

Educational Choice

Don Closson surveys the state of educational choice in America. Even though educational spending is the largest category in every state's budget, money is not our primary concern. It is the well being of our children.

What does the idea of educational choice have to do with a Christian worldview? Quite a lot, actually. As Christians we are called to be concerned about justice, about the poor, about the weakest individuals in our society. We also have an interest in having a population educated well enough to read and understand the Bible. It is about “loving our neighbors as ourselves” and “doing unto the least of these” in the society around us.

I must admit that during my twelve years of teaching and administrating in public schools educational choice wasn't a burning issue. I admit that personal interest convinced me to become a supporter. Vouchers made sense as I experienced the difficulty of paying taxes for local public schools even though my children were being home-schooled or were attending private schools. Back then, supporters of vouchers were either fans of free-market economist Milton Freeman or were philosophically opposed to the “one-best-system” approach of government-provided schooling. They were a small but vocal minority.



Times have changed. Today, supporters of educational choice are often people who are shocked by the failure of our inner city schools to educate children in any meaningful sense of the word. A rising number of urban leaders have concluded that the current model of schooling just hasn't worked for many of our children.

What is meant by the term “educational choice”? One definition

says, "...it means letting every parent send their child to the school of their choice regardless of where they live or income. Parents choose schools based on their child's needs, not their address."^[1] The desire for educational choice over the last couple of decades has found expression in the creation of voucher plans, charter schools, private scholarship programs, and personal tax credits or deductions. Since each state is responsible for establishing its own educational policies, there have been multiple variations on each of these categories along with endless court battles to affirm or deny the constitutionality of each plan.

Those who support educational choice begin with the assumption that increased competition is almost always a good thing. Its proponents argue that when schools must compete for students, they generally work harder at providing a better service. They believe in bottom-up reform, letting parents choose what educational methods and content is best for their children rather than a top-down approach that is guided by a centralized government or teachers' union.

In this article we survey the state of educational choice in America. Even though educational spending is the largest category in every state's budget, money is not our primary concern. It is the well being of our children.

Publicly Funded Vouchers

In 1955 economist Milton Friedman argued that America's public school system was not achieving the goals that it was created for. As a government operated monopoly it was failing in its mandate to educate all of our children equally regardless of race or class. In fact, it was a highly segregated system that was failing our most needy students in our inner city schools. His solution was to open up education to market forces by issuing vouchers to parents who could then choose where to spend their education dollars. He wrote, "In the end, the goal

of education is to ensure learning and guarantee a free society and stable democracy. These goals are better met when all parents are free to choose the school that works best for their child."

For decades, Friedman was a lone voice, but in the early 1990's Milwaukee Wisconsin began a voucher program with 337 students who could use their publicly funded vouchers to attend religious or non-religious private schools in the city. This program is now in its 17th year and is approaching its legislatively set cap of 15% of the districts students. In the 2007-08 school year over 18,000 students participated, attending 122 different private schools.[\[2\]](#) Voucher programs have been established in Cleveland Ohio, Colorado, Florida and Washington D.C., only to be met with an onslaught of legal challenges.

In 2002 the Supreme Court ruled that voucher programs are not a violation of the religious establishment clause of the First Amendment. Although that issue has been settled, state courts have whittled away or restricted these programs at every turn. Teachers' unions have also spent millions of dollars to fight voucher program legislation and to campaign against them in statewide referendums.

It appears that limited voucher programs aimed at poor inner-city students who are trapped in dysfunctional schools now have the best chance of succeeding. While middle-class evangelicals seemed supportive of vouchers early on, they now perceive them to be a threat to the independence of the many private religious schools that have sprung up in the last 20 years. Most middle class suburbanites already have the power of school choice because of their financial ability to move into districts with better schools.

Tax supported vouchers are still popular among the many free market conservatives who argue that competition in the educational marketplace would be good for children and for the

public schools. They have also garnered grass root support from the African-American and Hispanic communities in the last decade. There are other ways to inject choice into our educational system, but it is clear to many that choice is needed now, especially for our most needy students.

Why Educational Choice?

Giving inner city parents a choice in where they send their children to school is critical if we hope to solve the crises in our cities' schools. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings puts it this way:

"Despite our best efforts, there are still vast inequities within our education system. In too many of our cities, the reality faced by minority and low-income kids is shocking. As you've heard, 15% of our high schools produce more than half of our dropouts. Of these dropout factories a majority of the students trapped in them are minorities, and their high school experience looks vastly different from what most kids encounter. They go to schools where trash litters the floors, where graffiti decorates the walls. . . where most freshmen enter unable to read or do math at an eighth grade-level, and where graduation is a 50/50 shot, or worse."[{3}](#)

Why do many reformers believe that educational choice has the greatest potential to solve our nation's education problems? Referring to legislation passed in 2004 that provided the first federally funded choice scholarships for low income students in Washington D.C., Secretary of Education Rod Paige explained that:

"Educational choice is important for two reasons. First, it extends civil rights and social justice. Second, it enhances school effectiveness. The introduction of opportunity scholarships in the District comes fifty years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision. It comes 40 years after

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. demanded a full measure of the American promise. Opportunity scholarships help remove the chains of bureaucracy. They free low-income students to obtain a better education in a school of their choosing."[{4}](#)

Studies have shown how dramatic changes can occur in cities that allow its parents choice. Writing about the longest voucher program in the nation, the *Wall Street Journal* declares:

"There's no question the program has been a boon to the city's underprivileged. A 2004 study of high school graduation rates by Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute found that students using vouchers to attend Milwaukee's private schools had a graduation rate of 64%, versus 36% for their public school counterparts. Harvard's Caroline Hoxby has shown that Milwaukee public schools have raised their standards in the wake of voucher competition."[{5}](#)

Educational choice works because it puts power into the hands of the people who care most about our nation's children, their parents. It works because it increases the autonomy of school administrators so that they can provide the kind of education that the public wants. It works because it encourages learning communities of like-minded adults to work together to provide the best learning environment possible.

Private Vouchers and Tax Credits

Although the press has focused on the legal battles surrounding the use of tax-supported educational vouchers to pay tuition at private religious schools, there is another type of voucher program that is helping thousands of children and continues to grow without legal controversy. There are now more than two dozen *private* voucher programs in cities across the United States. Millions of dollars are being raised by private citizens in order to offer vouchers to less fortunate

children so that they can attend better schools.

In that late 1990's, John Walton of Wal-Mart fame, and Theodore Forstmann of Forstmann Little & Company decided to offer 1,000 scholarships to low income students in Washington D.C. With very little publicity they received over 8,000 applications. Sensing a real need, in 1998 they together donated \$100 million towards a national program that would fund 40,000 scholarships inaugurating the Children's Scholarship Fund.[\[6\]](#) That got people's attention. Former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young, Martin Luther King III, General Colin Powell, and numerous C.E.O.'s from some of America's best known corporations have served on the organization's board.

By September of 1998 the fund grew to \$170 million. Eventually, the Children's Scholarship Fund received applications from 1.25 million children from 22,000 cities and towns in all fifty states.

Mr. Forstmann concluded that:

The parents of 1.25 million children put an end to the debate over whether low-income families want choice in education: They passionately, desperately, unequivocally do. Now it is up to the defenders of the status quo to tell them, and the millions they represent, why they cannot have it.[\[7\]](#)

In 2007, the Children's Scholarship Fund gave vouchers to 29,000 students. The families receiving these scholarships earned an average of around \$27,000 a year, and supplemented the scholarship with an additional \$2,000 per student. These low income families have a strong desire to remove their children from their current schools and are willing to make a significant sacrifice to acquire a good education for their children.

State-sponsored tax credits are another alternative to tax-funded vouchers. They are popular because of they are simple

to administrate; they have a relatively long history and a settled legal status. They have limited scope because not all states have an income tax and often it is the families who need help the most who do not benefit from tax credits because of their low tax liability.

Advocates of educational choice agree that it will take many different tactics to provide the freedom parents need to get the best education possible for their children.

Educational Freedom

In 2001, the Manhattan Institute released an interesting study concerning the idea of educational freedom. The study suggested a strong relationship between the amount of freedom a state gives parents in directing their children to a school of their choice and the level of academic achievement accomplished by those children.

Since education is primarily governed at the state level, it makes sense to measure educational freedom by state. In the study, a state's ranking is determined by how much freedom parents are given by its laws regulating vouchers, charter schools, home-schooling, choice within existing public schools, and tax credits allowed for education expenses.

According to the study, the most educationally free state is Arizona. It gets the top spot because of its wide selection of charter schools and its tax credits for private school expenses. The least educationally free state is Hawaii. Hawaii scores lowest on the index because it has one large school district for the entire state, no charter schools, and it highly regulates home-schoolers. Utah is second to last because gives no assistance to those sending their children to private schools, has few charter schools, and has large centralized school districts.

The study concludes that "For many years education reformers

have advocated strengthening accountability systems and expanding educational freedom. Our statistical models suggest that such reforms, where implemented, have yielded the academic improvements that reformers predicted.”{8} For instance, a one-point increase in a state’s freedom index would predict a 4% increase in that state’s math test results indicated by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Educational freedom received another boost in a study released in October 2007 by the Milton & Rose Friedman Foundation. The research concludes that “A large body of top-quality studies consistently shows that school choice produces higher academic achievement for the students who have the opportunity to use it. On this issue, the evidence supporting school choice is as strong as the evidence on any social policy question whatsoever.”{9}

Freedom makes a difference in education. Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute writes, “Simply providing families with additional options in the education of their children has a larger independent effect on student achievement than increasing education spending or reducing class size... the magnitude of the benefit of education freedom for student learning is comparable to the benefit of significantly increasing median household income.”{10}

Christians are called upon to love their neighbors, and their neighbors’ children, as themselves. If we are serious about helping our underprivileged neighbors, especially in our inner-cities schools, educational freedom through greater choice is a policy we can and should endorse.

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A President's Educational Choice

An Important Choice

With each presidential election Americans are called to reflect upon public policy, ranging from military funding to education reform. Once the new president is chosen, everyone looks for evidence that he will move the federal bureaucracy in a direction favorable to their own agenda.

When it comes to education, President Obama has been difficult to figure out. In early speeches he seemed to favor dramatic reform. During the campaign he said:

We need a new vision for a 21st century education – one where we aren't just supporting existing schools, but spurring innovation; where we're not just investing more money, but demanding more reform; where parents take responsibility for their children's success; where our schools and government are accountable for results; where we're recruiting, retaining, and rewarding an army of new teachers, and students are excited to learn because they're attending schools of the future; and where we expect all our children not only to graduate high school, but to graduate college and get a good paying job.[*{1}*](#)

Later, Obama appeared to move closer to those who already hold sway over how our schools operate, especially the teachers unions. An indication of this trend was the sound of relief voiced by Marty Hittelman, president of the California Federation of Teachers, who said, "It's such a clear change from what we've had. . . . Someone who's friendly to labor. . . . Someone who wants to work with teachers."[*{2}*](#) Obama has also signaled encouragement to the unions by appointing a teacher-friendly Stanford University professor to lead his education transition team.

But sometimes personal action speaks louder than political appointments. Our new president has decided to send his two children, Malia Anne and Natasha, to a well known private school in Washington, D.C. The Obama children will attend Sidwell Friends School, a private Quaker affiliated school that charges \$29,000 a year per student. Some are criticizing the Obama family for not supporting the local public schools. As a supporter of educational freedom, and choice, I personally have no problem with the president choosing the best educational setting for his children. I would do the same.

What interests me is what this choice says about President Obama's thoughts regarding educational excellence. Sidwell

Friends School violates key principles that the teachers unions and other public school supporters tell us are necessary elements for excellent schools, programs and policies that reformers insist taxpayers should be providing for every student in America.

Ensuring an adequate education for all of our children is a matter of justice that Christians should be concerned about. In what follows I will look at these so-called educational necessities the teachers unions and other public school supporters demand.

What Sidwell Needs

President Obama's decision to place his daughters in Sidwell reveals something about what he thinks it takes to provide a superior education. Choosing this expensive private school raises interesting questions about President Obama's support of what might be called the "common wisdom" that public school leaders and teachers unions tell us is necessary for good schools.

Much of the following was brought to my attention by Mike Antonucci who writes a monthly newsletter for those who are concerned about education in America and particularly the role that the unions play in shaping it. Antonucci points out six areas in which the Sidwell School might be seen as deficient by our leading reformers and especially by the teachers unions.

According to the National Education Association, the largest teachers union in the country, the first deficiency at Sidwell is obvious. On its web site the NEA argues that "the attainment and exercise of collective bargaining rights are essential to the promotion of education employee and student needs in society."[\[3\]](#) In other words, the school simply must be unionized. How can Sidwell School hope to effectively

educate students without a collective bargaining agreement? It boggles the mind to think that they can educate President Obama's children without such necessities as union agency fees, binding arbitration, grievance procedures, and most important, teachers strikes!

How can real education occur in the absence of an angry battle between a well financed teachers union and a harried entrenched school administration? Can real learning happen in the absence of endless hours of negotiations over every aspect of the curriculum, the daily schedule, and teacher placement? Doesn't the president know that a hostile, confrontational working environment actually improves the educational process?

In addition to this remarkable neglect, the Sidwell School forces its teachers to pay between ten and forty percent of their health care insurance premiums, contribute towards their own retirement plan, and almost unbelievably receive only two personal days off per school year. Barbaric! Everyone knows that teachers are only concerned about compensation and benefits and if they do not receive an amount above the median level paid out by other schools of similar size, they simply can't function. These teachers are obviously being coerced to remain at this school. And to think that some have suggested that the opportunity to work with motivated students and supportive parents in building a strong learning community might be more important than financial rewards.

More Problems with Sidwell

A key ingredient missing from the Sidwell experience will be an appropriate level of diversity. To many, diversity has become the ultimate good in education. Millions upon millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent to create highly diverse student bodies across the nation. Without a high level of diversity, it's argued, students will not develop the necessary degree of tolerance, both for people and ideas,

needed for our society to prosper or even exist into the future. A diversity deficit might result in the president's children coming to the frightening conclusion that truth itself isn't diverse and that perhaps we should not accept all ideas equally.

Although the Sidwell School has a significant level of diversity – thirty-nine percent of the students are part of an ethnic or racial minority group – Washington D. C. public schools are ninety-five percent ethnic and racial minorities. How can the president send his children to a learning environment that is so far behind the level of essential diversity prominent in our capitol's public schools? If some diversity is good, isn't more diversity better?

However, this deficit of diversity pales in comparison to the next problem. The Sidwell School is a Quaker institution. It has mandatory weekly worship meetings for all its students, including the president's children. This practice goes far beyond the legitimate academic objective of learning the history of religious traditions; it requires students to participate in a religious activity.

The official National Education Association's Web site makes it clear that "encouraging or compelling students to participate in any religious activity, such as prayer, during any type of holiday festivity or classroom activity is forbidden."[\[4\]](#) Now, if such activity is harmful to our public school students, does it make sense to expose the president's children to them?

The NEA adds that while students may study various religious expressions and practices, they may do so "as long as schools make sure different faiths are represented in school-wide or classroom activities."[\[5\]](#) Does Sidwell promote Islamic or Wiccan worship? Is our president setting a good example by allowing his children to be taught in such an intolerant setting?

Sidwell's Curriculum

Here's another problem. It appears that Sidwell is kind of old fashioned when it comes to its curriculum. Its Web site says, "We believe that to be effective, education must be founded on secure mastery of basic skills . . . We place strong emphasis on reading, personal expression of ideas through speaking and writing, and the mastery of computational and problem solving skills. We also encourage scientific exploration, artistic creativity, physical activity, second language acquisition." [\[6\]](#) Basic skills? Mastery learning? Isn't this a throwback to the education of the nineteenth century?

In the middle school, Sidwell's history curriculum says that "Each history course is designed to provide students with a sound foundation of knowledge in a given subject area and to develop research, writing and interpretive skills." [\[7\]](#) To many modern educators, this focus on acquiring information and developing mastery of essential skills is reminiscent of educational policies that have been out of vogue for decades.

Professional educators tend to endorse something called the Progressive Education Movement. This movement emphasized a "naturalistic," "project-oriented," "hands-on," "critical-thinking" curriculum and "democratic" education policies endorsed by the philosopher John Dewey. [\[8\]](#) Beginning early in the twentieth century, educators challenged the emphasis on subject matter and have attempted to replace it with what might be called the "tool" metaphor for learning.

The "tool" metaphor argues that students' minds shouldn't be filled with lots of facts, but instead should be taught how to learn. Although various arguments are used to promote this view, the one most often heard goes something like this: "Since knowledge is growing so quickly – in fact it's exploding – we need to teach kids how to learn, not a bunch of facts that will quickly become outdated." Education historian Lawrence Cremin writes that our elementary schools have been

dominated by this metaphor since the 1960s, and that our secondary schools are not far behind.[\[9\]](#) The result of this monopoly has been a reduction of what might be called “intellectual capital,” an agreed upon set of necessary facts that all well educated people should possess.

The Sidwell School seems to believe that this so called intellectual capital is important. By stressing the acquisition of key information in its curriculum it is revealing a more traditional rather than progressive education. Can this antiquated curriculum possibly prepare the Obama children for the rapid changes of the twenty-first century?

Educational Excellence

It seems, then, that the Sidwell Friends School chosen by the Obama family for their daughters violates many of what is considered to be the “best practices” in the public school sector.

On the other hand, it represents many of the factors that we know make for a superior learning environment. Almost twenty years ago the Brookings Institution published a book that made a powerful argument regarding what makes for an effective school and what doesn't.[\[10\]](#) The author's conclusions were really not that surprising. In a nutshell they found that bureaucracy kills, and if public schools are anything they are bureaucratic. In fact, the study argued that private schools are usually more effective simply because they have greater autonomy than public schools.

Exercising this autonomy begins with an educational leader. The role of a private school headmaster is often quite different from the public school equivalent, the principal. The headmaster has much more autonomy in fashioning the educational vision for his school as well as the authority for

executing it. This includes shaping the curriculum and hiring and firing teachers based on their effectiveness and support for the school's program. In the end, private school leaders have much greater power to fashion the kind of educational community they envision than do public school administrators.

Private school leaders also enjoy the freedom to create a disciplined environment necessary for learning to occur. Because parents have freely chosen a private school for their children to attend, they have already bought into the way the school chooses to structure its students' time and how it deals with distractions to learning. Parents of private school children tend to be much more supportive of the school's teachers and administrators as a result. This is not to say that private schools always get it right when establishing a disciplined learning environment, but parents always have the option of pulling out if they become disenchanted with the program. This educational choice both empowers private schools and encourages change as well. Parents vote for the programs that work and take their funds elsewhere when they feel the school is not a good fit for their children. Successful schools are rewarded; others are encouraged to change.

Private schools succeed when the headmaster, teachers, parents, and children have worked together to create a learning community. As simple as this sounds, it can be life changing for the students involved. Even students from our most challenging urban environments have benefitted from schools that have been freed from their bureaucratic straitjackets. If we hope to impact our most needy students in this country, we will do so by encouraging policies that increase the autonomy of school leaders and empower parents by giving them the kind of educational choice that President Obama enjoyed when deciding to send his children to the Sidwell Friends School.

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"Spanish Language Immersion Programs in Public Schools?"

Should we be concerned about Spanish language immersion programs in public schools? Our system just started one, offering Spanish-only kindergarten and first grade classes. Am

I just an alarmist or is this just another ploy to undermine our sovereignty?

Thank you for your e-mail. I have noticed that some states (like North Carolina) are implementing a Spanish language immersion program like Los Puentes. On its face, it is probably a good idea since children learn language so much easier when they are younger. So I don't think there is anything to be concerned about English-speaking students learning Spanish at a young age.

That being said, there are concerns people have raised about bilingual education that does not put Spanish speaking kids into the mainstream. Recently I had a guest on [my radio program](#) who was responsible for some of this (in particular he was the reason all ballots are in both English and Spanish).

Also, the Rand Corporation released a study that documented the costs for language assistance instruction programs. They found that the total per pupil costs was estimated to be in the range of \$460 to \$1,600 in 2007 dollars. The total cost was \$3.9 billion.

Bilingual education has been expensive, and it doesn't seem to help Spanish-speaking students. It tends to isolate them rather than integrate them.

Thanks for writing.

Kerby Anderson

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“Should Our Kids to Be Required to Study Islam and Recite Islamic Prayers in School?”

I recently stole a look into my nephew's high school history book. It has three chapters on Islam but only one mention of Jesus. Some parents are concerned that these kids are required to read Islamic doctrine and recite Islamic prayers, which the teachers consider “education.” Yet Christianity is not taught because it violates the supposed separation of church and state. Is this not contrary to court decisions?

And since my nephew and my children attend church every Sunday and we are making every effort to raise our kids to be good Christians, is the school not violating our civil rights if they are required to recite Islamic prayers?

Actually the courts have supported teaching about religion as long as no proselytizing occurs. However, I am not aware of any laws that mandate equal time for the different faith systems. It would be helpful if the fans of multiculturalism promoted giving equal attention to the major world religions, but Christianity seems to be the only faith that often does not get a fair hearing.

Reciting prayers is definitely over the line; I would gently inform the teacher or administrator in charge that while you do not mind your child learning about other faith systems (preferably with Christianity getting equal time), forcing a child to pray definitely violates the restrictions established by the Supreme Court on prayer in school.

For Him,

Self-Esteem Curricula

Controversy Over Self-Esteem Curricula

In the last several years a controversy has been building over the use of self-esteem curricula in our schools. Educators claim that these programs encourage creativity, increase concentration, decrease drug use, and delay sexual activity. These so-called life skills programs are being used in gifted, sex-ed, drug-ed, and regular classrooms, in public and private schools.

Opponents of the programs argue that the current focus on self-esteem is a direct result of a change in the way we view human nature. This change has been towards a relativistic view of morality, which discourages belief in transcendent moral values. Students are prompted to seek truth within and to see moral values, or ethics, as emanating from that process. Truth is seen as tied to a particular person; it becomes biographical. What is true for you may not be true for me.

Hundreds of self-esteem-oriented programs are now used in schools. "Quest," one of the most popular programs, is used in 20,000 schools throughout the world. "DUSO" and "Pumsy" have caused controversy in hundreds of elementary schools across the country.

Although the philosophical foundation for these programs goes back a number of decades, a turning point occurred in 1986 when California sponsored a study on self-esteem called the

"California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. The driving force behind the legislation was California State Assembly member John Vasconcellos. His personal search for self-esteem sheds light on the nature of this movement. Vasconcellos was raised in a strict Catholic home. He writes, "I had been conditioned to know myself basically as a sinner, guilt-ridden and ashamed, constantly beating my breast and professing my unworthiness."[\(1\)](#) But in the 1960s he went through a period of Rogerian person-centered therapy with a priest-psychologist and claims that he became more fully integrated and more whole. Thus he turned his life work toward this issue of self-esteem.

Vasconcellos sees two possible models for defining human nature. The first he labels a constrained vision, supported by the writings of Adam Smith, Thomas Hobbes, and Frederick Hayek. The second is an unconstrained vision, associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke. The constrained vision sees man as basically evil, needing to be governed and controlled. The unconstrained vision sees man as "basically good, even perfectible." Vasconcellos chose the second view after hearing Carl Rogers speak on the subject. Vasconcellos argues that the self-esteem movement is built upon the "faith that people are basically good and that a relationship exists between self-esteem and healthy human behavior. He adds that self-esteem is a "deeply felt appreciation of 'oneself and one's natural being,' a trust of one's instincts and abilities."[\(2\)](#) This information about Vasconcellos is important for understanding why this controversy is so heated and significant. It is not just about what curricula will be used to teach our children, but about how we view human nature itself. Our view of human nature will determine the kind of education we design for our children and the goals towards which that education will aspire.

Visualization and Self-Esteem

Vasconcellos believes that self-esteem results from developing a deeply felt appreciation of oneself and one's natural being. But what is our natural being? Some who hold an Eastern view of human nature have argued that our natural being is spiritual and ultimately one with the rest of the universe.

A subtle example of this is a curriculum called "Flights of Fantasy" by Lorraine Plum. The manual says that

Flights of Fantasy is designed to enhance and refine children's natural inclination to image and fantasize—to use this special ability as a powerful vehicle for developing language, creativity, relaxation and a positive self-concept.

It adds that

...only when we consciously and consistently provide experiences that acknowledge the body, the feelings, and the spirit, and honor both hemispheric functions of the brain, can we say with any sense of integrity that we are striving to develop the whole person. [\(3\)](#)

Just what is meant by providing experiences that acknowledge a person's spirit?

The author argues that two types of seeing are available to us. The first is "external seeing," a combination of optical sensory abilities and the interpreting ability of the brain. The other type is "internal seeing," which utilizes the brain's ability to visualize or fantasize. Plum believes that both are real experiences in the sense that our bodies respond equally to both. Finally, here's the pitch for an Eastern view of human nature: Plum asserts that, with its visualization and fantasy experiences, "Flights of Fantasy" will help students feel connected to nature and the entire universe, be more open

to risk-taking, develop a sense of wonder, and become aware of personal power. All of these notions fit well into an Eastern, New Age perspective.

A monistic, Eastern worldview believes that all is one. Distinctions in the physical realm are mere illusions. When we get in touch with this oneness, we will have inner powers similar to Christ and other so-called risen masters. In a sense, humans are gods, limited gods who suffer from amnesia. A consciousness-raising experience is necessary to reconnect with this oneness. Various meditative states, visualization techniques and Yoga are used to experience oneness with the universe.

Not every instructor using these materials buys into this religious view. Many use them innocently, hoping to bring experiences into their classroom that might somehow benefit troubled students. But authors such as Jack Canfield, a friend of John Vasconcellos, have a definite purpose in mind. In his article "Education in the New Age," Canfield promotes activities that put children in contact with wisdom that he believes lies deep within each of us. He sees himself as a bridge between Eastern and Western thought, particularly in our schools.[\(4\)](#)

At minimum, "Flights of Fantasy" gives the impression that people can change their psychological state by sheer self-will. The manual states that if our mental images are

...portraits of self-doubt and failure, we have the power to replace them with self-confident, successful images. If we are unable to get into the image mentally, we will not get into the behavior physically.

This view of human nature leaves out any notion of sin or an obligation to a transcendent moral order. In its view we are perfectible, self-correcting, autonomous beings.

The curriculum may also be laying the ground-work for an Eastern view of human nature, one that conflicts dramatically with the biblical view that we are the creation of a personal, all-powerful, loving God.

Pumsy

A very popular theme of modern culture is the concept of “wisdom within”: the heroes in George Lucas’s Star Wars trilogy used the power of “The Force,” and Shirley MacClaine’s New Age gospel teaches that we must turn inward to find truth. Pumsy, a self-esteem curriculum used in primary schools across the country, focuses on this “wisdom within” theme. Although Pumsy teaches behavior that Christians can wholeheartedly endorse and attempts to help children be independent from peer influence, it also teaches in a subtle way that children have an autonomous source of wisdom within themselves.

Advocates of self-esteem curricula argue that these programs are needed to help those children who are overwhelmed by the negative aspects of culture or home environment, but they also claim that all children can benefit from class time spent focusing within themselves and being told how naturally good they are. Again we find the idea that by getting in touch with our natural goodness we will automatically behave in a manner that is personally rewarding. An example of this belief in our natural goodness is found in the Pumsy student storybook:

Your clear mind is the best friend you’ll ever have. It will always be there when you need it. It is always close to you and it will never leave you. You may think you have lost your clear mind, but it will never lose you.

Attributes of this clear mind are worth noting. According to the workbook, “It always finds a way to get you to the other side of the wall, if you just listen to it . . . trust and let

it do good things for you.” According to the manual, clear minds are also a source of peacefulness and strength.

When Pumsy, an imaginary dragon, is in her clear mind, she feels good about herself; when she is in her mud mind, nothing goes right—she doesn’t like herself or anything else. Students are told that they can leave behind their mud minds and put on a clear mind whenever they choose to. In other words, bad feelings can be overcome merely by choosing to ignore them, by positing a clear mind.

Songs sung by the children focus on the same theme. Lyrics to one say, “I am special. So are you. I am enough. You are, too.” Another says, “When I am responsible for my day, many, many things seem to go my way. Good consequences. Good consequences. That’s the life for me!” The message of this curriculum is not very subtle: Humans have the power to perfect themselves emotionally and psychologically, they only need to choose to do so. The only sin that exists is not choosing a clear mind.

This curricula prompts some important questions. Are all negative feelings bad? Is it necessarily a good thing to be able to shut off mourning for a lost loved one? Can a person really alter his or her situation merely by thinking positively? We all recognize the importance of self-confidence, but how closely does the self-esteem taught by this program match reality? Does it really benefit our students? When we read that American students perform poorly on international math tests, yet feel good about their ability to do math, something is wrong. Could we be causing students to develop a false security based on feelings that may not match reality? From a Christian viewpoint, our children need to know that they bear God’s image, which bestows great dignity and purpose to life. They must be aware that they are fallen creatures in need of redemption and transformation and a renewal of their minds in order to be more like Christ.

Quest

Quest is one of the most used drug-education programs in America. It includes high-school, junior-high, and some grade-school components. What makes discussion of this curriculum difficult is that its founder, Rick Little, is a Christian who used input from other Christians in its development. In its original form, the program used values clarification and other non-directive techniques, visualization exercises, and moral decision-making models. These methods have not proven successful in reducing drug use and have been accused of promoting a value-relative worldview. Howard Kirschenbaum, who is closely associated with the values- clarification movement of the 1970s, was hired to write the original curriculum and directed the program towards this approach. Quest makes some of the same assumptions about human nature as Pumsy. If students get in touch with their true selves, which are by nature good, they will not do drugs or be sexually active at an early age. If they see their true value, they will choose only healthy options. The key, according to Quest authors, is not to preach or be highly directive to the kids. Teachers are to be facilitators of discussion, not builders of character. The students naturally determine what is right for them via the decision-making model presented in class. Once they arrive at the right values, Quest assumes they will live consistently with them. The presumptions are that humans desire to do what is right once the right is determined and that they can do so using their own moral convictions.

To be fair, some of the more blatant values-clarification and visualization techniques have been removed, and Kirschenbaum is no longer part of the program. But many still find the overall emphasis to be non-directive and morally relativistic. Ken Greene, an executive director who left the company in 1982, has said,

We thought we were doing God's will and had invested

tremendous amounts of energy and time. . . . It still leaves me a little confused. I sometimes say "Lord, did we forsake the cross?"[\(5\)](#)

Dr. James Dobson, a contributor to the original Quest textbook, has recently voiced his concerns about parts of the program. Although he notes that the curriculum has positive aspects, he adds that the authors have incorporated the work of secular humanists into the curriculum and have prescribed group exercises and techniques closely resembling those employed in psychotherapy. This, he argues, is a "risky practice in the absence of professionally trained leadership."[\(6\)](#) According to William Kilpatrick,

Despite its attempts to distance itself from its past . . . Quest remains a feelings-based program. It still operates on the dubious assumption that morality is a by-product of feeling good about yourself, and it still advertises itself as a child- centered approach.[\(7\)](#)

In spite of the fact that non-directive, values-clarification-based curricula have been used for decades, there is little evidence that they actually reduce the use of drugs or other harmful behaviors. In 1976, researcher Richard Blum found that an "affective drug program" called "Decide" had little positive effect on drug use. Those who sat in the class actually used more drugs than a control group. He found similar results in a repeat of the study in 1978. Research was done on other affective programs in the 1980s. "Smart," "Here's Looking at You," and Quest all were found to increase drug use rather than reduce it.[\(8\)](#) Some states have removed Quest from their approved drug education list because it fails to comply with federal mandates that these programs clearly state that drugs are harmful and against the law.

Criticism and an Alternative

Although an early advocate of non-directive, self-esteem-oriented therapy, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow began to question the use of this approach for children later in his life. He argued that

...self actualization does not occur in young people . . . they have not learned how to be patient; nor have they learned enough about evil in themselves and others . . . nor have they generally become knowledgeable and educated enough to open the possibility of becoming wise. They have not acquired enough courage to be unpopular, to be unashamed about being openly virtuous.” [\(9\)](#)

Nondirective therapeutic approaches used by Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and William Coulson produced a pattern of failure in schools even in the hands of these founding experts. Coulson now says, “We owe the American public an apology. Can we expect relatively untrained teachers to achieve better results?”

One specific objection to these programs is their use of hypnotic trance induction and suggestion techniques. Psychologists feel that the constant use of trance-induced altered states of consciousness may cause difficulty for some students in differentiating reality and fantasy. An altered mental state is the mind's defense mechanism, particularly in children, for enduring extremely stressful situations. If these self-protective mechanisms are taught when a child is not under life-threatening stress, the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy in the future may be impaired.

Some feel that affective educational programs undermine authority as well. Along with an emphasis on moral tolerance, these programs often state that there are no right or wrong answers to moral questions. This leaves students open to the

considerable power of peer pressure and group conformity and reduces the validity of parental or church influence. Although this approach may leave students with an uncritically good feeling about themselves, there is little evidence that this feeling correlates to academic success or healthy, moral decisions.

Many wonder whether schools can deal with values in a manner that isn't offensive to Christians and still be constitutional. Dr. William Kilpatrick, an education professor at the University of Boston, thinks they can. He advocates "character education, an approach that fell out of favor in the 1960s.

Character education is not a method. It is a comprehensive initiation into life rather than a debate on the difficult intricacies of moral dilemmas. It assumes that most of the time we know the right thing to do; the hard part is summoning the moral will to do it. Thus its emphasis is on moral training; the process of developing good habits. Honesty, helpfulness, and self-control need to become second nature, or instinctive responses, to life's daily temptations and difficulties.

In reality, one cannot choose to do the right thing unless he or she has the capacity to do so. Selfless behavior is only possible for those who have been trained, via modeling and correction, not to be self-centered. Until we recognize that the virtuous path is the more difficult one, we rob our children even of the possibility of moral discipline. Values-clarification methods, on the other hand, are easy to teach and are fun for the kids. They require little commitment or moral persuasion.

The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi,

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good

repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.

This maxim transfers well into the secular realm. Children who are exposed to noble, virtuous behavior, who are given heroes that exhibit selfless sacrifice, are much more likely to do the same when confronted with moral choices.

Notes

1. Andrew M. Mecca, ed., *The Social Importance of Self- Esteem* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), xv.
2. Ibid., xii
3. Lorraine Plum, *Flights of Fantasy*, (Carthage, Ill.: Good Apple, 1980) 2. Emphasis added.
4. William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 216.
5. Michael Ebert, *Quest's Founder Listens to Kids Citizen* (20 July 1992), 15.
6. Ibid., 2.
7. Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong*, 47.
8. Ibid., 32.
9. Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong*, , 33.