

Preface

Teachers make a difference. As someone who grew up in one of the poorest and rural areas of a poor state and ended up attending elite graduate and professional schools, I have much to credit my public school teachers. My teachers sure struggled much to teach an amazingly wide variety of students from different backgrounds, abilities, and hopes. Given that reality, which undoubtedly repeats itself across the United States and globe, one would think that I should be quite hesitant to criticize a system that produces countless grateful students and productive citizens. I agree.

The pages that follow surely can be perceived as yet another attack on already much maligned schools that do produce impressive outcomes despite their limited resources, increased obligations, and the sustained barrage of attacks from competing interest groups. Some may even view the text as an affront to the inalienable rights of parents to raise their children as they see fit. Others surely could understand the analysis as another assault on our decentralized legal and school systems that should retain the right to balance the needs of communities, parents, schools, and students. I clearly did not intend, and do not see the ultimate result, as yet another diatribe on the manner teachers, parents and communities treat students.

I embarked on this project to understand what kind of environment today's adolescents need and what teachers, parents, and communities can do to address those needs. I also embarked on this project to determine how adolescents and their environments best can be supported to effect the outcomes and ideals our society formally promises but does not always deliver. As a result, I have been struck by the possible role law and basic social science can play in efforts to create responsive schools,

families, communities, and most often ignored, adolescents. I also have been intrigued by the tendency to polarize the rights and obligations of parents, schools, communities, and students. An honest look at the actual rights and obligations that serve as fodder for the polarization reveals much less support for absolutes than it does for shared interests, goals, expectations, and needs. Likewise, an honest look at social science evidence reveals that no single person nor single institution can be charged with the responsibility of promoting positive adolescent development. The analysis that follows simply offers what we know about schools' responses to adolescents' developmental needs and explores the contours of what laws can allow and, hopefully, can foster. In addressing those issues, the text certainly leaves room for further analyses, especially some that would envision concrete steps for reform and more concrete ways to address polarizing tendencies. This text has a more modest goal: to examine and envision what can be done to address adolescents' needs and propose that we actually can better address those needs while remaining faithful to the rights of others.

My hunch is that those who read the following most likely will feel the same way I do: grateful for the education that they have received and hopeful that others can dream and achieve their own goals. My hope is that we can take that gratitude and hope as the starting point to engage with the research, analyses and proposals offered here and try to imagine how schools can help deliver the promises that our liberal, democratic, civil society reminds us we must constantly evaluate, develop, and seek to achieve.

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