

Building character is a worthy subject in schools

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Would you rather have someone graduate high school with good computer skills or good character traits?

I grant it's a false choice. You ought to have both, and they're not in conflict. But I ask this as a way of asking what our priorities are when it comes to educating children.

It's hard to find a school that doesn't have lots of computers these days. The intense push to load schools up with computers seems to have eased, compared with a decade ago. Money is tighter now, and many schools don't need much more because they have a lot already.

But it's not so easy to find schools that have good character education programs.

Schools are held accountable for teaching reading and math and so on. The pressure is always on for academic records for each student and for a school as a whole. But students' character? Other than attendance and discipline for behavior problems, interest in that is pretty inconsistent.

Of course, many would say, it's not the school's job to civilize children. That's the parents' job. Absolutely correct, and I think more should be done to try to get more parents to do that job.

But an awful lot of parents are not doing well at that, if they're doing it at all. This is a big problem in the suburbs. And it is a bigger problem in the city, where the incidence of family dysfunction in every possible form is somewhere between high and epidemic. It may not be fair, but schools can be, and often need to be, the place where kids are inculcated with and given reinforcement for basic notions like treating others decently and taking responsibility for their actions.

What got me on this high horse? Four things, two negative and two positive:

The episodes of marauding youths in Riverwest on July 3 and at the State Fair on Aug. 4. Set aside the undeniable racial issues attached to those incidents. Put the primary blame on home life. But I also wonder if these kids were going to schools where they were being held to high expectations for conduct, or where they were part of a healthy school community. These headline-grabbing incidents raise the same questions for a large number of teens who do things routinely that are far less spectacular, but still harmful to the fabric of neighborhoods and the community as a whole.

The cheating scandals that surfaced in several major cities, especially Atlanta. Atlanta was considered one of the best-run urban districts in the country, with comparatively good results. That's all been cast into doubt by dozens of administrators and teachers who were doctoring score sheets on state standardized tests, in some cases, as a group activity at social gatherings. What can do more to show kids bad character traits and deny them good education than a concerted effort to lie about how they're doing? In no way am I generalizing this to all teachers, but these scandals are a forceful lesson in how adults in a school can teach character lessons, both for better and for worse.

(By the way, I asked Patrick Gasper, spokesman for the state Department of Public Instruction, if there were any known cheating scandals in Wisconsin. He said no. He added that the state's test vendor, CTB/McGraw-Hill, does an analysis each year of erasure patterns on students' answer sheets. That's one of the most common forms of cheating by teachers. The analysis has never found irregularities, he said. At least we're honest about test scores around here.)

The state character education conference in June at the Country Springs Hotel in Waukesha. I was invited to present awards to eight schools from around the state that had particularly good programs. Sometimes character education programs can be superficial. I once went to a rally at a school in favor of "respect." Everyone cheered for respect. I can't believe this changed anyone's actual character. But there are schools ingraining character development in what goes on every day, starting with the way the adults in the building treat each other and filtering down to what kids expect of themselves and their peers. And yes, this can happen in central city schools - I've seen it.

So I applaud schools that are doing this well. If I have a concern, it was that the conference was a small event, with maybe 125 people at the luncheon. Think of all the schools that weren't there.

Milwaukee Public Schools and other southeastern Wisconsin districts have been working on behavior issues in the last several years through programs such as Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS), which aims to encourage positive behavior. I'm sure some schools are doing this better than others, but I'm encouraged by hearing from some teachers who say these efforts are making a difference.

Back to my original question: I'm all in favor of developing computer skills among children.

On the other hand, I doubt what kids are learning now is going to be of much direct help years from now when they're in the job market. Technologically speaking, I assume everything will be different by then. And they'll pick up whatever skills they need then.

It's not so easy to pick up good character traits. I am convinced schools can play a role in building those traits. Those traits last a lifetime. If you have them, the chances are great that you'll be a good worker, a good citizen and a good family person. There is and will continue to be a huge need for those kind of people. As a new school year approaches, it's worth renewing commitment to the notion that a healthy climate in schools can boost the healthiness of the climate in our communities.

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