

THE YOUTH CHARTER

HOW COMMUNITIES CAN
WORK TOGETHER TO
RAISE STANDARDS FOR
ALL OUR CHILDREN



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TO
JOSEF
AND
MARSY MITTMANN

Preface

When it comes to the hopes and dreams that you hold for your children, you have more in common with the people around you than you may realize. Beneath the sense of isolation that has divided our communities, we all share a deep well of concern for the younger generation. If we can find a way to tap into that well, child rearing can become the secure and fulfilling joy that it should be, rather than the risky and nerve-racking challenge that it has become for too many parents.

Everywhere I go, parents and teachers complain that the forces influencing children have spun wildly out of their control. How can a parent pass on good values when children are exposed to every imaginable form of sordidness through the mass media? How can a teacher pass on skills and knowledge when the popular and peer cultures discourage serious academic motivation? Other citizens, too, express concerns. How can a pediatrician, seeing her caseload bursting with

unnecessary teenage health disasters—suicide attempts, alcoholism and drug abuse, eating disorders, assaults, injuries from driving accidents—do anything effective about preventing the damage when her young patients refuse to take her warning seriously? How can a citizen, seeing his home town wracked by youth vandalism, theft, and other petty crime, stop young people from destroying his town—and their own futures—when neither the police nor the youngsters' families seem able to control the youngsters' behavior?

We must ask ourselves: *Is the world today as wholesome a place to raise children as the places where we ourselves grew up?* If we cannot answer this question with a resounding yes, we must take positive steps to create a better cultural climate for our children. The first step must be to resist feeling helpless about the social forces shaping our children's futures.

This book is about how adults who care about the future of young people—parents, teachers, community members—can regain the control that they need to raise a healthy younger generation. We can regain control by joining together around a shared set of high standards and expectations for the young. Borrowing from some recent work in education and sociology, I am calling this shared vision a "youth charter."¹

Young people today receive many contradictory messages concerning the standards they are expected to meet, and the multiple voices they hear can create a confusing cacophony of demands. Teachers encourage a student to study hard, but the child's peers think that schoolwork is dorky. A guidance counselor advocates the importance of fair play, while a sports coach insists that his players do whatever it takes to win the big game. Parents expect their child to speak respectfully, but their child's teenage television idols emanate contempt for adults—and why not, since all the storylines make adults out to be clueless nitwits? Some of a child's teachers demand achievement, service, or obedience; others proclaim that youth is a time for playfulness, freedom, avoiding stress, and building self-esteem. Youngsters search in vain to find the coherent and inspiring guidance they need for a successful transition to responsible adulthood.

The youth charter is an approach that brings together all adults who are in positions to influence young people—parents, teachers, town officials, police, clergy, sports coaches, club leaders, counselors, news media, employers—in the quest to define high community standards for youth development. A youth charter focuses on the core features of

character and competence that young people need to acquire in order to become responsible citizens.

A community youth charter, written or unwritten, identifies a community's standards and expectations for young people's behavior and creates occasions for imparting these standards and expectations to the young. It guides the younger generation toward fundamental standards of honesty, civility, decency, respect, the pursuit of excellence, courage, skill, and a sense of purpose in work. A youth charter can open new lines of communication and start productive conversations, triggering the cultivation of resources and other opportunities for youth development. Youth charters can be revised as circumstances dictate, and because they reflect each community, they vary.

Youth charters, as powerful communication devices, can help young people understand the reactions of others to their behavior. When a teacher is disappointed in a child's performance or when a police officer calls a parent about a misbehaving teenager, a youth charter can turn the emotional experience into a constructive lesson. Youth charters can provide the basis for rigorous academic standards at school. They also can provide conduits for regular feedback between parent and child and create as well healthy links between young people and the adult community. Youth charters can be critical in dealing with crises, such as a sudden incident of self-destructive behavior or a school cheating scandal. It can help a community overcome the usual blaming and finger-pointing when such crises occur.

In my usage, the youth charter has two distinct but interconnected meanings. The first meaning is the process of building youth charters through town meetings, task forces, and other conversations among parents, teachers, community members, and young people. The second meaning is the product—the actual set of standards and expectations (often unwritten) that comprises a youth charter, providing guidance for young people in all areas of their lives. Both meanings are central to the notion of the youth charter.

The process of building a community youth charter is a method for establishing the core consensus that some places have enjoyed all along, but that has waned in many sectors of our divided society. The process relies on a series of large- and small-group conversations among members of a community—meetings among parents, teachers, police, sports coaches, religious leaders, local news media producers, employ-

ers of youth, and other concerned adults. These conversations can take many forms, and their outcomes can be as diverse as our society itself. The ultimate shape of the conversations and subsequent actions must be determined from within the community. It is variable, permeable, and evolving. One community may use a youth charter primarily to promote academic achievement among its young. Another may use it to discourage drug use and drinking at teen parties. A third may focus on spirituality or community service, a fourth on how to make sports, recreation, and part-time employment into character-building activities for young people. Each community takes up its own combination of concerns, and each resolves them in its own way. In this sense, the youth charter is a kind of operating system. It makes youth programs effective, but—within a very broad set of constraints—it does not define the nature of the programs. The youth charter process opens the system up for the work that needs to be done.

A youth charter is not about just any conceivable set of standards and expectations. It reflects the basic standards of civilized living, including respect, compassion, common decency, honesty, fairness, and personal responsibility. It also promotes high standards of achievement in school and other work settings. It is *not* a values-neutral approach. In fact, if there is one thing that we have learned from educational history, it is that neutral approaches—such as extreme moral relativism—do little more than pass on to young people the cynical message that adults have no principles that they care about enough to stand by.

In this sense, the youth charter is literally what it says: a charter of specific principles to guide the raising and education of the young. This does not mean that the youth charter is a formal document, written in stone, imposed from above, or identical in all contexts. It is a set of evolving understandings, some negotiable and some steadfast, that form the basis of deliberation and action. For example, a community from time to time might reconsider the specific sanctions that it imposes to deter cheating in school or vandalism on the streets while still affirming its continuing adherence to standards of honesty and respect for public property. A youth charter arises from within a community, and it reflects the community's experiences and circumstances.

In this book, I describe both the process of building youth charters and some of the core standards and expectations that will play a role in most community charters. Young people encounter standards and expectations in multiple contexts—at home, at school, through the mass

media, on sports teams, on jobs, among friends—and so I have devoted chapters to each of these settings. My first purpose is to show how all the major influences on young people in these settings can impart high standards and lofty expectations. My second purpose is to show how all these influences can work together, supporting rather than undermining one another.

I believe that every community has the capacity to establish a useful youth charter. Indeed, every community can do so on its own, without outside experts or a grand movement. This book offers my ideas about how this could take place. I present ideas about how such efforts can be launched, what a successful youth charter might look like, and which conditions in homes, schools, and society need to be changed in order to support such an effort.

The solutions that I offer are action-oriented. They bring together all members of a community to create common standards for young people's behavior, and they offer ways to keep these standards alive in the daily behavior of the young. Key players in this effort are the adults who are in positions to promote healthy development in the young. The main beneficiaries of the effort are the young people, the future of our society. I hope that my proposals will benefit the adults at the same time as the children. By opening new lines of communication around common standards, adults not only can help young people build a sense of purpose, but they can also create a sense of community for themselves. In this way, the youth charter holds the promise of re-constituting fragmented communities around a purpose that practically all people care about: the prospects and well-being of our young.

Acknowledgments

Anne Gregory, my research associate during the past two years, has been a true partner in our fledgling efforts to start youth charter discussions in local communities. Anne's dedication and good sense have contributed greatly to whatever success we have had in the initial attempts at launching this approach. Our research assistant, Lauren Bierbaum, also deserves thanks for her excellent support during youth charter meetings and also for organizing the start of a database on youth charter outcomes.

I am grateful to Lisa Stone and Judy Jones for spearheading the first comprehensive youth charter initiative in Wellesley, Massachusetts. I thank them not only for their help in arranging town meetings and other youth charter events, but also for the encouragement that they offered us. In this regard, I also thank John Whyman, Fred Livezey, and Rita Allen for their leadership of youth charter task forces, and also Jane Davidson and all the members of DAPAC for their vital support.

The town of Wellesley has shown me what is possible when citizens dedicate themselves to the futures of young people. (In order to prevent false inferences, I wish to be clear that I did *not* have Wellesley—or any other particular town, for that matter—in mind when I wrote the fictional account of Windsor for the first two chapters. In fact, the incidents that I invented for the fictional account in Chapters 2 and 3 bear little if any resemblance to *any* specific incidents that I have observed in Wellesley.)

In Rhode Island, Mike Cerullo of Spurwink gave us some welcome encouragement, as well as an opportunity to try out the approach with a number of youth service professionals and community leaders. In New Hampshire, Jim Zeppieri of the Louis Necho Trust hosted a town meeting that provided us with early formative experience in arranging and facilitating discussion groups. I express my appreciation to both of them and to all the others who have shown interest in this approach. Any new approach is most in need of a boost in its early stages, and I am grateful to all parents, teachers, professionals, and newswriters who provided us with such a boost.

For generous personal support and advice, I give special thanks to Joe and Marsy Mittlemann, to whom this book is dedicated. I also offer thanks to Howard Gardner for the continued lift that his friendship and writings have given me and to Nancy and Mike McCaskey for their valued support and the fine examples that they are setting with their work in professional sports and in the Chicago community. Vartan Gregorian's friendship, mentoring, and moral leadership have been a major influence on the direction of my own work, and he also has shown me how an institution can be brought to life by infusing it with a spirit of community.

My intellectual debts in this book are spread across many disciplines. In addition to my usual sources from human development, education and psychology, I also have drawn from sociological theory in the tradition of Emile Durkheim and Robert Bellah. I am grateful to Professor Bellah for the time and advice that he gave Anne Colby and me in our examinations of social responsibility in contemporary society. I have learned a great deal from the writings of sociologist and educator Francis Ianni, who (to the best of my knowledge) coined the phrase "youth charter." I thank Professor Ianni for his splendid 1989 book, *The Structure of Experience*, and for two unpublished reports and manuscripts that he graciously sent to me. Yet I should state plainly that

I have interpreted the notion of youth charter in my own way and that Professor Ianni bears no responsibility for the way in which I use the concept, which I know departs from his own meaning in some significant ways.

Thanks, too, to Susan Arellano, my excellent editor; to Pat Balsfiore; to Kim Witherspoon; to my wife, Anne Colby; and to my three children, Jesse, Maria, and Caroline, who never stop reminding me that I still have a long way to go in understanding the mysteries and constant surprises of child and adolescent development.

Contents

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xv

PART ONE

THE NEED

1. WINDSOR, 1997/98 3
2. WINDSOR, 1998/99 24
3. YOUTH CHARTERS 43

PART TWO

SETTINGS FOR GUIDANCE AND GROWTH

4. GUIDANCE ON THE HOME FRONT 61
5. SCHOOL SUCCESS 90

6. BEYOND HOME AND SCHOOL: SPORTS, FRIENDS,
MENTORS, JOBS 117

PART THREE
THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

7. THE MASS MEDIA 143
8. ENABLING A DISABLING SOCIETY 169
9. GOVERNMENT: ITS PROPER ROLE 188

PART FOUR
THE METHOD

10. GUIDELINES FOR BUILDING A COMMUNITY
YOUTH CHARTER 203

- Appendix: Task Force Reports
from the Wellesley Youth Charter Initiative 221
Notes 239
Index 243

PART ONE

THE NEED

1

WINDSOR, 1997/98

The following excerpts are drawn from the diary of Frank Castor, a high school guidance counselor in the pleasant suburban town of Windsor, Ohio. Frank has worked at the high school since the mid-1980s. Before that, he served as a junior officer in the U.S. Navy, and then, for a couple of frustrating years, he tried his hand at journalism and creative writing. Frank began his high school career as an English teacher, then moved up to assistant principal, then became head of the school guidance department. The diary excerpts quoted here cover the school year 1997/98.

These excerpts tell the first part of a before-and-after story from Frank's perspective. Chapter 2 relates the second part of the story from several other perspectives in addition to Frank's. The main story line across the two chapters is as follows: During two turbulent years, a modern suburban town transforms itself from a divided collection of isolated people into a community that comes together in an effort to create a