

Youth violence is an educational problem

Schools and parents are the answer to flash mobs.

By William C. Kashatus

Robert Coles, the Harvard social psychiatrist known for his research on the moral development of youngsters, defines character as “how you behave when no one is looking.” Coles believes it takes a great deal of moral courage to act as an individual when confronted with peer pressure, and that such issues must be addressed in education.

Coles’ advice is especially relevant given Philadelphia’s recent spate of teenage “flash mobs,” as well as the violence at South Philadelphia High School.

Some of the city’s teens have redefined the term “flash mob.” What began in other parts of the country as impromptu artistic gatherings organized on the Internet have essentially become public brawls in Philadelphia.

Summoned by social-networking Web sites and text messages, flash mobs have gathered on South Street on March 20 and elsewhere in Center City on March 3, Feb. 16, and Dec. 18. In each case, some form of violence broke out, including bullying, brawling, assaults on pedestrians, and vandalism.

Some of the teens were chanting “black boys” and “burn the city” during one of the flash mobs. Shockingly, others dismissed the gatherings as “no big deal” and “just getting caught up in the moment,” suggesting violence has become acceptable.

In separate incidents in December, 26 Asian students at South Philadelphia High were attacked and beaten by mostly African American students who roamed the halls searching for victims. Despite 10 arrests and the administration’s efforts at reconciliation, Asian students continue to feel unsafe at the school, which the state has labeled “persistently dangerous.”

The bullies in all these incidents acted without discipline, compassion, or charac-

ter. And they did what all cowards do: follow the crowd.

The flash mobs have raised questions about race and class, since most of the teens involved are black and from poor neighborhoods, while the areas affected are more racially mixed business districts. Another potential issue is teen idleness due to dramatic cuts in state and municipal funding for extracurricular activities and youth violence prevention.

But Mayor Nutter has rejected both notions, insisting, “There is no racial component to stupid behavior, and parents should not be looking to the government to provide entertainment for their children.” He has a point.

Too often, local and state governments have treated children as dependent on public programs, rather than personal initiative. Worse, many parents have abandoned responsibility for disciplining their children. Even the media promote adolescent rebellion as a virtue and emphasize the victimization of young people.

If we are raising an ethically bankrupt generation, we have nobody to blame but ourselves. Our children don’t want to be victims; they want to be loved, respected, and disciplined — yes, disciplined.

Good discipline teaches respect for self and others. It is one of the truest forms of love any adult can give a child. Young people realize that, though they may not always appreciate it until later in life. We must cultivate discipline, respect, and love in our schools if we hope to build character in our children.

We should also listen more carefully to Robert Coles and other reformers who press for more community-service programs in the schools, less glorification and commercialization of violence, and more time spent with our children.

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