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Commentary

Teaching or trashing values?

By Andrew L. Yarrow
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It recently became excruciatingly apparent to me -- via my fourth-grade son in a gifted-and-talented magnet school in one of the nation's best public-school systems -- that something is much more seriously wrong with American K-12 education than just our lousy math and science scores and the difficulties of attracting good teachers. Equally troubling is what is pawned off as social-studies curriculum that, if some of it were not so offensive, would be grist for late night comic hosts Jay Leno or David Letterman.

This sorry tale began with a classroom assignment centered on a "Human Values Chart" distributed at a suburban Washington, D.C., elementary school. While the very title might set off red flags for conservatives and liberals alike, the content may so offensive it might rally everyone from Tom DeLay Republicans to Bernie Sanders leftists to rise up in rightfully righteous indignation.

The chart, which -- charitably interpreted -- was intended to illustrate that cultural differences exist, lists eight "contemporary American values" to be juxtaposed with "Native American values." While this might seem a "simple" matter of political correctness at its most foolish, that was the least of the problem.

For each value -- "goal," "family," "child training," "property," "religion," "nature," "time," and "work" -- it spells out what "contemporary Americans" purportedly think. Nowhere is it explained whether these are descriptive or prescriptive, and never is it acknowledged that our diverse nation of 300 million people hold quite different values. Or that the beauty of a free and democratic society is that people are entitled to hold different values. However, by handing this out to, albeit bright, 9-year-olds, it is reasonable to assume most children would think these are "American values" that they should embrace -- or discard.

So, what were some of these values? For "nature," this magnet-school curriculum sheet proclaims Americans believe they "must conquer, dominate, and control nature, as God commanded me to do through Adam, and as is necessary for my survival." Leave aside

the environmentally absurd theological sleight-of-hand and the nonseparation of church and state. For at least a generation, poll upon poll and politician after politician have declared it our duty and goal to preserve -- not destroy -- nature, and serve as environmental stewards for future generations.

On "property," my son and his fellow fourth-graders were told Americans' "life goal is to acquire as many material possessions as possible: A good house, several cars, a camper, a motorcycle, a boat, and a swimming pool are things that I'd like my family to have." Again, it is doubtful Junior really would like Mom on a Harley or to vacation in a trailer park. And, while consumerism may have run amok in the last half-century, few Americans would explicitly agree with Michael Douglas' famous line in the movie "Wall Street" that "greed is good."

On child training, despite the kindly 60-year legacy of the late Dr. Benjamin Spock and the more recent legacy of permissive, helicopter parents, the "Values" sheet declares Americans "believe children must be made to feel guilty if bad and must be spanked if necessary." It is doubtful one could convene a quorum of psychologists to say making children feel guilty is good. Moreover, many, if not most, Americans are far from the days when corporal punishment was widely practiced.

Other "American values" described "merely" offend the millions of Americans who are divorced, homosexual, childless, single, or not members of the three major Western religions. To wit, a family is "a mother, father and children." On religion -- a rather slippery constitutional slope to be gliding down -- we are told Americans "believe there is a one and only God."

While these values -- and teaching them to fourth-graders -- are offensive, the chart's juxtaposition with "Native American values" adds another dollop of offensiveness. The children were expected to fill in the blanks for Native Americans for each corresponding "American" value.

Once again, aside from the niggling fact that Native Americans, like all Americans, are far from monolithic in their beliefs, the "right" answers were the mostly cuddly, and mostly historically untrue, nonmaterialistic, nature-loving values that supposedly preceded European and African settlement of America.

So, let's count the ways in which this is screwy:

(1) It is false, as both "Americans" and Native Americans -- like all people -- have combined great compassion and thoughtfulness with extreme brutality and stupidity. (2) It compares a mythic golden age with a dystopic, mythic present. (3) It all but tells the more than 99 percent of Americans who are not of Indian ancestry that their values are bad by comparison.

Much has been rightly said about other failures of how the United States educates its 6- to 18-year-olds. While our leading universities are world-beaters, research such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study reveal that America's 50-some million elementary and secondary school students rank near the middle or bottom in international comparisons of math and science performance. Likewise, we all know teacher pay of \$40,000 is hardly likely to draw the best and brightest when average compensation at Goldman Sachs, for example, is about \$500,000, and many of our 3 million teachers are on the verge of retirement.

Yet if the vast majority of Americans and their leaders rightly believe our nation has a problem with education, it goes far beyond math, science and teaching, as this -- sadly,

not unique -- assignment illustrates. And, to add salt to the wound, taxpayers are footing the bill for this tripe.

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