

EDITORIAL

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Should schools teach morality?

A news story on the front-page of today's *Star* concerns a matter of long-standing debate: What should public schools teach our children, particularly in the realm of morals and values?

The current debate focuses on the efforts of two Harlingen dentists, one of whom is a member of the Harlingen school board, to make available to teachers copies of the booklet, *The Way to Happiness: A Common Sense Guide to Better Living*. The booklet is written by L. Ron Hubbard, founder of the controversial Church of Scientology, and critics claim that use of the booklet is inappropriate.

The booklet presents itself as a "nonreligious moral code," and, indeed, it makes no reference to a higher being. But, while there is much in *The Way to Happiness* that might be suitable for Scientologists and non-Scientologists alike, the booklet also has elements that go beyond its generally benign core ideas like "be temperate" and "set a good example." Those elements may trouble some parents.

Besides some quirky phraseology, several ideas expressed in the booklet could provoke an animated debate, depending on the beliefs of the reader. For example, Hubbard praises the Civilian Conservation Corps for "creat(ing) far more wealth than it expended" and, while he shows a healthy wariness about government power, he rejects the value of civil disobedience. (Tell that to our revolutionary forefathers.)

Most distressing to non-Scientologists is the booklet's moral relativism, summed up by Hubbard's assertion that, "What is true is what is true for you. (Emphasis his.) Why then even offer a guide to morality?"

Which brings us to a primary point of departure: Should public schools teach morality at all or is that better left to families and churches?

Convincing arguments can be made on both sides of this issue. What both sides probably would agree on is that, if public schools do attempt to address the character of students, the values that are taught should be ones that are universally held.

But can that be done?

Most organized religions have moral guides for encouraging youngsters to follow the straight and narrow. There also exists several non-sectarian alternatives to booklets like *The Way to Happiness*.

Two such examples are offered by the Jefferson Center for Character Education, a Pasadena, Calif.-based non-profit organization that offers lessons in "common core values" for children through the sixth grade. The center's curriculum was devised 15 years ago by Dr. David Brooks, with recent additions made in conjunction with the Character Counts Coalition.

A second such organization is the Center for the Fourth and Fifth Rs, headed by Thomas Lickona, a professor of education and author of *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* — those are the fourth and fifth Rs.

Some school districts have foregone those types of choices and have developed their own character curriculum. That, too, would be preferable to any program closely linked to any one denomination, but safeguards would need to be built into such an effort. A very diverse body of parents should oversee the development of a homemade course on morals, and parents should be permitted to have their children opt out of any program that they find objectionable, including outside programs.

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Even the most well-intentioned, carefully designed program will have difficulty satisfying every parent within a school district, for the simple reason that we are all unique individuals. And while most people, whether they are Christian, Jew, Muslim, of some other faith or of no faith at all, do share some core values, how those values are presented and how they are applied hold enormous potential to offend. Public schools should not open themselves up to charges that they are infringing on the parents' right to determine the moral instruction of their children.

Additionally, are lessons in morality devoid of their spiritual underpinnings even worth teaching? That would provide students with the what but ignore the why — hardly the intellectual rigor we should be seeking from our young.

As seems to be always the case in debates surrounding public schools, the only answer which might satisfy nearly all parents is one in which they are free to direct their children's educations. One cannot object to the character education offered by a particular school when one has chosen that school from among a variety of alternatives.

But our public schools do not deal in choices. They maintain a captive clientele and must resort to one-size-fits-all programs that are bound to outrage some segment of the population while at the same time satisfying others.

Whether Harlingen or other local school districts decide to enter the field of character education, it is important that they do so only by respecting the diverse religious beliefs of the parents and children for whom they labor.