

THE EDUCATIONAL CRISIS IN THE UNITED STATES: A MAGISTERIAL CRITIQUE

Donald A. Doyle

Dr. Donald A. Doyle, who was a charter member of the SCSS, first President of the SCSS New York Metropolitan Chapter, and former school administrator and political science professor, wrote this personal assessment about current American education in light of the teaching of the Church before his death in 2005. The CSSR proudly presents it here as his last published writing.

The Church is first and foremost a teacher. Consequently her views on education have been important and influential throughout history. Indeed, the Magisterium or official teaching authority of the Church has anticipated the educational crisis that is widespread in America today.

The Church has always defined education as the multifaceted development of individuals, spiritually, morally, aesthetically, physically, psychologically and intellectually. The Church distinguishes between the affective and the cognitive domain in education. In addition, she recognizes that there are many agencies of education in society such as the Church herself, the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, sports programs, organizations, social groups, after school clubs and the family. Contemporary secular thinking is at variance with this view. Dr. Robert Hutchins, the famed President of the University of Chicago, referred to the educationist notion that the school should teach the whole child as the most meaningless, anti-intellectual concept in educational discussion. The view that the school is the primary educational agency in society is one major reason why the public schools over the last several decades have expanded their responsibilities into so many nonacademic areas.

The Church looks on the school as one of many agencies in society, but one that must always be a complement to and never in opposition to the primary educational agency, i.e., the family—with parents having the final say in the role of their education of their children. This brings us to the role of the state in the educational activity. The modern educator would clearly give primary responsibility for the education of youth to the state, whereas the Church maintains that the parents have this fundamental natural right. From the Catholic position, the state's task is to protect and defend this natural right or, as the *Declaration on Christian Education* from the Second Vatican

Council States: “Parents who have the primary and inalienable right and duty to educate their children must enjoy true liberty in their choice of schools. Consequently, the government which has the obligation to protect and defend the rights of citizens must see to it...that parents are truly free to choose, according to their consciences, the school they want for their children.” The *Declaration* continues by stating that: “Since parents have conferred life on their children, they have a most solemn obligation to educate their offspring. Hence, parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it. For it devolves on parents to create a family atmosphere so animated with love and reverence for God and men that a well-rounded personal and social development will be fostered among the children. Hence, the family is the first school of those social virtues which every society needs.” Pope John Paul II confirmed and developed this constant teaching of the Church, especially in his 1981 *Apostolic Exhortation on the Family*.

Interestingly, the Church’s view on the natural right of parents in education is more consistent with our constitutional traditions than the prevailing view of the modern educator. The landmark case, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, in 1925 said the parents and not the state had the natural right to educate their children as they saw fit. Nothing in the *Pierce* decision suggested the state is in the role of primary educator or superior educator, certainly not the standard-setter for all educational endeavors. The *Pierce* case continues to be the basis for recent court rulings on cases regarding the Amish schools, home schooling and the New York City decision denying the public schools the right to distribute condoms to students without parental permission.

Philosophically, the current crises in American public education are due to the fact that our schools are continuing to try to do the “whole job,” that they are not distinguishing between the affective and cognitive domain. Although the school is particularly competent to teach the academic subjects, it lacks the ability, competence and the authority to teach the affective domain. Father Andrew Greeley, the priest sociologist, conducted a study in the 1970’s that affirmed the competency of formal schooling in the academic subjects, but found the school was unsuccessful in its attempt at teaching values. Values are caught not taught, as the saying goes. They are most effectively conveyed on a one to one, interpersonal level as well as by example. At their best, schools reinforce the values of the families of their students. Since religion is prohibited, however, public schools tend to promote values that are contrary to the wishes of many traditionally religious parents.

As the *New York Times* reported in a 1985 front-page article, "Public schools can teach what is legal and not legal, but not what is right or wrong." Morality, however, is civilization's first line of defense, which explains the following comparison between 1940 and 1990 American public school teachers. In his 1993 study titled, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*, William Bennett reported that, "A disturbing and telling sign of declining conditions among the young is the result of an on-going teacher survey. Over the years teachers have been asked to identify the top problems in America's public schools. In 1940, teachers identified talking out of turn; chewing gum; making noise; running in the halls; cutting in line; dress code infractions; and littering. When asked the same questions in 1990, teachers identified drug abuse; alcohol abuse; pregnancy; suicide; rape; robbery; and assault." As Thomas Sowell states in *Inside American Education: (1992)*: "All across this country the school curriculum has been invaded by psychological conditioning programs which not only take up time sorely needed from intellectual development, but also promote an emotionalized and anti-intellectual way of responding to the challenges facing every individual and every society. Worst of all, this psychotherapeutic curriculum systematically undermines the parent-child relationship and the shared values which make a society possible." In *The Devaluing of America*, William Bennett cites the landmark 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, the first national study of our public schools. It concluded that, "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people." Bennett's book goes on to list the results of a 1989 international comparison of mathematical and science skills that showed American students scoring at the bottom and South Korean students scoring at the top. In 1991, the National Assessment of Education Programs (NAEP) study reported that "72 percent of fourth graders can do third grade math, only 14 percent of our eighth graders can do seventh grade math, and only 5 percent of our high school seniors show an understanding of geometry and algebra that would indicate a sufficient preparedness for the study of relatively advanced or college level math." Our students are not deficient only in math and science. Finn and Ravitch, in their book, *What Do Seventeen Year Olds Know?*, have shown that 43 percent of high school seniors could not place World War I between 1900 and 1950. More than two-thirds of them did not know even the half-century in which the Civil War took place. And more than 75 percent were unable to say within twenty years when Abraham Lincoln was President. One-third of high school students tested in 1986 did not know that the Declaration of Independence marked the American

colonists' break from England. Also, according to National Assessment of Education survey of 21-25 year olds conducted in 1986, fewer than 40 percent were able to interpret an article by a newspaper columnist.

In *Values Matter Most*, Ben Wattenberg, a liberal Democrat and syndicated columnist in 200 newspapers, asks the question: "What's the problem? Is it money? No, the per pupil expenditures have climbed 81 percent since 1970. Is it technology? No, by 1990 97% of our schools had computers. Is it over crowded schools? No, by 1992 the teacher-student ratio was seventeen to one, a drop of 37 percent. In short, so many of the things that nice people once wanted to happen in our schools have happened. But all this is done at the expense of the primary purpose of education, namely academic excellence."

The problem in our schools concerns changed values! And, I would add, especially when those values are not those shared by traditionally religious parents.

The Magisterium anticipated this educational crisis. In 1929, Pope Pius XI said the following about education: "The school, if not a temple, is a den. When literary, social, domestic and religious education do not go hand in hand, man is unhappy and helpless."

From this observation of Pius XI, it follows that the so called "neutral" or "lay school," from which religion is excluded, is contrary to fundamental principles of education. Such a school, moreover, cannot exist in practice; it is bound to become irreligious.

The school is, by its very nature, an institution subsidiary and complementary to the family and to the Church. It follows logically and necessarily that it must not be in opposition to, but in positive accord with, those two elements and must form with them a perfect moral union, constituting a sanctuary of education, as it were, with the family and the Church. Otherwise, it is doomed to fail, and become instead an agent of destruction.

This was said in 1929, when our public school systems were known for educating the poorest of the poor, and were the envy of the world!

Except for the public school establishment ideologues, there are many secular scholars whose research confirms what the Magisterium asserts and many political leaders who reject the status quo.

The second nationwide study of education after *A Nation at Risk* was conducted in 1998. The results were clear from the title of the study: *A Nation Still at Risk*. The focus of this study is not only on improving K through 12 education, but also college education. The college situation is not encouraging. Some colleges have eliminated the core program altogether, allowing students to graduate without taking

even one history or political science course. Other colleges have watered down their liberal arts requirements. Most teacher preparation programs at the college level stress how to teach, not what to teach, thus further de-emphasizing liberal arts education.

The idea that the Catholic philosophical tradition could revitalize higher education is well taken. But even Catholic colleges must reform themselves first. Today, students even in Catholic colleges would be hard pressed to explain the natural law, the principle of subsidiarity, positivism, the natural law theory of law making, and the list could go on and on. The only true university is a Catholic university! That is why any school of higher education that wants to be called Catholic, in the tradition of Newman and John Paul II, must embrace *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* without reservation.

A truly pluralistic, free society cannot exist without educational diversity. Without choice in education, the current crises in American education will only get worse.