

George A. Wingate High School, Brooklyn, New York.



Photo: Wingate High School.

Wingate: Brooklyn's Born-Again High School

David G. Savage

Here's how one principal cut through administrative trivia, tackled reading and the rest of the curriculum, and turned his inner-city high school into a "model of urban education."

If you watched the CBS-TV documentary "Is Anyone Out There Learning?" last August you heard a litany of what is wrong with public education in America. But you also saw at least one example of what is very right. The CBS cameras visited what looked to be, and once was, an example of an impossible school—a high school of nearly all black and mostly poor students, students whose reading level was generally two grades below par, students long since turned off to education and only serving out their time, and a mostly white faculty that was demoralized and frightened. In the early 1970s, George Wingate High School in Brooklyn was chaotic, a "rathole," according to its principal, Robert L. Schain. But that's not what CBS found in 1978.

Instead, Wingate is increasingly referred to as a "model of urban education." The school is neat, the halls are orderly, the lawns are well-kept,

and even the bathrooms, once the center of the school's busy drug traffic, are being "used only as bathrooms," says Schain. The order and decorum isn't produced by a cadre of school security officers patrolling the halls. The students simply seem interested in getting an education. More than 80 percent go on to higher education.

Not surprisingly, Schain has been getting a lot of publicity of late, especially in the New York area. Diane Ravitch, an educational historian at Columbia University who has written about the New York City school "wars," called Wingate the "born-again" school in a *New York* magazine profile. Nat Hentoff, who often writes harshly critical articles about public schools for the *Village Voice*, found Schain and his school a throwback to the days of the great city high schools that once abounded in New York. *The New York Times*, while finding much to criticize about the city's



Principal Robert L. Schain has turned a once impossible school into a "model of urban education." Photo: Wingate High School.

public schools, repeatedly has cited Wingate as an example for other schools to follow.

How Did You Do It?

So, what everyone wants to know, Robert Schain, is how did you do it? He shuns any simplistic answers to the questions, but instead prefers to tell how the Wingate program developed. Until 1970, Schain had been a social studies teacher and department chairman at several city high schools. His conversation is spiced with historical examples and footnotes, from the origins of the Peloponnesian Wars to quotations from Chairman Mao. But he wanted to be a principal. After he was tested, "grilled" about his past work, required to observe classes and report his comments—a selection process considerably more rigid, and Schain believes, more effective than the current system—the Board of Education chose him to head Wingate. It was, as Hentoff wrote, similar to being promoted to captain in Napoleon's army as it began the retreat from Russia. "My friends said, 'Bob, that's a heart attack school. Don't take it,'" Schain said recently. "But I thought a lot could be accomplished. I was anxious to get the job."

Mini-schools for Reading

He admits to having had no grand plan to turn Wingate around. "You determine your priorities once you see the problems," he says. He found two things, a school where disruption had won out over education ("I seemed to spend most of my time in suspension hearings") and one where most students could barely read. And the two problems were clearly related. "If you can't read, education has passed you by," Schain observes, "so no wonder they were turned off and disruptive." He began an intensive basic skills mini-school, with his best, young, dedicated teachers working closely with the poorest students. Similarly, the school annually received an influx of French-speaking students from Haiti. For them, Schain established an intensive English program, one of total immersion in the new language, not bilingual education. Both programs paid dividends. The students began to learn, to make progress, and they also realized that the teachers and the school cared about them. Disruption, the symptom of a turned-off school, began to decline.

Then he turned his attention to the rest of Wingate's curriculum. He found it bland, overly traditional, and not really focused on the needs of the students. Schain makes it clear that he doesn't feel it was just the students who hadn't adapted to the school. The teachers hadn't adapted to the students, either. Wingate had a "massive reading problem," but the social studies teachers would say, "I'm not a reading teacher," Schain says. "And it's a myth to think English teachers can teach reading, too." Perhaps more than most administrators, he believes in the value of training. "Department chairman shouldn't be clerks; they should be teacher trainers. And the principal is responsible for selecting and training good department chairmen."

So the Wingate staff turned its attention to reading, with the object of integrating reading instruction into all courses. It was everybody's job, not "somebody else's." A by-product of this effort is a handbook, "Developing Reading Skills Through Subject Areas," written, edited, designed, and printed at Wingate. One of the many offshoots of the city's financial crisis has been that schools are shortchanged on funds for purchasing

materials. Schain has partly solved that problem by selling the reading book.¹

Challenging Alternatives: Learning to Fly

The Wingate staff also set out to extend the curriculum through alternative courses. The reasons are familiar enough—most high school students get turned off by traditional but unchallenging academic courses. The course offering sheet, once a one-pager, is now four pages long. New courses include psychology in literature, sports literature, Greek mythology, modern dance, photography, advanced algebra, calculus, trigonometry, Caribbean-American culture, and anthropology. But Wingate has received the most attention for its "institutes"—specialized programs that are both distinct and integrated into the curriculum.

For example, in a flight training institute taught by an Eastern Airlines pilot, students learn about engines, about aerodynamics, and even learn to fly. A legal institute and an international relations institute feature advanced courses in those areas. The medical science institute features courses in advanced chemistry, microbiology, math, physics, and foreign languages. Students get "hands on" experience working parttime at a nearby hospital, and the students' interest in medicine is incorporated into their entire course of studies. In English, they may read *Arrowsmith*, Sinclair Lewis' novel of a doctor's life.

Most of these programs were developed by the Wingate staff, not by the principal, Schain points out. He has encouraged the staff to come up with new ideas and usually gives them the green light to go ahead. "You've got to involve everyone in the decision-making process, seriously, meaningfully. You've got to get them enthused and thinking about education. That's what leader-



"The medical sciences institute features courses in advanced chemistry, microbiology, math, physics, and foreign languages." Photo: Wingate High School.

ship is. But we've got creative professionals here. When they're involved, they'll do a good job."

New York City has perhaps the most powerful, best entrenched teacher union in the nation. Schain doesn't minimize that as a problem. "Sure, we've got some teachers who are retired on the job. I've gotten rid of quite a few. In fact, I think I've given out more bad evaluations than any principal in the city. But this, like politics, is the art of the possible. You weed some out. And you encourage and support some, and they become good teachers again."

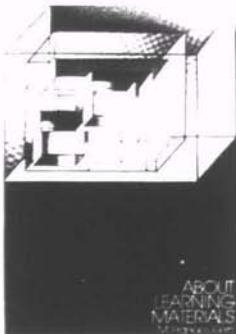
One of the problems of writing about good school management, or of educational leadership, is that the best ideas, once stated, seem so simple.

¹ Available for \$5.00 a copy from Wingate H.S., 600 Kingston Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11203.

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Sort of the "Elementary, my dear Watson" principle. But the key is not saying it, but doing it, putting the ideas into practice. Like most good schools, the most impressive aspect of Wingate is the attitude of teachers, staff, and students. As an administrator, it is easy to fall into the rut of seeing your job as handling administrative detail, attending meetings, and tackling discipline problems. Education can fall into the cracks. One of Schain's remarkable traits is that he, first and foremost, is still a teacher. He thinks and talks about education, believes he has a "no nonsense approach" to education, but spends almost no time talking about discipline or administrative trivia. Those are diversions, not the essence of the job. He'll talk at length about "crap courses," how many urban educators, faced with an influx of turned-off minority students, fell back on a "band-aid approach." "They sacrificed content to get the kid's interest. You can't do that. It's like saying I'll teach you to play the piano in 10 easy lessons—there's no such thing. You don't learn to do anything that counts in 10 easy lessons," he says. Instead, he believes good teaching is being able to make learning relevant to the lives of the students. It is this attitude, about the importance of education, even a love of education, that Schain passes on to the faculty, staff, and students.

Schain manages to keep a sense of humor even when the roof seems to be falling in, no small asset for the principal of a big city school. Teaching social studies and running a big school apparently provide a lot of comedy material. "I once asked a kid about who signed the Declaration of Independence and the wise guy says, 'I don't know, but I didn't do it.' I threw him out of class for being insolent. Later I met with his mother, and we had a nice chat. But as she got up to leave, she told me, 'You know, Dr. Schain, my Bobby is a lot of things, but he's not a liar. If he said he didn't sign that Declaration, he didn't sign it'."



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