

A STATEMENT OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE BOARD ADY 44 71
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UNITED STATES
CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

VALUE AND VIRTUE

MORAL EDUCATION
IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL

SEPTEMBER 1987

Children and young people are the future of our country, our civilization, and our world. They eventually will be responsible for the home, the Church, the state, and the world at large. However, before entrusting our institutions and world to them, we must encourage in them a basic value system whereby they will respect, cherish, and care for themselves and other creatures. We need to help the young develop into generous men and women of high and noble ideals.

High expectations challenge us, as adults, to provide the best for all youth as we call forth the best in them. This is no easy task. Children and young people experience difficulties as they pursue maturity and responsibility. The tragedies of teenage suicide, teenage pregnancy, teenage alcohol and drug abuse are but some of the signs of their struggle to mature. These troubling signs are often rooted more deeply in the sense of aimlessness and hopelessness that lead our youth to choose such negative options, options that divest them personally, and all of us, of their potential contributions.

We, as bishops, have a responsibility to provide guidance for the members of our own Church as they seek to form their consciences in making moral choices. We, as American citizens concerned for children and young people, would like to add our voice to the public debate on the issue of moral education in the public schools of this nation. We do not wish to impose a religious viewpoint on our fellow citizens, but we do wish to provide our reasoned

reflection on what we perceive to be a national concern. We are thoroughly convinced that it is through shared human reasoning that we can arrive at a common understanding of what is most promising for children and young people of this nation.

In our pastoral letter on the economy, we acknowledged that "sustaining a common culture and a common commitment to moral virtues is not easy in our world." The fact that it is not easy does not mean that it is impossible.

We state our belief, as Father John Courtney Murray wrote some years ago:

Pluralism . . . implies
disagreement and dissension
within the community.
But it also implies
a community within which
there must be agreement and
consensus.

We were reminded of this during the recent centennial celebration of the Statue of Liberty. We were inspired by the bestowal of citizenship on "[the] tired, [the] poor, [the] masses yearning to breathe free" from different races, creeds, and nationalities. Their acceptance of our invitation and their presence among us have broadened the pluralism within our country. Their oath of citizenship demonstrates the ongoing ability of men and women

to accept the shared vision that undergirds this nation—found in such documents as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. An explicitly shared public moral vision within our schools is also possible.

Four important and basic institutions have traditionally had a great impact on the total education of children and young people: the family, the church, the school, and the government. Historically, moral education has long had an honored place in the public schools of the United States. But, in recent years, the public philosophy, the shared moral vision that binds us together as a people, diverse yet one, has been significantly diluted and this development has adversely affected moral education in the public schools. Consequently, to the extent that there is a problem with moral education in the United States today, it fuels the “values problem” in the public schools.

A decline of our public philosophy has provided for a lively discussion—which we genuinely welcome—concerning moral education for children and young people in the public schools. This discussion has sometimes been marred by conflict, the questioning of motives, and dire warnings on all sides. We affirm a need in our nation for the present debate. We support efforts to find proper means of teaching moral values and truth in the public schools, and we do this as expressions both of our concern for the children and young people served by the public schools and for the future of our country.

Therefore, we would like to affirm the following points as part of the national discussion:

1. We maintain that a renewed shared moral vision within the public schools is possible. It must be grounded in the common bond of humanity that links people of every race, creed, and color. This country was established out of the respect and desire for human dignity. It remains for us today to spell out anew the ingredients of that shared humanity for our children and young people.

2. We maintain that schooling is an essential and unique part of the education process. Schools should enable the human person to become the best possible person, which necessarily includes being an authentically moral person. Anything less is to be satisfied with good technicians who cannot intelligently and reasonably deal with moral issues in their personal or societal lives.

3. We hold that the values, virtues, moral ideals, and truth of our heritage should be infused into the curriculum like threads woven into a fabric. Explicit and authentic education in critical moral thinking is necessary for quality education.

4. We regard teachers as transmitters of our cultural legacy and heritage. We strongly encourage teachers to be aware of themselves as models for the young in the pursuit of moral excellence. We also encourage them to lead the way in helping the public realize that schooling without moral education is poor schooling.

5. We maintain that students must be made aware of the moral impact they exert on one another in the course of their school time together. Peer pressure among students need not be solely for ill, but can be a great support in the pursuit of moral excellence.

6. We maintain that school communities as a whole must see themselves as moral communities that involve students, parents, teachers, administrators, and support staff.

We are encouraged in our concern for public schooling by the recent phenomenon of the school reform movement. Initiatives have engaged a broad spectrum of the community at the local, state, and national levels.

We call upon those responsible for schooling at the local, state, and national levels to convene the administrators, teachers, parents, and citizenry to address the moral needs of children and young people. On our part, we pledge our support and involvement. The Catholic community at the national, diocesan, and parish levels should enter into dialogue with their brothers and sisters across this land to address this national concern in a spirit that preserves everyone's integrity and dignity, while renewing a national moral vision.

Finally, we express our gratitude to those educators and parents who are already working conscientiously to provide children and young people with a solid grounding in moral values. We likewise express appreciation to the educators, parents, and many others who are parties to the present national discussion about moral education in public schools.

All groups in society, including public officials and legislators, have a stake in this discussion and a right and responsibility to contribute to it. The discussion, furthermore, should be carried on in a spirit and manner that express co-responsibility, cooperation, and a commitment to the common good. Ideological partisanship and unwillingness to hear what others are saying have no part here.

The goal is distinctly practical: to define and implement a form of moral education, integrated into the total curriculum, that corresponds to student needs and community consensus. Such a goal enriches the individual student and the nation.



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General Secretary
NCCB/USCC
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