

DROPOUT FORUM

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IN THE medical world the most difficult cases are the most important ones. It is from these that doctors learn most. Hospitals give their sickest patients the most attention. In education, apparently, opposite conditions exist. The "most well" students are given the greatest amount of attention. We believe, on the contrary, that the school's failures, the dropouts, are the important students. We believe that we can learn most from these students. They live closest to the school's problems. From first-hand experience, they can tell us where it hurts.

We work with the public school dropouts in the county adult education program and in the state women's prison. We decided to offer our two groups of students a forum on the subject of student rights.

These Are the "Failures"

Our students have a peculiar combination of great "street" awareness and sophistication, and extreme naïveté in areas of school achievement. Many have been involved with public school "adjustment" classes, juvenile detention centers, and the adult prison system. All of them have either dropped out or been kicked out of school and have recently returned to adult educational settings.

People like these are the failures who sit in every classroom in the country. Rarely do schools listen to, accept, or give credibility to their failures. In fact, the tendency is to get

rid of the "misfits" in much the same way that an amoeba expels foreign material. When schools do listen, what they believe they hear are more student "complaints." We fell into that trap, too. When we first began looking over student responses, we were disappointed. We had been hearing these sorts of things for years. It seemed that the students were telling us nothing really new. Then we began to realize that what seemed to us like complaining was really an accurate description of how the students were feeling—how they were perceiving their school experiences. In short, what we labeled as "complaints" was the reality that these students lived with. And they were telling us over and over again!

It became even more dramatic to listen to our students while we were seeing what they actually had done with their public school education. It is one thing to hear a high school student talk about school. At least he is still there. It is quite a different thing to hear a prison inmate, a dropout, a juvenile delinquent talk about school. It was also interesting that the responses from our in-prison group and from our out-of-prison group were so alike as to be indistinguishable.

We began by asking students to give their opinions about student rights. From the

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questions they asked, it became obvious to us that the whole notion of rights was confusing, if not completely foreign to them. They were aware of the black movement and of the more recent women's movement. But the idea that public school students might have rights had never occurred to them! We then asked other questions: What were your experiences in school? How did they affect your learning? How did you feel about school? What made you leave? Do you think schools treat students fairly? How were you treated? Are schools a good thing? What did the rules mean to you?

Here, with minimal editing, is what they said:

"Rights. Who really has them? Rights are opinions and freedom of activities which every human being is born with. You have all kinds of rights and responsibilities through the course of life, but during the education period in your life, you're pushed toward the responsibilities and denied the rights. It's like someone telling you not to lie, but never telling you the truth.

Teachers and other education officials are often biased and/or closed-minded to change in student rights and activities. Teachers dominate the student in not allowing freedom of speech to express his thoughts, and control the better part of his physical movement as well as dress. A teacher is forever telling you to sit up straight, be quiet, or get your hair out of your face.

Once I was taking a test in the 9th grade when my instructor proceeded to remove a pair of scissors from her desk drawer and cut my bangs. I was shocked and embarrassed. The only explanation she offered was that they were too long and she didn't think they were appropriate. I quit school about a year later. This as well as the continued superior attitude of teachers and other staff highly disgusted me."

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One year when I was going to high school we didn't have student rights, especially the blacks. And if one person did something against the school rules, the principal would penalize the whole school if he didn't know who did it.

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I dislike high schools because they wouldn't let young girls go to school pregnant. They threw you out instead of letting you go ahead and try to finish. I was in the twelfth grade and they found out somehow that I was pregnant and told me that I would have to stop school. I don't think that was right at all. Do you? Why couldn't they just let people alone?

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When I was in high school last year, there were three of us that they kept in social adjustment for the whole year. Every time we got out, they called us to the office about something we did two or three months ago. I think the public schools are so messed up that most of them are beyond help. When you get sent to the dean, you don't have a chance there. They're right and you're wrong. The only word the teachers and the whole school system know is social adjustment. People should do something about the schools, cause if they don't like you, they're gonna get you one way or the other.

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My 9 year old son is very slow and when he is in school, the teacher sends him outside or to the library just to get him out of the way and I think this is wrong.

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I feel that some schools are very unfair toward students. Teachers just try to make a living and all they really care about is the money that comes in at the end of the month. They don't really care if a student learns anything or not.

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School was very boring. After I got older, there were too many rules, and students had no say-so in making rules. I wanted more freedom during these times, and I felt that I was old enough to be responsible for my dress and hair. I'm a girl, but in the school I attended, I was told that my Afro was not permissible. This really disturbed me. Classes often were one-track and boring. Teachers never seemed to relate any of our subjects to the present happenings which would make classes more interesting to students. The gap made by the

stiff hand of authority turned me against teachers. I felt really inferior and could not relate to them. I quit.

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I don't think public schools are fair at all. Teachers pick out favorites in the class and treat a lot of the other students like dogs.

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Students have a few rights, but not enough so you could tell it. They can't voice their opinion about unfair teachers for the first reason deans and guidance counselors don't pay any attention. I have even been told to get out; that I didn't know anything and I was just trying to cause trouble.

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My opinion about schools today is that schools are too strict about grades and not concerned enough about the child and what causes him or her not to learn what the teacher thinks he should.

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I feel a student should be able to wear whatever is comfortable for him. I feel that a school is there for education purposes, not discipline purposes.

In a situation that a student has a personal item and disturbs the class with it, the student should be told to put it away and not have it taken away from him.

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I didn't feel like beating a person was a means of punishment that a student should have to suffer for being tardy for morning roll call or little petty things like talking out loud in class.

I hate racial discrimination that's going on in today's schools with the kids of this generation. I feel like something should be done about it. I also feel that nobody, absolutely nobody, can solve the problems of today's students except the students themselves.

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Do schools treat students fairly? No. Kids shouldn't have to bring absent and late notes. If one wants to attend, he will. Lots of kids are driven out of school because of that. It's too much of a hassle. Then before you know it you're getting kicked out. And one has lost touch of school and doesn't give a damn anymore.

I'm glad there is adult education or I'm sure I may not have made it through high school.

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Education today in our public schools leaves much to be desired. There are many teachers that do not need to be teachers. There are a number that are prejudiced against race and religion. The length of our hair or the style of our clothing is not any of their business, but they make it their business by condemning pupils in front of their classmates. They cop an attitude toward a person if their religion is different than theirs and give that person no slack at all. Their ideals and morals, their religion and their life style is the right one, and so they look down on anyone that has different views of life. Their minds are closed and locked to any views or ideas but their own. I feel what we need is a system by which to screen teachers to see if they are suited to the profession.

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Rights? Maybe I don't know what the word means, but as far as I'm concerned, students haven't any rights. It seems as though the rules are your rights and no exceptions. I think you have to have rules to have some kind of organization, but why can they break the rules for some and not for others? It seems to me that if you have money or your parents have some sort of influence, you just don't have to go through all the crap.

Students have a right to talk with a guidance counselor when things trouble them or just when they want to talk with someone to get your head back together. I think it's a downright shame when the guidance counselor is prejudiced, when he takes sides just because. . . . This leaves a person with nothing and no where to turn.

The people who wrote these are doing well now. They are in less structured and less traditional school settings. There is little pretense and less pressure. But the problems they left in public schools haven't really changed. Their leaving has probably made the school's problems easier. If the sickest patients dropped out or were kicked out of hospitals, the practice of medicine, too, would be much easier. But medicine would then be a masquerade. To the extent that schools deal exclusively with their "most well" students, and give only token consideration to the rights of all their students, to this extent schools, too, are only pretending to be involved in education. □

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