

# Education's Role in Fostering Adolescents

Society pays close attention to adolescents' actions. Much of the modern history of adolescence involves attempts to control and limit this age group's freedoms deemed potentially disruptive to society. So fervent is the scrutiny and concern for controlling adolescents that their actions frequently serve to index society's general health and civility. As a result, when both society and adolescents face challenges and encounter disruptions, the public responds with a sense of crisis. The crises are deemed particularly potent when the disruptions occur in public places, especially in schools that essentially exist to control and direct adolescents into responsible citizenship. In those instances, both adolescents and society are deemed at risk.

Recent murderous rampages by students, armed with guns and ammunitions more befitting soldiers on battlegrounds than students on playgrounds, illustrate how adolescents serve as barometers of societal health and civility. The events shocked and horrified a public that otherwise had become inured to reports of violent crime. Many sought answers as to why students would pose such a public threat. Speculations about the root causes offered a variety of sources: inadequate home life, overburdened teachers, inattentive school officials, corrupting media, easy access to weapons, declining moral standards, sex discrimination, victimization, racism, inadequate penal systems, etc. (e.g., Jenson & Howard, 1999; Sousa, 1999). All explanations linked to a perceived deterioration in the manner adolescents now treat one another in an increasingly troubled and challenging society.

Although the young killers exemplified a distressed society unable to foster adolescents, they also served to confirm the essence of a resistant, defiant, and precarious adolescent subculture. Evidence of adolescents' alleged resistance to authority takes many forms, so much so that even normal adolescents are perceived as defiant and hedonistic. Their speech is viewed as uncivil; and their modes of dress—such as boys' long hair, earrings, and baggy pants—often are seen as vulgar or at least as expressing too much autonomy and self-expression (Myhra, 1999). Their interests continue to be viewed as narcissistic and lacking in commitment to the welfare of others or society (Cohen & Cohen, 1996). Their interactions with others are perceived as harsh and marked by rampant bullying and harassing (Stein, 1999). Adolescents' romantic relationships are deemed inconsiderate, and actually violent at so many levels that they themselves do not even recognize the violence (Higginson, 1999). Their music is viewed as so coarse, insensitive and immoral that it incites them to violence (Strasburger, 1997). Even their aspirations are maligned as they allegedly make adolescents drifting dreamers with unrealistic goals (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Although available evidence does not seem to match popular perceptions that adolescents, as a group, are in crisis any more than other age groups, society continues to fear that adolescents are in a state of moral decline, and that the family, school, and church have lost their power to shape the coming generation responsibly.

### SCHOOLING'S SPECIAL ROLES AND FAILURES IN FOSTERING ADOLESCENTS

Society had responded to the plight of adolescents. One of the most common features of the American political landscape includes charges levied to all major social institutions to take better care of adolescents. The family, child welfare systems, juvenile justice systems, schools, religious organizations, and even the media and other big businesses are exhorted to reconsider how they treat adolescents. All institutions are currently being challenged, revived, dismantled, or reformed to shore up adolescents' proper social development. For example, welfare reform increasingly aims to address adolescent pregnancy (Levesque, 2000a); and the reform's promise to increase the number of working parents creates important challenges to fill non-school hours for adolescents whose parents will work rather than directly care for them (Quinn, 1999). Health reform's emerging focus on managed care also impacts adolescents; the renewed focus on prevention and healthy development directly aims at service provision for adolescents (Santelli et al., 1998). Juvenile justice

reforms increasingly treat adolescents more like adults and seek to abolish the traditional rehabilitative features of the juvenile court, a dramatic move that responds to new perceptions of crime and criminal behavior as well as to changing views of adolescents' needs and capabilities (Feld, 1999). Even though the limited data we have seem to suggest that the intended effects of juvenile justice reforms are not being realized, the (mis)perceptions of adolescents transfer to other social institutions. The get tough approach for the sake of enhancing proper development even finds expression in educational mandates, as reflected in efforts to eliminate social promotion, introduce zero-tolerance policies, mainstream exceptional children and provide more power to parents to direct their children's education (Adelman & Taylor, 2000). Even religious institutions reconsider the place and needs of adolescents, a recognition that becomes increasingly obvious as religious organizations become central to efforts to provide services to adolescents in need (Cnaan, Wineburg, & Boddie, 1999) and religion becomes viewed as highly linked to adolescents' health (Wallace & Forman, 1998). No institution remains immune from efforts to respond differently to adolescents' needs and perceptions of what adolescents may need.

Although many institutions are being challenged to respond to the needs of adolescents and society, only public schools must accept and transform all adolescents so that they become productive citizens capable of contributing to a democratic, civil society. Although facing the difficult challenge no other institution bears, schools have not been the site of public support. Instead of support, sociopolitical responses to school failure repeatedly result in weak public confidence and constant attacks. Schools have been wracked by polarizing political conflict over their educational missions; undermined by taxpayer revolts; weakened by teacher-bashing and by massive resource and racial inequalities; and continuously subjected to rhetoric that places schools at the center of culture wars (Hunter, 1991). Students themselves do not like school much either (Steinberg, 1999); most students report being bored about one-third the time they are in school (Larson, 2000) and nearly half report being bored most of the time (Scales, 1999). Likewise, schools play an important (but not necessarily determinative) role in promoting adolescents' distress (Schulenberg, Maggs, & Hurrelmann, 1997; Elliott, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998). Given these failures, it is not surprising to find a sagging confidence in public schools and a profound sense of despair that characterizes popular discussions of adolescents and their education (Loveless, 1997).

Public schooling certainly has not been a stranger to conflict, but the impact of social conflict on schooling now appears unusually excessive. Since its beginning as an effort to inculcate a common (Protestant,

Anglo American) culture through compulsory, common schools, public education has been at the center of repeating cycles of struggles over cultural turf, community boundaries, and efforts to create cohesion and unity out of diversity and self-absorption (Levesque, 1998a). Yet, it is only within the last decade that the challenges have been so great to question seriously the very notion and existence of public schooling. Commentators now note that the compact between the public and public education is close to null and void, so much so that leading commentators consider public schools essentially dead (Lieberman, 1993) or, if not dead, at least irretrievably about to be transformed (Minow, 1999). The increasing abandonment is particularly momentous given that the commitment to public schools decreases as the civil rights movement aggressively expands to address new mandates regarding race, gender, disability, economics, sexuality, violence and multicultural issues. As society burdens public schools and recognizes their fundamental place in ensuring more people's rights, desertion increases and challenges the very nature of schools deemed the bedrock of democratic life. In fact, the increased regulation needed to foster democratic schooling urges commentators with a wide variety of expertise and from a broad spectrum of political ideologies to conclude that society must move beyond public schools as a means to educate adolescents (Perkinson, 1995). Even those committed to public schooling argue that it is necessary to save public education from public schools (Arons, 1997) and that a system of non-public schools best meets public school values (Sugarman, 1991). As a result, one of the most popular approaches to privatizing public education—providing parents with vouchers and control to enroll students in schools of their choice—permits the sole legal requirement for education provided by alternative schools to be the simple confirmation of students' attendance (Keller, 1998).

Although commentators offer different futures for schools, differing views frequently agree on fundamental points. Schools ostensibly have lost their ability to foster adolescents. While no single body of data can document the state of American education and it remains important to recognize many schools' successes, all major evaluations point to consistent failure. Most notably, the National Assessment of Education Progress, which provides the "nation's report card," reveals that even dramatic reform efforts have been far from successful. Nearly one-third of the nation's high school seniors fail basic geography questions, almost two-thirds fail basic history questions, and where there has been the most improvement, mathematics, only 16% of seniors meet the requirements set by the National Educational Goals Panel (Macchiarola, Lipsky, & Gartner, 1996). Further, commentators typically agree that adolescents

themselves are in need of reform so that they could be more caring and responsible adolescents. For example, numerous reports reveal the subtle and ignored forms of maltreatment adolescent victims suffer at the hands of peers and how even victims engage in high levels of offending, much of which occurs in schools (Levesque, 1998b). Both areas of agreement distill to the fundamental point that schools' alarming failure roots in their inability to inculcate values and provide the skills necessary for adolescents to be productive and responsible members of society.

Despite pervasive agreement among commentators that schools fail both adolescents and society, reform proposals paradoxically fail to focus on adolescents and their place in society. A close look at current discourse about educational policy making and educational reform reveals that it has virtually nothing to do with adolescents. Recent efforts to impose national educational standards are grounded on the need to address the nation's economic vulnerability, not adolescents' individual needs (cf., Heise, 1994). Likewise, arguments about school choice essentially involve issues of parental choice to determine their children's entry into and exit from particular schools, not children's own choices (Ravitch & Viteritti, 1996). Concerns about student expression and adolescents' need for information really deal with school official control of curriculum, not students' demands and legitimate needs (cf., Verchick, 1991). Reforms to address school violence deal with societal fears of guns, gangs and violent adolescents, not necessarily the everyday fears and needs of students (Hyman & Snook, 1999). Cutting-edge policy approaches that guide the development of further educational reform and seek to include all relevant stakeholders actually fail to include students and opt to include their representatives—parents (Evans, 1992; Parker, 1996). Even commentaries that urge a more aggressive turn to human rights law in order to recognize adolescents' fundamental right to education in hopes of enacting more effective reform essentially ignore the adolescents they ostensibly aim to assist (cf., Levesque, 1998c). Although these mandates also include important forces that temper reforms so that they actually do consider the needs of adolescents, the mandates do clearly point to concerns that frequently override adolescents' own needs and interests. The needs and rights of adolescents in school settings remain pervasively subordinate to other concerns. Current discourse about education does not offer much hope to those interested in adolescents' own educational rights and the development of policies that address adolescents' peculiar needs.

Despite persistent failures of school reform, few commentators on law and education have sought to offer a different paradigm that actually would include a concern for adolescents' own interests, needs, and rights. In fact, discussions lump adolescents with children and fail to consider

<http://www.springer.com/978-0-306-46767-7>

Dangerous Adolescents, Model Adolescents  
Shaping the Role and Promise of Education

Levesque, R.J.R.

2002, XIII, 258 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-306-46767-7