

How Moral Education Is Finding Its Way Back into America's Schools

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Romanticism is always valuable as a protest. But another sort of trouble starts when romantics themselves get into positions of authority and demand that children shall scamper around being 'creative' and spontaneously 'discovering' what it has taken civilized man centuries to understand.¹

—Professor Richard Peters
Philosopher of Education, Oxford

HANNAH ARENDT IS said to have remarked that every year civilization is invaded by the millions of tiny barbarians: they are called children. All cultures try to civilize the invaders by educating them and inculcating a sense of right and wrong. Ours, however, may be the first to question the propriety of doing so. What happens when democratic societies deprive children of the moral knowledge that took civilized

1. R. S. Peters, "Concrete Principles and Rational Passions." In *Moral Education: Five Lectures*, Nancy F. and Theodore R. Sizer, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970): 29.

man centuries to understand? What happens when educators celebrate children's creativity and innate goodness but abandon the ancestral responsibility to discipline, train, and civilize them? Unfortunately, we know the answer: we are just emerging from a thirty-year laissez-aller experiment in moral deregulation.

In the fall of 1996, I took part in a televised ethics program billed as a Socratic dialogue. For an hour, I joined another ethics professor, a history teacher, and seven high school students in a discussion of moral dilemmas. The program, "Ethical Choices: Individual Voices," was shown on public television and is now circulated to high schools for use in classroom discussions of right and wrong.² Its message still troubles me.

In one typical exchange, the moderator, Stanford law professor Kim Taylor-Thompson, posed this dilemma to the students. Your teacher has unexpectedly assigned you a five-page paper. You have only a few days to do it, and you are already overwhelmed with work. Would it be wrong to hand in someone else's paper? Two of the students found the suggestion unthinkable and spoke about responsibility, honor, and principle. "I wouldn't do it. It is a matter of integrity," said Elizabeth. "It's dishonest," said Erin. Two others saw nothing wrong with cheating. Eleventh-grader Joseph flatly said, "If you have the opportunity, you should use it." Eric concurred. "I would use the paper and offer it to my friends."

I have taught moral philosophy to college freshmen for more than fifteen years, so I was not surprised to find students on the PBS program defending cheating. There are some in every class, playing devil's advocate with an open admiration for the devil's position. That evening, in our PBS Socratic dialogue, I expected at least to have a professional ally in the other philosophy teacher, who surely would join me in making the case for honesty. Instead, the professor defected. He told the students that in this situation, it was the teacher who was immoral

2. "Ethical Choices: Individual Voices" (New York: Thirteen/WNET, 1997).

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for having given the students such a burdensome assignment and was disappointed in us for not seeing it his way. "What disturbs me," he said, "is how accepting you all seem to be of this assignment . . . to me it's outrageous from the point of view of learning to force you to write a paper in this short a time."

Through most of the session the professor focused on the hypocrisy of parents, teachers, and corporations, but had little to say about the moral obligations of the students. When we discussed the immorality of shoplifting, he implied that stores are in the wrong for their pricing policies and he talked about "corporations deciding on a twelve percent profit margin . . . and perhaps sweatshops." The professor was friendly and, to all appearances, well-meaning. Perhaps his goal was to empower students to question authority and rules. That, however, is something contemporary adolescents already know how to do. Too often, we teach students to question principles before they even vaguely understand them. In this case, the professor advised high school students to question moral teachings and rules of behavior that are critical to their well-being.

The professor's hands-off style has been fashionable in the public schools for thirty years. It has gone under various names such as values clarification, situation ethics, and self-esteem guidance. These so-called value-free approaches to ethics have flourished at a time when many parents fail to give children basic guidance in right and wrong. The story of why so many children are being deprived of elementary moral training encompasses three or four decades of misguided reforms by educators, parents, and judges has yet to be entirely told. Reduced to its philosophical essentials, it is the story of the triumph of Jean-Jacques Rousseau over Aristotle.

Aristotle vs. Rousseau

Some 2,300 years ago Aristotle laid down what children need: clear guidance on how to be moral human beings. What Aristotle advocates

became the default model for moral education over the centuries. He shows parents and teachers how to civilize the invading hordes of child barbarians. It is only recently that many educators have begun to denigrate his teachings. Aristotle regards children as wayward, uncivilized, and very much in need of discipline. The early Christian philosopher, St. Augustine, went further, regarding the child's refractory nature as a manifestation of the original sin committed by Adam and Eve when they rebelled against the dictates of God. Each philosopher, in his way, regards perversity as a universal feature of human nature. Aristotle compares moral education to physical training. Just as we become strong and skillful by doing things that require strength and skill, so, he says, do we become good by practicing goodness. Ethical education, as he understands it, is training in emotional control and disciplined behavior. Habituation to right behavior comes before an appreciation or understanding of why we should be good. He advocated first socializing children by inculcating habits of decency, using suitable punishments and rewards to discipline them to behave well. Eventually they understand the reasons and advantages of being moral human beings.

Far from giving priority to the free expression of emotion, Aristotle (and Plato) teaches that moral development is achieved by educating children to modulate their emotions. For Aristotle, self-awareness means being aware of and avoiding behaviors that reason proscribes but emotion dictates. "We must notice the errors into which we ourselves are liable to fall (because we all have different tendencies) . . . and then we must drag ourselves in the contrary direction."³ Children with good moral habits gain control over the intemperate side of their natures and grow into free and flourishing human beings.

The moral virtues . . . are engendered in us neither by nor contrary to nature; we are constituted by nature to receive them, but their full development is due to habit . . . So it is a matter of no little importance

3. Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (London: Penguin, 1976): 109.

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what sort of habits we form from the earliest age—it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world.⁴

Aristotle's general principles for raising moral children were unquestioned through most of Western history; even today his teachings represent common-sense opinion about child rearing, but in the eighteenth century, the Aristotle's wisdom was directly challenged by the theories of the enlightenment philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau denies that children are born wayward (originally sinful), insisting instead that children are, by nature, noble, virtuous beings who are corrupted by an intrusive socialization. The untutored child is spontaneously good and graceful. "When I picture to myself a boy of ten or twelve, healthy, strong and well-built for his age, only pleasant thoughts arise I see him bright, eager, vigorous, care-free, completely absorbed in the present, rejoicing in abounding vitality."⁵

According to Rousseau "the first education should be purely negative. . . . It consists not in teaching virtue or truth, but in preserving the heart from vice and the mind from error."⁶ He rejects the traditional notion that moral education in the early stages must habituate the child to virtuous behavior:

The only habit a child should be allowed to acquire is to contract none. . . . Prepare in good time for the reign of freedom and the exercise of his powers, but allowing his body its natural habits and accustoming him always to be his own master and follow the dictates of his will as soon as he has a will of his own.⁷

4. ———. *Ethics*: 92.

5. From Steven Cahn, ed. "Emile." In *The Philosophical Foundations of Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970): 163. Selection from *The 'Emile' of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Selections*, William Boyd, ed. (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1962): 11–128.

6. William Boyd, ed. *The 'Emile' of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1970): 41.

7. Steven Cahn, *The Philosophical Foundations of Education*: 158.

Contrary to the received view, Rousseau believes the child's nature is originally good and free of sin. As he sees it, a proper education provides the soil for the flourishing of the child's inherently good nature, bringing it forth unspoiled and fully effective. In his view, the goal of moral education is defeated when an external code is imposed on children. Rousseau is modern in his distrust of socially ordained morals as well as in his belief that the best education elicits the child's own authentic (benevolent) nature. Rousseau emphatically rejects the Christian doctrine that human beings are innately rebellious and naturally sinful:

Let us lay it down as an incontestable principle that the first impulses of nature are always right. There is no original perversity in the human heart.⁸

Although Rousseau is against instilling moral habits in a free and noble being, he allows that the child's development requires guidance and encouragement to elicit its own good nature. He urges parents and tutors to put the child's "kindly feelings into action."⁹

Christian and classical pagan thinkers are convinced that far more is needed. They insist that virtue cannot be attained without a directive moral training that habituates the child to virtuous behavior. Saint Augustine and the orthodox Christian thinkers are especially pessimistic about the efficacy of putting kindly feelings into action. According to Augustine, not even the most disciplined moral education guarantees a virtuous child: education without divine help (grace) is insufficient. By contrast, not only do Rousseau's followers deny the Augustinian doctrine that our natures are originally sinful and rebellious—they further regard directive moral education as an assault on the child's right to develop freely.

There is much to admire in Rousseau. He argued for humane child

8. *Ibid.*, 162.

9. *Ibid.*, 174.

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rearing at a time when cruel rigidity was the norm. Though his criticisms of the educational practices of his day are valid, his own recommendations have simply not proved workable. It is, perhaps, worth noting that he did not apply his fine theories to his own life and was altogether irresponsible in dealing with his own children.¹⁰ His theories, too, are marred by inconsistencies. On the one hand, he is firmly against instilling habits in a child; on the other, he dispenses a lot of sound Aristotelian advice to parents for habituating their children to the classical virtues: "Keep your pupil occupied with all the good deeds."

Despite his celebration of freedom, even Rousseau would be appalled by the permissiveness we see so much of today. "The surest way to make your child unhappy," he wrote, "is to accustom him to get everything he wants."¹¹ All the same, Rousseau parted company with the traditionalists on the crucial question of human nature. For better or worse, Rousseau's followers ignored his Aristotelian side and developed the progressive elements of his educational philosophy.

Though we wish to believe him, Rousseau's rosy picture of the child fails to convince. In *Emile*, Rousseau states that although children may do bad deeds, a child can never be said to be bad "because wrong action depends on harmful intention and that he will never have."¹² This flies in the face of common experience. Most parents and teachers will tell you that children often have harmful intentions. In perhaps the most famous description of children's "harmful intentions," Saint Augustine, in his *Confessions*, describes his boyhood pleasure in doing wrong—simply for the joy of flouting prohibitions. Some parents and teachers might indeed find Augustine's description of children's unruly nature understated and some will find Golding's *Lord of the Flies* an even more

10. He is said to have fathered five illegitimate children by an uneducated servant girl, T rese Le Vasseur. All the children were sent to foundling homes, which was the equivalent of a death sentence. See Ronald Grimsley, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan, 1967): 218.

11. Cahn, *The Philosophical Foundations of Education*: 160.

12. *Ibid.*, 163.

telling description of what children are naturally like than that of Augustine's wayward boyhood friends.

Rousseau powerfully dominates the thinking of the theorists whose influence pervades modern schools of education. In pedagogy, Rousseau's views inspired the progressive movement in education, which turned away from rote teaching and sought methods to free the child's creativity. Rousseau's ideas are also deployed to discredit the traditional directive style of moral education associated with Aristotelian ethical theory and Judeo-Christian religion and practice.

Value-Free Kids

The directive style of education, denigrated as indoctrination, was cast aside in the second half of the twentieth century and discontinued as the progressive style became dominant. By the seventies, character education had been effectively discredited and virtually abandoned in practice.

In 1970, TheodoreSizer, then dean of the Harvard School of Education, coedited with his wife, Nancy, a collection of ethics lectures entitled *Moral Education*.¹³ The preface set the tone by condemning the morality of the Christian gentleman, the American prairie, the *McGuffey Readers*, and the hypocrisy of teachers who tolerate a grading system that is the "terror of the young."¹⁴ The Sizers were especially critical of the "crude and philosophically simpleminded sermonizing tradition" of the nineteenth century. They referred to directive ethics education in all its guises as the old morality. According to the Sizers, leading moralists agree that that kind of morality "can and should be scrapped." The Sizers favored a new morality that gives primacy to students' autonomy and independence. Teachers should never preach or attempt to inculcate virtue; rather, through their actions, they should

13. Nancy F. and Theodore R. Sizer, eds. *Moral Education: Five Lectures*.

14. *Ibid.*, 3–5.

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demonstrate a fierce commitment to social justice. In part, that means democratizing the classroom: "Teacher and children can learn about morality from each other."¹⁵

The Sizers preached a doctrine already practiced in many schools throughout the country. Schools were scrapping the old morality in favor of alternatives that gave primacy to the children's moral autonomy. Values clarification was popular in the seventies and its proponents consider it inappropriate for a teacher to encourage students, however indirectly, to adopt the values of the teacher or the community. The cardinal sin is to impose values on the student. Instead, the teacher's job is to help the students discover their own values. In *Readings in Values Clarification*, two of the leaders of the movement, Sidney Simon and Howard Kirschenbaum, explain what is wrong with traditional ethics education:

We call this approach "moralizing," although it has also been known as inculcation, imposition, indoctrination, and in its most extreme form, "brainwashing."¹⁶

Lawrence Kohlberg, a Harvard moral psychologist, developed cognitive moral development, a second favored approach. Kohlberg shared the Sizers' low opinion of traditional morality, referring disdainfully to the "old bags of virtues" that earlier educators had sought to inculcate.¹⁷ Kohlbergian teachers were more traditional than the proponents of values clarification. They sought to promote a Kantian awareness of duty and responsibility in students. Kohlberg was traditional in his opposition to the moral relativism that many progressive educators found congenial; all the same, Kohlbergians shared with other progressives a scorn for any form of top-down inculcation of moral principles.

15. Ibid., 4.

16. Sidney Simon and Howard Kirschenbaum, *Readings in Values Clarification* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston Press, 1973): 18.

17. See, for example, Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Cognitive-Developmental Approach," *Phi Delta Kappan* (June 1975): 670-75.

They too believed in student-centered teaching, where the teacher acts less as a guide than as a facilitator of the student's development.

Kohlberg himself later changed his mind and conceded that his rejection of indoctrinative moral education had been a mistake.¹⁸ His admirable recantation had little effect. The next fashion in progressive pedagogy, student-centered learning, was soon to leave the Kohlbergians and the values clarifiers far behind. By the late eighties, self-esteem education had become all the rage. Ethics was superseded by attention to the child's personal sense of well-being: the school's primary aim was to teach children to prize their rights and self-worth. In the old days, teachers asked seventh graders to write about "The Person I Admire Most." But in today's child-centered curriculum, they ask children to write essays celebrating themselves. In one popular middle school English text, an assignment called "The Nobel Prize for Being You" informs students that they are "wonderful" and "amazing" and instructs them to:

Create two documents in connection with your Nobel Prize. Let the first document be a nomination letter written by the person who knows you best. Let the second be the script for your acceptance speech, which you will give at the annual award ceremony in Stockholm, Sweden.¹⁹

18. See Lawrence Kohlberg, "Moral Education Reappraised," *The Humanist* (November/December 1978): 14–15. Kohlberg, renouncing his earlier position, said:

Some years of active involvement with the practice of moral education . . . has led me to realize that my notion . . . was mistaken . . . The educator must be a socializer, teaching value content and behavior and not [merely] . . . a process-facilitator of development . . . I no longer hold these negative views of indoctrinative moral education and I [now] believe that the concepts guiding moral education must be partly 'indoctrinative.' This is true, by necessity, in a world in which children engage in stealing, cheating and aggression."

19. *Write Source 2000 Sourcebook* (Wilmington, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1995): 217.

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For extra credit, students can award themselves a trophy “that is especially designed for you and no one else.”

Through most of human history, children learned about virtue and honor by hearing or reading the inspiring stories of great men and women. By the 1990s, this practice, which many educators regarded as too directive, was giving way to practices that suggested to students that they were their own best guides in life. This turn to the autonomous subject as the ultimate moral authority is a notable consequence of the triumph of the progressive style over traditional directive methods of education.

It's hard to see how the Harvard theorists who urged teachers to jettison the “crude and philosophically simpleminded sermonizing tradition of the nineteenth century” could defend the crude egoism that has replaced it. Apart from the philosophical niceties, there are concrete behavioral consequences. The moral deregulation that the New England educators required took hold in the very decades that saw a rise in conduct disorders among children in the nation's schools. No doubt much, perhaps most, of this trend can be ascribed to the large social changes that weakened family and community, but some of the blame can be laid at the doors of all the well-intentioned professors who helped undermine the schools' traditional mission of morally edifying their pupils.

Few thinkers have written about individual autonomy with greater passion and good sense than the nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill. Mill clearly is talking about adults. “We are not speaking of children,” he says in *On Liberty*.²⁰ “Nobody denies that people should be so taught and trained in youth as to know and benefit by the ascertained results of human experience.” Mill could not foresee the advent of thinkers like the Sizemores and the values clarificationists who glibly recommended scrapping the old morality.

20. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Chicago: Regnery Press, 1955): 14.

Where the Reformers Go Wrong

Progressive educators who follow Rousseau are at pains to preserve the child's autonomy. They frown on old-fashioned moralizing, preaching, and threats of punishment, regard such methods as coercive, and believe instead that children should discover for themselves, by their own rational faculties, which actions are moral. This laissez-aller policy abandons children to their fate. The purpose of moral education is not to preserve our children's autonomy, but to develop the character they will rely on as adults. As Aristotle persuasively argues, children who have been helped to develop good moral habits will find it easier to become autonomous adults. Conversely, children who have been left to their own devices will founder.

Those who oppose directive moral education often call it a form of brainwashing or indoctrination. That is sheer confusion. When you brainwash people, you undermine their autonomy, their rational self-mastery. You diminish their freedom. But when you educate children to be competent, self-controlled and morally responsible, you increase their freedom and enlarge their humanity. The Greeks and Romans understood this very well. So did the great scholastic and enlightenment thinkers. Indeed, a first principle of every great religion and high civilization is to know what is right and act on it. This is the highest expression of freedom and personal autonomy. To suggest that we place more emphasis on instilling a sense of responsibility and civility than on alerting children to their civil and personal rights under law may sound quaint, quixotic, or even reactionary but is practical and achievable. Despite appearances to the contrary, most children respect civility and good manners. If their own manners are wanting, it is because so little is expected of them.

Common sense, convention, tradition, and even modern social science²¹ research all converge in support of the Aristotelian tradition

21. See, for example, Laurence Steinberg in *Beyond the Classroom: Why School*

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of directive character education. Children need standards, they need clear guidelines, they need adults in their lives who are understanding but firmly insistent on responsible behavior, but a resolute adherence to standards has been out of fashion in education circles for more than thirty years. An Aristotelian education is still the child's best bet. Unfortunately, our era has been characterized by the ascendancy of Rousseau and a decided antipathy toward the directive inculcation of the virtues.

Two Badly Socialized Boys

In April 1999, the massacre at Columbine High School shocked an uncomprehending nation by its cold brutality. It was the seventh school shooting in less than two years. This time, more than ever, the public's need to make sense of such tragedies was palpable. How could it happen? The usual explanations made little sense. Poverty? Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were not poor. Easy access to weapons? True, but young men, especially in the West, have always had access to guns. Divorce? Both boys' families were intact. A nation of emotionally repressed boys? Boys were much the same back in the fifties and sixties when nobody shot up schoolmates. And why American boys?

Asking, Why now? and, Why here? puts us on the track of what is missing in the American way of socializing children that was present in the recent past. To find answers, we need to attend to the views of the progressive-education theorists who advocated abandoning the traditional mission of indoctrinating children in the "old morality" and persuaded the American educational establishment to adopt instead the romantic moral pedagogy of Rousseau. Teachers and parents who embraced this view badly underestimated the potential barbarism of children who are not given a directive moral education. It is not likely that

Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

a single ethics course would have been enough to stop boys like Harris and Klebold from murdering classmates. On the other hand, a K-12 curriculum infused with moral content might have created a climate that would make a massacre unthinkable. For such a depraved and immoral act was indeed unthinkable in the simpleminded days before the schools cast aside their mission of moral edification. An insistence on character education might have diminished the derisive mistreatment at the hands of more popular students suffered by the perpetrators, which apparently was one incitement for their gruesome actions.

Teachers, too, would have acted differently. Had K-12 teachers in the Littleton schools seen it as their routine duty to civilize the students in their care, they would never have overlooked the bizarre, antisocial behavior of Klebold and Harris. When the boys appeared in school with T-shirts with the words “Serial Killer” emblazoned on them, their teachers would have sent them home, nor would the boys have been allowed to wear swastikas or to produce grotesquely violent videos. By tolerating these modes of self-expression, the adults at Columbine High School implicitly sent the message to the students that there’s not much wrong with the serial or mass murder of innocent people.

One English teacher at Columbine told *Education Week* that both boys had written short stories about death and killing “that were horribly, graphically, violent” and that she had notified school officials. According to the teacher, they took no action because nothing the boys wrote violated school policy. Speaking with painful irony, the frustrated teacher explained, “In a free society, you can’t take action until they’ve committed some horrific crime because they are guaranteed freedom of speech.”²² In many high schools, students are confident that their right to free expression will be protected. Counselors and administrators, fearful of challenges by litigious parents who would be backed by the ACLU and other zealous guardians of students’ rights, rarely take action.

22. *Education Week* (April 28, 1999): 16; see also *Education Week* (May 26, 1999): 14.

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The love affair with Rousseau's romantic idealization of the child of American education has made it inevitable that our public schools fail to do their part in civilizing young "barbarians." Many schools no longer see themselves having a primary role in moral edification. The style is not to interfere with the child's self-expression and autonomy. Leaving children to discover their own values is a little like putting them in a chemistry lab full of volatile substances and saying, "Discover your own compounds, kids." We should not be surprised when some blow themselves up and destroy those around them.

A Wind of Change

Even before the spate of school shootings raised public concern about the moral climate in the nation's schools, voices called for reform. In the early nineties, a hitherto silent majority of parents, teachers, and community leaders began to agitate in favor of old-fashioned moral education. In July 1992, one group called the Character Counts Coalition (organized by the Josephson Institute of Ethics and made up of teachers, youth leaders, politicians, and ethicists) gathered in Aspen, Colorado, for a three-and-a-half-day conference on character education. At the end of the conference, the group put forward the Aspen Declaration on Character Education.²³ Among its principles:

- The present and future well-being of our society requires an involved, caring citizenry with good moral character.
- Effective character education is based on core ethical values which form the foundation of democratic society—in particular, respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, caring, justice, fairness, civic virtue, and citizenship.

23. "Aspen Declaration on Character Education," available through the Josephson Institute, Marina Del Ray, California; or Kevin Ryan, Director, Boston University Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character.

- Character education is, first and foremost, an obligation of families. It is also an important obligation of faith communities, schools, youth and other human service organizations.

The Character Counts Coalition has attracted a wide and politically diverse following. Its board of advisers includes liberals such as Marian Wright Edelman and conservatives such as William Bennett. Ten United States senators from both political parties have joined, along with a number of governors, mayors, and state representatives. The new character education movement is gaining impetus.

Today, schools throughout the country are finding their way back to contemporary versions of directive moral education. Teachers, administrators, and parents are again getting into the business of making it clear to students that they must behave honorably, courteously, and kindly, that they must work hard and strive for excellence. Several state departments of education and numerous large-city boards of education, including those of St. Louis, Chicago, Hartford, and San Antonio, have mandated an ethics curriculum. In some schools the whole curriculum is shaped by these imperatives.

Fallon Park Elementary School in Roanoke, Virginia, for example, has seen a dramatic change in its students since the principal adopted the Character Counts program in 1998.²⁴ Every morning the students recite the Pledge of Allegiance. This is followed by a pledge written by the students and teachers: "Each day in our words and actions we will persevere to exhibit respect, caring, fairness, trustworthiness, responsibility and citizenship. These qualities will help us to be successful students who work and play well together." According to the principal, suspensions have declined sixty percent, attendance and grades have improved, and—*mirabile dictu*—misbehavior on the bus has all but disappeared. The school's gym instructor, who has been there for twenty-nine years, has noticed a change. The kids are practicing good

24. See *Washington Post* (February 4, 1999): metro, 1.

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sportsmanship, and even school troublemakers seem to be changing for the better. She recently noticed one such boy encouraging a shy girl to join a game. "It almost brought tears to my eyes . . . this is the best year ever in this school."

Vera White, principal of Jefferson Junior High in Washington, D.C., was stunned some years ago to realize that children from her school had been part of an angry mob that attacked police and firefighters with rocks and bottles. "Those are my children. If they didn't care enough to respect the mayor and the fire marshal and everyone else, what good does an education do?" She decided to make character education central to the mission of her school. Students now attend assemblies that focus on positive traits such as respect and responsibility. Ms. White initiated the program in 1992; since then theft and fighting have been rare. Unlike other schools in the area, Jefferson has no bars on the windows and no metal detectors.²⁵

William F. Washington Jarvis, headmaster at the Roxbury Latin School in Boston and an Episcopal priest, has always emphasized character and discipline, but others are now joining him. Jarvis holds a harsh, non-Rousseauian view of human nature: left untrained, we are "brutish, selfish, and capable of great cruelty. We must do our utmost to be decent and responsible, and we must demand this of our children and our students." Whenever they behave badly, says the headmaster, "We have to hold up a mirror to the students and say, 'This is who you are. Stop it.'"²⁶

Contrast these schools with a school like Columbine High. We know that the Littleton killers had attended anger-management seminars, met weekly with a "diversion" officer, attended a Mothers Against Drunk Driving panel, and did compulsory community service. But it seems they never encountered a Reverend Jarvis or a Principal White.

25. *Dallas Morning News* (March 10, 1995): 1C.

26. Wray Herbert and Missy Daniel, "The Moral Child," *U.S. News & World Report* (June 3, 1996): 52.

After Littleton, many a barn door is being shut and padlocked, but a spokesperson for the Littleton school district had it right when she asked, “Do you make a high school into an armed prison camp where there are metal detectors that make kids feel imprisoned, or do you count on people’s basic goodness and put good rules in place?”²⁷

One very promising program for putting good rules in place is the Youth Charter, developed by William Damon, a professor of education at Stanford University and a leading authority on moral education.²⁸ Damon’s program calls for communities to work out a code of conduct for children. Youth Charter helps parents and schools set rules and standards that make clear to children what is expected of them.

Although the movement to reinstate directive moral education is gathering momentum, it is being fiercely resisted in some quarters by those who find it educationally retrograde. Amherst professor Benjamin DeMott wrote a scathing piece for *Harper’s* magazine a few years ago jeering at the reviving character education movement. He asked how we can hope to teach ethics in a society where CEOs award themselves large salaries in the midst of downsizing. Thomas Lasley, Dean of the University of Dayton School of Education, denounces what he calls the values juggernaut. Alfie Kohn, a noted education speaker and writer, accuses schools that are active in character education of indoctrinating children and blighting them politically. “Children in American schools are even expected to begin each day by reciting a loyalty oath to the Fatherland, although we call it by a different name.”²⁹ Kohn’s comparison—likening the Pledge of Allegiance to a loyalty oath in Hitler’s Reich—is a fair example of the mindset one still finds among some progressives.

Will the educational philosophy of the Kohns, Lasleys, De Motts,

27. *Education Week* (April 28, 1999): 17.

28. William Damon, *The Youth Charter: How Communities Can Work Together to Raise Standards for All Our Children* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

29. Alfie Kohn, “How Not to Teach Values: A Critical Look at Character Education,” *Phi Delta Kappan* (February 1997): 433.

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and Sizers prevail? The answer is “no, not any longer.” It appears that parents, teachers, school administrators, and community leaders have finally been alerted and alarmed, and are beginning to assert their wills. Programs like Character Counts and the Youth Charter are flourishing and new programs are starting up all the time. Nan Dearen, executive director of Kids with Character in Dallas, has characterized this momentum: “They say character education is a grassroots movement, but it just spreads like wildfire.”³⁰ Kevin Ryan, director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University, expresses the movement’s confidence and resolve: “Society will not put up with value-neutral education.”³¹

* * *

Social critics often refer to the Law of Unintended Consequences. According to this law, seemingly benign social or political changes often have unfortunate, even disastrous, side effects. Few romantic idealists of the 1920s and 1930s, for example, had any idea that applying utopian principles to real societies might cause their total degradation. Nor did anyone in the 1970s expect that applying Rousseau’s perspective to moral education would set children adrift, denying to them the essential guidance they need in life. Fortunately, a Law of Fortuitous Reversals also operates in social life. According to this second law, when bad, unintended consequences seem irreparable, the situation suddenly improves dramatically. One fortuitous reversal was the rapid, unforeseen disintegration of the Soviet system a decade ago. Another, just under way, is the unexpected return of Aristotelian common sense in the moral education of American children.

30. Colleen O’Connor, “The We Decade: Rebirth of Community,” *The Dallas Morning News* (March 10, 1995): 1.

31. Scott Baldauf, “Reading, Writing, and Right and Wrong,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (August 27, 1996): 1.