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Just What Are Schools to Do? The Aims and Purposes of Education

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Schools are never just about education. For that matter, *education* is never just about education. The school as an institution is founded and supported as a means to some end. In ancient Israel, education was to produce a faithful member of the chosen nation — a son who would bring pride to the family and his people and glory to God. In ancient Greece the school was to produce a productive citizen, wise and mature. Rome followed the example of Greece.

In the Christian tradition, education was first about making disciples. The earliest Christian schools were catechetical schools for new believers. The early church borrowed from the classical models and established new traditions.

Christianity and Christian culture would later give birth to monastic schools, the universities, and community schools. The university would emerge from the Christian conviction that all truth is established in the one true God, and is thus

rightly studied as a unity — in a *university*.

Many of the early community schools in Europe and England were established by churches and Christians who wanted to improve the prospects of the poor, especially the urban poor. This movement gained ground in Britain during the Industrial Revolution, as cities such as London, Manchester, and Liverpool filled with indigent children. The same was true of American cities such as New York, Boston, and (somewhat later) Chicago.

In the United States, the public schools emerged out of a vision to inculcate certain common values and a common vision of citizenship. This movement gained momentum in the early twentieth century, when “progressivist” educators saw the public schools as a mechanism to reduce the segmentation of urban areas into ethnic and religious enclaves — a very real problem in cities like Boston and New York. The “common school” would produce a generation of Americans — not just Irish-Americans, Polish-Americans, Italian-Americans, and others drawn by the great migrations to the United States. Rather early in the twentieth century, that vision was modified to add other concerns. Theorists such as John Dewey argued that the public schools must be pervasively secular in a sense they had not been before. Dewey wanted to see the schools separate children from the religious prejudices of their parents. Front and center in his concern was the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, and much of the public momentum behind the movement was driven by explicit anti-Catholicism. Many Protestants bought into the secularization concept because they were pleased to see Catholic influence checked. They would later learn that what they had set loose against the Catholics would lead to unintended and unwanted consequences.

Later influences on the public schools included the emphasis on science and technology that came in the midst of the “Sputnik scare” and the Cold War. The federal government poured millions upon millions of dollars into science and math education in the public schools, afraid that young Americans were falling behind young Soviets in terms of scientific know-how. Others wanted the schools to produce capable workers for the assembly lines and factories of the age of the machines.

The 1960s and later decades saw the public schools driven to take therapeutic concerns as a prime “educational” goal, with concepts such as self-esteem and “authenticity” coming to the fore. In addition, those with aggressive agendas concerning sex and sexuality education, “values clarification,” and a host of other ideological fads and fashions pushed those agendas into the public schools.

Even as the early movement to separate children from the religious “prejudices” of their parents set the schools in opposition to parents, the same was true with much of the sex education that was established in the public schools during

the 1980s and 1990s. Those battles continue today.

In reality, any debate over education is an ideological debate — a worldview clash. There is no neutrality in education. The education is designed to produce some kind of result, some kind of citizen. There is no way that this can be separated from character, morality, and worldview.

All this comes to mind when looking at a news report out of Britain. The respected headmaster of an admired school is taking leave of his position — resigning in protest of what he laments as the schools' descent into "social engineering."

As *The Telegraph* [London] reports:

A leading headmaster who is leaving one of the most popular schools in the state system to work in the private sector has accused the Government of turning teachers into "social workers and surrogate parents".

Rod MacKinnon, the head of Bexley Grammar School, south-east London, said schools were being forced to shun traditional lessons as ministers manipulated the education system for the purposes of "social engineering".

He said schools "cannot solve all of society's ills" and should be left to teach.

More:

"There are those who wish to use children and schools as social engineers with a view to creating a different society but we should not even be trying to do such things," he said. "Children need to be nurtured, educated and cared for; not thrown into the frontline of social reform. Muddled thinking is guaranteeing failure for the noble aspirations we all commonly hold for the education of the young."

Mr. MacKinnon reached the conclusion that school teachers "simply do not have the contact time to 'create' behaviours and attitudes within children. They are not – and cannot be – social engineers and social workers and surrogate parents, as well as subject teachers, all rolled into one."

That is an eloquent lament from an anguished educator. There are many American principals and teachers who share these concerns, and millions of citizens who should. Education is always controversial when worldviews and expectations collide — and for good reason. Seen rightly, education is all about what we want children to know, how we want them to think, and what kind of people we want them to be. Education is never only about what most people think of as *education*.

