A new Louisiana law will require children to address their teachers, and other adult school employees, as "ma'am" or "sir" and to use Mr., Mrs., Ms., or Miss when calling them by name. State Sen. Don Cravins, a Democrat, drafted the bill in an attempt to teach children civility and respect, and to put an end to school violence. Mr. Cravins feels that similar rules of address in Louisiana prisons work wonders with unruly prisoners: "I've seen how polite and well-mannered the young inmates are." The law will go into effect this autumn for students in kindergarten through 5th grade. Higher grades will be phased in a year at a time. Students who do not show proper respect will be subject to punishments to be determined by local school boards. The result, if Mr. Cravins is correct, will be a kinder, gentler blackboard jungle.

Schools have often been compared to prisons. After all, both schools and prisons have populations who would rather be elsewhere; both regulate the mental and physical lives of their inmates in minute detail; and, regardless of their mission to provide education and rehabilitation, both have crowd control as their primary day-to-day objective.

But in the past, this school-prison comparison came up when reformers wanted to make schools less like prisons. Now, in response to the latest wave of school violence, school critics are reversing their ground and suggesting that schools actually need to become more prison-like. So school authorities are adding uniforms and, in Louisiana at least, language control, to ride herd on students, whom they regard as doing hard time and ready to riot at any moment.

Unfortunately, adding more rules and making schools more rigid won't make students more manageable. Media violence and the availability of guns may trigger some of the violence that plagues our schools, but the
repressive, prison-like culture of the schools themselves must be a contributing factor, too. The Louisiana polite-speech law is particularly wrong-headed. Respect must be earned, not legislated. Requiring students to be polite will undercut earned respect and turn "sir" and "ma'am" into hollow and meaningless titles.

Students will naturally respect teachers who show them respect. We can't force them to respect teachers who do not. On a recent visit to a high school, I heard a teacher on hall patrol berating a student: "You're so dumb you should be in a special remedial class. You're too stupid to read the rules." The crime was carrying an unopened bottle of soda, violating a rule, written in the student handbook, that food was not allowed above the first floor. Throughout the incident, the student, who was in fact a very advanced reader, exhibited the kind of deferential behavior that is to be the law in Louisiana. But I don't imagine she was thinking deferential thoughts. Just as I don't imagine the Louisiana prisoners, addressing the guards as "sir" and "ma'am," think politely about their keepers.

I later mentioned this incident to one of the school's deans, whose second-floor office was well-equipped with a microwave and a variety of snack foods, reminders to the discipline cases waiting to see her that the no-food rule written in the student handbook doesn't apply to teachers. I worried aloud to her that in the post-Columbine era the teacher's overreaction might be just the thing to set off a fragile student with violent potential. After all, I added, hoping to defuse the situation a bit, carrying a bottle of soda was not the same as bringing a pipe bomb to school. But the dean replied that they were exactly the same. Rules were rules. Breaking one rule invites breaking all. Besides, the rule was in the student handbook. Of course, I thought to myself, students don't read the student handbook, which may mention food but does not specifically prohibit bringing pipe bombs to school.

Required uniforms and titles are reminders of the top-down power structure of the school, where teachers rule, and students have no voice. Teachers won't wear uniforms. Teachers will continue to address students any way they like. Teachers will enforce rules randomly or mindlessly. Placing more restrictions on students means schools will spend more time on enforcement and even less on learning, and it is almost certain to increase students' resentment of the way they are treated. And that, in turn, will make the schools even more afraid of their students. Sounds like prison to me.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that students don't surrender their civil rights when they enter a school building. That and the First Amendment could be enough to void the new Louisiana politeness law. But even if it stands, I suspect the law will be ineffective and unenforceable. Language just doesn't take well to being legislated. It's easier to smuggle contraband language into school than contraband Coke. The real message the Louisiana law sends to students is this: If we can't earn your respect, we'll require it instead, and punish you if you don't say, "Please, sir" and "Thank you, ma'am."

Of course, the final irony of the Louisiana law is that using polite titles need not be a sign of respect. I remember when I was in high school the class wise guy asked our very formal English teacher, "Mr. Stark, what's
your first name?" "My first name is Mister," Mr. Stark replied, without missing a beat, and to punish us for this breach in decorum, this suggestion that he might be human and fallible like us, he abandoned his lesson on Hawthorne and put a sentence on the board for us to diagram. We, in turn, couldn’t wait to break out of the joint.

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