

TASIS Policies: Tradition, “Sphere Sovereignty,” and Schooling M.D. Aeschliman, Ph.D.*

The TASIS Paideia, our foundational document, outlines a set of themes, concepts, and policies that are meant to orient the governance and procedures of the schools over the foreseeable and long-term future. In a relatively free and orderly society, different schools---public, parochial, independent---are free to take somewhat different approaches to education, as long as they meet common, minimum legal and moral standards. Even within the explicitly “public” sector, exam schools (e.g., Boston Latin School), subject-focus schools (e.g., Bronx HS of Science), and “Charter Schools” are free to have quite different profiles and characteristics. The idea of “best practices” in schools---for schools---is logical and helpful, but it can also be a Trojan Horse if it smuggles into educational discourse the premise or assumption that there is one “best way” for all schools to be successful. This logically leads to homogenization.

In trying to focus and retain the TASIS schools’ positive, distinctive features after the death of the charismatic founder, and with the eventual decline of the role of the Fleming-Aeschliman family, the Foundation Board, the separate School Boards, and the schools’ key internal leaders need to be aware of these factors and dynamics. TASIS does not want to be “just like” other schools, though in its way it hopes to be as good as the best of them. No one school can or should be “all things to all people,” though with the decline of social consensus and the intensification of the “culture wars” in Western countries many schools and colleges are driven in this direction, often for marketing reasons: “If you don’t like my principles, I’ve got others.”

When the **Paideia** asserts that “TASIS supports and promotes traditional family values,” it is drawing on a long tradition of “in loco parentis” thinking and practice but also on the realization that one of the most tragic, destructive developments of modern history was the growth of the State (left or right) at the expense of parents’ rights, especially in education.¹ The Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution was largely, and successfully, designed to protect the rights of individuals and groups against state power. Over the last century this tradition of protection for persons, property, and non-governmental organizations has been gradually eroded in Britain, but it remains strong in the USA. In education its finest exemplars are to be found in the public policies of Belgium and the Netherlands.²

The European Union itself has been influenced in its policies by what are called “sphere sovereignty” and “subsidiarity,” concepts that were originally developed by Dutch Protestant, neo-Calvinist thinkers (e.g., Abraham Kuyper, scholar and Dutch Prime Minister a century ago) and Catholic “social-doctrine” thinkers (Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, Englishman Henry Edward Cardinal Manning, Italian Pope Leo XIII in

¹ See M.D. Aeschliman, “Parents vs. the State,” **Crisis Magazine**, 23 November 2012: www.crisismagazine.com/2012/parents-vs-the-state.

² See *ibid.* and Charles L. Glenn, **Contrasting Models of State and School: A Comparative Study of Parental Choice and State Control** (2012).

“Rerum Novarum,” 1891). Some recent American political policies and social initiatives have also drawn on these traditions, which were largely articulated to defend the rights of parents, churches, independent schools, and local jurisdictions against encroaching state power.³ Also implicitly defended are privacy, property rights, and the rights of companies.

To take cases that bring these issues home to the TESIS context, consider that there are many potentially exemplary activities that the Schools wish to leave up to parental and student choice: enrollment and activism in a political party or a religious denomination are among them. TESIS stands unashamedly but modestly within the classical-Christian tradition---its Paideia asserts the virtues of “faith, hope, and charity”---but it does not mandate religious activities. It leaves to parents, students, and other agencies---churches, political parties, community organizations---“sphere sovereignty”: the right to make personal or family choices independent of a domineering, omnicompetent school (or government).

It is a sad lesson of modern educational history that the more kinds of things schools seek to do, the less well they seem to perform their core educational functions---teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, science, history, and basic moral-character formation in community. As the **Paideia** puts it, TESIS has been innovative and entrepreneurial but it has not been interested in “providing settings for utopian social experiments.” Thus the schools should be reluctant to lend their support and facilities to initiatives that are rightly in the sphere of individual persons and other agencies---individuals, affinity groups, clubs, churches, community organizations, private companies. Admittedly, there is not always a clear dividing line, but the schools should prefer to respect the rights and choices of parents to the temptation to impose controversial views by institutional force and prestige. Notable cases would be the teaching of sex education (where transparency of offerings and respect for parents’ views should be main considerations),⁴ explicit religious evangelization, and of course explicit political advocacy. In line with its policy of encouraging adolescent sexual abstinence and traditional sublimation of sensual impulses in cultural, educational, and sporting activities, TESIS should oppose explicit sexualization (e.g., public displays of erotic or sexual activity), in order to maintain or create a safe, non-threatening environment as free as possible of the commercial ‘sexploitation’ of the audio-visual culture. Other than the preceding considerations, and legitimate vigilance concerning any evidence of parental child abuse, TESIS should defer to parents to provide fundamental guidelines about sex and marriage for their children.

In modern education, there is a bad, revealing pattern of school and teacher hostility to parental rights and choices, and to religious and local or community traditions, most evident in Communist and Fascist states but also in nationalist ones such as Turkey and

³ The work of the Americans Robert Nisbet, Richard J. Neuhaus, Peter L. Berger, and Charles L. Glenn is particularly important in this regard. See M.D. Aeschliman, “A Contemporary Erasmus: Peter L. Berger,” **Modern Age**, Vol.53, No.3 (Summer 2011).

⁴ See Miriam Grossman, M.D., **You’re Teaching My Child What?** (Washington, DC, 2009)

France.⁵ As an independent, largely parent-financed educational enterprise, the TISIS organization does not wish to share this particular tradition of hostility, which is often unconscious on the part of school teachers themselves (especially those without children of their own). The Schools strive for an unashamedly family atmosphere, appreciate the trust (and financial investment) of parents, support the values of decent parents, and try to act toward their children in the normal, charitable way that decent parents have a right to expect---or to provide the stability that children from broken or divorced families badly need. As part of the Schools' identity and animating mission, this disposition is a fixed policy and is not open to change by staff or students (or parents), though individual staff members, students, or parents are always welcome to bring their concerns to the Headmasters.

TISIS school identity and policy are no more invasive than necessary for the promotion of 'decent Godly order' and the explicit aims of the **Paideia**. Opinions are free, but the defense (or development) of fundamental school policy is entrusted to the Headmasters and Board Chairs by the TISIS Foundation Board, the ultimate legal and policy-making authority of the organization.

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⁵ See Note 1; Paul C. Vitz, **Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks** (Ann Arbor, MI, 1986); Brigitte Berger and Peter L. Berger, **The War Over the Family** (NY, 1983); Charles L. Glenn, Jr., "Public Education Changes Partners," **Journal of Policy History**, 13, 1 (2001), 133-156. Boston University's Charles Glenn is our finest living authority on these issues.