

OPINION PAGES

OUR VIEW

Small crime What ever happened to detention hall?

Nearly everyone fondly remembers the carefree days of elementary school. Story times, field trips and vigorous sessions of kickball during recess often come to mind.

But the early days of school weren't always picturesque and innocent; troublemakers popped up now and then. They were the ones who passed notes in class and stuffed paper towels into sink drains in the restrooms. They whispered dirty jokes behind the teacher's back, ate paste and purposely mumbled the wrong words to the Pledge of Allegiance.

And when most of us look back at our grade school days, we realize that — on one occasion or another — we were troublemakers, too.

But in elementary and secondary schools across America in recent weeks, a new breed of troublemakers has begun to rear its ugly head. They are seemingly good students who have become grouped with all the habitual paste-eaters and note-passers.

— In North Carolina, a first-grader was suspended for violating his school's policy on sexual harassment. He had kissed a classmate on the cheek.

— In Florida, two Roman Catholic high school students were suspended for refusing to remove pro-choice stickers from their cars.

— In Ohio, a 13-year-old honor student was suspended for the possession of narcotics. She had taken Midol to school.

These students and events, while unrelated, have all earned national media attention because of both the severity of the punishments and, in some cases, the laughable nature of the crimes.

In attempts to quell the fears of paranoid parents and earn the praise of grandstanding politicians, schools across the country have taken a track toward stricter enforcement of long-standing rules and regulations. Although this course of action may sound as though it would provide a sense of order in a potentially chaotic environment, in these cases it has created the opposite.

How can an environment be called orderly when a bottle of Midol is filed under the same punishment heading as crack cocaine? Or when a first-grader's peck on the cheek is called sexual harassment?

School administrators defended their actions in these instances by saying they were doing what the public told them to do: Get tough on crime.

But when the paranoia of the masses is enough to get harmless children suspended, that paranoia needs to be put in check. Because even if we did decide to systematically remove every bad apple from our schools, in the process we would end up throwing away far too many good ones.

And the environment we will have created for our children would not be one of learning, but one of fear and paranoia. And our children shouldn't have to be afraid and paranoid before they graduate high school.

They'll have the rest of their lives to do that.

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MEHSLING'S VIEW

MEHSLING ^{OF} DAILY NEBRASKAN



Brent
POPE

Out of order Crooked cops are below the law

Two years ago, on Oct. 1, an innocent man died after a struggle with Lincoln police officers. His name was Francisco Renteria. In case you weren't in Nebraska at the time or you forgot, here's a more detailed version of the tragedy:

The Lincoln Police Department got a call saying there was a Hispanic man violating a protection order and disturbing the peace. The LPD sent several cars to the site. Officers saw Mr. Renteria, a Hispanic man, walking in the area and assumed he was the suspect. They were wrong. It was a case of mistaken identity. They stopped Renteria and attempted to question him, but he didn't speak English. He tried to walk away ... What happened next depends on who you believe.

The officers involved said that Renteria had a seizure in the police car, but doctors found no pre-existing medical conditions that would have explained a seizure.

The officers said they believed he was drunk, and that's why he vomited while they were ESCORTING him to the police car. Doctors found no alcohol or drugs in Renteria's system.

The officers also stated that he was restrained in the normal fashion. A Nebraska legislator said that the autopsy report indicated bruises on Renteria's head, neck, back, legs and sides, and showed swelling of the brain.

No matter who you believe, this much is indisputable: Francisco Renteria died of a brain hemorrhage



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after being mistaken for another Hispanic man and apprehended by Lincoln police.

The police chief, two officers and a fire captain were investigated for possible wrongdoing; all four were acquitted. Even so, I am quite sure there are dirty cops right here in Lincoln. In fact, I've encountered a couple.

In the summer of 1990, I bought a car at a Lincoln Telephone Company auction. It was a bright yellow 1974 Chevy Nova — one of the ugliest cars ever made. On my way home, I pulled onto O Street.

At 12th and O, a cop pulled me over with no explanation. I wasn't speeding or anything, he just wanted

to see my license and registration. (I don't think that's legal.)

At 48th and O, I was pulled over again. And again, I wasn't breaking any laws. This police officer was nice enough to get his night stick out and demand that I get out of my car. When I asked him why, he responded, "Because I think you stole this car, boy!" I refused to get out of my car. Luckily, I was on a busy street and nothing really came of the accusation. I gave him my license and registration, and he sent me on my way.

The sad thing is, I never reported what happened to any authorities. I just went home and tried to forget about it. When the Renteria incident occurred, I felt really guilty about not telling anyone about my own incident. Not because it would have stopped that tragedy from taking place, but because I didn't do my part in making people aware that these things can and do happen.

We must do everything we can to make sure that police are held accountable for their actions. The police are watching us, and we should return the favor. I'm not talking about being a vigilante, I'm talking about being aware of a potential problem and protecting yourself from it.

And please don't think that this is just a racial issue. Some cops are prejudiced against guys with long hair and earrings. Some don't like it if you have a nice car. Some just have chips on their shoulders.

Anyone can be a victim.

Pope is a senior broadcasting major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

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