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Returning Character Education to Schools

By Joseph A. Gauld

The deep reason America is in imbalance and decline seems obvious: We have educated ourselves to value achievement and wealth over character and purpose. As a result, the present character of our leadership, economy, and culture cannot sustain the greatness of our nation.

Since the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik in 1957, we have chosen to seek only academic proficiency in our schools. And more than 54 years of reform efforts have failed.

The basic purpose of education should be character development, where learning is centered on values derived from the family. Family-based character education is clearly superior to the education practiced in our schools today.

Studies such as **one in 1998** by Lawrence Rudner, then the director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation, show home-schooled students significantly outscoring public school students on assessments and going on to do well socially, in college, and in life.

Over the years, making academic proficiency the purpose of American education has shifted the benefits of learning away from students and families, onto schools, colleges, businesses, and the education industry itself.

For example, "No Child Left Behind" is a bogus slogan. The concern of that federal legislation is how schools, districts, states, and the nation are doing compared with one another. It is not how the individual student is doing. Within a school, it is commonly known that those students close to being proficient, and not the weakest students, are given extra attention. Why? Because schools are being measured by how many students reach proficiency on a test. The students "on the bubble" (those nearing the proficiency mark) are given the most attention and the most strategies to improve. Struggling students receive minimal, leftover resources.

For a nation committed to the individual, how did we develop such an educational system?

Here's how: In the 19th century, our agrarian state and the McGuffey Reader made American schools more character-centered. From 1836 to 1960, some 120 million McGuffey Readers—books that mixed character lessons with academic work—were sold. Those texts confirmed family life (and ethics) as an integral part of the educational process.

But the rise of the industrial age defined education primarily as a route to commerce. The McGuffey-family influence slowly waned, and with it, the emphasis on character development.

"We need to commit our public schools to developing the American character."

As a teacher-coach in 1962, I experienced a crisis of conscience when I realized I was part of an education system that was failing to properly prepare American kids for life. By 1966, with the help of others, I was able to found the Hyde School in Bath, Maine, to explore the premise that every student is gifted with a unique potential, a belief I sought to support with a new college-preparatory curriculum built on the development of character—courage, integrity, concern, curiosity, and leadership.

In 1974, by tracing the progress of Hyde graduates in college and life, I realized we also needed to address parental growth and family issues on a regular basis to truly develop individual character. Hyde slowly became a community of parents, teachers, and students working together toward the same goal: individual excellence.

Today, Hyde is a network of seven public and private schools, serving more than 2,000 students, 80 percent of them from minority groups, with 98 percent of Hyde students matriculating to college. Hyde's focus is on family-based character education and individual understandings of courage, curiosity, concern, leadership, humility, and integrity, which reaffirms the power of the American character and the American family.

After World War II, American colleges were flooded with returning soldiers receiving tuition through the GI Bill. Some university presidents strongly opposed the bill, with one saying unqualified GIs would turn our colleges into "educational hobo jungles."

In fact, these GIs went on to become in many ways the most admired college students in American history. These Depression-era young people had just one thing going for them: character. With that, they were able to restore and maintain greatness for America.

We need to commit our public schools to developing the American character. Since in character development, parents are the primary teachers and the home the primary classroom, this action will begin to restore the American family and begin a powerful partnership between family and school.

As home-schooled families have proven, this partnership should produce significantly improved academic students. More important, it will produce leaders, professionals, workers, and citizens with character, who will restore this nation's integrity—and its greatness.

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