

BEACON PRESS DISCUSSION GUIDES

for Unitarian Universalist Communities

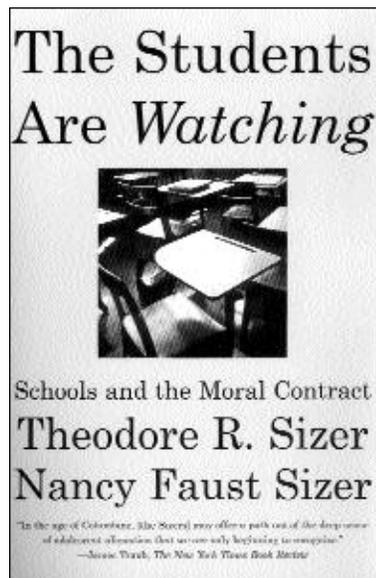
The Students Are Watching

*Schools and the
Moral Contract*

THEODORE R. SIZER AND
NANCY FAUST SIZER

A LEADER'S GUIDE

BY JULIA WATTS



 **Beacon Press**
www.beacon.org

This guide was made possible by a grant from the
Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock.

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The Students Are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract
by Theodore R.Sizer and Nancy Faust Sizer
Beacon Press, 2000/\$12.00/paperback/0-8070-3121-6
UUA Bookstore: 1-800-215-9076 or www.uua.org

Leader's Guide
by Julia Watts

0-8070-9155-3

INTRODUCTION

Whether we are educators, parents, students or simply concerned bystanders, contemporary American schools provoke difficult questions. As media reports of school violence escalate, many of us are shocked and disturbed. Some believe we are seeing the signs of unprecedented moral decline. Others wonder whether we are just now glimpsing public pictures of a long-standing underbelly of our educational system—a system that teaches violence, fear and alienation just as it purports to instruct children in algebra, social sciences and the ethics of citizenship.

What are the ethics of citizenship, and how shall we teach them? In social studies classrooms across the country, overworked teachers drill bored young people in the structures of governance, the ways a bill becomes a law, and other rote details of civic education, yet few have the time, the tenacity or the social support it takes to encourage deeper questions of civic life and engaged public participation.

The questions of moral education force us to examine the roots and basic substance of our own ethics and beliefs. For some, the idea of teaching values in schools seems the exclusive project of religious conservatives, laced with the rhetoric of family values which fail to value all families or all family ideals. Yet we teach values every day in subtle and not-so-subtle lessons of formal schoolrooms and the larger social class-

rooms of our homes, our televisions, our churches, our shopping malls, our libraries and our everyday actions.

In *The Students are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract*, Theodore and Nancy Sizer lead us through the lessons of the unspoken curriculum, the lessons that institutions teach—not through their professed ideals but through their actions. The Sizers write that,

if we care about our children's values—how as a matter of habit they treat others and how aware they are of why they do what they do—we must look into a mirror.... What do our actions tell our students about our purposes? About our principles? (p. 116)

In inviting us to consider the lessons and implications of our own choices and lived values, the Sizers encourage us to grapple with questions about how we might articulate and enact our principles—not simply in our schools, but throughout the entire fabric of our social lives.

This guide aims to create a framework for Unitarian Universalist discussion groups to share ideas about:

- the principles and lessons we believe are most important for our life journey;
- the character and politics of schooling, including the unspoken lessons of institutions; and
- how we might build more meaningful relationships between the generations—relationships based on trust, understanding and respect.

This program encourages the reflections and contributions of young adults as well as parents, educators and other adults who finished their years of formal schooling. We hope it will foster meaningful conversation between people of all ages, recognizing that we are all teachers and learners, acknowledging that we all have a stake in the nature of moral education.

Adjust the Format as Needed

This program includes reading, reflection and participation in three two-hour discussion sessions. We recommend a group size of no more than ten people. While the discussion guide offers specific questions, readings and activities, feel free to adapt the program to your own needs. You can substitute your own questions, adapt those that are provided here, and add thoughts of your own.

GETTING STARTED

Promote the Program

Many congregations have a number of resources for publicizing new programs in the community. It is always a good idea to create flyers and post notices on bulletin boards and in newsletters. Announcements during meetings and services help spread the word. Some congregations promote new programs by organizing “Kick-off Sundays,” which include a sermon by a minister or lay leader about a related topic.

You might consider targeting specific groups to embark on this journey. For example, parents, religious education teachers and volunteers might have particular interest in this program, as might young adult groups. The series might be an opportunity to build bridges beyond the congregation, expanding your relationships with youth groups and parenting groups in your community, teachers, school administrators and school board members, and parent-teacher association members.

Provide a Comfortable Setting

Hold the session in a comfortable, well-lit setting, preferably with cushioned chairs arranged in a circle. Some discussions will be carried out in small groups of 2-4 people, so it is important to find a space that will enable uninterrupted discussion for small groups as well as for the larger group. Some discussion sessions call for information to be recorded on newsprint, so you will need adequate wall space or easels to display what has been written. You might ask volunteers to provide refreshments and perhaps a light snack.

When people register, it’s a good idea to ask them if they have particular accessibility needs. When you promote the workshop, tell people that you will do your best to accommodate their accessibility needs (such as large print materials) if they provide advance notice. Do your best to hold the sessions in a room that is wheelchair accessible. However, if your space is not wheelchair accessible, let people know. Offer to strategize solutions with them.

Involve the Group in Setting the Tone

The group should take responsibility for creating an environment that is welcoming and conducive to open dialogue. Bring to the group's attention the importance of active listening, thoughtful responses and mutual respect. Also, note that occasional silences are acceptable. Use people's own experiences as a way to ground the discussion when it threatens to become too abstract.

Some people have a tendency to be more vocal than others. If a few people clearly dominate the conversation, you might need to open a space for those who have not had a chance to speak to do so if they wish.

As a discussion leader, it is important to establish a balance between too much control and too little direction. It will be important to be responsive in your leadership and draw people out, yet keep the discussion on track.

We suggest that the group draft a set of ground rules at the beginning of the first session, post them on newsprint, and review them at the beginning of the second session. If all participants give input, everyone will be accountable to the group's needs. Common ground rules include:

- ❑ maintain confidentiality—don't repeat personal stories outside of the group;
- ❑ make personal ("I") statements—don't speak for others;
- ❑ give full attention to the person who is speaking; and
- ❑ turn off pagers and cell phones during the program.

Prepare for the First Session

Ask participants to read Theodore and Nancy Sizer's *The Students are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract* in its entirety before the first session. Encourage them to keep a journal of their thoughts and reactions while reading the book, or to spend some time in reflection based on passages they found memorable. Invite participants to learn more about the school experiences of family members and friends. Let them know that throughout the program, they will be encouraged to bring in their own life stories.

Evaluate the Program

Two evaluation forms are provided in the last pages of this guide. Participant Evaluation Forms should be distributed at the end of the final session so participants can give feedback to group leaders. (Note that questions 7 and 8 on the form give leaders a chance to pose their own questions to participants.) Also, be sure to send Beacon Press your completed Leader Evaluation Form. We are striving to meet the program needs of UU congregations, and your continued feedback and suggestions will bring us a long way toward reaching our goal. We really want to hear from you!

After the reading, ask people to go around the circle and share briefly.

Ask participants to introduce themselves and state their hopes and expectations for the program. If they like, invite them to share one reason that they came.

SESSION ONE

Materials: Newsprint, markers, masking tape, chalice, candle, matches, UUA Hymnal (*Singing the Living Tradition*. Boston: UUA, 1993), paper, pens

Welcome and Opening Check-In (15 min.)

Welcome participants, light the chalice, and thank them for coming. Make sure that everyone knows where to find restrooms, water fountains, and other necessities. Encourage people to share their accessibility needs now or throughout the program. Introduce the program, and offer time for questions. Circulate a sheet of paper so that people can write down contact information for your records.

Explain to participants that before you begin, you would like the group to establish ground rules.

Ask a volunteer to record the group's suggested guidelines on newsprint. If certain rules you find important are not mentioned, suggest them yourself. (See "Getting Started" for common ground rules.) Once the suggestions are finished, check with the group to make sure that everyone is comfortable with the ground rules.

Tell participants that every session will begin with a reflection and a check-in. Open with reading #458 from the UUA Hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition) or another reading of your choosing.

Small Group Discussion: Experiences with Education (15 min.)

Separate into groups of 2 or 3. Allow each person about 5 minutes to share.

- What was your experience like in high school? If you have been out of high school for several years, what are your impressions of high school now? Do you have children in school? Have you taught school? What are your sources of knowledge? How does your conception of contemporary formal education compare with what you experienced?
- What are your experiences with education outside of formal schools? In what ways are you involved in education, either as a learner or a teacher?
- How do your educational background and your experiences with education affect how you read the Sizess' book? When you think about education today, what is at stake for you?

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Large Group Conversation: What Makes a Good Education Possible? (20 min.)

Throughout their book, the Sizess emphasize the kind of lessons institutions teach by their actions. They write,

Institutions can bear witness, in good and bad times. That is, they can model certain kinds of behavior. The persistent question is, of course, *which* behaviors, *which* values, *which* qualities are to be modeled. (p. 13)

Invite the group to reflect upon the ideals they hold for good education.

- What are the signs and signals of a “good” school? How would we know if schools were doing their job?
- Where have you experienced or observed good education? What were its characteristics? What social supports made it possible? What personal qualities were required among teachers and learners?

Small Groups: Grappling and Education

(15 min.)

Separate into small groups of 3 or 4 to discuss how the schools you know measure up to your ideals. You may want to reflect on the schools you attended or schools you know through a family member or friend.

- The Sizemore emphasize the importance of grappling with meaningful issues through a curriculum rich in complex content. (pp. 22-24). In what ways were you or others encouraged to grapple with complicated questions? What questions were out-of-bounds?
- The Sizemore believe that grappling “presumes that the student has something to add to the story.” (p. 25) To what extent did these schools act as though students had knowledge and passions of their own? In what ways were students treated as empty vessels to be filled?

Group Discussion: Teaching for the Journey

(30 min.)

If we believe that education is not merely the acquisition of facts, but also the development of wisdom and personal character, we must grapple ourselves with the content of the lessons we wish to teach. The Sizemore write that, “As Zen Buddhists say, it is the quality of the journey more than its destination which is to be celebrated.” (p. xvi) They liken the difference between the journey and the destination as one between nouns and verbs.

Nouns are treated as completed statues lined up on the top shelves of a person’s character. Verbs are active—no less demanding, but requiring constant engagement. They are not structures, but rather, engines. (p. xvi)

Ask each person to tell one lesson they feel is important for the life journey, inviting them to share a short example of grappling with this lesson in their own life, if they choose. Encourage the group to use verbs, not nouns. Remind them that they need not all agree with the lessons that others would like to teach.

Small Groups: Modeling Our Lessons and Our Questions

(15 min.)

After the group exercise, separate into small groups of 3 or 4. Invite groups to reflect on the lessons they have heard.

- How might you model 1-2 of these lessons in your everyday life?
- Which lessons can be modeled through formal systems of education? How?
- Which lessons do you find modeled most often in your congregation and faith community?
- Which lessons do you most miss?

Preparing for the Next Session

Let participants know that the next session will include more time to think about the congregation as a place for education. Encourage them to reflect on the lessons that the congregation models, and invite them to keep a journal on their thoughts if they wish.

Closing Reading

Thank the participants for their presence and participation. Close with reading #687 from the UUA Hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition) or with another reading of your choosing. Extinguish the chalice. Ask for volunteers to help restore the room to its original state.

SESSION TWO

Materials: Chalice, candle, matches, UUA Hymnal (*Singing the Living Tradition*. Boston: UUA, 1993), paper, pens

Opening Reading and Check-In (10 min.)

To open this session, light the chalice and share reading #652 (“The Great End in Religious Instruction,” by William Ellery Channing).

After the reading, ask people to go around the circle and check-in briefly.

Small Groups: The Aim of Religious Education (15 min.)

In small groups, invite participants to share their thoughts on religious education.

- Share your reactions to and reflections on Channing’s words regarding the aim of religious education. What do you believe religious education should strive to accomplish?
- What lessons does your congregation foster, either in its formal programs or its larger life? What are its greatest education strengths? Where might it invest more energy?

Large Group Sharing (10 min.)

Invite each small group to share some of their reflections with the larger body.

Small Groups: Sorting Out Choice (20 min.)

The vision that congregations hold for education often differs from that of schools. Congregations generally let their principles guide them toward a more wholesome life of shared learning. Yet congregations are not separate from the larger community. In *The Students Are Watching*, the Sizars address the issue of choice—who gets to what kinds of educational options; the pressures of sorting; the way schools select their winners and their losers; the challenges of difference and the troubling comforts of an ordered, homogeneous set of students.

The Sizars write “when the time comes to choose one’s high school, each student has more or fewer options depending on his record, his wealth, the part of the country he lives in.” (p. 61) Within schools themselves, students and teachers choose who they spend time with, who they praise, how much they mingle and who they punish.

Ask participants to separate into small groups of 3 or 4, reflecting on people they know who are presently in school or on their own memories of a school choice.

- What options (or lack of options) were presented in the process of choosing a school? What are your hopes and concerns about the educational opportunities in this setting?
- In what ways have you or your loved ones experienced the privileges of choice? What are the challenges you face in trying to secure a good education?
- What values and principles have you or others you know used to make choices about schools and communities in which to live?

Individual Journaling (15 min.)

Ask participants to reflect on their own situation, writing journal entries about these questions or other questions that encourage their thinking. Before they begin, tell them they will not be expected to share their writing.

- Consider your own background and circumstances—what privileges did you experience? What were the barriers?
- How do you think your background affected your choices and available options?

Small Group Discussion: Issues of Class

(15 min.)

The Sizemore write that we must “insist on clear and principled thinking about the effect of social class on the education we are offering to American’s children.” (p. 120) They contrast this country’s democratic ideals with the realities that many students experience.

Invite participants to share their thoughts in small groups. They may wish to discuss some of what they wrote, or to talk about the following:

- To what extent did your school encourage relationships with people of other class backgrounds? Did you experience those relationships in truth?
- How do you feel class background has affected the education of the people you know closely? What about the education of people in schools that you or your loved ones have chosen not to attend?

Large Group Discussion: The Politics of Education (20 min.)

Throughout their book, the Sizemore reflect on the importance of restructuring institutions to better reflect the values we wish to instill in students. Most teachers and many institutions are pressed for time and pummeled with competing demands. They write,

The problem is that we have not been willing to arrange things so that Dick could do his work in a fuller and more time-consuming and effective way. And the fact of the matter is, we could. The students see that, and more than anything else, it brings fear into their hearts, and dispirits them. (p. 115)

- What public values need to change before we can reshape schools into places that you feel would be more fruitful for learning?
- What principles and spiritual values motivate you to reflection and to action?
- What opportunities do you see for becoming involved in the process of reshaping education—in your own home, your congregation, your community or beyond?

Small Groups: Coming Back Home

(20 min.)

Invite groups to separate into small groups of 3 or 4 to reflect once more on education in the congregation.

- In what ways might you—individually or as a group—share your thoughts on education with the rest of the congregation?
- How might you contribute to your congregation’s program for religious education—either its formal program or its informal lessons—in order to model spiritual values and encourage meaningful grappling?

Closing Reading

Thank the participants for their presence and participation. Close with reading #701 from the UUA Hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition) or with another reading of your choosing. Extinguish the chalice. Ask for volunteers to help restore the room to its original state.

SESSION THREE

Materials: Newsprint, markers, masking tape, chalice, candle, matches, UUA Hymnal (*Singing the Living Tradition*. Boston: UUA, 1993), paper, pens, photocopies of the Participant Evaluation Form

Opening Reading and Check-In (10 min.)

To open this session, light the chalice and share reading #649 (“From Generation to Generation,” by Antoine de St.-Exupéry from the UUA Hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition) or another selection of your choosing.

After the reading, ask people to go around the circle and check-in briefly.

Large Group: Hopes for Education and Relationships across Generations

(30 min.)

- Share a time from your own life when education worked, when the passwords Antoine de St.-Exupéry describes were handed down from one generation to another.

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Large Group Brainstorm: Requirements for Meaningful Education (15 min.)

After hearing stories of intergenerational education, invite the group to brainstorm ideas about personal qualities, values and social supports that make this kind of sharing possible. You might ask a volunteer to record ideas on newsprint.

Small Groups: Encouraging Honesty and Clear Communication

(15 min.)

The Sizars critique the hypocrisy and bluffing that underlie much of our intergenerational relationships. They believe that “trust comes from the understanding that emerges from dialogue (p. 17),” yet honest dialogue can be difficult to undertake.

Separate into groups of 3 or 4, encouraging variation in age.

- Reflect on the power of nostalgia, the tendency to create a rosy, simplified image based on an idealized past and project these notions of education and

- youth onto the present circumstances.
- Reflect on the belief that youth, adults or elders don't and won't understand, that honest communication is neither possible nor necessary.

Individual Journaling (10 min.)

When young people share their passions and ideals, adults sometimes treat these forays into open communication as childish or naïve. Yet scorn or laughter from elders is not without serious consequences. The Sizars describe how a young person's "hope and sense of agency is often dependent on her sense that there is something she can do which is valued by others."

Ask participants to reflect their own past experiences, journaling on these questions or other questions that encourage their thinking. Before they begin, tell them they will not be expected to share their writing.

- You might wish to write about a time when your ideals or dreams were not supported, as well as a time when they were. How were you affected?
- Consider a time when you failed to support another person's earnest ideals. Why did you do so?

Small Groups: Encouraging Grappling, Challenging Hypocrisy (15 min.)

After individual journaling, separate into small groups of 3 or 4 people. Invite the groups to share their reflections. People may wish to share from their writing, or to discuss ways we limit meaningful communication across generations, including:

- the extent to which we believe young people can't handle truth or complexity and consequently don't leave room for moral ambiguity; and
- how we limit relationships by shrinking from acknowledging our own imperfections, and our own failure to live up to ideals.

Large Group Discussion: Intergenerational Friendship (20 min.)

The Sizemore's emphasize the importance of relationships between students and adults, whether as advisors in schools or as mentors beyond school. They speak of adults "as friends—rather than only as dispensers of information." (p. 7) These meaningful connections between youth and elders offer a chance for a deeper process of education, a learning that travels in both directions.

Begin a discussion about ways to better support young people, as well as their thoughts and ideals. You may also wish to read the text from reading #715 in the UUA Hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition) and invite responses.

- How might adults serve as mentors to young people? What challenges present themselves? What success stories do you know?
- How might your congregation foster additional opportunities for relationship between youth and adults?
- In what ways might we as individuals and as a society more fully come to believe that "youth are a resource to be developed, not a problem to be solved"? (p. 7)

Closing Circle and Closing Reading

Invite participants to spend a moment in silence, reflecting upon the lessons learned and the education you have engaged in together. If you wish, you may want to have each person offer a word or phrase that testifies to one of their lessons. You might close with reading #580 from the UUA Hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition) or with another reading of your choosing.

Extinguish the chalice. Thank participants for their sharing, enthusiasm and participation. Ask for volunteers to help restore the room to its original state.

Evaluations

Distribute the Participant Evaluation Forms. Ask participants to complete them and return them to you.

For further reading we recommend the following Beacon books:

The End of Homework, by Etta Kralovec and John Buell
Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers, by Linda Lantieri
Tales Out of School: Contemporary Writers on Their Student Years, by Susan Richards Shreve and Porter Shreve

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the following people for their support on this project:

Devorah Greenstein, Julia Watts and Sofia Betancourt of Starr King School for the Ministry. Advisory Committee: Donna Bivens, Co-Director, Women's Theological Center; Rev. Nancy Bowen, Clara Barton District Consultant; Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, Adult Programs Director, UUA Dept. of Religious Education; Jacqui James, Anti-Oppression Programs and Resources Director, UUA Dept. of Religious Education; Rev. Meg Riley, Director of UUA Washington Office, Dept. for Faith in Action

We are grateful for assistance from the New Hampshire Vermont, Pacific Northwest, Thomas Jefferson, Joseph Priestley, Pacific Central, and Northeast Districts and for support from the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock.

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Participant Evaluation Form

Name (optional): _____ Date: _____

Group Leader: _____

Book Title: _____

Please indicate your evaluation of the following:

| | | | | | |
|----------------------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| meeting space | poor | fair | okay | good | great |
| pacing | poor | fair | okay | good | great |
| content | poor | fair | okay | good | great |
| overall | poor | fair | okay | good | great |

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1. Do you think the sessions were: (Please check one)

____ too long ____ about right ____ too short

How long would you like the sessions to be? _____

2. Do you think there were: (Please check one)

____ too many sessions ____ the right number of sessions ____ too few sessions

If you thought there were too many sessions, which one(s) would you leave out?

3. If your large group broke into smaller groups for discussion, did this process work? Why or why not?

4. Is there anything that you would like to have talked about that was not included in the sessions? If so, what? _____

5. What activity(ies) did you especially like? Why? _____

6. If there was an activity that you feel did not work in this context, can you tell us which activity and why? _____

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7. Question: _____

8. Question: _____

9. Please rate your group leader's skills in leading the session(s): (Circle one)
Excellent Good Average Fair Poor

10. What suggestions would you offer to the group leader to improve the way the group is conducted? _____

BEACON PRESS DISCUSSION GUIDES

Leader Evaluation Form

Name (optional): _____ Date: _____

UU Society: _____ District: _____

Book Title: _____

1. Do you and/or your participants think the sessions were: (Please check one)

____ too long ____ about right ____ too short

How long would you like the sessions to be? _____

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2. Do you think that there were: (Please check one)

____ too many sessions ____ the right number of sessions ____ too few sessions

If you thought there were too many sessions, which ones would you leave out?

3. If your large group broke into smaller groups for discussion, did this process work?

Why or why not?

4. Is there anything that you would like to have talked about that was not included in the sessions? If so, what?

5. What activity(ies) did you especially like and why?

6. If there was an activity that you feel did not work in this context, can you tell us which activity and why?

7. Do you think the discussion guides will help to promote a stronger sense of community in your congregation? Why or why not?

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8. Can you suggest other books or subjects that might work in this context?

9. If you changed the format, please describe the changes you made and your reason for making them.

Thank you for taking the time to give us your feedback!

Please return this form to:

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*Unitarian Universalism's Voice
for Good in the Twenty-First Century*

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