

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. 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

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style sex education. Given that our public schools embrace so many questionable trends and ideas, parents are rightly wary.

But there is one brute fact that all sides should acknowledge: The schools cannot get out of the business of character education. Parents cannot turn over their child to the schools for 13 impressionable years and then prevent the school from having a profound impact on his character. Schools by their nature cannot be morally neutral. Indeed, they are moral cauldrons of rewards and punishments, winners and losers, and a continuing parade of issues calling out to be labeled “right” or “wrong.”

Two hundred years ago, Edmund Burke said, “Example is the school of mankind and they will learn at no other.” From literature and history to the playground, schools overflow with good and bad examples of human behavior. A child’s character, his pattern of habits and sense of right and wrong cannot help but be affected by the daily moral grind of school life.

While character education may have become an educational bandwagon, it is no newcomer to our schools. The formation of character and conscience were the *raison d’être* of public schools in the New World. In 1647 the Massachusetts colonists passed our first school establishment law, called the Old Deluder Act, for the express purpose of teaching children how to read the Bible, so as to resist the snares of that Old Deluder, Satan.

From the beginning, character formation has been part and parcel of public education. But by the 1960s our history teachers insisted we had no moral heritage to bequeath to our children. “Who are we to impose our values on the young?” they asked. And so for the past 30 years our schools have been value-free zones. With weakened and distracted families and churches dealing with new problems, like the exploding elderly population and the homeless, schools are being asked to fill the void.

Admittedly, the odds of our public schools successfully reclaiming this work are long. The biggest problem is that our teachers—overwhelmingly people of good will—don’t know what to do. Educated in elementary and secondary schools without moral and character education and trained in universities that ignore the moral arena, teachers are clueless. Preparing them to reclaim their responsibilities for character formation is a huge problem, particularly since most teachers receive only one or two days’ staff development training yearly.

The issue, then, is not, Should the public schools engage in character education? but rather, What will happen to them if they fail to do it or do it foolishly? No society can ignore the character development of the next generation. Americans are finally recognizing that we have been on vacation from our young. We are looking to the schools for help. Our support for educational vouchers largely has its roots in schools’ failures to be a constructive force in character education. If the schools do not quickly and sensibly take up their traditional responsibilities for character education, the public will abandon its public schools.

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of cultural relativism: each culture is so different from every other culture that no culture has the right to *make judgments* about any other culture. From here, of course, it is only a short step to moral relativism (no individual has the right to make judgments about the behavior of other individuals)—a step that educators are willing to take.

Multiculturalism provides a heightened sense of group and ethnic consciousness, which makes it nearly impossible for schools to create a common school culture and common behavioral expectations. When different ethnic groups sit in different sections of the lunchroom, when blacks are taught Afrocentrism and whites are

taught to feel guilty, and when, as happens in some multiculturally advanced high schools, blacks, whites, and Chicanos have separate graduation ceremonies, then there is little hope of establishing an atmosphere of unified moral purpose in schools.

If public schools were once reasonably effective at the job of character formation, it was largely because the school ethos could be tied to the group-transcending visions provided by Western, Judeo-Christian tradition. The historical situation that made this possible has passed. Now it is politically incorrect for schools to have any special allegiance to Western culture or religion. And the ethos of the average school has come to resemble the therapeutic ethos of a counseling center.

But helping students feel comfortable with whatever they happen to want to do is not conducive to their developing solid virtues.

Effective character formation, once within the reach of all public schools, is now possible, for the most part, only in private and parochial schools. Even here the sledding will be rough. But at least such schools still have the ability to create a powerful ethos. Although they often have plenty of ethnic diversity, it is still understood that one’s ethnicity should be subordinate to the more important traditions, spiritual and philosophical, that give the school its moral authority.

Those who hope for a revival of character education in the public schools argue that if it was done before, why not again. But all the evidence suggests that, short of some dramatic and probably traumatic historical reversal, that blessed state cannot be recaptured.

It’s time to face up to that fact. Character education in public schools doesn’t have a prayer.

William Kilpatrick is the author of Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right from Wrong.

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TWO ACADEMIC PARIASHS TALK ABOUT SEX, RACE, AND THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD THAT LED THEM FROM THE LEFT.

Eugene Genovese & Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

*Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have been dubbed “the royal couple of radicalism” by Vanity Fair. Long regarded as the nation’s leading Marxist historian, an expert on the antebellum South and slavery, Eugene Genovese has of late become a lacerating critic of the academic Left and a defender of the Southern Right. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, whose most recent book is titled *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life*, was a pioneer in the field of women’s studies—yet she has become a pariah in feminist circles, not least for her defense of traditional families.*

As a girl, Mrs. Fox-Genovese had three ambitions: to become the first woman president, to marry a black man, and to have 21 children. As a boy, her husband dreamed of a Communist America. They got a happy marriage instead. Editors Bill Kauffman and Scott Walter interviewed the couple at their Atlanta home.

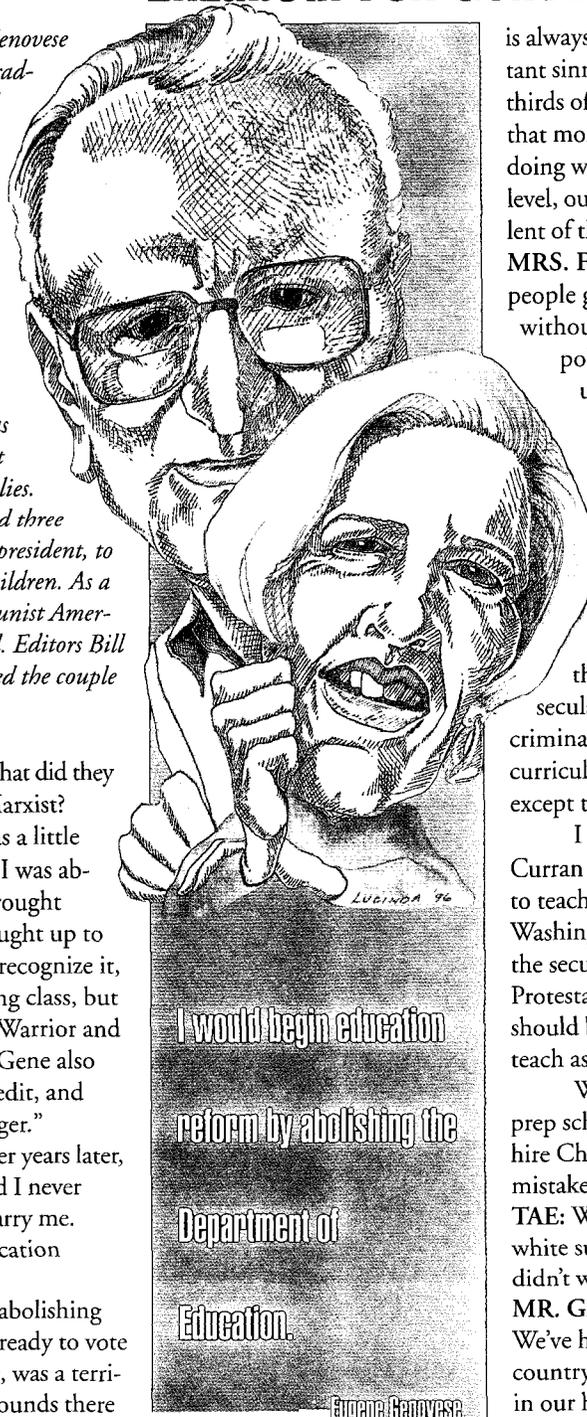
TAE: You’re from a patrician family. What did they think when you married a Sicilian Marxist?

MRS. FOX-GENOVESE: There was a little initial, how shall we say, opposition. I was absolutely outraged. I was sure I had brought them the man whom I had been brought up to marry. And they didn’t immediately recognize it, not because he was Sicilian or working class, but my father was a long-standing Cold Warrior and was a little nervous about Marxism. Gene also had two previous marriages to his credit, and something of a reputation as a “swinger.”

MR. GENOVESE: I kidded her father years later, told him he was a terrible father. I said I never would have let a daughter of mine marry me.

TAE: What would your favorite education reform be?

MR. GENOVESE: I would start by abolishing the Department of Education. I was ready to vote for Lamar Alexander, who, I thought, was a terrible Secretary of Education, on the grounds there



is always room on a mourners’ bench for repentant sinners. I would also close down half to two-thirds of the colleges in the country and transfer that money to secondary education. If we were doing what we should be doing at the secondary level, our students would be getting the equivalent of the first two years of college anyway.

MRS. FOX-GENOVESE: Many too many people go to college, but they can’t get jobs without college. We have a cultural elite and a political economy that has devalued manual labor and frequently doesn’t pay it or abolishes the jobs.

I’d certainly restore single-sex schooling. I’d favor a voucher system. I would favor public subsidy for religious schools, while allowing them to retain their religious principles and identity.

MR. GENOVESE: One of the things that has struck me is the way in which the Catholic schools have been turned into secular institutions, because if you can’t discriminate in hiring, much less the content of the curriculum, what makes you a Catholic school except that it gives you an angle to beat taxes?

I cannot get over this business with Father Curran protesting the loss of his Church license to teach theology at Catholic University in Washington. Was it really an issue to be taken to the secular courts, loaded with Jews, atheists, and Protestants, over whether a Catholic university should be able to determine what is proper to teach as Catholic theology? This is a bad joke.

We’ve had a problem with an excellent prep school in Georgia because they would only hire Christian teachers. I think they are making a mistake, but a mistake they’re entitled to make.

TAE: Would you make the same defense of a white supremacist who owned a restaurant and didn’t want to serve blacks?

MR. GENOVESE: That’s a trickier question. We’ve had a history of racial antagonism in this country which brought on the most ghastly war in our history. It’s poisoned our life as a nation.