

# Beyond Order and Expectations in High Schools Serving At-Risk Youth

To break the cycle of alienation experienced by students and teachers in urban schools, we must accompany calls for order and high expectations with respect and relevance for students and professionalism for teachers.

Over the last decade, effective schools research has reinforced common sense to suggest that a safe, orderly environment and high expectations for performance enhance student learning (Edmonds 1979, Mackenzie 1983). In high schools, criteria of effectiveness have broadened to include better attendance, fewer dropouts, fewer teen pregnancies, and improved relationships among students of different ethnic groups. Where high schools perform poorly on these criteria, they are said to have substantial proportions of at-risk youth (McCann and Austin 1988). What contributes to all these problems is student alienation from school (Ekstrom et al. 1986, Newman 1981).

Two colleagues and I recently conducted a study of student alienation in high schools in Baltimore, Newark, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Washington, D.C. (Firestone et al. 1987). We

asked the superintendents in each city to identify two high schools. One was to be a problem school; the other was to have a similar student population but to be performing better in terms of student learning, dropout rates, or other indicators. The median student population of the schools selected was

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1,553, including two very large ones with enrollments over 2,500. In seven schools, three-fourths or more of the students were black; and in eight, two-fifths or more received free lunches. In the six schools where data were available, average daily attendance ranged from 72 to 85 percent.

Our findings suggest that while order and high expectations *are* important, an expanded view of school effectiveness must be taken if we are to serve at-risk students well. First, teacher alienation must be recognized as a factor in the cycle. Many teachers in urban high schools are trapped in positions they do not want but cannot afford to leave, complaining of burnout and, in the worst cases, retiring on the job (Dworkin 1986). Their disengagement feeds the alienation of students and is in turn reinforced by it. Second, an exclusive emphasis on order and high expectations is a hard-line position: it raises standards with-

out providing help to meet them and without necessarily increasing incentives. To alleviate alienation, the emphasis on order and expectations must be accompanied by equal parts of respect and relevance for students and professionalism for teachers.

### The Alienation Cycle

Because teachers and students share the school environment and because each group is dependent upon the other to meet its needs and achieve its successes, teacher alienation and student alienation feed each other. Therefore, we gathered information about how the cycle of alienation worked in some schools and how it had been broken in others. A team of three people spent a day in each school, conducting individual interviews with principals, assistant principals, and counselors. They also interviewed teachers and department heads from a variety of departments (English, mathematics, vocational programs, and others) and both high- and low-achieving students. For the schools in our study, we constructed measures of both forms of alienation, then rated each school's overall levels of student and teacher alienation separately.<sup>1</sup> The rank-order correlation between teacher alienation and student alienation was .92, indicating a high degree of association.

We found students had clear yet complex ideas about what makes a good teacher, saying, for example, "a good teacher is fun, caring, devoted, patient, intelligent, a role model, expressive, personal." Students wanted the teacher to make the work interesting and, even more important, to explain again when students did not understand the first time. Explaining and re-explaining became the dominant theme in students' comments about teachers:

Good teachers don't get mad when you ask them to repeat a question.

A bad teacher is one who does not care, one that tosses the work on the board and don't [sic] explain it. One that doesn't involve himself or his work into the students.

When teachers did not explain sufficiently, students could not do the

Photographs courtesy Kenneth Friedman, yearbook sponsor, H. D. Woodson High School, Washington, D.C.



At H. D. Woodson High School, Washington, D.C., respect is apparent in the way teachers act toward students, as seen here in gym class.

work. When teachers got mad, students gave up because they felt insulted for trying.

Just as students' feelings about school depended on teachers, teachers' alienation depended on the responses they got from students. As one teacher put it:

[A bad day is] when you think you're really cooking and they say, "Can I go to the bathroom?" . . . when you look into their eyes and you can see clear out of the backs of their heads.

The opposite was also true. Teachers reported good days

when students want to hang around and ask questions. Students keep the seatwork or discussion going. It's not teacher-centered.

These findings suggest that creating a high-quality school climate, where productivity and satisfaction and a sense of community prevail, is not likely to result from fragmented efforts. When principals and teachers recognize that student and teacher alienation are mutually reinforcing, they can direct strategies for improvement toward both groups. For example, dropout programs will be more successful if administrators address teacher concerns at the same time; and burnout programs will work better if student discontent is simultaneously a focus of action.

### Beyond Order: Respect

When a get-tough orientation is over-emphasized, safety is too often purchased at the price of personal freedom and self-respect. At a time when Patterson principal Joe Clark can gain national publicity for maintaining order with a baseball bat and a bullhorn (*Time Magazine*, February 1988), it is important to recognize that there is more than one way to create a safe school climate.

High school students expect to receive respect from adults in the school; this is one attribute they recognize in a good teacher. This respect is apparent in what teachers say to students, how teachers act toward students, and how teachers use their time:

Some teachers talk down to you like you're stupid when you ask questions.

Some teachers embarrass you in front of the class. They make jokes about failed tests, poor grades, and things.

Teachers in our study expressed similar concerns about their administrators. In one school with both alienated teachers and students, a teacher explained that "the principal and the vice principal have a punitive attitude toward teachers, the way we deal with some kids." As with students, the problem is that they do not feel treated with respect.

Standards of safety and respect can be combined in the concept of *consistency*. In a consistent environment, order is maintained, roles are clear, and rules are enforced fairly and rigorously, but not harshly. In our study, the schools with a consistent environment generally had the highest teacher and student commitment.

H. D. Woodson High School, in Washington, D.C., exemplifies this combination of order and respect. For example, the site visit team arrived in the school on the day of the homecoming dance. Before school started, hundreds of students were milling around the school lobby, trying to buy tickets. What might have been a riot situation was handled firmly but calmly by the principal and vice principals, who quickly formed a line and arranged for students to buy their tickets before school started. Meanwhile,

teachers checked in at the main office, chatting for a moment with each other, the secretaries, or the administrators as they prepared for the day's work. The school had established its own code of conduct, enforced not only by adults but by students, which the principal described as

very cordial and humanistic. There is respect for children as well as adults. There is no dress code, but there is the "Woodson Way" of dress: no shorts, T-shirts, punk haircuts. . . . It's a business atmosphere. We stress getting to school on time. People speak to each other, they say, "Good morning."

### **Beyond High Expectations: Relevance**

The same research that emphasizes the importance of order in the school also stresses the need for high academic expectations for all students (Mackenzie 1983). Our observations corroborated this conclusion, although the range of internally generated academic standards in these schools was limited.

The schools fell into three groups with regard to expectations. In the largest group, there was little pressure for teaching and student achievement. Sometimes goals were unclear or misplaced. In one of these schools, a teacher complained that when the principal brought a visiting dignitary into her class it was to point out a city all-star basketball player, not her teaching. The second group of schools tried to create support for instruction. In one, teachers and administrators agreed "this is a place where teachers can teach," but there was no special training or pressure for them to teach better. These schools also provided incentives for students who succeeded academically. In the third group, one school combined strong management and incentives for students with an extensive program of teacher training and inservice. Here we found an unusually high level of reflectiveness about teaching among the staff. Generally, alienation was lowest where academic expectations were highest; this was especially true for measures of student alienation.

The effective schools research stresses the principal's role in creating

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high expectations, but our study teams rarely saw principals playing this role. The principals whose schools had low alienation put their efforts into creating a situation where students and teachers could work together, but they did not spend a lot of time setting academic goals and directions. Instead, they usually accepted the academic standards of their state and district policies. These included standardized district-wide curriculum and testing programs, increases in course requirements for graduation, state graduation tests, and inservice programs for teachers that emphasized academic content and concerns. Though important, these strategies have certain limits: they increase the workload for students without providing incentives for doing the work.

*The need for relevance.* Students need personal reasons to meet standards. This need was less acute with higher achieving students, but those having the greatest trouble in school took the narrowest view of what was worth learning:

I don't see the purpose of algebra. All you need is English and math. The rest just fills time.

In English you need to learn to speak and read right, but reading stories is pointless.

The clearest way to show at-risk students the relevance of schoolwork

was to provide a short-term direct connection to future employability. Programs that trained students to be dental technicians, truck drivers, bank tellers, and the like had considerable appeal. Often, however, the students were woefully ignorant of what was required to get the jobs they wanted. One low-achieving student thought that after attending a community college, she could go to medical school. Then after nursing school, an internship, and a residency, she could become a doctor.

Two factors contributed to students' perceptions that schooling was relevant. The first was the availability of career-oriented programs in such areas as business and finance, technology, and junior ROTC. However, although some schools had good programs, they appeared to serve fewer than the majority; for those who got in, though, the programs were highly motivating. The second relevance factor was counseling. While some counselors really listened to students and helped them find appropriate colleges and careers, most were hampered by time constraints that included handling routine paperwork, crisis counseling, and non-counseling work like patrolling halls and lunchrooms. The schools with the least student alienation usually had one or two especially effective counselors.

*Supporting professionalism.* High academic standards in the form of integrated curriculums and testing programs or increased graduation standards had placed new pressures on teachers as well as students. In some schools teachers had responded to the reforms with anger and resentment; in others, with enthusiasm. What made the difference was the effort of school and district administrators to professionalize teaching conditions. With one exception, most of these schools had not engaged in any of the power-sharing or career-restructuring recommendations being proposed to reform teaching. However, three factors facilitated teachers' work and gave them autonomy.

The first was the presence of supportive working conditions. These included the quality of the buildings—were they clean and in good repair?—

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and the adequacy of materials—did all students in each class have enough books? Even more important was the level of administrative support. Where principals were approachable, found special resources for teachers, backed them when problems arose, and of-

fered understanding when things went poorly, teachers were more committed to their work.

The second factor was a sense of collegiality among teachers. At one extreme, teachers complained that their colleagues no longer tried to maintain discipline in the building. In most schools teachers were cordial with each other, but their closeness did not include discussions of teaching practice. At the positive extreme was one school where teachers felt close enough to share instructional ideas. Not surprisingly, alienation was lowest where collegiality was highest.

The final factor was influence sharing. Teachers in these schools were not deeply interested in major policy issues concerning district budgets, curriculum, and new programs; but they wanted a great deal of influence over the things that affected them daily. Generally, they wanted both the leeway and the support to try new

things in the classroom. In some schools, their interest was in controlling matters that were not functioning smoothly. Sometimes the problem was discipline; at other schools, it was the allocation of supplies. In one school, teachers appreciated the opportunity to work as a department with the administration to establish their individual schedules. Another example of high influence was giving teachers input into the design of a districtwide criterion-referenced testing program. We found that such influence sharing reduced teacher alienation.

Pittsburgh's Schenley High School best illustrated the benefits of complementing the new standards with new professionalism. With the help of the University of Pittsburgh, the district had developed MAP (Monitoring Achievement in Pittsburgh), a sophisticated system of criterion-referenced tests for tracking students' progress through the curriculum. In addition, the district sought to enhance teachers' professional development, for example, in the Schenley Teacher Center. Teachers from all other high schools in the district came to the school for eight-week mini-sabbaticals, with instruction provided by some of Schenley's teachers. Visiting teachers would often teach classes under the supervision of these clinical resident teachers. This effort required a high level of interaction and discussion about instruction among Schenley's teachers. Also, the principal established a pattern of forming teacher committees to solve schoolwide problems whenever they developed. The principal was, as one teacher put it, "very flexible. If you want to be creative and independent, he supports you." The result, according to the teachers, was that "the degree of professionalism here is exceptional." As one teacher expressed it:

At my previous school, the main topic of discussion was retirement. Here we talk about educational issues.

As a group, the Schenley teachers were highly motivated, highly engaged in their work; they showed exceptional interest in and professional



*In mechanical drawing class at H. D. Woodson High School, Washington, D.C., this student apparently finds his schoolwork relevant, perhaps because he understands the connections between his assignment and his future employability and perhaps also because his counselors are helping him to plan his future well.*

|                        | Daily Actions of Principals and Teachers                                                                 | Formal Decisions by Principals                                                                                                       | Formal Decisions by District Office                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Order</b>           | Consistency on the part of principals<br>Respect from all adults in school                               |                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Expectations</b>    |                                                                                                          | School incentive programs (like academic letter jackets)                                                                             | Districtwide coordinated student testing and curriculum articulation programs<br><br>Districtwide inservice and staff development programs                   |
| <b>Relevance</b>       | Quality counseling                                                                                       | Career programs                                                                                                                      | Career programs<br><br>Adequately staffed counseling programs                                                                                                |
| <b>Professionalism</b> | Personalized administrative support for teachers<br><br>Sharing among teachers about professional issues | Administrative actions, from parties to retreats, to promote collegiality<br><br>Sharing influence and decision making with teachers | Districtwide inservice programs<br><br>Opportunities for teacher influence over relevant district decisions (like testing and curriculum alignment programs) |

Fig. 1. Factors That Reduce Student and Teacher Alienation

knowledge about approaches to curriculum and instruction.

### The Tried-and-True and the Out-of-Step

Figure 1 summarizes the specific practices we observed that served to reduce student and teacher alienation. The practices presented here are quite conventional, much like what goes on in good suburban high schools. Nevertheless, no matter how common these practices may be in suburban locations, they are quite uncommon and quite difficult to accomplish in urban high schools. In many cases, the desire for school improvement does not require invention—we know what to do. What is needed is the will, and sometimes the power, to accomplish it.

Yet the recommendations made here may sound curiously out of step: *respect* and *relevance* are more consonant with the innovations of the 1970s than those of the 1980s. The current policy environment projects a get-tough orientation, reflected in increased testing and

high school graduation requirements—formal embodiments of high expectations. Such policies do introduce students to more academic content, but they risk driving out the marginal student. On the other hand, the practices associated with increasing the engagement of students and teachers have to do with recognizing the importance of relevance and respect for students and, to a lesser extent, teacher professionalism. An emphasis on relevance and respect provides students reasons for staying in school, minimizes the forces that often encourage students to leave, and fosters an environment where their needs for belonging and recognition are met. Professionalism—involving teachers in decision making and providing desirable working conditions—creates a climate that helps teachers treat students with respect.

These two potentially contradictory policy streams—one emphasizing externally imposed standards and the other emphasizing the creation of a productive school community—need to be combined. Schools like Woodson and

Schenley happily suggest that such a fusion is possible. □

1. Details of the rating process are presented in Firestone, Rosenblum, and Webb (1987).

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