

**Cover:** From modest curriculum add-ons to wholesale plans to upgrade classroom culture, public schools are expressing renewed interest in character education. Coverage starts page 6.

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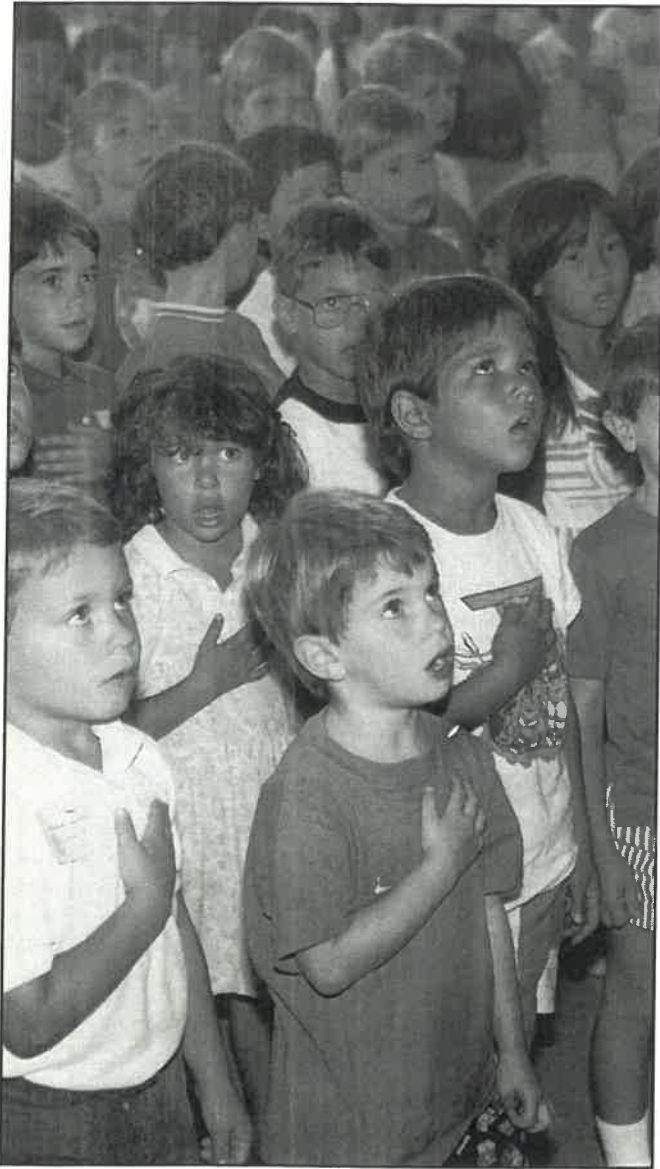
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# Where Focus on the Family Falls Short on Character Development

## Four Reactions from School Leaders



*Photo by William P. Mills/Montgomery County, Md., Public Schools*

## Narrow Definition for a Broad Problem

BY SHELDON H. BERMAN

Superintendent, Hudson School District, Hudson, Massachusetts

I commend Linda Page of *Focus on the Family* for her support of character education and for her desire to have schools model the virtues of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, justice, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

I, too, find it auspicious that 30 national leaders from widely divergent perspectives were able to set aside their differences and find common ground on the need for character education as well as a common list of virtues they could support.

However, Page's analysis of the roots of the crisis in character and her recommended solutions are too narrow to address the problem.

Page argues that the source of the moral crisis in this country lies in a 30-year history of moral relativism in the



schools promoted by the values clarification movement. As an educator throughout this period, I cannot remember a time when educators did not articulate strong moral standards promoting truthfulness, trustworthiness, respect, and justice.

Values clarification was a minor movement within the larger moral education effort. Although often misunderstood, its primary focus was on helping students make choices among competing alternatives and understand that there may be differing perspectives on which choices might be most productive. As a curricular program, it had neither the following nor the comprehensiveness to justify the significance Page claims it has had.

Placing the burden of responsibility on values clarification focuses the source of our moral crisis in the wrong arena and blames educators for the growth in crime and violence and the decline of moral courage and test scores. Through all the vicissitudes of the past 30 years, the schools have been a source of moral strength for students.

### Greater Forces

What has changed over the past generation is the social context in which children are growing up. Children are mirrors in which we can see our own reflection. If we are seeing a crisis in character or morality, we need to examine our behavior as a society for its roots.

Causes of far greater significance would include the growing economic disparity in the United States, the increasing acceptability of violence in the media, the sense of disenfranchisement and hopelessness among the young, and the emergence of self-interest and material gratification as primary ethics in our society, replacing an appreciation of the common good and the safeguarding of the rights of others.

Page's solution to the problem is also narrow, relying on the assumption that the only vehicle for encouraging moral courage is faith. Religious faith can be a powerful motivator of moral courage and many moral exemplars have held deep religious beliefs. Studies of moral exemplars, altruistic individuals, and pro-social activists show that the central

motivators of pro-social action are a unity of one's sense of self and one's morality, a sense of personal connectedness to the welfare of others, and a sense of meaning that one derives from contributing to something larger than oneself. These themes are at the heart of positive religious faith, although they also may stand independent of faith.

The research in citizen education, political socialization, pro-social behavior, moral development, and psychosocial development point to four key processes that promote moral courage, social engagement, and pro-social action.

These include:

- (1) maintaining a nurturant and caring environment that emphasizes children's involvement in decision-making, pro-social action, and reasoning about discipline and ethics;
- (2) modeling of pro-social action and ethical behavior by parents, other adults, or peers;
- (3) developing perspective-taking skills that allow young people to step beyond themselves into the lives and perspectives of others; and
- (4) teaching effective ways of handling conflict and confrontations with injustice.

The research shows that children's awareness of the social and political world emerges far earlier and their social and moral abilities are far more advanced at an early age than we previously thought. What they lack is the skill to handle moral conflicts in effective ways in the face of a social environment that often models poor ethics and poor conflict management skills.

### Nurturing Environment

Although the schools can model respect for religious traditions and values and teach about religion in a way that entertains multiple perspectives and considers both the positive and negative historical influences of religion, the real vehicle for character education lies in the environment we create and the skills we teach in schools.

The environments that foster good character and moral courage are ones that are open, nurturant, and participatory, where people model and live

pro-social values and where conflict is handled instructively and effectively. They are environments where young people are provided opportunities for taking the perspective of others and

"...I cannot remember a time when educators did not articulate strong moral standards..."



reflecting on their own attitudes and beliefs.

Educating for character means helping young people understand that their lives are intimately connected to the well-being of others and to the social and political world around them, that they make a difference in their daily lives by their choices and values, that diversity in cultures, races, and religious beliefs enriches our lives, and that they can participate in the social and political arena to create a more just, peaceful, and ecologically sound world.

To build this kind of environment for children we have to be wary, as adults, and as leaders of local school systems, of statements that divide us into the righteous and the nonrighteous and further polarize us into competing camps. The social and moral problems we face are complex and demand introspection, social analysis, dialogue, and a search for common ground.

We have to think and act in ways that model pro-social behavior and respect for diversity so that students have access to adults they can look to as examples of the way they can become.

*Sheldon Berman is the past president of Educators for Social Responsibility and author of the forthcoming book Children's Social Consciousness, published by SUNY Press.*