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# Youth Truth



Official 'Zine of Americans for a Society Free from Age Restrictions [www.asfar.org](http://www.asfar.org)

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## Ask Not What School Can Do For You

*Sandra Buckley*

Why should students attend school? For as long as we have had compulsory education, there have been truant officers. Levels of enforcement have varied from school to school, from time to time, ranging from “draconian” to “lax.” But throughout the past century and into the present, the belief that “kids should be in school” has remained.

This fall, American schoolkids are experiencing a massive “crackdown” on truancy. Local media outlets started broadcasting this news before school began. Warnings of the consequences of “unexcused absences” were hard to miss. (One district sent cops to the homes of students to deliver anti-truancy material and talk to parents personally.)<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the penalty is a failing grade, or being held back—but now, fewer absences will earn a student that penalty.<sup>2</sup> One school district boasts an automatic dialing system able to “notify as many as 40,000 parents each afternoon” of their children’s absences.”<sup>3</sup> Some security systems at school entrances are equipped with “card swipe” slots, to record attendance: students must swipe to enter, and the ID holder’s stored photograph may be displayed on a screen (so a security guard can make sure the students are using their own IDs).<sup>4</sup> Some districts are suggesting incentives for good attendance, like tickets to sporting events or concerts.<sup>5</sup> And, of course, many school districts vow to prosecute parents of children who don’t show up.<sup>6</sup>

The warnings seldom focus on the legal consequences to the truants themselves, perhaps because many kids who hate and avoid school believe that jail couldn’t be much worse. But kids can be arrested and detained for school absence,<sup>7</sup> and it’s already happening this year.<sup>8</sup> On August 26 in New Orleans, for instance, overzealous police rounded up more than 80 students who were delayed by transit problems; the students remained in custody all day.<sup>9</sup>

Why the big crackdown? In the past, the reasons given for enforcing school attendance laws were always the same. Children need to learn, and they learn in school. Parents don’t have time to look after them, and it’s too dangerous for children to be left on their own, without supervision. Kids without scheduled activities and discipline are liable to turn to drugs to fill the void, or get involved in crime, ruining their own lives and the lives of others.

We might challenge these claims. We might argue that kids learn best *outside* of schools, and that the risks of allowing kids freedom and autonomy are exaggerated. But we have to admit that the pro-school bunch seems well-meaning, truly believing that promoting—and even forcing—school attendance is in the best interest of kids as well as others.

But this year, we are hearing a new reason for kids to go to school: *to help save the school*. An August 29 article from an Athens, Georgia newspaper reveals the real motive for the attendance crackdown. The No Child Left Behind Act includes student attendance as one measure by which a school’s performance is judged. Schools that don’t meet the standard—a 95% attendance rate—face “sanctions” (or, after several years of failure, “possible take-overs”).<sup>10</sup>

In Georgia, with around 2000 schools, 536 failed to meet national standards *because* of attendance requirements. In a meeting with state senators, Georgia’s school chief Kathy Cox said some schools “had high test scores but flunked because of the attendance problem.” Her solution: “Georgia’s chronic school truancy problem must be fixed.” She pledged to work with parents and law enforcement. One senator was surprised to find that a good school could still “get a red flag” if a few students didn’t show up.

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# Redirect

## God Is Welcome in Schools

A piece at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/commentary.aspx?id=11563> tries to set the record straight on the U.S. Supreme Court's 1963 decision in *Abington Township School District v. Schempp*, the case often said to have "kicked God out of schools."

## Is Education Worthwhile?

A letter to the editor of the *Salt Lake City Tribune* at [http://www.sltrib.com/2003/Aug/08302003/public\\_f/88214.asp](http://www.sltrib.com/2003/Aug/08302003/public_f/88214.asp) questions the value of education.

## Danger on Paper

The issue of kids being suspended or arrested for fictional writing or poetry with violent themes is tackled at <http://www.wired.com/news/conflict/0,2100,60144,00.html>.

## Zero Tolerance

"Goodness sakes, it's really awful—now almost everything's unlawful!" cries an opinion piece at <http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=12352>, and proceeds to list thirteen "zero tolerance horror stories."

## Gatto Sounds Off

"Against School," a new article by John Taylor Gatto, author of *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*, is in the September issue of *Harper's*. The article is not yet online, but free access to older articles is often found at <http://www.harpers.org/>, so keep checking. If Gatto's article turns out to be one of them, that's where you'll find it.

## Don't Ask, Don't Tell In School?

Can schools require gay students to stay in the closet? An editorial at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/commentary.aspx?id=11848> concludes that the best solution is to allow students to speak freely, but with "civility and respect."

## Steal From the Young, Give to the Old

An editorial at <http://www.reason.com/links/links070903.shtml> argues that the image of a poor, elderly widow, doing without food to pay for needed medication, is being used to provide new benefits to the richest segment of the population, at the expense of the "under 18-set who will help foot the bill."

## Amber Analyzed

A discussion of the restrictions on free expression hidden in the "Amber Alert Bill" appears at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/analysis.aspx?id=11865>.

# Letters

## Negative Tolerance

(An America Online page at <http://members.aol.com/bdspd/news/resource/youth.html> telling that, in Washington State, any minor in a vehicle with *another* minor who is drinking or in possession of alcohol can also be charged with "possession" and lose his or her driver's license, prompted the following.)

A few years ago there was a campaign to make sure there was one non-drinker in a party who could drive. But if the non-drinker is going to get done as well, where's the incentive to stay sober and drive safely? Laurence

MADD and the other anti-youth, anti-alcohol groups complain that the designated driver concept applied to people under the magic age "dilutes" the "no-use" message they try to push. This seems to be a common thread among "underage anything" prevention groups. Harm reduction is seen as being just as bad or a contributor to the most extreme form of the behavior. Personally, I see this as them trying to make "underage whatever" as dangerous as possible, further justifying their position and feeding some policymakers insatiable appetite for newer and harsher laws. Pedro P

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# News Links

## Forced Pledging Not Okay

U.S. District Judge Lewis Babcock ruled in August that, while group recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance can be held in Colorado schools, *requiring* students to participate violates their First Amendment rights. See <[http://www.insidedenver.com/drmn/state/article/0,1299,DRMN\\_21\\_2186736,00.html](http://www.insidedenver.com/drmn/state/article/0,1299,DRMN_21_2186736,00.html)>.

## Alabama County Puts Away Paddles

On August 26th, Mobile County's school board voted to ban corporal punishment in all 101 schools in its jurisdiction. All of the links to this story, however, seem to have mysteriously stopped working or disappeared! A brief news summary at <[http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/wuwf/news.newsmain?action=article&ARTICLE\\_ID=538805](http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/wuwf/news.newsmain?action=article&ARTICLE_ID=538805)> is (as we publish) still there; the paragraph at the bottom confirms that this really did happen.

## Not Literate, But Maybe Functional?

Over twenty Lawrence, Massachusetts teachers were placed on unpaid leave for failing a basic literacy test, but superintendent Wilfredo T. Laboy is still getting his \$156,560 salary after failing the test *three times*. The state's Education Commissioner has praised Laboy, however, for his "excellent" leadership of the district. Laboy complains, at <<http://www.web1.whdh.com/news/articles/local/A17309/>>, that he can't see "the congruence of what I do here every day and this stupid test."

## School Bus Hazards

Several school bus accidents occurred around the U.S. during the first week of school—a few involving fatalities—but only one so far caused the death of a bus passenger. Shawna Ward, 14, of Fillmore, Illinois died August 27 of internal injuries after the 70-year-old driver veered off the road and the bus rolled down an embankment. According to <[http://www.news-tribune.com/stories/083003/wor\\_0830030031.asp](http://www.news-tribune.com/stories/083003/wor_0830030031.asp)>, the driver and the 14 other students on the bus all sustained injuries; one remains in critical condition.

## Technical Difficulties

The opening of a Steelton, Pennsylvania elementary school was delayed after the discovery that part of the library's ceiling had collapsed; according to <<http://www.thewgalchannel.com/learningmatters/2430742/detail.html>>, the large falling chunks had crushed a chair. And special education students in Detroit spent their first day back at school cleaning dust left behind by an asbestos removal crew, reports <<http://www.clickondetroit.com/education/2432247/detail.html>>.

## Changing the Rules

Most New York high-school students failed the Regents math exam in June, so the state's Education Commission altered the scoring system to allow more to pass, reports <<http://www.nysut.org/newyorkteacher/2003-2004/030910math.html>>. In North Carolina, school officials' bonuses are tied to drop-out rates, so "drop-out" was redefined to exclude students working toward GEDs, says <<http://www.wral.com/news/2430140/detail.html>>.

## ABCs of NCLB

The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* explains the basics of the "No Child Left Behind" Act at <[http://www.seattlepi.nwsources.com/local/137200\\_q&a29.html](http://www.seattlepi.nwsources.com/local/137200_q&a29.html)>.

## Fear Was In the Air ...

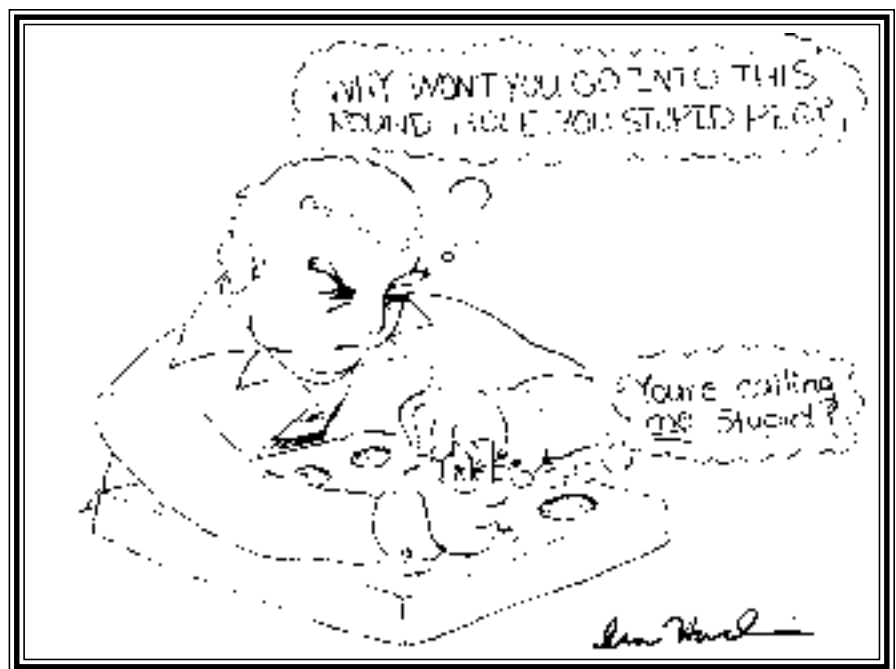
as schools got their "grades" in August. News wires buzzed with lists of schools on "watch lists", or tales of schools scrambling to arrange placements for students in other schools, having failed to meet new national standards. One typical report is at <<http://www.ajc.com/metro/content/metro/gwinnett/0803/25nochild.html>> (or search "school" and "failure" to see many more similar stories).

## Save Our State—Postpone School

Michigan students, parents, and tourist trade leaders all agree: school should start after Labor Day! (School officials don't.) See <<http://www.woodtv.com/Global/story.asp?S=1415233&nav=0RceHdKT>>.

## The Educator

## Toon



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# News Links

## **Mississippi Rehabilitation**

Roach and rodent infestation. Hours of forced exercise carrying mattresses, tires, or logs. Being pepper sprayed, hogtied, chained to a pole, locked in a room with no toilet. Forced to eat one's own vomit. This is just some of what was endured by inmates of Mississippi juvenile detention centers, as told at <<http://www.clarionledger.com/news/0307/15/m02.html>>, <<http://www.thejacksonchannel.com/news/2334525/detail.html>>, and <<http://www.newsobserver.com/24hour/nation/story/949950p-6642921c.html>>. In response to the reports, three institution officials have been assigned to other jobs.

## **Mother Regrets Turning to State**

Autumn Campbell of Alabama, now 15, was molested at age 6 by a neighbor, who was sentenced only to probation, and her trauma resurfaced six years later when her grandmother died. After her third suicide attempt, Autumn's mother, whose health insurance didn't cover long-term counseling, asked the state for help. The state responded by sending Autumn to a juvenile correctional facility for eight months. Her story is at <[http://www.al.com/news/birminghamnews/index.ssf?/xml/story.ssf/html\\_standard.xml?/base/news/1060507477116420.xml](http://www.al.com/news/birminghamnews/index.ssf?/xml/story.ssf/html_standard.xml?/base/news/1060507477116420.xml)>.

## **Young Med Student Seems to Fit In**

Sho Yano, a 12-year-old medical student at the University of Chicago, seems to be getting along just fine with his classes and his fellow students. One professor, according to <<http://foxnews.com/story/0,2933,95544,00.html>>, "sometimes forgets that Sho is younger than his classmates."

## **Older High School Student Causes Concern**

In Mississippi, parents, school officials, and even a senator are all upset that 20-year-old Anthony Evans is attending high school, and are trying to find a way to get him out. Evans, says <<http://www.wlbt.com/Global/story.asp?S=1416418&nav=2CSfHeLo>>, did get in trouble for making a bomb threat once, but more troubling is the fact that a "full-grown man" can be in classes with "more protected children."

## **Principal Requires Medical Exam**

Last April, several 8th graders skipped school to attend a party. When word of the party reached the school's principal, she called the absent students into her office, demanding that they immediately be tested for pregnancy and sexually-transmitted disease or face suspension. Some of the students have sued the school, according to <<http://www.cnn.com/2003/LAW/07/08/student.pregnancy.tests/index.html>>.

## **Cross-Wearing Aide Reinstated**

A federal court decided on August 28 that Brenda Nichols could wear her cross necklace outside her clothing and still keep her job as a teacher's aide in a Pennsylvania school. According to <<http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/news.aspx?id=11875>>, the judge ruled that an "uncertified teacher's aide" was not a state employee and could be exempted from the school's policy.

## **Gay-Friendly School Expanded**

The Harvey Milk School, opened nearly twenty years ago in New York City to provide an alternative to gay students facing harassment, reopens this fall after receiving \$3.2 million from the city to expand its facilities. Civil libertarians have criticized the school for promoting "segregation", but school officials argue at <<http://www.cnn.com/2003/EDUCATION/08/25/sprj.sch.gay.school.ap/>> that the school, which accepts students of *any* sexual orientation, is essential to ensure gay students' "right to a safe education."

## **Student Shocked by Yearbook Ad**

In La Mesa Junior High School in California, having a toy gun, a squirt gun, or anything that looks *at all* like a gun is likely to get a student suspended. So last June when school yearbooks were distributed, one student was amazed to see a half-page advertisement for the NRA in its pages, including its logo of "an eagle clutching two rifles in its talons." According to <<http://www.jointogether.org/gv/news/summaries/reader/0,2061,563913,00.html>>, school Superintendent Robert C. Lee sees no problem (or irony) in the ad's appearance in the yearbook.

## **Utah Teacher Spoke Too Freely**

Some parents are complaining about a teacher's remarks in an honors English class in Orem High School. Ruth McAtee urged her students to be "open-minded about sexual orientation and same-sex marriage," comments which some parents viewed as a threat to their families' religious beliefs. Although the school is defending the veteran teacher, <<http://www.sltrib.com/2003/Aug/08272003/utah/87289.asp>> says that they have assigned a "mentor" to monitor her lesson plans, and have allowed five of the 30 students to transfer into other honors English classes.

## **Cameras In School? Why Not?**

An article at <<http://www.usatoday.com/usatoday/20030811/5396054s.htm>> praises the brilliant idea of installing digital cameras to keep tabs on students (and teachers) in schools. The piece focuses on Mississippi schools, which are among the biggest webcam users. "Americans are on camera ... at work, on the road, at public events. Why should schools be different?" (Maybe because students aren't in school voluntarily?)

## A Dry Homecoming

One of the lucky ones is coming home. Honorably discharged. Possibly injured. Or perhaps only on a 30-day leave. At any rate, the family is rejoicing. They're happy to see their child alive again, in whatever condition, for however long it lasts.

Neighbors and town officials help plan the homecoming event, which soon turns into a giant block party. The mayor arranges for a microphone and loudspeakers so he can publicly thank the local hero. Area businesses donate balloons, banners and flags. And a liquor store offers two cases of champagne.

But after discussion, the champagne is rejected. The returning soldier, after all, is only 20 years old and, strictly speaking, isn't supposed to be drinking it.

This soldier who has endured months of deprivation, carrying heavy gear in ruthless heat, is not allowed to relax like other Americans after a long hard day at work. This soldier who has faced bullets and bombs must not be given a beverage that other Americans enjoy—because it is not good for him. This soldier whom we trust to defend our freedoms can't be trusted with one of those freedoms—because he is not old enough.

You may say, no law is going to stop these soldiers from having a drink, any more than the law stopped them *before* they went into the military, any more than it stops any other young person under the age of 21. And in the case of returning war heroes, plenty of bartenders and cops would probably be willing to bend the law in their case. Call it civil disobedience.

But that is not civil disobedience. Civil disobedience is a public act of protest designed to make others aware of an unjust law, and harness public opinion to change it. People who practice civil disobedience have the expectation of being punished for it and accept the personal consequences, while publicly rejecting the law that imposes them. Breaking a law privately, discreetly, with the expectation or hope of *avoiding* the penalty, is *not* civil disobedience. It is merely lawbreaking.

Americans tolerate vast amounts of lawbreaking because of laws such as the drinking age, rather than taking the personal risk of opposing such laws and going to the trouble of trying to change them. But this does not mean that no one is harmed by these laws, which have labeled untold numbers of people as criminals simply for doing what others in our society have a legal right to do. Police and justice officials often use their "discretion" in "handling" such cases; if the offender is wealthy, an "A" student, or a war hero, they may be given a wink and a warning. Those who *are* prosecuted, the less-favored ones, see the injustice, and become more angry and alienated.

Even worse, perhaps, is the general perception that it is okay to break the law when you do not agree with it, that if a law is "stupid" or shouldn't apply to you, it is all right to ignore it. The more laws we have that unnecessarily interfere with our freedom, the less we are inclined to honor the law in general.

The drinking age is offensive to young people. Based upon a single piece of data from the whole of their lives—their age—it places them into a category of people who are not to be trusted with the rights granted to others. Even if they get away with violating the law and enjoying some of the forbidden freedoms of adults, they still know that those freedoms *are* forbidden to them. They know that no matter how they have lived their lives, no matter what they have accomplished, our society will still refuse to see them as worthy of the rights of adults.

That is why the drinking age is offensive, not only to returning war heroes, nor just to young people who pay taxes and work to support families. It is offensive to all young people. When a law offends us, it is our duty as Americans to do more than simply ignore it. We must honor the concept of law by working to change unjust laws. We at home must also be soldiers, fighting for our nation.

## News Links

### Parents Don't Know Best?

Wisconsin is one of seven states where underage patrons can be served alcoholic drinks in restaurants or bars if parents are present and approve. State Representative John Ainsworth wants to change all that. His new bill, described at <http://www.msnbc.com/news/959189.asp>, would stop parents from helping their kids to drink responsibly until they're 18 (too late, John!). It would also eliminate the exemption to the drinking age for young people who marry someone over 21.

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# News Links

## Donating Age Struck Down

A federal panel of judges found many portions of last year's campaign finance law unconstitutional on May 2, among them the prohibition on contributions by people under 18. Look carefully and you'll see the good news hidden in [http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-05-02-court-soft-money\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-05-02-court-soft-money_x.htm).

## Germany's Universal Suffrage Plan

Germany's Parliament is considering eliminating the voting age, but the plan, described at <http://www.scotlandonsunday.com/international.cfm?id=960722003> is certainly controversial, even for youth rights advocates, allowing parents to vote on behalf of their children until they are able to vote themselves.

## British Reconsidering Voting Age

England's Electoral Commission is examining the possibility of lowering the nation's current voting age of 18 to 16, reports <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/apathy/story/0,12822,998082,00.html>.

## Baltimore Youth Have Ally

Baltimore city council member Sheila Dixon vows that she will work to lower the city's voting age to 16, according to <http://washingtontimes.com/metro/20030826-104300-8335r.htm>.

## Head Start Goes "Faith-Based"

A bill allowing religious groups to receive federal funding for the early-childhood education program Head Start, *even* when they hire staff on the basis of religious affiliation, passed the U.S. House by one vote on July 25. Democrats unanimously opposed the bill, and 12 Republicans also voted against it. Senators pledge to work to change the bill to satisfy both sides of the aisle, but according to the article at <http://www.philly.com/ml/inquirer/living/education/6387467.htm>, President Bush is likely to veto the bill if the "religious-hiring idea" is removed.

## Flexibility or Federal Funding?

No state's child welfare system currently meets federal standards, and like schools, all may face loss of federal funding if they don't shape up. But Pennsylvania's child welfare agencies are already denied some funding simply because their definition of child abuse disagrees slightly with that of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. According to <http://www.pennlive.com/newsflash/pa/index.ssf?base/news-6/10622540416561.xml>, DHHS includes the "imminent risk of emotional harm" in its definition, while for Pennsylvania, the harm must already be documented, not merely imminent. State officials say their definition allows them to concentrate on the most serious cases, and that including the "imminent" category would cost the state more than it would gain in federal funds anyway.

## Reducing Class Size, Florida's Way

Florida's Dept. of Education, required by a new law to reduce "class size" in the state's schools, has ordered a reduction in the size of *classrooms*. As reported at <http://www.venicegondolier.com/NewsArchive3/083003/tp3vn12.htm>, the new directive affects numerous planned construction and renovation projects.

## The Show Can Go On

A law passed in May threatened the jobs of two Missouri single mothers working as exotic dancers by raising the age for nude dancing to 19. U.S. District Judge Ortrie Smith stopped the enforcement of the law on August 27, one day before it was to take effect, says <http://www.firstamendment.org/news.aspx?id=11876>.

## Intending to Have Sex Also Illegal

Though they never actually "did it," two Wisconsin 14-year-olds are now charged with "attempted second degree sexual assault" and "fourth degree sexual assault." From <http://www.jsonline.com/news/metro/aug03/163688.asp>, it seems their mistake was not acting *embarrassed* when caught together in bed, instead brazenly admitting that they planned to have sex.

## Florida DCF Developments

An article at [http://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/content/auto/epaper/editions/saturday/news\\_f305227ec64e119f002a.html](http://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/content/auto/epaper/editions/saturday/news_f305227ec64e119f002a.html) reviews the record of Florida's Department of Children and Families over the past year, since Jerry Regier was appointed by Governor Jeb Bush to straighten out DCF's problems. Another item focuses on Regier's recent hiring of James H. K. Bruner as "special assistant to the general counsel" of DCF. At <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-locbruner30083003aug30,0,3904706.story?coll=orl-news-headlines> we are told that Bruner's *resume* lists his religion as "Episcopalian (Born Again)" and notes that his father was "President G. H. W. Bush's pastor ... for 30 years"—more information than one expects to find on a lawyer's resume in this day and age. Some have called DCF's new legal assistant intolerant and a religious extremist, but Regier says Bruner's job won't involve policymaking.

## Court: Sex Info Not Pornographic

A Vermont law prohibiting online publishing of sexually explicit material can't be used to ban information about legal and health issues related to sex, says an August 27 federal appeals court ruling. The law, according to <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/computing/20030828-1411-vermontinternetsex.html> was probably never meant to be enforced against sex information sites.

## Ohio Mall Mistrusts Youth

In September, people under 16 will have to find some older person to take them to the Dayton Mall on Friday or Saturday nights. According to <http://www.daytondailynews.com/localnews/content/localnews/daily/0830mall.html>, the mall's policy originally required a parent or guardian to escort groups of no more than five children; in response to public complaints they agreed to allow *anyone* 21 or older to accompany up to eight kids, and to allow parents under 21 to be given special passes to shop with their kids.

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# News Links

## Arizona Twins Raised in Cages

On August 23, Phoenix police discovered two five-year-old brothers confined in filthy makeshift cages in a roach-infested home; both were unable to communicate. The article at <http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/news/article/0826cagedkids26.html> reports that the boys may have been kept in the cages for four of their five years, and their situation had been reported to Child Protective Services as early as September 2001.

## Father Tortures Boy

A Connecticut father was arrested after he allegedly forced his 8-year-old son to do eight hours of exercise with a sock in his mouth and eat his own vomit. The boy's mother didn't approve of her husband's sadistic behavior, according to [http://www.zwire.com/site/news/cfm?newsid=9948443&BRD=985&PAG=461&dept\\_id=161556&rft=6](http://www.zwire.com/site/news/cfm?newsid=9948443&BRD=985&PAG=461&dept_id=161556&rft=6), but only called police after he pushed her into their baby's crib, breaking it, when she tried to intervene to stop the boy's punishment.

## "Petite" Woman Beats Son to Death

Finally escaping from his mother, with whom he'd been "fighting" for over an hour, 14-year-old Matthew Calbi of New Jersey managed to lock himself in a room and call 911. After emergency surgery, Matthew died on August 18 of a ruptured neck artery; internal hemorrhaging was also present in his head and right eye. According to <http://www.nj.com/news/ledger/index.ssf?/base/news-10/1061270075219780.xml>, New Jersey child welfare had a file on the mother for over two years because of her heavy drinking and other child abuse incidents.

## Girl Thrown Away

Stephanie Ramos, blind and disabled with cerebral palsy, lived in a filthy "hellhole" with a woman paid \$3800 a month for the three foster kids she kept. When she died, the woman put her in a garbage bag, left her at the curb, and reported her missing, says <http://www.nydailynews.com/front/story/99911p-90306c.html>.

## Father Beat, Mother Starved

Edith Gonzales was a healthy 3-year-old five months ago when she arrived from Ecuador to live with her natural parents in Brooklyn, New York. But when she was admitted to the hospital on August 25, says <http://www.nydailynews.com/front/story/112764p-101784c.html>, she weighed 16 lbs. and had a skull fracture. She died two days later.

## Kyshawn's Third Strike

While his mother was serving in the army, two-year-old Kyshawn Stewart, back home in Georgia, was being abused. Taken from and returned to his stepfather's custody twice this summer, he died on August 14. Who's at fault? See different answers at <http://www.ajc.com/metro/content/metro/dekalb/0803/21toddler.html>, <http://www.ajc.com/metro/content/metro/dekalb/0803/25kayshawn.html>, and at <http://www.ajc.com/opinion/content/opinion/0803/21dfacs.html>.

## Boy Killed by Exorcism

After Milwaukee mother Patricia Cooper joined Faith Temple Church of Apostolic Faith last spring, church members began holding frequent "prayer sessions" with her autistic 8-year-old son Torrance to heal him of demonic possession. A neighbor said one of the sessions, held in Cooper's apartment, seemed to consist of "church members taking turns striking the boy," quotes an article at <http://www.jsonline.com/news/metro/aug03/164521.asp>. Torrance died at the August 22 session held at the pastor's home. His death from "asphyxia due to external chest compression" is ruled a homicide, reports <http://www.jsonline.com/news/metro/aug03/164682.asp>, but the pastor insists church members "didn't do nothing wrong."

## Kids Still Die In Cars

As of August 25, according to [http://www.abcnews.go.com/wire/US/ap20030825\\_1064.html](http://www.abcnews.go.com/wire/US/ap20030825_1064.html), at least 36 children had died in 2003 from being left in cars in the heat. One three-year-old recently died while her mother played an internet game.

## Three Angry Dads

Within recent weeks, three fathers have been reported to have shot their kids. Manuel Gehring of New Hampshire told police he'd killed his daughter Sarah, 14, and son Philip, 11, after watching Fourth of July fireworks with them, according to <http://www.sunspot.net/news/bal-te.search01sep01,0,3891777.story?coll=bal-home-headlines>. Detroit father Anthony Bailey allegedly shot his four children on August 19 while his wife was at work; from <http://www.detnews.com/2003/metro/0308/22/a01-250410.htm> we learn that three of the children died. And on September 4, Evan Nash, 14, was killed by his father at his California high school, says <http://www.msnbc.com/news/962466.asp?cp1=1>. All three fathers were upset about divorce and custody issues.

## Kids In the Back!

A Maryland couple was arrested for letting their 12-year-old son and a friend ride in the trunk of their car "just for fun." The boys were "red faced and sweating," says [http://abcnews.go.com/sections/GMA/US/GMA030723Locked\\_in\\_trunk.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/GMA/US/GMA030723Locked_in_trunk.html). The parents spent two days in jail and could be sentenced to 15 years.

## Mom Plays Doctor, Loses Child

An Ohio woman couldn't afford surgery to remove her son's extra finger and tried to do it herself, says <http://www.daytondailynews.com/localnews/content/localnews/daily/0830ohfinger.html>. The baby with a "red and cut" finger was taken away; the regretful mother, sentenced to a year's probation. Seems sad.

## Agencies Let Kids Down

Connecticut's child welfare agencies are criticized for taking too long to petition to terminate parental rights after repeated abuse. The Aug. 7 report is summarized at [http://www.zwire.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=9981939&BRD=985&PAG=461&dept\\_id=161556&rft=6](http://www.zwire.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=9981939&BRD=985&PAG=461&dept_id=161556&rft=6).

## School-Related Books

It's hard for me to read books about school. They all start with the assumption that kids should be required to receive some kind of schooling. Even those that promote free schools, home-schooling, or other alternative forms of education take for granted that all students must be taught some basic academic subjects before they can become full, independent citizens. As I read, I find myself arguing out loud, as if the book or its author could hear me. "If only education were not compulsory, such and such a problem would not exist!"

Oh, well. Back in the real world, school's back in session, so here are a few fairly recent selections on that miserable topic. Feel free to consider these for your next (sigh) book report ...

The subtitle says it all. This compact paperback goes to great lengths to convince readers of its thesis: homework is bad. The arguments against the practice include:

—By assigning homework, schools turn over their own responsibility to educate to families, enabling them to blame parents and students for failures.

—The notion that long hours of study lead to increased academic achievement is not supported by research.

—Students who lack resources in their homes and neighborhoods (such as good libraries, books and computers at home, quiet surroundings, adequate heat and lighting, parents who are both available and competent to help) are placed at a greater disadvantage by homework requirements.

—Learning—or helping others to learn—is not an activity that can be done effectively by people already tired after a full day.

—Because of homework, families' limited "quality time" together is too often characterized by battles, frustration, and despair.

—Homework makes school subjects stressful and unpalatable.

—Homework promotes cheating.

—Homework deprives kids of opportunities to pursue their own studies and interests, to learn non-academic skills (such as domestic tasks), to develop social skills, or simply to "find themselves" through introspection and daydreaming.

—It is wrong to *require* people—students included—to bear the pressures of their "day job" constantly, during what should be their own time.

The book is tightly focused on the single issue of homework. In addition to stories of individual students and families, the authors cite research studies, expert opinions, and common-sense arguments to make their case. There is also a chapter on

Kralovec, Etta and Buell, John. *The end of homework : how homework disrupts families, overburdens children, and limits learning.* Boston : Beacon Press, 2000.

the "history of homework," a topic rarely seen in other books. Unlike many books on schools or education in general, which often repeat each other's facts, statistics and ideas, *The End of Homework* is one of a kind.

Despite the narrow scope of the book, it does contain a few passages that are applicable to broader youth-related issues:

Self-discipline ... can be acquired in a variety of ways. Whether it can be imparted through assignments imposed by teachers is an open question, since by definition self-discipline is the ability to take control of one's own actions.

The authors quote from a 1980 study:

"... it is difficult to say whether people know more because they attended school longer or attended school longer because they were more capable."

Finally they offer their suspicions about the motives of a society that continues to support homework for students in the face of all of their arguments against it:

... it seems intended to accustom them, early on, to the long working days that characterize our current political economy. Those ... who cannot even as children successfully carry out their perpetual tasks can then be held up as examples, with their very failures cited to rationalize and justify their continuing marginalized status within the U.S. economy.

*The End of Homework* is clear and forceful, well-organized and readable. If you hate homework, this is the book for you.

Pope, Denise Clark. *"Doing school" : how we are creating a generation of stressed-out, materialistic, and miseducated students*. New Haven : Yale University Press, 2001.

## Sue's Review

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Case histories of particular children (as compiled by adults) have always proven to be compelling reading (for adults). Such books are often exposés of problems among certain groups of youth, bringing to adult readers the "voices" of kids in ghetto schools and neighborhoods, mental institutions or correctional facilities, their tragic situations presented through the comforting filter of the author who observes and writes about them. Such authors are practicing field anthropology, but are seldom trained for such endeavors. Their results may be of value, but they are also suspect; one must always ask if their interpretations might be colored by their own world views.

In *"Doing School,"* author Denise Pope chose to investigate kids that most adults wouldn't normally feel sorry for: five devoted, high-performing students in a suburban high school in California. Over the course of a semester, the author "shadowed" each student, accompanying them to classes and elsewhere, observing and interviewing them. Pope never states exactly when this research took place; I gather, from the dates of some citations and other references in the book, that it was between 1995 and 1998. Nor does she make clear whether all five students were observed during the same semester, or if she spent five semesters on the project. Either way, the total amount of time she spent with each student is not specified.

At any rate, the stories are fun to read and somewhat revealing, inviting comparisons with the reader's own school experience. One can certainly sympathize with these struggling students, especially the two for whom English is not their first language, and who must also work to help support their families.

Pope wanted to know: How do these five students accomplish and define their own academic success? How does it affect them? She identifies some common elements:

**Making connections.** In a high-school population of over 2000, these five students were remembered and referred to the author by school officials; that's how they came to be profiled in the book. "Successful students learned to devise various strategies ... to please those in power positions." Some strategies were as simple as "kissing up," but the students also learned to behave very differently in different classrooms, becoming "chameleons ... to meet the diverse expectations of their teachers." Intervention of parents on their behalf was sometimes helpful, too. Some (like one who had access to material from NASA not available to the general public for a class presentation) were just lucky.

**Complaining about grades.** Four of the five occasionally appealed to teachers for higher grades, usually getting them.

**Multi-tasking.** Four of the five students regularly worked on homework or studied for one class while paying only partial attention to a lecture in another, and utilized various techniques to conceal this activity from the teacher.

**Cheating.** Four of the five resorted to some type of cheating; all four had some regrets about it.

**Sacrificing sleep, health, or mental health.** Three of the five were seriously sleep-deprived. Four experienced stress-related health problems; one suffered a "breakdown." The two male students both inflicted damage on the school at one point, one punching and denting a locker, the other kicking holes in a wall—actions for which they could have been suspended.

**Sacrificing ethical principles.** All five students regretted, to some extent, the shortcuts, manipulation, and competitive ploys they felt they had to employ to achieve their goals.

Pope didn't count "sacrificing academic or other interests" as a shared characteristic among the five, but her stories reveal this as another downside of high school achievement. Encouraged by parents or others, the students sometimes chose to take classes of less interest because they'd look good on a transcript, help with college entrance exams, or be easy enough to improve their grade point averages. And time pressures limited all the students' involvement in leisure or social activities.

Pope began the book by telling how she "fell in love with Walt Whitman" in high school, and worries that the demands and schedules of students such as these make it difficult for them to experience passion for any subject, let alone pursue it on their own. She does admit, with a note of sadness, that the prioritizing, multi-tasking and "interpersonal" (psychological manipulation) skills these students are mastering may serve them well in future corporate or professional careers.

All in all, *"Doing School"* is an interesting collection of case histories. It covers only five students, and its data and conclusions must be taken with a grain of salt. But toward the goal of understanding student success and failure, changing schools and society to better serve young people—well, it's a start.

Apple, Michael W. *Educating the "right" way : markets, standards, God, and inequality.*  
New York : RoutledgeFalmer, 2001.

My libertarian colleagues in the youth rights movement won't be happy with this book. Written in a scholarly style, it's still an unabashedly left-wing tract, strongly against privatization of education and other "rightist" trends. If the author hoped that the book's title might entice right-wing readers to buy it, he undeceives them as early as page 8, when he reveals his own "place on the political/educational spectrum."

The 306 pages are divided into three nearly equal parts. The first 100 pages provides a broad introduction to four political viewpoints whose adherents have, to some extent, joined forces to push for this country's current educational trends:

... neoliberal marketized solutions to educational problems, neoconservative intellectuals who want a "return" to higher standards and a "common culture," authoritarian populist religious fundamentalists ... deeply worried about secularity and the preservation of their own traditions, and particular fractions of the professionally oriented new middle class ... committed to the ideology and techniques of accountability, measurement, and "management."

Long portions of the discussion of these four groups don't mention education at all, covering instead the origins and more general political focus of each group (the fourth group is rather neglected, being the least interesting of the bunch). That they are able to come together on issues of vouchers and other forms of privatization may be due to the shared assumption

... that only *certain* kinds of persons were actually capable of exercising the rights of freedom .... Freedom and property became intertwined, and economic independence became the identificatory sign of being worthy .... Freedom cannot be extended to those who by their very nature are dependent, especially since "they are not people, but property."

The assumption is shared by liberals as well. Children, of course, are now the only group now left who are considered dependent "by their very nature" (it's odd that we must have laws, which really shouldn't be needed, to enforce this natural dependence). All four of the groups would likely prefer private control of education over government control, since in a "marketplace" of education, "owners" of children can buy their favorite brand of schooling to feed and nurture their "property."

The second 100 pages is devoted almost entirely to the third group, discussing how groups of fundamentalist Christians have used the agendas of the other three groups to promote their own, which is sometimes racist, often sexist, and generally intolerant of the "freedom" and "choice" they claim to support:

They are more apt to hold that "Christian morality" should be the law of the land and less apt to believe that other people—even those who are not themselves Christians—should be able to set their own moral standards.

I think many of us have observed this among certain groups of Christians—the Alabama supporters of (former?) Chief Justice Roy Moore in the recently-publicized "Ten Commandments in the Courthouse" case are a good example. It always puzzles me. If it became illegal to deviate from Christian morality (however defined) and such deviations were punishable as crimes, then Christians would no longer be able to claim any special virtue for choosing to follow its precepts. In a way, this would result in the end of the meaning of Christianity, as a religion to which one makes a special commitment. It would simply be mandated by law. Why would any Christian want that?

The third section describes responses from the left, and how supporters of free public education can participate in "keeping such debates alive and vibrant," plus 59 pages of endnotes and an index. I have a problem with the endnotes, extensive and valuable though they may be. The little superscript numbers in the text seem to appear wherever the author feels like putting them, which means they don't always appear immediately after he quotes or draws information from other sources. Sometimes they're at the end of a paragraph containing a quotation, at which point one can no longer be certain if it was the quotation that came from the source cited, or something later in the paragraph. This is, at least, sloppy.

Much of the information and opinion in *Educating the "Right" Way* I'd already heard or read elsewhere, but occasional tidbits were new to me. The author asserts that England's Education Act of 1993, which encouraged private companies to provide public education, did bring about privatization, but hasn't provided diverse alternatives to the "entrenched" curricula and teaching methods in those districts. Instead, the schools now practice "educational triage," neglecting or turning away the poorest students deemed least likely to help the schools' image. Their public dollars also pay for *advertising* their schools, to attract the best students and thereby increase their prestige.

I would have appreciated more detail on subjects such as these, and more precision in the citing of sources, but *Teaching the "Right" Way* did provide me with some new information, some new topics to pursue further, and a lot to think about. Even for my libertarian pals, it's probably worth reading.

Ravitch, Diane. *The language police : how pressure groups restrict what children learn.* New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

## Sue's Review

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One of the best arguments in favor of public education—or even compulsory education—is that it gives children an opportunity to be exposed to ideas *other* than those in their own homes. Children who might otherwise be kept isolated from different people, different ways, and different beliefs can at least become aware of them in school.

According to the book *The Language Police*, that benefit of school attendance is being wiped out. Nowadays, publishers of textbooks and other school materials, as well as the school districts that select and use them, have adopted extensive sets of guidelines forbidding words, topics, or portrayals that could offend any parent, upset or “distract” any child, or give any student a potential advantage over any other. Author Diane Ravitch managed to obtain copies of some of those guidelines, and shares them with us in this fascinating and horrifying book.

The book contains chapters on the origins and history of school censorship, exploring the motives and beliefs of the various groups that have demanded it. It delves into the processes of textbook writing, publishing, and selection, revealing why the publishers feel they must go to such great lengths to avoid anything that could be seen as bias (but do not always take such care to avoid factual errors or distortions).

But it is the guidelines themselves, and examples of how they are applied, which hold center stage in *The Language Police*. They are incredible. A few of the targeted words and phrases:

“Majority group” and “minority group” are both “offensive ... to cultural differences”

“Man” (or any word containing “man,” such as craftsmanship, man-made, middleman, postman, or even snowman!)

“Middle East” is considered a “Eurocentric” expression

“Old man” is found to be a “demeaning” phrase

“Polo” is deemed “elitist,” but mentioning “stickball” would constitute “regional or ethnic bias”

“Soda” and “pop” both reflect “regional bias”

Back in the old days, there were some serious problems with textbooks and bias; I can vouch for that myself. It's quite true that Dick was always running or jumping or standing over Jane, while Jane sat quietly reading or sewing. I recall one textbook that divided humankind into three races: “Caucasian,” “Negroid” and “Mongoloid,” the first being “civilized” and the latter two “primitive” or “savage” or at least “exotic.” It's no wonder

people wanted to correct these outrageous stereotypes being perpetrated in schools. But now, according to some guidelines, school materials must *never* depict or describe

Women as teachers, mothers, nurses, secretaries, or engaged in shopping or household chores

Men as lawyers, doctors, police officers, construction workers, plumbers, or engaged in sports or working with tools

African Americans as athletes, musicians, dancers, working in low-paying jobs, or living in urban settings

Asian Americans as quiet, polite, studious, unathletic, wearing glasses, or “having strong family ties”

Hispanic Americans in urban settings or working on farms

Older people as weak, inactive, sedentary, retired, “engaged in a life of leisure activities,” or using canes or walkers

This combination of “diversity” and “sensitivity” often requires altering the biographies of actual people. It is all based upon the apparent belief that a child is incapable of reading anything without automatically adopting it into his or her world view.

Aside from the avoidance of gender biases, the portrayal of children is not specifically covered by the guidelines, except to prohibit their depiction as “questioning parental authority,” in “conflict with authority,” engaged in “behavior that will lead to dangerous situations,” or being “healthy bundles of energy.” Prohibited nouns include “gimp,” “geezer,” “mute” and even “lady,” along with many other terms which could be seen as insulting, but “brat” and “punk” do not appear on this list which is intended to protect children from offensive references.

For adults, this book is a mind-bending expose. For kids who are now using these textbooks, it should also be an eye-opener; textbooks weren't always like this! The examples I've given here hardly scratch the surface. You gotta read it to believe it.

When TV producers or executives get complaints from offended viewers, they can weigh the seriousness of the complaint and decide whether a change is warranted, but they can always tell the viewer to *change the channel*. Nobody is forced to watch a TV program. As long as children are forced to read textbooks (and expected to believe what's in them), the publishers and schools will remain at the mercy of every nonsensical demand that is made of them.

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## Ask Not What School Can Do For You

continued from page 1

The article never claimed that the school-skipppers were threatened with dangers outside of the safety of the school building. There was no mention of truants disturbing the community or committing crimes. If test scores were high, the academic achievement of the student body was not being hurt by these absences. No argument was made that anything of value was being lost by these students when they did not attend. Saving the school from failure and government sanctions was seen as an end in itself.

Another article stated it even more bluntly: “We receive an additional \$20 million for every 1 percent increase in attendance,” Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan was quoted as saying.<sup>11</sup> So, the reason for students to attend school is ... to get more money for the school.

The No Child Left Behind Act has been widely criticized for its unreasonable, unrealistic expectations, but most U.S. schools seem to be making a big effort to comply.

Instead of helping and caring about students as individuals, schools are now worrying about the bottom line. Instead of striving to meet the needs of each of their students, schools are now resorting to any means to make those students—all of them—conform to national standards.

Kids will be forced to go to school, whether or not it is good for them or for society—because if they don’t, the *schools* will be punished. In school, they’ll be pushed to demonstrate unnatural levels of achievement on tests, in all subject areas. If they cannot or will not meet the demands made of them, the schools are quite willing to mete out their own punishments to students and their parents. Is this in the best interest of children? or society?

Under this new order, schools can no longer be seen as providing a service to the nation’s children; now, instead, students are performing a service to the state by attending school. Does anybody else find this disturbing?

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11. “Back to class for Chicago public school kids” (see 5).

Please Please Please!! Don’t discard this issue.  
Instead, pass it along to someone else.

