

Schools must teach values

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When The Age recently profiled Korumburra Secondary College as an outstanding model of public education, its assistant principal, Ailsa Brown, said of her students: "If their leaders have faith in them, they have faith in themselves."

Parents are increasingly concerned to know who is teaching their children and what they are being taught. Kids being able to read, write, count and communicate when they leave school have always been priorities. But increasingly, parents are concerned to know education is being delivered within a values-based framework with which they feel comfortable.

The great challenge of education, and increasingly the expectation of parents, is for it to transfer to children not only the ability to learn and acquire skills for an increasingly complex world. It is also to assist in the building of character.

Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted 150 years ago that "character is higher than intellect". Aristotle saw character as the amalgamation of virtues, described by Benjamin Franklin as the prerequisite for the enjoyment of freedom. That is, each of us needs to know right from wrong and act accordingly if we are to enjoy freedom. When we do not, the price we pay is legislated loss of freedom.

Federal Labor frontbencher Mark Latham was recently reported as subscribing to a political doctrine based on hatred of his opponents. When asked about the unduly aggressive nature of politics, his defence of it being so was, "I can take you to any sports field any Saturday morning and show you parents getting stuck into it. Having a go at the ref, yelling abuse." Latham described such behaviour as "the Australian way".

We recently learnt that in New South Wales specialist police units would be placed in state schools to deal with student violence, at the extreme end of which have been machete attacks.

And the Victorian Government is legislating to crack down on "ugly parent syndrome" - parents abusing umpires at kids' sporting events. Such is the flawed behaviour of some adults that now it is necessary to legislate for what should be a social norm.

Passing laws is all well and good, but it is an exercise in futility if individuals have neither regard for laws nor respect for those who enact them. The problem in many cases is not that young people have not learned our values, it is that they have.

What needs encouragement and formalisation in our schools is the teaching of values and the building of character. Why shouldn't we identify and acknowledge the values we implicitly communicate, and ask whether we want these values taught?

Some teachers have argued that their role is to be neutral, to provide students with information they need in order to make what (hopefully) will be the correct decision from a variety of choices.

But is there not great risk in adopting a position of moral neutrality with young people? To deliberately not take a stand on life choices - drug use, exploitation of others, relationships with authority, or sexual activity - is to send a powerful subliminal message that "anything goes".

Criticism directed at me for suggesting that the convicted criminal Mark "Chopper" Read was an unsuitable role-model author for promotion to secondary students was based on the argument that it should be a matter of choice for the school as to whether his books should be on the syllabus. The educational leadership of the country apparently has no place in such decisions.

We should not be surprised if a values-free education produces values-free adults.

Surely we want children to become adults who are caring, persistent, tolerant, fair and imbued with a deep sense of compassion. We should teach them to do their best, to be just, reasonable, loyal and trustworthy. Imperfect though we all are as human beings, we must surely aspire to see these attributes as the foundation on which we build young lives.

The values adopted should be those of the school and the community in which it is based.

On behalf of the Federal Government, I have engaged the Curriculum Corporation to conduct a detailed study of the values taught in Australian and overseas schools.

The purpose is to examine how values were developed and adopted, and the extent to which they inform and influence personal and educational outcomes. An initial 60 schools will also be funded to demonstrate their model of values-based education.

Perhaps it is also time to reinvigorate school mottos. Some schools do not even have one.

The challenge for education is not simply to prepare young people for the future. It is also to equip them to create the kind of future they want.

Without a context of meaning rooted in values, education serves only a utilitarian purpose. It must also be the basis of our faith in the next generation to build a better future.

Brendan Nelson is the federal Minister for Education.

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