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Warren Simmons, Executive Director

Editor
Robert Rothman

Managing Editor
Susan Fisher

Copy Editor
Margaret Balch-Gonzalez

Production & Distribution
Mary Arkins Decasse

Design
Gilbert Design Associates, Inc.

Illustration
Carolina Arentsen

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Annenberg Institute for School Reform
Brown University, Box 1985
Providence, Rhode Island 02912
Tel: 401 863-7990
Fax: 401 863-1290
Web: www.annenberginstitute.org

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Learning in Context: The Importance of Learning Environments

Robert Rothman

In a recent speech, Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers, New York City’s teachers union, outlined a plan for rating schools and holding them accountable for improvement. Under Weingarten’s plan – an alternative to the system developed by the city’s department of education – schools would be judged along several dimensions, not just test scores.

One dimension on which schools would be rated would be the quality of the learning environment. As Weingarten put it in her speech of March 13, 2008, “A safe, secure environment is a threshold issue for any school and it is indispensable if teachers and students are to focus on what is important – teaching and learning. Kids tell me this all the time – they are scared of being bullied, and they need the adults to help create an atmosphere where they feel safe.”

Weingarten’s proposal was a recognition – rare in this era of test-based accountability – that learning takes place *in a context*. If students and schools are to be held accountable for learning, then educators and public officials ought to be held accountable for establishing the conditions that make effective learning possible.

Safety and security are important aspects of an effective learning environment, but they are not the only ones. The physical environment is critical too. At the most basic level, this means that schools that are clean and where pipes don’t leak are more conducive to learning than schools in decrepit conditions. It also means that facilities necessary for learning, such

Robert Rothman is senior editor at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and editor of *Voices in Urban Education*.

as science laboratories, libraries, and computers, need to be adequate as well. And it means that schools need to be designed in ways that are welcoming to students and that create spaces where students want to be and want to learn.

School cultures also contribute to the learning environment. The extent to which adults hold high expectations for students and create supports necessary for students to succeed are vital to student learning. These supports, moreover, include the availability of learning resources in the time students are out of school – such as partnerships with cultural institutions and after-school programs. They also include expectations and supports for adult learning; schools in which teachers and leaders themselves are continually learning are effective in improving student learning.

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* examines learning environments from a variety of perspectives. The articles look at various ways that schools and their partners make effective learning possible – or impede it.

- Judith Johnson defines an effective learning environment and considers ways that district leaders and partners can create and support such environments in schools.
- Prakash Nair and Annalise Gehling consider the uninviting ways most schools are designed and outline innovative designs that foster student motivation and learning.



- Kathleen Nolan describes a school in which a policy of imposing order ended up criminalizing misbehavior and failed to enhance the learning environment.
- John Beam, Chase Madar, and Deinya Phenix show vivid examples of schools that have been successful in improving safety and discipline without punitive measures.
- Carol Ascher and Cindy Maguire outline the characteristics of high schools that have “beaten the odds” and succeeded in improving graduation and college-going rates.

These articles make clear that learning is more than simply the interaction between a teacher and student, and that the conditions in which learning takes place have a huge effect on that interaction. And many actors outside of schools are responsible for creating and maintaining those conditions.

Weingarten’s proposal is a bold attempt to hold policy-makers accountable for their role in establishing adequate and equitable learning environments. If her proposal were approved, it would signal a sea change in how Americans view accountability. In the early days of the standards-based reform movement, the idea of establishing standards for students’ opportunity to learn, in addition to their performance, got shot down in Congress. At the time, critics, including governors, contended that schools should be accountable solely for student outcomes, not inputs.

Perhaps policy-makers are ready to consider the idea that the conditions in which students learn *produce* outcomes, and that closing the achievement gap requires equitable learning environments. That would be a most welcome development.

The View from Central Office: A Superintendent Looks at Learning Environments

Judith Johnson

To a leading superintendent, an effective learning environment requires support from community partners and the district central office.

Judith Johnson has been a leader in education reform at the national and local levels for decades. During the Clinton administration, as acting Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education, she oversaw federal aid to local school districts and helped create a number of initiatives, including the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. Since 2001, she has been superintendent of the Peekskill City School District, a 3,000-pupil district along the Hudson River north of New York City.

Johnson has been a leading voice for high standards and equity and for ensuring that all students have a broad range of educational opportunities. She was a member of the Time, Learning, and Afterschool Task Force, a national panel convened by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, which produced the report *A New Day for Learning*.

Johnson spoke with *Voices in Urban Education* editor Robert Rothman about a district's role in establishing and maintaining effective learning environments.

How would you define an effective learning environment?

I would say there are probably three goals that an effective learning environment would be shaped by: one, constantly improving the academic performance of students; two, maintaining and supporting a quality workforce; and three, extending and involving the community in the success of schools.

Characteristics of an Effective Learning Environment

I would start by ensuring that everyone saw teaching and learning as well defined, with clear expectations; that the entire school community had clear goals that extended beyond performance on test scores; and that there

was a focus across the district on continuous improvement. All members of a school community, staff and students, see themselves as continuous learners. The standards are fixed, they're high, and time is a variable. Academic rigor is a constant across all the curriculum areas. And there's ongoing reflection.

The environment, of course, would have adequate class sizes, well-trained staff members, certified staff members, a strong security force. In the classroom, the teaching is engaging, interactive, and focused on student engagement. I think co-curricular activities and an effective learning environment are an integral part of a school. I am a strong

Judith Johnson is superintendent of the Peekskill (New York) City School District and is the 2008 New York State School Superintendent of the Year.



believer in ensuring that the fine and performing arts are considered components of an effective learning environment. There's an ongoing commitment to professional development.

Everyone uses data – students as well as teachers as well as administrators use data to assess progress and outcomes. I think that's a start, in terms of an effective environment.

What are some of the physical aspects that make a learning environment effective?

The facilities are clean, the facilities are modern, and the facilities provide for adequate access for all, including the developmentally disabled. There are computers and technology obvious throughout the physical environment. The grounds and the exterior of the building have curb appeal and say to

anyone entering the building, "We care about the children that are housed in this building." That's a start.

What about the social interactions among students and between students and adults?

I'll talk a little bit about how we view that in Peekskill. We have a theme that the Peekskill City Schools represent a caring community. Within that caring community, the interactions are expected to be cordial and civil, which means that we focus on teaching positive behaviors from the time students enter kindergarten to the time they graduate from high school. There are consequences for inappropriate behaviors; however, the consequences always include the opportunity to learn, so that punishment isn't the answer to inappropriate behavior. A consequence plus an understanding of how one would handle a situation differently is really what we focus on with social interactions.

Students are expected to be civil; they are expected to reflect the kind of behavior that we want them to demonstrate when they become caring adults in the world beyond schools. And there's a real focus on anti-bullying behavior as well as anti-violent behavior and absolutely zero tolerance for any gang behavior.

So it is expected that schools are mini-societies that represent not just democratic ideals but positive social behaviors and, therefore, that's what we expect to see in all of our children.

I do want to talk a little about consequences and celebrations. We strongly believe that accountability is an absolutely important measure. It's how you define accountability and what you do with that information that makes a difference. A really solid school district

uses data in a variety of ways: to assess teacher performance, to assess student achievement, to assess how effectively the district itself is meeting its goals. If you're going to have consequences for the failure to meet goals, then you need to have celebrations whenever they are met, so that people feel they're being acknowledged for their work.

I think, in school settings, all too often, that acknowledgment doesn't occur frequently enough. Take that back to the teachers who feel they're working as hard as they can and they know that they're facing challenges, but they're not being recognized for the accomplishments that they have achieved. I think I didn't do a good job of that in the beginning. I think I'm very sensitive to it now, because I recognized that's how you keep people going, by acknowledging and celebrating their accomplishments.

The Challenges of Implementation

How prevalent would you say that these conditions you've described are in schools today? Would you say that those are common or rare?

I guess I don't think they're rare anymore. I think that what I'm describing to you represents the language and expectations that many superintendents have for the districts they lead. I think the challenge is in the implementation. One, do they have the financial resources to ensure that the attributes that we think are the positive attributes can really be installed in schools? And two, to what degree does the school community support the components of an effective learning environment, particularly the component related to social behaviors?

When you're in an urban setting, one of the challenges you face is the challenge of the loss of hope. You have families who have, for generations, failed to see success or accomplishments. They send their kids to school with a diminished sense of hope because they, themselves, do not have examples or models that they can show children. This is probably the most devastating part of the civil-rights movement, and that is the folks who have been left behind. They have a different culture, and the culture of despair is one that we need to be concerned about in this country because it doesn't reflect positive social behaviors. It reflects abandonment of those behaviors. I think we haven't spent enough time looking at what I call the moral debt that we have to really address if we're going to create environments where social behaviors are cordial and respectful and civil and productive.

If you're going to have consequences for the failure to meet goals, then you need to have celebrations whenever they are met, so that people feel they're being acknowledged for their work.

The Consequences of a Poor Learning Environment

What happens when the learning environment is ineffective and doesn't respond to those needs?

You don't have a shared sense of purpose; you don't have a set of expectations shared by everyone. You find that the achievement gap is a glaring gap – which, by the way, is a problem everywhere in this country regardless of the environment, but it's even more glaring in environments where these expectations are not clear and these attributes are not present.

You find large numbers of students who do not see a connection between school and the rest of their lives. When they don't see that connection they are candidates for either psychological dropout or physical dropout. So you often see high dropout rates in such environments – kids simply abandoning the schools. And there are even instances where parents agree to sign them out, because they, too, don't see the relationship between school and the rest of their lives. That's the most compelling set of indicators of such environments.

Large numbers of students do not see a connection between school and the rest of their lives. When they don't see that connection they are candidates for either psychological dropout or physical dropout.

Are there effects on teachers as well?

There are. Teachers sometimes have a sense of not being supported by parents. They have a sense that their work is not valued. They have a sense of being pushed to produce test scores without an understanding of what the relationship is between test scores and improving the lot of these children as they move toward adulthood.

You do see low morale in many of these places. You do see a more significant turnover of teaching staff in places where these attributes are not present. But I think you also see constant conflict between teacher and parent communities, between teachers and administrators. The conflict is a result of an absence of agreement on the purposes for which everybody comes to work every day, and that is to educate all of our children to high standards.

They often have low expectations for their students. That's the challenge that needs to be turned around in these environments. I don't know what comes first: the low expectations or the devastating environment. But I do know that they sit in the same sphere. They absolutely do. Where you have teachers who have high expectations for their students – and for all students – and believe they can all be successful, that's where you're likely to find hard work and people attempting to put in place the kinds of positive learning environments that are successful for all kids.

The Roles of Community Partners

What is the role of out-of-school settings – after-school programs, community organizations, and institutions – in maintaining learning environments?

I'll talk from personal experience in Peekskill. These are integral to the success



of our students. We have a number of partners, and I'll talk a little about them.

We have partners in the faith-based community. They have a formal organization and they work closely with us on student attitudes and student behaviors, and they support the programs that are in place. They will speak from the pulpit on occasion about key school issues when we ask them to do that.

We have a local Hudson Valley Contemporary Museum that prepares students to become docents and often introduces them to the world of fine arts. They provide programs as well as educational experiences for parents and students.

We have the police department. They're a positive partner. They do a number of things. They help kids understand what's appropriate and inappropriate behavior. They also view themselves as friends of adolescents, and so they attempt to put in place programs that allow students to see police officers as protectors of their

safety as well as their typical role of ensuring that community residents do not break the law.

We have a local community college that forms an integral part of our school system by offering courses. The healthcare center provides healthcare services. The healthcare services are really important, because sometimes it's the only place where kids learn absolutely how to engage in positive pro-social and positive health behaviors.

There is no way that you can address the educational needs of a school community in the absence of partners. If you listened to what I've just described, we have healthcare partners, museums, the police department, the local community college – in fact, there are several colleges that work with us – and all play an integral role. If they were to disappear tomorrow, that would actually leave a hole in the educational services we provide to students. That's how important they are. And it's almost seamless. They come into the buildings, or we send students to their sites, depending on the program. Everyone views them as part of the educational community.

The Role of the District

What's the role of districts – superintendents and central offices – in creating and maintaining effective learning environments?

Clearly, in providing leadership and in setting the standards and articulating the goals and communicating effectively what the expectations are for students and the school community. That's one set of conditions.

The other is making sure that time and resources are available to meet the goals, providing opportunities for both consequences and celebrations in these effective learning environments. And seeking and ensuring that there's appropriate fiscal support for all the innovation that needs to go on in these effective learning environments.

The collecting of data is an integral part of a district role if you're going to create an effective learning environment. If you have standards and goals in place, you have to determine whether or not they are being met. And you do that by collecting all kinds of data. If they are not being met, you have to ask yourself, what strategies or innovations have to be put in place that would move us more rapidly toward the goal, or do we have to rethink the goal? Is it the appropriate goal?

Sharing that information, making it transparent, thinking aloud with the community so that people know that you're reflective and that you are constantly assessing progress to determine whether or not you're going in the right direction – which, by the way, means the district must communicate on an ongoing basis and in a variety of ways to the entire community – I think all of those are attributes of maintaining effective learning environments.

I think the communication to the community can be done in a variety of ways and must be done. People don't need to feel that schools operate as secret entities and they don't share their experiences. Particularly in New York State, where they vote on school budgets, we need to be transparent about our successes. And I think that if you're transparent and honest, it helps both the teachers and the administrators, as well as the parents, to understand that the learning environment is responding constantly to change. Part of that change comes from external factors and part of it comes from this constant analysis of data. But it's always with the student at the center of our thinking, along with examining whether or not we're meeting all the goals we think we need in place to ensure students are going to be successful learners and, ultimately, successful adults.

Democratic School Architecture: The Community Center Model

Prakash Nair and Annalise Gehling

A new model of school design would eliminate the “binary” structure that divides formal learning from students’ own time and would foster student motivation and learning.

The experiences that a young person can have within the confines of a classroom do not reflect the diversity of settings and relationships young people must learn to negotiate in order to thrive in the academy and the workplace.

— David Lemmel & Samuel Steinberg Seidel,
“Alternative High Schools”

There’s a definite and unfortunate divide in school time between formal lessons, during which students have limited control over their learning, and students’ own time, which is generally spent on social activities. The design of a majority of school buildings clearly reflects this divide. Formal learning takes place in classrooms and specialty areas like science labs, while social learning is relegated to unfurnished corridors, institutional cafeterias, and outside spaces of variable quality. Under this prevailing model of school, bells that signal the end of classroom time actually invite students to “switch off” from learning.

There are several problems with this model; in this article, we will discuss two.

1. *It does not create a culture of lifelong learning.*

If you are only able to identify learning as such when it is happening under tutelage, it is difficult to make other time “learning time” as well.

Remember when you were told you had “free time” at school, and how exciting that was? As a teenager, did you want to use this precious time for study? Of course not. We are conditioned into this binary of “work is hard and boring, so someone has to make you do it”/ “Play is about being social, not creative.” It is difficult to create a personal or community culture of lifelong learning within a system that is saying you can only learn when someone else packages the lessons for you.

Recently, we spoke with a Ph.D. student who remarked, “I didn’t actually learn much at school. The most important things I learned were from Scouts.” In scouting, she had experienced leading and working with a small group over an extended period of time, figured out new skills “just in time” to use them, and discovered a love of healthy living. Scouting doesn’t have a

Prakash Nair is president of and Annalise Gehling is an educational planner with Fielding Nair International, which served as the planner and design consultant for the High School for the Recording Arts in Minneapolis.

“sit down and be quiet” time and a “go and play with your friends” time. At a Scout camp, the “work” really doesn’t stop, whether that involves setting up a scavenger hunt for the next-door Cub pack, cooking dinner, washing up, or looking for firewood. It’s full of learning experiences, but it isn’t a binary of work and play. Both involve being creative and doing things with each other.

2. *A pure focus on the social isn’t socially inclusive.*

Time in school that has not been fully programmed by an adult is quite limited, and the spaces students are able to occupy in this time are not designed for them to exercise creativity. The focus, then, is entirely on peer relationships – which is fine if you’re one of the coolest kids in school. If you’re not, this single focus is really stressful. One colleague recalls spending recess and lunchtimes walking purposefully from place to place so that it looked like she was busy, even if she wasn’t, just to appear not to be as lonely as she felt. It’s far easier to be social in the context of meaningful activities.



The Binary School Building

The design of school buildings reflects this binary of teacher-directed work and the peripheral spaces without active teacher direction, which are expressly noted as non-learning spaces. This section describes some commonly found parts of a school and some implications of the design of these spaces.

Classrooms

Classrooms are designed for classes led by a teacher. They are not designed to accommodate active learning with passive supervision. Typically, there is no transparency from other spaces to enable a line of sight into the room, so whenever students are in the room an adult also needs to be there. For explicit teaching, referred to by David Thornburg (2001) with the “primordial learning metaphor” of “Campfire,” they are reasonable, if not ideal, spaces.

But the Campfire mode should really only constitute a small part of each student’s learning program. Learning means doing, practicing, and discussing in search of an “Aha!” moment when the new puzzle piece clicks in among an earlier set of learning. Listening to the teacher may be a first step, but it doesn’t constitute learning. So in an ideal school, there could be space explicitly designed for direct instruction, but the percentage of the school that such spaces consume would only reflect the percentage of a student’s program that requires sitting and listening.

Corridors

Corridors are designed simply to get from room to room. The fact that many contain lockers is, perhaps, an accident rather than a design, since if one were to think critically about designing a space for a person’s belongings, it probably wouldn’t be a little

box mashed in with hundreds of others when you are expecting that all the students will want to access their things at the same time.

Double-loaded corridors (corridors with rooms off to both sides) aren't nice places to be. They tend to be dark and completely devoid of furnishings. If you want to relax in the corridor you often have only a sticky linoleum floor to sit on, not a comfortable couch or some café-style seats and tables.

Libraries

Libraries are often democratic in nature, encouraging individual browsing and small-group work or study around large tables. If students enter a library of their own accord, it is with the expectation that they will be autonomous learners there, able to browse, read, work at a computer, or, at least, just sit on a comfortable chair.

The experience is completely unlike that in a classroom, where students leave their responsibility for learning at the door, sit down, and expect that responsibility to be doled back out to them, piece by isolated piece. However, students spend so little time in the school library that it does not offer enough of a reprieve from the binary system discussed above.

Other Specialist Areas

Other specialist areas are simply modified classrooms and, so, support the same kind of power structure where teachers attempt to control students in order to tell them things. Even when there seems to be more active learning happening (as in a drama studio or science lab), the basic model remains largely unchanged, with the teacher firmly in command and with the time for the activity clearly prescribed.

Corridors aren't nice places to be. If you want to relax you often have only a sticky linoleum floor to sit on, not a comfortable couch or some café-style seats and tables.

Outdoor Areas

Outdoor areas are, generally, chronically underfurnished and rarely connected to the main teaching and learning spaces. It is difficult for a teacher to send one or two students to work outside because often there isn't a direct connection between the main learning areas and the outside, there's no furniture to sit on out there, and supervision of the outside, from the inside, is difficult when there is no transparency.

Cafeterias

School cafeterias are designed to herd students, cattle-like, through a "refueling" process. They are designed without thought to honoring cultural rituals, sharing together, or involving students in the processes of food preparation. Generally, only one kind of furniture is available: long tables with bench seating, as opposed to more socially inclusive furniture which may be used to read, socialize, collaborate on projects, or complete school assignments. Contrast the typical school cafeteria with urban cafés that exude warmth and homeliness and invite individuals and small groups to work, read or share, and appreciate good food.



Figure 1. Concept diagram for a small learning community of 125 students and five to six teachers, utilizing the community center model

The Community Center Model for Schools

Like many compartmentalized cities, schools are usually devoid of true public space. Corridors masquerade as public space, but it's a role they fill very poorly. Urban planning expert Jan Gehl (2007) describes public space as having three roles: space to move, space to meet, and space to trade – or, as he says, “moving place, meeting place, and marketplace.” Corridors are designed purely as “moving space,” like a highway lined by gated communities.

Public space, on the other hand, looks like the cobbled streets of Helsinki, or Federation Square in Melbourne, Australia, or Union Square

in Manhattan. In public space, there is a common expectation of self-control, and a number of different activities can be happening simultaneously.

How can schools also be designed around the notion of public space? One solution may be the *community center model*, an architectural solution that gives school communities an intimate “home base” from which to autonomously construct community- and school-based learning opportunities.

How Can It Be Used?

The community center model is capable of facilitating both student-directed, project-based learning and explicit instruction in small and large groups. The teaching group operates autonomously, enabling it to respond to the

specific interests and needs of its own community, enhancing the scope for interdisciplinary, inquiry-based learning and developing a common understanding of the student body it supports.

Because it enables passive supervision, the community center model allows teachers to focus on work with small groups in the knowledge that their colleagues will be passively supervising those students going about their own, student-directed work.

Why Is It Better?

All good teachers know that it's never a good idea to fight, or "up the ante," with an aggressive student. Yet the hidden curriculum of a standard classroom/corridor school design (aka "cells and bells") is one of domination, upping the ante from the moment the student enters the school. The community center model's hidden curriculum is an expectation of self-control, and the rights and responsibilities are built right into the space: respect for students means that they are welcomed into the space as responsible citizens.

Schools with a Community Center Model Design

A number of schools are designed explicitly to support this positive hidden curriculum through various interpretations of the community center model.

High School for the Recording Arts (HSRA) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was founded by MC/producer David "TC" Ellis after local disenfranchised youths pestered him for time in his recording studio. Ellis noted that the teenagers were passionate about music but had completely rejected the school system and, in many instances, lacked the literacy they needed to develop their passion into a livelihood.

HSRA, or "Hip Hop High" as it is also known, is a place that feels very much as though it is the domain of the students, and key to this is student-owned space in which it is socially acceptable to study, practice, perform, or socialize. The students' programs involve significant "class time," but the classes are small and supplemented with substantial time for learning at individual work stations clustered in small study groups.

Evidence of this school's success is the fact that 75 percent of all students who have attended the school have completed their high school diploma, even though the vast majority of students would otherwise not have remained at school.

Wooranna Park Primary School, in Melbourne, Australia, operates as a series of small learning communities in the community center model. With over 70 percent of students from a non-English-speaking background, and many of these from war-torn nations, the school faces a number of challenges. On standardized tests, the

The community center model's hidden curriculum is an expectation of self-control, and the rights and responsibilities are built right into the space.

school performs above average among “like schools” (other schools with similar population characteristics).

However, the skills developed at this school go well beyond what can be measured on a standardized test. Students are not simply told how to manage their time here – they are expected to self-manage as a matter of course. Weekly one-on-one meetings with an advisor give students a chance to reflect on their performance, set goals, and devise work strategies for the weeks ahead. Assessment is personalized. Small-group tutorial sessions and inquiry-based workshops are held in the community in rooms designed expressly for that purpose.

Individual and small-group project work is then supported throughout the community, able to be supervised by the teachers who aren’t in explicit teaching sessions. It’s important to note that these individual and small-group

projects may be computer based or performance based, or may involve testing hypotheses and constructing art or design pieces. Facilities for all of those modes are available in the center.

The Community-as-School Model

In the 2006 *Edutopia* article “Getting Beyond the School as Temple,” we introduced the concept of *community as school*, or the idea that local businesses and community organizations become everyday partners in the life of the school, giving students access to authentic learning opportunities and avoiding unnecessary duplication of resources (Nair 2006).

The community-as-school model complements the community center model remarkably well. It enables community-based learning opportunities to be brought back to a home base where teachers and students can meet, plan, engage in direct instruction, and work on projects together. Another benefit of the combination that is particularly relevant for secondary schools is that because the community center model enables teaching autonomy within a small group, community-based learning opportunities are far easier to take advantage of when they arise. At the very least, it is far easier to organize field trips when you can simply negotiate with a less complex timetable.

A Blend of Two Models

The Met Center, in Providence, Rhode Island, is evidence of the successful marriage that can be achieved when the community center model and the community-as-school model are merged. At the Met, students spend two days a week in an internship with a local business or organization. The relationships formed in these place-



The community-as-school model enables community-based learning opportunities to be brought back to a home base where teachers and students can meet, plan, engage in direct instruction, and work on projects together.

ments are long-term, enabling students to learn in depth and reach a high level of proficiency.

The flexibility required by this arrangement is complemented well by the architecture of the campus, where there are no classrooms, no formal lessons, no bells, no grades, no uniforms, and no detentions, and the role of the teacher is more like that of “coach.”

Preparing for Lifelong Learning

Common to all of these case studies is that the schools truly embody the notion of preparation for lifelong learning. Students are free to socialize and work in the same spaces and, surprisingly, when given the chance, they choose to work more often than not. The building hasn’t forced them into a specific learning mode that may or may not suit them – instead, it has invited them to realize their potential on their own terms.

On the Met Center Web site, school founder Dennis Littky writes, “To our surprise, students wouldn’t leave the building when it was time to go home for Christmas vacation.” That’s the attitude we believe purposeful, critical, big-picture-thinking school design can help foster.

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For further information

To learn more about the Community Center Model, visit Fielding Nair’s Web site at <<http://fieldingnair.com>> or e-mail the authors at Prakash@FieldingNair.com or Annalise@FieldingNair.com.

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The Impact of Order-Maintenance Policing on an Urban School Environment: An Ethnographic Portrait

Kathleen Nolan

A school's policy of imposing order to allow learning ended up criminalizing misbehavior and failed to enhance the learning environment.

In the mid-1990s, *zero tolerance*, a term appropriated from the criminal justice system, was adopted as a framework for school discipline. Zero tolerance called for swift and harsh punishment, suspension or expulsion, and, at times, police intervention, even for first-time offenders. Although the policy was initially designed to target weapons and drug possession in school, zero tolerance quickly expanded to include a wide range of minor school infractions (Skiba & Peterson 1999; Advancement Project & Civil Rights Project 2000; Brown 2003, 2005).

More recently, in a growing number of racially segregated schools in poor urban neighborhoods, zero tolerance has been augmented by another approach rooted in the criminal justice system – the heavy influx of law enforcement officials and the use of order maintenance, a popular form of street policing that entails cracking down on low-level, “quality of life” violations of the law through the issuance of court summonses and misdemeanor arrests (Harcourt 2001).

These disciplinary tactics have become prominent as a purported means to regain control over troubled urban schools. But how do criminal

justice-oriented disciplinary practices impact the school environment and the educative aims of the institution? What happens when law and order in schools is viewed as the primary means of mitigating disorder?

In this article, I report on an ethnographic study I began in fall 2004 in a Bronx high school I will call UPHS (urban public high school). The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of zero tolerance and order maintenance on the school environment and students’ lives. I observed student behaviors and disciplinary practices several times a week through the course of the year; I interviewed school personnel, law enforcement officials,¹ and students; and I conducted a systematic review of occurrence reports, which document disciplinary incidents and interventions. Finally, in order to gain insight into the entire disciplinary process, I accompanied some students to court when they responded to summonses.

¹ New York City Police Department (NYPD) police officers from the local precinct, NYPD officers assigned to a special school safety taskforce, and security agents who work under the auspices of the NYPD.

Kathleen Nolan is an assistant professor of education at Mercy College.

What I learned during my year at UPHS was that within the new disciplinary framework, there was a pervasive assumption among administrators and deans (teachers who are assigned disciplinary duties) that law and order was a precondition for educational innovation. It also became clear that order-maintenance policing was not primarily a means of ridding schools of serious violence; it was used, instead, as a general strategy of control.²

Through my review of the occurrence reports, I also found that the majority of incidents in which the police were involved and for which students were punished through the legal system began with a student breaking a *school rule*, not the law, and these incidents occurred mainly outside the classroom as large numbers of students remained in the hallways and other “public” areas of the building when classes were in session.

Order Maintenance in the Hallways

Although misbehavior occurred frequently in classrooms, this was not the primary concern of the disciplinarians.

Instead, much attention was placed on what was happening *outside* the classroom – the disorder that existed in the hallways and the problem of cutting, which, according to the deans, was the most pervasive discipline problem in the school. According to school occurrence reports, 52 percent of all summonses (about 230 for the school year) issued to students were for the ambiguous offense of disorderly conduct. Some of these offenses were coupled with an added charge of resisting arrest.³

The majority of these situations began when a law enforcement official would approach a student found in the hallways while classes were in session. Confrontations between students and officers or agents would escalate into a “police matter” when a student refused to hand over his or her ID card or when a student felt disrespected by an officer and attempted to defend him or herself. Law enforcement officials would respond to students’ “disrespect” or unwillingness to concede guilt with the use of criminal procedural-level

2 According to school and police reports and numerous testimonies from school personnel and students, the school did have fewer incidents of violence than it had had in previous years. However, most people I interviewed attributed this not to the influx of police officers, but to the hard work of the deans and administrators who relied as often as they could on counseling, peer mediation, parental meetings, and other less-punitive disciplinary approaches. Most people I interviewed also attributed the decrease in violence to the removal of over 100 of the most notorious students prior to my entering UPHS. Although this practice likely did reduce the violence at UPHS, it is worth noting that it also served to exclude young people from school and, in reality, it only moved the violence to other schools and/or the streets in which those students ended up.

3 Other summonses were commonly issued for assault (fighting) or harassment (usually involving some kind of menacing behavior or altercation without physical violence). Drug possession and weapon possession charges were made less frequently and usually occurred during routine searches at the school entrance. One student was charged with grand larceny for stealing thirteen pieces of candy and \$39. Another student got a summons for criminal mischief for drawing gang-related graffiti symbols on a desk. These behaviors, at first glance, may appear to warrant legal consequences, but at closer examination, it became clear that many of these infractions did not necessarily constitute a violation of the law. For example, historically there has been significant subjectivity when defining a high school fistfight as a criminal offense. Until police officers routinely patrolled school hallways, most fistfights were handled internally by educators.

When students are arrested or issued summonses, they must miss a day of school to appear in criminal court. School discipline, then, literally extends into the criminal justice system.

strategies – handcuffs, summonses to criminal court, and arrest.⁴

An excerpt from my field notes illustrates the first part of the disciplinary process:

Two handcuffed young men are escorted by three officers into the office of the assistant principal of school safety, Mr. Juarez. Two other officers enter the room. The young men are forcibly placed into chairs to await the arrival of the police van. They are visibly upset and speaking to each other in low whispers as the police converge for the own consultation. I hear one of the boys tell the other, “They are beasts,” referring to the officers.

Within minutes, the two students are hauled off through the hallway, into the van, and down to the precinct house. Later I learn they are brothers,

⁴ Although the total number of summonses of this kind may not seem excessive for a large high school, the *threat* of a summons or arrest was much more pervasive. Daily, I witnessed students threatened with such consequences, and the actual use of criminal procedural-level strategies happened often enough that they had become normalized within the culture of the school.

Terrell and James. Terrell claims to have come to James’s aid after he was stopped by the police and had unsuccessfully tried to explain his presence in the hallway during class time.

The occurrence report documenting this incident reads:

Two male students were arrested by PO Johnson of the 30th pct for Disorderly Conduct and Resisting Arrest. One student refused to provide identification. They were both disorderly and disrespectful when stopped. Parental contact unsuccessful. Suspensions are pending.

This vignette describes a typical scenario in which a “violation of the law” occurred only after the students were approached by the police. In this case, the confrontation escalated when one student’s brother got involved, and both students ended up with the added charge of resisting arrest.

School Discipline Extends into the Courtroom

School discipline does not stop at a trip to the precinct house. When students are arrested or issued summonses, they must miss a day of school to appear in criminal court. School discipline, then, literally extends into the criminal justice system.

The story continues two months later on a cold November morning when I arrive at the Bronx Criminal Court House to appear in court with Carlos, a UPHS student I’ve come to know quite well. He has received a summons for disorderly conduct. After he arrives and we go through the ritual of the metal detector, we chat briefly with Terrell, who is there with his brother, James. Carlos knows Terrell from the neighborhood. I recognize him from that late September day in

Juarez's office. He smiles warmly and says, "I know you. You're the lady writing a book or something."

At some point during our wait I ask Carlos, "So, how did you end up getting this summons again?"

He explains how a police officer found him in the hallway of the school heading to lunch after the bell had rung. Carlos claims that the stairwell was too crowded, so he decided to take another route, but the bell rang before he was able to work his way through the building to the cafeteria. Carlos believes that the police officer disrespected him by demanding to see his ID and refusing to listen to an explanation for why he was in the hallway when he wasn't supposed to be. As with so many students in similar situations, Carlos decided not to cooperate because he did not believe he had done anything wrong, so the officer cuffed him, brought him to the detention room, and gave him a summons for disorderly conduct.

Finally, Carlos is called into the courtroom. We take seats two rows behind Terrell and James. One after the other, young men and women are called before the judge for minor offenses: riding a bicycle on the sidewalk, public urination, possessing an open bottle of beer. Then, the officer bellows, "Thomas Jones, disorderly conduct." A young Black man of about seventeen years of age, a student from another school, presents himself before the judge.

"What high school do you go to?" the judge asks from his high perch. On this particular day, the judge decides he wants to see all the schoolboys on another day with a parent. Of the four in the courtroom, none except Carlos is accompanied by an adult. As we leave the courthouse, I see the judge's tactic

worries Carlos. He has not experienced it before. He considers the numerous summonses he has previously received, and he asks me if I think he'll be locked up.

Thinking of another student who recently received five days in jail after responding to a summons for a fistfight, I say to Carlos, "No, I think he just wants to speak to your mother." And I hope that's really the case.

These vignettes are meant to illuminate the process from hallway confrontation to appearance in court before the judge. In this ethnographic description, we can begin to understand how criminal justice-oriented school discipline policies, such as zero tolerance and order maintenance, actually work to redefine the school environment by closely linking the school with street policing and the courts.

This linking of the school with institutions and practices of the criminal justice system was also evident in students' comments about the school



atmosphere. Frequently, they reported that they felt their school resembled a prison, and expressions associated with street policing and prison, such as “getting picked up,” “going on lockdown,” and “doing time” (in the detention room), were infused into their everyday discourse. These common associations with prison and policing reinforced the culture of control inside the school.

But What’s Happening in the Classroom?

In a criminological framework, it is assumed that disorder must be eradicated before neighborhoods can function in a healthy manner. When this model is applied to a school, the assumption is that the educational process is dysfunctional largely because of the disorder that exists. So the primary mission of the institution becomes control through penal management as a precondition for educational transformation. Additionally, the disciplinary focus is placed on events *outside* the classroom, where disorder is most evident, not the misbehavior and non-participation that occurs *in* the classroom.

Interviews with administrators and deans revealed the general belief that disorder needed to be eliminated before problems in the classroom could be resolved. The principal, for example, expressed a keen understanding of the relationship between classroom practice and school discipline; however, her comments to me also made clear that her primary goal was to bring order to the school. When I asked her how she came to be placed at UPHS during the previous year, she replied:

I came to be here at the request of the regional superintendent. At the time, they were looking for someone who had a strong background in security and discipline and so they asked me to come here and address those issues.

When I asked her about her responsibilities, she answered:

Well, I am the instructional leader in this building. That’s what a principal is and is supposed to be. But that does not mean there are not other issues. . . . The bulk of my time [last year] was security and discipline. And that was mostly my focus, unfortunately. There was barely any time spent in the classroom.

The principal often attempted to bring order to the school through the use of educational, rather than criminal justice, strategies. She expressed a strong belief in getting to know the students on a first-name basis and addressing organizational problems (such as students being registered for the wrong classes) before they became discipline issues.

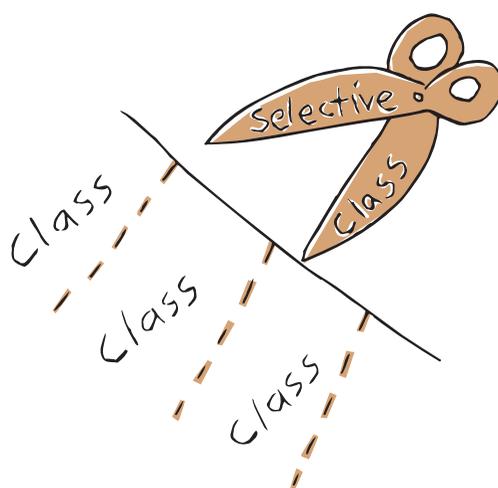
Nevertheless, within the criminal justice-oriented disciplinary framework, a culture of control took hold. The principal and her staff of deans became invested in criminal justice-oriented discipline as a means of creating order. They regularly spoke about the importance of getting kids to show respect during interactions with authority figures, and I frequently heard them threaten students with summonses and arrest. I also noted that deans spent considerable time trying to get students to go to their classes or “take their education more seriously”; yet, there was virtually no discussion about the need to challenge what students were encountering when they did attend classes.

Given that my study of the disciplinary process led me into the

hallways, the deans' office, the detention room, and even the courthouse, I began to wonder what was happening in the classrooms and decided to conduct observations. Although I witnessed efforts to make classes relevant, most observations revealed pervasive frustration and alienation among students. Teachers relied on teacher-centered, transmission approaches (Freire 1972), such as worksheets, information handouts, and lectures, in an effort to cover the vast amount of material that might appear on the Regents exams (New York State's standardized high-stakes tests). My findings in this respect reinforce the growing literature on the adverse impacts of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning, especially in historically low-performing schools serving students from non-dominant cultures (see Apple 2001; McNeil 2000; Lipman 2004).

My findings also indicate that selective cutting became pervasive in the context of the frustration and alienation students apparently experienced. It became evident to me that such a connection is worth exploring when I noted three general categories of students' responses (or excuses) when they were asked why they did not attend some of their classes. These were: "Classes are boring," "That teacher doesn't like me," and "Why bother? I've already failed the first marking period."

When I explored the notion that classes were "boring," I learned that this perspective occurred in a context of inaccessible material and perceived poor pedagogical practices, or as one student put it, "Some teachers can't even teach!" Other students expressed their boredom and frustration in other



ways. Wanda, a junior, shared with me her thoughts on typical classroom practice at UPHS. "I like sitting in the classroom, but I can't sit in the classroom that long and hear the teacher talk about the same thing over and over again and then give me a worksheet, like, for what? We just did this worksheet in class."

She hands me a legal-size paper with a small picture of Galileo and a description of his life and work. "[My teacher] gave us this worksheet. Like, come on, you're supposed to be a history teacher! Teach us about some history of something. . . . Nobody hardly read it!"

I begin to read aloud. "Galileo changes the universe . . ."

Wanda repeats emphatically, "Nobody did it."

Wanda's focus on the boring worksheet or handout was a common theme in my interviews, but perhaps even more common were the complaints that material was not made accessible.

“I like sitting in the classroom, but I can’t sit in the classroom that long and hear the teacher talk about the same thing over and over again and then give me a worksheet, like, for what? We just did this worksheet in class.”

During a conversation with a group of students in the library one afternoon, I asked, “What does a good teacher do? How does a good teacher teach?”

Lena responds, “Like, sit down and take time to explain a topic so that the kids understand because sometimes they don’t even understand. [Teachers] just go through [the material] like that and say, ‘Okay, now do it.’ That’s it. They don’t explain.”

Damian’s comment made during another conversation echoes this theme. I asked him and his friends how teachers could make class better. “Make sure that the students understand what the teacher’s trying to say,” Damian quickly blurts out. “Make it interesting,” he adds.

“How does a teacher make it interesting?” I ask.

Damian explains, “Ms. Cantrell [an English teacher], when she says stuff, she explains it. She’s not like one of those teachers that say stuff and expect you to know what it is. She talks and explains stuff. If you can make learning a bit more fun for the kids, they’ll respond with a better attitude.”

Students also rationalized their cutting by proclaiming that their teachers didn’t like them. A few of the more oppositional students even reported that teachers had thrown them out of the classroom as soon as they entered the room before taking their seats. One such student, Duane, reported never going back after that happened to him.

Finally, students who failed the first of three marking periods in the semester would often choose not to attend a class, as they believed that there was little chance they would be able to pass the course, so, “What’s the point?”

With the vast majority of students entering UPHS reading below grade level, their perceptions of the poor pedagogical approaches they encountered, their patterns of failure, and, at times, their perceptions that their teachers did not like them led me to think it was no wonder that many students felt frustrated and became alienated from classroom life. It was also not surprising that many students practiced selective cutting and ended up getting into trouble in the hallways.

Toward an Effective Learning Environment

While much of the current research on criminal justice-oriented school discipline emphasizes the problem of tracking students into the criminal justice system (Brown 2003, 2005; Nolan

& Anyon 2004; Nolan, forthcoming), I have focused here on how such disciplinary practices create an atmosphere of penal control and take precedence over educational transformation. The implicit mission becomes an almost obsessive quest for order and respect at the hands of law enforcement, while the problem of student alienation is overshadowed and its role in creating disorder is not fully acknowledged.

To be clear, I do not argue that disorder and violence are purely a result of poor pedagogical practices, student alienation, and selective cutting. Certainly, disorder and violence in urban schools are largely a result of a very complex set of social and economic forces and the emergent “street” lifestyles to which many marginalized urban youth gravitate. Nevertheless, my research at UPHS strongly indicated that even in a notoriously violent school, the vast majority of students tend to try to avoid violence. They want to attend classes and do so when they find them engaging. Thus, law and order cannot be established *before* pedagogical concerns are addressed, any more than a sole focus on pedagogy can precede anti-violence efforts and good discipline. The processes must work together.

At schools like UPHS, I propose two general courses of action to improve the school learning environment. First, serious investment must be made to transform the classroom experience, something high-stakes testing and other recent educational “reforms” do not (nor were they designed to) accomplish. When students’ perspectives are taken into account, it becomes clear that many are struggling with low literacy skills, frustrated by irrel-



evant content, and alienated by poor pedagogical practices. With a serious commitment to addressing these issues, levels of engagement would increase and the problem of selective cutting would likely be mitigated.

Secondly, the school needs to be severed from institutions of the criminal justice system. Only serious, criminal offenses should be handled by law enforcement, while educators need to be trained and encouraged to use educational solutions to minor infractions and low-level disorder. These changes, implemented simultaneously, could have a significant positive impact on the school learning environment.

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Life without Lockdown: Do Peaceful Schools Require High-Profile Policing?

John M. Beam, Chase Madar,
and Deinya Phenix

Despite the prevalence of zero tolerance discipline policies, some schools in New York City have succeeded in improving safety and discipline without punitive measures.

A substantial body of research has confirmed the link between school safety and academic achievement (Barton 2003; Barton, Coley & Wenglinsky 1998; Bryk, Lee & Holland 1993; Chubb & Moe 1990). According to one overview of indicators of school quality, “An orderly school atmosphere conducive to learning could be an example of a ‘necessary, but not sufficient’ characteristic of quality schools” (Mayer, Mullins & Moore 2000, p. 42).

Many policy-makers have internalized the “necessary” without the “but not sufficient” half of this proposition. Moreover, they have equated “positive disciplinary climate” with zero tolerance for a wide range of behaviors. Distinctly non-urban tragedies such as the Columbine, Paducah, and Jonesboro school shootings are invoked to create the climate justifying locking down urban schools serving students of color. While concern for gangs has more relevance in discussing order and safety in big city schools, the topic is overused politically and under-examined in terms of its actual relevance to schools, which are often the safest environments available to low-income city youths.

With well over a million students and more than 1,400 public schools with wildly varying enrollments, class sizes, and school cultures spread throughout 250 neighborhoods, New York City’s school system is potentially a natural laboratory for studying different approaches to establishing orderly learning environments. According to the New York City school chancellor’s discipline policy, “School personnel are responsible for developing and using strategies that promote optimal learning and positive behavior throughout a student’s school experience. They are also responsible for addressing behaviors which disrupt learning” (NYCDOE 2007, p. 2). Intervention and prevention approaches can include a range of counseling, social services, and academic support.

The highly centralized management of the school system has, in fact, pushed a focused and muscular interpretation of this discipline mandate. One of the first policy changes made when City Hall won mayoral control over schools from the governor and legislature was to transfer authority over school security to the New York City Police Department. This change meant that school safety agents (SSAs) were

John M. Beam is executive director of the National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University. Chase Madar is staff attorney at Make the Road New York. Deinya Phenix is a senior data analyst and data manager at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

no longer employees of the school system and now worked in a completely separate chain of command from everyone else in a school, with their separate hierarchies intersecting only in the mayor’s office.

Has a zero tolerance approach – not only to actual violence and criminal acts but also to rowdiness, lateness, and perceived disrespect of authority (e.g., not producing one’s class schedule upon demand), in other words, standard operating procedure for teenagers – enhanced the ability of *school personnel* to comply with the chancellor’s mandate that they be “responsible for developing and using strategies that promote optimal learning and positive behavior throughout a student’s school experience”?

Consider data from the New York City high schools chosen for the Impact Initiative, a program that increased school police and other security enhancements. These schools were among the city’s neediest, lowest-performing schools (Brady, Balmer & Phenix 2007). About a year and a half after the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) implemented the program, these schools had experienced no reduction in dropout and student mobility rates. And there was a

decrease in attendance and a dramatic increase in both suspensions and non-criminal police incidents. However, because there was some decrease in major crimes in New York City high schools, the program continues.

Successful Alternatives to Lockdown

Fortunately, there are examples of alternative approaches showing that running schools by lockdown is not the only, or even the most effective, strategy for promoting the “optimal learning and positive behavior throughout a student’s school experience” to which the chancellor and mayor putatively aspire.

This article presents profiles of six high schools in New York,¹ studied recently as part of ongoing work with students by one of the authors (Madar) and colleague Sarah Landes, a youth organizer at Make the Road New York, that take a very different approach to school security – with excellent results. None of the schools in these school-security success stories have metal detectors, and all of them have extremely low rates of violent incidents (see Figure 1).

¹ One of the schools is a campus containing several schools.

	Number of schools	Number of students	Suspensions	Incidents per 100 students			
				Violent crimes	Property crimes	Other crimes	Non-criminal incidents
<i>Case study schools</i>	9	7,374	2.66	0.15	0.15	1.15	2.05
<i>Non-case study schools total</i>	294	296,593	7.43	0.18	0.16	1.39	4.09
<i>with metal detectors</i>	74	93,812	9.43	0.23	0.18	1.65	6.58
<i>without metal detectors</i>	220	202,781	6.50	0.16	0.15	1.28	2.93
<i>All NYC Schools</i>	303	303,967	7.31	0.18	0.16	1.39	4.04

Figure 1. Disciplinary actions and police incidents in case study schools and other schools

Note: The six schools profiled in this article include five autonomous schools and one complex of four high schools.

None of the six high schools profiled in this article are among the city's elite magnet schools.² In fact, the student demographic data on the schools studied do not seem to differ markedly from that of the more problematic Impact schools. These schools were selected, using a snowball method³ for identifying schools, because of their strong departure from the dominant, officially promoted paradigm. Each of the six schools provided a slightly different combination of evidence of how learning-focused school culture is possible.

Bushwick Community High School

Bushwick Community High School (BCHS) in Brooklyn is a “second chance” school. According to principal Tira Randall,

All our students have failed in, and been failed by, the school system. The typical male student is eighteen and has been disconnected for a year or two from his previous school. Many of the female students are mothers. Many of the students work full-time. Almost all the students are Black or Latino. There are Crips, Bloods, and Latin Kings in the school, and the teachers all know who they are.

But BCHS has had only one fight in the past three years, and that was outside of school bounds. BCHS has no metal detectors. The school has 350 students and only one security guard.

² These schools had, on average, more students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and a higher percentage of Latino students than the citywide averages.

³ The snowball sampling method, used when the desired sample characteristic is rare, relies on referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects.

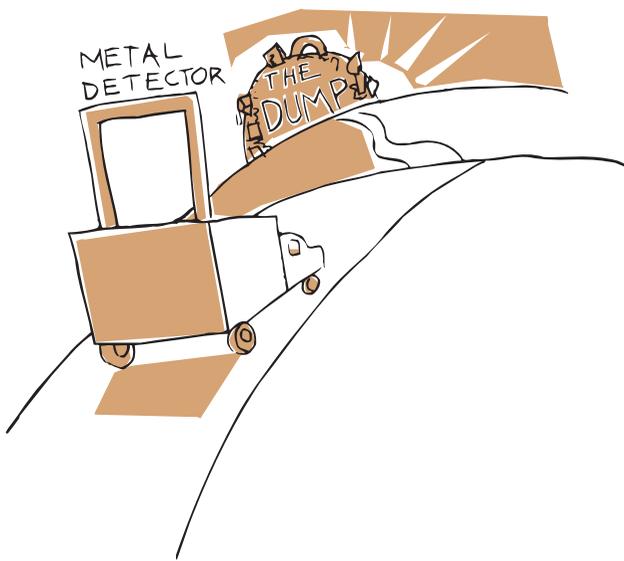


Tabari Bomani, a longtime teacher at this school, says,

I have always been dedicated to the idea that if you treat people like criminals they will respond that way. We have always sought to develop a school culture that is based on a real expression of love, camaraderie, and unified struggle.

This culture is backed up by customs and rules. There is plenty of discussion about shared struggle and shared alienation and a rigorous ban on homophobic epithets and the N-word. Another rule is: you fight and you are out.

As anyone who walks into BCHS can immediately tell, these rules get results. The atmosphere is calm and orderly, and students and teachers interact with mutual respect. The school's



longtime security guard, Gail Baine, acts more as a counselor than as muscle.

To be sure, BCHS does enforce a disciplinary policy, and every year a couple of students are discharged – as is the norm at any city high school. What sets BCHS apart is that there have been absolutely no violent incidents on its premises in all its four years.

Progress High School for Professional Careers

After a radical overhaul of its security system, Progress High School in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, is one of the safest high schools in the city – a remarkable achievement, given the school’s origins. With 1,100 students, Progress is one of the three self-contained smaller schools in the building that used to house Eastern District High School, an enormous and troubled school that dissolved in 1996. Eastern District had operated with a heavy-duty security apparatus – permanent metal detectors, many security guards, surveillance cameras – which failed to prevent the school from chronically making the top-ten list of the city’s most dangerous schools.

In 1996, the Board of Education restructured the mega-school with the participation of community leaders, elected officials, teachers, union representatives, and students. One of the major proposals of the Redesign Advisory Committee in 1996 was the removal of the metal detectors from the building’s entrance – a proposal the NYCDOE eventually agreed to.

Progress principal William Jusino says,

This happened not without some struggle. The superintendents cautioned against it, telling us that if anything happens, God forbid, the first question will be, “Why weren’t there metal detectors in place?”

But in the fall of 2006, the Grand Street Campus, as the building was renamed, opened without scanners. Jusino thinks organized and vocal community opposition to the scanners got them taken out.

The removal of metal detectors was only part of the security overhaul. The thirteen security guards at the Grand Street Campus are community and student minded and see their job as defusing potential violence rather than heavy-handed intervention.

“I don’t want SSAs to do stuff that teachers can do, like break up a fight or discipline a student,” says Jusino. It is clear that this principal, by carefully cultivating relationships with his security agents, is running the school with the guards’ help – not the other way around.

NYCDOE statistics show that Progress is a very safe place. Principal Jusino is deservedly proud.

We went from being one of the most dangerous schools in the city to one of the safest, among those with the fewest incidents, and those that we’ve had have been minimal. The statistics speak for themselves. We have a very safe school, and we do it at a fraction of the cost of schools with more scanners and guards. We wouldn’t want to go back to the way things were.

But has the NYCDOE taken note of this accomplishment?

You’d think we’d get a lot of visitors and a lot of write-up about our success, but we don’t. We’re one of the best-kept secrets in New York. They’re not looking for fewer sites for scanners, they’re looking for more, and they need ways to justify and explain all the scanners. The real work isn’t officers working machines – it’s how you communicate with your students and your staff.

El Puente Academy

From its beginning in 1993, El Puente Academy High School has trusted its students to act like mature and responsible adults. There are no bells sounding the start and stop of each period. The students – about 175 of them now – know when class is over from the clock on the wall. Nor are there any metal detectors at the entrance. Until the late 1990s, the school didn’t even employ any SSAs. Now the school has three SSAs, and they essentially work as greeters at the front door. There has yet to be a fight, let alone a shooting, in this school.

The students like it this way. According to founding principal Frances Lucerna,

Our young people have come to really value this – they know the school is safe, because they’ve made it safe, and they respect what they have. Young people talk to the staff – they understand the privilege and the responsibility about safety. They embrace it!

“We have a very safe school, and we do it at a fraction of the cost of schools with more scanners and guards. We wouldn’t want to go back to the way things were.”

“In discussions about the new building, the students’ first question is always, ‘Are we going to have metal detectors? Are we going to have police in schools?’”

The students and the staff aim to keep it this way. For several years now, the NYCDOE has promised a new building to El Puente Academy, which is currently housed in a disused church. Lucerna says,

In discussions about the new building, the students’ first question is always, “Are we going to have metal detectors? Are we going to have police in schools?” Our answer is always, “It’s in your power. If a single person brings a gun or a knife, that person is giving this up for all of you.” The students understand that.

Julia Richman Educational Complex
Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Julia Richman High School was one of the worst high schools in Manhattan – poor attendance, low graduation rates, and a chaotic environment unchecked by a massive security apparatus, including metal detectors and over a dozen security guards.⁴ In 1995, the school was shuttered and redesigned into six

separate smaller schools – four high schools, a K–8 school, and a junior high school – comprising the Julia Richman Educational Complex (JREC), all of which are flourishing today with a combined graduation rate of 90 percent. The redesign also overhauled the school’s security apparatus.

Today, JREC has no metal detectors. The responsibilities of the SSAs have been limited to their more traditional role as intervention of the last resort, meaning that now the educators are in charge of discipline. For example, students who arrive late are no longer berated or penalized by the security guards. “Lateness, that’s not a security problem,” says one SSA. “If you’re here, I want you to come in.” When students reenter the campus after an unauthorized trip off the grounds for lunch, disciplinary action is taken by the educators, not the guards.

The results? In the 2006–2007 school year, SSAs reported only four fights, none involving any weapon more dangerous than thrown fruit.

Much of the credit for this successful transformation of school security goes to the supervising SSA, who has passed on the values of this more traditional approach to school security to all her subordinates. The supervising SSA knows the students by name and cultivates a close rapport with them. And she knows what’s at stake. “Kids do stupid stuff all the time. But these are somebody’s children.”

Urban Assembly School for Careers in Sports

The Urban Assembly School for Careers in Sports, in the Bronx, has been without metal detectors ever since it began in 2002. “The entire school community takes tremendous pride that they are not needed in the school,” says principal Felice Lepore.

⁴ Information about Julia Richman comes from Mukherjee (2007).

They have not been needed because there has not been a single serious violent incident since the school was formed. Urban Assembly has 325 students and six SSAs, two of whom have been at the school from the start. The SSAs are integrated into the daily running of the school and work hand in hand with the deans, teachers, and school aides. According to Lepore,

Any time we have an event, we make it a point to invite all safety personnel to eat and mingle with us. They are completely included in our day-to-day operation at the school. The SSAs, deans, and aides are part of any mediation that takes place among our students.

Herbert H. Lehman High School

Unlike many of the schools with successful security methods that we examined, Herbert H. Lehman High School is an old-style behemoth, with nearly 4,400 students. There is a reason that Lehman has not been broken down into smaller units: the place works very well and has never been on any “persistently dangerous” list. Lehman is not an elite school, like the Bronx High School of Science; it is a neighborhood-zoned school in the Westchester Square area of the Bronx with students of every race and national origin, mostly working-class. The graduation rate is 60 percent, but of those graduating students, 94 percent go to a two-year or four-year college. Lehman is plainly a high school that does many things right. Judging from the low number of violent incidents, security is one of them.

How has Lehman been able to achieve this success? For starters, the school’s security leaders have been working together for over two decades. Principal Robert Leder has run Lehman for twenty-nine years and Juanita Sizemore has been the sergeant in

charge of SSAs since 1983. There have never been any metal detectors and, according to school reports, violent incidents are few and far between. Joseph DiMaio, assistant principal for administration and security, credits the success of this low-impact approach to the consistent efforts of Leder and Sizemore.

Leder has done a great job of establishing a safe atmosphere. And we all have a great relationship with Sergeant Sizemore. I meet with her constantly, at least once a day.

There are fifteen part-time teachers who also do security work, joining a dozen SSAs and some twenty school aides.

The school has never had metal detectors at the doors and will not be adding any in the foreseeable future. DiMaio says,

Detectors are a double-edged sword. You know you’re keeping weapons out, but it would destroy the atmosphere here. We’ve made Lehman friendly and home-like. Scanners at schools make the ones at airports look nice and welcoming in comparison.





On top of that, to get every student through the detectors every morning would most likely require cutting the school size in half; otherwise, it would be impossible to get all the students into the building every morning. Not that DiMaio is categorically opposed to scanners: “I’ve seen them work and I’ve seen them not work. But here we have the right people in the right place.”

Juanita Sizemore is one of those right people, and her soft but firm touch with the students is one of the reasons behind the school’s nonviolent but orderly ambience.

As long as you respect the kids, they give you that respect back. Even if a student starts acting out of character, we try to look at that child as if he was our own child, or a cousin, or a nephew.

And she is eager to deal with disciplinary problems right there at the school rather than turn it into a matter for the local police.

If a kid’s acting up, I just say, “Look, if I take you to the precinct, it won’t be the same; they’ll be a lot rougher on you than we are.” That works.

Sizemore seems appalled at the now-normal practice of handcuffing high-school students for minor disciplinary infractions, like cursing or going somewhere without a pass.

Within my twenty-five-year career as a school safety agent, I can count on one hand the times I’ve had to handcuff a student. Usually when we have a serious incident, when we come on the scene and start talking, the kids are in compliance. Handcuffing is only if the kids are totally out of control. And I don’t foresee that if I left Lehman I would ever have to use this measure.

Why, then, are SSAs using handcuffs more frequently, not just in high schools but even in elementary schools?

It could come from a lack of experience and a lack of verbal skills. If that’s the only way they know how to get a kid to follow the rules, then the guards need more training. For you to just cuff a student because he’s misbehaving or acting irate, that doesn’t sit right with me.

Security at Lehman is no cakewalk. The school is badly overcrowded – DiMaio estimates it was probably built for a full 1,000 fewer students than are currently enrolled – and crowd management in the hallways and at the exits is a necessity. However, Lehman trusts its students to control their own actions at school. For example, Lehman is

If values and practices such as those identified in six New York City high schools are products of school cultures that successfully minimize negative behavior without metal detectors or muscle, how can we replicate them? How can we protect the ones that are already in place?

an “open campus” that allows students to leave the building for lunch without special permission. DiMaio says,

We trust the kids with this responsibility. Most of them can handle it, but some do not. Still, we try to treat them like adults, at least a little, to get them used to responsibility.

Lessons Learned

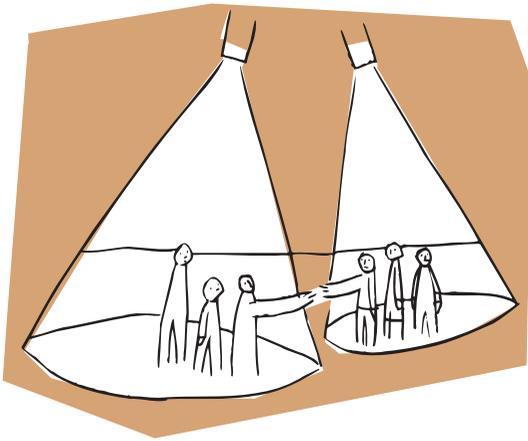
As a group, the six schools share some or all of a short list of values and practices. These include:

- no metal detectors in the school’s current incarnation and an express desire on the part of faculty and students to keep them out, in the face of pressure from central office
- a conscious policy or practice of trusting students to behave responsibly
- clear and simple rules, formed with some student input
- an adult perception of students as people and someone’s children
- a principal who has established authority over the SSAs and defines role and behavior standards for them
- a clear delineation of responsibilities for discipline (faculty) and bona fide safety concerns (SSAs)
- strong leadership from senior SSAs

- constant communication between school staff and SSAs and integration of SSAs into the school community through meetings and community events

If values and practices such as those identified in six New York City high schools are products of school cultures that successfully minimize negative behavior without metal detectors or muscle, two questions come to mind immediately, often in the wrong order. First, how can we replicate them? Second, how can we protect the ones that are already in place?

We would argue that a centralized bureaucracy can destroy a school’s culture much more easily than it can mandate that a school adopt a given culture. The possible combinations of humanity, neighborhood setting, racial and economic particularities, and so on mean that each learning community is unique and will, therefore, develop its own culture. For example, some school leaders “consistently refused metal detectors or other screening devices on their campuses” in a protective attempt to maintain the “respectful, high-achieving academic environment they were working so hard to develop” (Ascher & Maguire 2007, p. 9).



City education departments could establish a protective environment in which schools can create their own cultures that allow our children and youth to study and learn in a peaceful, supportive atmosphere.

Cultures, however, exist within an environment – a natural, physical, economic, and political context that defines and constrains choices and individual and community survival. With the increasing willingness of big-city mayors to take responsibility for their public schools, that environment would be the policies, actions, and omissions of administrators and politicians whose previous separate domains now overlap. City education departments are powerless to clone successful school cultures. What they could do, however, is establish a protective environment in which schools can create their own cultures that allow our children and youth to study and learn in a peaceful, supportive atmosphere.

What might the features of that environment include?

- an institutional modeling of respect for students, demonstrated by providing the “instrumentalities of learning”⁵ with resources, especially space and class size, distributed in sufficient quantity and targeted to the real-world needs of individual children and youth
- an explicit acknowledgement that as people, students have a set of basic civil and human rights that must be respected
- a clear line of authority in which the principal has the same formal, front-line responsibility for the SSAs as he or she does for all other professional and support staff in their schools – such authority would be in keeping with the chancellor’s claim that the principals are the CEOs of their buildings
- new, explicit rules of engagement and chain of command for police officers who enter a school

⁵ Chief Judge Kaye, majority opinion, *Campaign for Fiscal Equity v. State of New York*, 86 NY2d 307.

- authority for students to submit complaints about SSAs to the Civilian Complaint Review Board

Beyond these specifics, the division of labor between school-level leadership and where the buck stops at City Hall is that the former must learn to cultivate the culture of calm and cooperation that will work for their schools, while the latter must provide the resources, trust, and policy environment that will allow each culture to grow.

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Beating the Odds

Carol Ascher and Cindy Maguire

High schools that have “beaten the odds” and succeeded in improving graduation and college-going rates share practices that contribute to their success.

Across the nation, urban districts struggle to raise what are often abysmally low high school graduation rates. New York City, with a four-year graduation rate of 57 percent, is no exception. Yet, some high schools in New York, as elsewhere, succeed beyond expectations in bringing ninth-grade students with low academic skills and high needs to graduation in four years, followed by enrollment in college.

This article describes a study, conducted in 2006 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, of a small group of New York City high schools that have demonstrated success in preparing low-performing ninth-grade students, who generally lack college-going supports in their families, for timely high school graduation and college going. Our study was designed to understand how these high schools are able to “beat the odds” and suggest how the success of these schools can be maintained and scaled up. The study was inspired by New York City high school students in the Urban Youth Collaborative, a citywide high school

organizing group that raised demands for improved college-going rates in their schools and communities.¹

Thirteen Schools That Are Beating the Odds

The thirteen Beat the Odds (BTO) schools described in this article were identified in an earlier quantitative analysis, based on New York City Department of Education 2001–2002 data (Siegel et al. 2005).² Success was defined as: graduation from high school in four years; graduates’ enrollment in the City College of New York (CCNY); and first-year academic success in CCNY. Although these thirteen high schools admitted ninth-graders with far-below-average eighth-grade reading

Carol Ascher is a principal associate and Cindy Maguire is a research associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

¹ For more detail about the study and findings, see Ascher and Maguire (2007).

² The Siegel et al. (2005) study was based on 2001–2002 data from the New York City Department of Education’s *Annual School Report*, the Department of Education’s school-based expenditure report, as well as aggregated student-level data from the Department of Education and the City University of New York. A regression analysis controlled for student demographic characteristics and eighth-grade math and English test scores to capture high schools’ contributions to student success.

and math scores, they produced four-year graduation rates and/or CCNY grade-point averages that were better than their demographics and prior math and/or English achievement would predict.

Though the BTO schools include two long-established technical-vocational schools, nine of the thirteen were created between 1993 and 1998, generally with support from intermediary organizations, as part of an earlier wave of high school reform in the New York City system. Two high schools resulted from the reconstitution of large, failing high schools.

The BTO schools were and remain relatively small. They had lower percentages of teachers with five or more years' experience than all New York City high schools, and the cost per student in the BTO schools was 10 percent more than the citywide average.

Also, in both 2001 and 2005, the thirteen BTO schools served the city's most disadvantaged students. Entering ninth-grade students in the BTO schools were more likely to be over age for their grade than the citywide average. And BTO schools had higher percentages of special education students.³ However, the BTO schools' students were less likely than the citywide average to be foreign born or English-language learners.

The four-year graduation rate in BTO schools in 2001 was 59.1 percent, exceeding the citywide graduation rate of 51 percent. Moreover, the graduation rate at schools with similar high-needs students was 45.6 percent, considerably

lower. Yet, in 2001, students in the BTO schools received largely local, rather than Regents, diplomas.

BTO schools were more successful than comparison schools in all other student outcomes. BTO schools enrolled students in both two- and four-year CCNY colleges at percentages similar to the citywide average and had much higher two- and four-year enrollment levels than other high schools with comparable student populations. While we have no data for *actual* college enrollment for 2005, 35 percent of the graduating students in the BTO schools *planned* to enroll in CCNY, compared with 28.3 percent in the comparison group.

Best Practices in the BTO Schools

Our interviews with the BTO high school administrators revealed that, despite a generally unsupportive district environment, the high schools share a common commitment to bringing each and every student to high school completion and to making it possible for them all to attend and succeed in college. This section describes the practices that enable them to achieve that standard.



³ This contrasts with lower rates of special education students in New York City's small schools noted by other researchers. See, for example, Citywide Council on High Schools (2006).

Academic Rigor

College going, at a basic level, is dependent on students taking rigorous college-preparatory courses, including, but not limited to, a foreign language, physics, chemistry, and advanced math and algebra. Since the BTO schools take in low-performing ninth-graders and move them to high school graduation and college going beyond the levels predicted, our first interest was in the standards for rigor that these BTO schools developed and the courses they offered.

In most of the BTO schools, staff used such formats as grade-level and departmental meetings to develop and sustain jointly held standards for curricular rigor and student work across disciplines, including both academic and technical/vocational courses.

To monitor the implementation of these standards, administrators in several of the schools visited classrooms on a regular basis and conducted learning walks with faculty. Administrators also examined classroom data to understand where faculty was working well with students, which students might need additional help, and where curriculum and/or instruction might be falling short.

All the BTO schools offered at least two Advanced Placement (AP) courses and/or opportunities for students to earn college credit through attending courses at nearby colleges. The AP courses included Spanish, English, world history, U.S. history, psychology, calculus, art, and computer science. In one school, the principal decided not to offer AP courses. Since these courses could not be offered to all students, the principal believed AP

offerings operated as a form of tracking. As an alternative, students were encouraged to take courses in a nearby college.

Networks of Timely Supports

Creating a pre-college curriculum is only the first step in enabling low-performing students to succeed in academically rigorous courses. Since any academic subject can potentially be a source of frustration, discouragement, and failure, schools must provide the assistance and support necessary for students to succeed.

To generate timely graduation and create college-going pathways for low-performing students, adults in the BTO high schools kept track of every student's progress and intervened quickly with a targeted and efficient intervention when difficulties arose.

Despite growing enrollments, staff in every BTO school were organized to ensure that no student's academic, behavioral, or personal needs went unnoticed. All schools had structures for assigning each student to one or more adults on campus to make sure that no student's academic progress escaped scrutiny. Schools tracked their students' progress, both formally and informally, through multiple strategies. Several schools implemented advisories, often the initial sites in which faculty members engaged with struggling students. In several other schools, faculty and administration regularly reviewed transcripts to assess students' academic progress and credit accumulation. In addition, most schools relied on school secretaries and paraprofessionals for information on how students were progressing.

For BTO school staff, providing a solid preparation for graduation and college required a commitment that went beyond their class assignments and the regular school day to providing tutoring, mentoring, counseling, and

other activities through which they maintained close relationships with students. One administrator intentionally hired teachers with multiple skills and interests, so that the faculty could assist students in after-school clubs and engage in direct work with students both inside and outside the classroom. Yet administrators were also clear that maintaining this level of staff commitment amid increasing enrollment pressures was becoming more difficult and that in some schools teacher turnover had increased; some administrators wondered whether students' difficulties would begin to go unnoticed without the needed attention.

Through their understanding of students' needs, the BTO schools developed a range of timely interventions, from phoning a parent or guardian to academic interventions that included before- and after-school tutoring, Saturday school, lunchtime classes, and special classes that enabled students to revisit skills or other curriculum components they hadn't yet mastered. While the number of students enrolling in these recuperative efforts was described as high, the classes were also described as short in duration, enabling the students to return quickly to, and succeed in, the assigned course.

As part of working to respond to students' social and emotional as well as academic needs, two schools recognized that a segment of Black males was experiencing particular difficulty in focusing on academic coursework. These schools then implemented special after-school conversation groups, run by Black male faculty members who operated as mentors for these young men.

All the BTO schools were also open for extended hours before and after school, during the week, and on

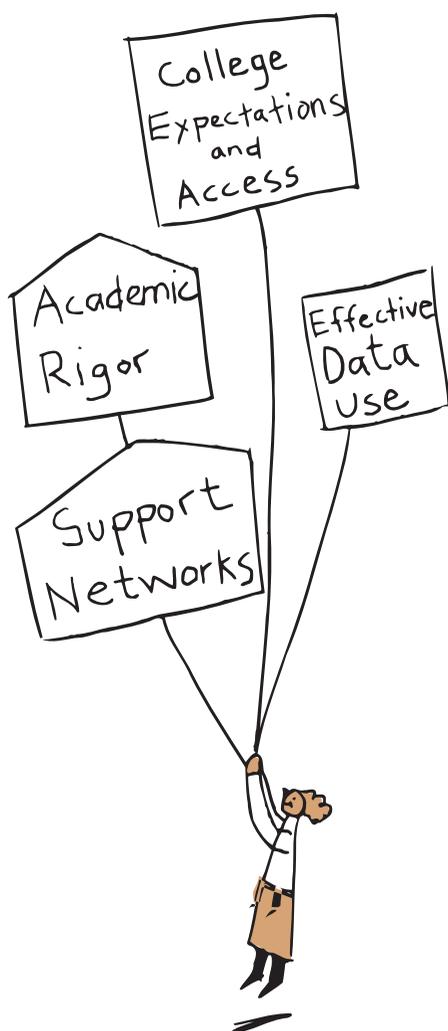
Saturdays for ad hoc academic programming and support for students. Most of the schools also offered summer school, including eighth-to-ninth-grade bridge programs. Through these structures, the schools also developed more intense levels of ongoing community building across the student body and teaching faculty. However, as administrators reported, these programs had been cut throughout the district in the time between our quantitative and qualitative studies; they were recently reintroduced for smaller numbers of students.

While most administrators in the BTO schools were critical of "test prep," their students were given multiple opportunities to prepare for and take the various Regents exams, as well as SAT/PSAT tests for college admission. Some of this preparation focused on offering practice in the types of problems the tests presented or in such skill areas as test-essay writing. One administrator, whose school

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had shifted its course sequence across grades to better meet the needs of its students, waited until a few weeks before the testing periods to briefly halt the school's innovative curriculum and prepare students for the tests. Some principals provided after-school and Saturday "cramming sessions," as well as counseling, pep talks, and meals to their students before tests.

In the conviction that a focus on both academics and behavior was integral to the overall well-being of their schools, the administrators in all the BTO schools enforced ground rules for behavior that inculcated mutual respect between adults and students.



Several schools required that students wear uniforms. In the schools without uniforms, dress codes were clearly delineated and enforced by the adults on campus.

The twin focus on academics and behavior was also evident in how school security was handled. With two exceptions (one was a school that was entered through another school which housed the screener), these schools had consistently refused metal detectors or other screening devices on their campuses. Several administrators viewed screening devices as antithetical to the respectful, high-achieving academic environment they were working so hard to develop. Quantitative data substantiates our impression that the BTO schools were able to maintain extremely low incidents of violence on campus. Ten of the thirteen BTO schools reported 0–1 violent crimes in 2005 – lower than the citywide average.⁴ BTO schools also averaged 5.1 suspensions per hundred students in 2005, compared with 8.2 per hundred in similar schools and 7.5 per hundred citywide.

College Expectations and Access

Low-income students of color whose families have not had access to college require special efforts to sustain their belief in the possibility of college going. Care must also be taken to ensure that they have the skills, coursework, and national tests required for college entry. These students must be helped to navigate the daunting complexities of choosing a college, filling out

⁴ The average for all NYC high schools in 2004–2005 was 2.14; when weighted by student population so big schools don't unduly skew the average, the figure is 3.54. Citywide, the number of violent crimes per school ranged from zero to 14 in 2004–2005.

applications and financial forms, and meeting all application deadlines. These supports can only be provided by an individual or individuals with extensive knowledge of the world of colleges and what it takes for first-generation students to get there, as well as the time to devote to working with these students.

All the BTO schools began their relationships to their entering ninth-grade students by making it clear that the next four years would involve disciplined academic work directed to graduation and college or another form of post-secondary education. The technical schools helped their students understand that careers in their fields depended upon post-high school technical programs. The principal of one BTO technical high school believed that the high graduation and college-going rates in his school were the result of *all* faculty continually emphasizing to students the exact post-secondary education programs needed to enter specific technical careers.

The BTO schools also made a point of giving prominent visual and physical space to the college-going process. However, administrators reported that this space had been increasingly threatened between 2001 and our 2006 school visits. Schools were asked to displace libraries and elective classrooms to devote physical space to additional students and to disciplinary and special education rooms in compliance with unfunded federal and state mandates.

All but one of the BTO schools still housed a college counseling office in 2006. Though often small and rudimentary, these offices displayed pictures of and information about colleges

and offered computers and a quiet supportive room in which students could review their transcripts, write their essays, and work on other aspects of their college and financial-aid applications. Most schools showcased students' college acceptances, prominently displaying letters of acceptance and scholarship awards in the school hallways.

In some schools, college offices were staffed by college counselors, whose duties were devoted solely to assisting students in getting into college. In other schools, because of budgetary constraints, the counselor who staffed this program or office was assigned additional duties. Several schools reworked their budgets to hire college counselors on a part-time basis, and one school worked with a retired counselor with strong ties to colleges. This individual, a fierce advocate for students as they sought college entry, had for some years spent several days a week at the school, but had recently been cut back to a day a week and wondered how she could continue to adequately serve students.

To impress on students the range of opportunities and options that awaited them after high school, all the BTO high schools hosted annual college and career fairs. They also established direct linkages to colleges, either through the contacts that administrators and teachers developed with admissions offices or through former students currently enrolled at these colleges. At one school, a graduate's success in a college had led to fifteen students being awarded full college scholarships at this college in the following two years. At several schools, we met graduates who had returned to visit with former teachers and talk to students. It was clear that the graduates

expected – and received – warm welcomes and pride in their accomplishments. In one college office, we found a graduate engrossed in helping a student fill out a college application form.

The BTO schools collaborated with local community-based organizations, where students were able to participate in service learning and the kinds of extracurricular activities and community service opportunities valued by admissions officers – traditionally more available to middle-class students.

In all the BTO schools, administrators raised private funds to sponsor yearly visits to a handful of colleges both in and out of state. These college visits involved overnight trips for significant numbers of students, mostly eleventh- and twelfth-graders. In two schools, an annual busload of students traveled south for a tour of the historically Black colleges. Other schools provided annual visits to northern colleges, including such high-prestige

schools as Yale, Tufts, Ithaca College, and Cornell. Students in all the BTO schools visited local two- and four-year colleges (CUNY and others) and colleges in the State University of New York (SUNY) system.

Since most of the students in the BTO schools were the first generation in their families to attend college, administrators in these schools understood that parents' support for college going had to be built and sustained. Parents needed to understand college as a real possibility and an important benefit – even a priority – for their children. Thus, the schools used a variety of strategies to help parents keep track of their children's academic progress in relation to the requirements for graduation and college entry. Schools hosted parent nights, notified parents of tutoring or testing opportunities, and held college-going and financial-aid workshops for parents. One school made a point of inviting parents on the college tours, so that the tours became multigenerational.

In two schools, administrators talked of parents' apparent shame about their incomes and their reluctance to giving out accurate (or any) income information on financial-aid forms. Staff expended considerable effort overcoming this obstacle to students receiving critical financial assistance.

In all BTO schools, an individual or group of staff sought public and private scholarships and other funds to make attending college more feasible for their students. For several schools, finding money for undocumented students, who are not eligible for government scholarships, was an extra struggle. (Reluctance of undocumented parents and students to provide personal information was common and understandable.) One

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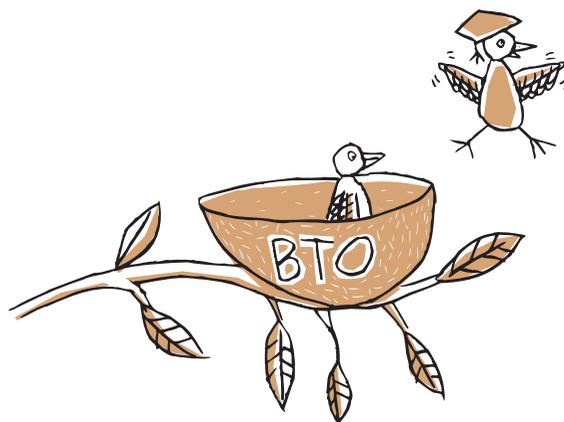
school with a number of undocumented students held a workshop addressing issues of college access and funding for undocumented students.

Effective Use of Data

Data-driven reform has become a complex and contested practice, given how the pressure of standardized tests has narrowed students' learning opportunities. While data collection and analyses are increasingly defined as integral to improving student achievement, administrators and teachers are generally viewed as reluctant users of data. Not surprisingly, a common criticism of college-preparation programs is the lack of systematic data collection and analysis (for example, see Hughes et al. 2005).

School administrators and faculty in the BTO schools viewed the effective use of data as their weakest area of practice. Indeed, *all* the administrators reported needing to strengthen this area. In spite of this, all the BTO schools did use student data in a variety of ways to strengthen programs and practice. All the BTO schools analyzed their four-year and five-year graduation rates and regularly reviewed a range of other data to keep track of students and strengthen their instructional programs.

In all the BTO schools, data was used to follow students' progress and to identify student weaknesses and strengths across different academic subjects. This information was also used to shape tutoring and other academic interventions and to provide feedback to the administration and faculty about how curriculum could be revised, modified, and reinforced.



The BTO schools also kept track of how individual students were accumulating credits. In one school, the principal maintained a cohort file with the program and graduation requirements of every senior. Students were asked to review the file regularly and to sign off as they accumulated the necessary credit requirements to graduate. In another school, the guidance counselor met weekly with all students who were behind in their credit accumulation, again asking them to sign off once they had jointly created a plan for moving forward and catching up.

All but two schools kept track of students' PSAT and SAT test-taking rates and results. While most administrators were proud of high rates of PSAT and SAT test taking, a principal who had raised money to pay for all sophomores taking the PSATs reported that low scores had greatly discouraged some students and that

the goal of encouraging *all* students to take the PSAT needed to be rethought.

The level of information provided about college opportunities and scholarships varied across BTO schools, as did the sophistication of technology schools employed for keeping track of student data. As several administrators pointed out, a recent wave of retirements among guidance counselors had exacerbated information flow problems, since retiring counselors had taken their expertise and knowledge with them.

Six schools tracked the percentages of students who applied to two- and four-year colleges. However, several BTO administrators expressed concern over their lack of knowledge about whether or not their students followed through on college acceptances. (Our ability to link New York City Department of Education and CUNY data was a revelation to several.) Moreover, the schools rarely knew whether students who entered a two-year college transferred to a four-year program. Nor did BTO schools have systematic data on how well their students did in different colleges or other post-secondary programs.

Less formally, most administrators and counselors used returning graduates to keep track of the colleges students actually enrolled in and how well they did once enrolled. However, since administrators assumed that those students who did well in college were more likely to return to their high school than those who were struggling or had even dropped out, they realized that this information was likely skewed.

Scholarships and other financial aid awarded to students were sources of pride in all the BTO schools. In two high schools, administrators and counselors knew exactly how much scholarship money had been awarded



to students graduating in spring 2006 and, in a third school, the administrator had a list of all the scholarships graduating seniors had received. However, information in this area depended on the efforts of the college counselor and/or principal, who, being over-stretched, regarded systematic data collection as a low priority. No school had information on how well former students who had received financial aid performed in college, even though this knowledge might influence the decision of a philanthropist or scholarship provider to fund other students from the same high school.

Administrators and faculty in all the BTO schools reported going far beyond their job descriptions to enable most of their students to graduate in a timely manner and enter college. The administrators worked long days and on weekends, and students regularly streamed into their offices, including during their interviews with us. Most were clear that they had reached the limits of what they could do and that data was an area that suffered as they responded to the immediate needs of students. Yet all acknowledged the importance of finding ways to use data to better keep track of student progress both before and after graduation.

The Remaining Challenge: Maintaining and Scaling Up the Success of BTO Schools

It is cause for celebration when any student, against steep odds, graduates from high school and goes to college. It is equally cause for celebration when schools, against steep odds, produce high graduation and college-going rates with students who would not ordinarily graduate and attend college.

The administrators in the schools we visited were courageous, highly skilled, and relentless in developing and sustaining their programming initiatives and interventions on behalf of their students.

The administrators in the schools we visited were courageous, highly skilled, and relentless in developing and sustaining their programming initiatives and interventions on behalf of their students. All strived to create coherent and integrated academic programs and supports, which demanded a high degree of faculty buy-in. All understood that their expectations for their schools had to be consistently communicated to both faculty and students, at the same time as they negotiated district, state, and federal mandates – strengthening the positive effects and minimizing the negative effects of these mandates on their schools.

When asked, “Is there a way to do all this without being a hero or a heroine?” one BTO administrator laughed, shaking her head, and gave an emphatic, “No!” The only recourse, she explained, when exhaustion threatened, was to ask herself and her staff, “Wouldn’t you do this for your own child?” Yet the solutions to “beating the odds” could not always be found within the schools themselves. Increasing enrollments and decreasing

support were generating burnout and real or potential faculty turnover, and several BTO administrators wondered how long their staffs could expend the commitment and devotion necessary to sustain high graduation and college-going rates.

While BTO schools provide strong examples that high schools can turn students who enter ninth grade with low skills into timely graduates and successful college-goers, several important elements are needed for these schools to continue their success and for their practices to be scaled up to a wider group of New York City high schools. Most important, to stabilize the work these schools are doing and to support other schools that might be able to “beat the odds” requires a better distribution of resources, greater control over enrollments, and a stronger system of district support and accountability.

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