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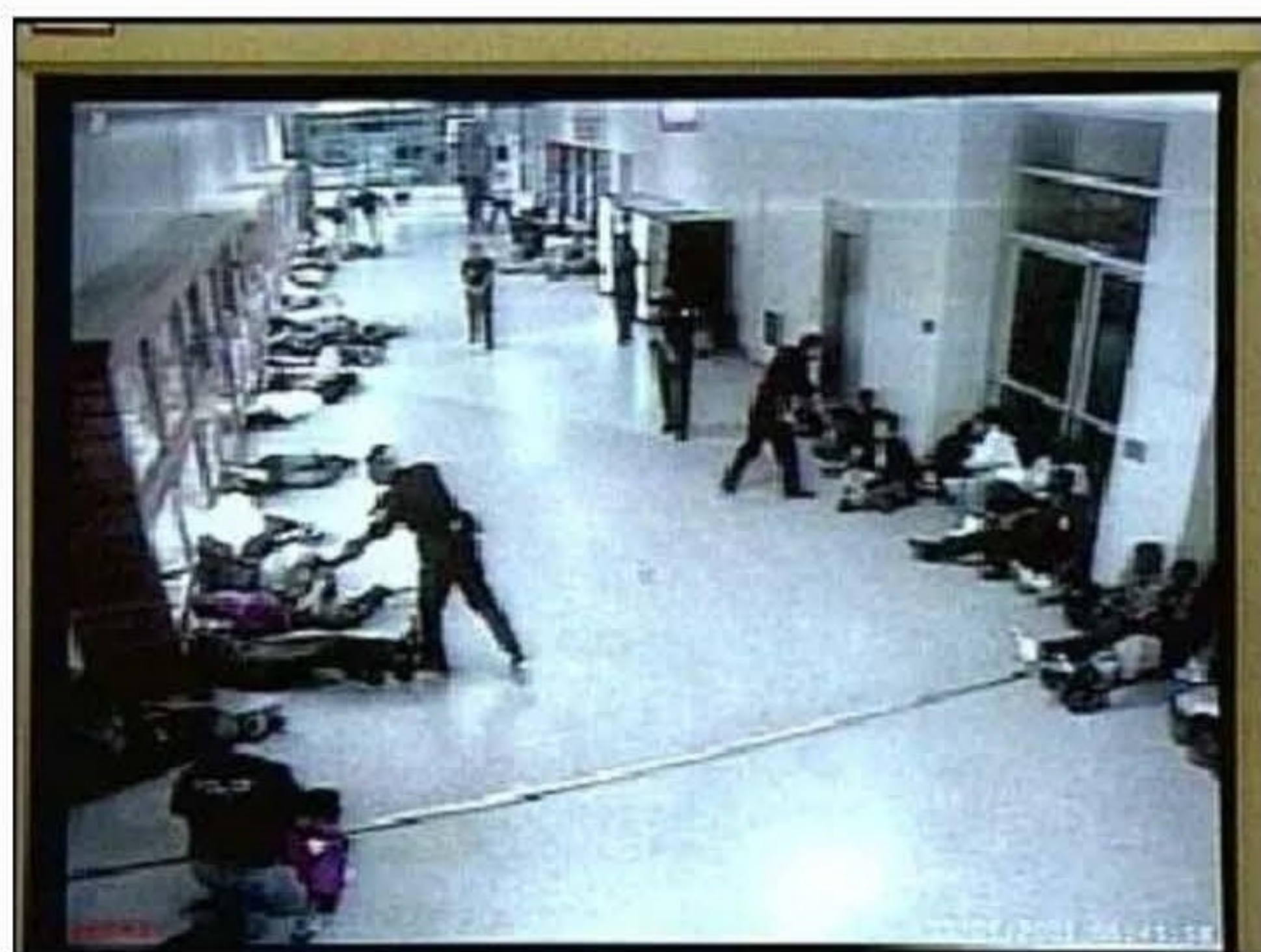
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Why Public Schools Must Be Abolished

By Cevin Soling

In 1852, Aunt Phillis's Cabin was published. The novel depicts a romantic vision of joyful slaves cared for by patriarchal masters. This idealized conception of slavery was pitted against the harsh reality of free blacks in the North facing deprivations. The prevailing myth was that slavery not only enabled the cultural superiority of the South, but also the institution benefited slaves who were not morally or intellectually fit for the freedom they found in the North.

This scenario is not unique. The key to sustaining an abusive, oppressive system is to convince people that it holds merits for the victims. While moral clarity might obfuscate such consideration, a legitimate case can be made that everyday life for many blacks was safer and more secure before the abolition of slavery. After all, slave owners wanted their slaves alive and healthy for work. Some slaves even defended the institution, as was dramatically witnessed during Nat Turner's capture. Truths like these are routinely concealed because we rightly see freedom as a nobler aspiration. Even if former slaves had to endure the conditions of extreme poverty and hunger and the threat of lynching, the potential for self-actualization existed where it did not before. The danger of negating tangible, albeit specious, benefits in addition to suppressing the expressions of support for tyranny by the oppressed is that it prevents us from recognizing institutions of subjugation within our midst.



SWAT team called in to search for drugs. Image from Stratford H.S. Security Camera, Goose Creek, SC

To appreciate how people could be so willfully blind as to permit such a ubiquitous malevolent presence as slavery, one needs only to look at American public schools. The analogy between public schooling and slavery is presented solely to demonstrate that both are socially destructive institutions that are sustained by the belief that oppression, when it is even acknowledged, is necessary and beneficial. Where public schools are concerned, the most salient feature is that dissent is not permitted.

This was codified by the Supreme Court in Tinker v. Des Moines, which is ironically presented as a landmark ruling for student rights. In fact, it sets forth three considerable hurdles that must be met for students to expect basic constitutional protections of free speech and due process. In the judgment summary, students were permitted to wear armbands because: "The petitioners were quiet and passive. They were not disruptive and did not impinge upon the rights of others." It is worth noting that within these guidelines the tactics of pacifists such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. would not be tolerated.

An essential feature of fascism is that it deprives individuals the capacity to comment on the conditions to which they are involuntarily subjected. Nevertheless, children, like slaves, are expected not simply to endure, but to embrace these conditions.

In order for "good" people to accept the purlieus of public schools, they must 1) deny that autocratic conditions exist and 2) insist that the victims of this system require such treatment. The most fundamental assertion of tyrannical authority is that youth are required to be in school under threat of violence. In all 50 states, their presence is compulsory. The only tenable defense is that it is for students' own good -- i.e., they lack the moral and intellectual fiber for freedom and would otherwise spend their days playing video games or something else that is wasteful or dissolute. Evidence to the contrary abounds, but is not acknowledged.

The eloquent genius of Frederick Douglass was similarly not adequate to dismiss ugly misconceptions about blacks. In the same way, the downtime pastimes of students crippled and broken by public schooling is held up as signature behaviors of unschooled children left to their own devices. When a parent sees their dejected child, whose soul has been drained by an endless stream of banal assignments, glued to a computer or television, they commonly assume that kind of behavior is typical for kids who would presumably spend all their days passively in front of a screen were it not for schools. The context for their actions is routinely ignored.

When evaluating schools, as Marshall McLuhan asserts, "the medium is the message." All of school pathologies make sense when you understand that people -- which include children -- do not enjoy or respond well to being subjected to a repressive environment. While it is possible for a North Korean POW to learn calculus under duress from their prison guard, it is reasonable to assume they will: A) associate math with incarceration; B) despise the inmates who learn for appearing readily complicit with their captors; and C. try to forget the information the moment they are free. Sound familiar?

Despite trillions of dollars expended, schools cannot eliminate problems like bullying and illiteracy because it is the nature of school that exacerbates these problems. You cannot reform school just as it is not possible to reform slavery.

Learned helplessness is a vital feature and takes place very early when children discover that they will never be permitted to follow their passions. This is axiomatic due to the inexorably rigid curriculum, structure, and design that must accompany processing large numbers of students. Every aspect of student life is controlled, including their surroundings, what they can do, how they can act, and what and how they may think. Public school students are under constant surveillance. Hallways and classrooms are monitored. Permission must be obtained to talk, leave the classroom, and even to use the bathroom. Lockers, backpacks, and persons are routinely searched. In many schools, police patrol the building and grounds. 95% of those police carry firearms. Break times are generally shorter than what prisoners of war are required to receive under the terms of the Third Geneva Convention. In fact, public schools consistently violate Articles 17, 18, 22, 25, 26, 38, 51, 52, 53, and 99, which govern discipline, labor demands, personal effects, general health and well being, diet, and exposure to humiliation. It is remarkable that parents voluntarily subject their children to conditions that would be considered war crimes if their children were enemy combatants.

Resistance is futile. In 2008, 223,190 students were physically beaten for nugaratory reasons including tardiness, talking back to teachers, inappropriate dress, and inappropriate language. As incomprehensibly large as that number is, it only represents the reported incidents. Other creative forms of punishment, like solitary confinement, persist in the thirty states that do not permit corporal punishment. Worse still are the millions who are drugged into submission with prescribed medications for conditions reminiscent of Drapetomania -- a psychological disorder discovered in 1851 that impels slaves to try to escape captivity.

The general philosophy of public schools is that civil rights are at odds with learning. Fear, humiliation, and degradation are routinely seen as indispensable educational tools. Because schooling numerous children at the same time requires submission and conformity, social efficiency must always dictate and be the final arbiter in all decisions involving public school administration.

Consequently, obedience to authority emerges as the most important lesson that any student will learn. Schools that most effectively maintain order are revered. The delusional insist that kids learn to be citizens in this environment. However, as Simone Weil correctly observed in her book Waiting for God, "a slave does not become like his master by obeying him." Success in school is not based on one's mastery of the subject, but how one meets the expectations of their teacher. This distinction is not subtle.

It is important to appreciate that these intolerable conditions occur in varying degrees at all public schools, even so-called "progressive" models. This is tautological. Most educators, who are largely well-meaning, must exist in a state of denial or else they would have to acknowledge their complicity. Every school is founded on the notion that its population is forced to be there and must submit to the culture imposed. Those former students who adapted better fail to appreciate that their marginal success was predicated on the misfortune of others. Just as anyone can win the lottery, but everyone cannot, failure is an essential feature of schools tied to its process of sorting students based on selective performance.

The insistence that alternatives to public schooling must be presented in any discussion that attacks public schooling is a diversionary tactic that need not be entertained. Abolition of slavery was not postponed until there was a clear vision for how to integrate millions of former slaves into society. Mass recognition of the fundamental evil of the institution demanded immediate action. Freed slaves embarked into a hostile world of profound deprivation and misery. In the 150 years since abolition, great advances have been made, but there is still a need for improvement. The moral imperative for the abolition of public school requires a similar great awakening. Such recognition is especially challenging when former "house slaves" insist their experience in public school was happy and constructive. We must keep in mind that even the most ludicrous worst-case scenarios for children in a post-public school society are still preferable to the status quo. Human rights are at stake.