An educational theory that first appeared during the 1930s in the United States, essentialism emphasizes the basic skills related to reading, writing, mathematics, science, and history. It is rooted or grounded in the ancient philosophical orientations of idealism and realism. Essentialism focuses on or adheres to the major idea that there are core (essential) subjects or disciplines that should be studied; and, the teacher is the primary authority in the classroom. Teachers are not charged with changing society; rather the essentialists focus on transmitting the values and knowledge that students need to become effective citizens.

The aim of essentialism is to educate students to become useful and competent individuals. Its content includes the three R’s, liberal arts and science, academic disciplines, academic excellence, and basic skills. Testing is used to determine mastery of these subjects, and assessments are based on rigorous academic standards. The essentialist tradition maintains that there are concerned citizens who believe the public schools have declined and that they need to return to stricter discipline and to a study of the “basics.” Since the 1930s, the essentialists have advanced efforts to warn the American public of progressive notions (e.g., “life-adjustment education” and child-centered education) and the continuing erosion of education or learning in the United States.

Proponents of essentialism have included William C. Bagley, Isaac L. Kandel, Arthur Bestor, Hyman Rickover, James Bryant Conant, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Diane Ravitch, and various governmental commissions in the United States (e.g., the 1983 President’s Commission on Excellence in Education).

In 1938 a group of prominent educators led by William C. Bagley (1874–1946) began a movement that called for intellectual training in schools instead of “child growth and development.” Bagley argued that education requires hard work and attention as well as respect for genuine authority. He stressed the logical sequence of subjects and called for a “back to basics” movement to combat the lowering of academic standards. Bagley’s disciples argued that progressive educational tendencies and practices were too soft and placed less emphasis on dealing with educational basics such as mastery of the three R’s and established facts.

During the 1950s, essentialists returned in force and again exerted antiprogressive sentiments via the Council for Basic Education under the leadership of Arthur Bestor and others. Bestor wrote Educational Wastelands: The Retreat From Learning in Our Public Schools—a work that is also considered an essentialist manifesto. Joining Bestor in the attack on progressive ideas in public schools was Hyman Rickover, who deplored the lack of developed minds in the United States. He favored a European type of education that focused on the basics and would lead students to be better prepared to enter an intensive and rigorous professional or technological program of study. With greater emphasis on the basics, many believed schools in the United States could produce the kinds of minds capable of matching those of the Soviets, who had launched the artificial satellite Sputnik in 1957. As a result of this event and these educational concerns, the federal government passed significant reform legislation, the National Defense Education Act, in 1958.

The essentialist watershed event that brought the national government into the arena of public education in the United States was the issuance of A Nation at Risk (1983). This seminal government report—based on a study conducted at the direction of the president—noted that the government must identify and protect the nation’s interests in
Ethical Theories

Moral and ethical reasoning has always been a part of the school environment. Teachers and administrators are bound by professional practice codes that are grounded in ethical principles. Whether the adults in the schools really appreciate how ethical reasoning guides their thinking, the use of ethical principles becomes apparent as soon as teachers have to deal with racism, cheating, parental pressures, false accusations, or the rights of students or student groups. As the field of education has matured, so too has the emphasis on the use of ethical reasoning to guide the actions of teachers and adults as they manage the school environment. Educational reformers cannot agree on exactly which perspectives should guide what practitioners do, but almost all agree that ethical reasoning comes into play as soon as decisions must be made.

Ethical Perspectives

Those who focus on what it means to be ethical and on moral problems within the school environment (e.g., Robert Starratt) generally describe three different ethical perspectives: the ethic of critique, the ethic of justice, and the ethic of care. Each of these ethical approaches is grounded on certain assumptions about the nature of human existence and about how human beings ought to relate to one another.

The ethic of critique focuses on the nature of the school and the bureaucratic structures undergirding the educational system. Unfortunately, within the American educational system some students...