

Michigan's Uneasy Schools Grope for Understanding

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know when they are on solid ground.

● They find counseling and guidance services lacking or inadequate, directing them in to general and vocational studies rather than college preparatory courses and discouraging them from normal social and professional aspirations.

● They feel the quality and direction of much of their instruction are impractical and not addressed to their experience and needs.

● They are supervised by administrators who respond to their requests only as much as necessary to avoid trouble—enough response to keep the school quiet, but not so much that the white majority population of their town becomes irate.

Certainly not all those charges apply to every school which has felt disruption, but there is hardly an honest school system in Michigan that won't confess to at least one or two of the points.

RITA SCOTT, head of the MCRC educational division, wades knee-deep into most of the state's serious school race controversies. After probably more exposure to race problems in the schools than anyone else in Michigan, she looks at that list and sighs: "So many of these allegations are legitimate."

And school administrators admit she is right.

In Mount Clemens, where administrators acceded to a number of student demands after a walkout last year, high school principal Harold E. Jones says: "I believe perhaps, that many times the students perceive a discrimination that isn't really there."

"But that isn't the point. The point is that if they perceive it, or think they perceive it, then to them it is there." Incidents involving discrimination have risen out of student busing in Grand Rapids, "outside agitation" by a Central High graduate in Kalamazoo, teacher attitudes in Benton Harbor, and as many varied problems as there have been schools in trouble.

IN KALAMAZOO, Central High School teachers spent a week out of their classes, which were closed because of student protest and violence. When they came back, the teachers proposed a system which would allow students to appeal the teachers' own disciplinary decisions.

To everyone but students and teachers, that might seem a small thing. But those educators are volunteering away one of the prime levers teachers have most valued—the ability to keep order without question.

This year, maybe for the first time, Benton Harbor High's principal, Lionel Stacy, doesn't sound so strange when he says: "I can't see why, just because we're adults, we shouldn't be chastised. Ten or 15 years ago there was no question that whatever a teacher said was right. Now we are all being questioned."

In the weeks following their late-September shutdown, Kalamazoo teachers are reflecting the kind of attitude Mount Clemens Principal Jones describes when he says:

"It's no use feeling sorry for yourself just because you've always done a good job and suddenly someone comes along and says it's still not enough. You should just work harder and try to achieve whatever is enough."

JONES SAYS IT very simply. But one of the biggest barriers to teachers and officials caught in high school race turmoil has been learning that lesson—that the issues students are picking, fighting and walking-out over are no less important just because they seem new.

The fighting isn't new. Teenagers, whether they are Irish, Italian, Polish, German or Negro, have been taking out their frustrations and energy on people they could reach—each other—for decades.

Only the rhetoric is exclusively of this generation. And it is aimed not at fellow students so much as at the faculty and administration of schools which black students consider biased.

Benton Harbor's Principal Stacy says: "We still have problems with a few of our staff members. They are mostly older staff people who just haven't made the change and don't understand these kids. We have more problems by far with adults than students, inside and outside school."

RAY BOOZER, assistant superintendent of the Grand Rapids school system, refers to troubles at previously all-white Union High, where Negro students have been bussed for the first time this year, when he says:

"We have been accused of requiring a dual standard of conduct for whites and Negroes. Maybe we have treated some of these young people differently, as anyone would treat anybody differently in a situation for the first time."

"If we've held a double standard—and I don't agree with that—it's because we don't yet understand."

says: "The teacher is in a position that when dissatisfaction is shown by a student, there is a danger that dissatisfaction will become personalized. Many of the things kids do may be taken personally when they are not meant personally."

What this means in a racial context transcending the schools is that race problems in the high schools are not simply mirrors of the turbulence of society at large. They are magnifications of it.

JUST AS BLACK citizens are beginning to demand a new kind of responsiveness from their democratic institutions—asking emotional and ambitious demands on the schools.

But by time-honored design, schools are perhaps the least "democratic" social institutions in America. Sparing the rod has always been anathema to school law and order, without which, in traditional terms, there can be no continuity to education.

Discipline and social conformity—not student rights—have in past years been the keystones of public education.

As a result, public high schools have perhaps been the most demanding of social institutions—asking emotional and ebullient young people to cooperatively coexist for hours every day, while home and society shudder over questions of race and right.

THE STRAIN is substantial. As one southeastern Michigan school administrator says: "You can't have youngsters whose parents talk about the 'goddam niggers' and the 'white racists' and not expect some of this to rub off."

Some administrators of race-troubled schools are inclined to consider themselves victims of social circumstance. Says one principal: "For the most part, I don't think it has to do with the school as such. It's just people placed in close proximity with other people, when they haven't had to relate with anyone before, except at home. Put all the elements together and light a match and it would be unusual if you didn't get a fire."

Mrs. Scott of the MCRC says: "We acknowledge the problems. But what can the school do in those five hours to help their kids break out of their environment? The school's scapegoat is the quality of education or the low level of expectation of the teachers. It's the mothers and fathers and the fifth and the environment of the students."

"That's not an acceptable answer to any reasonable Negro I know of."

Mrs. Scott and the MCRC are asking the schools to assume a greater social role relevant to today. Slowly and painfully, administrators are beginning to try, despite conservative school boards, despite alienated taxpayers, despite recalcitrant parents, despite old-line teachers, despite militant, hurry-up black parents and organizations and to a degree, despite themselves.

BLACK HISTORY courses are becoming more common in high schools and new looks are being taken at social science courses, with an eye toward making them more meaningful to both black and white students.

There are more black cheerleaders than there used to be and more inter-racial student liaison committees talking to officials and faculty. There are more teachers being forced, sometimes as an unofficial condition of employment, to loosen up in their dealings with students and try to understand the new breed of young people, black and white.

There are more black administrators being named, and numerous administrators leaving or being moved out when they can't bear up to the changes in their approaches that are expected. Flint lost two principals last year and other high level administrative ousters or resignations have occurred in Grand Rapids, Benton Harbor and elsewhere.

The dismissals and resignations that occur in the nation's school systems in the face of racial disruption can, in a general way, be linked to one of two causes:

● Either an administrator or teacher is being made a scapegoat for a set of conditions he wasn't totally responsible for—not an uncommon occurrence.

● Or he was simply unable to make adjustments necessary to deal with students in ways constructive for all of them.

DETROIT DEPUTY school superintendent Arthur Johnson says the difficulties school people are encountering in adapting to the new set of demands facing them "are related to a rather fundamental issue that emerges between the schools and the black community."

"The issue is whether or not the life experience of the black ghetto youngster and his parents and of the black ghetto as a whole can be treated and respected in the schools as a valid basis for successful and appropriate



Mt. Clemens students making demands

teaching and learning," says Johnson.

"I hold that this experience is not only valid, but in any way separate the schools from this experience, and therefore separate the students from their life experience, is to destroy the only bridges for a student's successful movement from one learning experience to the next."

"If these bridges are destroyed or weakened, we threaten the very purpose of the school itself as a community institution."

Hence the sudden attention to black history and culture in the high school curriculum, the "sensitivity training" which teachers in integrated schools are undergoing to become more aware of the needs of their black students and a number of other approaches toward educating educators about their students.

They haven't all learned their lessons yet.

WHEN BENTON HARBOR school officials met some of the demands of students after a walkout last spring the Benton Harbor High faculty walked out. The students didn't miss the rather obvious implications of the teaching staff's action.

In another town, a Negro active in civil rights and school affairs was telephoned by a white teacher from his daughter's school who didn't know exactly who she was talking to.

Says the father: "I got this call, and the teacher said: 'Do you know your daughter was seen talking several times to (a white boy in the school?)' "I said: 'I know she is. He's been to our house. She helps him with his algebra.'"

Because of the volatility of the race question and the vast shadings of opinion among both black and white activists, a school system trying to do

all the right things can sometimes find itself irritating most of its community, at least temporarily.

GRAND RAPIDS is a case in point.

Worried about the number of whites leaving certain areas of the city and the social needs of the schools, administrators partially abandoned their neighborhood school policy this fall to break up the concentration of black students at Grand Rapids South High, 73 percent black last year.

South High was closed and its students were bussed to three other high schools—Central, Creston and Union—which had few black students previously.

Administrators expected difficulties, but as assistant superintendent Boozer says: "We didn't think in the United States of America in 1968 we could allow whites to run, nor could we allow all black schools or totally white schools in our community."

But many white parents in the formerly all-white Union district were enraged and certain South High students and Negro activists didn't like the plan either, claiming South High students were being uprooted from school and community. A week after Union High opened, there was fighting in the halls, growing from a chance argument between a white youth and a Negro. The two patched up their differences, but the violence continued. Finally the black students were bussed back home.

SEEKING COMMUNITY stability, better social education for its students and the desegregation called for by courts and a local citizens committee, the Grand Rapids' school system encountered strong opposition and head-line-making disruption.

Central has been overcrowded for some time and is especially tense now.

But both parents and school people are responding.

A school spokesman says: "The teachers are beginning to say they don't know all the answers any more. We're still going to have trouble, but we are learning."

KALAMAZOO administrators are almost as pleased about new, mostly constructive interest that parents' organizations are taking in Central's problems. As one says: "I don't think we can depend on today's youth to change if they're going to be continually hammered at by adults. We have to get to the adults."

The adults in Kalamazoo, in and out of school, are not delighted with Sutton's influence on the students. But, as has been the case in many troubled schools and cities, it has taken someone like Sutton to create a situation seemingly serious enough to stir response.

What has happened in Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo this fall and in Flint, Benton Harbor, Jackson, Battle Creek, Oak Park, Dearborn Heights, Mount Clemens and many other Michigan cities earlier this year is not unusual in the nation today.

And it isn't over. For the two conditions which agencies like MCRC have found in all the troubled school districts are conditions which still prevail in many, if not most of those districts.

THE FIRST is a school or teacher discipline policy which is either harder on black students than whites or unpredictable. Either way, it makes students hostile toward the authorities.

Benton Harbor High's Stacey says: "I think students are hungry to find guidelines. These kids are trying to find rules and answers and we as adults haven't provided them."

The second condition is a policy of segregation in elementary schools which makes students hostile toward each other.

John Mack of the Flint Urban League says: "Integra-

tion at the elementary level is an area of great concern. You can't expect black and white kids to come together in high school and compete, because there is a difference in the quality of their elementary educations."

Mrs. Scott of MCRC says: "We desegregate backwards. We don't start in pre-school, we start in high school. The sooner anyone is in contact with someone, the more potential there is for a plus relationship."

There is not a city in Michigan which does not largely segregate its elementary school students by neighborhood, by district, and hence by race.

BECAUSE OF the dissatisfaction black parents feel toward the quality of administration of the schools, some activist Detroit black people are working not toward school integration but community school control; typical of other movements afoot in America's larger urban ghettos.

Their response to integrationists: The Supreme Court may have been right when it said there was no such thing as separate, equal education, but integration isn't working and we can make separate education better than it is now.

Educators for the most part disagree, and so do many civil rights activists. But they can't argue away the dissatisfaction that moves people to talk seriously about trying to gain control of the schools.

Changes are coming. The Civil Rights Commission has won a case in one outstate district, gaining a commitment from the district to develop clear and equitable discipline policies.

Students have won concessions in some places, parents in others, private organizations in still others.

But as MCRC field man Ray Pallas says: "A teacher can use a word like 'boy' to a Negro student the first day of school because she didn't know his name and blow the whole first semester."

The problem is that specific and that demanding.

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