



Introduction



Our Schools Are In Trouble

Too many schools have become war zones. The incidence of violence is alarming. The leading cause of death of youth in North America is murder. Many youth in North American cities go to school with weapons. Metal detectors and armed guards are needed at the doors. Too many of our children are technical wizards and moral incompetents. Students are dropping out of school at an alarming rate. Teachers are increasingly stressed by the threat of violence and are already overburdened by the demands of academic requirements. We know that unless we get to the root causes of these problems, they will persist and worsen.



The Loss of Meaning

A study out of the Harvard Center for Moral Education asked the question “Why did you do it?” of youth jailed for committing random acts of violence. Ninety per cent of these youth said “Because I was bored.” Boredom is a spiritual disease – the disease of meaninglessness.

If loss of meaning is the disease, the cure must incorporate a way for young people to connect with meaning and purpose. There is a longing deep within adolescents to make a difference, to have impact. It comes from the developmental urge to fulfill their innate virtues of idealism, purposefulness, and creativity. It is the call of early adulthood saying “Make your mark.” When that fierce idealism is not given a positive focus through opportunities for young people to explore and experience what is meaningful in their lives, it seeks another channel.



A Renaissance of Values and Virtues

Thankfully, there is a renaissance of values and virtues to address the heart of the matter. The purpose of life as described in all the world’s wisdom traditions is the cultivation of the virtues. There is nothing new about justice. There is nothing original about love. Virtues are the oldest ideas in the world.

Yet, we are spiritually and morally parched for these simple, timeless practices. Many teachers and administrators are finding that applying the strategies of The Virtues Project is transforming the culture in their schools by helping them to create a **total environment** of caring and respect. They have replaced discouragement with empowerment, having discovered that words such as “lazy”, “stupid”, “no good”, “hopeless”, and “unacceptable” were literally demoralizing and dis-courage-ing their students. When they fill their classrooms with encouraging words, such as “helpful”, “excellent”, “compassionate”, “self-disciplined”, and “kind”, they find that these behaviors flourish.

Why Virtues? Why Not Values?

Values are what we value and care about. They could be anything. We may value getting rich and famous, we may value being the best criminal the world has ever seen, we may value power over others, but that doesn't mean we will have good character. Also, values are culture-specific. What some families or cultures value, others don't. Virtues are much more elemental than values. While values are culture-specific, virtues are universally valued by all cultures.

“Virtues are what's good about us.”
Sharon, Age 6

An Inclusive Approach

Sometimes educators get bogged down in their pursuit of character education by the dilemma of how to introduce values without offending people of diverse belief systems, including the religious and the non-religious children. How do we introduce character education in a pluralistic society? How do we safeguard against imposing the values of any one belief system? A simple way to address this issue is by focusing on the development of virtues.

We cannot afford to wait until the values debate is resolved. Too many of our children are dying. And so this program side-steps the debate and gets on with the business of how to inspire the courage, honor, justice, and compassion in our kids. All parents, of whatever faith or of no faith, support having their children develop the integrity of their character.

The strategies of The Virtues Project are a simple, proven methodology which helps children to remember who they really are, and to know that the purpose of life is to have a life of purpose. Virtues are the content of our character, the elements of the human spirit. They exist within each child in potential. What is needed is a method to help children act on the best within them. The purpose of a true educator – which literally means “one who leads forth” – is

to awaken the virtues which **already exist** within a child. This book is about simple ways to do that.

The best time to awaken a child's qualities of character is in the early years. Early childhood education is the ideal time to introduce an awareness of virtues as the core of life's meaning, yet we have found it is never too late to help them discover it.

Virtue is alive and well within our children — it merely needs to be awakened. As this practice spreads, "virtue will triumph everywhere".

"Cultivate Virtue in your self, and Virtue will be real.

Cultivate Virtue in the family, and Virtue will flourish.

Cultivate Virtue in the village, and Virtue will spread.

Cultivate Virtue in the nation, and Virtue will be abundant.

Cultivate Virtue in the world and Virtue will triumph everywhere."

Lao Tsu