PS for 9/7/89

Privacy Rights for Students

One of the largest school districts in the nation has just adopted a "Rights of Privacy Policy" which should be a model for all 15,500 school districts across the country. It was unanimously passed by the Montgomery County Board of Education, which has jurisdiction over 100,000 Maryland pupils in suburban Washington, D.C.

The crux of the new policy is: "Student privacy interests shall be respected. Therefore, to preserve legitimate expectations of privacy in the student's personal and home life, no student shall be required to reveal, as part of the instructional program, matters relating to his/her personal life, those of his/her family, or his/her status within the family."

Do you wonder why any school would want to question pupils about personal or family matters that are none of the school's business? Unfortunately, such interrogations have become commonplace in public schools, and the Maryland Coalition of Concerned Parents has filled repeated complaints about the privacy-invading and negative questionnaires.

One typical questionnaire to which Montgomery County parents objected included such questions as, "How do other people see you? What sort of person are you? Are you shy? Why are you always timid? Why don't you like to go to church? Why are you an outcast? A loner? What do your parents think of you?"

The offensive questionnaire also required pupils to complete such sentences as: "Most parents are _____. I get embarrassed when _____. If I were an animal I would want to be _____." The children were also told to "write a letter describing the most embarrassing situation happening to them at school."

The new Montgomery County policy includes specific guidelines to assist the school in observing the new policy, such as, "Classroom discussion should ordinarily be 'external' in focus." Why in the world would such an admonition be needed?

Because classroom curricula, over the last 15 years, have shifted from the external to the internal, from the objective to the subjective away from teaching subject content and skills, and toward probing students' feelings, values, and attitudes.

That's why today's public school pupils learn so much about sex and emotions, but can't read, spell, add or subtract, or find the United States on a map of the world.

So, the guidelines state that classroom instruction must "never require students to reveal family occurrences or personal habits, relationships, preferences, traits, decisions, or problems. Nor will students be called upon to make comparisons with themselves or their families."

The new Montgomery County policy tells teacher to review "all instructional materials and activities for obvious invasions of privacy and for more subtle, potential sources of embarrassment or psychological harm." The teacher is instructed to manifest "psychological sensitivity" and warned that "the greater the degree of personal and/or affective involvement called for by the instructional objectives, the greater the need for respecting the individual's privacy."

If teachers adhere to these guidelines, there should ordinarily be no need for students to be offered alternative activities. Nevertheless, "if, for any reason, a student's parent requests that his/her child not participate in a particular activity, the teacher should provide an alternative and equally attractive activity in a manner which does not call attention to the student's religion, values, or physical condition."

Since the teacher is an authority figure and the child is a minor and a captive audience, the guidelines caution that extra care must be exercised. "The relationship between teachers and students in such that even asking a student to fill out a questionnaire voluntarily may be seen as coercive."

Therefore, the teachers are instructed that "prying into past experiences, feelings, viewpoints, or home life which might create anxiety must be avoided. It is not a question of merely respecting the student and his/her family; teachers are prohibited from invading the privacy of students and their families."

The guidelines conclude with this specific instruction: "The use of survival games or other decision-making exercises in which participants are presented with hypothetical crises and asked to decide which member of a group should survive and which should perish are prohibited."

School administrators are generally unfriendly to any recognition of pupil and parental rights, and the Montgomery County School Board adopted the new policy over the objections of Superintendent Harry Pitt. In the continuing battle for

parental rights in public school education, the victory of the Maryland Coalition of Concerned Parents is significant.