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**Section:** Commentary

## **PREPARE CHILDREN FOR THE TESTS OF LIFE, NOT A LIFE OF TESTS**

On Sept. 12 of this year, U.S. children awoke much older than they were the day before, a day when their country suffered unprecedented terrorist attacks in New York City and just outside Washington. Our children had experienced evil. They had seen it in a way more poignant and wrenching than the dark side of "Star Wars" or the special effects of a horror movie. Real evil has no commercials, and its chilling effects don't stop after a couple of hours. Our children have received a graduate degree in what can happen when concern for oneself and one's own interests is mixed with anger and hatred and a desire to harm others in an act of vengeance. The question now is: How will we teach them in equally powerful ways about the good—the best instincts of human nature?

Many positive lessons came their way in the aftermath of these events in the form of courage, caring, and teamwork displayed by those engaged in rescue operations. Leaders, in New York City specially, provided strong messages of reassurance and a clear dedication to constructive action, combined with overt expressions of deep sadness. Our children learned much from this about how to lead, how to care, and how to help.

But history tells us that the positive messages of tragedy do not last very long. While hundreds of thousands of people were directly affected by the terrorist acts, many millions were not. They will seek refuge and comfort in a return to their routines, as well they should. But we dare not let this moment pass without drawing an important lesson: We must educate our students for civic participation, for the development of sound character, and to understand clearly the gifts of our democratic freedom. They also need to know the responsibilities that go along with this freedom, and they need the social and emotional skills to protect, nurture, and improve our democratic way of life.

In the wake of such calamities, lessons begin when children return to school. The organization with which I am associated, the Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, urges schools to begin the school day on such occasions with a period of time for students to discuss the tragedy, to share their reactions to the images they have seen, and to relate the feelings they have had. Teachers have no way of knowing exactly, to share their reactions to the images they have seen, and to relate the students they have had. Teachers have no way of knowing exactly how their students have been affected by such disasters, or who may be having particular difficulty coping. These conversations will help them find out. Such "morning meetings" need not last long. But they are powerful statements to children that, in real life, we don't simply return to business as usual after the video images are returned off.

Having these kinds of discussions can be difficult for many teachers, but that is part of what it means to be a professional. We have seen this exemplified in New York City and Washington: Professionals do what is necessary and more when the needs are great. Job descriptions get extended. Difficult situations are confronted. And the larger system mobilizes to provide support and guidance. This is true for teachers, as well. Web sites such as those maintained by CASEL (<http://www.casel.org/>), by Educators for Social Responsibility (<http://www.esrnational.org/>), and others contain guidelines for leading classroom discussions about the nation's current tragedy.

So much of our recent focus in education has been on the academic side of the report card that we are in danger of losing sight of what many of us call "the other side." This side encompasses the skills and understandings we are seeing mobilized in response to terror. We may pretend that these skills are not as important as academic grades and relegate them to secondary status on report cards—small checklists about such matters as "comes prepared to class," "works well in groups," and "does not cooperate," along with attendance and tardiness—but are such traits of behavior any less important in real life than algebra, geometry, chemistry, and spelling grades.

We in CASEL have identified teachable skills that are essential for educating students in sound character and giving them the ability to see themselves and their learning as positive resources for their families, schools, workplaces, and communities. The list of skills makes intuitive sense, especially now, in the shadow of tragedy: knowing and managing emotions, recognizing strengths, showing ethical and social responsibility, perspective taking, respecting others, appreciating diversity, adaptive goal-setting, problem-solving, clear listening and communication, relationship-building, cooperation, negotiating and conflict-management skills, and help-seeking and help-giving. We base our findings on converging evidence from research, site visits to schools that excel in addressing students' academic, social, and emotional development, and analysis of exemplary programs for social and emotional learning.

America may well find that the terrorist of Sept. 11, 2001, we're aided by lapses in these skills among the many people with whom they came in contact on their way to accomplishing their hideous crimes. We also may find that, on the hijacked plane that crashed in the skies over rural Pennsylvania, courageous actions taken to prevent that flying bomb from reaching its target were the product of early inculcation of such skills.

In our homes and our schools, we must give children a chance to express their feelings, to realize that there is danger. Children must know that not everything that happens has a neat explanation or gets wrapped up as nicely as it seems on TV and in movies. But we also must dedicate ourselves to giving children a complete education, one rich in the social, emotional, and academic skills that undergird our democratic freedoms. And we must educate them for civic participation at every level, so that they and we come to see more committed, generous, and heroic actions as a part of everyday life, not just a reaction to crisis.

Our plans in these areas should be informed by several guiding principles:

- Caring relationships form the foundation of all learning, and the school is organized to provide these relationships for each student.
- Students function better and learn more effectively when they are encouraged to have clear, positive goals and values; when they are encouraged to manage their emotions and make responsible decisions; and when they are engaged in setting goals for their own learning, while also pursuing goals they must reach to function well in society.
- Students behave more responsibly and respectfully when given opportunities for moral action and community service.
- A challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners motivates and helps them succeed.
- The school staff must become a caring, moral community of learners, and must model as well as teach caring and moral behavior.
- The opportunity for a child to achieve moral probity and to reach social, emotional, and academic goals is enhanced when the school, the parents, and the community collaborate.

- The needs and concerns of all students, including those with special education classifications and other needs, must be fully integrated into the mainstream functioning of the school.

Now is the time to put our pledge to "leave no child behind" into its full context. We must prepare our children for the tests of life, not a life of tests.

History tells us that the positive messages of tragedy do not last very long. ... We dare not let this moment pass without drawing important lessons.

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By Maurice J. Elias

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