

# A TEACHER'S VIEW

by Patrick Welsh

**O**n the front lawn of Alexandria, Virginia's T.C. Williams High School, where I have been teaching English for the past 20 years, there is a large sign from the U.S. Department of Education proclaiming us "one of the outstanding high schools in America." The sign has been there since 1984, when then-Secretary of Education Terrell Bell drove across the Potomac River to present us with one of the Reagan administration's first Excellence in Education awards.

Nine months earlier, Bell had issued the now famous *A Nation at Risk* report proclaiming that America was in big trouble because of its deteriorating schools. But on this day the Secretary was extolling T.C. Williams as an example to the nation. He praised it as a school that was able to "meet the needs of all its students" in spite of the diversity of its student body. We were one of 88 schools nationwide receiving the first excellence awards. Yet if the list had been cut to a mere 10, Bell assured us, "T.C. Williams would still be there."

"Meeting the needs of all our students" is the espoused goal not only of T.C. Williams but also of most public and private high schools across the country. The concept owes much of its popularity to former Harvard President James B. Conant's 1959 report, *The American High School Today*. Conant extolled the comprehensive high school "whose programs correspond to the educational needs of all youth in the community." Such an institution would have something for everyone. It would "meet

the needs" of the budding young scientist and the promising dramatist. It would have vocational education for this kid and Latin for that one. And students would be grouped by ability, so that each was challenged on a proper level.

Certainly T.C. Williams has a lot of needs to meet. In our hallways the sons and daughters of the prominent and well-to-do brush shoulders with kids on welfare, and handsome young Afghan and Hispanic guys neck with blond-haired redneck girls. We offer hundreds of courses, from Heating and Air Conditioning Repair to Russian III and Organic Chemistry. Our extracurricular activities run the gamut from women's crew and basketball to Frisbee and a ski club. Yet the truth is that T.C. Williams, like most other American high schools, is nowhere near "meeting the educational needs of all youth in the community."

Why did Conant's sensible vision fail to become reality? One answer, I suspect, is that the America Conant wrote about vanished during the years after his report was published. It was swept away by demographic, cultural, economic, and technological changes that Conant did not foresee, and that American high schools and families are only beginning to recognize.

One of the major problems in discussing education reform is that everyone—from parents to politicians—considers himself an expert by virtue of having been to school. But many of the "experts" are caught in a time warp, imagining that schools today are just like schools when they were students, and that what would work in the 1940s or '50s will work today.

Even I who spend so much of my life with students have to remind myself constantly that the public school where I teach is not the small Catholic high school I attended decades ago.

When I came home in the afternoon from Notre Dame High School in Batavia, New York in the late 1950s, I'd practice my jump shot and do my homework. My mother was there and my neighbors kept an eye on me. My TV viewing consisted of the Wednesday night fights and an occasional Sid Caesar show. I didn't face pressure to try drugs or alcohol. But in the ensuing years the world I grew up in disappeared. TV and the electronic media began to rival and then to far exceed the influence of the classroom teacher. In 1960, surveys showed that parents, and teachers were the leading influence on 13- to 19-year-olds. By 1980, teachers had slipped to fourth place, behind peers, parents and media (TV, radio, and records). By then, a seductive, independent youth culture, with its own music, drugs, and sexual mores was challenging the traditional values of school and family. At the same time, as a result of economic pressures and the women's movement, mothers of even young children were being drawn out of the home and into the workplace by the millions. The family structure that I and most of today's education reformers grew up in during the 1940s and '50s was coming undone. In the 1950s, only four percent of all children were born into fatherless homes—two percent of white children and 18 percent of black children. Today, one-quarter of all children are born to single mothers—17 percent of white and 62 percent of black children. Almost 60 percent of all children born in the early 1980s will live with only one parent at some time before reaching the age of 18. These kids are bringing so

much emotional baggage to school that they often seem to need psychologists, social workers, and counselors more than they need teachers.

In some ways, the unchanging routines of high school provide a sense of reassuring continuity. An American high school in the 1990s looks and feels pretty much like it did in the 1950s. The bell still rings every 50 minutes. The senior prom and the fortunes of the football team are still staples of school life. Every September, the new senior class officers promise that "this year is going to be different." And the difference usually comes down to the bigger and better hotel selected for the prom. The motivational posters in the classrooms of earnest young teachers say such things as "Today is the first day of the rest of your life" and "You can make a difference!"—just as they always did.

And yet these familiar images are misleading. In the 1990s, cheerleaders take the pill, the band does drugs, and the classroom has become peripheral in the lives of many of our "students." Nearly one out of two of them lives with only one natural parent; for the blacks among them it's closer to two out of three. T.C. Williams and other schools are doing more parenting on behalf of families than would have been imaginable a few decades ago. "We do a lot of mopping up here," says Jim McClure, T.C.'s director of guidance. "I see too many parents who want a quick fix for their kids. It's the fast-paced society we live in, with both parents often working and coming home exhausted. I can talk to a mother of a troubled kid in the morning and to the father in the afternoon, and you'd have no idea it was the same kid we are discussing. So many parents who are the picture of confidence and success when it comes to their

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LIFE IN HELL

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### SCHOOLISHEZZ

THE CARTOON WITH IDENTIFIABLE PERCEPTUAL COMMUNICATIVE DISORDERS

### LESSON 12: HIGH SCHOOL — THE 2<sup>ND</sup> DEEPEST PIT IN HELL

### 3 USELESS THINGS

STUDY HALL TEXTBOOKS

## WELCOME TO HIGH SCHOOL

FOR YEARS WE'VE BEEN WATCHING YOU, GRADING YOU, TESTING YOU, KEEPING SECRET FILES ON YOU-- AND YOU'LL BE GLAD TO KNOW YOU'RE NORMAL! THERE'S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT.

YOU'RE UNSPECIAL, UNREMARKABLE, AND THOROUGHLY AVERAGE, YOU PROBABLY DON'T EVEN REALIZE IT, BUT WE'VE DEVELOPED A SERIES OF UNDEMANDING CLASSES TAUGHT BY TEACHERS WHO WERE ONCE JUST LIKE YOU.

YOUR JOB IS TO SHOW UP, NOT WRECK ANYTHING, AND STAY JUST THE WAY YOU ARE. AS A REWARD, WE'LL GIVE YOU A DIPLOMA. WE KNOW YOU CAN DO IT.

### TIPS FOR TEENS

WHY NOT GET A JOB AT NIGHT AND LEARN THE WONDERS OF DEEP FRYING, SECRET SAUCE, MINIMUM WAGE, AND SLEEPING IN SCHOOL?

### CONTEMPORARY EXCUSES FOR NOT HAVING DONE YOUR HOMEWORK

THE PRINTER BROKE!

THE FLOPPY DISK WAS DEFECTIVE!

I PUSHED THE WRONG BUTTON AND DELETED EVERYTHING!

### HOW HARD DO YOU WANT TO STUDY?

TYPE OF COURSE	DEGREE OF HAPPINESS	DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY	BEST SUITED FOR KIDS WHO ARE:
HONORS	😊	KINDA EASY	WHIZZY, CRAZY
COLLEGE PREP	😐	FAIRLY EASY	DIZZY, BUSY
GENERAL	😞	REAL EASY	BREEZY, LAZY
BASIC	😡	BEYOND EASY	CHEESY, SLEAZY

### DID YOU KNOW?

SHOPPING MALLS ARE ACTUALLY KIND OF BORING AFTER AWHILE.

### WARNING!

DO NOT TALK TO TEACHERS IN THE SAME TONE OF VOICE THEY USE TALKING TO YOU.

YOU WILL BE SUSPENDED FOR INSOLENCE.

### TIPS FOR TEENS

IF SOMEONE DROPS HIS OR HER STUFF IN THE RUSH BETWEEN CLASSES, BE SURE TO STOMP ON IT. AN ENTIRE YEAR'S WORK CAN BE TRAMPLED, RIPPED, AND DESTROYED IN A MATTER OF SECONDS IF EVERYONE COOPERATES.

### DID YOU KNOW?

The best work is that which is done at the last minute.

### TIPS FOR TEENS

REMEMBER! MOST TEACHERS ARE EAGER TO PLAY THE GAME "I WON'T MESS WITH YOU IF YOU DON'T BUG ME."

THINGS TO WORRY ABOUT IN HIGH SCHOOL	THINGS NOT TO WORRY ABOUT IN HIGH SCHOOL
STATUS SEX CLOTHES GRADES DRINKING CAPACITY KILLING YOURSELF GRADUATION YOUR FACE	SCHOOL SPIRIT

High school, viewed from the bottom up.

jobs are desperate when it comes to their own children."

Today, after-school jobs and weekend parties take precedence over education. In my day the fast girl was the one who put her hand on the back of your neck during slow dances. Kids are more precocious

now. While many middle-class parents like to feel that teen sex is pretty much limited to the low-income minority kids who are having babies in record numbers, the fact is that middle- and upper-income teens are far more sexually active than their parents would care to know. "I could count the

number of virgins in my high school peer group on the fingers of both hands. And most of those were on a rampage to lose their virginity during senior year because they thought that being a virgin in college was unacceptable," says T.C. Williams valedictorian Jim Dawes, now at the University of Pennsylvania. Kyra Cook, a former student of mine now at the College of William and Mary, says that "In eighth grade, if a couple was sleeping together, it was big news. But it's no big deal in high school. If a couple is dating for a few months, everyone just assumes they are having sex. There's no stigma at all to it. Girls no longer try to hide it. In my class the majority of girls were sleeping with guys but only two or three had 'bad reputations' and they slept with everyone."

The Alan Guttmacher Institute reported recently that the proportion of sexually active women ages 15-17 is 18 percent higher than it was in 1982, with most of the increase occurring among white teenagers and those in high-income families. Seventy percent of young people 19 and under are said to be sexually active.

There is the same parental naiveté about teen use of alcohol and other drugs as there is about teen sex. "It's especially hard to convince parents of their kids' alcohol or drug abuse when the kids are academically and socially successful. 'What the hell are you talking about! How could he have a problem?' is the usual response when you confront parents with excessive use, even dependency," says Richard Ryan, who runs nationwide drug education programs based in Boston and Colorado. Jen Cheavens, who just graduated from West Springfield High School in Fairfax County, Virginia, confirms Ryan's view. "As long as you are doing well in school, hanging around the right friends and appearing to have things in control, many parents don't ask questions about what you do on the

weekends," says Cheavens. I've had kids in my honors classes apologize for turning in papers that were rendered incoherent by months of steady abuse of alcohol and other drugs.

All these changes have affected the ability of schools and teachers to do their jobs. Members of our experienced science department attest to a decline in the willingness of the majority of students to do homework on a nightly basis or to put in the consistent effort that science has always required. The science department has been viewed as "unreasonably tough," but science teachers insist that they are really demanding less than they were 15 years ago. "Let's face it, there is not an academic work ethic in this country," says Anthea Maton, a British physics teacher with the National Science Teachers Association who travels around the country training physics teachers. "In America, kids are told that school should be fun. School should be their job. But cars, nice clothes, and sports come first."

**N**o one sees the reluctance of American students to work hard more clearly than the foreign-born kids in our high schools. Hoang-An Nguyen came to this country with other Vietnamese refugees in 1981. He ran circles around his American friends in the classroom—even in English courses—and was a semifinalist in the Westinghouse Science Talent Search. Says Nguyen: "Many American students are lazy and wasteful. They have so many opportunities and just don't seem to care. They say Orientals are smarter but that is not so. We just spend more time working at our studies. I want to pay back my family for all they have done for me." Edgar Campos came from El Salvador five years ago speaking no English. By the time he was in my senior English class he was reading Faulkner and Shakespeare with

more understanding than most of his American classmates. Now an engineering student at Cornell University, Campos says that "many Americans whine and complain about their grades but aren't willing to do the work to get the grades. They are too comfortable with their money and cars. They seem to feel that they are going to get success without work."

If American schools really have deteriorated as much as the "experts" say they have, how can kids like Campos and Nguyen come to them knowing hardly any English and flourish academically? The fact is the system works for kids who come from families with a strong work ethic.

Lara Miles, now a sophomore at the University of Virginia, remembers many kids just "blowing off high school. They think that because their parents have it made that their lives are set for them."

Some of my students seem to be looking for the same stimulation and entertainment in class that they find in television. As one of them remarked, "Young people have a TV attitude toward school, like it is there to give you a good program and all you have to do is watch, complain, and turn the channel now and then." Kids talk in class, another girl explained to me, the way they talk at home during a TV commercial, ignoring the teacher as if he or she had no more feelings than a Sony Trinitron.

As an English teacher it is particularly disturbing to see fewer and fewer of even the brightest students reading, except when a grade is involved. The new term for these nonreaders is "aliterate." There was a time when many young people would curl up with a good book when they were bored. Today, they are more likely to rent a movie at a video store, or turn on their Nintendo or Sega home video games, or simply pick up the remote control of their TV and "slum around" its dozens of cable channels until they find something that distracts

them. This past spring I had kids sneak their pocket-sized Nintendo video games into class; others were wired with special Walkmans that are very hard to detect. Several girls told me that before they leave for school in the morning they set their VCRs to record the soaps from 12:30 to 4:00. Said one: "When I get home from my after-school job around five, I go to my room and start watching my regular programs like 'Laverne and Shirley.' I'll grab a quick dinner and then pick up my night shows like 'Cosby' until about 9:30. Then comes the best part. I turn on the VCR and get caught up in my soaps. At about midnight I fall asleep." Stories like that, chilling though they are to a teacher, are not uncommon, especially with low-income kids who are already behind in their skills.

At the same time that television, the youth culture, and other social and economic forces were changing the world of young people, schools were experiencing the impact of two momentous occurrences in American society. One was the largest influx of immigrants since the 19th century; the other was school desegregation. When Conant wrote his report, the student bodies of most American high schools were fairly homogeneous. Nowadays, as a result of busing, the breakdown of old discriminatory housing patterns, and liberal immigration policies, high schools made up predominantly of a single racial or ethnic group are becoming the exception. T.C. Williams is typical of thousands of American high schools struggling to educate increasingly diverse student bodies. At present our student body is 42 percent black, 37 percent white, and 21 percent foreign-born. When students pour off the buses in the morning we look like an ideal of integration. But once the bells ring, kids go off to classes that often look as if they were selected on the basis of race and so-

cial status. Honors and advanced placement courses are full of white middle-class kids, with a sprinkling of blacks and Orientals. Many call these classes our private-school-within-a-public-school. They are supposed to be for the brightest and most motivated students, and certainly those types are there. But those classes also have a good number of lazy, burned-out kids whose affluent parents insisted they be placed in honors courses. On the other end, remedial and vocational courses are mostly filled with low-income blacks and recently arrived foreign students.

Black activists in the community see these programs as a racist remnant of segregation. Many whites say that they are only an attempt save the schools from lowering academic standards and facing the "white flight" that would inevitably follow. Presented with the conflicting priorities of retaining white middle-class loyalties while desegregating, schools evolved a system of sorting in which the bright were separated from the average and the average from the slow early in their education.

What we see in my school—and I believe in most schools—is a rigid system of class stratification. In previous generations, schools were the great equalizers, as education helped the poor rise in social and economic standing. This was especially true of the children of immigrants in the early part of the century. My grandfather came here as a 16-year-old, illiterate Irish farm worker. His lack of education and money did not prevent his son, my father, from graduating from Georgetown Medical School. Today, if a child is born into the kind of poverty my dad was, chances are far slimmer that our schools will help him rise out of it. A number of the kids in our school who grew up in the dire poverty of the public housing projects have ended up selling drugs; some have lost their lives in the process. Most of these young men are not drug users; they

are entrepreneurs who saw selling drugs as a way out of the poverty they knew all their lives. Twelve years of education—including vocational courses in our state-of-the-art career wing—failed to give them the skills or the hope they needed to change their lives.

The story of several 17-year-olds I talked to while they were being held in the Alexandria jail as adults sounded all too familiar. "For me it was just being out there, the fame and the glory. I still had a vision of going legitimate and setting myself up in a career, but when you are in the game for a while, the money becomes an addiction and you can't give it up. You make \$150 a week at Roy Rogers, but \$150 a minute on the street," said one young man who professed to making several thousand dollars a week in the drug trade.

"When you see a friend grow—bust out and buy a new car—you just want to do it. I always had this feeling of missing something; I got desperate to have cars, clothes, and guns," said another who was recently sentenced to 20 years.

Far sadder than the small group of young men who are selling drugs are the many honest kids from poor homes whom the schools have not reached. By the time many of these kids get to high school they are woefully behind their middle-class peers in reading and math skills. "Nobody wants to say it, but everyone knows that these kids are just marking time here, hanging around till they get their meaningless diploma," says Otha Myers, a black counselor who has worked in the Alexandria and Fairfax County schools.

Vocational-education instructors themselves are not all that happy with the situation. They complain that many of their students don't have the basic skills for success in voc. ed. any more than in English or math. "We've become a dumping ground," says one voc. ed. teacher. "Students with low verbal and math ability simply cannot

grasp the concepts or master the skills necessary for this type of work," says Charlie Adams, who teaches auto mechanics. Like other teachers, those in voc. ed. have trouble reaching and motivating kids who lack basic skills and a desire to learn.

But educators don't like to talk much about the kids in voc. ed. Our failure with so many of them makes us feel guilty, and they are certainly not the kind of public relations material that is going to help us in our competition with private schools. We'd rather talk about the kids in our honors and advanced placement courses. On the surface, it looks like we are meeting the needs of these kids. Every year we brandish our National Merit Scholarships, Ivy League acceptances, and science prizes to convince anxious middle-class parents that their children can get as good an education at the local public high school as at the expensive, mostly white, private schools. The word in the community is that T.C. Williams is an excellent place for the bright, motivated student. Few private schools can match our well-equipped science laboratories, our array of college-level advanced placement courses, or our extensive sports and extracurricular programs. This past year when six of our seniors got into Princeton and large numbers were accepted at other highly selective colleges and universities, there was a lot of dismay among local parents who had chosen to send their kids to expensive private schools but didn't see the same results.

Still, even among the brightest and most accomplished students, there is a lot to be desired. In the last 10 years there has been an ever growing hysteria among these kids and their parents about grades and

Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. It's as if high school has become nothing more than an arena in which to build résumés for the next step—college. And not just any college but the most prestigious. Canon Charles Martin, former headmaster of the prestigious St. Alban's School in Washington, D.C., used to gather parents in the school chapel to convince them that their sons' success and happiness in life did not hinge on acceptance to one of New England's ivied nirvanas. "We are not preparing your boys for the kingdom of Harvard or the kingdom of Yale, but for the kingdom of God," Martin would say, often to no avail. He recalls that there wasn't much need for his speech until recent decades.

"We have kids and parents frantic about



*The ideal student of yore seems more anachronistic with every passing year. He knew nothing (or little) of television, MTV, video games, alcohol, drugs, or sex.*

college," says John Keating, director of guidance at prestigious Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Maryland, another suburb of Washington. "Many parents have more riding on the letter of acceptance than the child has. It's gotten to be some kind of merit badge or medal—a test of their genes or the job they have done as parents."

"Some of the independent schools are cauldrons," says Fred Wetzel of the New England office of the College Board. They are not healthy places to work or study. They have the most volatile elements: affluent kids of widely varying ability and pushy parents who have paid all this money so their kids are entitled to get into the best colleges," says Wetzel.

Kids seem so worried about building résumés for college that they have little time to think about what they want to do with their lives once college is over. "In high school, we were told that college was the next step, the place where we would get focused and our careers would find us," says University of Virginia junior Theresa Kennedy. "Then when you don't find out in college you go on to grad school and spend another couple years to find out what you are supposed to be doing. There are a lot of people just walking around the campus aimlessly. It's hard not having any finish line, any goal to work for. In high school you worked for grades to get into college. In college, if you don't have anything planned out there is no motivating force," says Kennedy.

"Not too many college students are in a rush to get into the working world," says Brown University junior Jennifer Seltz. "College is this cushy life where you go to class a few hours a day and then spend the rest of the time hanging out with your friends. It's this luxurious period that allows you to be completely self-centered. All you have to worry about is your next paper

or your next little activist stance. There are awareness weeks for everything from Body Image to Classism," says Seltz, who during one semester last year had a total of 10 hours and 40 minutes of class time per week. On Monday her first and only class went from 11:00 a.m. to noon. Her only class on Thursdays was from 1:00 to 2:20 p.m. "If you put all the class time and study time together," she says, "you'd barely come up with a 40-hour week—except for those in engineering or science."

I don't want to paint too bleak a picture of today's high schools. Yes, a lot of our better students are more into résumé-building than learning for learning's sake. But many of them are also taking more challenging courses than their successful parents ever dreamed of taking in high school—courses like Russian, physics with calculus, and organic chemistry. When we look at the plight of many of our low-income minority kids, we must remember that many of them are the first in their family to graduate high school, and others are the first to go on to college. The effects of centuries of poverty and discrimination cannot be eradicated in a few decades.

But before we start talking about reforming schools, we would do well to remember what sociologist Christopher Jencks said 18 years ago in his controversial book *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America*. Jencks came to the surprising (and still much disputed) conclusion that schools actually have rather little impact on the IQ or the later occupational status, job satisfaction, or economic position of their students. If all high schools were equally effective, Jencks concluded, the academic inequalities among 12th graders would not change much, and disparities in their subsequent attainment would change less than one percent. Family background, condi-



tions in the home, the neighborhood, genetic attributes, and other factors all seemed to Jencks to be more important in determining what happened to individuals in life than schooling.

Jencks's conclusions outraged many, but like it or not, his theories seem to be borne out by American education. Most schools are no better or worse in terms of academic results than the students they serve. Year after year, high schools like New Trier in Winnetka, Illinois, Stuyvesant in New York City, and Walt Whitman in Bethesda turn out a large number of National Merit Scholars and garner many Ivy League acceptances. Everybody talks about how good these schools are. But, of course, what is really perceived as good about them has more to do with the abilities of their students, children, for the most part, of intelligent, highly educated parents. Three years ago my own school had the highest number of National Merit Scholars of any high school, public or private, in the state of Virginia. And we got all the publicity we could out of those students. But graduating with them that year also were a few hundred kids—mostly black and poor, and many of them already parents themselves—who read several years below grade level and whom 12 years of schooling had barely reached.

My own school tried almost every "reform" measure that came along in the 1980s: peer coaching, teacher empowerment, strategic planning, curriculum mapping, and minority achievement among them. Like those on the national level, none of the reforms at my school have had a real effect on student performance. The kids who do well, whether they be rich or poor, have one thing in common: parents or some other adult in their lives who have put a premium on education and have pushed them.

I am not saying that everything depends

on the home environment and that we should forget about reforming schools. But some of the major reforms being proposed seem to me terribly misguided. Take parental choice, a favorite of U.S. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander. Proponents of choice seem to be forgetting that the biggest problems in our schools are those kids who have no advocates at home, whose parents do not care or are not tuned into how schools work. As I see it, choice will mean that parents in the know will move their kids into what they see as the better schools, while the kids whose parents are not active will be left behind in schools that—bereft of the kind of parents that demand quality—will deteriorate.

And as Philip Schlechty, president of the Center for Leadership in School Reform points out, "Anyone who believes that some parents will not exercise choice on grounds other than those that have to do with high quality democratic education misunderstands why the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was necessary in the first place. Anyone who believes that academic quality is the basis of choice in all or nearly all instances does not understand the power of basketball and football in the life of schools and communities."

The fact is that we already have choice at work within most schools. Aggressive parents in the know see to it that their kids get the best teachers and the most stimulating courses—gifted and talented, advanced placement, or whatever the label. Administrators then fill the classes of the incompetent or marginal teachers they are afraid to get rid of with kids who have the least vocal parents, usually the children of the poor.

Of course some reforms can make some difference. One that has been tried but not tried enough is Headstart. Children living in poverty with single mothers come into

school so far behind their middle-class peers that most of them never catch up. Despite research showing that Headstart can make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged children, only 20 percent of those eligible nationwide are actually enrolled in programs. In the city of Alexandria, there are enough children for 12 centers, but only two centers are in operation. Ideally, we would be able to stop the soaring rate of out-of-wedlock births among impoverished teenage girls. But until we do, programs like Headstart must intervene to assure that the children born to such young women get the preparation for school that most middle-class kids come by naturally.

In the schools, cooperative learning, where students work in groups of four or five, not only stimulates kids to take ownership of their learning but helps people of various backgrounds get used to the kind of group problem-solving that is so important in the real world. School-based management can allow talented teachers and principals to address the unique needs of their own school without having to worry about officious central-office bureaucrats. Peer coaching can break up the deadly isolation in which most teachers work and allow them to share ideas and strategies for reaching kids. And the 535 new experimental schools that President Bush has proposed to create during the next five years as part of his America 2000 education strategy will be a giant step toward reinventing a school system that hasn't really changed that much since the turn of the century.

But even the most enlightened reforms will not make much of a difference until American education deals with the basic philosophical bind in which it is trapped—namely, how do we insist that everyone is entitled to a public education and still uphold the moral and academic standards that are essential if schools are going to work? The reformers talk a great deal about

standards, but most high schools and colleges back off when it comes to the crunch. We are obsessed about the drop-out rate in our high schools but refuse to admit, in spite of mounting evidence everywhere, that the kick-out rate must go up if our schools are going to be serious institutions rather than “the place I go to be with my friends,” as so many kids now see them.

In my own school, we have had “students” arrested on drug and weapons charges at night only to be allowed back in school the next morning. One fellow, an All-Metropolitan football star, made headlines for five arrests in the course of four months. He became so infamous that the Washington magazine *Regardie's* sponsored a contest awarding a dinner for two to the person who could correctly predict the date of his next encounter with the police. After each arrest—several of them drug related—he was back at school, a hero to many of his peers.

But the real criminals aren't as big a problem as the just plain disruptive kids, usually from totally dysfunctional families. These kids often make teaching impossible. They poison the atmosphere and frustrate their classmates and teachers. Principals and other administrators walk the halls with walkie-talkies, acting more like cops or wardens than educators. It's time to let high schools be for learning, and let some other public institution be responsible for warehousing chronically disruptive kids.

There must not only be higher standards of conduct—off and on the high school campus—but higher academic standards. Yet high schools alone cannot accomplish this. Columnist Robert Samuelson, writing in the *Washington Post* last year, put the problem very clearly. “College leaders see themselves as the victims of poor high schools. This rationalization is at least half backward,” wrote Samuelson. “Lax high school and college academic

standards feed on each other. In our society, the badge of successfully completing high school is not just a degree but the ability to go to college—and almost anyone can go to college.”

In the last 10 years I have been amazed to see the kinds of students that colleges have been accepting. Affluent white kids who have been kicked out of several private schools before landing in my school, who barely have a C average, and who have been addicted to alcohol and other drugs have been getting into what I once thought were respectable schools. Minority kids who are barely literate have been waltzing into “higher” education. And then there are the just plain lazy kids who have drifted through high school. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that if you are medically alive and your parents write a check, you can get into college today. And the point is the kids know it. They see their do-nothing older buddies getting in and they realize that they don’t have to work. University of Chicago freshman Sarah Drucker put it this way: “There might be better ways to teach, but that is not the real problem. I’ve had so many good teachers. I hear kids saying, ‘All my teachers suck—that’s why I’m not getting A’s.’ They are just making excuses for not working. It’s our culture—the American way—not to push yourself if it is not going to have some immediate reward. Most kids don’t care if they learn as long as they get the A’s and get into name schools.”

“Adolescents are like adults,” writes Al-

bert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers. “They do as much as they have to in order to get what they want. The young people who want to go to elite schools must meet high standards, and they work hard. But the rest of high school students know they can get into some college no matter how poorly they do.”

Because so many colleges today are concerned with survival, they “subtly lower academic standards to ensure the flow of students,” continues Robert Samuelson. He suggests that “states could shut down 10 to 20 percent of their colleges and universities, so schools wouldn’t have to continually scrounge for students. States could also sharply raise their tuition and couple the increases with big boosts in scholarships. But to keep scholarships, students would have to keep a C average.”

Samuelson’s ideas aren’t going to make college bureaucrats happy. But he is right on the mark when he says that these measures “would instantly improve high schools.” Instead of adopting such procedures, however, “we prefer to maintain poor schools—high schools and colleges—that everyone can attend, rather than have good schools that might benefit most students. We prefer to complain about ‘underinvestment’ in education rather than face the harder question of why our massive investment in education produces such poor results . . . . No matter how worthy, ‘reforms’ can’t succeed unless students work harder.”

And making students work harder won’t cost any money!

