

When did assimilation become indoctrination?

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Marty Trillhaase
Smith and Cannon

Tea Party members, Rick Layton of Spokane has some advice for you.

Remove your children from the public schools.

Keeping them there, Layton told Saturday's Lewis-Clark Tea Party Patriots rally at Clarkston, gives the government implied consent to indoctrinate them.

What does Layton consider indoctrination?

America is a country without a national religion. There is no American ethnic group or race. Some families have been here for centuries. Others are immigrants. What they share is a creed - a shared core of values and ideals.

And since the earliest days of the republic, public schools have been the guardians of that creed, assimilating generations into the unique culture they're about to inherit.

Such as the ideal of democracy. The majority rules.

Such as its limitations. Majorities can not tyrannize the minority.

When a child learns that in class, is he being indoctrinated?

Kids don't need a textbook lesson about pluralism. Any student in a public school is immersed in it. Public schools are the last great equalizers. After they leave school, students drift into their separate colleges and universities. They stratify into high- and low-paying jobs. Some move into gated communities, others into suburbia.

While still in public schools, however, they mingle with all kinds - children whose parents are professionals, those with natural intellectual or athletic abilities, children who speak English as a second language or perhaps not at all, students with disabilities. They encounter different faiths, personalities, viewpoints, people from different ethnic and racial heritages.

If a child absorbs nothing from that, at least he learns tolerance.

Is that what Layton labels government indoctrination?

In the schools, students are exposed to the noblest of American aims:

"All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. ..."

"We the people ..."

"Government by the people, for the people, ..."

Then they see the harsh history of a people who have fallen short, who struggled - and continue to struggle - to redeem those pledges with slow, plodding but steady progress toward expanding that circle of democracy to include women and minorities.

This is a country that endured a bloody civil war to put down rebellion and extend those liberties.

In public school classrooms, children begin to grasp - perhaps far from completely - that theirs is a country where civil rights and freedoms matter above all else.

That government exists to protect individuals from powerful forces - nature, foreign governments, corporations and, yes, even their own leaders.

Would you call that indoctrination?

Ask a public school teacher and he'll tell you adults visit football fields, gymnasiums and auditoriums. But a classroom? Most have not seen the inside of one since their own adolescent years.

Were they to do so, they could tell Layton and those who agree with him that school is a much different place than it was 20 or 30 years back. Standards are higher. Curriculum is more demanding.

And they'd recognize instantly there is nothing monolithic about the young people who sit behind the desks.

Regardless of any indoctrination, real or imagined, they leave school much the way they began it - with their individuality intact. - M.T.