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Public-School Outrages

by Anthony Gregory

Americans across the political spectrum see the failure of the government school system in teaching the basics, such as reading, writing, math, science, and history. No matter how many tax dollars have been spent or reform proposals implemented, the dismal performance of public-school students continues unabated. A recent case involving a student's arrest helps to shed some light on what might be the underlying problem.

An 18-year-old Kentucky high-school student, William Poole, recently found himself arrested for possessing materials at home that the authorities believed constituted a threat against faculty members and fellow students. The proscribed and dangerous object was apparently a fictional short story Poole wrote for English class, which he described as "about a high school over run by zombies." He insists the story specified no one in real life, or even his particular school, but he was nevertheless charged with making terrorist threats.

As a local police detective put it, "Any time you make any threat or possess matter involving a school or function it's a felony in the state of Kentucky."

Now, the arrest of someone — an 18-year old legal adult, mind you — merely for possessing — off campus — a story, written for English class — that is verboten for "involving a school or function" — and treating the offense as a felony is not something that should happen in a sane society, let alone a free one. For his work of fiction, this young man was dragged off to the police station as if he had committed a criminal act. The judge set his bond at \$5,000.

Despite America's many problems, artistic freedom is relatively robust here. Filmmakers, artists, authors, and actors have a wide range in what they are allowed to write about, portray, and present in their art. Aside from the few unfortunate restrictions in place, this is as it should be. The one factor that appears to have negated any principle of proportionality, common sense, or reason in Poole's case was that the 18-year-old is a student of a public school and is thus exposed to an entire slate of absurd policies and restrictions that do not apply to the average nonstudent citizen.

The goal of public schooling

Being a student at a public school, despite his legal adulthood and the fact that the offending literature was found off campus, the young man was an easy victim of the state's heavy-handed thought policing. This all falls into place with the fundamental role of public schooling, which is not to teach the basics but instead to instill obedience to the government's authority.

As Sheldon Richman explains in *Separating School & State* (Fairfax, Va.: Future of Freedom Foundation, 1994), the reasons for public education fall "into two broad categories, the macro and the micro." Originally, the aim of the public schools at the macro, or social, level was the creation of a homogenous, national Protestant culture: the Americanization and Protestantization of the disparate groups that made up the United States. At the micro, or individual, level the aim was the creation of the "good citizen," someone who trusted government and deferred to it in all areas it claimed as its own. Obviously, the two levels are linked because a certain culture cannot be brought about without remaking the individuals who make it up.

Richman demonstrates how the American public-school system was largely adopted from the militaristic Prussian government of the 19th century, whose educational regime mirrored its military. As Franz de Hovre put it in 1917 (quoted by Richman),

The prime fundamental of German education is that it is based on a national principle.... A fundamental feature of German education: education to the State, education for the State, education by the State.

This is the general principle that guided the development of government schools in America. Citing proponents of regimented state education in America such as John Dewey, Benjamin Rush, and Horace Mann, Richman shows that each of them generally saw government schooling, in Dewey's words, as

a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness.... [The] adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction.

The recent persecution of William Poole is only the latest in a series of similar absurdities and outrages having to do with so-called zero tolerance policy. Students of various young ages have been suspended, expelled, or even jailed for such "crimes" as bringing aspirin to school, kissing classmates on the cheek, possessing a butter knife, doodling sketches of weapons or soldiers at war, having G.I. Joe-sized plastic guns, or pointing fingers or pieces of chicken at playmates and saying, "Bang!"

What these students learn is the sovereignty of the state's arbitrary power, its ability to punish according to its nonsensical decree and whimsical say-so. To instill in children the supremacy of state authority in the absence of any reason or logic is the quintessential purpose of the Prussian-American model of public education.

As Murray N. Rothbard wrote in *Education: Free and Compulsory* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1999),

The historical development of compulsory education is a record of state usurpation of parental control over children; inculcation of the ideals of authoritarian rule and obedience to the state; imposition of uniformity and equality in retarding individual growth; and repression of reasoning power and independent thought among children.

The extension of these authoritarian controls to a young man as old as 18 is no surprise. The coercive nature of public schooling, in its funding and especially its attendance, combined with its function of molding future taxpaying adult citizens of the state, virtually guarantees that it will stretch its boundaries in what it can get away with, including its presumptuous state-enforced reach into the home and writings of a young legal adult.

The success of public schooling

The proposed solutions and reforms for the school system usually entail more money for education — though steadily increasing funding over the last several decades has hardly demonstrated any visible improvements — and quasi-free-market reform proposals, such as vouchers, that simply extend government funding and involvement to private schools. Unfortunately, the private schools are already thoroughly regulated and regimented by the state, and thus fail to offer as much of a true alternative to public schools as they could. Putting them under the state's funding would very likely increase the state's domination and influence over them.

The underlying problem with coercive public schooling cuts right through all the typical attempts to improve on its success in educating America's young. Indeed, considering the historical purposes of compulsory education — the training of young Americans to be good citizens of the state, rather than intellectually curious, independent, creative, and knowledgeable persons — the government-school system has succeeded, perhaps beyond reasonable expectations.

American youth appear to be even more favorable to government management and control than older generations, at least on a number of important issues. On the matter of free speech and expression, which ties in not so tangentially to Poole's case, a recent poll conducted by the University of Connecticut found, among other unsettling things, that one in three students of

public and government-regulated private schools thought the language of the First Amendment went “too far,” and only half of them thought that newspapers should be allowed to print stories without government approval.

At least one federal lawmaker has suggested a typically bureaucratic remedy to the poor understanding of the Constitution on the part of America’s young: mandate more lessons on the Constitution. But considering the anti-individualistic authoritarian origins and nature of the American school system, we could probably expect the schools to do no better, and probably worse, at teaching about freedom than they do teaching math, English, and history. Even totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany have been somewhat able to inculcate the arts and sciences into their young subjects.

To teach about liberty — to convincingly and profoundly impart the principles of freedom to a generation of students — requires a radically different system, one that is divorced from the coercive mechanisms of state central planning and relies instead on freedom and voluntary choice. Only then will young Americans reach their full potential in learning the basics, enjoy the true freedom that is their birthright, and cease to be scared that writing about zombies or playing cops and robbers with their food will land them in jail.

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