

**“You Can Lead a Horse to Water,
But Can You Make the Horse Drink?”**

Are They Learning Anything?

How Many Attended the School?

1996

Dear Mrs. Sun,

There was an activity at my daughter's elementary school that I chose to attend to volunteer. The activity was to engage in writing a short story and also drawing a picture to correlate to the story. I work during the week, normally while the children are in school but I have some flexibility in my schedule to attend activities like these. To my surprise, I was the only parent who attend the activity and there was sufficient notice about the event.

When I entered the classroom, it was an utter "madhouse"! Some children were playing close to the door and others were playing with their friends in the room. Now there were a handful of kids that were actually engaged with the teacher, I'm proud to say my child was one of them. The teacher commented to me saying "Sorry, this is one of those bad days!" She ultimately had to reach out to the front office for assistance in getting the room back in order. The activity didn't last too long due to the lack of volunteers showing up & the constant interruptions.

I don't want to solely place blame on the teacher for the behavior of the children because she really tries to work hard with them. I honestly feel that better corrective measures need to be taken in the homes of some of the children that were disruptive. This incident is not an isolated one. I can tell by some new behaviors that my child has tried to exhibit at home. These kids are only in Kindergarten and the time to work on them now by the teachers but most importantly, us the parents!!

Jermaine

Teacher's Nightmare?

I FIRST admired Nigger in school, when I was new there. He banged the teacher on the nose.

School is a jail for children. One's crime is youth, and the jailers punish one for it. I hated school at first; I missed the street. It made me nervous to sit stiffly in a room while New York blazed with autumn.

I was always in hot water. The fat old maid teacher (weight about 250 pounds), with a snuffle, and eye-glasses, and the waddle of a ruptured person, was my enemy.

She was shocked by the dirty word I, a six-year-old villain, once used. She washed my mouth with yellow lye soap. I submitted. She stood me in the corner for the day to serve as an example of anarchy to a class of fifty scared kids.

Soap eating is nasty. But my parents objected because soap is made of Christian fat, is not kosher. I was being forced into pork-eating, a crime against the Mosaic law. They complained to the Principal.

O irritable, starched old maid teacher, O stupid, proper, unimaginative despot, O cow with no milk or calf or bull, it was torture to you, Ku Kluxer before your time, to teach in a Jewish neighborhood.

I knew no English when handed to you. I was a little savage and lover of the street. I used no toothbrush. I slept in my underwear, I was lousy, maybe. To sit on a bench made me restless, my body hated coffins. But Teacher! O Teacher for little slaves, O ruptured American virgin of fifty-five, you should not have called me "LITTLE KIKE."

Nigger banged you on the nose for that. I should have been as brave. It was Justice.

Michael Gold, Jews Without Money, 1930.

“The Classroom Combat Zone”

“Midway through her first year of teaching in a Spanish Harlem junior high, a young graduate of the Harvard Graduate School of Education wrote Dean Theodore R.Sizer to complain about the inadequacy of her training.

In your attempt to uplift the quality of teaching and materials you have us take courses from assistants and Ph.D. candidates who have had little teaching experience. And although they were extremely bright and charming people, their lack of experience “in the field” was a significant handicap....

How to tell you about JHS 45...?

At 8:40 A.M. I am meant to be standing in the hall outside my classroom, welcoming my children, preventing them from running down the halls, killing each other, passing cigarettes, etc.; however, I can't make it to the hall because I haven't mastered the taking of attendance. Each day I have four separate attendance sheets to fill out (twice, needs to be done after lunch). A crisis and then a cross in blue or black ink. Red pen for mistakes. About eight different kinds of notations for different sorts of lateness.

Postcards home for those who were absent... “T-slip” for probation for those who are absent five days. At the end of each week there's the fifth attendance from, which involves averages....

The whole place is mad and absurd; going to school is going to war. My classes are devoted to trying to get the kids to open their notebooks, stay seated, stop talking, stop fighting....

We have not started to *learn* yet, I am afraid. When I admit this to my colleagues, they retort, “Miss Kovner, you must learn to keep your classroom door closed when you're having trouble.”

My suggestions: please to God, if you are going to send HGSE students into urban schools, prepare them a bit more than I was prepared. The dynamics of the classroom situation are overwhelming; they must be studied and solved before *anything* can be taught and learned. For me the idea of trying to teach any normal academic curriculum is absurd at the moment.... As to teacher training, expose future “slum” teachers to the killing fact that they have a war on their hands.... Whether I'll be able to last out more than a year at [JHS] 45, I don't know”*

As things turned out, the young lady was not able to “last out” even her first year at JHS 45; she left her post at the end of only one semester of teaching – to join the faculty of the Harvard Graduate School Education!

* Quoted in Bernard Bard, “The Classroom Combat Zone,” The New York Post, January 28, 1967

The lessons of an educational Cinderella story

Six years ago, Kansas City's public schools were the educational equivalent of an unwanted stepchild in an old folk tale—abused, neglected and chronically poor. But they have undergone a transformation akin to Cinderella's, brought about by their very own fairy godmother, federal Judge Russell Clark. What has happened since then may be the illuminating educational experiment of our time.

In 1987, the judge stunned legal experts by ordering an increase in local property and income taxes to finance a complete rehabilitation of the schools in Kansas City. He hoped to combat racial segregation by luring back whites, most of whom had long since fled to private or suburban schools.

Stephen Chapman

The ultimate goal, however, was to improve the performance of black students, whose underachievement Clark blamed on racial isolation and miserly funding.

His decision has produced a windfall of \$1.3 billion, or a staggering \$36,000 in extra funds for every pupil in the system. As a federal appeals court noted, "The sheer immensity of the program . . . [is] without parallel in any other school district in the country."

State officials forced to come up with the new funds gripe about "Taj Mahal buildings." Schools that once were open to the elements have every amenity an educator could imagine. Among the additions are a \$250,000 planetarium, 15 science labs, greenhouses, language-immersion programs and a host of magnet schools. The district now boasts high schools specializing in agribusiness, engineering and advanced technology.

Throughout the system, class sizes have dropped dramatically. Central High School, a decrepit facility that was torn down and replaced at a cost of \$32 million, now features a swimming pool, handball courts, courses in Ancient Greek and hundreds of personal computers. Previously all-black, it now has a liberal smattering of white faces.

And what has been the effect of all this on educational achievement? More failure. The students who were supposed to profit from the rebuilding of Kansas City's schools are not doing better. They are doing worse.

As the Economist magazine of Britain notes in its Aug. 28 issue, high school dropout rates in Kansas City have soared since 1987 and now exceed 60 percent—more than double the national rate. Data compiled by University of Missouri education professor John Alspaugh show that black Kansas City grade-school students score lower on reading and math achievement tests today than they did when this gigantic experiment began.

Contrary to what anyone would assume, pupils in ordinary schools outperform those in the expensive, lavishly equipped magnet schools. And the bizarre evidence is that the longer kids stay in magnet schools, the worse they do.

Following the progress of kids through the years is a depressing experience, says Northwestern University law professor Daniel Polsby, who has studied the matter: "The children get further behind every year." Those who think decent school funding would make our educational deserts bloom ought to ask: Where are the flowers in Kansas City?

Skeptics may say it's too early to gauge the value of the effort. That's not what they said at the outset. In his original ruling, Judge Clark cited expert testimony to the effect that with the new money, Kansas City could raise achievement levels in elementary schools to the national average "within four to five years." Instead of heading upward, test scores have gone south.

It is no secret to critics of the existing public school system that money doesn't necessarily translate into good schooling. But never has that belief gotten a more thunderous vindication than in Kansas City. Any fool with little money, old books and rotting buildings can turn out poorly educated kids. It takes the special alchemy of urban public schools to perform that feat with the best facilities money can buy.

Arthur Benson II, the lawyer who filed the lawsuit that prompted this undertaking, once said that the overhaul of the Kansas City schools would be a valuable test of theories: "Conservatives say the '60s proved you can't solve social problems by throwing money at them, and liberals say the '60s proved you can't solve social problems without throwing enough money at them."

The people running Kansas City's public schools have thrown more than enough money at their problems. They have proved only that they know how to buy their students everything but a good education.

Friday, October 18, 1996

Volunteer frustrated by schools' problems



Some 60 years ago, William D. Harris was a student at Nettelhorst School up on the North Side.

For 44 years, he ran his own greeting cards publishing company. And more lately, having retired six years ago, Harris has been doing volunteer service as a tutor at Nettelhorst and at Jenner School in Cabrini-Green.

He has a long and unusual then-and-now perspective on Chicago's troubled public schools.

And I want to share with you a letter Harris wrote to Mayor Daley, a copy of which he sent to me and about which we talked this week.

For a start, Harris wrote, "the accent is being placed on the wrong syllable" in that blaming teachers for the failing schools is "unfair and, more importantly, wrong."

It was "as a concerned citizen," Harris wrote, that he began tutoring kids, in reading and math three semesters ago at Nettelhorst, and he was "expecting" his work "to be rewarding."

Instead, both at Nettelhorst and now at Jenner, his experience has been "frustrating."

And "what a difference!" from when he was in school 60 years ago. Most of the kids at Nettelhorst now "do not come to school with any motivation to learn anything or do well or behave.

"... The poor teachers spend most of their time trying to maintain order. So, how the hell are they going to teach anything?"

"When I first started doing this at Nettelhorst, I sat in on an upper grade classroom and I was shocked at what I was witnessing. So I asked the poor teacher why she couldn't control the class better than that.

■ Schools in Crisis series; Pages 12-13.

"She said, throwing up her hands, 'Look, you don't understand. This is the way it is today in all the big city

schools. It gets worse, too, if you look into schools in the real poor neighborhoods.'

"Well, she was right about that, as I am now volunteering at a Cabrini-Green school where it is just that—worse.

"And I never saw people working as hard as these teachers trying to create order out of chaos and still get some teaching in."

"Today I worked with fifth-graders who could just barely read a little bit. And when it came to math, if they did not have 10 fingers to count on, they would not be able to add or figure anything.

"And do you think the kids who are sent to me for tutoring show any inclination or interest in getting some help to improve their reading or math? The answer is too obvious.

"They fidget, they squirm, they yawn. They poke at each other, they laugh and talk when they should be listening. And the few who can tell time keep looking at the clock. . . .

"Last semester [at Jenner] I was talking to one of the teachers about my frustration. . . . She said to me, 'You know if you work with eight or 10 kids on a particular day and manage to help one of them a little bit, you have to be satisfied with that.'

"Well, I'm sorry. That is not satisfactory to me."

The "crux of the matter," Harris wrote, is that the kids are "a product of their environment." There are exceptions, of course, but most of the kids "are not sent to school with any dedication or even an understanding of the need for a good education."

"My problem," Harris said when we talked this week, is, "I'm trying to teach them something," but "how can you teach if they don't want to learn?"

"I tell them everything you do or want to do in life starts with reading," he said. "They couldn't care less. They're not motivated at all at home. It's too late when they get [to school]. If they don't get the motivation at home, it doesn't mean anything."

Harris summed up his letter by asking: "How are you going to educate people who couldn't care less about getting an education? Huh?"

A Slum School

In considering the relative abilities of whites and Negroes, let us examine the situation in an *all-white* slum in a city of considerable size. Perhaps the greatest handicap to good school work is the high mobility of the population in the neighborhood. It is not uncommon in such a school to have a turnover of the entire enrollment in one school year. A careful study of a group of children in grade 4 of one such school showed that their average achievement level was a full year below their grade placement—a typical situation in any slum area.

What the teachers in this school have to contend with is shown by a report from the principal, who writes:

“When a residential area composed of large, old homes formerly occupied by owners and single family groups changes economically and socially, conditions of general deterioration begin. Absentee owners rent the property by single rooms or small so-called apartments of two or three rooms to large families. . . . Such conditions attract transients (who either cannot or will not qualify for supervised low income housing), the unemployed, the unskilled and unschooled, and the distressed families whose breadwinners have either just been committed to prisons or mental institutions or who have but recently been released from such. The only possession most of these families have is children. . . . In such an environment all forms of evil flourish—the peddling of dope, drunkenness, disease, accidents, truancies, physical, mental and moral handicaps, sex perversions involving children. . . .

“The parents of at least one-third of the children are either in penal institutions, are on probation, or have prison records. At least 100 children are on probation to the Juvenile Court. There has not been a day since I’ve been at the school that there has not been one or more children in detention at the Juvenile Court. . . .

“Unless a school is able to educate its children so they may become competent and responsible citizens its work is a temporary stopgap that relieves immediate suffering only. Although the school is the only organization that has instruction as its primary responsibility, when a noble hearted teacher faces a barefoot, hungry, sick, distressed child, the result is an endless chain of efforts to relieve such a child.

“We realize that little or nothing can be done for or with the parents of the children who face such serious problems in their homes. These problems directly affect the child’s health, attendance, emotional and personal adjustment, his learning and his progress (or lack of it) in every respect. In all probability at least one-half of our children will be school dropouts. In our opinion the children need, desperately, for desirable development, in addition to good schools—good homes, churches and communities.”

I am quoting from an official report which, in acknowledging the generally low achievement of the white children in this school, makes the interesting statement that “There is no reason to believe that these students as a group are inherently or genetically less capable than average students, but apparently because of some types of experiences in their lives they have been unable to develop their intellectual skills.”

James Bryant Conant*, Slums and Suburbs, 1961, 15ff.

(*Conant, President of Harvard University then, involved deeply in Public School education problems during Progressive Education of 1950s)

