What Do They Fear?
By SANDY COYNER

There’s really nothing wrong with long hair as such. But school administrators all over the country are shearing it off young male students with an enthusiasm that makes it seem almost lethal. A case very close to home is that of Stephen Mackey.

It can’t be the hair itself that is offensive or dangerous, especially in Stephen’s case, as photographs will show. Rather it is what the hair is associated with; long hair seems reminiscent of beatniks, rebellious and uncontrolled teenagers, riots, and, to some, even Commies. Long hair seems to be synonymous with trouble.

In some cases it may be. A really bad haircut could cause great amounts of confusion and distraction in a high school classroom, and out of it. In many cases it could be a manifestation, though not a cause, of a rebellious and undisciplined personality.

But Stephen Mackey’s hair, at least, is not in any way connected with trouble. His conduct record is spotless, and his academic record is excellent. His haircut has not caused disturbance to the educational procedure; indeed it could not have caused any such disturbance before the original order to shear was issued on the first day of school.

The school administrators who expelled him from Lamar High School defended their actions because “this is our policy.” But in fact they have no written or formal policy on length of hair. The Lamar administrators, like those all over the country, seem to be scared. And it is an irrational fear, because hair is not something to be afraid of.

Professor Mackey opposes their actions because they are “arbitrary abuses of authority.” The importance of limitations on authority cannot be denied. In Houston all matters of haircuts and dress are left to the judgment of the school principals; superintendent McFarland has admitted that they can force students to comply with whatever rulings they wish, and get away with it.

Power without limitation is dictatorship; arbitrary authority is tyranny. As long as we admit a belief in such a thing as civil liberties, and claim a belief in liberty under law, we must also believe that there can be no arbitrary and unlimited authority, and we ought perhaps to examine even the spheres of high school principals.

The question of haircuts is part of a far larger debate which rages in our society over the limits on jurisdiction of our public school system—what constitutes legitimate material to be taught, and what are the limits on the school’s disciplinary jurisdiction.

Our schools are designed for education. Leaving aside for a moment the question of what the schools shall teach, the fact remains that certain disciplinary measures are necessary for the educative process. The schools not only have the right but the obligation to maintain whatever conditions are necessary for the best possible education.

Dr. Mackey is quick to point out that schools must regulate haircuts and dress in order to achieve this goal of education. If dress or haircut is such that it disrupts normal classroom procedure, it should be changed. But schools should not regulate haircuts just for the sake of regulating haircuts.

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should fear being wrong

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Our public schools teach more than just technical and academic subjects. They teach a variety of "social adjustment" helps, trying to enable students to fit into and contribute to the society of which they are members. They teach a certain amount of taste and judgment, good grooming, how to be attractive, have a charming personality, and make friends.

Schools are responsible for teaching youngsters how to be effective members of society, how to understand it and how to get along in it. But it is highly questionable that schools can force pupils to be effective members of society and get along in it. In matters of taste and judgment, schools surely have no right to compel pupils to agree with and conform to the taste and judgment of the principal as a prerequisite for an education. Public schools cannot require a specific sort of taste before they will admit pupils to the classroom.

Some private schools have pupils wear uniforms, and they have a rationale for it. But public schools have not yet adopted this system, at least formally.

The idea of special types of haircuts is akin to that of the uniform: the corporate trim, if you will, or the uniform of normalcy, ordinariness, and conformity—the uniform of the principal's taste.

As long as public schools are public and education is required by law, and as long as taste is not a prerequisite to education, school administrators cannot send children home simply because they don't like the haircut. Haircuts are illegitimate only insofar as they disrupt education, the business of the school.

We recognize some definite limits on the sphere of jurisdiction of our educational system. A dramatic one is the separation of religion from the school; schools may not teach any religion, or practice any religion, and especially they may not require any religion as a prerequisite for an education. But this limit was hard won after centuries of hard fighting.

Do the schools have authority to teach and require everything except that which they are forbidden to teach and require, or are the schools instructed as to the specific materials they must teach, and the specific discipline they may require?

It is necessary to remember in connection with haircuts that there is such a thing as a normal process of fashion and style, a process which proceeds by virtue of dynamic forces largely contained within the process. Social pressure determines what is "in" and what is "out"; in a time of abundance and advertising, the two can reverse radically.

It is dangerous to tamper with the process. There is a vitality and a spirit in the youth which decides it likes long haircuts on boys, and certainly no evil. If the natural enthusiasm is repressed unjustly, it may explode in rebellion.

It is true that long, greasy, unruly haircuts often appear on undesirable characters. In these cases, however, the hair is a symptom, not a cause, of undesirability. In individual cases, it is possible that a haircut could be a step toward a solution of what could be personality difficulties.

But a blanket rule banning long hair won't work. It won't help those who really need help, and it will catch people like Stephen Mackey. And anyway, longer hair is becoming acceptable by the normal, natural phenomenon of fashion. Length of hair is not really a criterion of undesirability.

The Houston Schools are in a tough situation with the Mackey case. They have worked themselves into a position from which it will be difficult to move without losing too much face. And they have voiced the fear of losing all authority if they lose this case. If Stephen doesn't have to cut his hair, no one else will want to cut his hair, and perhaps other pupils will challenge authority in the other spheres where it is justified and necessary.

The schools should not have to be so worried. They should realize where their authority is justified and where it is abused. If they are clear about it, if they can see where they need to be strong and where they must let well enough alone, they can make proper rules and enforce them. When the schools are right, they need not fear losing the battle; they are strong enough indeed. But where they are wrong, they should worry. They should worry about being wrong.