

Remarks of Dr. Charles Glenn to TASIS Faculty, Lugano, March 2009

Dr. Charles Glenn holds doctorates from Harvard and Boston Universities, is the author of several books on educational history and policy, and has served as Deputy Commissioner of Education in Massachusetts and Dean of the Boston University School of Education, as well as an educational advisor to the European Union and several European governments. Three of his seven children have attended or worked at TASIS and he has delivered Commencement Addresses at both TASIS schools.

I am just reading a new book called *Sweating the Small Stuff*, about half a dozen American urban schools that serve poor minority pupils remarkably well. Their approaches are very different; what they have in common is that they pay close attention to the 'small stuff', to the countless details of school life that make up the powerful hidden curriculum of focused effort and mutually-respectful behavior that, in each very different case, translates the mission of the school into practice. Each rejects the idea that educators should focus on the 'important' things and that the rest will fall into place. Each school insists that everything that its students experience is important, that no neglect or carelessness must be allowed to undermine the coherence of how the school lives out its expectations.

Cris Fleming based her life's work on a certain concept of beauty that informed her whole project of education: not the Romantic beauty of Alpine precipices but the Classical beauty of balance and harmony. You know that very well because you see it all around you here in this beautiful place. But it was not a beauty only of buildings and furnishings that she sought but an ideal of what it was for young people to flourish and become all they were capable of being – more indeed in some cases than they or their parents imagined.

Plato, in what Rousseau and others have called the greatest book ever written about education, said that it should start with music, to develop harmony in the soul and in the body as well, a harmony that would be the end and goal as well as the starting point of an education worthy of the name.

In that tradition, the core ethos – the *paideia* – that informs

TASIS is the cultivation of a harmonious balance of mind and body and soul. Because of that concern for balanced development

'....where
*The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil'*

(Yeats, "Among School Children")

TASIS cultivates a climate of respect for its students, and expects in turn respect from them for the school, its teachers, and each other. (Such respect, it should be stressed, is not the same thing as acceptance of all the twists and turns of adolescence; indeed, that would not be respectful of youth or of the adults that they are seeking to become.)

That, then, as I understand it, is the tradition and the core mission of TASIS. It is important to stress, however, that it is not the only basis for a school, or for a good school. Good schools, even great schools, are built around quite varied missions and understandings of human flourishing, though I would contend that they have in common that all of them 'sweat the small stuff'. That is, all great schools not only have a clearly-expressed ethos or mission, but take care to translate it into all aspects of the distinctive character and life of the school.

One of the great advantages of private schools (and of charter schools in the US and in Alberta) is that they are free to develop fully a particular way of education, at least – and this is a significant condition – if they can persuade a sufficient number of parents to entrust their children to that vision. They can set out to satisfy some parents and their children very much while making no apologies for not being at all the cup of tea of some other parents and children. They are not forced to shoot for the lowest common denominator, what I call 'defensive teaching'.

In order to maintain the integrity of such a school – and for the sake of common honesty – there is an obligation to present very clearly to prospective parents what the school stands for, not just in the form of a general mission statement but in terms also of how the school functions in its daily life, and what it seeks to accomplish in the minds and also in the lives of its students. Some schools have drifted away from that clarity of mission in a panic about recruitment or a desire to please a wealthy donor. Such self-betrayal is fatal in the long run. For the same reason, there is an obligation to present just as explicitly to students what the school stands for – and will not stand for. Procedural fairness in student discipline is essential, but there is no appeal against what is essential to the core mission of the school.



Again for the same reason of maintaining the integrity of the school, there is an obligation to be very clear with prospective teachers about these matters – and a reciprocal obligation on the part of teachers not to accept a position in a school whose distinctive character they cannot endorse whole-heartedly. In a large public school system, teachers are bounced around from school to school on the basis of seniority and other factors; in the world of private schools, no one is obligated to work at a particular school and no one should work at one half-heartedly. This is, by the way, one of the main reasons why private school teachers, though on average paid less than those in public schools, report significantly higher job satisfaction. They are much more likely than public school teachers to report that they share with the other teachers in the school the same beliefs about education, which makes a big difference in their sense of efficacy.

European and American law recognize that the right of teachers to *Lehrfreiheit*, the freedom to teach based on one's convictions, does not include the freedom to undermine the mission of the school in which one teaches. This is why, for example, teachers in a French state school must not promote religion, while teachers in a publicly-funded French Catholic school must not criticize Catholic beliefs. The courts have referred to this as the 'duty of loyalty'. The Spanish Constitutional Court has pointed out that teaching is not a

solitary act, and that a teacher who chooses to work in a school because of its particular character would be injured in the exercise of her freedom to teach if another teacher is undermining that character. It does not violate the freedom of a teacher in a Montessori school to be expected to follow that pedagogy rather than the Steiner pedagogy, and vice versa.

This does not mean, I hasten to say, that teachers should not criticize the decisions of administrators or boards, but they should do it as necessary on the basis of the mission of the school, not attacking that mission. This issue arose in The Netherlands, when the legally-prescribed advisory councils of parents and teachers in some cases sought to change the fundamental character of schools. The *Onderwijsraad* ruled that the membership of such groups, by their very nature, come and go, and cannot usurp the role of the board responsible with maintaining the school's character over time.

Plato wrote that division and strife was the greatest evil. We are accustomed and grateful to live in 'open societies' where fundamental disagreements are accommodated and allowed institutional expression, not least in schools. The dilemma of public schools in the United States has derived in large part from their effort to accommodate every possible viewpoint, even on matters of the deepest significance, an effort which has too often resulted in a curriculum purged of much that makes education exciting. Private schools have the enormous advantage that, while welcoming honest differences of opinion, they can avoid differences that 'go all the way down'. They can do so because they are freely-chosen by parents and by teachers.

What you have at TASIS is precious: not just a lovely location and architecture, but a tradition of deep respect for harmonious beauty, and an approach to education reflecting that respect. I hope you know how unusual this is among elite secondary schools. I know from experience as a parent how often teachers believe that their role is to encourage youth – as if they needed such encouragement – to challenge what many generations have considered the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. How often teachers express a personal cynicism and communicate that, half-deliberately, to their students, sometimes in a pathetic effort to be accepted as 'one of the guys'. How few of my own teachers – mostly in high-ranked Episcopal church schools – expressed to us any personal ideals or convictions of a sort that would have caused me to consider that having such ideals and convictions, rather than a relic of babyhood to be left behind, was a part of being a fully-realized adult! I had to find such adult models elsewhere, and that is why I have tried to do better by the education of my own children, including sending one of them to TASIS. Surely it is no accident that, of all my children, she is the one who is now an inspiring high school teacher!