SCHOOLING AND THE «FAMILY CRISIS»

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«Certainly of all countries in the world,» Toqueville wrote in the 1830s, «America is the one in which the marriage tie is most respected and where the highest and truest conception of conjugal happiness has been conceived. ... When the American returns ... to the bosom of the family, he immediately finds a perfect picture of order and peace.» [1]

How times have changed! If there is now one point of agreement between political conservatives and progressives in the United States, it is that the family is in trouble. During the 1992 election campaign, Democrats and Republicans competed to convince the voters that they had the more credible plans to address this perceived crisis. Inevitably, American schools are being called upon to do their share of providing a solution. Educational leaders are quick to assure the public that they can add this mission to many others that schools have assumed (generally ineffectively) in recent decades.

What precisely is the problem? A conservative policy institute has ingeniously invented an «Index of Leading Cultural Indicators» modeled upon the method used to track the health of the American economy. On the cultural front (at least by the measures chosen) the news is almost all bad. Since 1960 the average hours of television watched has risen steadily, the average scores on standardized tests has fallen, and the violent crime rate has risen, while the median prison sentence for serious crimes has fallen. Four indicators measure in various ways the health of American families:

* the proportion of all births that are illegitimate rose from 5.3% in 1960 to 26.2% in 1990;

* the proportion of children with single mothers rose from 8% to 22% over the same period;

* the proportion of children in families dependent upon public financial assistance rose from 3.5% to 11.9%;

* finally, the suicide rate for teenagers rose from 3.6 to 11.3 per thousand over this period. [2]

The same concerns are echoed in the progressive camp. An influential review of strategies to «break the cycle of disadvantage» summarized the current situation of many American families in the following terms:

* More women, including many more mothers of young children, are working, the vast majority in response to economic pressures.

* More children are growing up in poverty and many more in concentrated poverty, subject to the strains that low income and depleted neighborhoods impose on family life.

* Greater population mobility ... means fewer relatives and friends nearby to lend an extra pair of hands ...

* Greater mobility also means the erosion of the sense of community which develops over generations ...

* Child rearing itself has become more difficult. Gone are the clear, shared values and precepts to be passed on to the children. ... The pace of change is so rapid, values are so much in conflict, that everyone, including parents of young children, has to make up instant new rules to live by — a task that older societies never imposed. [3]

There is a significant difference between the two diagnoses, parallel to that in debates over the reform of American education: the conservative emphasis on measurable outcomes contrasted with the progressive emphasis on the difficulties faced by families. Both agree, however, that the situation of American families has gotten worse in recent decades ... and that someone should do something about it. Neither side has been particularly clear about what should or can be done

The «disappearance of fathers» from the lives of many children is seen, by some, as an especially devastating aspect of the recent trend toward single parenting (almost always by women) and family instability. The feminist contention that networks of women would be an improvement upon the nuclear family has lost credibility lately, but not without taking

its toll. «Men have walked away from responsibility *and women have let them,* because neither wants to be tied down.» [4]

> In 1988, over one-third of children under eighteen were living without the presence of the biological father. By 1990, nearly 10 percent of American children (6.2 million) were living without *either* parent. [5]

One result has been an impoverishment of the emotional context of many children's lives. As one progressive put it, «Fathers have always spent too little time with their children. Now mothers have joined them.» [6] Another has been the absence of male role models and authority figures in the communities where many poor children grow up.

> Husband-and-wife families constituted only 8 percent of the more than twenty-seven thousand families with children living in Chicago Housing Authority dwellings in 1985. Mrs. Robertus Coleman, president of a block association on Harlem's 114th Street, says, «we have 454 families on this block, 600 children, and I don't think there's more than 10 or 15 men.» [7]

Some argue, indeed, that a wide range of social problems that trouble America can be traced to the growing prevalence of single-parent families, and speak of a «social recession.»

> The range of problems that urge our attention are not separate issues, but are linked in an important way by the family trend of our time, which is the break-up of the mother-father child-rearing team, and the increasing number of American children who spend all or a significant part of their childhood living apart from their father. [8]

Not only has illegitimacy risen in recent years, but the rate of legitimate births to two parent families has fallen. Researchers have related this to the growing number of women in professional employment, which can be more difficult to combine with intermissions for childrearing than are more traditional «women's occupations.» [9]

There has been a remarkable reversal, in recent years, of the traditional pattern of full-time (and involuntary) work by women low on the social scale, and cultivated leisure and homemaking by those at its upper end. Employment is now the norm for well-educated women whose husbands have ample incomes to support their families, while less-educated women increasingly have difficulty finding or keeping employment in a changing

economy. The idea that mothers work only because of stark economic necessity is belied by the fact that, according to the Census Bureau, the mothers most likely to go back to work before their babies are a year old are college-educated, married, and with a family income over $25,000. [10] As a result, «of mothers with infants, 68 percent of those with four or more years of [post-secondary] college are in the labor force, compared to 30 percent of those who have less than a high school education.» [11]

The improved economic position of most women in American society has had the further effect, sociologist Christopher Jencks suggests, of eroding «the moral norm that a man should marry a woman if he [had] gotten her pregnant.»

> That norm rested on the assumption that since women could not support themselves or their children without male help, men had to assume economic responsibility for their children. As women's earning power rose, more of them were able to get along without male help. ... Women's growing ability to control their own fertility may also have weakened men's feeling that they were morally obligated to marry a woman who was about to have their baby. [12]

The aggregate statistics obscure the fact that there are *two* crises of the American family. One is that of family life in general, the other specifically that of an «underclass» that is disproportionately black and Puerto Rican. Whatever problems white families have, these minority families seem to have in a more acute form.

> In 1970, 9 percent of white children and 32 percent of black children lived with one parent; by 1985, those figures had increased to 18 percent and 54 percent respectively. ... white children born in 1950-54 spent [on average] 8 percent of their childhood with only one parent, while the figure for black children born in those years was 22 percent. For those born in 1980, the comparable percentages of childhood projected to be spent in one-parent family status for white children were 31 percent, for black children, 59 percent. [13]

Data reported by the Bureau of the Census in 1992 showed that in twenty years the proportion of households with children headed by a single parent had risen from 36 to 63 percent among blacks and from 10 to 23 percent among whites. [14] «60 percent of black women 25 to 29 years old were married in 1960, but only 32 percent in the mid-1980s. For white women of the same age, the percentage married dropped from 83 to 62 percent.» [15]

It is unclear to what extent the high and growing rate of single parenthood among blacks is simply an exaggerated form of the moderate but growing rate among white, and to what extent it has separate causes in past history, present discrimination, or other factors. There is every indication that black women *want* a reliable husband as the father of their children just as much as do white women, yet the black marriage rate has been declining as a proportion of that of whites — from 70% of the white rate to 50% in the single decade from 1970 to 1980. [16]

The distinctly more serious nature of family breakdown among black Americans has only recently become a permitted topic in policy debate, and even now great caution must be used to avoid the accusation of racism. The extreme sensitivity of this issue goes back to 1965, when a report by then Assistant Secretary of Labor (now Senator) Daniel Patrick Moynihan pointed out that «the family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers approaching complete break down.» [17]

The heart of Moynihan's argument in 1965 was that a strange phenomenon had recently developed: as unemployment went down, the number of black families dependent on government financial assistance continued to rise. More and more families were no longer participating productively in the economy, even during good times, largely because there was only one adult in the family. To a remarkable extent, family structure was becoming a surrogate for inherited social class in a mobile society. The disproportionate representation of single-parent families among black Americans was contributing powerfully to the inability of many to take advantage of the enormous legal and political gains won by the Civil Rights movement, and almost impossible for their communities to continue to function as decent places to live. As Moynihan pointed out in an article the same year, «a community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future — that community asks for and gets chaos.» [18]

Moynihan's argument seemed to critics a variation on that of anthropologist Oscar Lewis and others, that a «culture of poverty» explained its persistence in the midst of opportunity. Like all cultures, Lewis wrote, this was a «design for living» adapted to the existential circumstances of the poor but assuming a «life of its own» passed on from parents to children. «By the time slum children are age six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture. Thereafter they are psychologically unready to take full advantage of

changing conditions or improved opportunities that may develop in their lifetime.» [19]

The critics of the assumption that there was something about the poor that contributed to their poverty argued that there was instead a «low-income life-style» that was essentially adaptive to the circumstances of poverty resulting from discrimination over several generations. [20]This was perhaps at most what Kenneth Clark had called «the contagious sickness of the community itself,» somehow impersonal and not imputable to any individual's decisions, much less «inherent criminal or deliberate viciousness.» [21] They accused Moynihan and others of «blaming the victim» of an unjust society for causing a situation for which in fact «the system» was responsible. [22]

Although Moynihan had taken care to deflect any suggestion of blame for this situation from black people themselves, the subsequent controversy made the topic of family breakdown among blacks virtually taboo for an academic generation and unfortunately «drove the issue of assisting the black family off the national agenda for nearly two decades.» [23] There was a gap in public discussion from Dr. King's initially favorable response to the spotlight on the crisis of the black family in 1965 [24] to the point in 1983 when the Executive Director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People placed «finding ways to end the precipitous slide of the black family» at the top of the civil rights agenda.

As discussion of this issue has belatedly resumed, there is less tendency than before to offer historical explanations related to slavery or to suggest that aspects of African culture continue to shape family patterns among blacks, and more attention to factors in contemporary American life. Charles Murray attributed the deterioration of family life among inner-city blacks to perverse incentives built into the welfare system. [25] William Julius Wilson, on the other hand, stressed forces (including decline of the racial discrimination which had kept the black middle class in the inner city) which changed the social context for poor black families.

> The exodus of black middle-class professionals from the inner city has been increasingly accompanied by a movement of stable working-class blacks ... [who] ... in earlier years provided stability to inner-city neighborhoods and perpetuated and reinforced societal norms and values. In short, their very presence enhanced the social organization of ghetto communities. If strong norms and sanctions against aberrant behavior, a sense of community, and positive neighborhood identification are the essential features of social organization in urban areas, inner-city neighborhoods today suffer from a severe lack of social organization. [26]

Sociologist Christopher Jencks has added the suggestion that the relaxation of sexual and other norms on the part of the elite groups who set the cultural tone through their domination of the media has had a devastating effect upon those with less resources who have imitated their irresponsibility without the cushions of position and wealth.

> Today we are rich enough that affluent couples can afford the luxury of supporting two households. As a result, elite support for the two-parent norm has eroded. ... Poor children have suffered the most from our newly permissive approach to reproduction. Shotgun weddings and lifetime marriages caused adults a lot of misery, but they ensured that almost every child had a claim on some adult male's earnings unless his father died. That is no longer the case. [27]

This might be called the «Murphy Brown effect,» after the fictional career woman on a popular television show who decided to have a child out of wedlock, calling it «just another life-style choice.» The television critic of the New York Times has written that the growing number of unmarried women on dramatic shows who have chosen to become pregnant reflects «the shifting realities of women's options,» the most important of which is that «women who want children do not need or necessarily want a spouse underfoot.» [28] Whether the children who would result from these fictional pregnancies would want fathers around is apparently not a question that can be posed.

Bitter arguments still divide the political camps over the causes of family breakdown among blacks and Puerto Ricans, and indeed in the wider society, but what is not at question is its effect upon children. At the most immediate level, children born to mothers who have never been married are far more likely (whether they are white or black) to spend much if not all of their childhood in poverty. [29]

> By any material measure, the people of that community are better off now than they were thirty years ago. And yet the conclusion is irresistible that they are, all in all, worse off. ... We might reasonably ask whether, in all of human history, we can find an instance of a large population group in which the institution of the family simply disappeared. [30]

Why is the mess that some people make of their family lives a fit concern for social policy? There are three reasons why society as a whole has a legitimate interest in the health of families.

The first is simply that our sense of the fitness of things is offended by

a massive breakdown of families. After all, for most Americans a happy family life remains a central goal. Surveys consistently find that «the overwhelming majority of young people today still put forth as their major life goal a lasting, monogamous, heterosexual relationship which includes the procreation of children.» [31] A 1993 survey of workers nationwide found that «effect on family life» was a very important consideration in choosing a job for 60 percent, while salary or wages had similar priority for only 35 percent. [32] A survey published in 1988 asked women to describe the best thing about being a woman: «Sixty percent said it is `motherhood.' Being a wife was in second place, and the great achievement of feminism, `Taking advantage of women's increased opportunities,' came in a distant fourth.» [33]

Families contribute to private happiness, and they also serve as essential building blocks of the civil society. Michael Walzer has defined 'civil society' as «the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks — formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology — that fill this space.» [34] Well-functioningfamilies are generally essential to what Michael Novak has called «the communitarian individual ... whose life has given substance by the many communities and associations in which he or she participates ... both in their families and at work, among friends they choose and among others with whom fate has conjoined them.» [35]

Families are important not just for the sake of the sociability and support they provide, but because they are one of the buffers between individuals and the state. Robert Nisbet points out that families inherently limit state power over their members. [36] Citing the French political philosopher Lamennais, Nisbet rejects Rousseau's idea that society is constituted through a social contract among individuals and argues instead that «man is made social only by his membership in the smaller associations of family, church, community, and guild.» This conservative theme has been picked up more recently by neo-liberal «communitarians,» who wish to strengthen the institutions of civil society that «transmit the moral values on which both liberty and prosperity depend, and do so far more effectively than the agencies of either the government or the market-place.» [37]

The second reason for our concern about families is that children are better off in families that are functioning well, with two biological parents who are making a reasonable success of marriage. In this instance as in many others, research has recently been confirming what everyone except researchers already knew. As one welfare expert has summarized this evidence,

The vast majority of children who are raised entirely in a two-parent home will never be poor during childhood. By contrast, the vast majority of children who spend time in a single-parent home will experience poverty. [38]

Put even more bluntly, «family structure is by far the best predictor of child poverty.» [39] Important as the level of schooling attained is for the escape from poverty or economic marginality, marital status turns out to be even more significant.

The conclusion that the best antipoverty program for children is a stable, intact family holds even for families with modest levels of educational attainment. For married high school graduates with children, the 1991 poverty rate was 7 percent, versus more than 41 percent for families headed by female high school graduates. For married high school dropouts with children, the poverty rate was 25 percent, versus more than 62 percent for families headed by female high school dropouts. [40]

It should be noted that some experts minimize the impact of family structure on the poverty rate, insisting that «breakup changes the economic circumstances of parents only if they are employed. ... Lack of earnings, not breakup, explains virtually all of the increase in poverty in the 1980s.» [41] But the family structure issue is not primarily one of marriage breakup through divorce or desertion but rather of young women having children before they have acquired work qualifications or work experience; even if they obtain employment, it is unlikely to lift them and their children above the poverty line.

The effects of family structure upon children are not limited to those who grow up in poverty. The absence of a parent (usually the father) is «often accompanied by psychological consequences, which include higher than average levels of youth suicide, low intellectual and educational performance, and higher than average rates of mental illness, violence, and drug use.» [42] An important qualification of this finding is that suicide rates do not appear to be higher among teenagers whose fathers have died; it is family breakup that has the devastating effect. [43]

A nationwide survey published in 1991 found that both children and parents from two-parent families were more positive on a whole range of factors than were those from single-parent families. [44]

Family structure in neighborhoods also appears to be a more powerful predictor of crime than either the race or the income level of the residents. [45] «Neighborhood standards may be set by mothers,» James Q. Wilson

points out, «but they are enforced by fathers, or at least by adult males. Neighborhoods without fathers are neighborhoods without men able and willing to confront errant youth ...» [46] And youth who are not confronted have little chance of mending their ways.

The third reason for a policy concern with families is less global but no less important: the success of children in school (and thus, in a credential-driven economy, in much of life) is directly though not inevitably related to the nature of their family life. James Coleman puts the research results in characteristically direct terms: «Schools are successful primarily for children from strong family backgrounds.   Schools are singularly unsuccessful for children from weak or disorganized families.» [47] After all,

> the family is the institution in which children have their earliest education, their earliest experiences in the learning of languages, the nurturance of cognitive, emotional, and motor competencies, the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, the internalization of values, and the assignment of meaning to the world. [48]

In view of the significance of education within the family, it is not surprising that studies by researchers at Princeton and Johns Hopkins concluded that growing up in a single-parent family tended to depress a pupil's academic achievement and attendance. One interesting finding was that, as a family broke up, parents became less involved in the education of their children; another was that what parents *do* cannot explain the entire difference in academic achievement, since «the *strength of the attachment* between parents and child» had a direct impact upon school success. [49]

Intermediate-level pupils from single-parent families have been found to be more disruptive and less academically successful than their classmates from two-parent families, holding race and class constant. [50] A study of third graders found that those whose parents had divorced were judged by their teachers as more maladjusted and less successful in schoolwork than children from intact families. [51]

James Coleman has suggested that much of the decline in student achievement can be traced to breakdown in the nuclear family. «Parents became much less able to raise children in a stable, orderly fashion.» [52] As Sara Lawrence Lightfoot put it, «the family teaches what matters most.» [53] If the family fails to teach those things, the efforts of teachers are immeasurably more difficult, and perhaps ultimately in vain.

This does not mean that only middle-class families, or indeed only

two-parent families, can provide the essential preparation and support. Reginald Clark's close study of poor black families in Chicago whose children were doing well in high school found

> the family's main contribution to a child's success in school is made through parents' dispositions and interpersonal relationships with the child in the household. ... a family's ability to equip its young members with survival and «success» knowledge is determined by the parent's (and other older family members') own upbringing, the parents' past relationships and experiences in community institutions, the parents' current support networks, social relationships and other circumstances outside the home, and, most centrally, the parents' current social relationships in the home, and their satisfaction with themselves and with home conditions. [54]

Clark noted a clear relationship between student success and «sacred and secular moral orientations,» as well as a disinclination on the part of parents to allow their children to see themselves as passive victims of a racist and exploitative system.

> These parents do not believe the school should provide all or even most of the academic training and support for the child. ... They are likely to say that «The world don't owe you anything; you owe something to yourself.» [55]

Since «families are the strongest factor in the development and maintenance of human competence,» it seems likely that «the solution to the problem of children who [do] not benefit from schooling [does] not lie in devoting more resources to schools, but in doing something about the way the parents treat the child at home.» [56] If there is any measure within the reach of public policy that can help parents to function more effectively, it would be at least as important as any of the school reforms to which we devote so much effort.

For these three reasons, then — the general health of society, the well-being of children, and their academic success — it has become increasingly clear that public policy cannot ignore the situation of American families. This conclusion has been arrived at only belatedly, however, compared with the long tradition of pro-family policies in most European nations. Responsibility must be shared for the lack of serious discussion in the United States about what policies would encourage stable, two-parent families. Conservatives have tended to use «the family issue» as a club to beat their opponents with, but have often failed to advance concrete measures that would benefit ordinary families; for example, the Bush

Administration pushed much harder for tax reductions benefiting the wealthy than for increased deductions or tax credits for children. Progressives for their part have been remarkably chary of taking up the cause of families. As a result of the cultural changes of the past several decades,

> liberals no longer had enough self-confidence to know which, if any, values they wanted the state to encourage. Liberals increasingly forgot that there is a distinction between using the state to *enforce* a rigid moral code — an effort as impractical as it is unappealing — and insisting that programs *promote* certain values that are beneficial to both society and the individuals who practiced them. Over time, liberals were no longer certain what kind of family was worth encouraging. ... [57]

For several decades elite opinion was dominated by the contention that there is no ideal model of family life; there are only «families» in endlessly different, equally-valid forms. It has been argued that there is a consistent pattern of hostility toward the traditional model of family life on the part of the «new class» which dominates the formation of public opinion in America. [58] The assumption that marriage is the normative basis for family life and for raising children has increasingly retreated, at least in the media and associated elite circles of American society, in response to claims that in fact the «traditional» family is a vanishing species in American life. This contention has been repeated so frequently and in such an apparently authoritative display of census data that it has been widely accepted, though a visit to any suburban mall on a Saturday — or to any church on a Sunday — would call it seriously into question.

Critics of such statements have pointed out that they rest upon extensive manipulation of the data. For example, it is commonly stated that «fewer than ten percent of families today fit the old model of homemaker Mother and breadwinner Father,» but this result is arrived at by counting as «families» every household in the nation, including old people and students living alone, and then denying the «traditional» label to any family in which the mother works for any amount of time at any point in the year, or in which there are less than or more than two children! Actually, according to government statistics in 1987, only 28.8 percent of families with pre-school children had both parents working full-time; in 33.3 percent of these families, the mother did not have any paid employment, and in 15.8 percent the mother had part-time employment. Employed single mothers headed 10.1 percent of all families with pre-school children. [59]

Arguments over statistics conceal a disagreement over how to define

the situation of the family in America. If most families are broadly «traditional» in the sense that they are headed by two married adults who share in some combination of earning income and caring for children, public policies might support this pattern by child allowances and other encouragements for mothers to remain in the home during the earliest years of their children's lives. If, on the other hand, marriage and shared child-rearing are no longer the norm, it is time, as some feminists argue, to discard such terms as «single-parent family» as implying that this is an abnormal condition. [60]

In view of the growing recognition of the importance to the health of society of how well its families function, however, both ends of the political spectrum are now stressing their preferred remedies to family dysfunction.

> Liberals and conservatives used to talk about values and character in very different ways. Conservatives would extol their singular importance, and liberals would worry that rhetoric about values and character was being used as a cop-out by those who would not acknowledge the need for government programs. Today people with widely different ideologies can meet on the common ground that the family is central, but, to assure that children grow into sturdy adults, the family needs to be buttressed by social institutions, including churches, schools, community agencies — and government. [61]

In view of the controversy during the Carter Administration (1977-1981) over any definition of «the family» that seemed to imply that there was any norm for how a family should be composed, [62] it is interesting to note the concession of an essay intended to set the tone for the next Democratic Administration, in 1993, that «a large body of evidence supports the conclusion that, in the aggregate, the intact two-parent family is best suited to the task of bringing up children.» [63] It is true that the authors went on quickly to stress that «this does not mean that all single-parent families are bad or dysfunctional,» but it is hard to distinguish this statement from that of influential Republican William Bennett, speaking of his own single-parent mother, that

> it should be obvious — it was obvious to me — it was obvious to my mother — that it is much harder for one parent to raise a child than it is for two. ... No, there is no shame, there is no second-class status, in raising a child by oneself. There is honor for those who can do it well. But we must say too that a husband and wife raising children together is preferable to a mother or father doing the job alone. It's better for the child, it's better for the parents. This is not something we can be properly neutral about. [64]

Assertion of the normative character of the «traditional» family is by no means accepted in elite circles, and has indeed come under new challenge by those calling for equal status for same-sex relationships; Bennett was too optimistic in asserting that «once again we can talk about the merits of traditional family life and the value of individual effort without being mocked, without being regarded as somehow acting out of fashion.» He is on more solid ground, however, in claiming that «nine out of ten Americans say they would welcome more emphasis on traditional American family ties.» [65]

Most conservative thinkers welcome the participation of women in the workforce in the full range of occupations, since

> in a long life expectancy, low birth rate society, there really is no serious alternative to major lifelong working careers for most women. The career of full-time wife, mother, and homemaker has simply ceased to be an adequate life project. [66]

The point of disagreement is whether women should work while they have young children, using all-day child care rather than minding their children at home, or whether they should be encouraged to postpone career advancement for a few years by measures that reduce the financial and long-term impact of doing so. James Coleman and other sociologists have suggested that the latter would be a wise public investment in the «social capital» that children need to succeed in school and in life. [67]

It is ironical that, only weeks after an election campaign in which Republican Vice President Quayle was widely mocked by his opponents when he criticized the fictional Murphy Brown for choosing to have a baby out of wedlock, the policy paper on families published by a policy institute closely associated with incoming President Clinton insisted that

> public programs cannot fully substitute for healthy families; community responsibility can supplement, but cannot replace, parental responsibility. ... the goal of government should be to reinforce and stabilize families while enhancing their child-rearing capacity. ... Is it not time for [an] ... intense campaign against teenage pregnancy and out-of-wedlock birth and in favor of marriage?[68]

Liberals assure themselves that «to want to support that kind of family is *not* to discriminate in favor of one `life-style' over others [God forbid!]. It is to lend a hand to the *only* institution in society whose main purpose for existing is the full-time nurturing of children.» [69] Conservatives need no such rationalization to support their preference for traditional families.

There is thus a growing consensus that *something* should be done to help families, though whether this should be a national day-care system, as progressives urge, or the conservative proposal of tax incentives for mothers to care for their own young children continues to prevent development of a vigorous policy. Underlying the disagreement is a fundamental philosophical orientation toward the appropriate role of government:

> American conservatives face their bedrock truth: the knowledge that governments can damage or destroy families, but cannot save them. ... the fate of the family lies in the cultural realm — the churches, the schools, literature, and the arts — where enduring values and normative expectations either find sustenance, or disappear. [70]

Conservatives tend to agree with Nisbet, that government efforts to «save the family» tend to put the family in even greater danger. [71] The public policy imperative from this perspective is to identify and eliminate those government practices (the present welfare system is often cited as a prime example) that encourage family-breakup, discourage marriage, or weaken the link between sexual activity and marriage as government-sponsored sex education programs in schools appear to do.

> By offering free contraceptives with the «backup» of free abortion, reinforced by values education stressing that these constitute the essence of «sexual responsibility,» the government programs have enormously reduced the cost of sexual activity among the unmarried young. It would be surprising indeed if sexual activity did not increase under these circumstances, as by all available measurements it has. [72]

Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus have pointed to the significance of the «mediating structures» (including families) through which individuals are connected to the wider society and protected from *anomie* and from the potentially totalitarian claims of the State. [73] They argue persuasively that, minimally, «public policy should be designed to do as little damage as possible to the mediating structures,» and preferably «should utilize mediating structures as much as possible» to achieve legitimate social goals. [74]

> Many of the problems of the modern welfare state would be greatly mitigated, if not eliminated, if public policy would favor and even utilize these mediating structures to a greater extent, instead of ignoring or even running over them, as has been the tendency of the liberal state. [75]

From this perspective, it is important not only to seek to prevent further erosion of the family but also to restore to the family something of its earlier function as the primary means and locus of education.

It is one thing to agree that public policy should seek to support families, and quite another to urge that schools take on the support of families as a major aspect of their mission. There are two primary dangers inherent in such an assignment of responsibility. The first is that it could further weaken the capacity of schools to carry out their primary function of providing instruction in those academic skills that are essential to a modern economy and society; school staff are already too distracted by the conflicting demands placed upon them. The second is that there is an inherent danger in encouraging government to use schools as an instrument of social policy, particularly when that entails seeking to influence the attitudes and beliefs of pupils. [76]

Despite these cautions, there are compelling reasons for teachers and those who set educational policy to think seriously about how schools affect the health of family life. There are at least three ways in which schools could make a positive contribution, without further distorting their own primary mission of instruction.

Briefly, these are (a) by making sure that they convey to pupils the message that family life is important, (b) by showing respect for the right of parents to make decisions about their children, and (c) by fostering linkages and collaboration between the school and the home.

The Importance of Family Life

Philosopher George Santayana wrote in 1934 that

> while the sentiments of most Americans in politics and morals . . . are very conservative, their democratic instincts and the force of circumstances have produced a system of education which anticipates all that the most extreme revolution would bring about. And while no one dreams of forcibly suppressing private property, religion, or the family, American education ignores these things, and proceeds as much as possible as if they did not exist. [77]

This view has penetrated even into elementary school textbooks, as psychologist Paul Vitz found in his study conducted in the mid-1980s:

[In forty social studies texts for grades 1 - 4] there is not one text reference to marriage as the foundation of the family. Indeed, not even the word marriage or wedding occurs once in the forty books [in an American context]! ... neither the word husband nor wife occurs once in any of these books. ... Public school officials may constantly bemoan teenage pregnancy and the frequency of illegitimate children, but their own textbooks begin fostering the notion of family without marriage in grades 1 to 4. ... Not one of the many families described in these books features a homemaker — that is, a wife and mother — as a model. ... There is not one citation indicating that the occupation of mother or housewife represents an important job, one with integrity, one that provides real satisfactions. ... there is not one portrayal of a contemporary American family that clearly features traditional sex roles. [78]

The intense controversy in New York City last year over a curriculum which, in the name of «multiculturalism,» sought to introduce schoolchildren to positive images of non-traditional families based upon gay and lesbian relationships was heightened by the resentment of many parents in traditional marriages who did not see their own «life-style choices» positively reflected in the curriculum.

Even what was traditionally the educational bulwark of «family values,» the home economics program that is part of the curriculum in most American secondary schools (usually for female students who are not college-bound but increasingly for young men as well) has succumbed to the anxiety to be up-to-date so characteristic of American education The American Home Economic Association officially «defines the family unit as two or more persons who share resources, share responsibility for decisions, share values and goals, and have commitment to one another over time ... regardless of blood, legal ties, adoption, or marriage.» [79]

The author once reviewed twelve books on how to teach moral education in schools, and found not a single positive reference to the role of families or to the need to reinforce the lessons that they have already been teaching through family norms and practices. The general tone of these books was that children need to be shown a better way than that of their parents.

Such messages, whether overt or conveyed through what is not said, undermine the respect of children for their families and their motivation to form healthy families of their own. «Rarely does the notion prevail that families are the first and primary educators whose effects should not be undone, but elaborated on, enriched, and expanded by schools.» [80]

Allan Bloom argues persuasively, in a posthumously-published study, that a primary goal of the education of adolescents should be to develop in them a longing for the ideal of sexuality expressed within a committed, permanent relationship.

> A cultured person is one in whom the sexual desire has been transformed in such a way that it longs for the true, the good, and the beautiful as seen in a single permanent partner with the orgasm as the fulfillment and reward of such longing. [81]

This is a timely reminder that school staff should take care to ensure that what they teach and what they do not teach does no damage to the families of their pupils or to the attractiveness of family life. Some widely-used forms of sex education, mentioned above, are an example of how schools can misguidedly give the message that responsible sexuality is a matter of hygiene rather than of the commitment that makes healthy family life possible.

Officials with responsibility for family issues from 21 European nations, in 1987, placed «the transmission of values» on an equal footing with «the social, physical and emotional protection of children, and called for schools to promote the stability of family life. [82] This would be an appropriate policy goal for American education as well.

The Moral Dignity of Parents

It is not enough to talk in school about the importance of families, if the educational system is so organized as to deny parents the opportunity to make significant decisions. The present system of assignment of pupils to schools in the United States is almost unique among the nations with universal schooling in its refusal to acknowledge the right of parents to choose schools for their children. This right is spelled out explicitly in the major international covenants protecting human rights. [83] For example, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) states that «parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.» The nations signing the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1966) agreed «to have respect for the liberty of parents ... to choose for their children schools, other than those established by public authorities, which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the State and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.» Similarly, the First Protocol to the *European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* provides that «in the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions» (article 2).

The same principle is enshrined in the recently-adopted constitutions of a number of post-communist societies. [84] For example, the new Bulgarian Constitution (1991) stipulates that «the raising and the education of children until they come of legal age is a right and an obligation of their parents; the state provides assistance» (article 47, 1). That of Estonia (1992) provides that «parents shall have the final decision in choosing education for their children. ... The provision of education shall be supervised by the state» (article 37). Croatia (1990) provides that «parents shall have the duty to bring up, support and school their children, and shall have the right and freedom independently to decide on the upbringing of children» (article 63). Hungary states in its new Constitution (1989) that «parents shall have the right to choose the type of education they wish to ensure for their children» (article 67, 2).

John Coons has argued eloquently that American education frustrates parents in exercising this right and duty:

> From top to bottom its structure effectively frustrates the choices of parent and child which the law protects in every other realm of life. Parents choose shoes, food, games, hours and every other important feature of a child's life. In education this liberty is not only opposed but squelched. Ordinary families with all their rich variety in culture and values are forced to accept the form, content and ideology of a politically dictated education.   Public schools, as presently organized, chill the traffic in ideas that is generated by free family choices in every other area of life. Though they vest in the mantle of freedom and diversity, in fact they flout this deepest purpose of the First Amendment. [85]

Some assert that government should make the decisions about the education of children because some parents — and poor parents in general — are incapable of doing so and indeed simply don't care. [86] Of course there are some inadequate and irresponsible parents, of every social class, and society must have ways of intervening to protect individual children from situations of clearly-established abuse and neglect, including that of their need for an education. But policy for the great majority should not be guided by the need to deal with exceptional cases.

Poor parents, perhaps more than others, need to be given opportunities to make important decisions about the well-being of their children; it is the responsibility of policy-makers to ensure that, so far as possible, there are no educationally bad choices. [87]

Research that we have carried out recently for the U. S. Department of Education shows that urban parents of all racial/ethnic groups are keenly interested in making school choices for their children, and use a variety of

means of obtaining information and reaching conclusions about which schools would best meet their needs. [88]

Freedom to choose schools in the United States is guaranteed by the 1925 ruling of the Supreme Court in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (268 U.S. 510) that

> the fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the state; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations.

It is high time that this «theory of liberty» is made the basis for how pupils are assigned to schools in the United States. The major impediment — besides the dislike of educators for the idea of competition among schools, with its implication that some will be more highly valued by parents than others — is the disrespect for the family which is unfortunately widespread among professional educators. Children from middle-class families are easy to teach, it is often said, though their parents may be too pushy and interfere with what educators alone are capable of deciding. Children from working-class or poor families are perceived as difficult, and their parents as not caring about education — which may be just as well, given the widespread belief that schools can't be expected to do much with their children.

What parents *are* is often discussed, and valued or devalued according to whether it is perceived as supporting what teachers *do*, but what parents themselves *do* is seldom considered to be of much importance. Educators have a tendency to a kind of moral imperialism, seeing themselves as uniquely qualified and appointed to define what education is and how it will take place, adapting how they work to suit the essentially passive raw materials supplied by compulsory attendance laws, collecting «little plastic lumps of human dough from private households and [shaping] them on the social kneadingboard.» [89] If challenged, educators might suggest that the patient does not tell the surgeon where to cut.

While it is an exaggeration to refer to «the family agenda of the left» as being to «convince the public that the training and development of children are far too important to be left to the whims and errors of parents,» [90] as does one prominent evangelical, it is impossible to deny an unthinking tendency in this direction on the part of the National Education Association and other organizations of the education establishment.

Children are not well served by policies that treat their parents as incapable of responsible decision-making. The message conveyed by a system in which parents are expected to be passive is that responsible choice, the expression of character or virtue, is exercised *for*, not *by*, the individual: a lesson which encourages personal irresponsibility. An opportunity is thereby lost to engage parents and their children together in making decisions whose consequences are immediately apparent to both.

If we have learned anything about equal educational opportunity in these past two decades it is that it is available only in schools that are *effective*, and that effective schools are marked by order, a sense of purpose, and the continual cultivation of self-discipline. Often I have found that effective urban schools are led by a rather old-fashioned principal, often an African-American educated in the South or a Latino educated outside the continental United States, with high expectations for the achievement and the behavior of the students and a disinclination to accept excuses based on race or poverty. Lightfoot notes as «one of the great mistakes of the sixties»

> when large numbers of humanistic, liberated teachers, mouthing the rhetoric of nontraditional education, invaded black communities. They sought to establish loving, caring, familial relationships with their young black charges. Their goals were often laudable and worthy. Their hearts were more or less pure. But their hippy clothes, missionary zeal, progressive pedagogy, and playful style offended black parents who wanted a more rigorous traditional education that focused on the basis skills of reading and writing. In fact, if ghetto schools are going to begin to be responsive to parental values it may be that the authority structures, pedagogical modes, and educational goals of schools will need to become more traditionally defined with visible and explicit criteria established for child competencies. In the King School in New Haven, when parents became increasingly involved in the schooling process, they negotiated with teachers for more structured and orderly classrooms, and emphasized the rigors of academic work. [91]

It is such teachers and principals that urban parents support most strongly, sensing that they share the parents' own aspirations for their children. Schools characterized by a shared sense of purpose, a sort of educational covenant, schools that have been freely chosen by families, can help in turn to develop in families a sense of the significance of their own efforts. Schools can help families to act more effectively by operating as though what families — whatever their social class — do is significant.

Normative judgments are the essential stuff of successful family life, and of successful education. They cannot be avoided. Neither can they be

imposed by the state. That is why only a system of schooling based upon family choice of schools would permit the uninhibited expression of particular angles on the truth within schools that have been freely chosen.

A policy supporting parent choice of schools is one way in which government can not only validate the decision-making of parents but can also make room within the educational system for differing views of what education is all about. In a society as divided over cultural issues as is the United States, that may be the only basis for a truce in the «culture wars» which divert so much energy from the real work of schools. It may be a hopeful sign that, according to a recent article in *The New Republic*, «school choice is rising to the top of the family values litany for conservatives who lack the stomach for the culture war.» [92] It remains to be seen whether the support that presidential candidate Clinton expressed for diversity and choice among schools will be reflected in the decisions made by President Clinton in face of the opposition of the National Education Association and other powerful groups.

Families and Schools Working Together

This is not the place for an exhaustive discussion of strategies to link home and school in a partnership that will make both stronger and more effective in educating children. [93 - 94] It will suffice to mention briefly four aspects of such linkages.

First, parents can be helped to carry out activities at home that will stimulate and support the cognitive and social development of their children. [95]

> Herbert Walberg found increases in the reading scores and intellectual skills of young black children in a large urban school where parents, teachers, and children drew up written contracts of participation and responsibility in the educational and schooling process. [96]

The HIPPY program working with pre-school children and their parents in Israel, the Netherlands, and other countries, and the intergenerational literacy program which is a central element of Boston University's work with the extremely poor city of Chelsea are examples of such interventions to strengthen the family's educative mission. The simple but powerful project in Belfield and Haringey, depressed multi-racial urban areas in England, asked parents to listen to their children read aloud each day, with remarkably positive results. Reginald Clark reached the same

conclusion from his study of the educational strategies used by poor families in Chicago.

> These Black parents also need practical training and information programs that pass on tools which help prepare children for specific classroom lessons. These parents need formal preparation for understanding how instruction proceeds in the school. By learning exactly what education procedures they can use in the home, parents will feel more confident in their ability to improve the quality of their children's classroom learning experiences. [97]

From a policy perspective, perhaps the most significant aspect of these initiatives is that they take poor and immigrant families seriously and treat them with dignity. It is also important to note that these initiatives differed from early childhood programs that seek to remove poor children from the influence of their homes, perceived as the course of their problems; they stress

> the importance of the institution *recognising* the family's role. The effectiveness of early education programs depends on family interaction (such as the amount of time parents spent with children or the parents' shared activity with the child). In fact, programs that introduced children's groups too early actually lowered children's achievement. It seemed that over-emphasis on groups gave parents the impression that their role was less than essential, and that the really effective agent was the professional expert in the group situation. As a consequence, parents reduced their own involvement in the education of their children. This resulted in falling measures of children's learning. [98]

There is considerable research evidence that «many important proeducational resources and practices are available to all parents, regardless of income or class.» [99] It should be stressed that «all parents» includes those raising children alone and those who have never been married; it is not the intention of this essay to argue that only traditional families based upon a stable marriage can be adequately supportive of children.

Second, parents can be involved directly in the work of the school, either as volunteers or as paraprofessional staff. Such involvement may be particularly helpful in schools that serve a large number of immigrant or language minority minority children; the parent in the school can both help to bridge the language and culture gap between home and school, and also serve as a model of how the children themselves may one day be a valued participants in the activities of the host society.

within the staff of the school; this is one of the respects in which non-public schools seem to have an advantage over public schools, for which such decisions are usually made at a higher level, through a political or a bureaucratic process. Public «schools of choice,» as in the extensive programs developed in sixteen Massachusetts cities, are more likely to have clearly-defined profiles because of their need to persuade parents to entrust their children, when they have other options. [104]

It would be difficult to over-emphasize the importance of obtaining a high degree of confidence on the part of parents for the work of the school. Unfortunately,

> educational systems tend to create separate worlds in which students and school, on one hand, and family and society, on the other, give rise to an excessively fragmented learning process, sometimes leading to dysfunctions and failures. [105]

This is to deprive the school of a powerful support for its educational mission, so well described by Coleman in several recent studies, the community of support formed by parents who have confidence in the school and in each other as well, because they have freely chosen the schools and have worked together to support its mission. [106]

Summing Up

Modern society has a tendency to move away from ascriptive identities, of which membership in traditional families is the prototype, toward identities and associations which are freely chosen. The decline of the family-as-fate (typified by arranged marriages) is probably irreversible, nor is there reason to regret an arrangement which was often experienced as oppressive. The family-as-choice can be oppressive in its own way, however, particularly when it must function within a cultural context in which the gratification of individual needs is the primary measure of value. Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas stresses the importance, for children, of being made to feel part of an on-going story, initially that of their family and then widening outward, a story that teaches what «we do» and thus places the habits that sustain virtue within a context of meaning. This has grown more difficult in contemporary American society, according to legal scholar Mary Ann Glendon:

> Neglect of the social dimension of personhood has made it extremely difficult for us to develop an adequate conceptual apparatus for taking

into account the sorts of groups within which human character, competence, and capacity for citizenship are formed. In a society where the seedbeds of civic virtue — families, neighborhoods, religious associations, and other communities — can no longer be taken for granted, this is no trifling matter. [107]

Surely this is the justification for treating the health of families as a concern of public policy, despite our appropriate concern about government interference in what is the private business of citizens. After all,

the public has a much greater interest in the conditions under which children are being raised than in the ways that adults generally choose to arrange their lives. European laws and policies ... routinely distinguish for many purposes ... between households that are engaged in child rearing and other types of living arrangements, [108]

Since «the institutions of civil society help to sustain a democratic order, by relativizing the power of both the market and the state, and by helping to counter both consumerist and totalitarian tendencies.» [109]

Unfortunately, among the loudest voices proclaiming the collapse of the family are those of educators and human service professionals who see this as an occasion for further expanding the role of their institutions, rather than for asking to what extent these institutions — public schooling, public housing, the welfare system, the «victim» mentality fostered by some psychological and social work interventions — have contributed to the loss of functions that has deprived family life of much of its traditional significance for family members. As Bennett has observed, «A family that has lost the conviction of its own irreplaceable mission, no outside agent can save.» [110]

Among those who have worked most creatively to link families and schools as partners is Yale psychiatrist James Comer, who argues that

the crisis that we're concerned about — that American kids don't achieve as well as European kids and some Asian kids — won't kill us because [the American students are] scoring high enough to compete. The one that will kill us is the large number of bright kids who fall out of the mainstream because their families are not functioning. [111]

The school *can* play an important role in restoring meaning to family life, and thus to helping families to function more effectively, but only if we learn to think differently about the school's mission and indeed about what sort of institution it is. We must not continue to conceive of the school as

an agent of government, serving the purposes of the wider society according to the principle that educational bureaucrats know best what is good for children, and of parents as a supporting cast whose collaboration is sought so long as they subordinate themselves to the professional definition of what is needful.

Of course there is a continuing role for professional expertise as well as for a societal concern for the schooling of each of its citizens, though the growing popularity of home schooling among parents who are themselves highly educated within the formal system suggests that the credibility of both educators and society-at-large has weakened considerably. What is needed to restore the appropriate balance is not an abdication on the part of teachers to the unassisted judgments of parents, but a more profound concept of the nature of educational expertise and how it should be put to work. Teachers who have reflected deeply about the common purposes of education and how they can best be pursued for pupils who are infinitely diverse will have no difficulty persuading parents to trust them to work in the best interests of their children. Such teachers will have no need to drape themselves in the mantle of professional omniscience, nor to mystify the learning process so that parents **can** have no part in it.

Teachers who are truly educated themselves are essential, but such teachers will need to work — indeed, will consent to work only — in schools that are communities for learning rather than branch offices of a government bureaucracy. Coleman warns that

> the changes in family and community will, as they continue, reduce further the effectiveness of schools, unless the conceptual foundations of the school — and, thus, its mode of operation — are changed in ways appropriate to the changes outside the school. ... minor changes in schools, or attempts to «improve the schools» without a reconstruction that gives them a different relation to society, will be ineffective. [112]

Self-governing schools, with charters that make learning objectives explicit and accountable to parents and to the public source of funding for meeting those objectives and at the same time prevent bureaucratic interference, can function as communities for learning in which teachers, parents, and pupils share an animating sense of purpose. Such schools flourish only on the basis of free choice by those who work in them and by those who entrust children to them since, as Coleman points out, «the conception of a child assigned by the state to a particular school is a conception that was viable when the school was an outgrowth of a homogeneous community. It is not viable for most schools today.» [113] Policies supporting such «independent public schools» have recently been adopted in Great Britain, in Russia, and in a few American states.

Does this mean, as Coleman almost seems to suggest, that schools should seek to replace the family for many children whose families are beyond rescue? Perhaps for some, though it is appropriate to close with political scientist James Q. Wilson's reminder that

> Were the family the mere social convention that some scholars imagine, it would long since have gone the way of cottage industries and the owner-occupied farm, the inevitable victim of the individualizing and rationalizing tendencies of modern life. ... It is not one of several alternative life-styles; it is not an arena in which rights are negotiated; it is not an old-fashioned and reactionary barrier to a promiscuous sex life; it is not a set of cost-benefit calculations. *It is a commitment.* [114]

Most parents are still prepared to make that commitment; public policy should sustain them in it by affirming in deeds as well as words its profound importance.

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SUMARIO: ESCUELA Y CRISIS DE LA FAMILIA.

Hay una extendida preocupación actualmente en los Estados Unidos en relación con el debilitamiento de las estructuras familiares tradicionales y el continuo aumento de las familias monoparentales, particularmente, pero no de modo exclusivo, entre las de orígenes afro-americanos. A pesar de los intentos que realizan ciertos círculos por presentar este creciente tipo de estructura familiar como el desarrollo de nuevos «estilos de vida alternativos igualmente válidos», existe la fuerte evidencia de que, en realidad, causan un importante daño a los niños y adolescentes. El sistema educativo puede ayudar a robustecer las familias si: a) presenta el compromiso matrimonial desde una perspectiva más positiva de como hoy lo está haciendo; b) respeta el derecho de los padres para tomar decisiones sobre la elección de la escuela de sus hijos, y c) anima a establecer lazos de unión sólidos entre la familia y la escuela.

KEY WORDS: FAMILY. PARENT. CHOICE. CURRICULUM.