

Walk Out and Don't Go Back

Today, students across America will join in a national school walkout day to memorialize the 17 people tragically killed in the recent Parkland, Florida school shooting and to advocate for stricter gun control laws.

But what if they don't go back?

The real protest would be to challenge the increasingly restrictive environment of forced mass schooling that is leading to serious mental health issues for children and adolescents. Recent data show that 20 percent of children ages 3 to 17 suffer from a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder. That is one out of every five children, or about 15 million kids.

The numbers keep getting worse, particularly regarding adolescent anxiety, depression, and suicide. The suicide rate for teen girls ages 15 to 19 doubled between 2007 and 2015, reaching a 40-year high in 2015. The suicide rate for teen boys also jumped 31 percent during those eight years.

While there are no clear answers as to why many American teenagers are in such emotional turmoil, school seems to be a key factor. Researchers at Vanderbilt University discovered that, unlike adults who experience suicide increases during warmer months, children's suicidal feelings and attempts decline in summer and spike at back-to-school time.

School isn't what it used to be. Today, young people are spending much more time in school than ever before, beginning at earlier ages and for much lengthier portions of the day and year than at any other time in our history. University of Michigan researchers found that children spent much more time in school and school-like activities in the early 2000s compared to the early 1980s, with a corresponding decline in outdoor play activities.

Since 2001 and the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, schooling has also become much more standardized and test-driven. Common Core State Standards were adopted by most states in 2009, the same year that Race to the Top grants enticed states to accept these national curriculum frameworks. And in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act reinforced standardized curriculum goals, with yearly testing expectations from 3rd through 8th grade and again in high school.

More restrictive schooling encompassing more of childhood, along with a corresponding drop in free, unstructured childhood play, may be contributing to the alarming rise of childhood mental health disorders. Boston College psychology professor, Dr. Peter Gray,

argues in a journal article for a causal link between the decline in childhood play and the rise in psychopathology in young people.

As students walk out of their schools on Wednesday, they should think seriously about whether or not they want to return. Instead of spending their childhood and adolescence in increasingly restrictive, test-driven mass schooling that is damaging their well-being, they could take back their own education and explore alternatives to school that put them in charge of their own learning and doing. With the support of their parents, they can regain their mental and emotional health and chart a future that is meaningful to them.

These students can disentangle their own education and individual passions and goals from the institution of forced schooling.

What a protest that would be.

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