

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Kathleen Kennedy Townsend was the lieutenant-governor of Maryland in 1990 when she published the essay from which this passage is adapted.

NOT JUST READING AND WRITING, BUT RIGHT AND WRONG

In my work helping teachers, I've walked into countless high schools where I could have filled a garbage bag with the trash in the halls. Yet I rarely hear teachers asking students to pick up the garbage--or telling them not to litter in the first place. Of course, many students obey the law, stay away from drugs, and perform selfless acts: They tutor, work with the elderly, or run anti-drug campaigns. But too many lack a sense of duty to a larger community.

A survey conducted for People for the American Way asked just over 1,000 Americans between fifteen and twenty-four what goals they considered important. Three times as many selected career success as chose community service--which finished dead last. Only one-third said they could countenance joining the military or working on a political campaign. During one focus group interview for the study, some young people were asked to name qualities that make this country special. There was a long silence until one young man came up with an answer: "Cable TV." The study concluded, "Young people have learned only half of America's story. . . [They] reveal notions of America's unique character that emphasize freedom and license almost to the complete exclusion of service or participation. . . they fail to perceive a need to reciprocate by exercising the duties and responsibilities of good citizenship."

While it is easy enough to blame this problem on the "me-ism" of the 1980s, it's time to recognize that it's also the result of deliberate educational policy. One principal I know speaks for too many others. "Schools," she says, "cannot impose duties on the students: Students come from different backgrounds. They have different standards." The consensus of the high school teachers and administrators participating in a curriculum workshop I ran last summer said it all: "Values--we can't get into that." As a result, most schools across America have simply refused to take responsibility for the character of their students. They wash their hands of the teaching of virtue, doing little to create an environment that teaches children the importance of self-discipline, obligation, and civic participation.

Now it's obvious that the public schools are a ticklish arena for instilling values. Our pluralistic society is justly worried about party lines of any kind. That means that teaching values in the schools--whether as an integral part of the traditional classes or as a separate course--requires subtle skills and real sensitivity to student and community needs. Of course, families and churches should play a part, but these influences are not as strong or effective as they were a generation ago. Only the schools are guaranteed to

get a shot at kids. That's why their current fumbling of anything smacking of right and wrong is so disastrous.

Ironically, in the eighteenth century Thomas Jefferson fought for public education because he believed that the citizen's virtue is the foundation of democracy. Only virtuous citizens, he knew, would resist private gain for the public good. And to know the public good you have to study literature, philosophy, history, and religion. For many years, Jefferson's wisdom about education prevailed. James Q. Wilson attributes America's low level of crime during the nineteenth century to the efforts of educators to instill self-discipline. He explains:

In the 1830s crime began to rise rapidly. New York had more murders than London, even though New York was only a tiny fraction of the size of London. However, rather than relying on police forces or other government programs, the citizens concentrated on education. Sunday schools were started. It was an all-day effort to provide education in morality, education in punctuality, in decency, in following rules and accepting responsibility, in being generous, in being kind. The process was so successful that in the second half of the nineteenth century, despite urbanization, despite the enormous influx into this country of immigrants from foreign countries all over Europe, despite the widening class cleavages, despite the beginning of an industrial proletariat, despite all those things which textbooks today teach us cause crime to go up, crime went down. And it went down, insofar as I or any historian can tell, because this effort to substitute the ethic of self-control for what appeared to be the emerging ethic of self-expression succeeded.

This growth in self-control can be seen in statistics measuring liquor consumption. In 1830 the average American drank ten gallons of distilled liquor a year. By 1850, it was down to two.

The intent of this nineteenth-century approach to education is preserved today in many state constitutions. North Dakota's is typical in declaring that public schools should "emphasize all branches of knowledge that tend to impress upon the mind the importance of truthfulness, temperance, purity, public spirit, and respect for honest labor of every kind." In 1981 the California State Assembly considered a bill that spelled out the values that should be included in public school instructional materials. Among those values were: honesty, acceptance of responsibility, respect for the individuality of others, respect for the responsibility inherent in being a parent or in a position of authority, the role of the work ethic in achieving personal goals, universal values of right and wrong, respect for property, the importance of the family unit, and the importance of respect for the law. The bill was defeated.

How have we reached the point where a list of such basic values is considered unsuitable for schools? There are some values that all teachers should affirm. My

daughter is the only girl on her soccer team, and recently some of the boys on the team spit at her. The coach should have made them stop. He should have made sure they knew they were wrong. That's what he should have done. What he actually did reveals a lot about schools today: he did nothing.

ESSAY TOPIC

For what reasons does Townsend advocate the teaching of values in public schools? What do you think of her views? To develop your essay, be sure to discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading--including "Not Just Reading and Writing, But Right and Wrong" itself.