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The Dictatorship That Is School

The top-down structure of school limits the success of everyone involved. We can do better.



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The top-down structure of a school, from the superintendent to the principals to the department heads, reeks of authority. Those who step out of line are crushed. The school is held tight in the fists of the ruler, and everyone else must fall in line.

While this comparison might seem overly-dramatic, the truth is that schools are designed to give authority to a single person who then divvies out further authority in small increments to selected individuals.

This power then trickles down to the teachers, who create their own small kingdoms (classrooms), and rule it with the authority **we give no other adult in our children's lives.**

Then on to the students who assert their power over each other in a **fight for dominance** in an atmosphere that invites competitiveness in grades, sports, and cliques.

In the dictatorship that is school, students and teachers learn they must go with the flow or face the consequences. **Conform, conform, conform.**

What other organization has such control over all of the people in the building? Control over thoughts, ideas, and expressions?

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We Have Little Choice

How did schools become a place where one person rules them all?

What are we teaching children if they are meant to conform to the will of adults from the time they start school until they graduate?

Children do not have a choice. They are mandated to attend school, enroll in classes we design, and spend their time in a schedule we dictate.

We are implicitly teaching students to conform while explicitly teaching students to stand up for their ideas.

It is no wonder that children are suffering from anxiety and depression in higher numbers. Michael Strong questions how schools are contributing to the mental health epidemic of young people his Medium article.

Are Public Schools Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness?

Behavioral health has become a public health crisis. No other public health crises are as...

medium.com

School Connectedness	Frequency of Alcohol (SD Units)	Frequency of Cigarettes (SD Units)	Frequency of Marijuana (SD Units)
2 (Somewhat)	0.2	0.1	0.3
3 (Quite A Bit)	0.1	0.0	0.2
4 (Very Connected)	0.0	-0.1	0.1

Teachers are also given little choice. We are told what to teach and how to teach it. We are told when students must be tested, and what we

must do to prepare them for the tests. We are told when to arrive, when to leave, and when to volunteer for extracurricular activities.

Parents are no exception. We tell them what classes their children must take and who will teach them. We tell them when they can go on campus and when they can be involved. We encourage them to stay loyal to the system and trust the teachers without asking too many questions.

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Alternatives to the Traditional Structure

We can alter the structure of the school and replace the principal with a committee where all voices are represented. We can make decisions as a community instead of behind closed doors.

We can give students the opportunity to learn what interests them the most, and encourage teachers to facilitate, instead of dictate, their learning.

We can include parents and invite their expertise on campus. We can give them a voice in their own children's educational experience.

And these alternative structures are already in place.

Democratic education gives equal weight to all of the individuals involved in a school. According to the [Institute for Democratic Education in America](#), democratic education sees young people *“as not the products of an education system, but rather valued participants in a vibrant learning community.”*

In the [Sudbury Model](#), students have equal responsibility, alongside the adults, in their own education.

“Sudbury school students have total control over what they learn, how they learn, their educational environment and how they are evaluated.”—Hudson Valley Sudbury School

These schools are successfully teaching students the value of independence and collaboration. Everyone in the school works toward a common goal—student growth and learning.

This is just one example of a model that is doing it differently. There are other alternative models focused on changing aspects of traditional educational structures.

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A Better Educational Experience

When I reflect on my own school experience, I was apathetic at best and angry at worst. I hated being told what to do all day, every day.

My experiences have made me a better teacher because I can empathize with my students who also struggle within the confines of a school.

But I wish I could make it better for them.

Just like a parent wanting to provide a better childhood for a child, I want to provide a better educational experience for my students. And in turn the teachers and parents as well.

I am hopeful for the future. As more schools redesign, there are changes on the horizon. **We can improve the educational experience for children. We have to.**

The Startup 

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