

# C.S. Lewis on “The Essential Evil” of Schools

Author C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) attended school in England between the ages of 9 and 15. During that time, Lewis was for the most part blessed with good teachers. Yet, in reflecting back on his experience, Lewis describes in his [autobiography](#) what he also came to see as “the essential evil of public-school life.” (“Public school” is England’s term for a private, secondary school, and during Lewis’ time they were typically boarding schools.) And, as you’ll see in explanation below, that “essential evil” often carries over into adult life:

*Spiritually speaking, the deadly thing was that school life was a life almost wholly dominated by the social struggle; to get on, to arrive, or, having reached the top, to remain there, was the absorbing preoccupation. It is often, of course, the preoccupation of adult life as well; but I have not yet seen any adult society in which the surrender to this impulse was so total. And from it, at school as in the world, all sorts of meanness flow; the sycophancy that courts those higher in the scale, the cultivation of those whom it is well to know, the speedy abandonment of friendships that will not help on the upward path, the readiness to join the cry against the unpopular, the secret motive in almost every action.*

People in America often assume that the modern school experience is a healthy rite of social passage—that it allows students to develop important social skills that they will use later in life. But is the social environment of today’s schools really that healthy? Or, is it rather an abnormal and unhealthy social environment that often thwarts learning?