

The Common Ground

Mose Durst
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Our middle school students at The Principled Academy just returned from a week-long trip to

Washington, D.C. For two years, the students raise money for the trip through bake sales, hot dog lunches, and other fundraising activities. The school initiated and supports this activity as part of its commitment to cooperative behavior among students. In addition to students working together for this trip, older students are reading-buddies with younger students, participate on field trips with them, and serve them lunch. Inevitably, there are competitive activities at school, but we want students to understand something about the common good, what is best for the entire school?

In recent blogs I have discussed the hyper-individualism" of our culture and the need to compensate for this by cooperative activities that lead to the common good. Authors such as David Brooks identify neighborhood projects of dedicated individuals who serve others rather than focusing on personal success. Although our country has many such caring people, my belief is that to maximize the potential of care and love, we need to begin with children and early childhood education and provide activities that allow students to understand and experience the common good.

Robert Reich, in a recent book entitled *The Common Good*, explains that "The common good consists of our shared values about what we owe one another as citizens bound together in the same society - the norms we voluntarily abide by, and the ideals we seek to achieve." The core of these ideals is often called civic education. Former justice of the Supreme Court Sandra Day O'Connor, as well as many public intellectuals, lament the lack of civic education in the schools.

Such education is more than teaching children "how a bill becomes a law". It is essentially moral or character education. Children need to learn respect, responsibility, empathy, compassion, and how to care for and love others. Children learn these virtues, or character strengths, through activities as well as academic education. Jonathan Sacks, in *The House We Build Together*, explains how from a religious point of view the ancient prophets emphasized that "society is built on moral foundation, equity, justice, loving kindness and compassion."

One need not be religious to embrace these ideals. Students can experience the meaning of these ideals by recording each day, in a gratitude journal, what they are grateful for. The Principled Academy sponsors a class-wide "Kindness and Justice Challenge". Each class posts on a large board the number of specific acts of kindness and justice they have done each day. At the end of a week, the class that has done the most acts receives an award. "We need to reinvigorate the concept of the common good," Sacks explains, "and there are endless ways to do this in a school, at home, and in a community".

Government, or the state, cannot teach us how to love our families, our neighbors, or our friends.

Our parents, our teachers, and a caring, creative community bear this responsibility. If we lack trust on this small-scale level, we cannot hope to build a healthy society. Sacks concludes his book with this final sentence: "Society is the home we build together when we bring our several gifts to the common good."



Mose Durst is an author, educator, and the former president of the Unification Church of the United States. He received a master's degree and PhD while studying English Literature at the University of Oregon. He taught at a number of colleges and currently teaches literature and history at the [Principled Academy](#) in San Leandro, California. He has published eight books including *Principled Education*, *Shakespeare's Plays*, and *Oakland, California: Towards A Sustainable City*.