

High schools or holding pens?

Four readers reply

8 April 1998

Updated 8 April 1998

The WSWS has received a number of letters regarding its 20 March 1998 article titled "High schools or holding pens? The attack on education and the threat to democratic rights." In the most recent letter, posted as the first below, a Philadelphia teacher referred to a recent story in the Los Angeles Times about the increasing frequency of angry outbursts by parents directed at teachers and staff in the public school system.

I noted with interest the correspondence you posted last week from the teacher commenting on the similarities of the problems French and American teachers are experiencing, particularly in reference to student discipline.

There is a connected problem, which is highlighted in a recent article from the *Los Angeles Times*. In the last couple of years, there has been a marked increase in incidents where parents verbally abuse and threaten school employees. I think the problem is more than a growth of "uncivility" in society. At my school in Philadelphia there are several incidents per week.

Having observed this social phenomenon for a few years, I have come to see it as similar to on the job violence in other occupations. Just as a postal worker who feels powerless to change his working conditions strikes out irrationally, so many parents, who are angry about the conditions of the educational system, strike out at school employees because they are accessible and visible representatives of the educational system. Since this anger is unorganized in society, it takes on a reactionary form because it further undermines a free public education. Many hours must be spent by teachers and administrators trying to appease angry parents.

I have no doubt that parents' attitudes are fueled by the constant media barrage against public education. Rather than directing their anger at politicians who have under-funded education for decades, some parents are being deceived into believing that "school choice" and vouchers are the answer. Most do not realize, I am sure, that even with a voucher they will have to pay thousands of dollars per year per child for their child's education. If they cannot pay, they will be left to send their children to public schools which are little more than holding areas for the children of the poor and working class.

KD

5 April 1998

Teacher

Philadelphia

Posted 2 April 1998

You probably know about this but tonight's *Le Journal*, a French-language newscast shown on WNYE, a New York public station seen on cable, showed thousands of students in one of the many marches of students and teachers making demands for education that have been growing throughout France. Of immediate pertinence to the story on the police being called into Cooley High is the story, also aired tonight, from a French middle school of police being called in to strip search an entire class, girls and boys, to find a missing key for a computer room. The principal claimed he had negotiated for 90 minutes with the students to get the key before calling the police, fearing the low security situation during upcoming holidays. These young adolescents were made to bend over and cough, and their parents were greatly upset and some are meeting with an assistant DA. Although it was reported that the key was found, there was no mention of a particular student being caught, which throws doubt on how the key was found.

In my own high school in New York City, the "security" office has taken on the very noticeable look of a police precinct, as opposed to an appropriately decorated classroom, with two armed police also stationed in the school.

However, also of interest in watching the television program was that, as a teacher, I recognized that the French teachers interviewed from the march were saying the same things that teachers here sit around and gripe about — that the decline over years of the educational environment has resulted in the degeneration of student attitudes and the increased difficulty of teaching.

HL

31 March 1998

Posted 24 March 1998

After reading your article, I felt that it may interest you to learn of some legislation that will possibly pass in Louisiana. I don't know if it is limited to only Caddo Parish or if it is statewide, but the proposal is gaining a great deal of support locally (I live in Shreveport). Basically, if, during a period of about six years, a school with low aptitude test scores does not improve in academic prowess, so to speak, that school will lose funding or the teachers will be fired.

It is designed, so I read, to force parents to increase their involvement in schools. I just thought that taking money away from a low income district school, as most schools with low test scores fall into this bracket (gee, that's a surprise), may not be the best way to encourage learning. I thought that this may tie into your article on lower class education. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

DJ

22 March 1998

Posted 24 March 1998

Dear Sir or Madam:

I'm a sophomore at a public high school (one of the best) in South Carolina, USA and I would like to say that it seems that only socialists truly recognize that students, teens, are humans and have basic civil rights too! We've been through the waves of civil rights for blacks, civil rights for women, and now it's time for civil rights for students! We're treated like second-class citizens simply because we're between the ages of 13 and 19! If someone treated a person of color like this they would call him/her a racist! Are teens, and youth in general, to be discriminated against just because we are youth?

And to my second point: It is true; schools that teach working class students are left to fall apart, without appropriate funding, materials, teachers, or the school building itself. The school I attend is new, only six years old, and it gets the best of everything from the best school system in South Carolina. Why? Because the area I live in is where most of the rich bourgeois businesspeople with school-age children live.

The most horrible thing about it all is that it is not only class based but also race based. My high school is 95% white. Can you believe that? I have recently moved here from North Carolina and my school there had a rich diversity of people of all shades and backgrounds. But not here. It's stereotypical white-bread suburbia. The schools & school systems inside the city limits of Columbia are almost 80-95% black, and don't get half the resources my school gets. It's like a big fat bypass to get back to segregation.

After all, kids in my Humanities Honors classes (the highest level history & English classes a sophomore can take) are frightened when they see a couple black guys walking down the street downtown. Like all young black men that live inside the city are muggers, or rapists or murderers, or something. It frightens me that in 1998 there are people who still think that way! ...

I attend another school in my district for German (not enough kids at my school chose to take it for me to be able to...it's French or Spanish for them) and it's a mutated, crumbling, stinking (I mean like an elephant exhibit), mess of a high school, and that is no doubt because more working class and black students go there.

My point is, though, is that a kid in my German class was all talking bad about Jews and then one of his friend circle says,

"Hey! I'm Jewish!" So he says, "Oh man, I've got to stop doing this...all of my friends are turning out to be Jews!" Can you believe that? ...

The conservatives would say, "It's those liberal teachers and administrators!" They replace principals when SAT scores go low but it's not their fault or even the teacher's fault. Frankly, I've never been able to tell the political leaning of any of my teachers or administrators. What those conservatives need and what most Democrats need is to spend a couple months each in eight different high schools, and then they'd have a different impression. They're all so gung-ho over these ID-tags (like we're POWs of the school) and locker searches and backpack searches and metal detectors like we're all criminals. If the media didn't trump up all of this useless crap we'd (the students) be in a lot better position.

Another thing: I can't stand how G. Gordon Liddy and other conservative mouthpieces get off saying public schools are failures when the people they supported made perfectly good public schools go down the toilet by dramatically slicing funds for public schools and made them that way, and then blame liberals!...Private school hype is yet another thing that really upsets me...

They, the conservatives, are also frightened that the working class kids will actually get an education and put it to good use and topple those conservatives from their cushy posts as the head of society. God forbid the workers get an education! They might get some crazy ideas into their head like freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religion! Don't want any of those Jew or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist or [insert your major religion here] worker disturbing our good Christian stranglehold on popular culture. No, Sir! That would be un-American!

WW

22 March 1998



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