

Ten Commitments

Guiding Principles for Teaching Values in America's Public Schools

Altruism

Altruism is the unselfish concern for the welfare of others without expectation of reward, recognition, or return. Opportunities for acts of altruism are everywhere in the family, the classroom, the school, and the wider community. Think of examples of altruistic acts in your experience. What person-to-person and group projects, classroom and school-wide activities, and community service projects might you and your students undertake?

Caring for the World Around Us

Everyone can and ought to play a role in caring for the Earth and its inhabitants. We can directly experience the living things in our homes and neighborhoods like trees, flowers, birds, insects, and pets. Gradually we expand our neighborhood. We learn about deserts and oceans, rivers and forests, the wildlife around us and the wildlife elsewhere. We learn that we are dependent on each other, on the natural world, and all that lives in it for food and shelter, space and beauty.

Critical Thinking

We gain reliable knowledge because we are able to observe, report, experiment, and analyze what goes on around us. We also learn to raise questions that are clear and precise, to gather information, and to reason about the information we receive in a way that tests it for truthfulness, accuracy, and utility. From our earliest years we learn how to think and to share and challenge our ideas and the ideas of others, and consider their consequences. Practice asking “what next?” and “why?” and “how do I/we know that?”

Empathy

We human beings are capable of empathy, the ability to understand and enter imaginatively into another living being’s feelings, the sad ones and the happy ones as well. Many of the personal relationships we have (in the family, among friends, between diverse individuals, and amid other living things) are made positive through empathy. With discussion and role-playing, we can learn how other people feel when they are sad or hurt or ignored, as well as when they experience great joys. We can use stories, anecdotes, and classroom events to help us nurture sensitivity to how our actions impact others.

Ethical Development

Questions of fairness, cooperation, and sharing are among the first moral issues we encounter in our ethical development as human beings. Ethical education is ongoing implicitly and explicitly in what is called the “hidden curriculum” that we experience through the media, the family, and the community. Ethics can be taught through discussion, role-playing, storytelling, and other activities that improve analysis and decision-making regarding what’s good and bad, right and wrong.

Global Awareness

We live in a world that is rich in cultural, social, and individual diversity, a world where interdependence is increasing rapidly so that events anywhere are more likely to have consequences everywhere. Much can be done to prepare the next generation for accepting the responsibility of global citizenship. Understanding can be gained regarding the many communities in which we live through history, anthropology, and biology. A linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity are present in the classroom and provide lessons of diversity and commonality. We help others reach understanding about the interconnectedness of the welfare of all humanity.

Humility

We must always remember that there's a lot we don't know about the universe. There's still so very much to learn. Science will help us. But sometimes scientists discover surprising things that tell us how some of our old beliefs are false. So we need to be willing to change when our knowledge changes. A good humanist doesn't try to be sure of things that science can't show are true.

Peace and Social Justice

A curriculum that values and fosters peace education would promote the human rights of all people and understanding among all nations, cultural and religious groups. Students should have opportunities to learn about the United Nations' role in preventing conflict as well as efforts to achieve social justice in the United States. They should learn about problems of injustice including what can be done to prevent and respond to these problems with meaningful actions that promote peace and social justice and that protect the inherent human rights of everyone both at home and abroad.

Responsibility

Our behavior is morally responsible when we tell the truth, help someone in trouble, and live up to promises we've made. Our behavior is legally responsible when we obey a just law and meet the requirements of membership or citizenship. But we also have a larger responsibility to be a caring member of our family, our community, and our world. Stories and role-playing can help students understand responsibility and its absence or failure. We learn from answering such questions as: What happens when we live in accordance with fair and just rules? What happens when we don't? What happens when the rules are unjust?

Service and Participation

Life's fulfillment can emerge from an individual's participation in the service of humane ideals. School-based service-learning combines community service objectives and learning objectives with the intent that the activities change both the recipient and the provider. It provides students with the ability to identify important issues in real-life situations. Through these efforts we learn that each of us can help meet the needs of others and of ourselves. Through our lifetime, we learn over and over again of our mutual dependence.