Public Schools Define American Culture

by Phyllis Schlafly November 15, 2006

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With all the public discussion about the values voters (whether they would vote in the 2006 election or stay home), the underlying (and still unanswered) question is, what is the role of government in defining our culture? Do both red states and blue states look to government to set or guide our cultural direction, whether it is about marriage vs. the gay agenda, free speech vs. pornography, life vs. abortion/cloning/euthanasia, property rights vs. community development, or sovereignty/patriotism vs. globalism/open borders?

Do we believe in a very limited government that would allow all these issues to be thrashed out and decided by Big Media, special-interest groups, and 527s? Should we demand that our elected representatives pass laws to address these issues, or should we allow non-elected judges to make those policy decisions for us?

Laws, judicial decisions, and media have a powerful effect on our culture. But more influential than all those in directing our culture is the arm of government known as the public schools.

The public schools are guiding the morals, attitudes, knowledge and decision-making (the elements that determine our culture) of 89 percent of American children. The public schools are financed by $500 billion a year of our money, forcibly taken from us in taxes, which the public school establishment spends

under a thin veneer of accountability to school board members elected in government-run elections.

Quo vadis? Whither are the public schools taking the next generation?

Prior to the 1960s, public schools and teachers clearly accepted their role in defining the culture of the youngsters under their supervision. The public schools, using a McGuffey-Reader-style curriculum, were the mechanism through which American kids learned not only the basics but also values such as honesty and patriotism, and immigrant kids assimilated by learning our language, laws and customs.

The American Citizens Handbook, published for teachers by the National Education Association in 1951, proclaimed: "It is important that people who are to live and work together shall have a common mind — a like heritage of purpose, religious ideals, love of country, beauty, and wisdom to guide and inspire them." This message was fortified by selections suitable for memorization, such as Old and New Testament passages, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Golden Rule, the Boy Scout oath, and patriotic songs.

The turning point in public schools came in the 1960s with the vast influence of the Humanist John Dewey and his Columbia Teachers College acolytes, who argued against objective truth, authoritative notions of good and evil, religion and tradition. Sidney Simon's 1972 book "Values Clarification," which sold nearly a million copies, was widely used to teach students to "clarify" their values, i.e., cast off their parents' values and make their own choices based on situation ethics.

Then the public schools welcomed the Kinsey-trained sexperts to change the sexual mores of our society from favoring sex-in-marriage to diversity. Concepts of right and wrong were banished, and children were taught about varieties of sex without reference to what is moral, good, or even legal.

Meanwhile, the curriculum suffered a vast dumbing down, allowing students to graduate without learning to read or calculate. American history courses now inculcate the doctrines of U.S. guilt and multiculturalism instead of the greatness of our heroes and successes.

By the 1990s, public schools effectively adopted a modis operandi described by Hillary Clinton as the village should raise the child. Public schools have become fortresses in which the administrators exercise near-absolute power to determine the students' values, morals, attitudes and hopes, while parents are kept outside the barricades.

Using activist judges to shore up their monopoly power, the schools persuaded the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court to rule last year that a public school can teach students "whatever information it wishes to provide, sexual or otherwise," and that parents' right to control the upbringing of their children "does not extend beyond the threshold of the school door." After heavy criticism in the U.S. House, the court reaffirmed its decision but tried to soften the "threshold" sentence.

The meaning of "whatever" is spelled out in anti-parent, pro-public-school decisions handed down in five circuits within the last two years. Federal courts upheld the right of public schools to indoctrinate students in Muslim religion and practices, to force students to watch a one-hour pro-homosexual video, to censor any mention of Intelligent Design, to use classroom materials that parents consider porn, to force students to answer nosy questionnaires with suggestive questions about sex and suicide, and to prohibit anti-gay T-shirts but welcome anti-Bush T-shirts.

It's not a question of whether, or if, government should define our culture. Government schools are every day defining the culture of the nation our children will live in, and they are doing it in violation of what the American people want.