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MORAL VALUES  
IN  
AMERICAN EDUCATION

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# Moral Values in American Education

By

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## Moral Values in American Education

**T**HE American people have had a profound respect for the worth and power of education. The Founders of the Republic and the champions of our democratic institutions have insisted at all times that the enduring strength of the nation depends upon the spread of learning among all the people. The American people on their side have responded generously to the inspiring pleas of our leaders for a nation-wide educational system which would teach the young to know, to appreciate and to cherish the precious heritage of the American tradition.

During the past century, America's confidence in education has been translated into vigorous and sustained action. This nation has dedicated itself to the task of making educational opportunities available to every child for a course of education running from the kindergarten to, at least, the completion of high school. The fact that the secondary schools and colleges of the United States enroll more young people than all the secondary schools and colleges of the rest of the world is evidence of the unrivaled generosity with which the American people have supported their schools. That comparatively few American children are deprived of adequate educational opportunities is not indicative of any betrayal of the national ideal of equalized educational opportunity for all children; it is symptomatic of an inequitable distribution of the funds for education which the American people have provided.

Because the American school is considered vital to the national welfare, it has been the subject of extensive and elaborate criticism and analysis. The shelves of libraries groan under the weight of the reports, surveys and studies of educational procedures. There is an endless stream of liter-

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ature dealing with the rights and wrongs, the achievements and failures, the strength and the weakness of American education. Unfortunately, most of the literature deals with surface problems or with the mere mechanics of education.

Impressed by the achievements of scientific management in industry, professional educators have attempted to study American education in terms of production and achievement. They have turned, almost exclusively, to measuring and counting for guidance in the development of school programs which will meet the pressing needs of the day. They have hoped that the answer to all problems in education will emerge as do neat and automatic sums from a calculating machine. As a result, a premium has been put upon achievement in school subjects, and it is assumed that the method of instruction which is most efficient is therefore the most desirable method, regardless of its merits in terms of the intangible moral and social objectives of education.

To the other extreme go the educators who look to the *interests* of the child for an infallible guide in developing the school program. In their opinion, the child is not to be educated in an authoritative manner; rather the child must be permitted to unfold his own character before the watchful eye of the teacher who, if necessary, will guide him away from certain harmful interests and activities. Granted that interest is an important factor in the learning process, we cannot hope to find in the child's interest alone any reliable guidance in making a penetrating analysis of educational objectives and procedures.

On the educational market, at the present time, there is a plethora of proposals for the reorganization of American education. Sensing that the elective system made the American school resemble an educational smorgasbord, schoolmen who favor an essentialist concept of the educational process are proposing a drastic curtailment of elective subjects, in both

the secondary and college curricula. School administrators are wrestling with the age-old problem of individual differences and are endeavoring to effect a compromise between the conflicting claims upon the school from the individual and from society. Unfortunately, too much of this planning has been characterized by proposals as to what *can* be done, rather than what *ought* to be done for the improvement of American education. Despite its limitations and overemphasis of superficial issues, this research and experimentation has built up a vast fund of information about schools in the United States. We are aware at least of our educational assets and liabilities. We have fairly accurate statistics to tell us how many children enjoy adequate educational opportunities and how many do not. We know what subjects are being taught and how efficiently they are being learned. But this accumulated data needs appraisal, if it is to be of worthwhile service for future planning.

The task awaiting the attention of educators is the appraisal of American education in terms of its objectives. In retrospect, we find that the boundless confidence of the American people in education has had a somewhat naïve aspect. We have more or less assumed that education is something good, that whatever goes on within the schools must be good for the children and good for the nation. We have gone so far as to think that education is essentially good and that it can do no wrong. As a result, attention has been riveted too much upon the expansion of school facilities which, we assumed, necessarily would dispel the ignorance which breeds personal and social evils.

The perverted purposes to which education was put by totalitarian states has shattered our simple illusions about the essential goodness of education. We know that the totalitarian governments in Germany, Japan, Italy and Russia used the school to propagandize students to the extent that the

pupils became fanatical in their loyalty to the dictatorial regimes. The dictators recognized the force of education for evil. Posing as munificent benefactors of education, they poured tax money into the schools and provided for their expansion, always with the carefully concealed intention of gaining control over the minds of their subjects for, if they controlled the minds of men, they need not fear resistance from those who could not learn the truth.

The constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization states, "Wars begin in the minds of men." Indeed, we may now say, that it has been admitted internationally that education may be made to serve any cause, that it may be used for good or evil, for freedom or for enslavement, for democracy or for totalitarianism. It is not inconceivable that the schools of this nation could be taken over by a dictator, that the children of this land could be taught to despise democracy, that the teachers themselves could become the tools of an insidious propaganda machine of a totalitarian government. It is high time that we cease computing the size of American education and turn to an appraisal of its worth for the preservation of our American heritage and national ideals. The real task facing educators is a serious consideration of the moral and social foundations of American education.

#### AN APPRAISAL OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

As we endeavor to set forth the objectives of American education, we turn for guidance to an analysis of the American democratic way of life which is to be protected, preserved and developed in and by the nation's educational institutions. To conceive first of all the idea of the democratic way of life, we think of the right of the individual to cast his vote in a free election, to express his opinion about political matters, to disagree openly with the policies of government. Penetrating deeper into its meaning, we consider the



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right of an American to a decent livelihood, his right to bargain collectively, his right to security, and still further the profound truths that all men are created equal, that they have certain inalienable rights, that all people are endowed with certain imprescriptible freedoms. The more we meditate upon the meaning of democracy, the closer we come to the realization that its very essence is the recognition of the principle that the individual human being is sacred. The free institutions of which our democratic society is so proud have no reason for existence if the people for whom they were made are not endowed individually with a sacred character. The individual person is sacred because he was made, as every child in America should know, by God to His own image and likeness. The individual is endowed with a soul which distinguishes him from the animal and empowers him to rise above the senses, to burst at will the mere bonds of immediacy. The soul exhibits a craving for happiness which the world cannot give but which, after a life of service in conformity with God's will, shall be granted in the bliss of Heaven. In other words, democracy essentially has definite religious as well as political and economic purposes.

In consideration of the democratic way of life we cannot overlook the social conditions which profoundly influence the development of human personality. The organization of the world, its economic structure, local customs, the condition of the home, all have a bearing upon the individual's pursuit of happiness. It has been said by Monsignor George Johnson that "better times await the emergence of better men," but it is also true that the few better men in the world who are better than their times must work for the improvement of social conditions to eliminate the handicaps to human betterment.

If American education is to be appraised accurately, it must be evaluated in terms of the objectives which promote the

perfection of the individual human personality, for out of such individual persons is our democracy formed. There are several commonly accepted objectives of American education about each of which we might write at length. For example, we might examine American schools to determine whether they have developed an effective health program, whether they are training their pupils for economic competency, whether the students are given adequate opportunity to develop social virtues, whether the schools are fostering cultural appreciations and tastes, and, finally, whether they are promoting moral perfection. These questions would all be valid in any appraisal of American education, for they are predicated upon the principle that good health, economic opportunity, social virtue, cultural tastes and moral perfection are essential elements of the kind of human living proper for an individual.

#### MORAL PERFECTION

Let us consider, in particular, the objectives of moral perfection for, in the final analysis, American education will be found completely faithful to its democratic commitments only to the extent that it has promoted the moral perfection of American youth. Moral perfection is the crowning glory of the human personality because it prepares the individual for a life of happiness. As an objective of education, moral perfection implies that individuals be encouraged to strive to become as good as they possibly can. Then health, wealth, social virtue, and cultural appreciations all have meaning and purpose as they contribute to progress along the way to moral perfection.

A morally perfect life is one in conformity with God's will. It is expressed in conduct which is consistent with life's purpose, and which follows rules sanctioned by divine authority and made manifest by the judgment of conscience. Training in moral perfection leads the individual to question every

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action for its conformity with life's basic purposes; it impels him to ask repeatedly, "Is this what God would want me to do?" Guidance towards moral perfection develops a sensitivity to what is pleasing or displeasing to God or, to put it in other words, to what is right and wrong.

It is proper to ask whether American education, as a whole, is clearly committed to a policy of training our young people in moral perfection. We cannot but find the answer disappointing, and not a little disturbing, for a search through educational literature and through the expressions of policy by prominent professional school organizations, reveals an alarming disregard for the importance of moral training. To be sure, there is an abundance of nebulous statements concerning "the good life," "spiritual values," "faith in democracy," but there is little down-to-earth practical discussion of the ways and means which shall be employed to teach American youth that there is fundamental difference between right and wrong, that evil is to be avoided and good pursued, that individuals have duties as well as rights, and that the only happiness worth having comes from a life of moral rectitude. One senses that it is often a mere lack of courage which keeps professional educators from expressing their convictions for fear that they might offend some devotee of the secularistic or materialistic conception of education. We should hope to have American educators express themselves as forcefully on the topic of moral training as they have concerning other objectives of much less importance.

Unfortunately, professional educational literature does not record the sincere efforts of American teachers to develop in their pupils a moral understanding and conviction which will guide them in the solution of life's really important problems. Those who know the typical American teacher are aware of her willingness and ambition to instill in her pupils the high ideals which are an essential element of the Ameri-

can character. Indeed, boys and girls in every American school probably will meet during their school experience at least one teacher whose influence and good example will make and leave a lasting impression upon their own moral character. So much depends upon the integrity of the American teacher that we must express the hope that teachers as a whole will take their profession most seriously, recognizing in it the tremendous responsibilities it entails for the national welfare.

At the present time, the teachers of America are looking to their professional leaders in the educational organizations and in the teacher-training institutions for guidance in the task of teaching moral perfection. They expect that the educational resources of the nation all be dedicated to an educational program for moral perfection. They insist that, to the degree our schools are dedicated to the teaching of democracy, to the same degree must they be committed to the teaching of moral perfection. A people whose only assets are health, wealth, culture, and even social virtue, may fall prey to the cunning dictator, but a people whose dominant interest is moral perfection will never forsake the true values of democracy. First and foremost in our list of objectives for American education must be moral perfection.

Growth in moral perfection comes from the performance of virtuous acts. It is altogether fitting, therefore, for the school to give children many opportunities for the practice of virtue. In the class room of the American school there should be an atmosphere of freedom, so that the individual child may be free to cooperate with others, to practice fair play in school enterprises, to acquire a sensitivity for kindness and sympathy, to develop a sincere loyalty to the group with which he is working. As Monsignor Johnson once wrote, "A school is a community in which a number of human beings are working together in a common endeavor. . . . When a child goes to

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school, he loses nothing of the sacredness of his personality; his dignity and worth as a rational creature are not diminished in any way. He cannot learn the art of living in a free society from training under a classroom dictatorship.”

Although the effort to attain moral perfection may, at times, result in deep and abiding satisfaction, it can scarcely be said that moral perfection or virtue is its own reward. On the contrary, the struggle to attain moral perfection is itself most difficult. The obstacles to perfection are many and varied. Of them all the disorder caused by original sin is the most formidable. Within us is an abiding revolt against the very notion of subjecting ourselves to higher authority. We are not inclined to sacrifice ourselves for any value that does not appeal to us at the moment. We suffer from a downward drag of self-love and weakness. So it is that men moved only by natural motives, such as a profound respect for human nature as it is in itself, will in many cases make considerable progress along the road to perfection, but, in time of crisis, when the practice of virtue appears foolish and vain, they often falter unless they can turn to religion for supernatural motivation. Indeed, progress towards the goal of perfection can be guaranteed only in the degree that trust is placed in God Himself, Who alone can help men rise above themselves, to the heights of perfection.

### RELIGION AND MORAL PERFECTION

It is, indeed, unfortunate that there are in America a few educators who, while professing their interest in moral values, claim that religion is neither necessary nor helpful for moral training. They consider the secular school self-sufficient for the teaching of what they call “the spiritual values.” In their opinion, religion is nothing more than a set of “taboos” which may mislead the student into a false conception of moral rectitude. These educators are not content to do the best they can within the limited boundaries of natural motivation; they

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expound a theory of secularized morality which can have but one effect—to depreciate the importance of religion in the minds of the American student and, thereby, deprive him of the supernatural motivation of religious convictions. Is it any wonder that at times American students, confronted with serious temptations to do wrong, collapse because they lack a religious foundation to sustain them during the inevitable moral crisis that comes into the life of every man? Would it not be better for every American educator to seek the assistance of religion rather than attempt to belittle its importance?

“By their fruits you shall know them.” The exclusion from the public school curriculum of any reference to religion has rendered religion innocuous in the lives of millions of public school graduates. Despite all protestations to the contrary, the public schools have not been neutral towards religion. To deny or to disregard the supernatural revealed truths of religion is to bring religion into the classroom with a vengeance. The tacit assumption that the things of God are not as important as the things of this world is the dominant principle of public school philosophy as it expresses itself in the administrative practice of barring religion from the school curriculum. As a result, American boys and girls, year after year, graduate from public school, without having learned that the riddle of life cannot be solved without religion. They go forth into the world, aware of every social force in the community, except the church. They pass along to succeeding generations a magnificent social heritage, but its treasure of religion is sealed away, of no use to its heirs. In vain do they seek some factor to integrate all that they have learned, to put together the many truths so that they may see them as a rational whole. Religion would help them, but religion was banned from their course of study. As leading the good life becomes difficult, as the practice of virtue becomes tedious, as

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encouragement for moral perfection is wanting, the public school graduate at the same time must face a hostile world which is little interested in his morals. If the product of our public schools does not succumb to disallusionment, discouragement, and disappointment and final moral failure, he may credit himself with a most unusual moral victory. If he does fail to be true to his ideals, he may point an accusing finger at American public education and ask, "Why have you kept religion out of my life?"

### RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOL

The admitted need for moral training in the American school is compelling school administrators to rethink the relationship between religion and American education. There is a growing conviction among school administrators that, too often, the association of religion and education is considered in terms of historical patterns and precedents that are not applicable to our present-day situations and problems. The issue is too serious to be treated casually, and only those who refuse to face issues squarely will dismiss the problem by resorting to alleged traditions and superficial slogans. The awakened interest in religion, as evidenced by its prominence in books, the newspapers, and the cinema, makes it imperative for all men of good will to grant a new hearing to those sincere Americans who favor a return to the American tradition of making religion an integral part of education.

Much has been said concerning the study of American history. A few surveys have proved that many American citizens are utterly unfamiliar with the history of our country, and because of their ignorance, fail to understand American traditions and institutions. This situation cannot be blamed upon American educators who, as a group, are well-versed in national history, and bring to their analysis of current problems an excellent historical perspective. That they fail to

communicate their historical knowledge to their students must be attributed to poor methods or some other pedagogical factor. However, for some reason never satisfactorily explained, the typical American public school professional seems to lose all historical sense and direction when he discusses the nature and the historical origin of the public school itself. He affirms, over and over again, that the public school must be secular, that religion has no place in it, that sectarianism is a constant threat to free public education, and, in support of these contentions, he gives a year by year account of the struggle between the public school and the churches. One gets the impression that the American people set about deliberately to eliminate religion from American education. Nothing could be further from the truth. The church was the mother of the American school. Competent research in the field of American educational history has produced convincing evidence that the founders of this nation, the noble men and women who endowed it with traditions, had no intention of secularizing American education when they made the financial support of the school a function of local government. On the contrary, the founders of the nation insisted upon the local control of education so that they could be assured of the continued existence of what they regarded as the most important element in the school program, the religious and moral training of their children.

At a later period in our history, immediately preceding and about the time of the Civil War, in what might be called the impetuous adolescent stage of the national life, certain educators became very much disturbed by the rivalries of religious sects. They were displeased, and rightly so, that various religious denominations insisted upon having their own schools, though they were not equipped to render adequate educational service to the community. There was validity also to their charge that some denominational schools were



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failing to train boys and girls for citizenship in a democracy. So it was, that under the leadership of Horace Mann, American educators sought a solution to the vexing problem of sectarianism in education. At first, they hoped that some way would be found to foster religion, yet avoid the conflict of sectarianism. This vain hope betrayed a pitiful misconception of the nature of religion, for indeed, if religion is not sectarian, it is so indefinite that it is meaningless. Finally, when the national temper became aroused by the controversy over sectarianism, educational and political leaders were forced to look for some kind of settlement. With what might be called "dubious ingenuity," educational leaders managed to escape coming to grips with the fundamental problem. They simply took the control of education away from the local communities and turned it over to the State governments. While the communities continued to battle over sectarian control, the States slyly dodged the sectarian issue by enacting laws which forbade the public support of any school teaching sectarian doctrines. The conclusion is that the relationship of religion and education in American schools is by no means a settled matter. What we refer to as a tradition in this matter is nothing more than an historical expediency. In fact, we may say that the complete secularization of American public education, as we know it today, has outrun the intentions of those who, in vain, tried to solve the sectarian problem.

It is the American tradition for every American school to promote respect for religion. This nation was conceived and brought forth by men of profound religious convictions. In the providence of God this nation has prospered so that it is acknowledged by almost all other nations to be the beneficiary of God's choicest blessings. It remains to be seen whether the nation's children can reach the high destiny ordained for them by Almighty God. Much will depend upon

the fidelity of the schools to the American tradition of respect for religion. Let the schools be closed on important religious holidays. Let the children be excused to assist at church services. Let the name of God be respected within the precincts of every American school. Let no child be embarrassed because of his religious belief. Woe to any teacher who is guilty of disrespect towards religion.

It would be only laboring the obvious to enumerate the barriers to the introduction of formal religious instruction into the regular public school curriculum. It is foolish and a waste of time to spin dreams about a "common core of religion." In almost all communities there is such a heterogeneity of religious beliefs that it would not be advisable to grant exclusive teaching privileges to any one denomination.

There are, however, certain basic propositions with which most Americans will agree. They are:

- (1) Textbooks prejudicial to religion should not be used in the public schools.
- (2) Textbooks and projects which will attract attention to religion should be made a part of the public school program.
- (3) Public schools should cooperate with plans which give the churches themselves an opportunity to present formal religious instruction.

The acceptance of these propositions would help much to counteract the basic secularism of the public school curriculum.

#### RELIGION AND THE CHURCH-CONTROLLED SCHOOL

We think it most significant that, at the present time, religious leaders of many denominations are approaching the conclusion that the only practical method for making religion an integral part of education is to give to the Church the control over some of our schools. The decision to keep the Catholic schools under the direct supervision and administra-

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tion of the Church was reached only after sharp dispute among church leaders concerning the wisdom of insisting upon such control. The prudent judgment of the bishops in the United States in deciding to maintain a system of parochial schools has merited the enthusiastic support of millions of Catholics who have contributed the funds for our vast and excellent American Catholic school system. The wisdom of the Council of Baltimore in insisting upon parochial school education for Catholic children is winning the admiration even of those outside the fold of the Church.

Religion does not lend itself to half-hearted, lukewarm endorsement. Religion must dominate; otherwise it is out of place. Religion must enjoy preeminence in the school curriculum; otherwise it is more or less useless. There can be no compromise with the claims of religion. Released time, Bible reading, Sunday school—all indeed are commendable for what little they do in the interest of religion, but only an integration of religion with every phase of the school program and the school curriculum will produce an integration of religion and every phase of life. If men are to see all things as God sees them, our schools must teach that religion has a bearing upon every subject in the curriculum. It is the Church alone which is adequate in knowledge, prestige and power to teach effectively a religious way of life. Give to the Church its rightful authority to teach the young people of this nation, and ere long God's blessings will descend upon us in even greater plenitude, for God will find in His people a generation which knows, loves and serves Him.

At the mere mention of church control over education, one hears rumblings as the old bogeyman of union of Church and State is shaken out of the closets of prejudice and bigotry. Perhaps the wisest words on this subject were voiced by a Supreme Court Judge in Mississippi who rendered a decision upholding the constitutionality of a statute which permitted

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the State to supply textbooks to children in non-public schools. He said:

Calm reason must not be stamped by random cries of church or state or sectarian control, or by the din from the conflict of catechism and dogmatism. A wholesome sanity must keep us immune to the disabling ptomaine of prejudice.

Useful citizenship is a product and a servant of both the church and the state, and the citizen's freedom must include the right to acknowledge the rights and benefits of each, and to import into each the ideals and training of the other.

There is no requirement that the church should be a liability to those of its citizenship who are at the same time citizens of the state, and entitled to privileges and benefits as such. Nor is there any requirement that the state should be godless or should ignore the privileges and benefits of the church.

It is not satisfactory to any church-controlled school to have public authority say that it is to be tolerated as some form of a protest school or as some kind of stimulant to public education. What more may public authority ask of a school than that it train competent citizens? Is it reasonable for public authority to indulge in a prejudice against the church-controlled school simply because many people entertain the idea that religion and education are not to be associated? We need to face up squarely to the facts. In thousands of communities there are church-controlled schools which satisfy every requirement and meet every standard established by the State educational authorities. The products of these schools are as well-trained in American citizenship as are the graduates of the neighboring public schools. Every child in the typical church-controlled school complies with State compulsory education laws. If the State will recognize the church-controlled school for this purpose, why does it arbitrarily withhold public support from qualified church-controlled schools?

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Perhaps there was a day in our national history when certain church-controlled schools did not do much more than foster religious bigotry. Their curricula and their school programs in general were woefully inadequate for the kind of enlightened training needed for the fullness of American citizenship. Such is not the situation in most church-controlled schools *today*. The public will admit that church-controlled schools are as competent as the public schools. Indeed, in many cases the church-controlled schools excel the public schools.

The problem awaiting the serious attention of the American people is this: Shall the State continue to monopolize public funds for the use of schools which are controlled completely by the State educational authority, or shall the State, in the truest sense of the democratic process, encourage in a practical way the continuance and the expansion of those church-controlled schools which meet the professional requirements set down by the State? We may concede that the *majority* of the American people prefer to have their children educated in the public school. Nevertheless, the State has the duty to consider the wishes of those parents who prefer to have their children educated in church-controlled schools. Under the present arrangement, only the parents of the minority who can afford to pay for the support of church-controlled schools are able, in a practical way, to give their children a religious education. It is not democratic to say that the wishes of the minority only shall be tolerated. To the contrary, the minority must be given an opportunity *to function*, provided it does not interfere with the functioning of the majority. In other nations, reputed to be less democratic than the United States, the educational prerogatives of minority groups are much better respected than with us.

This nation would take a long step towards world leadership if it were to work out a practical method for encouraging

church-controlled schools to assume responsibility for the religious education of children whose parents have come to the realization that the destiny of the nation is not in the hands of men but in the hands of God, that secularism is a menace to our democratic institutions, and that the Church alone is capable of training a child for life, here and with God in Heaven.

### CONCLUSION

Moral values in American education are entrusted to both the public and the church-controlled schools. Together as partners in American education, they should help one another in developing sound programs and procedures for guiding American children towards moral perfection. This means simply that the administrators of church-controlled schools should desist from exaggerated and destructive criticism of the public schools. There is no point in condemning the public schools for their secularism unless, at the same time, the critic has a reasonable suggestion for re-introducing moral training into the public school curriculum. Administrators of church-controlled schools should offer their services to administrators of public schools who are eager to work out a program for moral training which will be practical and effective but which will not in any way cause embarrassment to a student of any religious denomination.

In the same spirit of fellowship, the administrators of public schools should stop denouncing the church-controlled schools as "divisive forces in the community"; they should forego their petty objections to the use of a limited amount of public funds to furnish essential school services for children in church-controlled schools. Instead of condemning church-controlled schools for their separatism, they should assist these schools in becoming an integral part of the community's educational system so that the force of the church-controlled

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schools' moral teaching may be brought to bear upon all the activities of the community.

Both the public schools and the church-controlled schools are here to stay. There is no reason why they should dissipate any of their effectiveness by constantly criticizing one another. Instead they should pool their efforts in a common endeavor to develop a program for moral education in our American schools.

