

Schools in the Danger Zone

An inner-city education provides more than just a report card

Ted waits behind Burlington City High School in Burlington, N.J. The area is a well-known hangout for students and a marketplace for drugs.

But Ted, a former student at the high school, is not interested in drugs today. Nor is he interested in meeting with friends at the approaching lunch hour. He's waiting for Johnny. He's waiting for revenge.

A week before, Johnny accused Ted of stealing his coat. During the week, the two taunted each other in the halls and out on the street. When school administrators discovered that Ted had the coat, they expelled him. Now Ted, concealing a screwdriver, waits patiently for his accuser.

At lunch break, the students begin leaving school. They go about their business—some heading for the many fast-food chains in the neighborhood, others heading across the street to buy and sell drugs.

When Johnny appears, Ted takes out the screwdriver. Johnny spots Ted and runs. Ted follows. The chase continues for a few feet; then Johnny tries to leap a nearby bush, but trips and falls into it.

Ted catches him at the bush and jabs at the entangled body four times, connecting twice. Johnny untangles himself and eventually eludes Ted.

Johnny's wounds aren't serious, but later the police charge Ted with assault.

Charles Fryar witnessed a incident similar to this one while he was a high school student in Burlington.

Fryar, a junior at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and a comeback for the Nebraska football team, says he has also seen many fights and some riots.

Burlington, a school of about 3,000 students, is near a ghetto and is 85 to 90 percent black, Fryar says. Students need identification cards to get into the school and passes when they are in the halls. This policy, Fryar says, keeps out non-students who might cause trouble, such as drug pushers.

Many other high schools across the United States suffer problems like those at Burlington. In the last 40 years, many inner-city schools have experienced rampant drug use, gangs, high enrollment and poor instruction.

Jay Corzine, an associate professor of sociology at UNL, says some inner-city schools suffer because they are supported through local property taxes. Poor neighborhoods pay less taxes and schools can't afford to pay good teachers, he says.

Corzine, who did research at McKinley High School in St.

Louis during 1974-75, says students who are enrolled in poor inner-city high schools know the education is poor. As a result, they find other activities to occupy their time, he says.

Fryar says most Burlington students didn't attend school to learn.

"It was a social thing," Fryar says. "Everybody came to school to see everybody else."

Linetta Wilson, a UNL senior, agreed with Fryar. Wilson, who attended John Muir High School in Pasadena, Calif., says students were there to hang out rather than learn. She says the school employed about eight security guards.

"When you're doing other things, your interest in school is not there," says Wilson, a member of the Nebraska track team. "You go to school to meet with somebody and do other things."

Those other things include joining gangs, fighting and taking drugs. Many students are forced into doing them because of peer pressure and fear.

Fryar says drug use was common at Burlington.

"If you're not doing drugs, you're pushing them," Fryar says.

Drugs are so common, Fryar says, that he often carried on conversations in the street with friends who were looking to make a sale. From time to time, his friends stopped the conversation, walked a few feet away and made a sale, Fryar says.

This acceptance of drugs also was prevalent at Muir. Wilson says drugs were so common at Muir that even the teachers took them.

"Like, if you're not doing drugs, there's something wrong with you," Wilson says.

Corzine says the effect of drugs on students is obvious.

"If you got a kid who's getting stoned a lot in school, then he's probably not getting a hell of a lot out of it," he says.

Drugs also lead to violence, Corzine says. Drug users are not thugs, but pushers often try to monopolize the drug trade by violently eliminating or intimidating their competitors.

Violent schools also sprout in rough neighborhoods, Corzine says. Street gangs terrorize the neighborhoods and schools.

Wilson says two gangs roamed the halls at Muir: the Bloods and the Crips.

Wilson was a member of one of the gangs, although she wouldn't say which one. She joined, as did many other students, for protection and self-esteem, she says.

"If you walk around with five or six girls," Wilson says, "nobody's

going to mess with you.

"We helped each other out. We didn't have to take burdens upon ourselves. And if somebody bothered us (or) we were scared about something, we took care of that together."

Fighting usually was how they took care of problems. Wilson says her gang fought about once a week. But the gang didn't always fight for protection. Sometimes they fought over insults, Wilson says. Other times they would just fight another gang on the street.

Wilson says she has meltdowns since then. She says she has lost the macho attitude she had in high school and now concentrates on track and school. Gangs are a thing of the past for her, but not for Pasadena or for her home in Altadena, Calif.

"They're still going on out there, and they're as serious as ever," she says.

Gang fights also erupted at Martin Luther King Jr. High School on the south side of Chicago, where UNL freshman Richard Smith went to school. Smith says 15 gangs roamed the halls at King. Smith, a 6-foot-7 forward on the Nebraska basketball team, says the gangs would fight over anything.

"They'd fight over crap games in the bathroom," Smith says, "or somebody might have sold somebody some tea instead of some reefer."

Smith says the gangs also fight with anything. On the first school day of his senior year, he says, two gangs got into a belt fight in front of the school. Other students carried knives and a few carried guns, he says.

Smith says he was walking to basketball practice one day when he saw a student with a gun. The student, running toward Smith, had the gun pointed toward the ceiling.

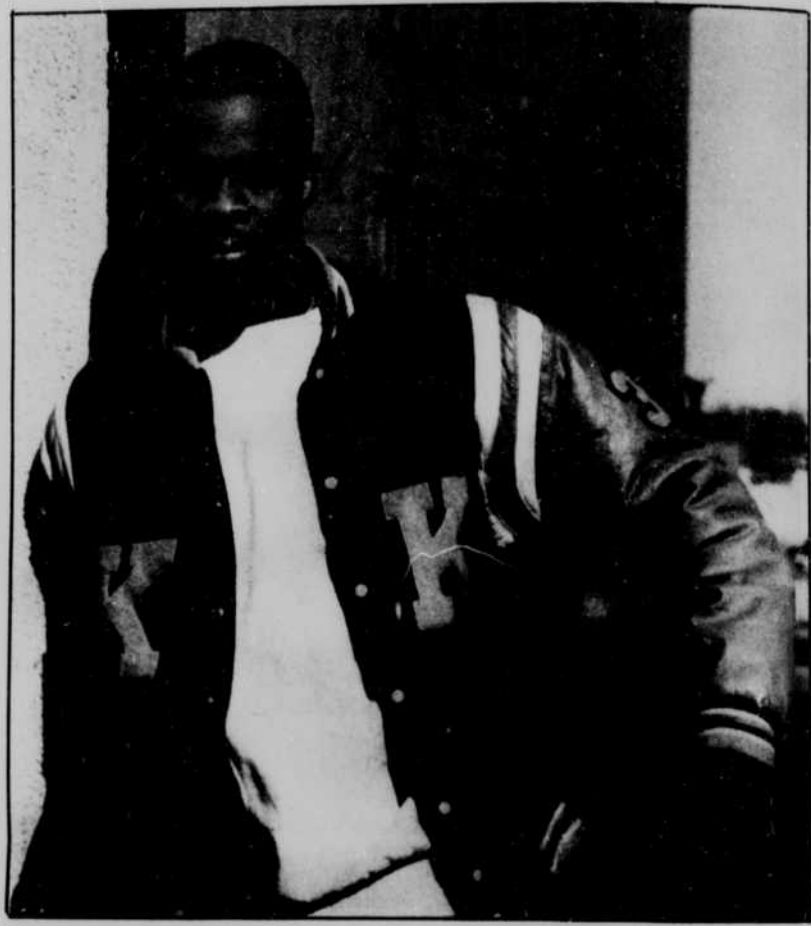
"I don't know what he was doing or who he was after, but I ran into the gym and went under the bleachers," Smith says.

Smith says he doesn't know what happened after that. But he heard no shots.

Smith says such incidents weren't common at his high school, but he wasn't surprised when they happened. Violence and intimidation were more common, he says, and it takes its toll on students. Many are afraid to attend school, he says.

"It's hard to go to school when you know somebody's going to beat you up and take your money," Smith says.

Students by themselves are vulnerable. But students in a group are protected. As a result, many students are pressured to join gangs, Smith



Smith

says. Peer pressure and the desire to be accepted also pressure them, he says.

"They don't want to get picked on," Smith says. "They want to pick on people."

Smith says King administrators tried to correct some of the problems by having police patrol the halls and lunch room. The police did well to keep order inside the school, Smith says, but they couldn't control violence outside.

King also used assistant principal Melver Scott, who could keep control.

"He knew everything that was going down," Smith said.

Wilson says Muir administrators developed a 13-point system. Students who lost all 13 points were transferred to a reform school, Wilson says.

Muir students lost points for being tardy or being caught in the halls during class, she says. Other wrongdoings brought on a punishment familiar to most high schools—detention.

Other administrators at inner-city schools take more drastic measures. Joe Clark, principal at Eastside High in Paterson, N.J., has received much attention from the media for expelling drug pushers and students who don't earn any credits.

In his first year at Eastside in 1982, Clark expelled 300 students. When he was accused of expelling 66 students without due process last December, the media attention returned.

Some believe he has turned a school that was full of drug pushers and thugs into a safe place where education can be nurtured. Two of Clark's supporters are President Reagan and Secretary of Education William Bennett, who have called Clark a tough leader.

But others aren't so quick to praise Clark's approach.

Thomas Christie, a sociology teacher at Lincoln High School, says Clark has quick answers for complicated problems.

Christie, who attended Wanamaker Junior High in a Philadelphia ghetto during the early 1960s, says Clark is "full of crap."

Christie says he thinks some students need alternatives to high school. But Clark's reference to students as "leeches and parasites" is degrading and his expulsions without due process are unnecessary, Christie says.

"If (Clark) wants to be great," Christie says, "why doesn't he teach kids to lobby the city council or the police department so they treat people with more dignity in those neighborhoods. If he wants to be great, why doesn't he set up gang relations with the school and gang leaders in the community."

Corzine says that although he doesn't appreciate Clark's methods, his "get tough" attitude is the only solution in some cases. Clark hasn't made significant improvements in education, Corzine says, but he has made the school a safe place.

"Given the limitations of what you have to work with, it's proba-