “working collaboratively with others.” This proved politically untenable—parents protested against government imposing patterns of behavior or thought on children under the guise of mandatory academic standards. So most states pulled back from behavioral and affective standards and confined their standards to the more strictly cognitive domains.

There had been an earlier time, mainly during the 1970s flow-

4. “The Civic Mission of Schools” (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, February 2003), 10.

ering of postmodernism and relativism on university campuses, when some prominent educators, most famously Harvard professor Lawrence Kohlberg, urged schools to encourage children to “clarify” their own values. Instead of instructing youngsters on which values they should hold, such educators held that their responsibility was to refrain from being “judgmental” and, instead, to elicit the values that presumably lurk within the bosom of every human being. This, too, produced a backlash among parents who felt that teachers should admonish children as to the difference between right and wrong, not refrain from such distinctions. But it left a lasting imprint on the education profession and on the training of teachers and principals.

These episodes suggest the basic problem: When they enter the domain of virtues and values, schools and educators can do harm as well as good by, for example, teaching youngsters that moral judgments are relative, idiosyncratic, and anchored to nothing but one’s own opinions or preferences. Yet we also see that schools (and educators) are damned both when they do enter this domain and when they don’t. Beyond a very narrow core of civic values, Americans hold strong but often divergent views about the virtues and values they want their children to acquire, about the role of teachers and schools in inculcating those virtues and values, and, especially, about the role of distant governments in trying to shape, standardize, and regulate such decisions.

Signs of Weakness

Our continuing ambivalence about these matters—uncertainty that it’s any of the school’s business and worry that the formal education system’s direct engagement with such sensitive matters may lead to vexed outcomes—helps to explain why many schools have done a lackluster job of instilling values and developing character in youngsters. Certainly there’s ample evidence—cheating,

violence, and so on—that a lot of youngsters aren't acquiring and internalizing the virtues that most adult Americans think they should espouse and practice. To be sure, some blame for such failings must be laid at the door of negligent and self-absorbed (or absent) parents, the baleful influence of the mass media, and other negative forces at work in the lives of children. Still, responsibility must also be shared by the education profession, which for the most part is awash in relativism, postmodernism, multiculturalism, and childcenteredness, all calculated *not* to produce teachers (or textbooks, lesson plans, and so on) who think it's their job to instruct children on the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, democratic and authoritarian. We know from a recent survey of education-school professors that their own beliefs about what's important for teachers to know and schools to do are distant from those of most ordinary Americans.⁵ We also know that teachers, like everyone else, live and learn within a broader culture that transmits insalubrious values (via television, popular music, and so on), even as it signals that anything goes—that one's own pleasures and needs deserve top priority and that well-behaved grown-ups don't render harsh judgments or make invidious comparisons.

Whatever the reasons for their dereliction, the recent Carnegie report blasted the schools for doing a weak job with their "civic mission" and insisted that their doorstep is where this responsibility properly belongs, if only because other institutions "have lost the capacity or will to engage young people. . . . Schools can help reverse this trend."⁶

5. Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson, *Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public Education* (New York: Public Agenda, 1997). This was the first comprehensive survey ever undertaken of the views of education professors from United States colleges and universities. Their vision of education and the mission of teacher education programs are explored, including their attitudes toward core curriculum, testing, standards, and the public's parameters.

6. Carnegie, "The Civic Mission of Schools," 5.

Note, though, that disappointment and discontent regarding the public schools' performance in fostering sound values in children are not just a recent story. Confusion and conflict in this domain have deeper roots, beginning with the reality that in a pluralistic society, values that one group deems admirable may be abhorrent to another. As long ago as the 1890s, for example, U.S. Catholic leaders determined that the public schools of their day, more or less overtly Protestant, were a danger to the "faith and morals" of young Catholics. This led to the Church's decision to create the far-flung system of parochial schools that still largely endures today. The defection of many Catholics from the public schools did not, however, cause those schools to become even more Protestant. Instead, they gradually turned more secular, sometimes stridently so, banning even silent prayer and Christmas pageants. That secularism is one reason that most Catholic youngsters today attend public schools. But it also led other parents—especially fundamentalist Christians—to conclude that their own children's faith and morals were in mounting jeopardy, which gave rise to yet another crop of private schools, the fast-spreading network of "Christian schools" of the past quarter-century.

Other groups, many of them defined by religious belief, have created their own private schools, including Quakers, Lutherans, Jews, and, recently, Muslims. This option (combined, of late, with home schooling) has provided a partial solution to the values-in-public-education quandary. So have some of today's charter schools that work especially hard on moral and character education. There is much to be said for such pluralistic developments in terms of character formation, academic progress, and the likelihood that the child's school will reinforce values that are important to his parents. But with every new set of schools devoted to the beliefs of one or another segment of our polyglot population, we also add to the risk of societal fragmentation and to our uncer-

tainty that the values being taught to children in those schools will strengthen the foundations of a liberal democracy.

Obstacles to Improvement

The regular public schools, meanwhile, have become both more secular—surely more secular than the First Amendment requires—and more value-free. The education profession’s cherished “progressivism” is part of the reason. And the close scrutiny of fierce watchdog groups that scan the horizon for the slightest hint of religiosity in public schools also has made schools and educators gun-shy. In recent years, however, perhaps the strongest influences have been postmodern relativism and multiculturalism, which first trickled, then gushed from the university campus into primary and secondary school classrooms. If scholars, teachers, and those who train them abjure fixed distinctions between right and wrong, if all judgments are said to depend upon one’s unique perspective or background rather than universal standards of truth, beauty, or virtue, if every form of family, society, and polity is deemed equal to all other forms, and if every group’s mores and values must be taught (along with its culture, its food, its music, its history, and so on), who is there (in school) to help children determine what it means to be an American, how to behave, and what to believe?

Further complicating this picture is the spread of what we may term the political activism conception of civic education, such as that espoused in the new Carnegie study, which sees influencing public policy and engaging in political activity as the highest—maybe the only legitimate—form of civic participation and which gives short shrift to being a good parent, a dependable neighbor, and a conscientious member of the nongovernmental institutions that comprise civil society. It even faults nonpolitical, school-based “service-learning” programs on the dubious grounds that they may

encourage “students to volunteer in place of political participation.”⁷

Civic education is also roiled by overwrought political correctness and hypersensitivity to the possibility of textbook bias or controversy. This baleful influence arises on both left and right. As the eminent education historian Diane Ravitch recently noted, “The content of today’s textbooks and tests reflects a remarkable convergence of the interests of feminists and multiculturalists on one side and the religious right on the other. No words or illustrations may be used that might offend the former groups, and no topics can be introduced that might offend those on the other side of the ideological divide.”⁸

Hence much gets omitted from class materials and much of what remains has been sanitized to the point that it could not possibly offend any person, group, cause, or viewpoint. This has the effect of depriving schools and teachers of a huge fraction of the very stories, books, poems, plays, and legends from which children might best learn the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, hero and villain, patriot and traitor. And because this peculiar paranoia has now been internalized by curriculum writers and textbook publishers, it has the further effect of causing new instructional materials to be value-free from the outset. Escalated to the level of state standards and district curricula, it substitutes mushy generalities for specifics. Nowhere is this clearer than in the troubled subject known as social studies.

The Social Studies Mess

The man in the street probably still supposes that social studies is mainly about history and civics leavened with some geography and

7. Ibid., 26.

8. Diane Ravitch, “Education After the Culture Wars,” *Daedalus* (summer 2002), 15. Also see her book, *The Language Police* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

economics and that at the end of a well-taught K–12 social studies sequence, young people will know who Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt were, why World War II was fought, how to find Italy and Iraq on a map, what “supply and demand” means, and how many senators each state sends to Washington for terms of what duration.

If that were so, school-based social studies would contribute to the forging of citizens, at least on the cognitive side. But that’s not what animates the experts who dominate this field, shape its academic standards and textbooks, and signal to ed-school professors and primary-secondary teachers alike what is important for children to learn.

The main professional organization in this field is the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). Here is its view of what schools should accomplish:

A well-designed social studies curriculum will help each learner construct a blend of personal, academic, pluralist, and global views of the human condition in the following ways: Students should be helped to construct a *personal perspective* that enables them to explore emerging events and persistent or recurring issues, considering implications for self, family, and the whole national and world community. . . .

Students should be helped to construct an *academic perspective* through study and application of social studies learning experiences. The social studies disciplines provide specific points of view. . . . The informed social studies learner applies knowledge and processes from academic disciplines and from interdisciplinary means to both personal and social experiences.

Students should be helped to construct a *pluralist perspective* based on diversity. This perspective involves respect for differences of opinion and preference; of race, religion, and gender; of class and ethnicity; and of culture in general. This construction should be based on the realization that differences exist among individuals and the conviction that this diversity can be positive and socially enriching. . . .

Students should be helped to construct a *global perspective* that includes knowledge, skills, and commitments needed to live wisely in a world that possesses limited resources and that is characterized by cultural diversity. A global perspective involves viewing the world and its people with understanding and concern. This perspective develops a sense of responsibility for the needs of all people and a commitment to finding just and peaceful solutions to global problems.⁹

As this position statement makes plain, American education has a sizable problem with the field of social studies itself, a field that has become steadily less interested in students' basic knowledge of civics and history and more devoted to their "perspectives" and choices. This problem was underscored in the curricular guidance that the NCSS and many other education groups provided to teachers with respect to lessons about the horrific terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, and their anniversary a year later. Such guidance encouraged teachers to deal with students' feelings about those events, to help them feel good about themselves, to be nice, tolerant, and multicultural, but not really to teach them who attacked America and why our values are despised or feared (or envied) by some of the world's inhabitants.¹⁰

If "reformers" such as the Carnegie group have their way, however, the NCSS will have even more clout and civic education will be slanted even more in the direction of its political values—and away from the kinds of book-learning that may at least ground children in important information. (The Carnegie report itself is schizophrenic about knowledge, first admonishing schools to do better at instructing students in "government, history, law, and democracy," then deprecating "rote facts" on grounds that these

9. National Council for Social Studies Web site, <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/1.2.html>.

10. For a fuller discussion of the problems with 9/11 curriculum guidance and for an alternative body of guidance organized by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, see <http://www.edexcellence.net/Sept11/September11.html>.

“may actually alienate [pupils] from politics.”) Thus, we face a truly perplexing problem: Our schools have not done well at forging character, values, or civic consciousness in young Americans. They may, in fact, be teaching harmful lessons that will weaken the foundations of a free society and sap its willingness to trumpet its core principles and defend its vital interests. Meanwhile, they have failed even to impart specific information to children about their country’s history and how its government and civil institutions work. That is why many studies document the thinness of student knowledge of basic civics and history. The federally funded testing program called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a recurrent source of such evidence.

Here, for example, is the NAEP Governing Board’s description of what it means for students to be “proficient” in civics at the twelfth-grade level:

Twelfth-grade students performing at the *Proficient* level should have a good understanding of how constitutions can limit the power of government and support the rule of law. They should be able to distinguish between parliamentary systems of government and those based on separate and shared powers, and they should be able to describe the structure and functions of American government. These students should be able to identify issues in which fundamental democratic values and principles are in conflict—liberty and equality, individual rights and the common good, and majority rule and minority rights, for example, and they should be able to take and defend positions on these issues. They should be able to evaluate ways that law protects individual rights and promotes the common good in American society. They should understand how the application of fundamental principles of American constitutional democracy has expanded participation in public life, and they should be able to explain how citizens can work individually and collectively to monitor and influence public policy. These students should understand the importance and means of participation in political life at the national, state, and local levels. They should be

able to evaluate contributions made by political parties, interest groups, and the media to the development of public policy, and they should be able to explain how public service and political leadership contribute to American democracy. They should understand how American foreign policy is made and carried out, and they should be able to evaluate the performance of major international organizations. Finally, these students should be able to discuss reasons for and consequences of conflicts that arise when international disputes cannot be resolved peacefully.¹¹

That's an exemplary summary of the knowledge and understanding of civics that many Americans want the schools to impart to their children. In 1998, however, just 26 percent of high school seniors attained that level of success on the NAEP civics assessment. Three-quarters fared worse, including large fractions who scored far below that level.

United States history also presents a bleak picture. This vital subject was most recently assessed in 2001, and once again a chasm yawned between the desirable and the actual. According to the NAEP Governing Board,

Twelfth-grade students performing at the *Proficient* level should understand particular people, places, events, ideas, and documents in historical context, with some awareness of the political, economic, geographic, social, religious, technological, and ideological factors that shape historical settings. They should be able to communicate reasoned interpretations of past events, using historical evidence effectively to support their positions. Their written arguments should reflect some in-depth grasp of issues and refer to both primary and secondary sources.¹²

Yet just 11 percent of high school seniors attained that level of

11. National Center for Education Statistics Web site, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics/achieveall.asp>.

12. See <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/ushistory/achieveall.asp>.

mastery in 2001, whereas an alarming 57 percent scored below the “basic” level on that assessment.¹³

NAEP is not the only source of gloomy evidence that young people emerging from U.S. schools are cognitively ill-equipped for citizenship. There’s less formal data about their preparation for such nonacademic dimensions as civic participation, being law-abiding, and community responsibility. But the available evidence is far from comforting when one looks at volunteering and voting rates among young Americans.

The Quest for Solutions

To what extent, if any, can government solve this problem? It has surely been trying, both on the curriculum side and by pushing for more “service learning” and suchlike. In his 2002 State of the Union message, President George W. Bush called for a new outpouring of national service and voluntarism and announced creation of a policy-coordination unit called the U.S.A. Freedom Corps.¹⁴ He followed up in September 2002 with a stirring call for American schools to rededicate themselves to history and civics education and announced a multiagency effort to help make that

13. Twelfth-grade “basic” is described as follows (note that the 57 percent of high school seniors mentioned in the text were performing *below* this level on the 2001 National Assessment of U.S. history): “Twelfth-grade students performing at the *Basic* level should be able to identify the significance of many people, places, events, dates, ideas, and documents in U.S. history. They should also recognize the importance of unity and diversity in the social and cultural history of the United States and have an awareness of America’s changing relationships with the rest of the world. They should have a sense of continuity and change in history and be able to relate relevant experience from the past to their understanding of contemporary issues. They should recognize that history is subject to interpretation and should understand the role of evidence in making an historical argument.”

14. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> for the president’s text and <http://www.usafreedomcorps.gov> for information about the federal government’s programmatic efforts in this regard.

happen.¹⁵ His 2004 budget contains substantial sums to support essay contests, teacher training, and other elements of what the National Endowment for the Humanities calls its We the People program.¹⁶ The Department of Education is home to another program, catalyzed by West Virginia Democrat Robert Byrd, who is widely known as the Senate's foremost history buff. Called Teaching of Traditional American History, it supports programs that seek to strengthen the knowledge base and pedagogical prowess of K–12 history teachers.¹⁷ The Education Department also provides continuing support for worthy private programs and organizations, such as the Center for Civic Education.¹⁸

The Carnegie group and many others would have Washington expand its reach in civic education and spend a lot more money—even going so far as to urge the creation of a new federal agency to house and coordinate all such efforts. But are government programs and similar efforts to regulate, coerce, and “incentivize” schools the best or only way to tackle this problem? Perhaps not. A different approach would foster freedom, diversity, and competition in the field of education itself, notably by advancing the reform agenda that is usually termed “school choice,” which accommodates the divergent views and priorities of ethnic and religious groups, parents, and educators in these domains, allowing them to tailor the approach they want for their children rather than settle for awkward efforts at a lowest-common-denominator political consensus for all public schools.

School choice takes many forms: publicly funded (and publicly accountable) “charter” schools; innumerable versions of public-school choice within and across district boundaries; magnet

15. See http://www.usafreedomcorps.gov/about_usafc/whats_new/speeches/20020917-1.asp for the president's remarks.

16. See <http://www.wethepeople.gov/>.

17. See <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/reference/2c4.html>.

18. See <http://www.civiced.org/>.

schools; home schooling; and attendance in privately operated schools with a fiscal boost from vouchers, tax credits or scholarships. The choice strategy received some encouragement in the federal government's No Child Left Behind Act and is advanced by the growth of charter-school programs in many states and voucher programs in a few. But whereas similar choices are widespread at the preschool and postsecondary levels, they remain the subject of intense controversy at the K–12 level. This controversy stems from many sources and directions, but two of its recurrent themes intersect with the subject of values and virtues.

First is the matter of state subsidy for instruction in religious and parochial schools and the concern of some that this violates the First Amendment's "establishment clause." (This debate no longer arises when government assists college students to attend Notre Dame or Yeshiva.) However, at least for the time being, this issue has been laid to rest by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the 2002 *Zelman* case,¹⁹ which approved the publicly funded voucher program that Ohio has been operating for low-income children in Cleveland, notwithstanding the fact that most of the voucher recipients attend Catholic schools. The Court said, in effect, that this situation is permissible so long as the children's choice of school is made by parents, not government.²⁰ This decision will ease "establishment clause" anxieties over school choice as a matter of jurisprudence, but not as a matter of politics. Many state constitutions contain their own prohibitions against public dollars flowing into church-affiliated entities. These are often far

19. *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 536 U.S. 639.

20. A major reason that such a large fraction of Cleveland voucher recipients wound up in parochial schools is that suburban public schools refused to admit them, even though they had this option under state law—and the Ohio program is structured in such a way that the voucher amount is considerably larger when redeemed in public schools. As low-income minority children living in inner cities often discover, the prosperous suburban school systems across the municipal boundary want nothing to do with them.

more restrictive than even a Jeffersonian reading of the First Amendment and they were not undone by the Supreme Court's holding in *Zelman*. Moreover, watchdog groups continue to scan the education sky for any signs of slippage on the "establishment" front. It's more than a bit ironic, though, because in today's public schools pervasive secularism is a bigger problem from a values and virtues standpoint than is rampant sectarianism.

The second school-choice controversy that bears upon the present discussion is concern that the proliferation of distinctive schools, catering to different world-views, ethnic groups, social groups, or philosophies, will balkanize American society. Justice Breyer alluded to this fear in his dissent in the *Zelman* case, and it's not one to dismiss lightly, particularly by those who believe that schools could do better at forging citizens by imparting the "unum's" shared values to all young Americans. There is, however, evidence that private-school students are more civically engaged than their public-school classmates.²¹ We have also seen that government-operated schools do a lackluster job in this area—and are so whipsawed by conflicting views that the chances of their doing much better seem remote. Moreover, so long as states retain the authority to establish core academic standards for all public schools and to mandate high-stakes tests keyed to those standards, they have the opportunity to mitigate the curricular balkanization, even in such fractious fields as social studies. In my view—admittedly a controversial one—it's reasonable for the state to insist that any child whose education is subsidized with public funds must acquire the knowledge and skills spelled out in the state's academic

21. David E. Campbell, "Bowling Together," *Education Next* (fall 2001). Available online at <http://www.educationnext.org/20013/55.html>. The unabridged version, complete with data, can be found at <http://www.educationnext.org/unabridged/20013/campbell.html>.

standards, even if that youngster attends a privately operated school.²²

The Limits of Schooling

America has a considerable distance yet to traverse on the school-choice front even as we face a continuing problem on the virtues-and-values education front. In considering solutions to that problem, however, we do well not to focus obsessively on the schools. We must bear in mind that American youngsters spend relatively little of their lives there: only 9 percent of their hours on Earth between birth and their eighteenth birthdays.²³ This means that 91 percent of their time is spent elsewhere. School may, of course, influence a larger fraction of many days—if homework is intense, if extracurricular activities engage youngsters until late afternoon, if the school sponsors after-school projects and weekend events, and if the amount of time spent commuting to and from is large. The sense that life revolves around school is probably keenest in middle-class households where parents calibrate family rhythms to school schedules, oversee homework assignments, and limit television and other nonacademic pursuits lest they interfere with schoolwork. The picture is very different, however, for youngsters

22. This view is intensely controversial within America's private-school community, and for many schools such a requirement would be reason enough to eschew vouchers—and possibly even tax credits—and forgo the additional students.

23. One can easily calculate this. The numerator consists of 180 (the typical number of days in the school year, assuming perfect attendance) \times 13 (the number of years of schooling from kindergarten through high school (assuming full-day kindergarten) \times 6 (the number of hours in the typical school day, with no discount taken for recess, lunch, gym or study hall). The denominator is 365 (days in the year) \times 18 (years on earth) \times 24 (hours per day). The quotient is .09. If you want to allow for sleep, change the number of hours per day in the denominator to 16. Then the quotient is 13.3. But keep in mind that few youngsters have perfect attendance in school and that few schools devote a full six hours a day to academics.

from disorganized families and heedless parents, whose school attendance may be spotty, whose attention to homework may be rare, and whose lives from 2:30 p.m. until 8:30 a.m.—and all day on weekends and during the summer—are scarcely touched by the demands and expectations set by teachers and schools.

From a values standpoint, limited leverage on the school's part can be good or bad. On the positive side, it means that if parents, churches, and other nonschool institutions are purposeful and effective in their nurturing of youthful virtue, they can exert a powerful influence on how children will turn out. On the negative side, it means that, for many youngsters, time outside school is spent in the grip not of positive, value-shaping institutions but of the popular culture (or, worse, street and gang culture). In that case, even a conscientious effort by teachers and schools to instill sound values during their share of the day is apt to be swamped by the forces at work on youngsters during the other 91 percent.

The schools' modest leverage in children's lives poses an academic problem, too; youngsters simply don't spend enough time engaged in structured learning to end up learning enough. Certainly they don't spend as much time at it as do the children of many competitor nations. This problem is compounded when well-meaning people insist that schools also tackle sundry social problems by adding drug education, sex education, AIDS education, health education, and, indeed, character education, values education, or service learning, to their curricula. When those additions are squeezed into the same meager fraction of children's lives that the schools control, they are apt to push out some of the academic curriculum while probably also proving ineffective at solving the social problems to which they're addressed—the more so when, having entrusted these problems to the schools, other agencies and institutions and policies wash their hands of responsibility.

Against this backdrop, we find any number of contemporary

efforts to help schools do a better job on the values and virtues front. Some federal grant programs are designed solely for this purpose. There are special curricular materials, textbooks, teaching packages, even (lately) some cyberversions.²⁴ Experts such as Stanford's William Damon and organizations such as the Center for Civic Education are glad to supply guidance and instructional materials.²⁵ If one also considers the sizable public investment in such related domains as school-based programs for drug and violence prevention, one might even conclude that America is now making a substantial effort to enlist its schools as agents for developing sound values and behavior patterns in the young. Alas, one also has to say that the jury is out as to how well these special programs and extra services are working.

We must also ask how these special-emphasis programs compare in impact with the subliminal effects that schools and teachers have on children's values even when not meant to. The teacher is inherently and inevitably a role model, for good or ill. How she conducts herself, how she treats people, how conscientious she is, how well prepared—these are things that children notice, that they compare with other adults in their lives, and that they may pattern themselves after. The curriculum has a subliminal effect on values, too, particularly in literature and social studies. Which heroes (if any) are studied? Which villains? Or do curriculum and textbook settle for the softer values of being friendly, tolerant, and non-judgmental? Which works of literature are read, and on what basis are they selected? the author's race or gender? the timeless worth of the chosen works? Ravitch's research indicates that classic works

24. See, for example, the patriotism curriculum developed by K12, the private firm chaired by former Education Secretary William J. Bennett, which can be found at <http://patriot.k12.com/>. K12 also has a virtues program, to be accessed at <http://www.products.k12.com/virtues/>.

25. Much can be learned from *Bringing in a New Era in Character Education*, ed. William Damon (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2002).

of literature are being squeezed out of the K–12 classroom by overwrought anxiety about bias, noninclusiveness, political incorrectness, and so on. When, as often happens in the study of literature, the reader comes upon questions of human relations, morals, values, and ethics, how does the teacher explain them? What aspects are focused on? What lessons are learned?

The “extra-curriculum” matters, too. How the school functions and the sorts of activities it encourages help shape the non-academic side of civic education. In “The Civic Mission of Schools,” for example, the Carnegie group urges that students be enabled to participate in school governance and given many opportunities—even the obligation—to participate in service-learning programs outside the school itself.

Conclusion

Schools, in sum, are surely part of the problem and potentially part of the solution. Their inherent and subliminal influences may be more powerful than special add-on programs supplied by government and other outside forces. Ensuring that one’s child is in the right school, with the right curriculum and the right teacher—this is important to the child’s values as well as to his cognitive knowledge. I suspect it’s more consequential than the presence or absence in his school of single-purpose efforts to impart values or develop character.

In the U.S. context, I believe, these salubrious circumstances are more readily obtainable within the framework of a liberal school-choice policy that encourages people to seek the best schools for their kids and does not get in the way of schools that are clear about their curriculum and choosy about their teachers (including those who never attended education schools) and that go out of their way to teach values, virtues, even religious faith. Such a regimen will strengthen the private side of the public-

private balance that will surely continue to characterize K–12 education governance in America. As for the public side, it should focus on state efforts (with an occasional boost from Washington and, one hopes, conscientious implementation at the local level) to insist that all schools deliver a core curriculum that includes the essentials of history and civics. If that insistence also catalyzes a top-to-bottom overhaul of the subject known as social studies, everyone would benefit.