

# A Prison Mentality Is Killing Our Schools

Why are kids today so soft? There is a lot of talk about safe space and participation awards, but these are only symptoms of a larger problem. The root of the problem lies deeper in the underlying ideologies that govern schools.

In order to understand the shift that has taken place, we must first look to the prison system. The prison system is designed to do two things: house and control. Any attempts at rehabilitation are an afterthought. Because the primary goals are to house and control, a prison operates in a behavioralist mode of rewarding the slightest effort and punishing unwanted behavior. The goal is to create inmates that do exactly what the staff of the prison desire them to do. However, this approach has unintended consequences. Since the rewarded behavior is insignificant (you cleaned your cell, so you can check out three books at a time, etc), then punishment has the larger impact. The prison is controlled by fear. For example, for fear of isolation, an inmate obeys a guard.

The result of this type of system is a destruction of personal relationships and a reduction of rational thought. When fear is a driving force of one's behavior it is only natural that the inmate will see all other people as suspect. Meanwhile, since the inmate is only doing what someone else manipulates him to do, rational thinking atrophies.

This is why prisoners may be seen as model inmates and released only to remain anti-social and revert to their old destructive ways. They have no need of relationships and are not using rational thought. And so it goes. (The book to read: [Dr. William Glasser's Choice Theory](#))

Now, consider our school system. More and more, schools

resemble prisons. The Marshall Project [reports](#) on one school that goes beyond just metal detectors to having no windows, patrols by armed police officers, and regular searches of personal property.

The similarities go beyond structure and policing, however. Pedro Noguera [wrote](#) in *Theory and Practice*, “Disciplinary practices in schools often bear a striking similarity to the strategies used to punish adults in society. Typically, schools rely on some form of exclusion or ostracism to control the behavior of students.”

By rewarding the most insignificant events (attendance, participation, etc.) and punishing any unwanted behavior, our schools hinder meaningful relationships and rational thought. The result is a generation of young adults with over-inflated egos and a penchant for irrational, emotional thinking.

How can this change? A clue may be found in the classic paraclete models of teaching. Plato learned from Socrates and later taught Aristotle. In Jewish tradition, a rabbi taught a small group of disciples. Pre-industrial revolution, Master tradesmen taught apprentices. In any of these methods, there was little use for insignificant achievements, but rather a relationship which encouraged a student to become like a master.

There will always be a portion of society that can be nothing but controlled, but it cannot be a method that will bring out the best in the class. It is time to look back to the classics in order to find an education system which supports strong community relationships and rational thought.

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