Let Them Drop Out

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Let Them Drop Out
A response to the killings in suburban high schools
By Jackson Toby

Why do white middle-class kids from seemingly normal families kill their classmates in suburban high schools like Columbine, Santana, and Granite Hills? How can these crimes be stopped? For answers, we should look to the schools where such crimes almost never happen—bad inner-city schools. For although mass murders inside of American schools are statistically very, very rare, when they do occur, they are more likely to take place in good suburban schools than in bad inner-city schools.

Why should excellent schools incubate mass murderers? Because the more exalted the reputation of a school, the worse it is for a student who feels trapped in such a school. Trapped? Yes, students in excellent schools are learning what they need to know to get in to selective colleges and, ultimately, to land well-paid jobs in our information-oriented society. But still they can feel miserable for what adults may consider trivial reasons: the teasing of classmates, a poor body-image, athletic or romantic failures, unpopularity. What's more, they can't escape their misery because, even if they have passed the age when state laws no longer compel school attendance, dropping out of a Columbine or a Santana High School is culturally unacceptable. Their parents would be horrified. Their friends would be bewildered. Their teachers would be shocked. Consequently it is unthinkable and therefore undoable. Better to kill people and commit suicide?

No. Most of the time such students just suffer in silence, and maybe a semester later the world brightens. They lose weight and become more attractive. Or maybe they develop a skill that makes them more popular. But sometimes they take desperate measures to cope with what they perceive as a desperate situation. They steal guns and try to kill as many people as possible at their school. That is what happened at Columbine High School and the handful of other suburban and rural schools that have experienced senseless massacres in recent years.

There are occasional murders in inner-city high schools, but they are nothing like suburban school shootings. In February 1992, for example, a black teenager fatally shot two of his classmates in the hallway of Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn an hour before the mayor of New York City at the time, David Dinkins, was to deliver a speech at a school assembly telling students that they had the power to break free of the violence and drugs of their neighborhoods. Why did this make so little news? Probably because the 15-year-old shooter was on probation for a street robbery two years earlier to
which he had pleaded guilty. And he was carrying out a grudge murder against a former partner in crime. Had the shooting not taken place in the high school, it might well have occurred on the streets of a neighborhood where, alas, quarrels frequently escalate into lethal violence; on those streets more than a dozen Thomas Jefferson students had been killed within recent memory.

But why are inner-city high schools themselves, though located in violent neighborhoods and plagued by much more everyday school violence, far less likely to experience the promiscuous mass murders of successful suburban schools like Columbine, Santana, and Granite Hills? The explanation lies in the different causes of school violence. Everyday school violence is fostered when students do not perceive school as contributing to their futures, have little incentive to be respectful to their teachers or to try to please them, and must cope with being compelled to spend a good part of their time in an environment they dislike. Some become truants. Some clown around for the amusement of their friends and themselves. Some come to school drunk or high. Some wander the halls looking for friends to speak with or enemies to fight. Some assault other kids or extort money or valuables from them, partly for profit but also for kicks. Everyday school violence results from internal dropouts—students going through the motions of education, unconvinced that education will lead anywhere. But everyday school violence is tame stuff compared with the explosive violence that sometimes erupts in middle-class schools.

Why so tame? Because escape is possible before frustration reaches a flashpoint. These internal dropouts become chronic truants or actual dropouts; schoolwork does not enjoy sufficient parental or peer group support to keep them in class. They are less trapped than middle-class kids in suburban schools. The silver lining to a high dropout and a high truancy rate in inner-city schools is that no one need reach the breaking point that occurs occasionally in suburban high schools like Columbine.

True, the high dropout rate of the inner city is widely deplored, and inner-city kids, too, are under pressure to remain enrolled whether they find school meaningful or not: formal pressure from compulsory attendance laws, informal dropout-prevention arguments from teachers, parents, and the larger society, threats of depriving dropouts of driver's licenses or welfare benefits, and incentives like part-time jobs, promises to finance college attendance, and even money payments. For instance, the Red Bank Regional High School in Little Silver, New Jersey, has used a grant of $108,000 from the Labor Department to pay potential dropouts $25 a week to stay in school, attending regularly, and bringing books and pencils to class. Perhaps fortunately, these programs are not very successful; the dropout rate in such schools is high. If they were more successful—that is, retaining more reluctantly enrolled students—the violence rate of inner-city high schools, already too high, might explode.
So how can suburban school massacres be prevented? The conventional wisdom relies on one or both of two remedies: (1) Identify possible mass murderers early and send them for psychotherapy; (2) Prevent lethal weapons from getting into the hands of kids.

Neither of these remedies looks practical. True, some desperate kids talk about their fantasy of shooting up the school. But most of the time this is idle chatter—false positives, as researchers call them. And some mass murderers do not signal their intention to anybody, including the psychotherapists they are already seeing. As for keeping lethal weapons where kids cannot get at them, remember that Americans own more than 200,000,000 guns for hunting, target practice, self-defense, and collecting. Why should kids be less likely to get hold of them for school murders than adults are for more common crimes like armed robberies and fatal quarrels?

A more practical approach to preventing some mass murders at school would be to give children who are miserable at school for whatever reason more options. For those old enough to drop out and go to work, make it legitimate to stop school for a while and try a job in the real world. (The Swedes speak of kids being "school-tired" and do not stigmatize those who leave for a timeout; most eventually return a year or two later.) In the torrent of words commenting on the murders at Columbine in Littleton, Colorado, an obvious question was not raised: Why, if Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were so miserable at school, didn't they simply drop out and try a job in a nearby ski resort?

The first step in legitimating leaving school temporarily is to dispel two myths. One myth is that dropping out is tantamount to suicide because dropouts are doomed to live an economically and culturally impoverished life. What kind of job can a dropout get? Flipping hamburgers at the minimum wage? Fast-food restaurants have a reputation for offering dead-end jobs, yet they are actually a major trainer of the poorly educated for jobs that lead into the middle class. McDonald's is more successful at training egocentric teenagers, including dropouts, to become workers good enough to move on to better jobs than most government training programs. Of course, some have to be fired and others quit. But those teenage employees who stick it out learn to be less shy with other people, to cooperate with fellow workers, to smile even in the face of customer abuse, to say, "Thank you; please come again," to get to work on time, and to work hard and fast.

The second myth is that students who leave school before graduating will generate a crime wave. Two longitudinal studies exploded that myth a generation ago: a national study of adolescents conducted by researchers from the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan (Dropping Out: Problem or Symptom?) and a study of California youths conducted by two distinguished criminologists (Delinquency and Dropout). Both studies followed students carefully throughout their high school years and beyond, gathering delinquency data covering the entire time period, and independently reaching the same conclusion: While it is true that high school dropouts have a higher crime rate than students who graduate, the higher delinquency rate precedes their dropping out of school. In the national study, the rate remained at the same high level after the students dropped out of school; in the California study, delinquency actually declined somewhat after the students left. Why didn't their criminality get worse after dropping out? We don't
know for sure. Perhaps they could no longer tell their parents that they were going to school and consequently faced pressure to get a job. Those who did often found more responsible role models, and their behavior improved. Of course, some dropouts, already in trouble with the law, did not get jobs and continued a criminal way of life.

So, even apart from successful famous high school dropouts like Marilyn Monroe and George Gershwin, it does not seem that leaving school early is necessarily a career handicap. Formal education is not the only path to responsible adulthood. Furthermore, deciding not to complete high school is a revocable choice. The former governor of New Jersey, Jim Florio, dropped out of high school at 17, joined the Navy, realized that lack of education was a handicap, took the GED exam to obtain a high school degree, and eventually completed college and law school. Instead of locking the high school doors to prevent students from leaving and thereby inviting violence, we ought to let those who leave know that the doors are open when they are ready to return.

Yes, there are students too young to leave school, even temporarily, who feel trapped and miserable. School systems can make other educational choices more available for them. We have been gradually moving toward increasing options for the sake of educational effectiveness, and this development should help with the school violence problem, too. There already are alternative schools, charter schools, and private and parochial schools available through voucher programs. The guiding principle should be: Try not to trap kids, because trapped kids can become dangerous to their classmates, their teachers, and themselves. Suburban school massacres are rare; increased options for desperately unhappy kids could make them rarer.

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