

Philadelphia teacher considers causes of Colorado school shooting

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Major sections of American society are at war with our children. While not always visible in our perception of our society, this war is increasingly breaking into our consciousness by such events as the shooting at Columbine High. Your article "Colorado School Shooting: American Pastoral ... American Berserk" clearly described the dead-end of blaming these acts of violence solely on the individual perpetrators. As a teacher in Philadelphia, I have witnessed first-hand the result of this blame-the-child policy. Two months ago, I had an incident with a sixth-grade student. When he lost his temper in the hallway, he began ripping down student projects. I grabbed his wrist to stop him and he proceeded to pummel me and try to rip my clothes, requiring me to restrain him until other teachers assisted me. Over the next several days I was advised by my Principal, Union Rep and some teachers to file assault charges against this 12-year-old child. When I protested that this was a disturbed child who had been classified last fall as needing Special Education, but the school board had not placed him for budgetary reasons, I was told this is the only way the School Board will place him. When I called my Union to inquire about the Union filing a lawsuit to make the School Board place students who have been classified as needing Special Education services, the Union official asked me about the incident that prompted my call. Her only response was that I should "file assault charges for my own protection because the parents could sue you for touching the child." The child remains in the same setting as two months ago, being frequently suspended for violent incidents. There are ten children in my school like this, one who as been deemed needing private school placement with intensive psychotherapy we cannot provide, but has been turned down by three private schools because of her problems. She remains at our school, daily requiring incredible amounts of

attention from teachers and administrators because of violent incidents she instigates.

The media has been filled in the last weeks with speculation about the causes of the Columbine High killings. Is it easy access to guns? Is it video games? Is it violent TV and movies? Is it parental neglect? Is it because "God has been removed from our schools"? At the same time, in the aftermath of the Columbine shootings, there have been a wave of "copy-cat" threats in schools. In the eight-county region surrounding and including Philadelphia, as of April 30, seventy-five students have been arrested for making violent threats. Two hundred bomb threats or threats of violence have been phoned into schools. The Philadelphia School District has announced they will no longer provide statistics to the media about bomb threats for fear of feeding "copy-cat" incidents.

Solely blaming the individual student does nothing to clarify the social causes of such alienation. As the stock market has boomed in this "miracle economy", working and middle class families are increasingly stressed. Working class parents must work long hours at low pay to meet the material needs of their families. Many middle class families, such as those in Columbine, have bought into the "American Dream" and have mortgaged their family to an expensive fortress in a pastoral setting, far from the urban problems. The result in both settings is children who may have their material needs met, but who are left to emotionally fend for themselves. The chief social and recreational outlet for teenagers has become the shopping mall. Hours are spent with friends in these museums of American consumerism. More hours are spent playing video games where points scored is based on the number of kills you make before you are killed. In place of parents, children get guidance from TV. Hours are spent each night watching such shows as so-called

professional wrestling and so-called talk shows. While adults laugh at these shows as live-action cartoons, children see the rough-housing, bullying, and verbal abuse as the norm and seek to model it. Mainstream movies glorify and sensationalize senseless violence as entertainment. The result can be seen in any school yard in America at recess.

Combine these cultural factors with the underfunding of schools which has gone on for decades, and you have a prescription for disaster. Urban schools, in particular, have decaying facilities (my school building is ninety-eight years old), inadequate textbooks and supplies, and large classes filled with many emotionally needy children. In my K-8 school, we have one counselor for 950 students. The Philadelphia School District is proposing a budget for educating 280,000 students in the 1999-2000 school year of \$1.5 billion, with a projected deficit of \$94 million dollars. One B-2 "Spirit" stealth bomber costs \$2.2 billion. The Pentagon has a fleet of 21 B-2 bombers, which costs \$44 billion, and is asking for more. Before the war against Yugoslavia even began, next year's Pentagon budget was proposed at \$276 billion. And we ask why our schools are failing?

The response of the politicians has been the ruse of school vouchers. After denying public schools the funding needed for quality education, the politicians divert the attention of parents away from their neglect of public schools by holding out the hope to parents that they will find something better in private and religious schools. The major promoter of this deception has been the Religious Right which would like to remove the Constitutional separation of church and state and require public schools to have state-sanctioned reading of the Christian Bible and prayer. These forces have sought to exploit the Columbine tragedy for this end, neglecting to point out that incidents such as Columbine and Jonesboro have occurred in strongholds of the Religious Right.

So, what is the source of this war against our children? In a word, profit. Would a system based on human need, rather than profit, neglect its society's children so egregiously? Would a system based on human need have unlimited resources for war, but neglect its schools? Would a system based on human need expose its children day after day to the basest of human instincts through its media? From the war

against Yugoslavia to the Columbine killings, the capitalist system is showing itself to be a threat to life on earth. It is even incapable of preparing the next generation for a decent life. We must reorganize this system of profit for a few, and use the incredible technology and knowledge that humanity has struggled to create over the centuries to create a socialist system based on human need which will provide a decent, secure world for all humanity.

KD

Philadelphia



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