

# Family Pledge: The Ultimate Guide To Raising Smart Kids in a Broken School System (Common Sense Parenting Book 2)

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FamilyPledge FamilyPledge RAISING LIFE-LONG LEARNERS AND GOOD CITIZENS James L. Casale Ph.d. Also by James L. Casale, Ph.D. *Wise Up and Be the Solution: How Create a Culture of Learning at Home and Guide Your Child to Success in School and Life* (This book was acquired by Skyhorse Publishing. They altered the title slightly) *Four Basic back to School Priorities That Have Nothing to Do with Shopping* (available only as an e-book) Copyright © 2017 by James L. Casale Ph.d. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems without permission in writing from the author. Brief passages may be quoted in a review. Website: [www.jamescasalephd.com](http://www.jamescasalephd.com) Cover photo credit: Jessica Luciana Zunic; JLZ Designs ISBN: 9780692924570 ISBN: 0692924574 Library of Congress Control Number: 2017913641 Casale Consulting, Palm Beach Gardens, FL Dedication *To my mentor, my hero, a lifelong learner, a good citizen, and the quintessential role model, Carmel Catherine Puma Casale* "The smallest school in America is the family." □JOHN GARDNER Forward "Parenting is not easy. Parenting is a struggle. However, if you live in the same house with your children, you can't avoid it." □JAMES L. CASALE My wife and I were not the perfect parents; far from it. Despite the fact that I was a schoolteacher, we were always just hoping that we were doing the right thing. If there is anything more important for parents than to accept their solemn responsibility to raise their children to be healthy, lifelong learners, upstanding citizens, and men and women of impeccable character, I don't know what it is. In 2010, before I published my first parenting book, I began writing articles and essays specifically to offer some tools that may positively affect the environment in your household. I shared my thoughts on a variety of my own websites, other parenting websites, columns in magazines and newspapers, and on the editorial pages of my local newspaper. In 2013, I self-published my first parenting book, *Wise Up and Be the Solution*. It was later acquired by Skyhorse Publishing and reissued in late 2015 with a new cover and an additional 4,000 words. Most parents I have encountered believe **mistakenly** that parent involvement in their child's education translates into helping with homework and/or actually teaching and volunteering at school. That is **not** accurate. In fact, no special skills are needed at all. Rather, what is needed is patience, tenacity, perseverance, love, attitude, a sense of humor, and a plan that "sets the table" for lifelong learning and character development. Be mindful that, generally speaking, public schools are beyond reform for a variety of reasons that include a paucity of highly effective teachers and principals, teachers' unions that worship at the altar of the status quo, state governments and their mismanagement of public schools—evidenced by their emphasis on high-stakes testing—and an intrusive federal government that entices state governments and school districts with the almighty dollar if they "get on board" with federal programs such as Common Core. Why do you think charter schools, vouchers, private schools, tutoring academies, virtual instruction, and homeschooling are expanding so rapidly? The answer,

simply stated, is that parents are dissatisfied with public schools. But unfortunately, none of these options guarantee anything. Any school setting has to rely on the talent and artistry of highly effective teachers and the leadership skills of principals. Tutoring is expensive, and homeschooling is a challenge for the faint of heart. It requires an enormous amount of time, effort, skill, and information. Not every parent is cut out for home schooling, and for working parents, it's not an option. This book is unique in that the reader does not have to begin at the beginning. The table of contents consists of the title of each essay. Choose an essay that piques your interest and start there. When appropriate, I will begin each essay with a brief commentary. I invite your comments, which you may email to me at [jamescasalephd77@gmail.com](mailto:jamescasalephd77@gmail.com). My website is [www.jamescasalephd.com](http://www.jamescasalephd.com). Note: Some essays may seem repetitive. I did this on purpose for two reasons: The content is structured to allow the reader to choose essays that are of particular interest and read them in any order. I offer several versions of the same theme to emphasize critical issues that may concern stressed-out parents. Table of Contents

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#### CHAPTER 1 Why Is School Reform Mission Impossible?

"Don't rely on the school to create lifelong learners, good citizens, and men and women of good character." □JAMES L. CASALE**Commentary:** After 50 years in public education as a substitute teacher, teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, and college professor, I am convinced that, generally speaking, the public schools are a failure. Of course, there are some outstanding schools, school districts, teachers, and administrators, but there are not enough of them to rate the public schools as a success. When students do well, the success equation includes parents who value education, are involved in their child's education, and genetics. The reasons for the dismal performance of the majority of public schools are stated in this and other essays in this book. If you would like to comment, email me at the address in the Forward. It would be easier to saddle up a python and ride off into the sunset than reform our government schools. The system is fatally broken, and even Tom Cruise can't rescue it. Those who govern the system (state and local) are—I am being kind—misinformed, the school talent pool is too shallow and always has been, and the teachers' unions continue to be major obstructionists. Decision makers Our founding fathers assigned or, should I say, *left* the responsibility of educating the public to the states. This precipitates three questions: Who are our legislators? What do they know? And from whom do they

get their information about education? The approval rating for state legislatures is better than that of congress, and many of our legislators, both state and federal, have college degrees. But are they really equipped to make the important decisions about a complex system they know little about? In fact, the Lilliard E. Richardson report (University of Missouri) reveals that the *least* formally educated legislatures have a higher public approval rating. An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* quotes John Adams speaking about representative assemblies, saying they “should be in miniature an exact portrait of the people at large.” Does this equate to states being more equipped to make important decisions about the government education system? No. Now, add governors, state boards, education commissioners (one Florida commissioner reportedly had one year of teaching on his resume), and school board members to this assembly of decision makers. What you have is the proverbial “inmates running the asylum.” I can only guess where they obtain their information before they make important decisions: colleagues, staffers, donors, college professors—who haven’t been in a classroom for decades—committees, commissions, spouses, and friends come to mind. Do they even bother to seek and find the most knowledgeable teachers and administrators who are the true experts? Where is the talent, the research, and the objectivity that should comprise state and local decision-making? The federal government should not be involved at all. It’s not their constitutional responsibility. One bureaucracy is enough. Jeb Bush and George H. W. Bush, with the assistance of Ted Kennedy, in their infinite wisdom about education and accountability, spawned the No Child Left Behind Act. This added to the stress of high-stakes testing, and is now being modified. Jeb Bush also thought it would be a good idea to rate schools on an A-F scale. This added more stress to already overstressed teachers, administrators, and school boards while ignoring the fact that “A” schools do not serve all students adequately and “C” schools have successful students. Let’s add Common Core to the mix and divulge the intrusion of the federal government onto state-regulated public education. With billions of federal dollars dangled in front of state legislators and school districts, the race was on to be a champion of Common Core. This ill-advised intrusion added more complexity to a system that does not need it. Does anyone remember the Atlanta public schools cheating scandal? The shallow talent pool The talent pool of outstanding teachers and principals—the line staff who can produce results—is shallow. There never was, is not now, and never will be enough talent to save the government schools. Our profession does not attract the best and the brightest. GRE scores for Education majors are among the lowest. However, the brightest prospects are not necessarily the best, since teaching is an art form that requires an artist’s instincts and a unique set of characteristics that include a solid knowledge base, sense of humor, compassion, tenacity, kindness, enthusiasm, self-assessment, lifelong learning, and leadership. But not enough talented people are attracted to the teaching profession due to the salaries, the unimaginable difficulty of teaching a classroom of young people with varying abilities, the inadequate teacher training programs, the lack of respect, the paucity of leadership, the misguided legislators, the local and state regulations that amp up the stress level, and teachers’ unions who worship at the altar of the status quo. (Think teacher tenure, a job for life.) Think back on your own K-12 experiences and compile a list of the most outstanding teachers you experienced. You wanted to be in their class, wanted to do their homework, worked hard for them, and wanted their approval because they were always prepared, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, inspiring, respectful, compassionate, fair, and modeled what should be every school’s mantra: *Learning how to learn, becoming a life-long learner, and figuring out how to get along with everybody*. OK. How many? My unscientific surveys always reveal a number less than ten. Teachers’ unions are obstacles Should I stop here? They have been obstacles to school reform since forever. They oppose anyone and anything that interferes with their main mission: recruit members, negotiate for benefits and working conditions, protect tenure, and worship at the altar of mediocrity. They oppose charter schools, vouchers, merit pay, California’s trigger law—which allows parents to close failing schools and convert them to charter schools—innovative teacher evaluation reform, and anything that impinges on their power and turf. Their PAC organizations, lobbyists, and hefty donations control state and national Democratic politicians and thus legislatures. Ask Scott Walker, the Wisconsin Governor who had the audacity to challenge union power in 2011. We witnessed Democratic legislators running for cover to the

next state in order to foil quorum requirements. Demonstrations and rallies by union sheep were rampant and included the usual hired suspects from those outside the state of Wisconsin. New York's Governor Cuomo, a Democrat, and NYC's Mayor Bloomberg, an undeclared Democrat, challenged teachers' unions in their state. Cuomo was trying to link a mandatory teacher evaluation component to the state budget, and Bloomberg wanted to close failing schools and dismiss 1500 *bad teachers*. It didn't happen. The unions' latest enemy is Betsy DeVos, the current secretary of education and a champion for charter schools and vouchers. There is hope for improvement. While true school reform is *not* possible, school improvement has a chance, and it does happen sporadically to individual schools and school districts in spite of the all the obstacles. It requires, at least at the local level, school boards with the vision, knowledge, tenacity, and wisdom to hire outstanding administrators and teachers. Unfortunately, tenure is an albatross hanging around the necks of state legislators and school boards that prevents them from dismissing incompetent teachers and administrators without spending hundreds of thousands of dollars. (I am not talking about the ones who commit crimes.) Parents who accept their solemn responsibility as their child's first teachers and role models are our only hope to improve schools. They must become more knowledgeable and proactive. No special skills are required. What is required is a commitment to becoming involved in their child's education. This commitment requires a positive attitude about education, accurate information about their school's policies and protocols, emphasizing lifelong learning, creating a family mission statement, and developing a plan that is guided by their family goals. These recommendations will, if enacted, establish a culture of learning at home. CHAPTER 2 A Student's Foremost Teacher Is at Home

"It is a greater work to educate a child...than to rule a state." □WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING

**Commentary:** I accept, along with teachers and administrators across the country, that there are too many dysfunctional families who are incapable of raising children. Divorce, drugs, illness, criminal behavior, apathy, and ignorance render these families unable to contribute to the success of their children. This essay was published in the "Point of View" section of the *Palm Beach Post* on 9/22/14. It has been slightly edited from the original. **Two** recent articles in the *Palm Beach Post* pinpointed major flaws in our education system, but both miss the mark on true school reform. Mona Charin's "Better Teachers Will Lead to a Better School System" exposes a major fault line in the education profession: there are not enough outstanding teachers. I submit there will never be enough highly competent teachers to fulfill the goal—nationwide—of better school systems. Superior teachers are artists of the highest magnitude. In my opinion, highly effective teachers (HETs) outrank performing artists or those whose talents are in the visual arts. None other than Albert Einstein reminds us that "it is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge." Even Frank Sinatra couldn't do that. There are more than three million K-12 teachers in the United States. How many are truly superior? Some *are* superior and thus highly effective. Most are mediocre, and too many are incompetent. Why? Within our public education system, attrition rates are high due to the following: low wages, inadequate training, state and local regulations, lack of support from school authorities and parents, and the stress factor associated with all of the above. Misguided governors and legislatures. The second article I am responding to in the *Palm Beach Post* was written by Kathleen Orepeza (9/14/14): "Forcing High-stakes Testing on Kindergarteners Makes no Sense." The article reveals a second fault line in our education system. Governors, their lackeys, and state legislatures are misguided, misinformed, basically ignorant, and are usually just trying to get re-elected. Who are these people? What do they know about education, and when did they know it? Aren't many of these people lawyers? God save us. Under these circumstances, school reform remains impossible. Parents can make a difference if they want to. Parents must wake up and wise up to their sacred responsibility of raising their children and becoming their children's first set of teachers and role models. Do not rely on the schools to raise your children. Collaborate with teachers and administrators but do not adopt a "leave it to the schools" attitude. First, become more knowledgeable and, second, become more proactive. **No special skills are needed.** Parents can create a learning culture in their homes that supports school and life success. Your plan includes the following: Hang a family mission statement on the wall. Limit TV and all entertainment electronics. Practice and encourage

self-restraint, kindness, compassion, hard work, persistence, and cooperation. Don't blame the schools, the lawmakers, or your circumstances. No one should be more influential or important in your child's life than **you**. Who do you want your child to look up to? CHAPTER 3 Who Is Teaching Your Child About Character and Virtue?

"Who do you want your child to look up to?" □JAMES L. CASALE  
**Commentary:** Character education programs have been established in most schools across the United States. I applaud the efforts of school districts, administrators, and teachers who devote themselves to this effort. But where should this effort begin? Do you believe that specific virtues and character traits lead to a happy and successful life? Do you believe that good character is more important than talent? If you do, have you thought about how these traits are acquired and who is supposed to instill them in children? Are they ever acquired by coddling, pampering, and giving in to the whims and desires of our children? Kathleen Parker, editorial writer for the *Washington Post*, doesn't think so, and neither do I. Her editorial "Our Coddling Culture Has Ruined College Students" is worth reading. I cut it out and laminated it. It's that good. She does not blame the students; she blames the "everybody gets a trophy" culture and a system that does not teach about history, government, or the Bill of Rights. She claims, and rightly so, that the current condition of overly sensitive students "was auto induced with the zealous pampering of the American child." I concur, but my focus is on the parent curriculum, *not* the school curriculum. The schools are trying to be parents Schools are trying—through various character education programs—to sincerely and earnestly teach about character and virtue and their connection to success. But it's not their job or responsibility. I recently attended a well-meaning *Character Education* assembly at a local school attended by my grandchildren. One of my grandsons received an award for his resiliency. I am proud of him, as are his parents and his grandmothers. School officials flashed a huge image of the school's character pledge on the gymnasium wall and showed a clip from the latest Rocky movie, *Creed*. Well done. Good try. I hope it helps. But it is **no** substitute for what should transpire at home. Parents need to wise up John Gardner reminds us that "The smallest school in America is the family." Parents and caregivers are responsible for child rearing, not the schools or—heaven forbid—the colleges. Which character traits are most important to you and your family? Select your top five or six from this list: kindness, compassion, honesty, respect, responsibility, perseverance, forgiveness, diligence, and self-restraint. Add your own and become proactive. Two critical things that parents must do early and often are: 1) State your expectations for your children, write them down, and hang them on a poster in a conspicuous place in your house. One caution is that this is not shopping list. Choose carefully and keep it short and simple. Family mission statements or pledges are referenced in [chapter two](#) of my first parenting guide. Refer to your family pledge often. Modify if necessary. 2) Model your expectations on a daily basis. School reform starts at home. It doesn't take a village; you're the village. Your children live with you. When they're in the village, what they do is a reflection on their home life. CHAPTER 4 Don't Blame the Teachers

"For the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world." □WILLIAM ROSS WALLACE  
**Commentary:** This short essay was in response to an editorial in the *Palm Beach Post*: "It's a Mistake to Blame Teachers Solely for What Ails Schools." My response was published in the "Point of View" section on 12/1/14. I've changed the title. **The Post** has one thing right: the headline. After that, their argument falls apart because the *Post* continues to carry the old, tired, and worn baggage of teachers' unions, who claim that child poverty, inadequate pay for teachers, underfunded schools, overregulation, and misguided accountability are the culprits harming public education. Let's get serious It's not child poverty; it's the poverty associated with the unwillingness of parents to set high standards for their children, hold themselves and their children accountable, and create a positive learning environment at home that includes: creating a family mission statement that emphasizes lifelong learning and character development, modeling expectations for children, establishing a positive learning environment, and refusing to blame teachers and schools for their own inadequacy. When was teacher pay ever adequate? Teachers know at the outset they are not going to be compensated according to their worth and service to the community. The highly effective teachers who stay are committed to their students and their role as one of the most important adults in a child's life. They are worth their weight in diamonds.

But the underperforming teachers who stay make the *same* money as the best teachers. This is not a system that will ever attract the best and the brightest. School budgets are heavily weighted toward salaries, but more money has never been the answer. Failing schools are always associated with weak teachers, incompetent administrators, and even weaker parenting. According to the *Coleman Report* issued in 1966, more than any other factor, it's the **quality of the family** that determines student success. When I was the principal of Purchase School in Harrison, New York, a National School of Excellence, I had the smartest kids in the district. But I also had the most active parents, who were devoted to their child's education and proved it by being both knowledgeable and proactive. And yes, I had some of the best teachers in the district; I know because I hired them. For the five decades that I have served in public education, the unions have always been part of the cause for failing schools. Tenure—lifetime jobs for teachers—has been the scourge of our profession. Unions, by their nature, must protect everyone, even the *rotten apples*, and have fought tenaciously against any legislation that would curtail tenure rules. For them, nothing is better than the *status quo*. And their members follow them like sheep. Legislators contribute to failing schools. And finally, the legislators' contribution to failing schools must be considered. They are usually ill-advised on most issues but forge ahead anyway in the name of progress. In Florida, they managed to curtail tenure but can't come up with an adequate system of teacher evaluation other than the results of high-stakes testing. Grading schools (A, B, C, D, F) unknowingly created testing *boot camps* that place undue pressure on teachers, administrators, and our students with the sheer number of tests required. And evaluating teachers on the results is simply sinful. Most legislators should be sent to the principal's office for disciplinary action. Let's get the root causes right, and then can we pursue solutions, but don't hold your breath. The ultimate solution to school reform is a home that values education and does something about it.

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Parenting is not brain surgery or quantum physics; it's harder. This book is unique. It contains 40 essays. Read them in any order you choose. The purpose is to inspire, encourage, inform and cheer on parents who understand that they are their child's first teachers and role models.

Your child's success in school and life is determined by the quality of the family. Establish a family culture that treasures character traits over talent and enjoy the results forever. Teaching and modeling are the key ingredients. Buy this book and change your family dynamic instantly.

Learn how to say, no, and how to limit electronic devices that kids use for entertainment only. Knowing how to deal with and navigate the public schools is critical. They don't raise your children; you do.

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His love There is a sense in which souls are eternal with no beginning and no end.

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