


## **Our Killing Schools - Public Schools: Intellectual and Moral Wastelands that Destroy America's Youth**

by **C. Bradley Thompson** (June 4, 1999)

**Summary:** So what's happening? Why are America's adolescent boys so angry, and why are they expressing their anger through mindless acts of violence?

[[www.CapitalismMagazine.com](http://www.CapitalismMagazine.com)] The tragic school shooting in Littleton, Colorado forces us to ask once again: What is going on in our schools? When the 15 killed in Littleton are added to those in Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; and Springfield, Oregon, the total stands at a staggering 29, with scores injured. 

These mindless acts of mayhem have captured the public imagination because the killers don't fit the profile of a typical school-yard thug. First, the killers were middle-class boys from small-town or suburban America. Second, their average age was 15. Third, by all accounts the boys were good students, indeed, they all seemed rather nerdish. Fourth, the shootings had nothing to do with drugs or traditional gangs.

In attempting to explain why this is happening, sociologists and educators have advanced several possible causes. Some think that the shootings are a consequence of America's "gun-crazed" culture. Others blame Hollywood, video games and the Internet for their gratuitous glorification of violence. And yet, we seem to be missing the obvious. The shootings have one thing in common: they all took place at school. The boys didn't kill on the weekend, they didn't kill after school, and they didn't shoot up the local Dairy Queen.

So what's happening? Why are America's adolescent boys so angry, and why are they expressing their anger through mindless acts of violence?

That they all killed at school is a fact worth pondering. The explanation for all these shootings might very well be found in the destruction of the minds and souls of America's young people by an education establishment bent on using our children as guinea pigs for their bizarre experiments in schooling. The fact of the matter is that most of our public schools today are intellectual and moral wastelands.

As a college professor, I meet hundreds of current and recently graduated high school students every year. I am struck by four factors: first, students don't believe in very much and are unwilling to make moral judgments; second, they have artificially inflated opinions of themselves and are unwilling to tolerate criticism; third, they are poorly educated; and finally, they hated their high school experience. The result is an explosive mixture of nihilism, narcissism, ignorance, and resentment.

Though the schools do not teach ethics as part of the regular curriculum, the moral ethos of our education system is dominated by the anti-principle of moral relativism. The one sure thing that a college professor can expect from new students is that they do not believe in moral absolutes; they are unwilling to judge morally the opinions or actions of others, even when they disagree with them. Beginning in elementary school, students are taught that all lifestyles are equal and that they should not discriminate between them. What this means most of all is: "Do your own thing" and don't judge me.

Related to moral relativism but incorporated more systematically into the curriculum is the dogma that children should be constantly told how good they are. Positive reinforcement for deeds well done has been transformed by the education establishment into indiscriminate praise so that children will "feel good" about themselves regardless of whether their ideas or actions are praiseworthy or not. The problem with this binge in juvenile "self-love" is that children with unjustifiably high opinions of themselves are becoming aggressive and even violent when confronted with criticism or teasing.

But we must look deeper. The crisis of our schools is at heart a philosophical issue.

The precipitous rise in school violence over the course of the last decade runs directly parallel with the rise of "Progressive" theories of education. Progressive education rejects traditional schooling, which emphasizes learning a body of pre-established information. Progressive education replaces that with a child-centered approach that emphasizes a child's self-expression and spontaneous impulses. Progressivism holds that children do not learn by thinking but rather by feeling and doing. Teachers should not be authoritarian, and they should always praise children for their unique and inventive answers regardless of whether they are right or wrong. Knowledge (e.g., the rules of grammar and mathematics, and the facts of science and history) is explicitly not the goal of Progressive education.

When I talk to high school students they tell me, virtually to a person, the same thing: that high school is boring and unchallenging. It's not that they don't want to learn or that they find subjects such as algebra or history intrinsically boring; in fact, it's quite the opposite. When I press a little deeper, I learn that for most students the problem is that they have teachers who aren't particularly good at what they do: the teachers don't seem to know their subjects very well and they don't have a passion for teaching.

Dissuaded from making moral distinctions, fed a daily diet of an “I’m okay, you’re okay” philosophy, denied logic, knowledge and truth, and driven by unknown fears and anxieties, today’s young people are left with nothing but their untutored “feelings” and “emotions” as their guides through the trials and tribulations of adolescence. Thus we should not be surprised when they respond with outbursts of rage and acts of violence when things don’t go their way.

The education establishment has responded to this crisis by turning our schools into something more akin to prisons than places of learning. Barbed wire, metal detectors, identification cards, closed-circuit television monitors, and guards are common features of today’s school. Worse yet, the school system treats our young people in the same way that the penal system treats its prison population. A good many schools in this country are simply providing day-care for teenagers and in the worst schools they are providing incarceration. Class time is more like a prison lockup.

If Americans want to stop school-yard violence and address the social pathologies that increasingly afflict our young, if they want to turn our schools into serious places of learning, they should abandon their deadly experiment in Progressive education and restore a curriculum that emphasizes reason over emotions, knowledge over feelings, moral judgment over moral agnosticism, and self-control over self-expression.

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