What Caused Columbine?

May 12, 1999

Google Ads are provided by Google and are not selected or endorsed by Eagle Forum

Everybody's looking for the causes of the terrible tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, and for ways to prevent such horrible happenings in the future. Hillary Clinton has volunteered her intuition that "part of growing up is learning how to control one's impulses."

Putting aside the point that most of us don't have impulses to go on a killing rampage, who is going to teach kids to control their impulses? Certainly not the "village" (i.e., the government or government schools), which Mrs. Clinton believes should have prime responsibility for raising children.

For the past 25 years, the prevailing dogma in public school teaching has been Values Clarification (as in the tremendously influential 1972 book of the same name by Sidney Simon). That means teaching students to reject "the old moral and ethical standards" and instead create "their own value system."

Values Clarification teaches that, since there are absolutely no absolutes, students can make their own decisions about behavior instead of looking to God, the Ten Commandments, parents, church, or other authority that teaches that behavior should conform to traditional morality. Indeed, Eric Harris created his "own value system."

Modern public school teaching exalts "tolerance" of other people's behavior as the highest virtue, and "self-esteem" as education's principal objective. We are forbidden to be "judgmental" about the behavior of others when they indulge in their impulses instead of controlling them.

As best described by the late Senator (and former university president) Sam Hayakawa, the public schools adopted "an educational heresy . . . that rejects the idea of education as the acquisition of knowledge and skills . . . and regards the fundamental task in education as therapy." These "therapy" courses opened the floodgates to all sort sorts of psychological courses, one of the weirdest of which was Death and Dying.

In 1987 Colorado Eagle Forum produced a two-hour video in which student Tara Backer spoke at length about the relentless focus on death, dying and suicide in her sophomore classes at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. She and several of her classmates attempted suicide as a result of this depressing teaching, and it took them many months to recover from the experience.

Tara was subsequently interviewed for an ABC 20/20 program in 1988, where she said, "I had thought about [suicide] as a possible option for a lot of years, but I never would have gone through with it, never, because I wasn't brave enough. The things that we learned in the class taught us how to be brave enough to face death."

She added, "We talked about what we wanted to look like in our caskets." ABC's Tom Jarriel concluded the segment by asking if these courses "suggest death as an answer to adolescent problems."

The 20/20 segment showed morbid visuals of student visits to cemeteries, embalming labs, and crematoriums, and told about picking some bones out of the ashes. It was clear that Tom Jarriel and Hugh Downs thought that death ed was bizarre.

An investigative piece in Atlantic Monthly the same year confirmed that death and dying courses are given in "thousands of schools," often sneaked into health, social studies, literature or home-economics courses without parents' knowledge. The magazine described how these courses include requiring students to write their own obituaries, epitaphs, wills, or suicide notes, and to decide how they would prefer to die, have their body disposed of, and who they want for pallbearers.

Unfortunately, parents in Illinois, Michigan and Florida have attributed their sons' suicides to public school courses in death, dying, or suicide.

Death ed is apparently still taught at Columbine. One student told the Associated Press that shooter Eric Harris was asked to write out his will as part of a class assignment.

Littleton, Colorado has been a focus for many years for all the trendy "edufads" such as Outcome Based Education (OBE). In 1993, parents rebelled against this dumbing-down process and, by a two-to-one vote, elected a "back-to-basics" school board.

The teachers union hit back in the following election and retook control of the Littleton schools. The union was supported by People for the American Way, who used the usual negative slurs, accusing those opposed to OBE of being "fundamentalists" and part of the "religious right."

Some politicians are using the Columbine tragedy to push their liberal political agenda, such as gun control. That's obviously not the answer since killers Harris and Klebold violated 18 current federal and state gun control laws that, had they lived, would have kept them locked up for the rest of their lives.

We are paying a terrible price for allowing public school curricula to teach students to create "their own value system" instead of respecting moral laws such as "Thou shalt not kill." It's time to overturn the foolish Supreme Court decision that bars the Ten Commandments from public school classrooms.