

STUDENTS WANT MORE DISCIPLINE, DISRUPTIVE CLASSMATES OUT

BY LYRIC WALLWORK WINIK

IT IS SEPTEMBER 3, 1996, the first day of the new school year. But for twenty-one high school students in the greater metropolitan area of a major American city, the first school night isn't spent hitting the books or even in front of the television. It's spent inside a windowless, nondescript room, seated around a wooden veneer table.

For four hours, two groups of young people, eleven from the city schools and another ten from the surrounding suburbs, talked about their education, their schools, their future. Dressed for the first day back in shorts, jeans, and assorted T-shirts, these students, ranging in grade from ninth to twelfth, may or may not be representative of American youth as a whole. But while the two focus groups were not designed for scientific accuracy, what these students had to say, in between fidgeting with pencils and doodling on notepads, should give pause to educators across the country.

According to these students, what their schools most lack—and what students most want—are discipline and order.

Violence, often coupled with drugs, disorder in the classroom, and the weak enforcement of school rules were of paramount concern. Overwhelmingly, the students' message was clear: Standards of behavior matter, both for everyday safety and for academic success.

School violence consumed much of the attention of both focus groups, whether it was sporadic, as at some of the suburban schools, or a more constant threat, as at several of the urban ones. When asked to grade personal behavior at their schools, most students gave their peers, and even their teachers and administrators, C's and D's. Both groups reported fights breaking out and the presence of weapons. Several suburban students spoke of the state police monitoring certain schools for drug problems and thefts, while many

Lyric Wallwork Winik, a Washington, D.C.-area writer, is a frequent contributor to Parade magazine, where she often covers educational issues. She has also written for Washingtonian magazine, The New York Times, and other publications.

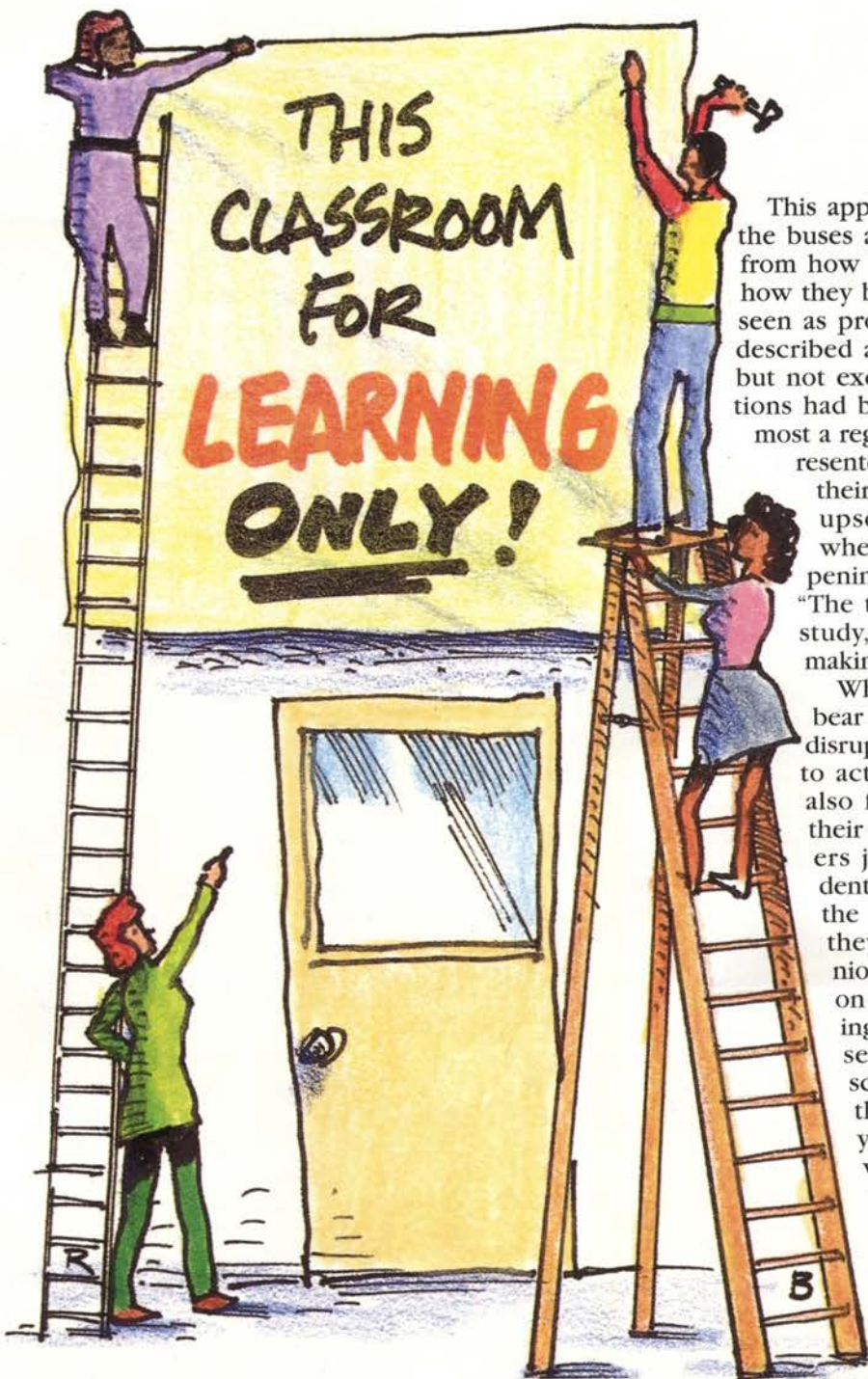
urban students told of schools where they were constantly on edge, despite metal detectors, private guards (also called "rent-a-cops"), and new security procedures.

"You think being in school, you be safe," said Jackie,* a sophomore at a city high school, "but you're in school and you're still not safe." "There's a lot of fighting," added Taker, a junior, "... Sometimes I be scared to walk down the hall because somebody will turn off the lights and the boys be hiding in the lockers. So when you walk down the hallway, you don't know what's going to jump out from behind you or in front of you." The trip to and from school may also be a time of danger. "Sometimes I be scared to go on that bus out there," said Lynn, a senior, "so sometimes I walk.... You know how boys will get, like drunk or something at school, so when they get on the bus they don't know how to act and they'll start fighting or something."

Several city students also complained of the easy access outsiders and strangers seem to have to their schools, explaining that almost anyone can enter the building and start a fight. "I mean they let you get in with a temporary ID, instead of enforcing the rules like they're supposed to," Taker explained. "They just let you in with a temporary ID and they don't do anything about it.... I'm saying, if you don't have an ID, you shouldn't be able to get inside, because everybody's sister, mother, and cousin could be in [my school]."

While episodes of violence seemed to be more common in the city schools, suburban students reported that they were far from exempt. Dave, a suburban sophomore, described the problems in his school as serious: "There's a lot of drugs, but they don't do anything about it. People pull guns on each other and they don't do anything...." Jared, a senior whose school has been plagued by fires, including one where the women's bathroom was doused in magnesium and set ablaze, explained, "People don't respect our school."

**EDITOR'S NOTE: For the purposes of this article, all student names have been changed.*



This apparent lack of respect carries over from the buses and the bathrooms to the classroom—from how students behave toward each other to how they behave toward teachers. If violence was seen as problematic, classroom disruptions were described as epidemic. Several students—mostly, but not exclusively, urban—indicated that disruptions had become so common that they were almost a regular part of each class period. And they resented having to pay an academic price for their classmates' misbehavior. "It makes you upset, especially like around exam time when you really need to know what's happening," explained Aisha, a city sophomore. "The teacher's telling you what you need to study, and they're disrupting the class and making it hard for you to learn."

While many students feel that their peers bear much of the responsibility for classroom disruptions—"you should already know how to act," explained one urban student—they also fault those teachers who fail to exert their authority in the classroom. "Some teachers just don't have control, and their students take over," said Aisha, "but I can have the same classmates in a different class and they don't say anything." James, a city junior, placed half the blame for disruptions on students and half on teachers, explaining, "... I think the teachers, they need to set precedents. Like on the first day of school, you know, show to the students that they have control. Because, like, if you don't and if they see that they can walk over him, they are going to take that opportunity. And also you've just got a few ignorant students out there who just want to get in detention or whatever else."

Several teens also placed the blame for class disruptions and school tensions directly on the students' shoulders. "I definitely think it's the

students' fault, at least in my school," said Marc, a suburban junior. "There's just a lot of ignorant people in my school. They're just disrespectful.... They don't respect people except for themselves or their group."

Many students expressed sympathy for teachers in their struggle to manage and discipline large, unruly classes. Jackie, the urban sophomore, even raised the issue of teachers' personal safety. "Because it's like some people, if they can hit their mother, they can hit a teacher.... You can't hit a student, but then a student can hit you, really. That's how it is." Added Kim, a freshman, many teachers "are scared of the students."

Many students also expressed frustration with the ineffectiveness of schools' disciplinary procedures, a source of repeated complaints from both sets of students, although with several variations. "The problem lies in the students," said Doug, a suburban senior, "but the fault lies in the administration. The school is there to do something, and [even] if the students are the ones with the problem, they're not going to change on their own. If the administration's not going to do anything—which they won't—nothing's ever going to change. I put the fault in the administration."

Some students thought that their school's disciplinary code needed to be made tougher; some thought that the rules were adequate but said that lack of enforcement was the problem. Others said that there were far too many rules, but the serious problems remained unaddressed. "We've got plenty of rules that's like in binders this thick," said Dave. "They expect you to know every rule. They've got everything from if your pants are too big around your waist, you've got to wear a belt. Your boxers can only show this far. [But] they only do anything about the stupid stuff, like talking in class. The people that bring drugs into the schools and guns, a month after they get expelled, they're back in school. [For] the most serious acts, students need to get kicked out of school—for good—and need to go to an alternative school. And then their schools have to have stronger rules too."

In fact, urban and suburban students, alike, felt themselves plagued by violent and disruptive peers—students who may have been removed from class or even expelled from the school—only to return in a week, a month, or just a day, as if nothing had happened. "... [T]hey're going to know they can do whatever they want and just come back. I think there needs to be a certain point, you know, just kick them out," explained an urban junior, who attends one of the city's more prestigious magnet schools. Lynn, a city senior, agreed. "Just kick them out of class. If you don't show that you're serious about it, then the students aren't going to take you seriously. Like if you just let them get away with things, then students are going to keep doing them."

The support for permanently removing unruly classmates was just as strong among suburban students: "If a student is being disruptive, then just kick him out. Get him out of the class.... I mean, if they don't want to learn, you gave them the chance," said Alan, a senior with an interest in law and graphic design. He went on to add, in obvious frustration, that disruptive students should be told, "This is your high school education, and if you don't want it, we're not going to give it to

you.... If a person is constantly disruptive, then they obviously don't care. If they're throwing paper and whatnot, get them out of class. I mean, sure, everybody may do something to a substitute teacher, everybody may do something once in a while, but there are people who are constantly, absolutely disruptive who just shouldn't be there, who aren't learning but yet they're still there."

Indeed, students' desire for orderly classrooms clearly overlaps with their concern over academics. And here again, the wish is for identifiable standards. In fact, the same preference among many students for enforceable standards for classroom conduct extends, in varying forms, to their views on academic achievement.

"I don't think I'll be prepared for college," said Dave, the suburban sophomore, "because there are just too many students in the school that are just like [not serious].... There are just too many disruptions." For some, large class sizes—several suburban students spoke of classes of forty-five or more—seem to guarantee a certain level of anonymity in which standards of behavior and academic achievement are both allowed to slide.

Several urban students also complained that, in some instances, good behavior is allowed to substitute for academic achievement. "I think they just grade you on the way you act," said Aisha, "If you was quiet, you get a 90." Added Takeru, "They give you what they think you deserve...."

One suburban student explained that there was very little difference in the actual work between standard and honors classes. The real difference was to be found in students' behavior: "... the kids in there actually want to learn, that's why they're signed up for honors, they actually want to be there."

Indeed, most of these high schoolers have come to *expect* other students to behave badly. Alan, the suburban senior, summarized students' frustrations this way, "I think it's the whole setting. The teachers don't care, the kids don't care, the administration doesn't care, when it comes down to it, after three years, you don't care."

For Guy Molyneux at Peter D. Hart Research Associates, observations like Alan's lead to some larger and troubling conclusions. "Most students accept their current school conditions," he says. "And although they voice specific complaints, they do not have a sense that their schools may have been or could become better." Perhaps most disturbing is the researcher's comment that, "Most of these high schoolers have a hard time imagining a school in which students and teachers are respectful of one another and in which learning and hard work are valued."

For anyone concerned with the state of education, such observations and conclusions raise an important question well beyond the scope of these two focus groups: These students clearly expressed a desire for higher standards, for themselves and their peers, in the areas of both discipline and academics. At the same time, it appears that the students' standards for and expectations of their schools are declining. The question now is: How does the nation and its public school system raise students' expectations—and fulfill them? □