

Roots and wings: A public school agenda

There are only two lasting bequests we can give our children: one is roots, the other is wings."

Rev. James J. Close,
Superintendent of Mercy
Boys' Home, Chicago

We have come to the moment in the history of our society when Bill Clinton, once the shaggy-haired "progressive" student protester of the 1960's, is advocating the imposition of dress codes, of school uniforms, as a way of instilling pride and discipline in our youngsters.

What a difference a generation makes, even in the life of one man.

Liberals and conservatives both are beginning to recognize that after three decades of experimentation, of tossing out the old dusty ways or searching for bright new solutions, the social revolution was in many ways simply a very roundabout way of reinventing the wheel.

The consequences of our wanderings are dire. We can no longer wait. It is time we recognized the state of our society, and maybe, for the first time, take seriously the clear indications of what the future holds, and begin applying the lessons we have learned (and been forced to re-learn) to our educational institutions.

It is time we stopped just talking about character education, and started teaching it. It is time we gave our kids roots, so that, firmly planted, they can sprout wings.

The facts which are prompting these re-evaluations are horrifying. Not only are juveniles, children really, aged 13 to 17 more likely to commit violent crimes than any other age group, but youngsters in New York City commit murder at two and a half times the terrifying national rate. In 10 years, the number of murders and violent crimes committed by kids almost doubled. These facts are not the concoction of some fear-mongering law-and-order right-wingers: they come from Congressman Charles Schumer, a Democrat, a New Yorker and a liberal.

These figures might be enough to keep us awake at night, but consider that the number of youngsters in this age group is about to increase dramatically, as a demographic "bulge," a sort of mini-baby-boom, begins to make its way into the teenage years. This is the stuff of which nightmares are made.

Since Bill Clinton and his peers were teenagers themselves, violent crime has not just doubled, but increased

more than five-fold; suicide by teenagers has more than doubled; the number of youngsters who have only one parent at home has tripled; and scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the basic entrance exam for college, has dropped as much as 80 points at one point.

We can also argue about whether television is a contributing factor to this, or merely a reflection of our society, but either way, consider that by age 18, our children have probably watched about 22,000 hours of TV, but spent only 11,000 hours in a classroom. What is more, they have witnessed 14,000 murders in the pale bluish glow of the tube.

None of our educational reforms, or changes in curriculum and approach, or restructuring of educational priorities, or our pioneering of new pedagogical methods has made any significant dent in this rising tide of violence and despair. This is not because we do not have methods and proposals which could make a difference, but because the

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methods which have given proven results have not been tried on any significant scale.

Until, perhaps, how.

Think of the public schools where school uniforms and other bits of character education have been introduced: school loyalty is "in," kids have pride in their achievements, and see themselves as part of a group that is meant to work together. It is this which can lead to improved grades and generally higher scholastic standards.

The time has come for us to stop arguing and discussing, and start implementing character education, including the value of school uniforms. This should be a topic of concern at every school-based management committee meeting in our schools. The longer we shy away from this, the longer we perpetuate an educational and societal gap that fails young people, leaves them feeling rudderless and confused, gives them feelings of hopelessness and despair. This can only result in their becoming angry, frustrated, lashing out to violently conquer in order to feel good. In short, failing our kids by leaving them in such an educational vacuum virtually assures that they will, through our failure, become

destroyers of democracy by chaos, of community by violence.

This is not to demand or advocate conformity for the sake of conformity. The very purpose of a sound education should be to help students develop the critical skills needed to make their own decisions, to choose their own values, to seek their own answers. However, the discipline and habits of mind necessary for true freedom of thought and independence of will can only come when the young receive educational formation that values the formation of character values themselves.

There are basic fundamental truths in life which never seem to be undermined by fleeting avant-garde newisms of a society. Our job, as the educating generation, is to look beyond fads in educational policy and practice, and assess what has traditionally worked and survived time and peoples, and not be afraid to apply it to the learning generation.

So, as the talk begins to become serious about Clinton's school uniforms proposal, I can proudly say, "I told you so." Since my earliest days on our local school board, I have been a proponent of these ideas. If all the social engineering and patchwork education practices we have seen come and go under the New York City Board of Education, and boards of education throughout the country, were as good and vital and respectful of the real needs of our kids as they claimed to be, we would not be seeing students so at risk as we are seeing them now. We must be introspective, assess what our community needs and decide what proactive steps we can take, if only to be "safe rather than sorry."

Bill Clinton, and the politicians of his generation have finally come around, at least to some degree, to an understanding of the importance of what we once rejected in this country. Now, let's take this opportunity to give our youngsters roots, real roots, deep roots, to strengthen their characters, so that the wings we give them will be that much more substantial and they will be that much more able to truly soar. It can and must happen in our public schools.

After all, the measure of our success will not be how "progressive" our schools are, by anyone's definition, but how much progress our students make.

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