

School must maintain its integrity.

By William C. Kashatus

Last week, Friends' Central School renewed my faith in Quaker education. After serious deliberation, the school decided to expel an 11th-grade student for a private online conversation suggesting that "stupid and crazy people" be "killed off so they don't collapse our civilization."

Having been involved in difficult disciplinary matters at other Quaker schools, I know the decision was not made arbitrarily. I also know that the school and its headmaster will come under fire for being "intolerant" of a child's poor judgment or "overreacting" in the wake of the

Columbine tragedy. In fact, the power play for readmission has already begun. The student's attorney is trying to pressure the school's administration by exploiting the fact that the "conversation was not at a school and did not utilize school computers or school Internet access." He has also appealed, by letter, to the 420 families who send their children to the high school, evoking fears of wiretapping and invasion of privacy, while dismissing the conversation as nothing more than "a subject of much public debate." He's missing the point.

When headmaster David Felsen claimed that the online conversation was "completely antithetical" to the school's "most basic values," he made it clear that the decision to expel the student was nothing less than a matter of the school's moral integrity.

Integrity is a virtue that we all seem to admire but is difficult to define. Stephen Carter, a Yale University law professor, comes the closest in his recent book titled simply *Integrity*. Carter explains that the term conveys a "sense of wholeness" that can be found in the "serenity of a person or community of people who are confident in the knowledge that they are living rightly."

Critical to his argument is the understanding that integrity requires three essential steps:

- Discerning what is right and what is wrong.
- Acting on what you have discerned, even at a personal cost.
- Saying openly that you are acting on your understanding of right from wrong.

None of these steps, unfortunately, are easily applied in a society with so many competing ethical systems and uncertainty over basic values. Few people, for example, take the time to discern right from wrong, or to really think about what they value. It's so much easier to follow the crowd.

Just as difficult is to act on one's understanding of right from wrong. We seem to have a remarkable capacity to say one thing and do another. It's not that we're hypocritical, but rather that we lack the self-assurance or commitment to act on our beliefs. For a person or institution to state publicly today that they are doing what they believe to be right, even when others disagree, is perhaps most difficult.

Schools have become hostage to this kind of thinking. The politicians, businessmen and self-styled reformers who invariably run the schools have transformed them into a reflection of society itself, replete with the very same social and moral injustices.

Schools may encourage conflict resolution and responsibility to the community, but too often their efforts are compromised by market pressures — which demand greater emphasis on competition and credentialism — and the media, which constantly promote violence, rebellion and the victimization of youth.

Friends' Central clearly has a strong commitment to Quaker spiritual and educational testimonies, including nonviolence.

But Friends' Central is demonstrating institutional integrity as well as moral courage by taking a stand. Founded by the Religious Society of Friends in 1845, Friends'

Central clearly has a strong commitment to Quaker spiritual and educational testimonies. Chief among those testimonies is nonviolence. For those of us who have dedicated our lives to Quaker education, these testimonies are a way of life. We have a responsibility to model and teach those testimonies to the children their families place under our care, whether they are Friends or not.

Sometimes the lessons are painful. But they must be taught in a way that protects the welfare of the school community and shows compassion for the individual. If nothing else, this unfortunate incident will deliver the message that attending a Quaker school is *not* a right, but a privilege that demands personal responsibility, both inside and outside of the school community.

William C. Kashatus, formerly a Quaker schoolteacher, is author of "A Virtuous Education: William Penn's Vision for Philadelphia's Schools."

Philadelphia Inquirer

SATURDAY, JANUARY 15, 2000