

Parents: Be on the lookout for Miranda the toucan. She shows up in "Here's Looking at You, 2000," a health curriculum used in several thousand public schools. Because she knows that parents can't be trusted, Miranda encourages children to check the family cupboards for "poisons," including alcohol and tobacco. The busybody curriculum also urges them to confess "problems at home" by writing secret messages to the teacher.

Using students to "re-educate" their parents is standard fare now in the schools. Adults commonly joke about being "turned in" by their children for such crimes as drinking a glass of wine with dinner or failing to recycle a soda can.

Working on those "problems at home," which many schools consider part of their role, is a never-ending task for zealous reformers. In Petaluma, Calif., ninth-graders in a "human interaction program" were sent home with worksheets that judged whether their families worked on an "open" or "democratic" model or on a "closed, authoritarian" model.

In Tucson, high school students were asked in a health class, "How many of you hate your parents?" Oregon parents testified that in a "values clarification" program, their children were asked, "How many of you ever wanted to beat up your parents?" Discussing or judging parents is routine in heavily therapeutic "life skills" and "human interaction" programs. In the sex-education handbook "Changing Bodies, Changing Lives," parents are one of the "voices" students must weigh and judge. As in other textbooks, parents are either problems to contend with or examples of what to avoid.

Told by the schools to construct their own value systems, students are often led to challenge parental values or to dismiss almost any adult objections as illegitimate. Last week a friend here in New York saw this ethic in action. When she asked what her young child's school was going to do about a wave of bullying, including pushing classmates down

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a flight of stairs, the head of the school said no action would be taken because "children at this stage in their development do not welcome adult intervention."

Dana Mack's strong new book, "The Assault on Parenthood: How Our Culture Undermines the Family," makes the case that the crisis of the public school system is not simply the familiar one of academic failure. It's also that a new ethic, dismissive of parents and traditional values, has descended on the schools. "At the heart of parents' frustration with the schools," she writes, "is a deep and unbridgeable chasm between the vocabulary of moral dictates, rules and authority that parents think are best for children and the vocabulary of autonomy and 'choices' that emanates from the classroom."

For generations, child-rearing experts have been suspicious or negative about the instincts and authority of parents. Miss Mack makes the case that what used to be called the adversary culture — based on relativism, egalitarianism, "sexual diversity," a therapeutic view of the world, and hostility to family, authority and religion — has extended its control over the public schools.

Like a submarine slowly surfacing, this set of attitudes is becoming more visible each day as an official school ideology that nobody has ever voted for. In their franker moments, many educators admit that their real business is social

transformation. In her book "Ed School Follies," about the dominant philosophy at schools of education, Rita Kramer quotes the acting dean of the University of Texas education school: "You can't not use the schools as agencies of social change. It's too convenient." The dean admitted that this emphasis on change "sometimes impedes learning."

Most of us would settle for schools that skip all the social transformation and just concentrate on teaching children how to read and write. It turns out that the modern touchy-feely "affective" curriculum, aimed at improving self-esteem or "getting children to think about themselves," tends to crowd out actual learning. The new ideology is heavily anti-achievement as well, sometimes actively hostile to brighter students because excelling is regarded as elitist, illiberal and anti-democratic. Better to stay dumb, fit in and feel good about yourself.

In the media, parental objections to all this usually come under the heading of condoms, school prayer and the religious right. But behind the media screen, parents of all political stripes are getting the message and pressure is building. Alan Wolfe, one of our best public intellectuals, reviewed the Dana Mack book in the New Republic and didn't much like it. But he agreed with the central message. In his well-off suburb, he said, friends and neighbors are shopping around for alternatives to the public schools because of the schools' anti-intellectualism and hostility to parents. "If social trends can be proclaimed based on my personal experience," he wrote, "suburban public schools are about to face the same precipitous declines in enrollment suffered by urban ones." This is just one indicator that the problem isn't a regional, conservative or religious one. Unhappiness with the social transformers in our schools is national, and it's growing.

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