are schools the assassins of education?

Subordinated by a hierarchical system that indoctrinates students early on, letting them know that their success depends on their capacity to obey, most students fear questioning anything about the way their classrooms are structured.

—bell hooks, *Teaching Community*

[T]he whole system equates urban children … with what is naturally criminal and in need of reform. ... Encouraging students to be critical thinkers, to question accepted beliefs and norms, remains key to a teacher’s role at any grade level. … The public educational system … should be overhauled! Trashed. Dumped. Parents, teachers, and students need to say it’s over. Enough!

—Lenore J. Daniels, “Arne Duncan Doesn’t Care About Black and Brown Children! Why Should He?”

When civil rights leader Malcolm X declared five decades ago “Education is our passport to the future,” he was unlikely investing infallible trust in the school system to carry the cross. The last two decades alone have printed out hundreds of texts chronicling the deleterious effects schools seem to be having on students—thriving in households nationwide by fanning the sweltering frustration, of parents, with the quality and content of school-based education. Concerned parents understand that if education should “draw out” degrees of greatness in students, the school system might be way of mark with an alarming fixation on provincial curricula and high test scores as metric scales to weigh intellectual worth.

The swelling homeschooling movement confirms this much. Parents have begun searching, like never before, alternative pedagogical avenues through which the guarantees of self-discovery and metacognition can fulfill in the minds of children. They seem convinced “failure to achieve harmony of mind, body, and spirit has furthered anti-intellectualism in our culture and made of our schools mere factories.” Few parents thus desire seeing their seeds of life raised as products and commodities, trampled along the way for exhibiting flaws common to most kids.

No more is it secret that many public schools these days are modeled, in style and standard, after prisons. In some states, with more money spent on “correction facilities” than education facilities, disruptive students fall victim fast to zero-tolerance policies, leading off to detention halls eerily identical to the penitentiaries many ultimately end up in. And most public schools located in low-income districts, dilapidated and underfunded, invest more energy reducing violence and preventing gang activity than sculpturing and molding future pioneers. Poor students are
disciplined into submission with roguish rules and regulations, all to ensure academic “excellence” on tests narrower than a bell’s curve.

“Zero tolerance is not simply the effect of possibly ignorant adults who misunderstand data on youth violence; it is not simply the resulting social policy of ill-spirited adults who carelessly toe the line of pejorative media representations of youth; it is not simply another devastating practice of traditional top-down, corporate models of school governance. … [It is] all of these things, together.” The words of Christopher Robbins, whose 2008 book, Expelling Hope: The Assault on Youth and the Militarization of Schooling, writes out the epitaph of a society long-relieved of its soul, consigned now to chop down children whose blooming is yet to begin.6

Schools now feature surveillance systems plastered at every nook and cranny; and all day long, kids are monitored closely by police officers and other security personnel. And even when the closing bell rings, students still fall within the omnipresent reach of curriculum, dragging their feet home, joyless and lifeless, with book bags filled, backs hunched. Why wouldn’t they hate school, when deprived of any opportunity better spent “learn[ing] … by exploration or by apprenticing to some wise person in the neighborhood”?7

The traditional form of homework, which countless studies have discredited as unproductive, not only deprives children of free time after school, but also “disrupts families, overburdens children, and limits learning.” Still, many solemnly swear any shift in practice promises nothing short of Armageddon. And for good reason: “When education leaders continue to cling to the traditional bromide of blaming student’s lack of success on laziness, even in the face of other reasonable explanations, we must begin to suspect that the emphasis on homework serves the needs of powerful groups within our society.”8

The public school system is fractured nearly beyond repair, and raging calls for a complete overhaul might have it right. Charters, vouchers, and all other commercial alternatives cannot be counted on to do the trick.

With strict dress codes and military drills, many of these academies speak more of rigidity and regiment than freedom and fulfillment. bell hooks took a courageous stand in 2003: “When educational settings become places that have as their central goal the teaching of bourgeois manner, vernacular speech and languages other than standard English are not valued.”9 With self-expression penalized (even criminalized), excellence has more to do with wearing school uniforms neatly, and accurately enunciating words, than helping young minds find themselves. Many charter schools also make great use as political footballs, punted back and forth by witless politicians who with error-riddled data claim public schools fail to meet the mark not for inadequate funding or deficient resources but undisciplined students and unwilling parents.

Charter schools, numbering about 5,000 nationwide, and serving over 1.5 million kids, have bubbled within the last decade, most at the behest of millionaire executives whose gazes have been increasingly sharpening toward this new financial frontier. Of certain, there are at least two kinds of charter schools: the regular and the boutique, the latter of the Harlem Children’s Zone, KIPP, and Aspire sort (fronted by for-profit