

Indicators

SCHOOL CHOICE AND FAMILY SATISFACTION

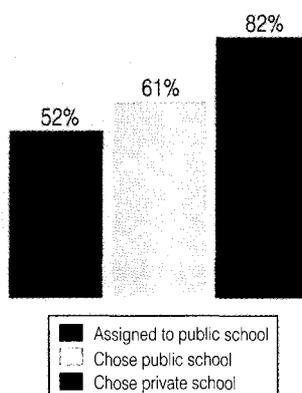
Nearly a fifth of all U.S. children attend a school other than their assigned public school. Some go to private or religious schools, some are homeschooled, some attend a public school they have been allowed to transfer into. Figures show that the people walking away from their local public schools are rural as well as urban, low-income as well as middle-class. Black students are actually more likely than whites to opt for a school other than their government-assigned institution.

Do the parents and children who choose some alternative school actually end up better off? Yes: A survey published recently by the National Center for Education Statistics shows that just 52 percent of parents with children in assigned public institutions report being "very satisfied" with their youngster's school. **Parents who were able to choose schools were far happier**, as the accompanying graph indicates.

Parents with school choice were more

satisfied on every specific count—"child is challenged at school," "child enjoys school," "teachers maintain discipline," "students and teachers respect each other," and so forth.

Parents "very satisfied" with children's schools, by level of school choice



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 1995.

VERY PRIVATE CHOICES

Though teachers' unions ferociously oppose any reforms that would allow other parents to choose non-governmental schools, in their own families, **an astonishing number of public school teachers pull their kids out of the public schools.**

Public school teachers sending their children to private schools, by city:

Baltimore	44%	Los Angeles	39%
Boston	49	Miami	32
Cleveland	53	Milwaukee	45
Dayton	40	New Orleans	46
Detroit	36	Pittsburgh	47
Grand Rapids	55	Richmond	36
Honolulu	5		

Source: 1990 census data compiled by Denis Dayle.

MORE DOLLARS ≠ BETTER SCHOOLS

When alarm over the state of American schools first arose in the 1980s, the education establishment blamed a lack of resources. Earnest, concerned Americans took them at their word and threw money at the problem. Calculated on a per-student basis, **funding for public schools jumped 50 percent above and beyond inflation from 1980 to 1996.** The total national treasure devoted to education rose from about \$330 billion to \$540 billion in constant 1996 dollars.

The largest portion of that downpour of money went to teachers. Nationwide, public school teachers now average around \$40,000 in pay for their nine months of

work. The government reports that their salaries now run between 1½ and 2 times the salaries of teachers at private schools.

One budget line has grown even faster than spending on teachers: Spending on bureaucrats. Amazingly, 25¢ of every dollar spent on U.S. education now goes to salaries of non-teachers (far higher than in other countries). This covers administrators, central office clerks, examiners of regulatory paperwork, affirmative action officers, "special ed" managers, security guards, aides, social workers, and others who never teach a lesson. In many places now, **between 40 and 50 percent of school system employees are non-teaching personnel.**

The explosion of new education spending over the last 15 years made public employee unions happy, but there is no indication it fixed our school problems. We might have anticipated this: There is a hefty accumulation of research showing that **spending per pupil has little to do with successful outcomes.** Not even lowering the student-teacher ratio, that favorite magic bullet of education budget boosters, does much to improve learning.

The Japanese are living proof that more money and teachers are not the keys to good elementary and secondary schooling. Japan spends 4.8 percent of its (smaller) Gross Domestic Product on education, versus 7.2 percent in the U.S. Japanese teachers are not highly paid, and the average class size is 32 students at the elementary level, 38 in secondary school—much higher than U.S. levels. Yet outcomes are impressive.

The things that matter in education, the Japanese have realized, are **effort, discipline, and high standards.** Teachers and students work harder in Japan to meet more rigorous requirements. The school year is 240 days, versus 180 in the U.S., and each day is longer. Twice as much classroom time is spent learning math at the elementary level. There is an accepted body of common information that all Japanese students must master, and competency tests are enforced strictly. These are the keys to school success in Japan—and perhaps elsewhere.

KEVIN RYAN ARGUES THAT PUBLIC SCHOOLS CAN'T AVOID SHAPING STUDENTS' CHARACTER. WILLIAM KILPATRICK SAYS THEY CAN'T DO THE JOB RIGHT.



Kevin Ryan



William Kilpatrick

Is Character Education Hopeless?

The character education of our children is fast becoming the topic *du jour*. In his 1996 State of the Union address President Clinton urged American schools to perform character education. Bill Bennett, even before the success of his *Book of Virtues*, was exhorting schools over this issue. Meanwhile, our newsmagazines and airwaves teem with talk of virtues and values, and educational vendors are moving in on the Little Red Schoolhouse with everything from cups and T-shirts sporting catchy slogans to Hollywood-produced videotapes.

Character education has hit a nerve, with polls showing much support for schools teaching core moral principles, like honesty, responsibility, and respect.

THERE IS ONE BRUTE
FACT THAT ALL SIDES
SHOULD
ACKNOWLEDGE:
SCHOOLS CANNOT
GET OUT OF THE
BUSINESS OF
CHARACTER
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THEY CANNOT BE
MORALLY NEUTRAL.

Critics like the ACLU see the new character education movement as the stalking horse for the return of Christianity to the schools. Many Christians, on the other hand, are appalled by the idea of the public schools moving into the moral domain, a domain they see as the province of the family and the church. They believe the character education movement signals a new offensive by secular humanists, who have damaged our schools enough already.

The ever-vigilant ACLU may have had a case earlier this century, when character education was little more than thinly veiled advocacy for muscular Christianity. But today nothing strikes more terror into a public school teacher's heart than the fear of being accused of "religious indoctrination." The only vestige of religion in our schools is student-inspired and -led Bible study and prayer groups.

Christian fundamentalist critics have a more legitimate concern about character education. They have witnessed the growth of a toxic moral environment in our public schools, with rampant cheating, low levels of respect for teachers, and Swedish-

Is character education in the public schools a good idea? Of course it is. Helping youngsters become good people should be one of the central tasks of the schools. A better question, though, is whether character education in the public schools is possible.

To begin with, the vast majority of educators don't even understand the concept of character education. If they've heard it, they tend to think it's some new variation of values clarification or self-esteem education—in short, another way of getting students to talk about their values, or to talk about their feelings. What character education is really about—the cultivation of virtues through the formation of good habits—is so far removed from the current educational mindset as to be almost incomprehensible. In attempts to assimilate the idea, today's educators have been forced to distort and dilute it. Professor Ryan admits as much. In a recent article in *Educational Leadership* he points out that the character education movement is being co-opted by educators and entrepreneurs who still look at education in terms of prepackaged curricula and fun-and-games activities.

Character education may require some changes in or additions to the curriculum, but more importantly it would require fundamental changes in the school environment. Schools would need to set and enforce high standards of conduct (something they haven't been able to do for decades), create an atmosphere of civility (students would not be allowed to fondle one another, use four-letter words, etc.), and involve students in service to the school (for example, the Japanese have a daily ritual of cleaning up at the end of the school day). But to do these sorts of things would require a massive change of mind on the part of those many teachers and administrators who fear "imposing values," let alone behaviors.

And, as William Bennett and others have suggested, effective character formation also seems to require institutions with an allegiance to common cultural ideals—as well as a willingness to assimilate newcomers to these overarching purposes and visions. Ultimately, we require some *meaning* to sustain our *morality*. Else why should we behave ourselves or obey our teachers?

Right now the public schools appear to be marching in the exact opposite direction—toward the worship of diversity and multiculturalism. Educators may *talk* about character education, but they are actually promoting the concept of multiculturalism. And, as it is currently practiced, multiculturalism is the antithesis of a common culture. In essence, it is the revival of the old dogma