

The Progressive Review

Nbr 319

October 1993

The indifferent generation

Charles Wiggins

"The Supreme Court just reduced your rights."

I failed to provoke my high school sophomores. Not a hand. Not a face twitched.

Ignoring their stubborn silence, I began the current events portion of the period. Our topic was the recent - Supreme Court decision, *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*. I described how a high school principal in St. Louis had deleted certain articles from the school newspaper, *Spectrum*. The court had agreed that such censorship was constitutional.

Then I read the First Amendment out loud. Still there was silence.

For weeks, this indifference haunted me. Didn't these young Americans care about being censored?

Both Ted Sizer and a *New York Times* reporter have written about this indifference. From his visits to high schools, Sizer found students passive and disengaged from their studies and schools. The *Times* piece extended the dismal picture. Reporting from two studies conducted in the last couple of years, it concluded that students "know less, care less and are less critical of leaders and institutions than young people in the past." The other study reported: "Youth are alarmingly ill-prepared to keep democracy alive in the 1990s and beyond. There is a citizenship crisis." In my classroom I had apparently been witnessing a national phenomenon.

I started teaching twenty-five years ago at a high school in southwestern Connecticut. I remember students

gathering in front of the principal's office instead of attending class. A classmate had been "unjustly" suspended. They demanded an explanation. Their timing astounded me. At Columbia University, SDS had just taken over the campus.

Nor was there indifference in the faculty room. Colleagues debated the Supreme Court's *Tinker* decision, which said that students could wear black arm bands on campus. We also debated the Constitution's twenty-sixth amendment that gave eighteen-year-olds the right to vote. Discussions were fierce; they mattered.

The curriculum even changed. Electives were introduced. Students needed to learn how to make decisions, we argued. Choice was compelling. Youngsters would work harder if they elected their courses, we thought. In other schools teachers were establishing strong student governments.

Today I walk down the halls of another high school and feel the difference. A policeman visits classrooms. His gun seems out of place. The dress code has returned. No hats can be worn inside the building. The National Anthem and the Pledge of Allegiance begin the morning announcements.

Each year electives disappear from the curriculum guide. The student government is no longer independent from the principal's will.

The control takes other forms. Dr. Pavlov, for example, would be pleased with our bells. They speak with such authority. Beginning and ending the forty-five minute periods, they unleash a thousand teenagers into the halls for a four minute passing to the next class. These kids remind me of the bulls at Pampalona. The next bells snap the halls clear and empty. Such is the rhythm of the school day. A great dance of bells and clocks and feet, delivering one hundred teachers and a thousand teenagers to the right spot at the right time.

Students are punished for disobeying the bells. Quintuplicates do the job. These packets of multicolored forms sit on each teacher's desk. When activated, they can play havoc with a student's career. If a student skips a class or arrives late, one is issued. Those colorful copies start circulating throughout the building, filling files and

The Progressive Review

Bucking the system since 1966

The Progressive Review is published approximately 9 times a year. Formerly the DC Gazette. One year subscription: \$15. Two year subscription: \$27. Single copies: \$2.00. The Review uses the news services of College Press Service, Pacific News Service, New Liberation News Service, and the National Student News Service. The Review monitors both Compuserve and Peacenet.

*Editor: Sam Smith
The Progressive Review
1739 Connecticut Ave NW
Washington DC 20009
202-232-5544
Fax Nbr: 202-234-6222*

*Compuserve ID: 72067,1525
Peacenet handle: ssmith
Gateway address from Internet, Bitnet:
ssmith@igc.org
ISSN 0889-2202*

Become a supporting subscriber: Many small circulation publications keep going with the help of supporting subscribers who contribute a sum in addition to their regular subscription to aid the publication in its work. You will note on your renewal form that there is such a category. We will be grateful if you indicate your support of our efforts by subscribing or renewing with a contribution above the normal fee or by sending us a contribution today. Mail to the Progressive Review, 1739 Connecticut Ave NW DC 20009

Help spread the word: To introduce the Review to friends through a free trial subscription, just write their names and addresses on a postcard and send it to the Review.

Copyright 1993, The Progressive Review.

Articles not otherwise copyrighted may be reprinted by other periodicals provided they give proper credit and pay their normal reprint fees, if any.

drawers. One even goes home. A paper trail has been established. The arithmetic begins. Three skips denies a student a quarter credit. Two tardies equal one skip.

Quintuplicates are reinforced by passes. Control tightens. During class time the halls are off limits to students. A youngster needs written permission to be out there. Written authorization from a teacher or administrator is needed to visit the bathroom, office, store or guidance

counselor. Without it, the kid is dead. Another quintuplicate circulates.

Between Tinker and Hazelwood, in personal and national history, the ideology of control displaced that of choice -- the Moral Majority instead of the civil rights movement, and an administrator at my school, remembering SDS and Kent State, saying, "Give [students] a chance, and they'll walk all over you."

School boards caught the mood. They started clamping down. School cultures were reshaped. Perceptions of students shifted; no longer were they new citizens learning how to make decisions. Now they were potential anarchists.

Clamping down is shaping today's Indifferent Generation. It is not surprising that some students have turned their backs. They resent the insults, the automated distrust. They dislike being units on a bureaucrat's flow chart. Seniors don't want to be treated like freshmen. Instead of being processed, they yearn to be recognized as individuals.

Clamping down our high schools could be serving a social function, convenient for the status quo. For employers. The government.

But how troublesome for our democratic traditions. And how tragic for all of us.

Preventing ethnic conflicts

Dietrich Fischer

The terrible tragedy in the former Yugoslavia is only one of many similar conflicts among ethnic, linguistic or religious groups around the world, and there exist many more potential intergroup conflicts. How can such tragedies be avoided in the future? What can be done to end current civil wars?

A comparison between two similar conflicts -- in Northern Ireland and in Switzerland -- may give an indication. Both examples involve a Catholic minority feeling oppressed by a Protestant majority. In Ireland, the British government has tried to suppress a separatist movement with military force, so far unsuccessfully. Trying to suppress a conflict by force without addressing the underlying problem is comparable to pressing the lid on a pot to stop the steam from escaping without removing the pot from the heat.

By contrast, a peaceful solution was found to the dispute in Switzerland. The Catholic French-speaking