

# Mandatory Mindlessness by Aaron Kuller



There is a widespread assumption that it is the intent of the educational system to teach the skills that are necessary to operate as an independent being in the world. But for a large number of students, myself included, with the thought of High School the word 'education' hardly comes to mind. A more appropriate synonym for school, rather, might be "Holding Cell" or "Correctional Facility."

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE VALUABLE SKILLS YOU CAN LEARN AT SCHOOL:

- \*SIT
- \*STAY
- \*HEEL
- \*ROLL OVER
- \*PLAY DEAD

The most common justification for the level of sheer authority that the school is given is that High School prepares students to live successfully in the future. The average school day, like the work that is assigned, is largely dull, tiring, frivolous, and almost entirely void of educational value. The way to perform well in school is to give up your self-respect by giving in to the school's idiocy. As a reward for unquestioning docile behavior, the student who is willing to suffer through the most abuse (busy work, boring classes, lack of privacy or sleep, etc) receives the best grades. This is a cruel form of psychological and behavioral conditioning that tends to produce submissive, uncritical, and uneducated people, guaranteeing that any injustices in their future workplaces, communities, and country will go unchallenged. So, what kind of future are they conditioning us for? Are we being prepared for our own independence or to take our place in the monoculture?

This school environment is having an increasingly detrimental effect upon students. Almost every psychological study on the topic available suggests that there is a strong link between compulsory school attendance and psychological distress, and may play a partial role in provoking suicidal feelings. In fact, American High School students are more likely to commit suicide than High School students of any other nation, including Japan. The most recent studies in the

*Journal of the American Medical Association* imply that up to sixteen percent of High School students have attempted suicide, a dramatic increase from figures from only two years ago. School Districts around the nation have been implementing school programs intended for the prevention of suicide, but the suicide-prevention programs render themselves useless as they refuse to address the root causes of the problem. It is assumed that all intense feelings of anger, depression, and suicide are just a natural part of the teenager's life, ignoring the large role played by impositions on students' freedom by authority figures, and institutions.

The American Civil Liberties Union reports that in Washington State alone, for the last five years, at least 40 major violations of constitutionally protected civil liberties have been reported annually. These mainly consist of violations of free speech and personal privacy. It is ironic that even within schools that openly boast about teaching kids how to operate freely in a democratic society, dissenting viewpoints are discouraged, marginalized, or even outright persecuted. In a free, democratic society, all people have the right to speak their mind without fear of censorship or undue consequences. Perhaps school administrators have decided to redefine freedom: as a student and a citizen, you can say anything as long as the school system agrees with you, everything else is simply not 'school appropriate'. The largest problem with this attitude is that, as students mature and enter the world to fend for themselves, it becomes ingrained in society to the point where dissent is overlooked and critical thought is no longer present.

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Perhaps this gross violation of our constitutional rights should come as no surprise right now. With the recent passage of the P.A.T.R.I.O.T. act, coupled with the mass hysteria and mindless patriotism being fostered by the Bush administration and the corporate media — our civil liberties are simply being seen as an obstacle that needs to be danced around. Law enforcement agencies are taking advantage of this situation to increase their powers into people's lives and homes, never stopping to consider that our constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties aren't randomly created "obstacles" — but are actual laws that are there for good reasons.

This hysteria needs to stop — and the public needs to develop some critical thinking, and be able to deal with these issues rationally. Yes, terrorism is real, and it's something we can't ignore. But there are many ways to address these issues, and instantly resorting to violence and legislating away at little freedom we have isn't a part of the solution. Alternative views, ideas, perspectives, and solutions need to be discussed at every level. Not just among lawmakers and politicians (and the corporations they cater to) — but amongst the general public — students, workers, and families. Our ability to have these discussions is being threatened, and we need to make sure we take every opportunity we have to make alternative ideas heard.

Every time we back down and don't put our voices, our opinions, and our dissent out there to the public — we're allowing the status quo to go unchallenged. We can talk to each other how much we oppose the war on Afghanistan, oppose racism, oppose homophobia, or oppose our school policies — but we have to find the strength to make our voices heard by the everyday people around us — parents, teachers, peers, bosses, and the strangers on the street. As each one of us speaks out — we will encourage others to not be afraid to speak out either — as they see the support of people around them, and as we build a culture that is willing to engage in critical discussion.

Unpopular opinions, on any topic, are always difficult to hold. Being someone who went through school with what seemed like the always-unpopular opinion (I listened to punk music, had pink hair, didn't do what I was told, and constantly challenged authority), I was forced to really evaluate and defend my opinions and actions constantly. It was hard, but looking back, I can't imagine doing it any other way. Seeing how many of my old friends are still struggling to find their identity, and have so little understanding about how the world around them works — I know that standing up for what I felt was right, and dealing with all the shit that comes with it made me a fuller, freer person. Be prepared to fight to make your voice heard — but be assured that the fight is worth it.