Teaching of Moral and Spiritual Values

Inherent in the heritage of the public schools is a concern for the teaching of moral and spiritual values as an integral part of the curriculum. Historically, our democratic society has affirmed and fostered the belief that one of the central and continuing purposes of public education is the development of the moral and spiritual values necessary for the conduct of life in a democratic society. The curriculum of the public schools, therefore, is an index to the morals and values of the particular human group, our democratic society, which has established the schools.

Accepting the responsibility of teaching moral and spiritual values, the board of education affirms that such an acceptance further enhances and develops the philosophy of education of the Bellevue Public Schools. In that philosophy, the board of education has stated that moral and spiritual values should be taught in the public schools.

Definitions
Moral values are defined as those values which, when applied in human behavior, exalt and refine life consistent with the standards of conduct that are approved in our democratic culture.

Spiritual values are defined as those values which are not restricted to only religious values but which also include aesthetic, ethical, and intellectual values.

Curriculum is defined as those school system activities which are planned, carried out, and supervised for the purpose of helping students grow morally, spiritually, intellectually, and physically.

Rationale
Implicit in the responsibility of teaching moral and spiritual values is the recognition of the assumptions underlying the controversy. At the core of the disagreement are the differences of opinion in regard to (a) the nature of man and (b) the methods of ascertaining and establishing truth. It is with this issue that public education must affirm its neutrality and emphasize the distinction between church and state. Such a distinction is a matter of philosophical principle, a principle which underlies both the constitution of the federal government, the state constitution, and the thoughts of our founding fathers. That principle, or limitation, establishes freedom of conscience, thought, and worship, and predicates that the public schools, as organs of the state, must teach values, principles, morals, or virtues without reference to a particular religious belief. Neither can the public school assume a position that is anti-religious. In essence, the public schools, though acknowledging the disagreements in regard to the nature of man and the ascertainment of truths, must maintain a neutral attitude with respect to the teaching of specific religious beliefs which attempt to answer these questions. Therefore, the following premises are established:

1. that public schools must accept the responsibility of teaching moral and spiritual values.
2. that public schools cannot, either ethically or philosophically inculcate moral and spiritual values which are based solely on religious faiths.
3. that the public schools are hospitable to all religious opinion and are partial to none of them.

4. that public schools, when teaching spiritual and moral values, must observe the law, defined as the body of rules for human conduct prescribed and enforced by the representatives of organized society, and the common law, defined as the decisions of the federal and state courts.

5. that public schools must teach those moral and spiritual beliefs which are commonly accepted by society.

Acceptance of Responsibility

The implications in the responsibility for teaching moral and spiritual values are far-reaching. The very concept of democracy demands that its citizens reflect the values essential for the maintenance and continuity of a democratic society. If our democracy is to survive, the public schools must succeed in their responsibility for moral and spiritual education. In essence, the public schools must develop an understanding of the democratic principles, the common body of ideals such as truth, goodness, justice, honesty, duty and the host of other values that constitute the moral and spiritual heritage of Western civilization. When these values are common and parallel to those of religious faiths, then the school is not in conflict with the principle of separation of church and state when it teaches such values. In fact, the school teaches those morals and values which are both common to religious dogma and to the democratic principle.

Moreover, since the factor of religion is important to the concept of democracy, and is an important part in the growth of the student, then the student must have every opportunity to become aware of and familiar with religion as a part of his/her broad personal development. Without the development of personal integrity, the individual would fluctuate with every doctrinal issue which confronts the individual. Increasingly important in this age of powerful conflicting propaganda is the duty of the school to help the individual gain possession of a firm core of democratic convictions, ideals, and standards by which to weigh controversial issues.

Ethical and Philosophic Considerations

Although public schools are prohibited from selecting any system of religious faith as the sole basis for the teaching of spiritual and moral values, the presentation of religious issues as recognizable components of a larger social problem in which real and meaningful alternatives are presented is consistent with ethical and philosophical standards. The school is obligated to treat such issues. Any suppression of alternative points of view crushes freedom of expression and choice, and leads to indoctrination.
**Legislation and Common Law**

It is quite clear that the public schools are well within the law and, in effect, obligated by the law to teach those moral and spiritual values which have been established, through representative government, as public law. Specifically, then, the public schools must teach those laws, or rules for human conduct which are prescribed and enforced by the representatives of organized society. Some, but not all, of the laws which are derived from the common agreement of society are laws which govern:

1. property rights, either individual or group.
2. physically harmful acts toward individuals and/or society.
3. marriage and/or sexual conduct.
4. alcohol, narcotics, tobacco, and other items harmful to the individual and/or society.
5. parental obligations to the child.
6. treasonous acts.
7. acts which violate the civil rights of citizens.

**Common Moral and Spiritual Beliefs**

The board of education believes that there are common moral and spiritual values which should be taught in the Bellevue Public Schools. The following values, most of which are contained in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and in the declarations and creeds of the major religious groups, are imperative moral and spiritual values for the curriculum:

**Human Personality:** The importance of the individual personality, the inherent worth of every human being, and the capacity of the individual for moral judgments and moral responsibility are concepts fundamental to all that follow. The school should help the child acquire self-respect and an adequate self-concept.

**Moral Responsibility:** Marks of maturity are moral responsibility and self-discipline. The school should help children attain a measure of self-reliance tempered by social conscience and should help the child understand the responsibility of an action in relationship to himself/herself and to society.

**Institutions as Servant of Man:** Institutions justify their existence as they contribute to the growth, happiness, and well-being of individuals. Education must encourage a continuing appraisal of existing institutions, including that of education, itself, to the current and prospective needs of people.

**Common Consent:** Voluntary cooperation, contrary to the idea of survival of the fittest, is essential to all forms of life. According to the American system of values, no partisan interest is authorized to overreach the popular will. This does not mean the repudiation of force under any and all circumstances. Force, tempered by humanity, regulated by law, and safeguarded by justice, must restrain those who reject the methods of peace. The principle that group decisions should be made and enforced by common consent applies in all relationships of life. The principle is the same whether the group is 150 million citizens, or a thousand members of a student body, or three men planning a fishing trip.
Devotion to Truth: The human mind should be liberated by access to information and opinion. Custom and complacency have deprived us of a sharp awareness of the morality of intellectual freedom. Yet, in terms of human history, the rights of an individual to speak his/her mind, to worship according to conscience and training, and to have access to knowledge and divergent opinions are relatively recent achievements. The public schools should provide young people with experience in the processes of seeking truth, of comparing opinions, and of appealing to reason on controverted questions. Mastery of this kind of intellectual honesty is a difficult task. It is not achieved by allowing children to do as they please.

Respect for Excellence: The school should stimulate and recognize the achievement of excellence in every sphere of life, in skilled production, in social and civic leadership, in literary and artistic creativity, in scientific insight, in technological ingenuity, in social sensitivity, in physical health and stamina, and in personal integrity.

Moral Equality: It is recognized as a mark of virtue by all the great religions that one should treat other people as one would wish himself/herself to be treated. Thomas Jefferson gave political emphasis in his first inaugural to “equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever State of persuasion, religious or political.”

Brotherhood: The public school should be regarded as an agency for increasing the learner's usefulness to the entire society as well as a road to individual success. Such a school, while it moderates the egotistic tendencies and strengthens the social and cooperative impulses, will also insist that each individual learn to accept individual responsibility. Such a school will be consistent in fostering participation in a variety of humane and constructive community activities and at the same time applauding and encouraging every effort to achieve self-reliance and self-respect.

The Pursuit of Happiness: Lasting happiness is derived largely from deep personal resources and from the affection and respect of others. The schools, therefore, should give a large place to those types of experience that satisfy spiritual needs and inspire the noblest achievement.

Spiritual Enrichment: Spiritual enrichment and appropriate experiences to develop it are a major concern of the school. Although the public schools are prohibited from teaching any of the denominational creeds, they have a responsibility to teach moral and spiritual values without endangering religious freedom and without circumventing the policy of separation of church and state.
The Teacher and Academic Freedom

Academic freedom usually comprises three elements; freedom of inquiry and research; freedom of teaching within the school; and freedom of extra-mural utterance and action. Certain obligations are consistent within this framework of academic freedom and those obligations are especially true in the teaching of spiritual values and morals. The teacher, for example, will not judge the deep religious convictions of a child as either being right or wrong. The teacher, when discussing issues of a controversial nature must recognize the obligation of presenting objectively the various alternatives to an issue. The obligation of presenting theory as theory must be observed by the teacher. Although every teacher, as a human being, has the right of opinion and belief, the teacher will be especially cognizant of his/her beliefs and be able to avoid using the classroom as a forum for imposing his beliefs on the student. The teacher, therefore, must recognize that academic freedom applies not only to the teacher but also to the student, and makes every effort to assure that the student is free to select values consistent with the student’s framework of familial, personal, and religious beliefs.

The Pupil

The student, during the individual’s school years, should develop and strengthen the student’s own moral and spiritual code. If the student has a strong religious faith, and strong family support, the task of the school will be easier. If the student lacks a strong faith and parental support, the school must use as its only resources the law, the standards of the community, the teacher, and the school curriculum to develop within the student those moral and spiritual values that our American society has accepted.

Legal References:

Cross References:

Adopted: July 12, 1971
Reviewed: January 11, 1988
Revised: March 1, 1993
Reviewed: December, 2004