

Case for School Change

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The report by Chancellor Harvey B. Scribner's investigators of unrest in the New York City high schools is a depressing document – not because of any specific new revelations but rather because its findings repeat and confirm what critical observers have been saying for years. It is scandalous and discouraging that so many obvious remedies for the deteriorating atmosphere in the schools have been so long ignored.

The heart of the trouble, as set forth in the report, is that the high schools are monstrosously oversized and chronically overcrowded. The myth that bigness in urban high schools is an inevitable concomitant of the need for economy and efficiency has been blindly perpetuated by school planners. The emergency device of running schools on multiple, overlapping sessions has become standard operating procedure. Indeed, this indefensible habit appears to have become so addictive that John Dewey High School, one of the city's most encouraging experiments in innovative secondary education, now is being pressed to adopt it under threat of compulsion.

Well documented by earlier reports, including a major investigation by state education authorities, is the Scribner group's renewed finding that rigidity of curriculum and standardization of requirements are hazards both to pedagogy and discipline. Years ago, under pressure from informed critics, the school administration did commit itself to the comprehensive high school where college preparatory academic work and job-oriented vocational training are offered under the same roof. Yet, in the main, the conservatism of the educational profession has succeeded in blocking anything that challenges the status quo.

Similarly, the continued reluctance to give students a stake in both curricular and disciplinary matters has reinforced the combination of passivity, alienation and truculence that too often turns education into a policing and cooling process. And, contrary to all the rhetoric, parental participation in the children's schooling remains minimal.

Against all these gloomy elements at least three promising factors can be set. First, and most narrowly immediate, is that most principals sense a decline in violence and disruption. Second, Dr. Scribner was able to get the teachers' union, the school supervisors and the police – key factors often at loggerheads – to join in the investigation. Third, and most important, the Chancellor himself is committed to fundamental reforms, even if these clash with professional myths and upset administrative rulebooks.

The case for drastic change has been compellingly restated. The required action clearly involves school planners, architects, the fiscal authorities and social agencies; but it also involves the academic leaders who must rearrange the existing facilities and redeploy staff and resources. Where bigness is frozen into stone structures, schools within schools can be created. If the classroom cannot provide enough stimulus and experience, other institutions – industry, hospitals, museums, universities – can be enlisted. The only fixed requirement now is action, not more debate.