Teaching as a Secular Calling

by Charles C. Holloway

Elsewhere in this issue, Charles Glenn posts a powerful warning to advocates of parental choice in American public education:

> The most painstakingly designed system of public school diversity and choice might allow teachers and other educators to design the schools of their dreams and allow parents to choose among those schools based on solid information about each, all within a framework of protection and accountability—and yet the resulting schools might largely prove uninspired carbon copies produced by educators lacking the foggiest idea of how to do anything differently.

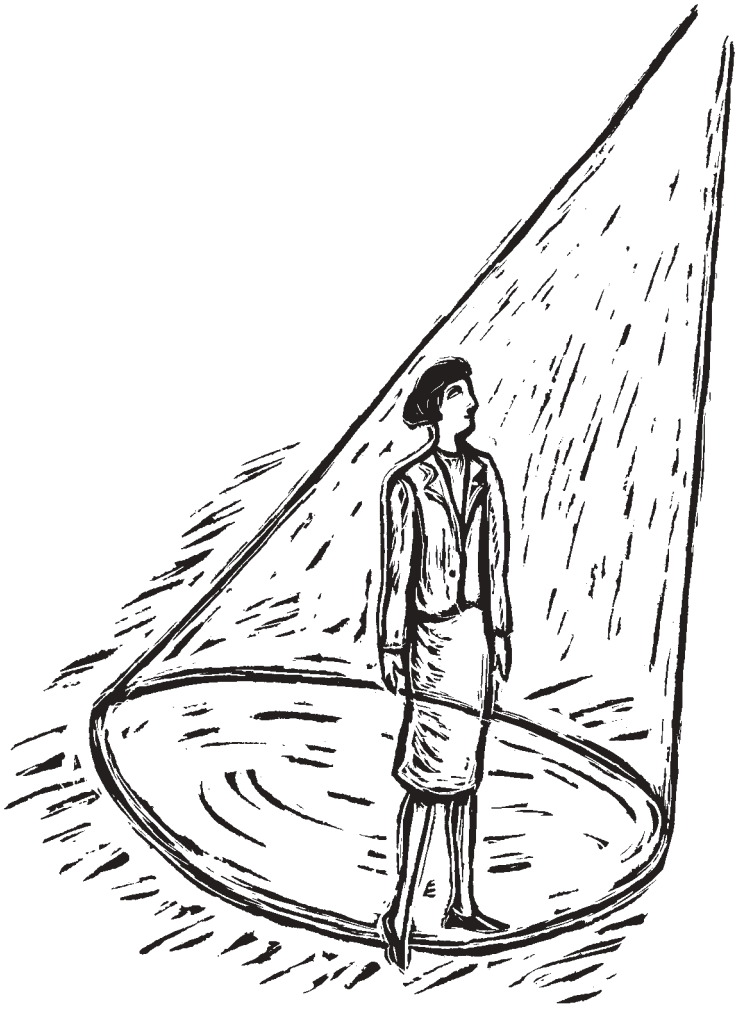
Glenn goes on to make the case that avoiding a self-defeating outcome depends on "hard thinking, thinking that grapples with complicated and delicate questions." The source of such thinking, says Glenn, cannot be teachers whose response to a challenge is "reluctant to identify meaningful aspects of the school that [require] change." He describes the teachers who can meet the challenge as those who have, in the words of Horace Mann, "a more sacred calling than the minister in his pulpit."

Although Glenn is a respected advocate of public financial support for faith-based schooling, he is evenhanded in his intellectual approach to education. He states, "It is by no means necessary that the distinctive school's mission be religious, though I suppose that every coherent way of understanding the world is in some sense religious, but its mission must be more than a bag of tricks picked up here and there and lacking any common theme."

Secular Calling versus Religious Calling

I agree with Glenn to an extent that approaches the profound, but I am concerned by how easy it is to blur the distinction between a "calling" and a "religious calling." The confusion, I think, lies in the likelihood

that teaching in a faith-based school offers a teacher of that faith a calling that is more readily identified and easier to follow than the secular calling followed by other teachers. Also in this issue, Steven Vryhof writes eloquently about the capacity of faith-based schools to create functional communities and to otherwise provide the prerequisites of a powerful calling to teachers who choose to teach there, and in the book that underlies the essay he discusses teacher calling in considerable detail. Evidently, religion is indeed a powerful element of the calling followed by teachers in faith-based schools.



However, my personal experience with teaching as a calling evidences a clear distinction between a religious calling and a calling driven by secular spiritualism. Not to argue with Vryhof, but I want to demonstrate that the spiritual calling that motivates committed teachers is not necessarily religious. I also want to challenge the stereotype that in faith-based schools parents, students, and teachers are more committed, that those schools offer an environment that cannot be found in public schools, and that public school teachers are just "putting in their time" and are less committed.

Recollections of one's motives in choosing a noble calling, twenty years after the fact, are notoriously prone to self-serving selective memory. However, I had to write down those very motives in 1981 as a requirement of my master's degree, and as I prepared to write this essay I stumbled upon that paper. I am a bit embarrassed by the callow idealism and completely unwarranted *sangfroid* it reveals, but I am truly heartened by how enduring the fundamental elements have proven to be during the last twenty years. It's short, so I have included it here verbatim. I trust you will excuse the naiveté as a reflection of youth and inexperience.

"The Movement"

> I see our jobs as educators in terms of a political cause bordering on a crusade. I feel that our movement is as urgent and contemporarily necessary as any social or political movement that now exists, and I feel that actually developing the idea/philosophy and calling it simply "The Movement" is logically necessary. Perhaps we need to go back to those "golden days of yesteryear" and approach our concerns with the fervor and the commitment found during the sixties. In this time, that obviously will be difficult because of the nature of political priorities of our country and the overall mood of the people, focused inwardly rather than toward external causes. In spite of that, and more because of it, we need to begin to consider our calling as an honest, sincere, and necessary movement.
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> I say "calling" because in a sense that's just what alternative education is. It draws from the general ranks of both teachers and students who are burned out, run down, disappointed, angered, betrayed, abused, ostracized, ignored, forgotten, smothered, and enslaved by the stagnancy of traditional public school ideology and practice. The quality of the people the Movement attracts cannot be questioned overall, for they possess abilities and attitudes outside and above the norm in contemporary education. Their commitment, devotion, compassion, competence, care,

love, and desire for their profession manifest themselves in such a way as to touch children's lives in ways never before imagined by the students that pass through their classes. It is for those reasons that traditional educational proponents balk, chastise, ridicule, and condemn the Movement. The threat to their ideology is blatantly realized. And it is for those same reasons that we need to reaffirm our commitment to the Movement, and push and work to grow even more.

The alternative school movement is a threat to the traditional educational system, as well it should be. The traditionalists see that, and fear it. Lower enrollment, nonexistent discipline, absence of learning with respect to declining test scores and evaluation measures, disrespect for teachers by students, administrators, and parents, low salaries, strikes—the list is endless. The need for change is imperative. Where education has been is no longer filling the bill, and the need for a new educational ideology ought not to be ignored.

We have the opportunity to make the change. We have the obligation to ourselves, the profession, and most of all the children to make a commitment, and continue to act to make the changes that are needed a reality. The alternative school movement can be the tool with which we make that change. The Movement exists. We need to step up the work, recruit larger numbers to the cause, and strive to improve ourselves daily in all aspects of our work. We need to work to enlighten those who are unaware we even exist, and moreover, accept and believe in the idea of alternative education as a truly necessary and effective political answer to the problem of education in the United States today. The truth is that we cannot afford to do anything less.

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Twenty Years Later

I have mellowed, particularly toward my fellow educators, many of whom I now know personally, and as colleagues rather than stereotypes. I think it is safe to say that many public school teachers, particularly those just entering the profession, feel a sense of calling. I also feel assured that if not all, certainly many of the public school teachers who can claim twenty-five or more years of service in the classroom have remained in the profession for so many years from a sense of duty and calling to serve the children.

I haven't mellowed much respecting the school system itself. I believe that what passes for alternative schools today are often programs and schools designed primarily to address discipline problems. As dropout rates and discipline problems such as violence, disrespect for teachers, truancy, and vandalism showed sharp increases in school corporations across the country in the early 1990s, school administrators were desperate to find solutions. The answer for many districts was to reestablish alternative schools. Unfortunately, most of them were designed as "soft jails" to hold "troubled" students until they were ready to be "reacclimated" to the traditional setting again after a semester away.

Most telling, though, the thrust of what I believe about the calling of teaching and the challenge to education is the same today as it was in 1981. The only difference is that in 1981 it was a mere manifesto, whereas today it is physically manifest, in the form of an alternative high school.

In my youthful exuberance, I wrote with great fervor—dare I say "religious fervor"?—but there is nothing at all religious about the calling I describe: spiritual, yes; religious, no. Is that calling any less powerful than the calling of a teacher in a faith-based school? Each individual must answer that question for himself. My own answer is no.

You don't have to read very deeply between the lines of Charles Glenn's essay to find the sentiment that words are but words and will be co-opted by the bureaucracy; that the test of a calling is in the deeds and the outcomes. I agree with that sentiment, and although I recognize that others have accomplished much more than I in the pursuit of school reform, I present a thumbnail sketch of the alternative high school that is the manifestation of that calling of two decades ago.

From Abstract Calling to Concrete Results

Aurora Alternative High School in Bloomington, Indiana, was created to serve students in grades 9–12 who have not experienced success in the district's two traditional public high schools. Its design is based on the school at which I first began teaching in 1981. William Smith High School in Aurora, Colorado, began as the Street Academy in the mid-1970s and became Colorado's first accredited public alternative high school. When I was given the opportunity to create a new alternative school for the Monroe County (Indiana) Community School Corporation in 1995, I already knew what model to follow.

According to the alternative education master's program that sent me to William Smith as an intern in 1981, the two major characteristics that make alternative schools true alternatives to traditional public schools are: 1) alternative schools are schools of choice students choose to attend, and 2) the schools offer curriculum and instruction different from those of traditional schools. These models for alternative schools

are less discipline-oriented and focus more on providing students and parents true alternatives to what the existing public schools offer. Aurora is true to that model.

Aurora opened in a three-room house with an enrollment of forty-two students. After two years it moved to its current location. Enrollment is currently at its capacity of ninety students, with a waiting list each trimester. Aurora students come from every corner of the district and from a variety of economic backgrounds. There are about as many boys as girls, and the age distribution is normal for a high school. Students attend Aurora for a variety of reasons, but all share the goal of attaining a high school diploma.

The most important requirement for admission into Aurora is that a student applicant must want to enroll, for students come of their own free will. Otherwise, admission is granted primarily on a first-come, first-served basis. Other than the usual age, grade, and residency requirements, Aurora makes only three demands of applicants: 1) those currently serving an expulsion may not start classes until the expulsion has been completed; 2) those currently enrolled at another school in the district must get the signature of that school's principal; and 3) those receiving special education services must submit a copy of the individualized education plan (IEP). (Aurora's application can be found at <www.aurora.mccsc.edu>.)

Students attend four classes of sixty-five minutes each beginning daily at 8:00 a.m. and ending at 12:35 p.m. Independent study courses and tutoring are available in the afternoon. Because of budget and facility limitations, lunch is not provided; students must provide for themselves when they stay for the afternoon.

Aurora's mission statement (below) requires that we educators meet the academic needs of our students. It also requires us to meet substantially more than academic needs and charges us with helping each Aurora student become a whole human being. The teacher duty day is from 8:00 a.m. until 3:30 p.m., but most of the staff can be found working with students or preparing lessons until 4:30 or 5:00 almost any day.

Other than small size, compact school day, and a student body of young people identified as not succeeding but willing to take the positive step of enrolling in an alternative school, what differentiates Aurora from other public schools? What characteristics of Aurora might apply to traditional schools? These are the characteristics that define Aurora:

School Choice and Participation. Upon acceptance, each student signs an enrollment agreement that states the school rules and expectations and the consequences of not honoring those terms. Students, parents, and school staff all understand the rules, the expectations, and the consequences. Students sign the enrollment agreement upon registration

for each new trimester's courses, and that serves as a reminder of school expectations and as a reaffirmation of the agreement to abide by them.

As active, voluntary members of the school community, students accept the responsibility of sharing in school operations. There are several opportunities for students to fulfill that responsibility. They participate in interviewing prospective new students, which promotes a sense of belonging and ownership in the successful continuance of the school as a positive learning environment. Students also sit on appeal boards, which are convened to respond to major student contract violations. The boards consist of three students and two teachers, who make recommendations to the school principal concerning the disposition of contract violations. That empowers students to hold each other accountable to the student contract and also gives them responsibility for a fair and impartial accountability system. Students also may submit discipline warnings to the principal for less serious behavioral infractions by other students. That process requires a face-to-face meeting attended by the principal, the writer of the warning, and the alleged violator but still empowers students to hold each other accountable for abiding by the conditions of enrollment.

Aurora Mission Statement

The mission of Aurora Alternative High School is to provide a positive, meaningful experience for students who have not been successful in traditional school settings. We are committed to providing a learning experience that is student centered, conducive to safe and supportive learning, academically comprehensive, educationally sensitive to the varied learning styles of all students, and emotionally and socially nurturing to all participants in the learning process. We strive to create an environment where students are empowered to take ownership in attaining their educational goals and are encouraged to become positive members of their communities.

Standards. The foremost expectation of the enrollment agreement is that students consent to attend school and to make progress toward graduation. Failure to pass classes is a violation of the student contract, and failure to make progress toward graduation over a given time can ultimately lead to expulsion. Students at Aurora take such consequences seriously. The personalized educational environment lends itself to academic improvement. Data show that between 60 percent and 80 percent of the students improve their cumulative grade-point averages each trimester.

Discipline. Because of the contract and the fact that students choose to attend Aurora, discipline issues are minimal. There has never been a fight on school grounds in the nine-year history of the school, and there has never been a weapons-related expulsion. Expulsions related to substance abuse number only one or two a year. Vandalism of school property is nearly nonexistent, with only four or five instances in ten years.

Personal Relationships with Teachers. In a survey conducted this past spring for the annual school improvement plan, students rated "positive relationships with the teachers" as the primary reason they like the school. Teachers are on a first-name basis with students, work with students for hours after school, and provide independent learning opportunities for students in addition to the regularly scheduled course offerings. Teachers spend significant time with students in after-school and weekend activities. Those activities entail student participation that serves both the school and the local community. Class sizes of no more than fifteen students ensure that students can receive needed attention. Teachers provide differentiated instruction to meet the needs of a variety of learners. Students are not numbers; they appreciate the fact that they get the help with class work that was absent in classes of thirty to forty in their former schools.

Town Meetings. Every Friday, students and staff attend a "town meeting" the last thirty to forty-five minutes of the day. Town meetings facilitate a range of school functions in an environment in which all school stakeholders are present. The meetings recognize student achievement, such as honor roll or graduation, share information about upcoming events, allow students and staff members to voice questions and concerns, provide opportunities for community members to address the student body as a whole, allow individual students and classes chances to share projects and academic accomplishments, and enhance community fellowship through recreational activities such as cookouts and holiday celebrations. At one of the first town meetings, the school was officially named "Aurora" by vote of the students.

Parent Voice. Parents have many opportunities to participate in their children's education at Aurora. Parents take part in the initial interview-

ing process. They sit on school improvement committees, diversity awareness committees, and their own advisory committee.

An unfortunate fact about alternative schools is the lesser degree to which parents demonstrate active involvement in school life. Even parents who would like to participate more find it hard to do so when they are the heads of single-parent households. Family Group (FG) teachers act as contacts for parents for all school issues, and initiate at least six personal phone contacts during the school year.

Family Groups. FGs exist to provide students and staff a means to connect in a personal, supportive manner. FG teachers act as advocates for the students assigned to their families, both academically and otherwise. Students are assigned to FGs upon acceptance to Aurora and usually stay with the same group throughout their time at the school. FGs meet weekly to discuss school issues, develop fellowship and connections among members, and respond to student issues and needs. Group members participate in interviewing candidates for admission and staff positions, sit on appeal boards, run weekly town meetings, help with orientation classes for new students, and participate in student governance. The groups also provide opportunities for community service and recreational activities. Each Family Group teacher serves as an additional contact point for parents' questions and concerns.

The additional contact point for parents is extremely important, because out-of-school difficulties force about half of Aurora's students to drop out before completing the senior year. Some get into difficulty with the law, some move away, but by far the largest number leave because of family dysfunction: e.g., the parent is put in jail and the family disintegrates, or the student simply is thrown out of the house. We don't have the resources to tackle that problem effectively; all we can do is recognize our vulnerability and try to minimize our losses. By the same token, we also recognize our successes and celebrate them: because Aurora is an accredited school, our students must pass Indiana's Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE) in order to receive a diploma. Of the students who stay in school through the senior year, more than 95 percent pass the GQE. Some then join the work force and some go on to college; but wherever they go, they go there propelled by a success: a success that they committed to, worked for, and earned.

Why "Alternative"?

My vision in 1995 was to ignore what others were doing and go with what I had learned and personally experienced: a model for a truly effective alternative to traditional public school education. It was an extension of a calling that had its roots in a movement established more

than thirty years ago. The positive impact it has on students is no less significant today than it was then.

Aurora is one of a select few public alternative high schools in Indiana to attain full performance-based accreditation as a separate educational entity and the only accredited public alternative high school in the state that issues its own diploma as a stand-alone school. From that perspective, it is distinct; yet it is still an "alternative," and that implies volumes about what mainstream education is today.

Other than the self-selected student body, is even one of the facets of Aurora that I described above not exactly what anyone would want for any school? Is any of them different from the constructive facets that Steven Vryhof rightly holds up as strengths of faith-based schools? Is any of them even a bit inconsistent with what has become the mainstream of school reform?

I think not; therefore, I agree with Charles Glenn's statement that the debate on parental choice and distinctive schools was fully formed more than a decade ago. Like Glenn, I believe the focus must now be on acting on what we believe and, increasingly, what we know to be true. And, be the motivation faith-based or secular, I believe Glenn is correct when he says that teachers who follow "a more sacred calling than the minister in his pulpit" are the key to accomplishing what must be accomplished.

Charles C. Holloway is the principal of Aurora Alternative High School in Bloomington, Indiana.