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COMMENTARY

Education for Democratic Citizenship

By Rosemary C. Salamone

Over the past decade, pollsters and pundits have raised warning flags of moral decay and declining political understanding and commitment among Americans. Scandals from Washington to Wall Street, voter apathy and cynicism, and the regeneration of the "me generation" in a climate of unprecedented prosperity have raised increasing concerns in the media over the moral state of the country.

The most alarming evidence has emerged from education, validating and documenting the anxieties that Americans share over the failure of schools to create citizens of character. By the mid-1990s, half of the nation's high school students reported that drugs and violence were a serious problem in their schools, while seven in 10 unabashedly noted that cheating on tests and assignments was commonplace. In fact, two-thirds of high school students admitted that they had cheated on an exam the previous year, while only 33 percent strongly agreed that "honesty is the best policy." More than six in 10 adults deplored the failure of young people to learn such values as honesty, respect, and responsibility. In communities across the country, Americans ranked character development second only to basic skills in a listing of educational purposes.

The issue is larger than the individual class or subject matter. The school itself must exist as a morally coherent community and as a microcosm of democracy.

More current findings sound an equally troubling note. Not only do the nation's young people lack a moral compass but also, according to the recently published results of the 1998 congressionally mandated National Assessment of Educational Progress civics exam, they only vaguely comprehend the underlying principles of democracy and constitutional government. In the first such assessment in 10 years, slightly more than 20 percent of students in the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades scored at the "proficient" level, a strikingly poor performance that must give educators and the general public pause. Add to this a

rash of school violence nationwide, and what emerges is a grim picture of a society unable to produce informed and ethical citizens.

In recent years, in response to the perceived crisis in public and private morality, educators across the nation have worked their way through the political and pedagogical minefields that surround values education to create programs that affect character. Judging from media reports, the NAEP results undoubtedly will generate a similar flurry of activity surrounding civics education. Both approaches are bound together by a basic belief that schools have an obligation to instill in students a core of common values and shared understandings that define us as a nation. Both approaches are clearly well-intentioned and important. However, despite the efforts of some educational leaders to underscore the importance of institutional process, the conventional discussion focuses on curricular substance, consequently missing a critical point about the nature of schooling and learning. I suggest that, instead of merely talking about developing character as if it were akin to teaching math skills or fluency in a foreign language or a list of vocabulary words, and instead of concentrating solely on the content of the social studies and history curriculum, we should broaden the discussion to include the concept of the school as a democratizing institution and the notion of education for democratic citizenship. What I mean here is an education that instills in students those core political beliefs and values drawn from liberal principles of individual rights and the republican ideal of civic virtue.

This is not a novel idea. The indissoluble link between education and a good society dates back to ancient Greece. The Greek *paideia*, or concept of education, joined citizenship and learning around a shared set of norms and values under the legal and moral authority of the *politeia*, or prevailing culture.

In communities across the country, Americans ranked character development second only to basic skills in a listing of educational purposes. In modern times, Thomas Jefferson fervently promoted government-supported schooling as an instrument for creating citizens of virtue and intelligence who could realize republican and democratic ideals. Early school reformers from Horace Mann to John Dewey espoused the belief that education should develop in students a common faith, albeit through markedly different processes, one tied to the values of mainstream Protestantism imposed by the school and the other secular in orientation and based in rational thought.

More recently, the U.S. Supreme Court repeatedly has affirmed that preparation for democratic citizenship is the primary end of state-supported education. In case after

case, the justices have noted that schools are the mechanism through which society "inculcate[s] the habits and manners of civility as ... indispensable to the practice of self-government," that they are "vitally important for inculcating fundamental values necessary to the maintenance of a democratic political system," and that they are "the most pervasive means for promoting our common destiny." Whether we agree or disagree with the court's changing perspective on schooling over the past three decades—from a rights-based to a governance-based ideology—the truth remains that schooling is an inherently indoctrinative process that conveys explicit and implicit messages. If schools are to promote the ends of democracy, they must direct these messages toward developing in students the values and understandings they need to participate effectively in democratic government.

Discussion of values inevitably evokes the question, "Whose values?" Needless to say, schools have been battered in the "culture wars" of recent years by conflicting worldviews and visions of the good life. Most of these disputes have centered on controversial social norms—from teenage sexuality to alternative lifestyles, gender roles, and religious expression in the schools. Despite differences at the margins, however, most Americans would agree that there exists a set of core democratic values that bind us together as a nation.

Such a list, while not meant to be exhaustive, might include such incontestable moral virtues or character traits as honesty, integrity, responsibility, perseverance, and self-discipline, combined with social values such as concern for those less fortunate and more fundamental political principles generally imparted through what we commonly call "civics education." Included among these principles are justice and fairness, freedom of conscience and belief, freedom of expression, political and religious tolerance, and equality in the sense of equal dignity for all. While not immune from attack by the political extremes, these shared commitments draw from several sources, including our common history and folklore, and most significantly from legal norms reflected in the U.S. Constitution, federal statutes, and court interpretations.

Having established the fact that schools, as socializing agents, should convey democratic values, then how should they go about the task? Some character education advocates would suggest that schools adopt a packaged curriculum or teach specified virtues through purposeful moralistic instruction. While such a didactic approach might be appropriate for conveying factual knowledge about government and history, it belies the fact that values and

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political commitment cannot be partitioned off into a discrete part of the curriculum. To the contrary, ethical or value considerations and civic understandings permeate the entire educational process.

First of all, schools already possess myriad resources and opportunities for developing values throughout the existing educational program, from science to literature and history. But more importantly, for values to be meaningful, they must infuse the entire school experience, including not just the overt but also the "hidden" curriculum. The governance structure of the school (hierarchical or democratic); the grading system (numbers, letters, or anecdotal reports); the range and perspective of extracurricular activities (karate, chess, hockey, or photography); the role models that teachers provide, including their mode of dress and affect; the importance and substance of exams; the student dress code, if any; the layout of the classrooms (lecture- or seminar-style); instructional styles (individual or cooperative)—all of these factors are value-laden and send subtle but powerful messages to students.

This is not to deny that students need to consciously learn the ideals and history of a free society. They need to develop an understanding and appreciation of the processes of self-government by carefully examining and deliberating over the functioning of a democratic community. But in a more real sense, students can best internalize democratic values by living them and not merely by talking about them. As Aristotle tells us, we need to practice virtue in order to become virtuous. The same can be said for the broader range of democratic understandings. In fact, the NAEP data reveal that students with real-world experiences, such as 12th graders who had engaged in community service, actually outperformed those who had not. Of course, one can question whether these results indicate a causative effect or merely a correlation between interest in community service and political concerns.

The issue, however, is larger than the individual class or subject matter. The school itself must exist as a morally coherent community and as a microcosm of democracy, creating a cohesive institutional ethos that persistently reinforces notions of democratic rights and responsibilities at all levels.

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For example, schools should reconsider the concept of the "disciplinary" code and replace it with an overarching "behavior" code, developed through a democratic process involving the various constituents, that incorporates behavioral standards for both staff and students and that reflects core democratic values of justice and fairness. If teachers fail to interact with

students in a respectful manner, or neglect to clearly inform students of the standards on which their academic performance will be assessed, or close their eyes to cheating or plagiarism, they convey values antithetical to democratic principles. If the sports program suggests, explicitly or implicitly, that winning is paramount and that the rules of good sportsmanship are to be broken whenever possible, school officials are fostering and legitimizing unethical attitudes that students will carry into adult life. If schools engage in "social promotion," they negate the value of diligence and competition, not to mention the negative impact on students' self-esteem and self-worth, although the intent might be opposite. On the other hand, retaining students without having earnestly afforded them the tools to succeed violates fundamental precepts of fair process. No amount of classroom instruction can erase the lessons of these experiences, lessons that harm the individual and ultimately society.

Rather than mandate community service for secondary students—a practice that some students rail against as intrusive and unfair, while others at the opposite extreme embrace in self-interest as a means of enhancing college applications—schools should develop in the youngest students an ethic of care that naturally induces them as adolescents to voluntarily serve their community. And rather than present community service as a self-standing requirement for graduation, schools could create a more meaningful experience by tying it to the instructional program through organized service learning. Here students should have the opportunity to study a social problem (for example, the homeless), to engage in action that addresses the problem (working in a shelter), and to reflect on their particular experience and more general issues of social justice and civic responsibility through writing and group discussion.

Perhaps public schools should adopt the practice, common in the private school sector, of expressly articulating a "mission" or statement of purposes from which all policies, practices, behavior, and instruction consciously flow. An advertisement recently appearing in a local New York City newspaper, juxtaposed with the NAEP results, brought this notion to mind. Clearly intended as a recruitment device for a private, independent K-8 school, the ad explicitly touted the school's emphasis on providing students with "the tools to make the right choices that will create responsible citizens." It talked about the need for children to "hear the same message" regarding the values shared by the home and the school, including honesty, fairness, giving of oneself and sharing, truth-telling, respect for oneself and for others, appreciation of differences, good citizenship, and civility.

I cannot attest to the fact that the school actually delivers on these commitments. What struck me, however, was the fact that this school had a clearly defined mission to educate for citizenship, and it conveyed to parents the clear message that they are partners in that process.

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I fully realize the vast distinctions between public schools that serve all and the selectivity of private schools, as well as the levels of parent participation each realistically can garner. Nevertheless, schools serving students at the lowest economic extreme bear an even greater responsibility for creating a community of meaning within the school itself, particularly where the surrounding community provides scarce social capital from which to draw. On the other hand, while privileged children may come to school with a broad understanding of history and government from repeated exposure in the home, teaching them to be ethical and caring individuals in a culture of hyped consumerism and competitive individualism presents its own challenges.

For schools across the economic spectrum, both public and private, a clear statement of purposes focused on democratic values, civil behavior, and community responsibility presents a first step toward creating a democratically infused school climate.

Next to the family, education is the most powerful socializing agent in society. Any project that aims to address the current crisis in democratic values and knowledge among young people must seriously consider institutional process—that is, the way schools are organized and governed and the way teaching and learning take place—and not merely the substance of the formal curriculum as we conventionally know it.

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