

Constitution provides values that schools need

The State Board of Education is considering a resolution to encourage character education and the teaching of values in public schools throughout Michigan.

Should values be taught to public school children? That's easy: of course they should! But which values, and how they are to be taught is a much more difficult matter.

It is without question that there are important moral and social values that make up the American cultural experience, values which should be transmitted from one generation to the next. It is also true that values have been, and always will be, transmitted by teachers, whether intended or not. Teachers are, after all, role models.

Honesty, responsibility, respect for oneself and others, a sense of fairness, and other values of good citizenship, for example, can and should be taught

to all children. Those values can (and must) be taught without reference to sectarian religious beliefs.

The president of the board has suggested that the Bible may be a suitable text to use in public school classrooms, Bible stories being appropriate motivational materials for the transmission of values. But the appropriate place for theological references (or teaching a theological basis for secular values) is in the home, church, synagogue and mosque.

There is a vast difference, for example, between a public school teacher instructing a child to "be considerate of the child sitting next to you," and saying "as the Bible commands, honor thy neighbor." The message may be similar, but the rationale and the delivery matter greatly.

In order to ensure that the secular values of our cultural heritage, rather

QUEST COLUMNIST



WENDY WAGENHEIM

than theological values, are being encouraged in Michigan's public schools, this resolution must be accompanied by guidelines. A directive describing what is, and what is not, constitutionally permissible with regard to religion in the public schools would help protect communities from the divisiveness and conflict certain to result if religious beliefs intrude

themselves into the public school classroom, and if the values of one religious faith are favored over another.

Further, the creation of committees of parents, business, religious, and other community representatives to develop a character education curriculum and "to select important common values" is a formula for chaos and conflict if the Board of Education's resolution does not also include directions governing the selection and authority of these committees. Guidelines will also help prevent school boards from stumbling into needless lawsuits when constitutional principles requiring government neutrality in matters of religion are violated. The public schools need to spend their money in the classroom, not the courtroom.

Public schools can be encouraged to

transmit values, but they must also maintain the trust that exists between parents, particularly parents of minority religious faiths, and the schools. That trust is based on what the U.S. Supreme Court has called an "understanding that the classroom will not purposely be used to advance religious views that may conflict with the private beliefs of the student and his or her family."

It is imperative that the State Board of Education include guidelines in its "character education" resolution, which clearly underscores the distinction between the secular values of our cultural heritage and the theological values that make up America's rich religious heritage.

Wendy Wagenheim is a Birmingham resident and Legislative Affairs Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan.

Bad education isn't what leads parents to 'choice' schools

In the dream world of certain politicians, education is a huge market. Parents want freedom to choose the best schools for their kids. Poor kids, in particular, need this kind of market choice because rich families can pack up and move or send the kids to private schools.

In this dream world, "schools of choice" will wipe out bad schools, the way the car market eliminated DeSoto and LaSalle.

The dream world is inhabited by Gov. John Engler, Sen. Bill Schuette, R-Midland, and a few luminaries on the State Board of Education. Their ideology tells them free markets work, so they believe free markets work.

The facts are far different.

Back in the 1980s when Metropolitan Fund and the late Chuck Muer were pushing school choice, Minnesota Gov. Rudy Perpich was brought into town to explain his state's sys-

tem. Perpich revealed that only one to four percent of parents ever wanted school choice. He thought choice was a good idea, but mathematically not particularly important.

For years Michigan has had a choice system called property transfers. It is used by families who live on the edge of school district A but would rather be in district B.

These cases go before an administrative law judge in Lansing and then to the State Board of Education. Most transfers involve rural residents; Eaton, Clinton and Livingston counties generate many cases. This company has newspapers in those counties. So when cases arise, I read the judge's report and often the transcripts from cover to cover.

The politicians who live in a dream world don't. If Tim Kelly, Engler's emissary to the State Board, reads them, he fails to tell the boss about it.

In reality, here is why parents



TIM RICHARD

exercise choice by seeking property transfers from district A to B:

- Dad and mom work in town B. If Junior gets sick, it's less disruptive to pick him up from B school than to backtrack 20 miles to A school.
- Dad and mom shop and bank in town B.
- Dad and mom go to church in town B, they grew up in town B, and their social contacts are there.
- The grandparents, aunts and relatives all live in town B and are available to take in the children if the par-

ents have to work overtime.

• Dad died, mom remarried and moved, but the children want to stay in the school where their friends go. The oldest boy is taking swimming lessons, and the other district doesn't have a pool.

• The family lives in district A, but district B's schools are eight miles closer, and the children wouldn't have to waste so much time on the bus if the property were in district B.

• The family really wanted to be in district B, and the Realtor told them the house was in B, but they didn't find out until months later the house was really in A.

Very, very rarely does a parent testify that the school program is better in district B. And when mom says so, she usually is referring to a particular teacher who can handle her child's problem.

That is the real world. Nothing

about market forces and competition and all that hogwash.

This is not to suggest parents have poor reasons for requesting "choice" through property transfers. Their reasons are excellent and practical. The administrative law judge and the State Board members who read the transcripts most often grant the transfer.

The point is that the requests have nothing to do with the dream world of market forces.

Survey after survey has revealed that the overwhelming bulk of parents are most interested in having their children attend the neighborhood school.

If there's a problem with the neighborhood school, they demand the elected school board — not mythical market forces — fix it.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

View of today's teenager far different than what mine was

I graduated from high school way back in 1956.

Our class was small, only 58, and over the years seven have died and another eight have just kind of disappeared. But our 40th class reunion last weekend was well-attended; we had 25 middle-aged classmates Saturday night at dinner, including one who came all the way from Singapore.

This event gave me the chance to test a theory that's occurred to me as I've moved through the years: As people get older, they become more and more like themselves. When kids graduate from high school, for example, who they are can be glimpsed, but when they reach middle age the experiences of the years seem to amplify and sharpen the original tendencies of character.

It's true. Dave, the red haired scrappy ball player in school, had grown a beard and won a wife, but he was even more scrappy and talking up a blue streak. Mike, the tall, gangling brain of the class was still tall and gangling, but now just a bit stooped and focused as a successful professor at the University of North Carolina. Wendy, a glamour girl when we graduated, wore lovely sophisticated clothes that showed off her still-beautiful figure and sunny personality.

My reunion also came at a poignant time. My son, Nathan, starts his own high school career next week when he enters ninth grade. As I listened to my classmates reminisce, I was struck at what a different world Nathan will be entering than the one I had known 40 years earlier. Different and far more dangerous.

Of course, there are still cars driven too fast by teenagers who still think they are immortal. But even those of us who were sexually active in high school — only a tiny minority ever went beyond petting — never thought about AIDS.

And as for substance abuse, the worst I ever heard about in my class was when some kids bought a bottle of blueberry brandy on our senior trip to New York. Nathan faces an entire pharmacopoeia of addictive and threatening drugs and a youth culture that is starting to re-glamorize being hooked.

Forty years ago, the tolerable bounds of mischief seem laughably mild today. The event recalled with greatest shame over the weekend was electing the ugliest girl in the class to be homecoming queen. Our homeroom teacher, Miss Chipman, put her foot down on that one. Of course, she never found who made paint



PHILIP POWER

bombs out of egg shells and threw them on the walls of a rival school.

Today, it seems unsurprising for kids to slash the tire on an entire fleet of school buses or try to burn down a school building. If an important part of a culture is defined by the limits to shame, we're living in an entirely different world than the one of my youth.

Maybe I lived in a protected world 40 years ago — I grew up in Ann Arbor — but there was very little sense of the racial and ethnic divisions that so slash and crosshatch our society today. Sure, there were Jewish and Asian and African-American kids in our school, but it wasn't until I went off to college that I was faced with the stereotypes that Jewish people were pushy and Asians were brains and African Americans couldn't be trusted.

Last week, Nathan, with the casual, stereotyped wisdom of a 14-year-old in today's world, told Kathy and me that someone was a "nice, pushy Jewish lady." Forty years ago, I never would have known or noticed.

And, of course, 40 years ago we had none of the pop culture that so efficiently infests our society today through broad band technology. We had radio and fuzzy black and white television when I graduated; Nathan has VCR's, CD-ROM computer games, MTV, Walkman and Discman and endless TV.

Thinking about the world that my son will be facing next week, I feel a slight chill of worry. Maybe I'm getting old and the days of my youth look innocent and happy when bathed in the bright, gauzy moonlight of 40 years. But I'm going to be praying for my son and his safety a lot over the next few years.

Philip Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1880.

With Mortgage Rates this low,
the only thing you can't afford
is the wrong lender.

7.750%
Interest Rate

8.265%
Annual Percentage Rate

5/1 Adjustable Rate Mortgage

- One of the most competitive rates in the Metro area
- Fixed rate first five years (then converts to a one year A.R.M.)
- 2% annual cap, 5% lifetime cap
- Rate available on loans from \$100,000 to \$1,000,000 (Includes construction loans)
- Call us for quick approvals

FIRST AMERICA
Mortgage Company

For more information, call 313-953-8140 or 810-608-1006 • Canton, 313-981-7810

Annual Percentage Rate includes 1.25 points and is effective as of 8/22/98 and subject to credit approval. For example, a \$100,000 mortgage loan (principal and interest only) would have a monthly payment of \$718.42 for 360 months. Rate subject to daily change. First of America Mortgage Loans are not eligible. Member FDIC. ©1998, FMA Corporation. Equal Housing Lender. If hearing impaired, TDD line available from 810-608-1006.