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Virtue, not 'bad,' needs to be the norm

By **RICHARD R. PIEPER SR. and SAMUEL P SCHEIBLER**

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Since our country was founded, Americans have understood that the nation's schools should be preparing our children to be better citizens. A safe and prosperous republic depends upon citizens who understand and practice shared core values - values that help us build a common framework for justice, fairness and mutual respect.

Even a brief glance at the daily news reveals that something has gone terribly wrong. Everyone knows that the system is broken, but there is little agreement on how it can be repaired.

Walter E. Williams, an economist at George Mason University, has spent years studying the crisis in our schools and its long-term impact on American society. He believes that many of our social problems begin in the classrooms and corridors of our public schools. And he is convinced that unless we do something about the problem, we will be suffering greater consequences in the years to come.

Violence, classroom and school activity disruption, disrespect, dishonesty and bullying are offenses that schools are supposed to teach children and youth to abhor. Williams concludes that the root of the trouble is "bad character and its manifestations, i.e. school violence exists because it is tolerated. 'Bad' has become the norm."

Public education is the only institution that touches the life of almost every American child during his or her formative years. Americans are overwhelmingly decent, hardworking, honest people. If we continue to lose ground by failing to insist on teaching these values in our schools, we cannot expect a secure and successful future.

The Wisconsin Character Education Partnership is a voluntary group of citizens drawn from business, education, industry and the community working to address problems in our schools. Our goal is to encourage and support the effort by schools, school districts and the state to teach Wisconsin's students core values such as integrity, honesty, fairness, responsibility and respect for themselves and for others - values that are shared by all Americans regardless of race, ethnic background, religion or status.

As a first step in developing a climate of character education in our schools, the WCEP established awards honoring promising practices in character education last year, and this year we will award "Wisconsin Schools of Character" prizes to deserving schools and school districts. The purpose of the awards is to showcase schools that have taken concrete and effective steps to integrate into the lives of their students the values that are vital to a free society.

The WCEP believes that a school, school district or educational community that is committed to character education will take a public stand for these core character values and share these values in the wider community. To be a recognized Wisconsin school of character, a local school must determine how to define these values for the circumstances and needs of the community and how to set clear, achievable goals for teachers and students. A Wisconsin school of character will honor behavior consistent with these values by holding everyone in the school and community accountable to the same standards of conduct.

In 2000, Wisconsin made a commitment to character education as part of the federal government's No Child Left Behind program. While noticeable efforts have been made across the state, the realities of tightening budgets, increasing work loads and confusing instructions from Washington have caused character education to suffer.

The Wisconsin Character Education Partnership is realistic. We understand that the core character values necessary to build a stronger state and nation in the decades ahead cannot be taught as another class or activity. These values must be instilled in our students by consistent, diligent, purposeful example. No single classroom activity, focus week, monthly theme or school assembly is going to turn the tide.

The WCEP is not recommending another character education curriculum, but rather the creation of schools of character where core values are an essential part of the day-to-day experience.

Through the Promising Practices and State Schools of Character programs, we focus on the best examples of where character education is making a difference. We hope that these schools of character will stand like lighthouses for educators, administrators and community members.

We believe that our solution is unique. We combine character education with resources already in place rather than add burdens of expense and greater time commitments to the overstretched resources of local schools. In this spirit, we are working with Wisconsin school administrators and teachers who have already demonstrated a commitment to character education rather than calling in expensive outside consultants and special program coordinators.

Because WCEP emphasizes core values shared by all Americans, we are not trying to impose a particular brand of morality in our public schools. We are fully aware of the deeply held beliefs and sensitivities of all Wisconsinites and know that raising the question of moral behavior in public education can cause controversy. While morality

may not be legislated, there is no constitutional barrier to our schools exemplifying, encouraging and rewarding decency while decrying, denouncing and disciplining the deplorable.

Creating schools of character will offer Wisconsin our best, most practical and most enduring defense of virtuous citizenship. We concur with our colleagues from George Mason University that "bad" is not only tolerated, it has become the norm in our schools.

We believe that identifying, encouraging and rewarding examples of character education at its best will create a momentum for making virtue the norm in Wisconsin's schools.

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