

# CLASSROOMS AT THE CROSSROADS

*The Washington Post*  
EDUCATION COMPANION

THE WASHINGTON POST  
WRITERS GROUP  
LEONARD KAPLAN



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# *Classrooms at the Crossroads*

The Washington Post  
Education Companion

*The Washington Post Writers Group*

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# Introduction

Everyone at one time or another has attended school. In our society this gives every taxpayer, or non-taxpayer for that matter, the opportunity to criticize, discuss, or offer an opinion on what's right and what's wrong with education in the United States. We may have some shortages in various places in our economy, but we have no shortages of solutions to the educational issues in this country. Politicians, especially during election years, have education on their agenda. Theologians, particularly in the last few years, have raised issues about the organization and substance of our schools. Parents have always had comments. Business and industry have put forth ideas on what type of educational system we need to compete in a global economy. The media, who claim not to influence policy but rather report news, offer insight into the business of education. On occasion, we even hear about educational policy from leaders in education who have not always been quick to be proactive but rather reactive.

Some viewers of education have criticized the seeming lack of commitment to the teaching of math, science, or geography. We hear about students who cannot find Chicago on a map or other students who have a hard time delivering acceptable scores on some standardized achievement test. Some criticism may be more than justified. However, it is too simplistic to point a finger of blame without examining other causes that may impact on these so-called problems. Anyone who has been around schools for any period of time recognizes that children ill-fed, abused, seemingly uncared for or unloved, raised in an atmosphere of violence, substance abuse and so many of the other cancers of society, just cannot give the type of attention required to serious learning. If the "Leave It To Beaver" family ever existed, it currently is in very, very small numbers today.

In an effort to heighten awareness of educational issues, articles that have appeared in the *Washington Post* over the last five years have been drawn together for this reader. These syndicated articles were written in an effort to draw attention to issues that affect how decisions are made regarding the future of our children. Those who wish to

become teachers will find these articles of interest because they attempt to provide the novice with a view of education they currently may not possess.

Those who are experienced teachers will find these articles of interest because they too may need to better understand what affects learners outside the classroom.

This book should be of interest to the school administrator who would like to branch out from the role of instructional manager to instructional leader. Principals, superintendents, and others who attempt to provide leadership in schools may best facilitate their instructional staff by better recognizing those impediments that keep teachers from doing their jobs.

The teaching profession continues to receive major criticisms from all sectors of society, much of it justified. However, it must be said that there are some wonderful examples of teaching going on in this country, much of it in spite of the obstacles and unnecessary bureaucracy. This end of the educational spectrum rarely gets its due.

It is anticipated that parents, communities, leaders in business and industry, members of the educational societies (public, private and parochial), as well as members in our government, will find value in many of these articles. By raising awareness and initiating dialogue, possibly better understanding of the business of educating our children will take place. The incompatibility or lack of agreement of values that exists between many of these agencies creates an impediment to education. Unfortunately, many of the disagreements that exist on educational issues have little to do with students and more to do with power and politics. Some good, honest dialogue between and among "caring" individuals may help ease some of the tensions that exist.

This book is not a novel. The reader will not necessarily start at the beginning and finish at the end. As an instructor of both preservice and inservice teachers and administrators, it is my intent to select various articles to be read with the idea that they will stimulate conversation in my classes. This book might also be used in the same fashion at faculty meetings, PTA discussions, or any other forum where it is appropriate to discuss specific issues pertaining to education. Hopefully, books such as this will provide the stimulus for better understanding. Some of the articles are purely informational. Others are reported with bias. All will inform.

L. K.

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# *At Risk Schools* 1

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## *When Cultures Clash* *Probing the Causes of School Violence*

JUDITH LYNNE HANNA

Though most American schools are peaceful enough, many schools continue to experience troubling incidents of racial and class hostility. At worst such tension, inter- but also intraracial, has exploded into violence. At the very least it can have a crippling effect on academic achievement.

What are the sources of this problem and what can be done about it?

Studies since the 1970s show that conflicts among youngsters, regardless of grade level, are about seven things: styles of expression; ways of making friends and attitudes toward aggression; game rules; responses to learning about black history; perceptions of teacher fairness; reactions to formal schooling; and classroom work patterns.

I first learned about the realities governing many American children's experience of school during a study of Pacesetter, a desegregated magnet elementary school located in a black, mostly low-income neighborhood in Dallas. Whites, mostly middle-income and from families supportive of integration, volunteered to be bused to the school, which had about 700 students. What children in grades 2, 4 and 6 told me about their experiences was generally confirmed by my systematic observations over the 1977-78 school year. I sat in on classes and observed children at play, in the halls, at lunch and on field trips. I also interviewed adults in the school and the community. Additional research I have done in the past decade indicates strongly that my findings at Pacesetter reflected then, and still reflect, the situation in many of the nation's 75,000 public schools.

Much of what took place at Pacesetter involved conflict between low-income blacks and middle-class blacks and whites. The racial element is troublesome for many, because there has been a taboo against

discussing aggressive and anti-school behavior found disproportionately among low-income blacks. But diverting focus from today's problems by charging "blaming the victim" or censoring information does nothing to promote change.

I want to stress that aspects of social class, culture and race often overlap in schools with diverse populations. Other studies—in Appalachia, Boston and in some English cities—have shown that the attitudes of many poor whites are similar to those of many poor blacks. Conversely middle-class blacks and whites often have much in common.

This complicates the first source of conflict among children—the clash between different styles of expression. Middle-class children, both black and white, tend to be uncomfortable with the more emotional or excitable styles of many low-income children, most of whom were black at Pacesetter. Such children speak too aggressively, move too close and touch too soon. The reserved children may in turn annoy others by their supposed passivity and unresponsiveness.

How youngsters make friends is a second form of discord. Middle-class children generally initiate friendships with talk and sharing. Although they may fight, make up, then resume the friendship, aggression is not the norm.

In contrast, both black and white students said (and I observed) that blacks fight more than whites. Some low-income youngsters learn to fight first to establish peer ranking and then to become friends. Often left alone to fend for themselves, these youngsters contend that their parents encourage aggression: "My momma let me fight when people mess with me," a black second-grader explained.

Different game rules among groups are a third source of contention at school. Youngsters show group identity through the rules they accept. Schools, in middle-class tradition, usually follow standard game rules; however, children from some low-income neighborhoods do not.

A black educator and former president of the Pacesetter PTA told me that her 6-year-old child (who had been playing with middle-class whites and blacks) said, "Mommy, I don't want to play with blacks. They don't play nice." At age 12, the same black child asked his mother, "Why am I not supposed to like whites?" During free play, white children were usually excluded from black-organized games; if they tried to join, no one would throw the ball to them.

Responses to learning about the plight of blacks is a fourth arena of tension. A black child would tell a white one, "I'll make you my slave," or push a record choice: "You in soul country now." When I asked what caused fights, a white youngster replied, "It's because, like, they blame

it on you, sayin' it's your fault that they were slaves. And it's not my fault, I didn't do it."

When Pacesetter school counselors queried children, both blacks and whites said the school accorded different, unfair treatment to their own race, a fifth point of friction. Teachers' efforts to give special help to low-income blacks, who were as a group two or more grade levels academically behind middle-class whites, led whites to feel that teachers favored blacks; yet blacks felt the opposite. Some low-income youngsters' perception of not getting attention was partly due to the adults' unemotional communication style. Trying to respect cultural differences, teachers disciplined whites for verbal and physical acts they ignored in blacks.

Opposite reactions to the demands of formal schooling are yet a sixth, and the greatest, source of difficulty. Academically-oriented children approve of cooperating with a teacher's request. By contrast, youngsters in the "counterschool" culture think cooperative classmates act "like fags, like real sissies."

The counterschool culture is a response among many low-income whites and blacks that develops from the perception that education does not pay off for them. They seek out nonacademic arenas in which they can excel and dominate. Being bookish is a renegade act provoking peer chiding, harassment or ostracism. Yet despite their devaluation of formal schooling, these children react as if to an assault on their dignity when a teacher calls upon them during regular lessons and they perform poorly in front of their classmates. Calling a counterschool culture child "dummy" triggers a fight.

The seventh and final point of contention, the clash between different styles or habits of working, can also cause antagonism in the classroom. Low-income youngsters brought up to work cooperatively at home often share their answers with friends in class. Middle-class children taught to work independently consider this behavior cheating. Merely bringing children of different colors or cultures together to fulfill the promise of school desegregation does not ensure equal opportunity. From the Pacesetter school experience, as well as that of other schools nationwide, a number of approaches have been developed that appear to help schools resolve clashes among racial, cultural and socioeconomic groups and improve academic achievement for all.

Addressing communication problems among different groups at school is critical. Conflict is often simply a matter of misunderstood messages. Sometimes messages are understood but their content or their apparently aggressive expression are disliked and feared. One solution is to teach the dominant culture's styles of communication, work and play without denigrating those of minority children. Just as people

recognize the appropriateness of Sunday dress or work clothes, children can learn the need for specific behavior in certain settings and at certain times. In well-managed classrooms, teachers can still accommodate different expressive styles; for example, some black children's verbally or physically exuberant behavior signifies approval of what is going on.

While it is possible to transform the excitement of fights and disruptive behavior into academic contests in which all youngsters play a constructive role, aggression—a sure way of getting attention—should be nipped in the bud at the elementary level in order to stem more dangerous violence in higher grades.

Alternative schools may be appropriate for bullies if teachers, principals, counselors and parents cannot help them alter their behavior.

We know that academic progress is linked to feelings about oneself and one's peers. Although controversial, ability grouping and regrouping as children master skills fosters learning and self-esteem among children who react fiercely when their inadequacy is exposed in front of classmates. More than anything, students fear looking stupid.

Rewards for leadership or for academic, athletic or artistic achievement at school can foster self-esteem, provided it is done in a way that will not invite peer attack. Youngsters in the counterschool culture can often be brought into the school culture by giving them leadership roles in the school. Similarly, when children learn skills and then tutor others or contribute to the development of the rules they will be asked to follow, they begin to feel they have a stake in the school.

Small classes in which teachers become well-acquainted with students and their parents (or guardians) permit the teacher to identify and meet a child's needs, to develop realistic expectations and to recognize developmental change. Teacher-assigned seating and work/play groupings based on interest and ability can allow children of different backgrounds to appreciate each other, become friends without using aggression and to overcome the tendency of black children to exclude whites and vice versa.

Yet however much teachers can do, it will not suffice. Educational success requires a cooperative effort on the part of the school, of the parents, the community, the government and the private sector.

The principal is a crucial figure, not just within the school but also as the key liaison with the local community and the mediator among parents, and between family and school; and it is government and private sector leaders that are responsible for the long-range planning and financing of programs like Head Start, preschool and afterschool child care, health services, summer job opportunities and individual tutoring that are critical to some minorities' success in school.

In the same way that it took complex social forces to produce a nation at risk, it will take a multi-pronged, holistic approach to better American education. Intrinsic to schooling, communication is the two-way sending and receiving of messages. Let the children's voices be heard and their activities recognized, as they have not been in the recent spate of task force reports on educational reform. A large poor population that goes ignored will ultimately sap the resources and strength of the entire society.

*Judith Lynne Hanna is the author of the book "Disruptive School Behavior: Class, Race, and Culture," from which this article is adapted.*

*April 4, 1989*

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## *School Spanking—It Hurts*

WILLIAM RASPBERRY

Ever since D.C. Mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon came out for school spankings, I've been having flashbacks to my own school days.

I've been thinking of classmates who got paddled for playground fights, for failing to produce homework assignments or even for being late to school. I've been thinking of the occasional spankings I received, although I can't recall what they were for—probably for clowning in class.

In each of these cases, I'm sure the teachers were acting out of concern for us. They wanted to instill the values of study, self-discipline, punctuality and what used to be called "deportment." The spankings did no harm that I can see, and probably did some good.

But I've also been thinking about some other children who got spanked for things like missing too many arithmetic problems or too many words on spelling tests; hungry kids who were paddled for stealing a classmate's lunch; nonreaders and slow learners who were punished for being what we inelegantly called "dumbo". And though we couldn't prove it, my classmates and I were certain that some children were more likely than others to get paddled, not because their deportment was significantly worse but because the teachers didn't like them.

These spankings, we knew even then, were harmful. They humiliated their victims, confused them in their belief that they were stupid (or bad) and made them hate school.

The kids knew the difference, and so did their parents. Some of us knew that if our parents found out we'd been spanked in school, we'd get another spanking at home. But others, even at that tender age, knew their punishment to be unfair. Several times a year, parents—mostly from "cross the tracks"—would show up at school to protest the humiliation of their children and to charge the teachers with having "picks" and "pets."

Mind you, this was small-town Mississippi in the 1940s, a place and time when parental spanking was universal.

How could it not be worse in a city like Washington, where some parents are likely to think of spanking—even by parents—as teaching children that might makes right and that violence is an acceptable way



of solving problems, while others who might spank their own children don't want them spanked by teachers whose fairness they doubt?

It's easy enough to see what's on Mayor Dixon's mind. She, like most of us, would like to see a return to the old values. Teachers, she said in an NBC-TV special on education scheduled to air next week, "need to have the authority to instill standards and values and discipline in young people, especially in a society where so many women are working and trying to rear children alone."

But to return to the old values is not necessarily to return to the old methods, which—though they might have done some limited good in communities that were, for all practical purposes, villages—would likely be a disaster in the bigger, more impersonal schools of the '90s.

Dixon's nostalgic views seem particularly anachronistic at a time when, on the one hand, we are having serious discussions about the advisability of installing metal detectors to keep weapons out of school buildings and, on the other, advocating student-directed dispute-resolution programs to teach children how to settle problems without resort to violence.

Her frustration—and mine—is that too many children come to school from homes where the old values, including discipline, are too little enforced. And her implied question needs to be taken seriously: How are children, undisciplined at home, to gain the self-control that makes learning possible?

But to acknowledge the importance of the question is not to reach her conclusion that children need "some kind of authoritative figure in their lives" and that corporal punishment is the way to achieve it.

An analogy to law enforcement might be helpful. There was less street crime in the days when cops cleared street corners by personal edict reinforced by the threat of a station house beating. Today, we have less summary punishment by law officers and more crime. Therefore . . .

A moment's reflection on the recent police brutality in Los Angeles reveals the fallacy of that reasoning.

Dixon is right: We need to teach our children the time-tested values, both at home and at school. We need to find ways to reward good behavior and to punish inappropriate behavior. But school spanking, apart, perhaps, from an emergency SWAT on the behind to keep a kindergartner from dashing into a busy street, isn't the way to do it.

*April 12, 1991*