

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

FA15

WHAT AM I DOING ABOUT EDUCATION?

Michael Gove has been the Education Secretary in the current coalition government for just over two years. We might well ask how well he is doing and what he has achieved. Well, for example, we are probably all aware that he is pushing hard for more academies and free schools because he believes these to be a key route to higher educational attainment for our children. Such schools, he contends, free up the pathways to greater success by allowing parents and high-calibre educators and leaders to demand, define and introduce higher standards, adopt effective practices and remove unnecessary bureaucratic restraints. He is also keen to promote change in what our children learn and how they are taught.

We could chart the successes and failures of Mr Gove over his years of office, examine his philosophy, assess his praxis and form a view of his tenure. Is the educational climate better now than it was? Are our children on the whole better educated? Has examination performance improved? (Be careful not to conflate the last two questions). There is, however, a more pressing and uncomfortable question: what am I doing to improve the education of our children?

The Bible, when assigning responsibility, always puts the emphasis first on me. If I am going to assess others, then let me first ask how I stand. Onerous and uncomfortable as this kind of self-reflection may be, it has to be carried out. This article will, hopefully, challenge us to examine what we are currently doing and provide stimulus, encouragement and practical guidance to do more.

Education is a battleground of ideologies. As you take your children to school, drop them off, chat to other parents or perhaps attend the school play or discuss your child's performance at a parents' evening, there may be little evidence of ideological conflict. The battle has gone on for decades at high levels – among educationists, politicians, militants and ideologues – and what we see at street level are the consequences which permeate, almost imperceptibly, into our everyday lives.

What commands attention is not just the effectiveness of the core process and the content of teaching and learning, but the moral and ethical climate in which this process is carried out and

the effect this climate has on the nature and character of our children. As our children and future society are in large measure the products of this system, this is therefore an issue for all of us, not just for those of us with children of school age.

So what are we going to do? What we will do, or what we are willing to do, is in great part determined by our belief in the significance of the problem, our view of the effectiveness of our participation and any relevant experiences we have had.

The significance of the problem is hard to perceive in real time and is best understood by reviewing relevant history. Although a little dated, the book *All Must Have Prizes* by Melanie Phillips (ISBN: 0316641200, 1996) provides a useful analysis of the educational decline over recent decades. She examines front-line teaching standards and educational achievement and then burrows deep into the past to unearth the wider moral and social changes which generated the current educational climate. *Lessons in Depravity* by E S Williams (ISBN: 0952993953, 2003) specifically addresses sex education in schools and its links with the ideology of the sexual revolution, contrasting it with the biblical view of sexuality in the context of marriage and family. This issue is arguably the most pronounced and significant of the social conflicts which currently exist between Establishment thinking and evangelical values.

In both books we see how the transition from biblical morality (external authority) to liberal individualism (internal authority) is worked out in the classroom through the values passed down to our children. Those values are largely and increasingly derived from secular thinking, with its origins in the 18th century, and decreasingly based on biblical principles and standards. The pivotal role of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) in rationalising and marketing this secular approach is illustrated by the permanence of the ethical mantra – the greatest happiness for the greatest number; and the moral benchmark – anything goes provided that it does no harm to others. As a consequence, generations have grown up, and will grow up in the post-modern mêlée, with little or no sense of fundamental biblical rights and wrongs and largely incapable of working out good moral approaches based on solid ethical principles. They will think and act in accordance with secular philosophy and their character will reflect its values – me first, autonomously right, the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Thankfully, God's common grace is at work through our Christian legacy and there is not yet a complete divorce between secular practice and biblical thinking. Indeed, we might detect a resurgence in some educational quarters of traditional, biblically traceable values such as discipline, order and respect, in reaction to the fact that the educational dalliances of past decades have proved unproductive. Consequently, the state of our schools and society is not as bad as it could be. Overall, however, downward drift is likely to continue unless we (all of us) act.

This tide of liberalism can seem overwhelming and inevitable, leaving many Christians feeling impotent to act against it. This is a good starting point. Biblical history continually takes us to this point and shows us what we have to do. We have to take the problem to our Lord, recognise our weaknesses and needs, pray about them, and act. The infinitesimally small contributions that we

can make can be translated into substantial influences under God's hand. Having a sense of the magnitude of the task and the relevance of our contribution, we can now focus on some specifics.

We need to consider our effectiveness, as mentioned earlier. Some of us may think a cause is not worth pursuing unless we judge that we can make a substantial impact. Unfortunately, this is a perspective often driven by ego and pride. Others of us will think of effectiveness in terms of 'effort in, value of product out.' Measuring 'product out' is often extremely difficult and is subject to substantial 'measurement error' when calibrated from our finite, earthly perspective. For many of us, our contributions are like drips in a June deluge and will go largely unnoticed this side of heaven. For all of us, our contribution by any scale, even if it had an impact upon the whole world, would be so small that it would be incomparable to God's. We are co-workers with Christ, not equal partners. Of course we must evaluate our gifts and exercise them wisely, matching them to the potential tasks before us. Not doing so is wrong and lazy. However, we must guard against over-analysis that can lead to paralysis. Paul, in uncomplicated fashion, urges: 'Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good' Galatians 6:10 (NIV2011). This demands that we think more of opportunity than effectiveness and more of doing good than doing big. Have we opportunity?

In the remainder of this article, let me outline some of the opportunities open to you. First though, there are some golden rules. Most importantly, in order to make the best of the opportunities which will come along, you will need to appreciate the school environment and adopt the attitude of a servant. Always ensure that you engage with the school supportively, with the clear purpose of helping and seeking to understand the difficulties, issues and distinctives which characterise the school, its teachers and teaching. Do not make it your primary objective to further a particular cause, whether the interests of your own child or a specific biblical aim. If you pursue the former you will be spotted straight away and lose credibility; if the latter you will become frustrated and give up early because of lack of progress.

- a) If you are a parent of schoolchildren, you have a number of opportunities to engage with your school. There will be formal contact with teachers to discuss your child's educational development. Use these not only to understand how your child is progressing (or not), but also to build a rapport and constructive relationship with teachers. Identify positive aspects of teaching that you can genuinely compliment. You will then be listened to with more sympathy, and will be more likely to influence a change when you identify concerns and issues.
- b) There will be ad hoc meetings at which schools will, for example, want to obtain feedback from parents on proposed changes or to seek greater engagement with their community. Such meetings are often poorly-attended and the parents who do go to them stand out. You can generate considerable credibility by making the effort to attend, taking opportunities to highlight genuine areas for positive feedback as well as pointing out areas of concern when appropriate.

- c) Schools are busy places and are grateful for any help parents and others can give. You may not see yourself as a fund-raiser or as an organiser of social events but Parent Teacher Associations contribute to the life of the school and provide opportunities to exercise an influence for good. A school will be much more sympathetic to a critical view or a challenging question raised by parents who have shown a desire to help the school, rather than by those who appear to be interested only in their own child. This does not mean that the school will not act well in responding to self-interested parents – only that parents with a wider interest are more likely to influence change for good. Remember that at best we are talking about small droplets of influence.
- d) If he is not already doing so, encourage and support your pastor or other speakers in your church to offer to take school assemblies. Pastors will rarely have the opportunity to preach in schools, but there is a dearth of even basic biblical facts. Opportunities to deliver such facts in an age of biblical ignorance are particularly valuable.
- e) Do you work in a local business? There is great interest in establishing links between schools and local businesses, leading to opportunities for involvement in school projects, sponsorship, and information and teaching sessions. Such links can create opportunities to be an influence for good.
- f) School governance is a well-established route into getting involved in a school. It is open to parents and non-parents alike, since a governing body has in many cases vacancies for parents and community and local authority representatives, as well as school staff, and foundation governors for church and similar non-community schools. Over the years, governance has become increasingly professionalised and carries a great deal of responsibility, the school's performance being ultimately attributable to the governors. Although individual governors are generally protected from personal liability as a result of the governing body's decisions and action, provided they act honestly, reasonably and in good faith, some governing bodies have been openly criticised.

Years ago, it was relatively easy to become a governor, but now – particularly for good or outstanding schools – governors will increasingly need to be able (for roles other than parent governors where other parents may vote for you simply out of popularity or other reasons) to offer skills or abilities which will clearly add value to the governing team. If you establish yourself as committed, useful and available, many good heads and their leadership teams will welcome your contribution and be open to your constructive comments and suggestions.

- g) Where existing schools do not meet their needs, the present government is particularly keen to encourage parents to set up their own schools under the free schools system. This is a huge commitment of time and effort, and a potential battleground with those who oppose any form of education not controlled by the State. However, it is also one where

opportunities to influence for good are expected to be much greater because the influence can be more direct and less fettered.

This article started by pointing out that a decline in societal values away from biblical principles and truths is reflected in the way our children are taught, and in their character and consequent behaviour. It then called for Christian parents to become more involved in schools and to use the available opportunities to 'do good.' In many prosperous, middle-class areas of the country, some of the deleterious effects of secular philosophy are masked by ostensibly good behaviour, attention to discipline and high academic and extra-curricular achievement. We must not be lulled into complacency by this false picture, but look beneath the surface and act.

In other parts of the country, communities and schools starkly exhibit the retreat from biblical norms, as the new head of OFSTED, Sir Michael Wilshaw, indicated in a recent speech to the National College of School Leaders:

'We need to bring back ambition to communities that lack aspiration. Schools too often have to try to pick up the pieces where society has failed.'

I know many of you try to do so with teachers who are great role models. They set high standards and care about their pupils. But schools simply can't plug all the gaps left by society's failings, nor should we expect them to do so.

Nobody has ever accused me of being soft on the shortcomings of schools. But equally, I don't think we should be soft on the shortcomings of our society – and under-estimate the impact that they have on schools and their pupils.

Of course, most parents today want the best for their children. They do what they can to support their children's learning, and make real sacrifices in the process. But too many children and young people come to school against a backdrop of lost standards, values and ambitions. And while some social indicators have improved, few could ignore the continuing challenge of, for example:

- *teenage pregnancy rates, which may be at their lowest level in four decades, but with 35,000 a year remain extremely high by international standards;*
- *crime generally may have fallen, but 300,000 young people a year are arrested or cautioned;*
- *400,000 children miss a month of school through truancy each year;*

but perhaps the biggest impediment to aspiration is that one in six children lives in a household where no adult is working.

And these figures are exacerbated by family breakdown, as one in five children has only one parent at home, usually a mother struggling to do her best for her child.

For boys, the absence of a regular and stable male influence can be particularly difficult. Dads need to see bringing up children as the right and manly thing to do.

All these issues can have a direct impact on education outcomes.

Young people need boundaries set by parents and society, not just by their schools. They need more stability at home and more security in their communities if they are going to succeed.'

Clear speeches like this immediately reveal that the problem is much wider and deeper than it sometimes appears. We need to bear in mind, however, that few of us are called to change the world. As co-workers with Christ, he will use our efforts, small though they may seem to us, as he sees fit. Our responsibility is to keep alert and take the opportunities presented to us, wherever we are.

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