



# Agitate

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## TOXIC SCHOOLS!

How would you respond if I told you that for the next dozen years or so you must spend most of your day in a toxic environment? Not just toxic in the sense that it is physiologically poisonous—though this is not ruled out—but rather toxic mentally, emotionally and sociologically. The environment will be overcrowded with insufficient resources to meet your needs. You will be fed garbage. You will be expected to conform to archaic standards. The work you do will be mostly mundane and meaningless. (Kozol, Kohn).

How would you respond? Would you resist? Refuse to participate? Withdraw? If you did, then you would be defined as bad and subject to discipline, humiliation and exclusion. Or worse, you would be defined as abnormal and put into special programs where even success is blunted by the “fact” of your “disability;” or you may even be dragged into compliance!

Sounds like a bleak, science fiction novel—Orwell? Huxley, perhaps? No, it’s our school system—public and private. You know. The very place where we send our children a hundred and eighty days a year!

For many years our politicians have given lip service to improving schools. They offer draconian policies like high stakes testing and zero tolerance and increased accountability (NCLB). Yet still, our schools continue to be in crisis. So we offer educational “alternatives,” like vouchers, so underprivileged kids can go to obviously superior private schools. Yet even in private schools, the basic structure of American education is maintained with very few variances. So how much better can private schools be. Very little, it turns out.

And yet, schools remain in crisis. How can this be? Anyone with children knows that kids love to learn. They suck up new knowledge like sponges. So why do most kids hate school? Could it be that children know what adults have chosen to forget—that schools are toxic environments not conducive to learning.

We know that kids learn best when they are in healthy environments, environments that ensure physical, psychological and emotional security. The research on this is too voluminous to reference. Yet when we ask the question, why can’t Johnny read? We blame

the teachers, the students, television, video games, a lax curriculum, social promotion and any of a number of things that are wrong with public schools. What we don’t do is analyze the very institutional nature of education in America. If we did we would come to the conclusion that the problem is systemic, that schools are not healthy environments; that students cannot effectively learn in schools.

**As adults we have the unfortunate habit of disregarding what our children say. This has had a negative impact on our educational system. If you listen to kids, as I have, you might just get some insights about school reform. Prevalent in my research has been kids comparing schools to prisons. Other children have commented that their teachers only care about passing the state mandated tests because they want their bonuses. Another young man wrote a very well written letter to the local news paper explaining that standardized tests only make students afraid. They do not help them learn. Of course, we have been socialized to believe that children are to be seen, not heard. We disregard what they say as juvenile, self serving or dishonest. Maybe the first step of school reform is LISTENING TO THE CHILDREN!**

The United States has a history of neglect with regard to public schools. Early reformers like Horace Mann had to struggle to get approval for publicly funded education for all, despite the obvious benefits that education vouches a democratic society. A two tier education has always prevailed in the United States. Those schools funded for the children of common workers were given minimal resources and often utilized Spartan exclusionary practices. American culture has never gotten past the assumption that education is for the elite. Education is reserved for a select few, relegating others to ignorance.

Not much has changed. Though there are many fine examples of exceptional schools in this country (which, of course, rarely ever get any press) too many of our schools are under-funded, under-resourced and overcrowded (Kozol). Students in such schools are put through a Taylorized version of education—treated much like products on an assembly line rather than human beings with their own potentials and drives.

Overcrowded and impersonal environments lead to social problems very similar to urban anomie. Students, as well as teachers, lose their sense of social cohesiveness. They are not a part of the social dynamic, but rather objects upon which these dynamics happen. Students and teachers have no means to assert their own subjectivity over an environment that is increasingly out of their control. As a result, students and teachers fall into a malaise of withdrawal, apathy, abuse and even violence.

It then becomes contingent upon those in charge of the institution to contend with these seemingly insurmountable problems. But, instead of using research and reason to address

the problems of schools, the response is reactionary—to get control.

The endeavor of control is an exercise of power technologies. In an overcrowded, under-resourced environment technologies of power are used to enforce individual and group conformity. This is known in educational parlance as “classroom management.” These technologies are in place to bribe, cajole and coerce conformed behavior. (Kohn, Glasser) This is true among all elements of the school. Non-conforming behavior is not tolerated, despite rhetorical acceptance of the need for “tolerance” in our schools.

Standardization is the method by which to enforce conformity of the mind. By standardizing the curriculum, texts, class resources and assessments, teachers are limited in the lessons they can expose their students to, and students are limited in the knowledge they are allowed by the institution to acquire. Typically, for all but a select few students, (those students who are already representative of the future power elite) this knowledge is lower level, content area knowledge learned through rote memorization. When such students do learn critical thinking skills and innovative ideas it is in spite of their education, not because of it.

At the bottom of this oppressive and sociologically toxic system is fear. Students must be made afraid in order to effectively utilize these power technologies. Kids must be made afraid of failure, afraid of being held back, of not graduating, of being labeled. Instead of invoking the natural, internal drive of young people to learn meaningful and worth while subjects, students must be intimidated into learning meaningless and irrelevant non-sense.

And if grades and testing are not sufficiently terrifying, then other forms of coercion must be put into place. Students must be removed from classrooms so their non-conforming behaviors do not influence the “good” students. Students are detained, suspended, even expelled.

Non-conforming behaviors are subject to labeling processes. The student who does not conform to this toxic environment is defined as either a delinquent deviant or a medical deviant. Delinquents are disposable. They are removed from schools and sent to programs with an extra emphasis on making them conform. Medical deviants are more workable. Such students are drugged into compliance (Breggin). They are chemically induced to pay scrupulous attention to meaningless non-sense. Of course, as William Chambliss exposed in his study, *The Saints and the Roughnecks*, socio-economic status is an influential variable in the process of labeling deviants. Just another factor contributing to the creation of an educational underclass.

Either way, society holds students and teachers accountable for not conforming to the toxicity of schools. Students are forced to conform or excluded if they resist the toxic influences of educational in-

### What are Schools For?

If we really want to affect change in our schooling institutions, be they public or private, the first question that we must answer is, “what are schools for?” or “why are we sending our kids to school?” American education was originally established to teach basic literacy, mathematics, but also to assimilate growing immigrant populations. Early proponents of public education knew what they wanted, but in 150 years, this question has not really been re-evaluated. Consequently, though we may all feel that schools are important, we may not all agree as to why.

stitutions. Teachers are held accountable if they try to introduce lessons outside of the standard curriculum, or utilize well researched methods of teaching at the expense of “classroom management.” Teachers whose students are not seated, are loud, excited and active are accused of having poor classroom management skills regardless of the level of learning taking place in the classroom. Teachers whose students are quiet, still—brain-dead, are credited with using “best practices.”

If schools are toxic environments then it is time to take the emphasis off of individual causes of school problems, as the individuals within the schools are merely responding to this miasma through conformity, resistance or withdrawal. Power practices that reward conformity and punish/treat resistance or withdrawal cannot be effective. Nor can we improve schools by changing the delivery of power dynamics within the institution. Using suspension or time-out is no more or less effective at improving school behavior than paddling and keeping students after school. Nor does deferring institutional responsibility from public, governmental organizations to private, corporate organizations constitute effective reform. Private schools are no better than public schools when they are using the same technologies of power.

It’s not school reform until the root problems underlying American education are addressed. Educational reform must be applied to maximize the human dignity and potential of all students. When students are treated as anonymous products to be controlled and managed within overcrowded, under-resourced schools they are being left behind. Our Taylorized, monolithic schools must be replaced with smaller, more intimate institutions in which students can build meaningful relationships with teachers and be guided through maximizing their potential.

In short, American schools must be detox’ed.

### Take Action!

Educational decisions are made on multiple levels. To be influential you must know the contact information for the departments of education for your state and your local school district. You can contact your National representatives and demand better, but the decentralized nature of American Education makes it easy to pass the buck and difficult to reform. But with enough support from the community, and enough pressure on your local school district changes can be made. Be informed. There are many alternatives to what we are doing now. My favorite is Dr. William Glasser’s Quality Schools, but this should not be considered the only way. Indeed, there are many sectors not yet heard from, such as kids and parents. Parents and students, to effect reform, must make themselves heard. Check the “Activism” page on *Journal of a Mad Sociologist* for some interesting sites to get informed and get active.

Breggin: [breggin.com](http://breggin.com)  
Chambliss: “The Saints and the Roughnecks”  
Glasser: [wglasser.org](http://wglasser.org)  
Kohn: [alfiekohn.com](http://alfiekohn.com)

Kozol: *The Shame of the Nation*  
NCLB: No Child Left Behind Act 2001 (Public Law 107-110)

