

Dangerous Teaching

by Thomas C. Reeves

How would you like to be a teacher in an urban public school? That question has challenged the teaching profession for a long time, of course — the movie “The Blackboard Jungle” (the first film to feature Rock music) came out in 1955. Conditions in the schools since that time have worsened considerably. Failure, as well as violence and mayhem, stalk the halls. Studies have shown that more than half of all black males fail to graduate from inner-city schools. The graduation rate for black males in Chicago is less than 40%. The 89,600 student, heavily minority, Milwaukee Public School System has problems that cry out for solutions.

In MPS, the truancy rate in the high schools is 75%. Nine high schools have rapidly rising suspension rates of more than 60%. More than 300 students were expelled in 2004-2005. Physical attacks were recently made on a principal and several teachers. The System is beginning to assign armed police officers to patrol school hallways. Now the cell phone is adding to the chaos.

Cell phones have been officially banned in the Milwaukee schools, but the great majority of students own and carry them anyway. Some students take photos of test questions with their phones and sell copies to peers. At Bradley Tech, teachers are forced to change tests every hour. Moreover, cell phones are used to summon others when, as is common, a fight erupts. At Bradley recently, two girls began arguing over a boy during a routine weapons check at the school door. Cell phones were activated, a fight broke out, and four adult males quickly arrived at the scene, increasing the violence level considerably before police could quell the outburst. Principal Ed Kovochnich saw a gun butt sticking out of a pocket of one of the four adults.

Kovochnich told a reporter, “We keep having problems with extended members of someone’s family coming up to intervene. . . . if we have a simple fight, everyone text-messages or calls their friends, half the school knows about it and shows up.” He wonders if the Federal Communications Commission would permit special antennas that could, with the flip of a switch, block a portion of the citywide cell phone service. Parents tend to oppose any restrictions on cell phones, saying that they want their children to be able to reach them during school hours.

What could be going wrong with the kids? A major factor is the dissolution of the traditional family, and the denigration of high moral standards, both long-time goals of the Left. Then too, there is the influence of the media. Today’s young people are members of the “digital generation,” the first to be wholly inundated by television, radio, movies, the Internet, instant messaging, iPods, video games, and cell phones.

Young people spend an average of four hours a day watching the tube. The notorious content of both television and movies is well documented. And sadly, much of what appears is designed specifically for young people. Turn on almost any radio station to behold an enormously popular music that scorns sensitivity, responsibility, and civility and rejects traditional virtues long known to bring stability, happiness, and prosperity to people of all ages. The iPod enables millions to live in this world during almost every waking hour.

While the Internet can bestow many blessings, there is a dark side, of course, that attracts many. According to a study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, boys between 12 and 17 are the largest group of viewers of online pornography. The average age when a child is first exposed to porn is 11. One in ten adolescent boys reported gambling online in an average month. According to the MacArthur Foundation, 83% of youngsters between the ages of 8 and 18 play video games regularly. Some 48% of young people admitted that the activity kept them from studying "some" or "a lot."

How can the most sincere and capable public school teachers reach young people from broken homes who often can barely read and are awash in the ugliness, violence, and stupidity of the media? That question is surely as important as any facing us.