Helping Your Child in School

Introduction

Over the course of their growing up, our two children have attended private Christian schools, public schools, and have been home schooled. To some, this personal experience makes us experts and is far more valuable than the twelve years I was a teacher and principal in public schools. To others my wife and I were merely confused and couldn’t make up our minds. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle.

I do know that nothing can be more exciting or frustrating than watching your child engage in the learning process and ultimately move towards mature independent adulthood.

Looking back at our twenty years of parenting, I would encourage all new parents to take the long view regarding the mental and moral development of their children. There are times when our little ones amaze us with their insight and precocious behavior. At other times we become desperate for any sign of intelligent life. Fortunately, most of our children will grow up to be capable adults. If we are patient and compassionate, not exasperating our sons and daughters with unreasonable demands (Eph. 6:4), we can not only enjoy a good relationship with them, but often they will follow our steps of faith.

A second axiom is that you are your child’s first and most important teacher. This point cannot be emphasized enough. In most cases, no one cares about your child as much as you care nor do they know your child like you do. This means that you must be engaged in the educational process of your child at every step regardless of the setting. Part of this responsibility includes deciding what goals should be accomplished by your children’s education. The answer to this

question might seem obvious. However, quite a variety of goals have been suggested. Some believe that learning to live in a democracy is the ultimate educational concern. Others emphasize vocation training. Still others seek character development or becoming a global citizen. It would be time well spent to think about the kind of person that should emerge from twelve or sixteen years of schooling.

Next, I would argue that there is no such thing as a perfect school, but there *are* some really bad ones. Unfortunately, this is true about private schools and home schools, as well as public schools. Just because a school has chosen to call itself Christian, it does not automatically follow that the school offers a sound curriculum or that its teachers are capable and motivated. In fact, private schools can fall victim to many of the ills found in public schools.

Finally I would argue that, as parents, we are called to use discernment when making important educational choices. This demands that we take very little for granted when it comes to our children's education. And one of the important aspects of our children's education is the parent-school connection.

The Parent-School Connection

There is much more freedom today for parents to chose a school that fits their educational philosophy and goals. Rather than being the end of a parent's responsibilities, selecting between a public or private school is really just the beginning. Once a child is placed in a school, the parent's job as chief advocate begins.

Although teachers, counselors, and administrators are usually well intentioned, students slip through the cracks in even the best schools. Students can sometimes find themselves at odds with a teacher or administrator because of an oversight or immature behavior, or they fail to get important information

regarding their course selection and requirements for graduation.

Under ideal circumstances, a parent would want to get to know, and be known by school administrators and other personnel before a problem occurs. Volunteering at the school—in the library, on committees, or in the classroom—is not only a positive civic service, but is also a good way to ensure a sympathetic hearing if a problem occurs later.

In order to be an effective advocate, a parent needs to be aware of the school's authority structure and rules. Every school should publish a handbook with all the important rules and regulations, as well as graduation requirements. Students are notorious for not reading or taking these documents seriously. It is often parents who must guide their children through course selection and run-ins with school personnel. Another important source of information is the school's open house. Schools usually host an open house each semester for the purpose of allowing parents the opportunity to meet their child's teachers and see the rooms they are assigned to.

Though most parents are hesitant to interfere with their child's schooling, my experience says that if something feels amiss, it is better to get involved rather than simply hope things will just work out. Teachers and administrators are public servants. Parents who are courteous, yet assertive, often get results when problems occur. Unfortunately, waiting and hoping for a positive resolution to a problem can result in long term difficulties for your child.

One obvious place for parental involvement is in your child's placement. In grade school this might mean tracking or special education classes. In high school, it might be the choice between vocational college prep, and honors programs. Such decisions should never be considered final. Unfortunately, once a student is placed in one program there is a tendency for school personnel to stick to that decision. But children

change. Sometimes an honors class proves too demanding, or a vocational curriculum is not challenging enough. The parent is usually the best person to make these assessments.

The Parent-Teacher Connection

Teachers are often hard working, dedicated, and sacrificial in the amount of time they devote to their profession. However, like most other workplaces, schools also employ many mediocre and some highly incompetent staff. No matter how good a school's reputation might be, your son's or daughter's learning experience will be directly dependent upon the teacher standing in front of him or her. It is often left to the parent to determine the capability of their child's teachers and then decide whether or not to leave them in the care of a particular teacher. If signs point to an abusive or merely incompetent teacher, do not wait for the administration to act. The impact on your child's education and well being can be substantial.

Elementary level teachers who demand too much or too little of students, or who do not understand or manage classroom behavior well, are widespread. High school teachers who are asked to teach outside their area of expertise or who fail to do the work necessary to become minimally competent are also common. Unfortunately, new teachers are sometimes thrown into a classroom with very little support and that can result in problems over discipline or grading policies. Remember faculty difficulties occur in even the highest-rated schools.

When a problem does arise, meet with the teacher as soon as possible. Although one wants to hope for the best, look for signs that the teacher is disorganized or preoccupied with problems outside of the school environment. Talk with other parents to find out if the concern is a new one or if a pattern exists. If a serious problem exists, go to a guidance counselor and request a classroom or schedule change for your child. If this is not allowed, get the principal involved.

Often, what appears to be an impossibility from the school's position becomes a reality if a parent is patient and does not give in to the first "No."

Let's hope incompetence is not an issue. Even so, meeting your child's teacher or teachers and letting them know that you are engaged in your son's or daughter's education is important. If a teacher already knows you, he or she will be more likely to contact you if need be. They will also be more inclined to engage your help in motivating your child before more serious problems occur. Most teachers really want students to succeed; if they feel that you are on their side, you will become an important ally in their work.

We should also to remember to pray for our child's instructors. The group "Moms in Touch" does a great job of this. Most of all remember to be gracious; teachers have a remarkably difficult job and will appreciate anyone who supports them and acknowledges the importance of their work. We are ambassadors for Christ, even in our interactions with school personnel.

The Parent-Student Connection

It never seems to fail that you will hear how great all of your friends' children are doing in school just when your son or daughter is experiencing their most severe classroom difficulties. The pain parents can feel when their child is struggling in school can be profound. Problems can range from relationships with other students to cases of severe underachievement or rebellion. Unsolved, these problems can destroy an academic career and worse, destroy the self-confidence necessary for a child's success in life.

A strong parent-student connection is fundamental to avoiding major school problems. Contrary to popular belief, the need for this connection grows rather than diminishes as kids get older. High school students still need help in making critical

decisions about class selection and extra-curricular activities, as well as occasional help in navigating the maze of modern high school life, and growth into adulthood.

Throughout a child's education one of the most important parental role is to be a good listener. Fortunately, most young children want to talk about school. Make it a practice to have a daily debriefing time. As children get older, particularly during the high school years, parents may need to be more patient and creative in order to stay informed.

Teenagers are much more likely to choose their own time to let you into their life. The most important thing for parents is to be available when that time hits (often very late at night when you are exhausted). Teens, especially boys, seem to enjoy making provocative statements just to shock parents. Don't react to the first words that come out of their mouths; eventually they will learn to trust you and realize that you really do want to listen, not just preach a sermon they already have memorized.

Parents should be constant encouragers. This doesn't mean giving praise when it is not deserved, but rather praising real effort and pointing out signs of growing maturity and discipline. Parents should also offer personal support like helping a child to memorize a list of historical events or think through a geometry problem. Let your struggling student know that you are with him for the long haul, that together you can accomplish whatever school requires. If a student will not let you help, find an outside tutor who is acceptable. The money will be well spent.

In the rush for academic excellence, parents and guidance counselors can pile on advanced classes that crush even hard working students. Watch for signs of depression and irritability, and be ready to help your son or daughter out of a workload that may have become overwhelming.

Maintaining an honest and positive relationship with our children is essential if we are going to have much influence on their schoolwork. Compassion, humor, and loving guidance will go a long way towards keeping the door open to their mind and heart.

Summary

We have considered how parents can further their children's education by developing connections to their school and with their teacher or teachers, by taking the time to know their children's needs, and by being available to share their educational burdens.

In closing, I would like to spend some time putting academic success into perspective. Parents sometimes blindly accept the notion that academic success is the answer to every problem. Historically, this has been the position of Enlightenment thinkers from Rousseau to John Dewey. If God is out of the picture, human reason—enhanced by education¾is of paramount importance.

Christianity has always valued education because of the foundational nature of the Bible. Only a literate people could directly benefit from God's revelation. However, the Bible never teaches that education is the solution to humanity's problems. It is evidence of misplaced priorities if Christian parents stress academic achievements over all others. Ephesians 6:4 tells fathers to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord. This is the only mandated education the Bible speaks about. If we push our children academically to the point where our relationship with them is in danger, we might just miss the opportunity to accomplish the Ephesians mandate successfully.

One extreme is to push talented students to achieve more and more, earlier and earlier. Often, these students find themselves academically burned out by college. I recently met

a gifted student who took part in a program that placed her in a nearby college as a high school junior. From there she went on to study engineering at UC-Berkeley. Now as a college senior, she realizes that she doesn't even like engineering and is worn out by the rush to finish. I have met other students who worked very hard in high school only to lose interest in college.

At the other end of the spectrum are those students who are underachievers from elementary school on and seem to need constant attention and encouragement. If we communicate that education is the only thing that is really important, failure in this area of their life can be catastrophic for both the child and the parent. Teenage suicide is one of the main causes of death among high school students and it becomes an option when a student feels trapped by rigid high expectations and sees no way out.

Our children need to know that God cares about school and their daily trials, and we need to pray with them about their schoolwork and the hard choices that they face everyday. However, He is even more concerned about the condition of their heart. As parents, our first priority is to teach our children to love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their mind.

Evaluating Education Reform

Changes in Education

It’s the end of your child’s first semester of high school and you are expecting the usual report card. Instead, he brings home a portfolio of work which exemplifies his progress towards achieving a series of educational goals established by the district. What’s a parent to think?

Or perhaps you have just found out that your first grader will be attending a multi-aged classroom next year which utilizes a cooperative education format and a whole language, interdisciplinary curriculum. What should a parent do?

How about finding out that your fifth-grade daughter attends a school that endorses mastery learning, site-based management, and an effective schools administrative plan? Is it time to panic?

In such circumstances, what is the proper course of action? Should you pull your children out and home school them? Or, should you enroll them in a private school?

Educational reform, which seems to be never ending, often places Christians in a difficult position. Frequently it’s hard to know which reforms are hostile to Christian truth, which are merely poorly conceived ideas, and which are actually worthwhile changes in the way we educate children? Many Americans, Christian or otherwise, are becoming cynical regarding educational reform. Every new innovation promises to revolutionize the classroom, and yet things seem to get progressively worse. The last decade has brought more sweeping reform to our schools than ever before, yet few seem to be convinced that our elementary and secondary schools are performing as we would like them to.

In this essay we will evaluate the notion of educational reform in America’s public schools. First, we will consider how one might evaluate reforms in general and then look at

specific reforms that are currently being debated. These debates often center on five concerns, or what some call crises, in our schools. They are the crisis of authority, the crisis of content, the crisis of methodology, the crisis of values, and the crisis of funding. The term *crisis* is used here to connotate "a turning point" rather than "collapse or abandonment." Although your local school district may not be embroiled in all five of these concerns, each are widespread throughout the country.

Never have so many Americans been so unsure of their public schools, and many of these people are looking for answers, any answers that will solve the problems that they feel are destroying the effectiveness of education in America. This time of crisis coincides with a split in our society over some very basic notions of what America should be and on what intellectual and moral foundations its institutions should rest. This makes our response to these crises as Christians even more significant. It is also a time of opportunity to have considerable impact on the way our schools operate.

Although the terminology surrounding these crises can be esoteric, they are anything but ivory tower issues. Not only is a great deal of money involved, literally billions of tax dollars, but how our children or perhaps our neighbor's children will be educated will be determined by the resolution of these issues.

Each crisis also represents an opportunity for the Christian community to be salt and light. In order to act as a preservative we must be a discerning people. Too often the Christian community responds to societal change with anger or passivity, when neither are appropriate. Once we gain an understanding of what is happening to our schools we need to respond in a biblically informed manner that seeks the best for both our children and those of our community.

How to Evaluate Reform

Your local school district has just announced that it is installing a new grade school curriculum based on the most recent innovations from brain research. The staff touts the program as widely implemented and research based. As a parent you have yet to take a position on the program, waiting until you have more information, but you feel at a loss as to what type of questions might be appropriate to ask in order to begin your evaluation.

The first step is to understand what is meant by a research-based innovation. For a school program to be truly research-based, an incredible amount of effort must be invested. Unfortunately, few educational reforms are based on such foundations. Two professors of education, Arthur Ellis and Jeffrey Fouts at Seattle Pacific University, have written a book titled *Research on Educational Innovations* that offers some realistic guidelines for evaluation. The first step in evaluating any reform is to realize that "Theories of human behavior have real, lasting consequences when we try them out on human beings." For that reason alone we should be careful when applying theory to our classrooms.

There are actually three levels of research that need to be finished before proponents of a theory can claim that their curriculum or innovation is truly "research-based." The first level is what might be called "pure research." This often consists of medical or psychological discoveries from clinical experimentation. This kind of research is most effective when specific in focus and highly controlled in methodology, but it might be also be the result of philosophical inquiry. The thinking and writing of Jean Piaget on the development of the intellect is an example of a theoretical source for educational reform that was derived from both observation and philosophical speculation. Unfortunately, this is where the research support of many programs ends, but in order to be

called research-based much more needs to be done.

The second level of research involves testing and measuring a theory's implications for actual learning. Here, the theory discovered in the laboratory or minds of philosophers must be implemented in a classroom setting. With the help of carefully controlled groups, researchers can determine whether or not the innovation actually aids in achieving stated educational goals– that kids really do learn more. A third level of research requires educators to discern if this innovation can be applied successfully school-wide and in diverse settings.

To complete research on an innovation at these three levels takes time, money, and tenacity, three things that are often found lacking in our schools. With the incredible political and social pressures to fix our system, educators often turn to programs that make dramatic promises yet lack the necessary testing and trial periods to substantiate the claims of their promoters.

For the Christian parent, establishing whether or not an educational reform is adequately researched is just the beginning of the evaluation process. Even if a program works in the sense that it achieves its stated goals, not all goals are equally desirable. Every reform must be weighed against biblical truth, because they often make assumptions about human nature, about morality, and the way we should answer some of the other big questions of life. Christian parents can never sit idly on the sidelines regarding their children's educational experiences, because education, in all its many facets, helps to shape our children's view of what is real and important in life.

Current Reforms

Outcome-based educational reform is causing some very heated debates throughout the country. At its core OBE is a fairly simple framework around which a curriculum may be organized.

It shifts schools away from the current focus on inputs to outcomes, from time units to measured abilities. It assumes all kids can learn, but not at the same speed. Instead of having all students take U.S. history for two semesters of sixteen weeks each, students would be given credit when they master a list of expected behavioral and cognitive outcomes. Not all students will complete the objectives at the same time. The focus is on the tasks to be accomplished, not the time it takes to accomplish them.

OBE would not qualify as a research-based innovation. It claims little or no research at the basic or primary level. At the classroom level, much of the associated research has been done on the concept of mastery learning. There has been considerable amount of work done on this teaching method, and many think that it is a good thing. Others, like Robert Slavin, argue that mastery learning produces short-term or limited results. This still leaves much of the OBE system without a research base. Level three research which seeks to determine if a reform innovation actually works at the district or school level is mostly anecdotal. Stories of how districts have been turned around by OBE are rarely published in journals for critical review.

This doesn’t mean that OBE is without merit; the point is, we really don’t know. What most people get upset about is how many in the educational bureaucracy have used OBE to establish a somewhat politically correct agenda as educational outcomes, often dealing more with feelings and attitudes than with knowledge and skills.

Another reform which creates conflict is the implementation of thinking skills programs. The idea is to formulate content neutral classroom exercises that will enhance thinking skills across the curriculum. This assumes that there are skills that can be isolated from content and be taught to students. Unfortunately, there isn’t an agreed upon list of skills that should be included. Brain research, cognitive science, and

information processing theories are possible sources for such a list, but according to Ellis and Fouts in their book *Research on Educational Innovations*, these have not been tied to basic research programs yet. Since there are ambiguities at the basic level, little level two research has been done to decide if learning can indeed be effected. One study done in 1985 (Norris) concluded that we don't know much about critical thinking and that what we do know suggests that it tends to be context sensitive which strongly argues against the entire notion of thinking skills courses.

School or district wide analysis of these programs tends to consist of "success stories" with little analysis. Again, at this point there is very little evidence that thinking skills can be taught independently of content.

Both outcome-based reform and higher reasoning skills programs are examples of ideas that have found great favor among educators, but little support among Christian parents. This often reflects the imposition of naturalistic or pantheistic assumptions via these reforms by some educators, rather than a critical evaluation of the reforms methods themselves. Unfortunately, some Christians have resorted to personal attacks on the reformers motives, rather than a careful study of the innovation or methodology itself.

Some school reforms are questionable from the beginning—comprehensive sex education being one that comes to mind. But others may contain helpful attributes and yet be poorly implemented or grow into a dogma that drives out other good or necessary parts of the curriculum. Cooperative education and whole language programs can often fit this description.

The two methodologies are different in that cooperative education has a well established research base supporting it, while whole language lacks much beyond the level one or basic research. Christians have generally been against both concepts, but for different reasons. Let's first describe the

innovations themselves.

Cooperative education grew out of Kurt Lewin's research in the 1930s on group dynamics and social interaction. One description, offered by an advocate states, "cooperative learning methods share the idea that students work together to learn and are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own." The idea is to use group motivation to get individuals to excel and grow. Most models of cooperative learning programs stress:

- *interdependence of learners*
- *student interaction and communication*
- *individual accountability*
- *instruction on social skills*
- *group processing of goal achievement.*

Advocates of cooperative learning have been charged by some Christians with wanting to do away with personal excellence and using group pressure to get children to conform to secular moral norms. I am sure that both of these complaints have justification, but this doesn't have to be the case. In fact, many advocates of cooperative learning don't want to do away with the competitive aspect of schooling, they just want to moderate it and to help students to develop the skill of working in groups. Working in groups does not conflict with Christian thinking. In fact, Christian schools and seminaries make use of similar techniques all the time.

A problem occurs when over-zealous promoters of cooperative learning declare all competitive learning to be dangerous, or offer cooperative learning as a schooling panacea equivalent to a cure for cancer. Some teachers fail to hold students accountable for their work which can lead to unequal effort and unjust rewards for individuals. This lesson damages student motivation and the integrity of the teacher.

Whole language has much less research to support its claims, most of which is at the theoretical or basic level. Whole language theorists argue that language is acquired by actually using it rather than by learning its parts. It rejects a technical approach to language which encouraged learning phonics and grammar rules rather than the simple joy of reading and writing. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that this approach teaches students to read and write well. A large study done in 1989 by Stahl and Miller concluded (1) that there is no evidence whole language instruction produces positive effects, and (2) that it may well produce negative ones.

This is not to say that some whole language ideas might not be implemented beneficially with the more traditional phonics, spelling, and grammar instruction. Its emphasis on reading actual literature, not basal readers, is a positive step, as is encouraging students to write often on diverse topics.

There are a number of problems from a theoretical viewpoint that I have with what is promoted as whole language theory, but my response as a Christian should be to work with the teacher and school my child attends, or to find a setting that teaches in a manner that satisfies my expectations. In any case, a Christlike humility should pervade my contact with the teacher and school.

Educators vs. The Public

In spite of the fact that most Americans see the need for improving our public schools, there has been tremendous resistance to reform, both from parents and many teachers. Information found in a recent study titled *First Things First: What Americans Expect From the Public Schools*, published by the Public Agenda Foundation might give us some reasons why.

Focusing on parents of public school children, and particularly on Christian and African-American families, the

report found that these groups support most of the same solutions to our school's problems. Both groups want higher educational standards and clear guidelines for what students should know and what teachers should teach. They reject social promotions and overwhelmingly feel that high school students should not graduate without writing and speaking English well. African-American parents were even more dissatisfied with their schools than others, and more concerned with low expectations on the part of educators.

A second finding was that school reform was viewed in fundamentally different ways by educators and the public. Most educators believe that schools are doing relatively well while the public feels that much improvement is needed. In Connecticut, 68% of educators felt the schools are better now than when they were in school. Only 16% of the public agreed. Educators and parents differ radically in their explanations for our school's problems. Educators blame public complacency, taxpayer selfishness and racism. Although the public supports integration and equal opportunity, it rejects the notion that more money will automatically fix our schools.

Parents' chief concerns are safe, orderly, and focused schools. Nine of ten Americans believe that dependability and discipline will help our students learn better than reforms in test taking or assessments in general. Three out of four parents support permanently removing students caught with guns or drugs from our schools and temporarily removing those who misbehave. Unfortunately, educators rarely make these issues the center of reform proposals. Other findings include the belief that stable families are a more decisive factor for determining student success than a particular school setting is and a perception that educators are often pushing untested experimental methods at the expense of the basics.

Educators and parents were far apart on a number of classroom methods as well. Parents find nothing wrong with having kids memorize the 50 state capitals and where they are located, or

to learn to perform math functions without the aid of a calculator. Educators are much more likely to stress higher-order reasoning skills and early use of calculators. Parents in general are less preoccupied with the need for sex ed, AIDS education, multicultural experiences, and even school prayer. They tend to want schools to be safe, orderly, and academically sound.

There seems to be much common ground that the vast majority of parents, and other taxpayers, agree on. As Christians, we probably would be much happier with our schools if they were safe, orderly, and academically sound. Most Christian parents understand and accept the fact that their public schools will not be overtly Christian. On the other hand, they feel that the Christian faith and its presuppositions should receive fair treatment when reforms are instituted. In recent years many Christian parents have seen their schools initiate programs that both challenge and ridicule their beliefs. This isn't necessary, and it has alienated the very people who must fund and support the schools if they are to be successful.

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.

Outcome Based Education

Outcome Based Education

Times are changing. The pressure on our public schools to improve, and change, has become intense. Since 1960 our population has increased by 41%, spending on education has increased by 225% (in constant 1990 dollars), but SAT scores have fallen by 8% (or 80 points). Although few would argue that the schools are solely to blame for our children's declining academic performance, many are hoping that schools can turn this trend around.

The decade of the 80s brought numerous education reforms, but few of them were a dramatic shift from what has gone on before. Outcome-based education (OBE) is one of those that is new, even revolutionary, and is now being promoted as the panacea for America's educational woes. This reform has been driven by educators in response to demands for greater accountability by taxpayers and as a vehicle for breaking with traditional ideas about how we teach our children. If implemented, this approach to curriculum development could change our schools more than any other reform proposal in the last thirty years.

The focus of past and present curriculum has been on content, on the knowledge to be acquired by each student. Our language,

literature, history, customs, traditions, and morals, often called Western civilization, dominated the learning process through secondary school. If students learned the information and performed well on tests and assignments, they received credit for the course and moved on to the next class. The point here is that the curriculum centered on the content to be learned; its purpose was to produce academically competent students. The daily schedule in a school was organized around the content. Each hour was devoted to a given topic; some students responded well to the instruction, and some did not.

Outcome-based education will change the focus of schools from the content to the student. According to William Spady, a major advocate of this type of reform, three goals drive this new approach to creating school curricula. First, all students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day or in the same way. Second, each success by a student breeds more success. Third, schools control the conditions of success. In other words, students are seen as totally malleable creatures. If we create the right environment, any student can be prepared for any academic or vocational career. The key is to custom fit the schools to each student's learning style and abilities.

The resulting schools will be vastly different from the ones recent generations attended. Yearly and daily schedules will change, teaching responsibilities will change, classroom activities will change, the evaluation of student performance will change, and most importantly, our perception of what it means to be an educated person will change.

What is OBE?

Education is a political and emotional process. Just ask Pennsylvania's legislators. That state, along with Florida, North Carolina, and Kansas, has been rocked by political battles over the implementation of outcome-based educational reforms. The governor, the state board of education, legislators, and parents have been wrestling over how, and if,

this reform should reshape the state's schools. Twenty-six other states claim to have generated outcome- based programs, and at least another nine are moving in that direction.

Before considering the details of this controversy, let's review the major differences between the traditional approach to schooling in America and an outcome-based approach.

Whereas previously the school calendar determined what a child might do at any moment of any school day, now progress toward specific outcomes will control activity. Time, content, and teaching technique will be altered to fit the needs of *each* student. Credit will be given for accomplishing stated outcomes, not for time spent in a given class.

The teacher's role in the classroom will become that of a coach. The instructor's goal is to move each child towards pre-determined outcomes rather than attempting to transmit the content of Western civilization to the next generation in a scholarly fashion. This dramatic change in the role of the teacher will occur because the focus is no longer on content. Feelings, attitudes, and skills such as learning to work together in groups will become just as important as learning information—some reformers would argue more important. Where traditional curricula focused on the past, reformers argue that outcome-based methods prepare students for the future and for the constant change which is inevitable in our society.

Many advocates of outcome-based education feel that evaluation methods must change as well since outcomes are now central to curriculum development. We can no longer rely on simple cognitive tests to determine complex outcomes. Vermont is testing a portfolio approach to evaluation, in which art work, literary works, and the results of group projects are added to traditional tests in order to evaluate a student's progress. Where traditional testing tended to compare the abilities of students with each other, outcome-based reform will be criterion based. This means that all students must master

information and skills at a predetermined level in order to move on to the next unit of material.

Implementing OBE Reform

Reformers advocating an outcome-based approach to curriculum development point to the logical simplicity of its technique. First, a list of desired outcomes in the form of student behaviors, skills, attitudes, and abilities is created. Second, learning experiences are designed that will allow teachers to coach the students to a mastery level in each outcome. Third, students are tested. Those who fail to achieve mastery receive remediation or retraining until mastery is achieved. Fourth, upon completion of learner outcomes a student graduates.

On the surface, this seems to be a reasonable approach to learning. In fact, the business world has made extensive use of this method for years, specifically for skills that were easily broken down into distinct units of information or specific behaviors. But as a comprehensive system for educating young minds, a few important questions have been raised. The most obvious question is who will determine the specific outcomes or learner objectives? This is also the area creating the most controversy across the country.

Transitional vs. Transformational OBE

According to William Spady, a reform advocate, outcomes can be written with traditional, transitional, or transformational goals in mind. Spady advocates transformation goals.

Traditional outcome-based programs would use the new methodology to teach traditional content areas like math, history, and science. The state of Illinois is an example of this approach. Although outcomes drive the schooling of these children, the outcomes themselves reflect the traditional content of public schools in the past.

Many teachers find this a positive option for challenging the minimal achiever. For example, a considerable number of students currently find their way through our schools, accumulating enough credits to graduate, while picking up little in the way of content knowledge or skills. Their knowledge base reflects little actual learning, but they have become skilled in working the system. An outcome-based program would prevent such students from graduating or passing to the next grade without reaching a pre-set mastery level of competency.

The idea of transformational reform is causing much turmoil. Transformational OBE subordinates course content to key issues, concepts, and processes. Indeed, Spady calls this the "highest evolution of the OBE concept." Central to the idea of transformational reform is the notion of outcomes of significance. Examples of such outcomes from Colorado and Wyoming school systems refer to collaborative workers, quality producers, involved citizens, self-directed achievers, and adaptable problem solvers. Spady supports transformational outcomes because they are future oriented, based on descriptions of future conditions that he feels should serve as starting points for OBE designs.

True to the spirit of the reform philosophy, little mention is made about specific things that students should know as a result of being in school. The focus is on attitudes and feelings, personal goals, initiative, and vision—in their words, the whole student.

It is in devising learner outcomes that one's worldview comes into play. Those who see the world in terms of constant change, politically and morally, find a transformation model useful. They view human nature as evolving, changing rather than fixed.

Christians see human nature as fixed and unchanging. We were created in God's image yet are now fallen and sinful. We also

hold to moral absolutes based on the character of God. The learner outcomes that have been proposed are controversial because they often accept a transformational, changing view of human nature. Advocates of outcome-based education point with pride to its focus on the student rather than course content. They feel that the key to educational reform is to be found in having students master stated learner outcomes. Critics fear that this is exactly what will happen. Their fear is based on the desire of reformers to educate the whole child. What will happen, they ask, when stated learner outcomes violate the moral or religious views of parents?

For example, most sex-education courses used in our schools claim to take a value-neutral approach to human sexuality. Following the example of the Kinsey studies and materials from the Sex Education and Information Council of the United States, most curricula make few distinctions between various sex acts. Sex within marriage between those of the opposite sex is not morally different from sex outside of marriage between those of the same sex. The goal of such programs is self-actualization and making people comfortable with their sexual preferences.

Under the traditional system of course credits a student could take a sex-ed course, totally disagree with the instruction and yet pass the course by doing acceptable work on the tests presented. Occasion-ally, an instructor might make life difficult for a student who fails to conform, but if the student learns the material that would qualify him or her for a passing grade and credit towards graduation.

If transformational outcome-based reformers have their way, this student would not get credit for the course until his or her attitudes, feelings, and behaviors matched the desired goals of the learner outcomes. For instance, in Pennsylvania the state board had recommended learner outcomes that would evaluate a student based on his or her ability to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of families. Many feel that this

is part of the effort to widen the definition of families to include homosexual couples. Another goal requires students to know about and *use* community health resources. Notice that just knowing that Planned Parenthood has an office in town isn't enough, one must use it.

Parents vs. the State

The point of all this is to say that transformational outcome-based reform would be a much more efficient mechanism for changing our children's values and attitudes about issues facing our society. Unfortunately, the direction these changes often take is in conflict with our Christian faith. At the core of this debate is this question, "Who has authority over our children?" Public officials assume they do. Governor Casey of Pennsylvania, calling for reform, told his legislature, "We must never forget that you and I—the elected representatives of the people—and not anyone else—have the ultimate responsibility to assure the future of our children." I hope this is merely political hyperbole. I would argue that parents of children in the state of Pennsylvania are ultimately responsible for their children's future. The state has rarely proved itself a trustworthy parent.

Outcome-based education is an ideologically neutral tool for curricular construction; whether it is more effective than traditional approaches remains to be seen. Unfortunately, because of its student-centered approach, its ability to influence individuals with a politically correct set of doctrines seems to be great. Parents (and all other taxpayers) need to weigh the possible benefits of outcome-based reform with the potential negatives.

Other Concerns About OBE

Many parents are concerned about who will determine the learner outcomes for their schools. One criticism already being heard is that many states have adopted very similar

outcomes regardless of the process put in place to get community input. Many wonder if there will be real consideration of what learner outcomes the public wants rather than assuming that educators know what's best for our children. Who will decide what it means to be an educated person, the taxpaying consumer or the providers of education?

If students are going to be allowed to proceed through the material at their own rate, what happens to the brighter children? Eventually students will be at many levels, what then? Will added teachers be necessary? Will computer-assisted instruction allow for individual learning speeds? Either option will cost more money. Some reformers offer a scenario where brighter students help tutor slower ones thereby encouraging group responsibility rather than promoting an elite group of learners. Critics feel that a mastery- learning approach will inevitably hold back brighter students.

With outcome-based reform, many educators are calling for a broader set of evaluation techniques. But early attempts at grading students based on portfolios of various kinds of works has proved difficult. The Rand Corporation studied Vermont's attempt and found that "rater reliability—the extent to which raters agreed on the quality of a student's work—was low." There is a general dislike of standardized tests among the reformers because it focuses on what the child knows rather than the whole child, but is there a viable substitute? Will students find that it is more important to be politically correct than to know specific facts?

Another question to be answered by reformers is whether or not school bureaucracies will allow for such dramatic change? How will the unions respond? Will legislative mandates that are already on the books be removed, or will this new approach simply be laid over the rest, creating a jungle of regulations and red tape? Reformers supporting outcome-based education claim that local schools will actually have more control over their programs. Once learner outcomes are established, schools

will be given the freedom to create programs that accomplish these goals. But critics respond by noting that although districts may be given input as to how these outcomes are achieved, local control of the outcomes themselves may be lost.

Finally, there are many who feel that focusing on transformational learner outcomes will allow for hidden agendas to be promoted in the schools. Many parents feel that there is already too much emphasis on global citizenship, radical environmentalism, humanistic views of self-esteem, and human sexuality at the expense of reading, writing, math, and science. They feel that education may become more propagandistic rather than academic in nature. Parents need to find out where their state is in regards to this movement. If an outcome-based program is being pursued, will it focus on traditional or transformational outcomes? If the outcomes are already written and adopted, can a copy be acquired? If they are not written yet, how can parents get involved?

If the state is considering a transformational OBE program, parental concerns should be brought before the legislature. If the reform is local, parents should contact their school board. Parents have an obligation to know what is being taught to their children and if it works. Recently, parental resistance halted the OBE movement in Pennsylvania when it was pointed out to the legislature that there is no solid evidence that the radical changes pro-posed will actually cause kids to learn more. While we still can, let’s make our voices heard on this issue.

Notes

1. “Beyond Traditional Outcome-Based Education,” *Educational Leadership* (October 1991), p. 67.
2. “Taking Account,” *Education Week* (17 March 1993), p. 10.
3. “Beyond Traditional,” p. 70.
4. “Amid Controversy, Pa. Board Adopts ‘Learner Outcomes,'”

Education Week (20 January 1993), p. 14.
5. “Casey Seeks Legislative Changes in Pa. Learning Goals,” *Education Week* (3 February 1993), p. 19.
6. “Taking Account,” p. 12.