

## Culture and Curriculum

By Bryan Lynch

“The medium is the message” stated Marshall McLuhan. That is, the way an idea is presented or delivered may often communicate more powerfully than the content of the message itself. Following McLuhan, Neil Postman has written (in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*) about the impact of television on our times. He is not concerned with the foolish or salacious content of the programs, but with the assumptions television makes—and trains in its viewers—about the world. The fast-paced, rapidly changing image, the need to constantly grab attention, the lack of challenging content, all communicate to the viewer, unconsciously, that the rest of the world ought to resemble television in these ways. We see the impact in education, religion, and politics. In a similar way, the curriculum of a school greatly impacts its culture, and in turn the culture acts as a powerful, if unseen, curriculum.

Curriculum, the course of study presented to students, teaches what is important by what it presents and what it ignores; by the questions it asks and those it leaves unasked or unanswered; by what it has the students fix their minds on, or meditate on. It shapes the very intellectual and spiritual air they breathe and in the end it creates a certain kind of person. Character—or virtue—is not just a matter of didactic instruction or principles derived from reading in theology or literature. The curriculum itself teaches by its inclusion or exclusion, and by the goal it is set up to achieve.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of*

*Man*, tells us that Aristotle says that “the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought.” Education is never merely the transfer of data. It is the enculturation of values from one generation to the next. Again, as Veritas’ mission statement puts it, education is the cultivation of wisdom, virtue and godliness. Lewis writes about education as older birds showing younger

the larger impact of the culture and curriculum. Education is not a neutral process and schools are not value-neutral places. Beyond even the topics discussed inside or outside the classroom, the very culture and curriculum of the school present students with clear and lasting, although perhaps unrecognized, impressions about truth, God, and life.

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birds how to fly. A very important part of that, of course, is learning what as well as how to think. Training the mind is critical, and academic skills, along with enduring knowledge, are vital. But the training of hearts goes together with the training of minds and bodies. Learning to live well and rightly is an inseparable part of learning. The well-educated person ought to be a good person. In fact, knowledge without virtue is dangerous. The culture, then, in which a student learns, is every bit as important as what he or she learns, and is often the most lasting part of what is learned.

Those who believe that schools are neutral institutions where “facts about things” are moved from one brain (teacher) to another (student) have failed to grasp

consisting of school rules and behavioral expectations, is of critical importance to the growth of young people. How students are trained to treat one another and adults shapes them. But the curriculum itself is a silent shaper. The aim of the content is in many ways as powerful as the environment of the school, perhaps even more powerful because it is often unrecognized, assumed, and undiscussed. Rarely is the ultimate aim of the curriculum self-consciously addressed, much less how the mission of the school relates to it.

In a classical Christian school the purpose of the school is something other than social integration or job training, or even preparation for college. If a curriculum is designed to do one of these, then the message to students is: this is what matters, this is how one ought to live, not just in school but in the world in general. What

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we teach must be thoughtfully selected because it is not just content or even academic skills that are passed on but an idea about living itself. In ACCS schools, the curriculum emphasizes a core of learning that supports our mission to “cultivate wisdom, virtue, and godliness.” All students learn to sing, all study the arts, all are helped to develop as well-rounded human beings made to live out the image of God in their world. Instruction in the truths of Scripture and of the Christian faith continues throughout their school years, and not just in the theology classes. The study of math and science, of history and literature, is carried out in an orderly and coordinated way meant to help students grow in their knowledge of the world around them. Growth in eloquent speech and writing allows them to communicate these truths to others. What we hope this curriculum permanently stamps within students is that the important things of this life are an understanding of, and love for, God’s truth in its many forms, as well as the ability to explain them to others.

In many respects, what is really taught in schools is a way of thinking and living. The environment of the school—what is seen as the right way to live and treat others—is often a very lasting lesson, regardless of the important efforts of subject-area teachers. In this sense, the culture is the curriculum.

Students may, it is true, ultimately reject the implications of the culture they are imbibing. Some of us who grew up in the curriculum and culture of public schooling in the 60s and 70s have seen it for what it was and have rejected it. Yet how much was

lost or damaged along the way? What opportunities were missed because the culture we had assumed to reflect reality steered us in certain directions? And how much of the culture created by that curriculum has persisted in shaping our way of looking at the world without us even knowing it?

Christian schools must consider these things to be sure that the underlying message of the curriculum and culture is what they want. Christian parents also ought to take all this seriously into consideration when thinking about the training of their children in the “fear and admonition of the Lord.” What culture is being transferred to students in the school? What is being said—explicitly and implicitly—about what is the right way to live, about how to treat others, about how to think about God and the things of God?

The stated curriculum influences the culture of a school and in many ways the culture itself makes up a vital part of a school’s curriculum. What is taught and how, and with what assumptions about the world and our place in it, are what schools are about. And just as a curriculum varies from place to place, so will the school culture—and so will the eternal lessons students take into their souls and with them into their lives.

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