

Summing Up the Case for Values Education

by Thomas Lickona

As we stand on the threshold of the twenty-first century, there are at least ten good reasons why schools should be making a clearheaded and wholehearted commitment to teaching moral values and developing good character:

1. There is a clear and urgent need.

Young people are increasingly hurting themselves and others, and decreasingly concerned about contributing to the welfare of their fellow human beings. In this they reflect the ills of societies in need of moral and spiritual renewal.

2. Transmitting values is and always has been the work of civilization.

A society needs values education both to survive and to thrive — to keep itself intact, and to keep itself growing toward conditions that support the full human development of all its members. Historically, three social institutions have shared the work of moral education: the home, the church, and the school. In taking up values education, schools are returning to their time-honored role, abandoned briefly in the middle part of this century.

3. The school's role as moral educator becomes even more vital at a time when millions of children get little moral teaching from their parents and where value-centered influences such as church or temple are also absent from their lives.

These days, when schools don't do moral education, influences hostile to good character rush in to fill the values vacuum.

4. There is common ethical ground even in our value-conflicted society.

Americans have intense and often angry differences over moral issues such as abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, and capital punishment. Despite this diversity, we can identify basic, shared values that allow us to engage in public moral education in a pluralistic society. Indeed, pluralism itself is not possible without agreement on values such as justice, honesty, civility, democratic process, and a respect for truth.

5. Democracies have a special need for moral education, because democracy is government by the people themselves.

The people must care about the rights of others and the common good and be willing to assume the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.

6. There is no such thing as value-free education.

Everything a school does teaches values — including the way teachers and other adults treat students, the way the principal treats teachers, the way the school treats parents, and the way students are allowed to treat school staff and each other. If questions of right and wrong are never discussed in classrooms, that too teaches a lesson about how much morality matters. In short, the relevant issue is never “Should schools teach values?” but rather “Which values will they teach?” and “How well will they teach them?”

7. The great questions facing both the individual person and the human race are moral questions.

For each of us as individuals, a question of the utmost existential importance is: “How should I live my life?” For all of humanity, the two most important questions facing us as we enter the next century are: “How can we live with each other?” and “How can we live with nature?”

8. There is broad-based, growing support for values education in the schools.

It comes from the federal government, which has identified values education as essential in the fight against drugs and crime. It comes from statehouses, which have passed resolutions calling upon all school districts to teach the values necessary for good citizenship and a law-abiding society. It comes from business, which recognizes that a responsible labor force requires workers who have character traits of honesty, dependability, pride in work, and the capacity to cooperate with others.

Support also comes from reform-minded groups such as Educators for Social Responsibility, which know that progress toward social justice and global peace demands morally principled citizens. It comes from groups such as the American Jewish Committee, which in 1988 reversed its long-standing caution against values education and issued a report urging schools to teach “civic virtues” such as “honesty, civility, responsibility, tolerance, and loyalty...”

Perhaps most significantly, support for school-based values education comes from parents who are looking for help in a world where it’s harder than ever to raise good children. For more than a decade, every Gallup poll that has asked parents whether schools should teach morals has come up with an unequivocal yes. Typical is the finding that 84 percent of parents with school-age children say they want the public schools to provide “instruction that would deal with morals and moral behavior.”

9. An unabashed commitment to moral education is essential if we are to attract and keep good teachers.

Says a young woman preparing to enter the teaching profession:

“I am not a teacher yet, but I need a sense of hope that teachers can help to turn around the community-shattering values of today’s society: materialism, me-first apathy, and disregard for truth and justice. Many of the teachers with whom I’ve spoken have been frustrated, some to the point of despair, with the deteriorating moral fiber of their students and the lack of effective methods in the schools to counter this trend. It is a hard message for me to hear as I stand on the threshold of a teaching career.”

If you want to do one thing to improve the lives of teachers, says Boston University educator Kevin Ryan, make moral education — including the creation of a civil, humane community in the school — the center of school life.

10. Values education is a doable job.

Given the enormous moral problems facing the country, their deep social roots, and the ever-increasing responsibilities that schools already shoulder, the prospect of taking on moral education can seem overwhelming. The good news...is that values education can be done within the school day, is happening now in school systems all across the country, and is making a positive difference in the moral attitudes and behavior of students, with the result that it’s easier for teachers to teach and students to learn.

Until recently, calls for school reform have focused on academic achievement. Now we know that character development is needed as well. That awareness cuts across all spheres of society; the current call for teaching values in the schools is part of an “ethics boom” that has seen more than a hundred institutionalized ethics programs — in fields as varied as journalism, medicine, law, and business — established in the United States in just the past few years. We’re recovering a foundational understanding: Just as character is the ultimate measure of an individual, so it is also the ultimate measure of a nation.

To develop the character of our children in a complex and changing world is no small task But it is time to take up the challenge.

From Educating for Character by Dr. Thomas Lickona.

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