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POSTING THE TEN COMMANDMENTS: Do YOU Think that Would Actually Make a Difference?

What's Really Wrong with Our Schools

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Governor Frank O'Bannon of Indiana recently signed a law which, among other things, allows schools and other government agencies to post the Ten Commandments in their buildings if they are displayed with other historical documents. While cynics might be tempted to guffaw at O'Bannon as some lone yokel, that would be a mistake. Legislators in at least nine other states are mulling over similar proposals, including Kentucky, South Dakota, Colorado, Florida, South Dakota and Oklahoma.

Of course, the ACLU and the other strict separationist groups have responded to these proposals in typical hysterical fashion, threatening lawsuits and denouncing the proposals as a violation of the First Amendment. Witness Barry W. Lynn, executive director of the American United for Separation of church and State: "When they [the Ten Commandments] are put up to inspire people, they are promoting religion in violation of the Constitution." What's the moral? That Mr. Jones or Ms. Beasley may tack his or her own list of rules of civility and goodness to the classroom bulletin board, but it's an unpardonable assault on the minds of children if these rules in any way mention a power beyond that of the teacher's will and yardstick. So much for value neutrality.

Regardless, some have sneered that here we see garden variety right-wing hypocrisy - those who are always crowing for local discretion in education and personal liberty are now attempting to pass state laws to ram God down children's throats. Others wonder whether this is the second prong in a Fundamentalist assault on the schools. Out with teaching evolution, in with Moses.

Actually, what appears to be occurring is a kind of revivalism. No, hordes of Protestants are not taking to the fields to attend open-tent revivals and hear Elmer Gantry thunder. Instead, legislators in the face of what appears to be growing moral idiocy among the young are attempting to reinvigorate a common moral sense.

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In reading of the justifications for posting the Ten Commandments and, say, the Declaration of Independence and Magna Charta, one sees repeated cries that the young of the nation are increasingly stricken by godlessness, anomie, and nihilism. Often, proponents of these laws cite the school shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas, Littleton, Colorado, and elsewhere as evidence of the moral rot. This same worry over the wayward behaviors of children prompted Louisiana to pass a law last summer that requires children to use "Sir," "Ms." And "Madam" when addressing adults on school grounds.

No doubt, the idea of posting the Declaration and other historical documents in addition to the Ten Commandments is in part a strategy for getting around possible constitutional barriers. But it is also a manifestation of the American psyche's habit of trying to return to "first principles" in times of trouble. H. Mark Roelofs, a colleague of mine at New York University, in his *The Poverty of American Politics* (Temple University Press, 1998) points out this habit. Like "Moses at Sinai, Joshua at Shechem, and Josiah and Ezra in Jerusalem," when Americans call for a return to their first principles they are engaging in "covenant renewal." In the Gettysburg Address, State of the Union speeches, and the push to post the Ten Commandments, the message is similar: 'we are a chosen, special people and we must return to our guiding precepts and make good on that promise.'

By posting the Ten Commandments, along with the Declaration of Independence and other 'great documents' in Western Civilization, legislators hope to infuse the hearts of the citizenry with the civic virtue and piety that purportedly made the earliest Americans great. Clearly, this sort of exercise requires that we ignore the moral shortcomings of the early Americans. George Washington was an admirable fellow, Aaron Burr was a scoundrel.

But there's a larger point to be addressed - public policy. Though there's likely no harm and perhaps some good in attempting to reinvigorate virtue in the young by posting the Ten Commandments and such, unfortunately, this policy proposal does nothing to contend with two larger causes of the moral estrangement of the young.

The first is the general structure of the public school. Gone are the days of the one-room schoolhouse. Today we have sprawling factory-like schools, housing a thousand to three thousand students. Though classroom sizes have in fact fallen over the past four decades, the general climate of schools remains bureaucratic and impersonal. Hanging the Ten Commandments in classrooms isn't likely to thwart the loneliness and emptiness a student may feel when he or she tromps through the halls surrounded by hundreds of other students. Only by shrinking schools to a few hundred or more can public school become a nurturing environment where students feel belonging to a larger community.

Second, forty years ago James Coleman's *The Adolescent Society, The Social Life of the Teenager and Its Impact on Education*, was published. Coleman, a celebrated sociologist, discovered that increasingly adolescents were becoming disconnected from the influence of their parents and increasingly affected by the mores of their peers. This created an obvious problem, as the values of adolescent peers

were very different from parents's.

Over time, this divide has increased. Parental control over the information and ideas that confront their children has dropped dramatically. Fifty years ago, there may have been one television and one radio in a home and a few copies of the Saturday Evening Post. And typically Mom was always home. So what children saw and learned was greatly limited by parental authority.

Today's child likely has access to cable television, a computer hooked to the Internet, and owns a radio and CD-playing Walkman. And both his parents work. Obviously the decrease in parental oversight and their provision of these technologies to their kids empowers the child to access mountains more information than his forebears could. So little Susie can watch the Howard Stern Show or the History channel; and little Johnny can surf to the Smithsonian website or Caligula's Orgy Palace.

Recently a teacher I know told me that she got to play judge in a student lip-sync contest held at her school. While parents and administrators looked on in horror, group after group of eleven and twelve-year olds took the stage and mouthed the lyrics to lewd rap songs. When castigated by the principal, the students responded by essentially saying, "What's the big deal?" Parents, meanwhile, said that they didn't even realize that their children were listening to "this kind of music."

If this anecdote illustrates anything, it's that parents have to take a more active role in examining and controlling the media their children are able to access. Posting the Ten Commandments and other great documents from Western Civilization in schools and elsewhere is no replacement.

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