

Must Schools Be Custodial Institutions?

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Why do students look upon schools as oppressive? Forced schooling makes a captive audience. Perhaps a new look at compulsory attendance, especially at the high school level, is needed.

WE CAN talk all we like about how open-minded we are in denouncing the oppressiveness in American education. Yet we still cling to one 16th century innovation that was introduced by Luther as part of the Reformation and, later on, imported to the Massachusetts Bay Colony by Puritans. Today it endures as an accepted characteristic of public schools. "It" is compulsory school attendance.

Compulsory attendance laws provide the schools with more than students. They turn the schools into custodial institutions, with problems of discipline, violence and vandalism, unresponsiveness, and oppression. Custody of unwilling students is an improper role for secondary education. The abandonment of the student surveillance role of public schools would do much to relieve the related oppression.

A preliminary report of a study on "oppressiveness" in schools was made public in a recent issue of *Educational Leadership*.¹ An extensive survey of 10,731 students, as

well as the teachers and administrators who worked directly with those students, revealed "many students feel that schools are oppressive. . . . They seem to feel that the schools' program and policies tend to become increasingly restrictive as they go up the grades in school."²

The following generalizations were reported by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development study team:

1. Males feel that school is more oppressive than females do.
2. Non-whites feel that school is more oppressive than whites do.
3. Tenth grade students feel that school is more oppressive than students who are attending either lower or higher grades in school.³

The ASCD report is only one of many which indicate the need for restructuring our educational system, particularly at the secondary level, in order to serve the current needs of young people. Recent national studies which emphasize the necessity for school reform are the National Association of Secondary School Principals' *American Youth*

² *Ibid.*, p. 532.

³ *Ibid.*

¹ Jack R. Frymier, Robert E. Bills, Jill Russell, and Cathy Finch. "Are the Schools Oppressive?" *Educational Leadership* 32 (8): 531-36; May 1975.

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in the Mid-Seventies; *The Reform of Secondary Education*, by the National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education; *Report of the National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education*, commissioned by the Office of Education; *The Greening of the High School*, issued by IDEA-EFL; and *Youth: Transition to Adulthood*, by the President's Science Advisory Committee.

Six Changes Are Recommended

Terrel H. Bell, U.S. Commissioner of Education, has indicated all five national studies contain similar recommendations in at least six areas.⁴ The reports were unanimous in urging that high school reform was necessary in the following six areas:

1. Dejuvenilize the whole operation. Drop the 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. custodial function.

This recommendation—dejuvenilize the whole operation—addresses itself to the “oppression” we find in forced schooling. Compulsion and oppression in education go hand in hand. If compulsory attendance laws were modified to allow young people, age 15 or above, with the advice of their

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parents, to decide if the traditional educational process will satisfy their needs, the oppression reported by the ASCD study team would be greatly alleviated.

The level of school violence and vandalism has become so high in many of the nation's schools that in some cases schools

⁴ Terrel H. Bell. “The Pivotal Seat in Secondary Education.” *NASSP Bulletin* 59 (391): 14-15; May 1975.

can no longer carry out their primary function—to educate.

The Senate Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee in April 1975 released an alarming report on violence and vandalism in our public schools. The statistics from 1970 to 1973:

Assaults on school teachers	up 77.4%
Assaults on students	up 85.3%
Rapes and attempted rapes on campuses	up 40.1%
Homicides on school premises	up 18.5%
Number of weapons confiscated	up 54.4% ⁵

Cost in dollars can be roughly computed. The District of Columbia spends \$622,000 a year to replace broken windows. Chicago spends nearly \$3 million on school security alone; New York, \$10 million.⁶

In one urban school district 250 weapons were confiscated, and in others, suburban as well as urban, there were prostitution, blackmail, and drug rings.⁷

Closely related to the senate subcommittee report is the concern of the American public about the lack of discipline in the public schools. According to George Gallup, the public continues to view discipline as the number one problem of the public schools, as it has been five of the past six years.⁸

Many believe that pressure to keep unwilling or rebellious youngsters from dropping out of school has aggravated the discipline problem. The percentage of 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds leaving school has been cut by almost two-thirds over the past generation, prompting noted educator Irving Kristol to state:

The results are not very different from

⁵ "Violence and Vandalism Rise Seen by Senate Subcommittee Which Seeks Remedies." *The School Administrator* 32 (5): 11; May 1975.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ George Gallup. "Public Schools: Their Problems, Their Future." *NASSP Bulletin* 59 (391): 1-12; May 1975.

dropping a gang of juveniles into a children's playpen. They proceed to wreck the place and make everyone miserable.⁹

The National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education has urged lowering the mandatory attendance age to 14 and providing jobs so that frustrated young people can get out and go to work. Compulsory enrollment does not work anyway, the Commission argues, because "in many of the large city high schools, fewer than half the enrolled students attend regularly."¹⁰

2. Provide more opportunities, plus credit toward graduation, for students to work as volunteers in hospitals, day care centers, government agencies, and the like.

The report by the President's Science Advisory Committee views schools as providing "an incomplete context for the accomplishment of many important facets of maturation" and urges questioning of existing institutional settings, reforming existing structures, and, if needed, creating entirely new "alternative environments for the transition to adulthood."¹¹ The USOE's National Panel urges that "the unattained concept of the comprehensive high school [be replaced] with the more practical goal of providing comprehensive education through a variety of means, including schools."¹²

3. Offer greater flexibility in class scheduling so that students can spend part of the school day in a museum, attending a concert, sketching in the park, or engaging in other intellectually stimulating activities.

The President's Panel on Youth argues "it is time to reappraise the contexts of youth, to question even the most accepted and ordinary aspects of their institutional settings

⁹ "Violence in Schools: Now a Crackdown." *U.S. News & World Report* 78 (15): 38; April 14, 1975.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹¹ A. Harry Passow. "Reforming America's High Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan* 56 (9): 587; May 1975.

¹² *Ibid.*

and to consider the reformation of existing structures and, if necessary, the creation of new ones."¹³

4. Open the schools to researchers seeking answers to basic questions—how students learn, what makes teachers effective, which instructional approaches work

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best with disadvantaged students, handicapped students, and so on.

The case is made by all of the national studies that reform in secondary education is needed. Such reform will come about only through a thorough analysis of the schooling and socializing processes in education settings. Professional researchers and practitioners must cooperatively conduct such analyses.

5. Reduce the age and cultural isolation of students by giving them opportunities to meet people of all ages and cultural backgrounds—in school and out. Bring in artists, artisans, and business and professional people to work with students. Let students visit them in their own working environments.

Our schools are reflections of the goals and values of their communities. The two cannot be divorced. The nature of a community determines to a large extent what goes on in the school. Conservative in nature, their administrators and teachers become ingrained in ritualistic 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. practices. These practices are slow to change, even though, both from within and without there is great discontent with present forced schooling practices. *The Reform of Secondary Education* study recommends that every school, with community participation, formulate its own statement of goals, post

these conspicuously, and then hold all parties accountable for their attainment.¹⁴

6. Develop more work-study arrangements with local businesses and nonprofit organizations to broaden student awareness of the adult world.

The modification of compulsory attendance laws will allow young people to seek “real world” educational experiences if they so desire. But first these experiences in the form of viable employment must be available. Unless local management and labor take up the challenge—and this seems highly unlikely—it will probably be necessary for Congress to appropriate funds for public work programs to alleviate the problem of unemployed youth.

One model for youth public work programs might be the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930's. The CCC has been called the most successful social experiment of the century. No act of Congress has been so widely accepted and praised by the American public. We have much the same need today for conservation work; and we have thousands of young people, age 15 and above, who might choose to do this work for their own personal growth and for the nation's benefit. Not only do needs exist in conservation but also in recreation areas, hospitals, and support services for the military.

No one would claim that providing full employment for these young people, whose needs are not being met by the schools, would automatically solve the multiple social problems of the schools and their communities. We all realize these problems are complex and there is no one solution. However, full employment would have a highly beneficial effect.

Why are the schools deemed oppressive by students? Forced schooling makes a captive audience. Too many students are in school because they are constrained to be there. For those of us who oppose the dehumanization and oppression of youth, a first step must be the elimination of forced schooling. □

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 590.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 588.

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