

HIGH SCHOOL REFORM; TOWARDS A STUDENT MOVEMENT

What I remember most about my school is that there is a 10-foot fence around it. In parts, there are three rows of barbed wire strung along the top. What concerns me most about the fence is not that it keeps me in--but that it keeps the rest of the world out, only admitting those portions of "reality" which the administration deems safe for us to view. Those responsible for our education have done their utmost to create an artificial community on the high school campus. A community which will demonstrate to us that it is better to "adjust" to an unsuitable society than to change the society into something in which we can live with honor and dignity. If we are to lead meaningful lives, and do more than pass on our problems to the next generation, we shall have to break out of that artificial community. It is to that end that this is being written.

There is already a considerable degree of unrest on the high school campus. At Palisades High School, an "underground" paper has been started. Similar papers have begun at Arcadia and Westchester. At Westchester, 30 students destroyed their Student Activity Cards and "sat in" for the first ten minutes of fifth period in protest of an assembly being called off for the third time. At University High School there has been a storm of protest over the suspension of a student for wearing his hair too long and an administration threat to take away nutrition unless we had a clean campus. Even such seemingly destructive actions as starting trash can fires and pulling fire alarms are actually forms of protest directed at the school as it is now constituted. Not only the defense of hair and clothing styles against administration attack, but the adoption of such styles themselves indicates a general disgust with the values and attitudes that our generation has been force-fed.

These problems, though, and the struggle against the oppressiveness of bureaucratic solutions to them, only serve as rough indicators of the real problem confronting us. We can get a clearer picture of the problems confronting high school students by looking at a few more aspects of campus life. Many schools have some form of police-squad with students being recruited for the purpose of guarding entrances to buildings and informing on fellow students.

All schools spend a great deal of money on staffing and supplying an Attendance Office with an elaborate and highly complex system of files, checks, and cross checks. The very existence of such a system would indicate a belief on the part of the administration that we are unwilling to play by the rules that were made by them, and must be coerced into doing so. It is clear that the motivating factor behind acceptable behavior is not understanding, but force. If so great and complex a structure is needed simply to ensure physical attendance, we may legitimately be concerned about why we are unwilling to even place our bodies in school, let alone pay attention to what happens there. We can only wonder about what would happen if even half the effort spent in making us attend school would be expended in an attempt to improve school so that we would want to attend.

There is one primary cause behind why we set trash can fires, why we cannot communicate with one another on campus, and are forced to make use of off-campus publications, and to why they have to build fences around us. High school is not worth the time we spend there. This is a truth which every student realizes on at least one level.

Courses which are irrelevant to the point of being ludicrous are forced upon us. Scientific courses are compulsory for those who will have little to do with science. "Health" classes warn us about drugs proven to be physically harmless, and blithely ignore sex education. "Guidance" classes aimed at fitting us neatly into the system and supplying us with a pre-fabricated moral code are so structured as to prevent any serious discussion of vital matters.

English classes in which we should be learning of the ideal of the great writers are hopelessly bogged down in an attempt to "cover enough ground" and have a "balanced curriculum". Both of which have the effect of stretching the class over so much material in 20 weeks that none of the real value may be gotten from it. Controversial contemporary authors such as Albee, Jones, and Ferlinghetti are not mentioned in class, so as to save our minds from perversion.

History and government classes, which could be relevant to all, are bogged down with irrelevant data to be digested and given back at a later date. We have a history book which tells us: "Though the Indians did help the early settlers, and have made some cultural contributions, on the whole, their effect on this country has been bad because they hindered our Western expansion." In Government, things are structured like Congress so we can learn how things Really Work. Would we not learn more about legislative operations if government classes were truly creative, rather than being a mockery of the word, and we could learn by structuring the legislature as we wished? Why is more emphasis placed upon the regurgitation of the various articles of the Constitution, and very little placed upon the motives behind the formation of that Constitution?

In speaking with many students, I have heard a nearly unanimous opinion that Current American Problems is one of the worst of the required courses. That such a vital course should be considered drudgery amazes me. How is it that a course with such a dynamic potential could be thought of like this? Obviously, little effort is being spent to tap even part of that potential. On one hand, the course is taken "seriously", as it is required. On the other hand, the teaching of the course is not serious, but superficial. Since we are the objects of that teaching, it would seem as though we are not being taken seriously, either.

Most of the people who teach us make sacrifices to do so. They could get much better jobs if they wanted to. They must, at least at the beginning, enjoy their work. We have all seen student teachers on their first assignment--enthusiastic and excited. We have seen other teachers who, with but a few notable exceptions, have become tired and passive after a few years on the job. What could have caused this change? Surely, not the students are at fault, or many teachers would have taken up new professions. Since the first schools consisted solely of teachers and students, it is conceivable that the same institution which squeezes the joy of living out of the students also oppresses the teachers.

Let us consider briefly the roles taken by students and teachers in our schools. It is the function of a teacher in our system to feed us material data designed to help us fit into a ready-made life in society. We, as students, undergo this change, and "help" our peers change through social pressure. Who dictates the nature of this change? Who tells teachers what to teach and how to teach it? Who tells students under what conditions they may learn in this Great and Free society? Both student and teacher are tool and product of administrative totalitarianism. The student comes out of high school a finished product to be consumed by either the agro-business or the war machine. He is by then also a tool, to be used to make others conform. The teacher, who began as a tool, in an Orwellian nightmare finally believes that he is helping his students to lead useful and moral lives in our society.

What madness is this? The administrator, whose real function is nothing greater than the maintenance of the campus (a task which could be easily performed by a simple-minded computer) has become the lord and master of our schools, commanding unbounded fealty.

The educative process should be a learning experience for both teacher and student. The teacher and his students should sit down and freely discuss the topics of the course and the method of study. This idea is workable. At least it worked for all the great philosophers. We've strayed a long way from that path. It will take great effort on our part to return to it.

Students cannot effectively change things through individual action. What is needed is an organization which will struggle for a free, viable, and realistic education for all students, which will base itself on mass student support. Such an organization will require more than some coalition between "liberal" and "conservative" elements of the student population. If we are to be at all effective, we must be able to talk to students who have not yet reached our level of concern, and are still trying to escape from society, rather than change it.

If we accept the three levels of anti-administration sentiment, (dress regulation, attendance, and finally, the education itself) we may consider these three different strata of understanding. Most students are already hostile to the administration on at least the first level. It is our job, then, through a combin-

ation of educational and action projects, to raise the level of understanding of the students, and help them to act upon that new understanding.

Many of us will find it initially difficult to communicate meaningfully with segments of the student population with which we have had little previous contact. Quite a few of these people regard us with a mixture of respect and hostility because we are "intellectuals, kooks, " or just plain "snobs." First of all we must realize that we have earned these titles in one way or another. We have our own cliques, if not as formal as the social ones, and tend to look down our noses at those who do not measure up to our own standards of intelligence, sensitivity, or social concern.

Our first task, then, is to show the students that we are on their side, and have many of the same concerns they do. One method is to begin agitation around issues students are already concerned about. We should be in the forefront of any student protest against administrative action. One of the best opportunities to talk to students about things which bother them comes during physical education classes. The unstratified, (we all wear the same clothes) nonacademic, and naturally friendly atmosphere is conducive to easy discussion of mutual problems. In "mixed schools, it is essential that we break down the barriers and establish communications between minority groups. These schools often have exorbitantly high fees for Student Activity Cards, Grad Nite, and Senior dues. These high charges effectively prevent most members of minority groups from participating in student activities. If this discriminatory pattern can be shown to these groups (if they aren't aware of them already) and the ideal of collective action is successfully prevented, large numbers of these groups, (which are usually closely-knit) may be activated. Since these groups are often disproportionately represented on athletic teams, a very strong case may be made to the majority of the student population. With a majority of the students then mobilized, the administration will be forced to lower prices.

In order to show students that we are not similar to student government and that we do more than hold offices and talk, while we are formally organizing and having our first membership drive, we must do something concrete, which can readily be seen as an attempt to help all the students. On virtually every college campus, there is some sort of "book" on professors and associate professors who teach at that college. Such a "book" is needed on our campuses. The legal problems of distribution should be carefully researched, but a tactful and respectfully written handbook on different aspects and quirks of individual teachers and courses would be received very well by the students, and if done properly, unhappily accepted by the administration. A manual should also be prepared for incoming BLOs. This should contain practical information about hashlines, shortcuts across campus, ways to see guidance counselors quickly, etc.

There is also the possibility of some organizing being done on junior high school campuses. Many people connected with our movement will have younger brothers and sisters in junior high schools. They should be introduced to our movement before they have already entered high school.

One way to get some publicity for community service is a tutorial project. They are easy to organize, open the door to communication with minority groups at different schools, and demonstrate to the community-at-large that we are a positive, rather than a negative force in the community.

We should not look with disdain upon student government. We have much to learn from SLATE, the Berkeley campus political movement. Everyone connected with us should run for student council, Boy's League, or Girl's League, on the issue of Student Government reform. On any campus where we are fairly strong, we should run candidates for Student Body Offices, and trying to organize mass active support of our candidates, as opposed to the efforts of 20-30 people. In marginal elections, we can control the swing vote and get concessions from run-off candidates. Where we win control of any offices, we force the administration to either give in on major points, or continually override our actions, which make the administration look silly to the students, our parents, and our principal's bosses downtown.

"Underground" newspapers have proven to be highly successful at two schools already. The first few issues should be written and produced by four or five people

(to distribute reprisals, as well as the workload). These students should continue to take responsibility for the production of the paper, but most of the material should come from other segments of the student population as soon as possible, so that it is a true reflection of student opinion. The first issue should be sent to the leadership of as many social cliques as possible (so the paper is IN), and should be MAILED TO THEM. Mailing is emphasized because any attempt to distribute such a paper on campus would result in those responsible for it being crushed by the administration. Special care should be taken to send copies to all the people in Journalism, as many of them will compare the "underground" paper favorably to the school paper, and can then be converted to our movement. Copies should be sent to friendly teachers. Mailing costs may be partially defrayed by contributions, but there should be no charge for subscription.

Efforts as great and broad-based as those outlined here will require a considerable degree of organization on both a school-wide and a city-wide level. Both levels should maintain as flexible a structure as possible. Campus groups should have small functional committees which will be responsible for projects undertaken on a local level. There should be larger meetings so that the rank-and-file both understand and control all that is happening. New situations may be handled by quick lunchtime meetings. Decisions should be reached by consensus rather than voting whenever possible. This serves the dual purpose of keeping the group dynamic through the synthesis of ideas rather than the total acceptance of one or the other, and keeps hostility down to a minimum. A level of order should be maintained, but parliamentarianism should be avoided as it stifles creative thinking. The leadership of the meetings should be rotated around the group so that an elitist clique doesn't develop and all participating members get valuable experience at chairing meetings.

The city-wide group should operate along these same general lines. A city-wide coordinating council should be set up as open to all members, but with required attendance for at least one person from every campus. Membership cards should be made available at a nominal cost, to give as many people as possible some tangible connection with the movement. If possible, later on, a small aesthetic button bearing the group symbol could be sold as a fund-raiser and to denote membership.

A city-wide newsletter should be started to maintain and strengthen contact with various schools. It should contain organizational news and other things that may be of interest to our membership.

Ours is a student movement. It is not a movement of liberals, radicals, or conservatives. If it is to succeed, it must steer clear of political issues such as civil rights and Vietnam, or other tempting topics, except where they directly relate to our education. We should remember that the Young Republicans actively participated in the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley. They were able to do so because the FSM limited itself to campus problems.

Once we are organized, we can count on a considerable degree of support from teachers. They already recognize that the administration has come between them and the students, but feel neither strong enough, nor sufficiently moved to do anything about it. I am confident that many would be activated by a student movement. One of the most exciting things they could help with would be the creation of "Freedom Schools", with lunchtime and after-school discussions on topics of interest. One possibility would be the creation of a parallel course in Current American Problems, free of feeble-minded texts and restraining administrators. This would show to the entire community, but especially to the students and their parents, how fresh and exciting a school could be if administrators would leave it alone.

We must also make an attempt to reach all segments of the outside community. Each student should convert his parents and get them to do as much as possible. Religious groups (especially Unitarian Churches and Reform Temples) should be contacted. Preferably, this should be done by someone whose parents are active in that local church. Individual members of the CDC could be approached. We should get in touch with the American Federation of Teachers and the American Civil Liberties Union, and request their formal organizational support. We can contact trade unions

and ask for help, stressing the many parallels between early union development and what we are doing now. We should get our parents active in PTA and make a concerted effort to get PTA support. In all our dealings with these groups, our position should be polite, but firm. We are asking them for support because we feel that in many areas, our interests are mutual, but that this is a student movement, and we have no intention whatsoever of giving up any of our power to adults.

What, then, are some of the specific things we are fighting for:

1. The creation of a joint Student-Faculty Council to set up general rules on each individual campus.
2. The right of teachers and students to collectively decide upon their courses and methods of study.
3. Full academic freedom and freedom of advocacy on the high school and junior college campus.
4. No more than 25 people in a class, with a school average of 20, and a maximum of 18 for special groups.
5. An end to unprofessional clerical and policing jobs for teachers.
6. An end to student police squads and oppressive Attendance Offices, replacing them with a voluntary honor system.
7. The right of students to take or not take courses as they see fit.

We should recognize that the nature of a group such as ours and the struggle it will undertake shall have a lasting effect on those who take part in it. It will not be enough for someone to be a "card-carrying member" of our movement, and have no other connection with it. Every member should take an active role in helping us organize. We have large and powerful forces arrayed against us. Anyone who wants to see us win will have to help us win.

We must not lose sight of our central goal. We want to change the educational system because we are disturbed at the type of "individual" that system is turning out. We want a society where all men are free to give the fullest expression to their beliefs and feelings. Where we are all free to communicate with one another on an equal, dignified, and non-violent plane. This is not ~~the~~ GREAT artificial SOCIETY we are building, merely a decent one.

---m. kleiman
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