Just as the Appalachian people have to lose their paranoia, we have to lose our fear of strongly held values.

A GROUP of parents and one school board member in the Kanawha County School District convinced themselves that: reputable English language arts textbooks threatened belief in God; impugned the sanctity of marriage; disparaged the United States; made patriotism appear foolish; portrayed ethical norms, such as respect for private property, as dependent on the situation; made deviations from correct grammar, even swearing, appear as legitimate as "Standard English"; and, through exercises in the teacher's manuals, encouraged students to openly discuss private family matters.

By September 1974, this large, diverse community, the capital of West Virginia, was polarized. The schools were stuck. The new texts had been legally adopted to meet new state guidelines, bought, paid for, and the old books had been destroyed. The protestors appeared to be unwilling or unable to compromise. Now, who was right or wrong in this tragic issue is not at question. Assessing blame will not help us understand what we want schools to do to us or for us. The question is if or how we can deal with divergent beliefs.

Americans have always had difficulty accommodating different religions. The common school movement promised to avoid religious issues and teach only the skills and factual information essential for future success. The progressive movement, which rose in protest to the lock-step, memory-based, conservative schools, promised to teach the students to solve problems so they could choose their own values more correctly. The point is neither side wanted any part of the thorny problem of what values should be taught and how it should be done. Both accommodated different beliefs by not considering them. So, organized religious groups protested that the public school was amoral, if not anti-religious. Religion crept into the schools when communities were homogeneous and parents could control the curriculum and teacher selection.

Today, our modern industrial society demands compromise and some rootlessness. With unstable communities and declining church enrollment, some institution has to reawaken a concern for morality. The schools may help here but not by preaching the McGuffey Reader. A quest for values cannot be satisfied by half-truths. Oversociologizing is equally misleading for it can be used to sidestep or denigrate deeply felt beliefs.

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concerns. Two examples appeared in the reports of the textbook protest.

First, those who attributed the book dispute to the fascist leanings of the working class or to racism overlooked the conservatism and racism of university professors and corporation executives all over America. Since suburban folk liked the modern texts and fundamentalists did not and racism is common to both, racism cannot be a sufficient reason for approving or disapproving the texts. This is not to excuse racism but to say racism and the book dispute are both conditions of our society. Ironically, the texts that were designed to increase communication and understanding between groups may reinforce racism insofar as they, like the contemporary literature they are drawn from, prefer to picture blacks as strident and militant in response to a pathological world à la Norman Mailer's White Negro rather than as decent, loving, normal people.

Second, those who explained the book dispute as a cultural conflict cannot help us understand or deal fairly with this question of values. The courts decided the books do not threaten religious beliefs. The absence of religious teachings or the consideration of diverse ethical standards is not a religion even if given the name "Secular Humanism." Analogously, the fact that the schools do not push a cultural norm but attempt to consider different cultural beliefs without favoring any one, as required by West Virginia law, cannot be interpreted to show that the schools are imposing the culture of one group on another. More important, the remedies implicit in the diagnosis of cultural conflict are unacceptable.

It would be culturecide if experts joined hands to find ways to help the Appalachian people relinquish their strong hold on family ties, faith in God, and moral certainty. . . .

In Kanawha County the books will go. A school board without strong beliefs cannot resist a dedicated group. But the protestors have alienated all but a few romantic critics of modern society who see the need for morality and direction in society. And these groups cannot get together or they regress into fascism. Only by asserting that the Appalachian natives are not yesterday's people but are exponents of the American Dream can we seek a way to resolve this dilemma which avoids the repression of isolating the dissenters, the relativism of depending on families or rapidly declining churches to preserve values, or the totalitarianism of a puritan school. The facts will support us.

Assertions that there is a culture of Appalachia comparable to a culture of poverty oversimplify differences within each group to emphasize differences between the groups. Even so, the differences found are not great. The inner direction of the Appalachian people is similar to the arrogance of social workers. The present orientation of the Appalachian people is similar to the credit cards of the middle class. Though Appalachian parents may believe the schools are spreading immorality, they do believe the schools can reverse the trend just as middle class parents saw the school as a bulwark against drug abuse.

Once seen as the painful cry of people
trapped in a technological society, the book dispute can help us find our place in our schools. For example, though the protestors are said to be anti-literature, schools may have been too willing to adopt superficial changes to answer charges that teachers were stifling creativity and imagination. The protestors picked on one textbook series which advertised itself as offering “thorough-going individualization.” Games, films, listening library, activity cards, and teacher’s manual reduce the need for planning and seem to transform the “hot” medium of books into a “cool” medium like television, more familiar to modern children. While this series may help teachers appear innovative, they cannot increase literacy, the ability to use imagination to fill in and expand ideas.

In short, totalitarianism can arise as Jacob Burkhardt and Ortega y Gasset warned, when we see groups as distinct cultural entities with their own language, values, and attitudes no one superior to another. Such relativism reinforces the fragmentation, alienation, and lack of direction of modern society. Those who selected the texts were right to say this is a land where all people can live and work together. The protestors showed us that pluralism cannot be served if traditional values are trivialized. Schools can become oppressive if they seek to avoid trouble by not making value choices and hiding behind a facade of impartiality.

We cannot live peacefully with textbook protestors or any group of militants but we cannot adopt any of their moral fervor if we encourage them to keep to themselves. Perhaps we can affirm those values we share with them, repudiate the bigotry, and encourage the free marketplace of ideas Jefferson wanted for America. The school system that takes a chance and affirms genuine pluralism with both sides interacting, maintaining the possibility of one finally dominating, searching for the truth all within limits will revolutionize education. Just as the Appalachian people have to lose their paranoia, we have to lose our fear of strongly held values.