Slow Death

Closing New York City's Failing High Schools in the Age of Bloomberg

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Slow Death examines New York City's policy of closing large failing high schools through the lens of one of its most notorious: Washington Irving. The school suffered both high crime and poor academic performance, and like many others was slated to close in 2015.

The book is both a personal journey and an analytical tome. It examines the school's struggles to improve, its failures, its ultimate dissolution and the associated costs in social capital. It addresses the sociological tensions which brought many urban schools to the same fate. And it looks at the effectiveness of the policies which upended the large-school model during Michael Bloomberg's tenure as mayor.

Chapter Synopsis

Introduction: The introduction looks at the decay of urban public education through the lens of one of its most troubled institutions. It addresses the reforms that the city implemented to address these issues, and the Bloomberg administration's policy of phasing out large failing high schools.

Part I. The Challenge of Social and Historical Forces

Chapter 1. Prelude to Failure. This chapter examines the academic profile of Washington Irving HS and the pedagogical challenges it faced with a student body drawn from the marginalized communities of New York.

Chapter 2. The Poverty of Discipline. Many high schools became chaotic by the 1980s. School administrators developed a stoical attitude toward discipline, which the street gangs exploited.

Chapter 3. Institutional Deficits. Successive principals were unable to counteract the building's mayhem. In 2001 an administrator came to the building with stronger grit, but her initial efforts were inadequate. As gang violence reached epidemic proportions, the United Federation of Teachers pressured the mayor's office for improvements in safety.

PART II. Desperate Measures to Control Safety: 2004 – 2008

Chapter 4. Going Impact: Addressing the Chaos. The Bloomberg administration developed its "Impact Schools Initiative," enforcing zero-tolerance policies and flooding troubled schools with armed police officers. This chapter looks at the reliance of school administrators on law enforcement, and highlights the murder of a student during one of the gang fights that year.

Chapter 5. Resistance to Reform. The administration's new authority provoked both enthusiasm and sabotage. It struggled to change the dysfunctional student culture; but the parents of challenging students took a dim view of the school's new authority and made efforts to usurp it.

PART III. Palliative Remedies for Academic Malaise

Chapter 6. Failure of Academic Achievement. Washington Irving was packed with students whose reading levels were three or four grades under par. Additional stress came from the special-needs and non-English-speaking students. New York State addressed the decline in its graduation statistics with alternatives to Regents exams. When this proved inadequate, the state revised the grading rubrics and "credit recovery" mechanisms for students whose graduation prospects were dim.

Chapter 7. Treating the Symptoms. Michael Bloomberg's education reforms depended on improved teacher performance. This was supported by federal grants which were contingent on stricter evaluation protocols. This chapter addresses the teacher variable within the context of Bloomberg's reforms and examines how school

administrators tried to maintain standards of teaching in light of weak accountability and teacher attrition.

PART IV. Divide and Conquer: 2008 – 2015

Chapter 8. Separation Anxiety. In 2008, the principal was replaced. At the same time, the DOE authorized the creation of a new school to share the building. Irving's new principal micromanaged security and frequently overruled the deans. This saw a decline in safety—three stabbings in one week—and generated stiff resistance from the staff.

Chapter 9. Balkanization. By 2012 four more schools were added to the campus, raising the number of institutions in the building to six. The decentralization of authority compromised security and saw a rise in student violence.

Chapter 10. Phase-out. In 2012 the DOE decided to phase out Washington Irving. In a decision that defied common sense, the DOE also gave space in the building to a charter primary school—whose students were five years old. While this was happening, the state reformed the teacher evaluation system, too late to save many careers at Irving.

Conclusion: The consequences of the city's phase-out policies. The DOE lauded its higher graduation and lower crime rates. But it dismissed the academic sleight-of-hand that produced those numbers and ignored the citywide drop in felony crimes between 2000 and 2020. What City Hall would not officially acknowledge was its failure to address the de facto segregation of its student population.

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PREFACE

NEW YORK CITY COULD ONCE CLAIM an enviable public school system. But by the 1990s it was in crisis. Unable to address the needs of a challenging student body, its academic product had become seriously compromised; and this was most evident in the performance of its high schools. At the same time many of those buildings had become rife with crime. The rise of gang culture in marginalized neighborhoods found its way into the schools, augmenting the already daunting challenges facing city administrators.

The new mayor, Michael Bloomberg, pledged to address these issues and took his cue from the latest innovation in public education: small learning communities. Over the course of twelve years his administration would pursue a policy of breaking up large failing high schools and filling their aging husks with smaller institutions—in some cases as many as seven in one building.

Washington Irving High School was one of those that met the mayor's scalpel. Once a highly respected institution, when I arrived there in 1994 it had been struggling with low student achievement for decades. It was now in the pits, and wise parents sent their children elsewhere.

Irving was not unique. Numerous New York City high schools were dealing with the same academic malaise. Nor was the city an outlier. Virtually every urban school system across the country confronted this issue. Each district treated academic performance differently, but a common solution was to address the failings of the pedagogue: Improve the teacher—the logic went—and you will raise achievement. And New York would invest a king's ransom in doing so.

In *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx credits philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel with his system of dialectics, a process involving the opposition of ideas which gives rise to subsequent social relations. But Marx rejected the primacy of ideas as the driving force of world history. He considered Hegel's system to be "standing on its head," and asserted that it needed to be "turned right-side up." Marx reversed the relationship, positing material social tensions as the foundation of consciousness and ideology.

The contemporary approach to high school reform is in some ways as askew as Marx considered Hegel's. The education industrial complex—teachers, supervisors, universities, publishers, consultants, tech companies, even organized labor—has a vested interest in reforming the system, but from the top down. And in twenty-seven years of service I witnessed impressive efforts to combat low achievement by improving administration and pedagogy. So what's wrong with that?

The city was dealing with overwhelming social and historical forces. The exigencies of a school system with over one million children precluded merit-based advancement. Overwhelmed with students who performed below grade level, the middle schools pushed their charges on and up for the high schools to try their luck. But teenagers entering the ninth grade need a strong footing in reading, writing and math. The majority of Washington Irving's students lacked that foundation, and they came unprepared for the rigors of secondary education. The district's solution to this Sisyphean challenge: creative pedagogy to develop students' "metacognitive skills." Hegel would have been impressed.

Washington Irving saw noble efforts to bring its students up to snuff. Consultants swarmed the school. Publishers flooded it with texts designed for "differentiated instruction." Technology was embraced as the miracle that would engage the most recalcitrant teenager. Impressive measures, but

in the end they failed to raise the level of learning: the district mandarins would subsequently close the school. And that is what happened to every troubled high school in New York City from the mid-1990s until the DeBlasio administration came to power in 2015.

Not everyone thinks that the current American model of universal high school education is worth saving. Some question whether the high schools should be preparing all their students for college, considering how many will never take that path. Many European school systems divide their high school programs into two tracks: academic and vocational. Students take qualification exams, usually after the tenth year, which determine their course of study. Those not destined to go to university take up a trade. There is no dishonor, and the programs are supported by regulated apprenticeships. But vocational education became a hot-button issue for American politicians in the 1960s, and the following decades saw it fall into disrepute: All students should go to college.

That wisdom is now being questioned. And critics point to schools like Washington Irving, where ill-prepared students were forced to spend four—in some cases, up to six—years studying material that would have little relevance to their social or economic lives. Understandably, this critique has provoked resistance from the education industrial complex, which supports a system that provides a steady stream of fodder for the colleges.

Academic malaise was only one issue confronting schools like Washington Irving. Many were also struggling with unprecedented violence which

came to a head in the early 2000s. Satisfied to allow overworked deans handle the chronic chaos that had become an inherent part of the school culture, the principals accepted a certain level of mayhem as the standard.

Until 2002 Washington Irving High School had no head of security. The latest principal, however, saw the value in appointing someone who would focus on safety and school tone, and she hired an assistant principal of security in August of that year. He lasted five months, then resigned. Another one was quickly appointed, and he too left the school by the end of the term. I was then in my tenth year of service as a social studies teacher when I became the third AP Security at Washington Irving in less than a year—a promotion I accepted with some trepidation.

I was unprepared to address the violence that plagued the school. In late September there was a vicious gang assault which resulted in the hospitalization of two female students. The New York tabloids ran pictures of the girls in the intensive care unit, their heads swollen like melons with tubes running in all directions. That night I told my wife that I probably wouldn't last any longer than my predecessors. Reader, I remained in the position for the next eleven years.

Discipline and safety got the lion's share of attention in the press, and despite the valiant efforts of the deans' office and remedies offered by the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations, the school failed to create a culture that would constrain student behavior. This is partly due to the conflicting goals of various offices within the Department of Education; and it is partly due to the broader cultural milieu of the city at the time.

The violence that engulfed students and staff was not restricted to the schools. These buildings were microcosms of a broader reality in the cities, where a culture of bedlam had become common. Students instinctively repeated the same behavior patterns in their schools that were common in

their neighborhoods. As crime in the ghettos expanded, so too did it rise in the schools. And as administrators became anesthetized to it, it became the cultural norm.

This is what Washington Irving High School confronted in the early 2000s: an academically deficient population for which poor discipline and violence were ingrained patterns of behavior. The goal of the administration in 2003 was to replace those mores with social conventions that could guarantee a disciplined environment: one where teachers could teach without distractions and students could learn safely. But changing cultures is easier said than done.

Slow Death examines the challenges that confronted Washington Irving High School—indeed all of New York City's failing high schools—in the last few decades. Of necessity, it also examines the city's slash-and-burn policies that sealed its fate. While the book is an empirical study, it does make specific assertions. Some of these will appear self-evident; others will no doubt be received with disdain.

While the student body of Washington Irving was mostly Black and Hispanic, the staff was mostly white. Racial tension occasionally fueled conflict in the school, and it continues to provoke dissonance in the academic community. The book is offered at the risk of provoking those who embrace rigid political orthodoxies. Nonetheless, some facts leave little room for interpretation, and rationalizing them would be intellectually dishonest. But I'll leave that to the judgment of the reader.

It is the current practice to provide trigger warnings. This book covers some disturbing incidents which had little to do with pedagogy but which created a social milieu that hampered teaching and learning. Within these pages one will occasionally encounter descriptions of violence and sexual assault, issues which confronted the high schools on a daily basis. To avoid a discussion of them would be to sanitize the context in which teachers struggled to teach and students struggled to learn. The profession of teaching comes with numerous personal rewards. But it is not for the faint of heart, and this book acknowledges that.

The book will be released one chapter per month. Commentary is welcome and is accessed by use of the tab on the left.

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THE LAB STOOL WENT FLYING OUT the sixth-floor window of Washington Irving High School at 10:35 a.m. on May 7, 2003. It fell towards the sidewalk on 17th Street, its velocity impeded only by the tree branches it severed on its way towards the skull of an unsuspecting victim. She was 29 years old, seven months pregnant, and was on her way to a temporary job in Union Square distributing leaflets for a new restaurant. She never made it to work. The stool was 30 inches in height and weighed 17 lbs. When it intersected with her head, it nearly killed her. She lay unconscious on the sidewalk, bleeding profusely.

Pedestrians rushed to help her. Someone had the presence of mind to run into the school and inform the administration while others called 911. The police responded in less than a minute. An ambulance showed up shortly afterwards, and the victim was taken to Beth Israel Hospital where

doctors raced to stem cranial bleeding and save her life. She suffered a brain hemorrhage, loss of blood, and multiple contusions.

When one of the witnesses came into the school, the first person to be told of the incident was a school safety agent, (SSA), NYPD's uniformed civilian employees that handle school security. The agent quickly put out a "10:10" call on the radio for all available agents and deans to respond to the north side of the 6th floor. He then informed the principal.

The police entered the building moments later. They had a quick meeting with the principal and SSA group leader; they then put the building in lockdown. The three thousand students and staff were informed over the PA system that everyone should stay in their rooms, a message that reverberated on all eleven floors.

Lockdowns are not casually implemented. Everyone is required to stay inside an office or classroom, lock the doors and admit no one who has the misfortune of still being in the hallway. At that point the police affect a vertical patrol and pick up anyone they find.

During this lockdown—which lasted over an hour—I was giving a lesson to a US history class. My students and I looked at each other, searching for explanations for the sudden emergency. We were used to occasional interruptions: fights in the hallways or the mini-riots that occurred when the gangs rumbled. But a lockdown meant serious crime, and the students were agitated by a combination of dread and excitement. Keeping them away from the doors would be my only job for the next hour.

The police swarmed the site. They split themselves up, taking the elevators to the top floors, then descending throughout the school. They were accompanied by school safety agents, who knew Washington Irving better than they did. Occupying two-thirds of a city block, it would take a while to search the building. Meanwhile, teachers had to placate their anxious students.

Within an hour the police made two arrests: both of them, fifteen-year-old male sophomores from the Yalow House, one of the school's science-themed programs. Along with two other students, they had gotten into an unattended classroom on the sixth floor, avoiding the always overcrowded and occasionally dangerous cafeteria. As their story unfolded

they acknowledged that they were horse-playing. The student who threw the stool out the window did so on a dare. The room had tiered seating, behind which were several windows. The bottom sashes were locked shut; only a custodian could open them. But the top sashes were unsecured. During the mischief the suspect picked up a stool to menace his friends. One of them made the dare, and he accepted the challenge. He walked up the three tiers with the stool in his hands, looked at his friends and threw it out the top of the window—much to their horror.

The two suspects proclaimed their lack of malice, but they could defend little. They were handcuffed and taken to the 13th Precinct. By twelve o'clock in the afternoon they were charged with second-degree assault and processed as criminals. And that was the first of many nails in the coffin of Washington Irving High School, which would be interred 12 years later.

The principal launched an investigation: How could unsupervised teenagers gain access to a classroom which was supposed to be locked? First suspicions fell on the teacher who had last occupied the room. He claimed the lock was broken—a common complaint in a 93-year-old building.

Teachers were responsible for locking classroom doors at the end of a lesson. But this policy had an Achilles heel. In an overcrowded school like Washington Irving, many teachers gave instruction in more than one room. (I travelled between three separate classrooms during my first year at the school.) Teachers frequently had to wait for the custodian to make them keys. Having one in hand, the teacher then hoped it would work. Door locks were occasionally vandalized or broken with age, and teachers were either unable to gain access to the room or lock it when the class was over. With this in mind, the investigation turned to the custodian's office to see if the teacher had filled out a repair slip for the lock. The response of the custodian was vague.

The supervisor of the Yalow House was also questioned. Washington Irving had implemented the small learning communities (SLCs) model in the early 1990s, and each house had a theme. Yalow's was science, and while its students were considered the school's nerds, its enrollment told a different story. The program struggled to recruit students who excelled in

math and science. It had trouble filling its seats and consequently received numerous students who were unqualified in those subjects. Pejoratively named "over-the-counters," Washington Irving was filled with students who, unable to gain admission to the school of their choice, were unceremoniously placed in one of the many programs that had open registers. Yalow was no different.

The supervising assistant principal, (AP), ran the science department as well as Yalow. Despite his students' varying levels of math and science skills, he was compassionate to all. Yalow permitted a relaxed atmosphere among staff and students, and this was reflected in the looser level of discipline in its hallways and classrooms. Consequently, following the incident, the AP came under criticism for permitting an intemperate student culture on his floor. But he survived the inquisition with little harm to his standing in the administration.

Somebody had to take the fall. The investigation's focus turned to the assistant principal for security, (APS), a man who had been on the job less than four months. Like his predecessor, he had failed to develop a system for taming a building which had defied more than a few administrations. With few allies in the school to run interference for him, he would become the scapegoat. By the end of June he found himself assigned to another school.

The "stool incident" propelled Washington Irving to new heights of infamy. It had been struggling with negative public relations for years, and this would precipitate its downfall. For years afterwards, Irving was known as the school where the stool flew out the window and almost killed a pedestrian. Nobody would know it for its stellar basketball team or for being the first public school in New York City to implement the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, (IB). Instead, the stool cemented Irving's troubled reputation, and did so long before the city codified these things with school progress reports.

The declining level of discipline at Washington Irving speaks of the administration's history of failure to control the school. It had been through seven principals in less than twenty years, most of whom left for less difficult institutions. Exclusive of its academic challenges, each administration

was unable to reverse the trend in poor conduct. Teachers frequently faced classes that were rendered uncontrollable by relatively few students. The administration's response was predictable as well as useless: "Call the parents." Lacking mechanisms to assert their authority and control disruptive behavior, teachers were reduced to complaining to their union, the United Federation of Teachers, (UFT), which could do little. Those who were more resourceful sought positions elsewhere.

The behavioral tone of the building was further corrupted by the frequency of raw violence, and not just that which occurred between gangs. The city's students were exposed to daily scraps in their neighborhoods, and it was not uncommon for fights to erupt over a minor slight. And teachers had to work in this environment, struggling to educate children whose minds were sometimes focused on the next rumble.

It is convenient to hold principals accountable for everything that happens, whether academic, disciplinary or criminal. But this doesn't absolve the Department of Education's, (DOE), chief bureaucrats; and the policies and practices that permitted the failing schools' slow decline bear some responsibility. Budgets, contractual mandates, due-process considerations, limited control over their enrollment and the fear of litigation constrained the principals' ability to effectively reform their institutions. This book addresses the constraints that Washington Irving and other large failing schools confronted as they struggled to provide a decent education, even as they were being phased out of existence.

I came to public education as a second career. I had been an academic before I walked into the then-Board of Education, (BOE), in downtown Brooklyn and, with my modest grasp of Spanish, (I would soon marry my Basque girlfriend), offered my services. I had earned a doctorate in international relations at NYU in 1987, and spent the next six years as a visiting or adjunct professor of government and political science. But by 1993 I had taught in seven separate colleges and universities, and had decided that my academic career was moribund. Two weeks after walking in to the BOE, I found myself in front of a classroom of Columbian, Central Ameri-

can and Dominican teenagers at Flushing High School in Queens, giving lessons on ancient civilizations, (about which I remembered little).

New York City was desperate for bilingual teachers to address the growing Hispanic student population that was overwhelming their resources. I had never taken an education class and was never mentored as a student teacher. Academics learn to lecture to college students by mimicking their own professors, and that is their only training in pedagogy. Teaching high school students requires a different repertoire, and despite my having none, the hard-pressed BOE gave me a provisional certificate which allowed me five years to complete the requirements for a permanent teaching license.

After one year at Flushing I came to Washington Irving, also as a bilingual social studies teacher. I would spend the next twenty years of my career there, observing its slow attrition until it passed into nothingness. But I continued to work in the DOE, and spent the next six years as an administrator "in excess," (a polite term for a supervisor whose appointment has vanished). During that time, I would be assigned to nine different high schools, some as august as Stuyvesant; others as troubled as Lower Manhattan Arts Academy, (LOMA).

Moving from school to school at the whim of the superintendent yielded more stress than the chaos at Washington Irving. So after twenty-seven years of service—and facing the prospect of being assigned to yet another basket case—I turned in my retirement papers. It was time to quit. I had worked in eleven different high schools and served thirteen different principals, which ultimately gave me a perspective that one could not purchase in any education program.

I began my career in the middle of a national crisis in education. Despite the inclination to paint a rosy picture of the past, public schools have always had their share of trouble. But numerous stresses confronted urban America in the post-war years that made a guarantee of quality education more tenuous. By the 1990s, the economic and sociological pressures were overwhelming, and the weakened institutional mechanisms that once supported a decent education revealed their flaws. The academic performance

of New York City's students was now ebbing while violence rose, exposing the system's failure to provide a safe venue for its pedagogical efforts.

Searching for remedies, education technocrats tried numerous palliatives. When those failed they focused their sights on the principals, replacing them with supervisors who were presumably better equipped to turn around a floundering school. When that didn't work they turned to the newest fashion in urban education, small learning communities, which offered a panacea for the ills of the archaic large high school model. A familiar pattern thus emerged: first replace the principals; when that failed, break the school up into smaller units.

The vetting process for school leaders also underwent changes. In the past a person would prove her mettle through many years of teaching before moving up to assistant principal and learning the art of supervision. After having spent significant time at this level she would then claim a principal's license and become a school leader. This long apprenticeship conferred legitimacy on a candidate: she would have a comprehensive understanding of the demands of an educational institution, and her leadership credentials would be unimpeachable. But that was no longer the norm in New York City, especially under the administration of the new mayor, Michael Bloomberg, where candidates with marginal experience could be advanced beyond their skills.

The break-up of the large schools between 2000 and 2015 elevated the urgency for more administrative talent. In 2007 Washington Irving had only one principal; when it was closed in 2015 the building had six different schools with as many principals. The proliferation of multiple institutions meant that administrators were drawn from myriad backgrounds—from education and other fields—with more than a few amateurs placed at the helms of new schools. And the change in leadership was not always pretty. Staff members often demonstrate subtle resistance to new leaders, especially if one is coming in to clean up Dodge. I witnessed several schools where the faculty made concerted efforts to undercut the endeavors of well-meaning if naïve principals, and it occasionally resulted in the new leader's ouster. And the frequent shift in leadership empowered the faculty, some of whom continued to work to professional standards while others exploit-

ed the weakness of the fledgling administrator to their own advantage. The end result rarely benefitted the students.

When changing principals proved ineffective, the next step was to phase out a failing school by attrition. Many of the large high schools had a history of academic success, but had succumbed to the city's practice of using them as dumping grounds for low achievers from far-off sections of the city. The old neighborhood-school model was giving way to "magnet" schools, and this had students commuting all over the city. The over-the-counters would place an additional burden on the schools' resources, since their academic achievement was compromised by their poor preparation and resentment at being there in the first place. Crime rose and the schools' academic statistics fell. Unable to find a viable solution, the only rational option to the DOE appeared to be the schools' dismemberment and closure.

Despite the administrative challenges of replacing large schools with smaller ones in the same building, the small-school model offered hope. Without the burden of huge enrollments, they could direct academic and guidance services more effectively. But their challenges were clear. They had to attract fourteen-year-olds to specific subjects as a prelude to a profession, so they offered popular themes such as law, business, computers, health, even cooking. The standard curriculum—which had produced generations of successful graduates—would now be in competition with courses that catered to a student's inner-self.

While the city was creating new schools and vivisecting large ones to make space for them, another player appeared on the stage to take advantage of this trend: charter schools. Offered as an alternative to traditional public education, (which was heavy with bureaucracy and burdened by labor-friendly contracts), these schools emerged as a variation on the small-school theme. And they frequently filled the vacuum left by the disappearing large schools, sharing space alongside their smaller public school colleagues.

There was a social cost to this slash-and-burn remedy. When schools were slated to phase out, the faculty began a death watch and were engulfed in an institutional ennui that affected both pedagogy and discipline.

With new schools and new principals filling the void, the once-unified institution now found itself on the defensive. Conflicts erupted over space and scheduling as the outgoing behemoth shrank beyond recognition and was invariably left under-resourced. And the now-decentralized centers of authority in the building resulted in administrative tensions and a noticeable compromise in tone.

The fallout of this policy saw a cost in human capital. As the large schools shrank they reduced their staff through attrition. If a tenured teacher did not pick up an appointment in another school, he would be assigned to the Absent Teacher Reserve, (ATR), the term quickly becoming a deprecation within the profession. Some of the teachers who ended up as ATRs were poor pedagogues and remained a drain on the city's budget. But those who were ethical and skilled professionals made important contributions to the schools they were temporarily assigned to, if the principal on the receiving end had the wit to recognize their value. But many of them would serve as glorified substitutes and do little more than take attendance five times a day—at full salary.

The most pressing issue that forced the closing of so many large high schools was the declining graduation rate. But many of the factors that depressed these numbers were beyond the schools' control. The weak standard for passage out of middle school is one example. Social promotion was common, and the high schools had to confront incoming ninth graders who in many cases were woefully unprepared.

Additional stress came from two other sources: special education and bilingual education. Federal legislation between the mid-1970s and late 1980s mandated that schools provide support for all students with disabilities. As time progressed the diagnosis of learning and behavioral disabilities became more common, and the programs expanded. But the burden fell mostly to the large schools, since the smaller ones claimed they could not offer appropriate services.

The growth of immigrant populations also impacted graduation. Encouraged by the urban political culture that saw English-only instruction as discriminatory, the schools were expected to offer English as a Second

Language, (ESL), as well as instruction in three academic areas in the students' own language. But many of them came to the country deficient in basic skills, and a majority of them failed to pass state exams, even when offered in their native tongue.

Several generations ago students had more options than the college track. The city had numerous vocational programs leading to a trade which complemented the education of students with limited interest in academics. But the political climate shifted in the 1960s, and vocational training was now viewed with suspicion. Its popularity waned in New York City, where no self-respecting politician would admit that not every student should go to college. And this inevitably pushed many students into inappropriate academic programs that almost certainly guaranteed their failure.

And fail they did, not in local class grades, (those were frequently inflated), but in the standardized exams offered by the Board of Regents. The state's response, (unable or unwilling to tackle social promotion and inappropriate curricula), was to keep the kids moving towards college with the Regents Competency Test, (RCT), an alternative (and easier) assessment. This placed additional pressures on school supervisors to boost their passing rates, fostering a practice of arbitrary and charitable scoring by the teachers, who, until 2013, graded their own students' exams.

There is an undeniable correlation between low graduation rates and safety. As the schools struggled to move their students on to college, they were also dealing with unprecedented levels of gang violence. The 1980s saw a surge in these incidents as the gangs brought the terrors of the streets into the schools—which could not eject them. And they remained there—oftentimes well past the age of graduation—to continue to tax an already overburdened system.

Racial friction sparked frequent and often fierce gang brawls. The gangs were dominated by two ethnic groups: Hispanics, (both immigrant and native born), and Blacks. There were myriad other ethnic groups in the system, (Asians, south Asians, Arabs, sub-Saharan Africans), but none demonstrated the same enmity towards each other as did Black and Hispanic students.

Although there had been uniformed BOE agents in the schools for years, the administration still struggled with security problems. As things deteriorated in the 1990s, law enforcement would emerge as an informal partner in school safety. Seeking more forceful remedies, the administration of Rudy Giuliani turned to NYPD and put the BOE's school safety division under the supervision of the police. This gave NYPD a permanent presence in the schools, and by extension this would automatically involve the courts. Some school administrators were timid about relying on law enforcement to assist with school discipline. But many, especially those who worked in buildings that were on the edge of chaos, welcomed their input.

The dependence on law enforcement reflected the DOE's weakness in controlling student behavior. It exposed how inadequate its institutional sanctions were in preventing the disorder that disrupted instruction and menaced student safety. Most schools had few penalties for minor infractions, except to call a parent, and only a violent offence warranted a suspension. New York State complicated matters in 2000 by mandating that suspended students receive in-school instruction every day for at least two hours. Of little educational value, it kept the troublemakers in school, many of whom wandered throughout the building, wreaking havoc.

Since students could easily access weapons, (mostly razors), scanning became the new normal in many large high schools. Some principals resisted this as an affront to innocence. It was difficult to rationalize, however, if their students were being menaced or mutilated by box cutters. Washington Irving introduced scanning in the mid-1980s. And despite the school's eventual dissolution and replacement by six SLCs, scanning remains in the building until this day. Despite the fall in crime and each principal's personal wish that it didn't crowd the elegant lobby, no administrator in Central would sign his name to the order removing it.

The city's ultimate response to crime in the schools came in 2004, when the Bloomberg administration created the Impact list: troubled schools that would receive additional security funding and a significant presence of armed police officers. While this seemed a logical response to a desperate situation, it also acknowledged the city's failure to create a school culture in which education could prosper without the support of

gendarmes. And Washington Irving was one of the first schools to earn this honor.

Both politicians and parents have found it easy to blame the education system for academic failure, and we have noted some of the institutional impediments to school improvement. But this ignores factors that have equal if not greater influence over student success; and it begs a discussion of variables over which the school system has no control.

The most common culprit is the student's social environment, and this must include economics, since poverty can burden the supportive climate necessary for intellectual nurturing. Adverse financial circumstances do not explain the whole story, however, and the system is a frequent witness to students who overcome dire economic conditions to excel in their studies. Stuyvesant High School, for example, had a large percentage of students who were at or near the poverty line. Between 2006 and 2016, thirty-three percent qualified for reduced-price or free lunch. Yet they managed to overcome humble economic origins and prosper.

Despite the stresses of living on the edge, numerous individuals have managed to overcome their circumstances, and many attribute this to the strong role of the family and its regard for schooling. But not everyone who claims to value the results of an education embraces the ethic necessary to achieve it. This was evident when I was a teacher and met with parents who believed they were fulfilling their role just by attending parent/teacher conferences. Bolstering a child's educational goals requires sacrificing personal time to create a supportive home environment. But not every child has parents with this level of commitment, and the schools have little control over this crucial factor that can either help or hinder a child's ability to learn.

At the same time it is unwise for school administrators or politicians to cast stones in that direction. Witness the short tenure of Cathie Black, one-time chancellor of the DOE under Michael Bloomberg. She had no greater background in education than her two predecessors, but she lacked their political acumen, which was evidenced one night in 2011. At a lower Manhattan task force meeting on overcrowded schools, she raised the need

for "some birth control."* Her already shaky hold on the position would not survive this moment of candor, and she was removed after three months on the job.

Disregarding sociological variables, some critics focus on individual responsibility. Academic education requires the ability to process abstract reasoning. This necessitates comprehension of symbolic thought and the exercise of impulse control. But concentration is hampered when the frontal lobe fails to control the urge towards pleasure, (or vengeance). And a student with these challenges finds it difficult to resist the stimulation that awaits in the hallways, let alone concentrate in a classroom.

A delicate question eventually surfaces: Are some students failing because of sociological factors or because of delayed personal development? The more pragmatic position focuses on the social environment, and some politicians have generated a tense polemic as they grappled with this issue. Mayor Bill DeBlasio, (2014-2021), addressed New York City's education challenges with a multifaceted approach. Recognizing that developing advanced cognitive skills requires early childhood support, he began a universal pre-K program in 2014. At the other end of the academic ladder, he sought to integrate the city's elite high schools. Acceptance to these schools requires high scores on the Specialized High School Admissions Test, (SHSAT), and nothing else. DeBlasio argued that this metric restricted the access of Black and Latino students, and proposed replacing it with a combination of state exams and class grades. Students who ranked in the top ten percent of their middle school would qualify; and this would balance the racial enrollment in schools like Stuyvesant and Bronx Science, which were dominated by Asians and whites.

This was poorly received in some quarters. I sat on the stage with the rest of the Stuyvesant administration at Carnegie Hall during the graduation ceremony in 2018 when Neil deGrasse Tyson, one of the country's foremost astrophysicists and the father of a graduating senior, raised this issue in his commencement speech. It fell on deaf ears for the Asian parents, who made up seventy percent of the parents association that year.

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*Garth Johnson, "Cathie Black's Solution for Crowded Schools? Birth Control," https://gothamist.com/news/cathie-blacks-solution-for-crowded-schools-birth-control

They viewed it as an attack on admissions standards and an attempt to satisfy a political agenda.

There is no singular cause of low student achievement, and resolving it is beyond the scope of this book. There are, however, many common issues that these schools confronted which brought them to the same unfortunate fate. This book is divided into four parts. Part I examines the social and historical pressures that confronted Washington Irving High School before it was declared an Impact school in 2004. It argues that these constraints made the school's failure a forgone conclusion. Part II looks at the city's attempts to correct the compromised security culture that confronted many high schools during this period. Part III considers the efforts of the city and state to stem the failing schools' long decline in academic performance. Part IV focuses on the subdivision of Washington Irving and the balkanization of the campus. It examines the subsequent tensions and traumas that affected the school as it shrank, and chronicles the school's inevitable phase-out with its associated social costs to students and staff alike.

Slow Death chronicles a school's decline, one which was repeated in large scale throughout New York City. The issues examined here should be seen within the context of the city's commitment to the small school model. But they should also be understood against institutions that did not conform to the fashionable paradigms of successful or failing schools. Being excessed in 2014, I saw the full spectrum of educational practice and malpractice. I saw large schools function admirably; I also saw small schools that exhibited the same pathologies as Irving. If I learned anything, it is that the stresses that fetter a school's pedagogical mandate have nothing to do with size.

Throughout this work I make frequent reference to school culture, or the weakness thereof. The viability of any social system requires that its members recognize the authority of key players—in this case teachers and administrators. This is reinforced through the socialization of youth and supported by viable sanctions for rule-breaking. This book contends that for many public high schools, this was their greatest failure. The inability to create strong institutional norms resulted in the chaos that jeopardized

student learning and safety, and the reasons for this cultural decay are explored throughout these pages.

Part I

The Challenge of Social and Historical Forces

(Please proceed to Chapter One.)

CHAPTER 1

PRELUDE TO FAILURE

> Education is the highest blessing bestowed on mankind. . . . When it takes a false turn which permits of correction, we should, one and all, devote the energy of a lifetime to its amendment.
>
> —Plato, *Laws*

THE BLOOMBERG ADMINISTRATION'S POLICY towards large failing schools put the burden of responsibility on the principals. But no school thrives or falters in a vacuum, and while the mayor's strategy was politically astute, it ignored the social and historical forces that brought these schools to their knees. To understand how a once-celebrated institution like Washington Irving could find itself struggling to get a majority of its students to graduate, it is instructive to examine the variables that the school could not control. This chapter looks at the slow decline of Irving over several decades, acknowledging social and historical influences as well as the school's effort to compensate for them with trendy pedagogical innovations. It examines the demographic changes that occurred after the Second World War, how this affected achievement, and describes the role of the staff during these shifts.

THE BUILDING

Washington Irving High School began as Girls Vocational High School in 1902 and was situated in a small building in lower Manhattan. In 1910 it moved uptown to Irving Place and 17th Street, where the city would construct a veritable cathedral of learning. In a nod to its location, Vocational Girls changed its name, taking that of the nineteenth century author, historian and one-time American ambassador to Spain. Originally eight stories

tall, an additional wing was built in 1935, adding another three stories and a library. The school now claimed two-thirds of a city block and could handle 2,400 students.[1]

The lobby's architecture demonstrated a reverence for public education. It was as wide as a city block, paneled in mahogany and lighted by gas lamps. A mezzanine was floored in marble and supported by mahogany-paneled columns. Twelve Barry Faulkner murals depicting early New Amsterdam/New York history graced the walls above the paneling.

The school's auditorium was accessed through the lobby. It was at the center of the building, holding over 1,500 seats, with 1,000 on the first floor and 500 in the wrap-around balcony. Its stage rivaled some of the great theaters of the day. The classrooms were on the second floor and above. Each floor had more than twenty classrooms, with a full complement of coat closets, cabinets, desks and the ubiquitous blackboards. The ceilings were tall, in most cases twelve feet high, and ample windows allowed natural daylight into the rooms.

Schools like Washington Irving were built all over the city to serve its myriad social classes. And they were a credit to the city government which saw the wisdom in investing in public education. But the twentieth century would take its toll on these palaces, and they would succumb to time, decay, socio-economic challenges and political manipulation.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the school was ninety years old. Little of the engineering infrastructure had changed and the building was unable to address the technical challenges of contemporary education. The electrical network of 1910 had only been slightly improved. Considering that a teacher of that generation relied on little more than a piece of chalk and a blackboard to educate high school students, there was no great de-

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[1] The site was three blocks south of Gramercy Park. This put the school among well-heeled neighbors who had little objection to a white, all-female student body coming to the neighborhood in crisp dresses. The attitude of the neighbors would change dramatically by the 1960s, however, as the shift in the racial character of the students reflected the increasing diversity of the city.

mand for electricity. Sixty years later the need for electrical outlets far outpaced their supply. By the 1990s, teachers would come to school with their own extension cords and power strips.

There was no air conditioning in the original building. Instead, architects relied on cross-ventilation. Every room featured large windows in the outside wall; louvered windows at the top of the inside walls controlled air flow during the warmer months. By 2014, most of the classrooms had air conditioners, but they would occasionally trip the circuit breakers.

Sociohistorical Influences

Washington Irving's student body was virtually all white when it opened in 1910. Italians and European Jews made up a large part of the immigrant pool during this period, and that was as diverse as it got. There were no Black or Latino students, although that would change by the 1940s.

The original curriculum of the school reflected the needs of the city's growing industrial base as well as its demands for a professional class. Washington Irving offered both academic and vocational studies. By the 1930s graduates would have to pass muster in science, math, social studies, English and a foreign language. They also had to study elocution, a subject little known today. There was no such thing as bilingual education; indeed, one not only had to speak English, but learn to speak it with proper diction.

As the century progressed, the schools saw a shift in the socioeconomic character of the student body. After World War II there was a large influx of Latin Americans from the Caribbean and Central America. Poor Blacks from the rural south also made their way to cities in the northern states, and their children swelled the ranks of the schools. But coming from school systems which favored whites, they arrived in New York deficient in basic academic skills. Both academic achievement and security were burdened by these new stresses, and the city was at a loss for remedies.

A far more radical change occurred at Irving in 1985, when the school admitted male students for the first time. They had congregated outside the building for years during entry and dismissal, attracted by the school's

abundance of estrogen. But admitting boys as registered students changed the equation and was at a minimum, unsettling. Some of the boys who came to Washington Irving were members of street gangs. And the facility with which they could get their hands on weapons mandated numerous security adjustments. By 1986 students had to scan their bags through x-ray machines and walk through metal detectors each morning. Those who set off alerts were unceremoniously hand-wanded. Washington Irving's decline was depressingly evident in the transformation of its once-glorious lobby: still paneled in mahogany, its marble floors were obscured by x-ray machines and metal detectors. With the frequent barking of school safety agents at recalcitrant students, the dignity of the lobby had descended to that of a bus station.

Academic Profile

By the 1980s the academic and security challenges of Washington Irving were overwhelming, and administrators responded by sequestering themselves in the relative safety of their offices. It is important to understand the limited options available to a principal in dealing with discipline.[2] While the ultimate sanction was a suspension, principals were hesitant to use this; it reflected in their yearly statistics, and that would deter better students from applying to the school. Consequently, most principals resorted to this mechanism only for the worst offenders, usually those involved in violence. Barring that, schools were reduced to calling in the parents for conferences.

While the city's schools were grappling with the combined problems of academic malaise and violence, the academic community responded with its own solutions. The most common was dividing large schools into small learning communities. The SLC model had a certain appeal. The ideal capacity of a high school would be under 500 students, so that the administration would get to know every student. Localizing the programs on

[2] Throughout this book, discipline refers to a student's aberrant behavior or the sanctions that a school levies on him.

specific floors would reduce the students' sense of anonymity as they navigated the building.

In 1992, the new principal, Robert Durkin, implemented a version of the SLC model at Washington Irving. The school would be broken up into "houses," mini-programs designed to support a student's long-term professional goals. Each house averaged four hundred students, and was overseen by its own assistant principal, coordinator and guidance counselor. And each student could now consider himself a member of a community with common goals. This would not only improve the school's academic statistics, but behavior as well. Though still a large school, Irving would now offer a more personal approach to education. Hopefully, its culture would change as well.

Washington Irving had a sizeable special-needs population, at one point upwards of 300 students. These kids were either learning or emotionally disabled, oftentimes both. The school had a department dedicated to these students, which took up the new wing on the third floor. Classes were capped at fifteen, giving a teacher more time to write individualized education plans, (IEPs—dense documents written in collaboration with teachers, counselors, assistant principals and parents that outline a child's disabilities and the services he must be provided). Considering that many special education classes had paraprofessionals assigned to work with the teachers, that made the ratio of students to adults as low as 8:1. In practice, it was even lower. Attendance for the special education community was poor, and it would not be uncommon to find a teacher and para giving a lesson to only five students.

Another burden on the school was the large immigrant population. While students came to Washington Irving from all over the globe, the majority of the school's foreign students came from Latin America. The challenge was twofold: teach these students the *lingua franca* in separate ESL classes; and teach them academic subjects in bilingual classes to prepare them for college. There was thus a concerted effort to find teachers who could teach the curriculum in Spanish.

There were numerous misgivings about the bilingual program. Most of the students were monolingual in Spanish, demonstrating little experience with the English language. And most teachers who taught these students did so exclusively in Spanish. But despite the investment in foreign-language pedagogues, the Board of Education's support for this program was weak, as was seen in the poor quality of the program's textbooks. When I complained about the texts, my supervisor told me to make do. I eventually acquired a softcover text used by a school system in Madrid, and spent the next few years photocopying pages from it every day.

The poor academic performance of Washington Irving students was evidenced in their state assessments. Besides their coursework, they had to pass five state Regents exams in the humanities and sciences. For those who could not do that, the state created the Regents Competency Test, (RCT), a watered-down version which gave hope to those with legitimate learning disabilities—or those who were just lazy. And for those with limited English proficiency, these exams could be taken in numerous foreign languages.[3]

When I became a social studies teacher in 1993, many schools had their students take both the Regents and RCT exams during the same assessment period. (The 1999 cohort was the last group of general education students to be eligible for the RCTs.) This put extraordinary pressure on the faculty, since they were responsible for both administering and grading the exams. But it gave the struggling student an opportunity to graduate and move on, even if he had not passed all five Regents.

The school had more demanding courses than those found in the Regents curriculum. Like most high schools, Washington Irving offered numerous Advanced Placement, (AP), courses ranging from the sciences to social studies. But Bob Durkin's crowning achievement was the implemen-

[3] Regents assessments are treated at more detail in Chapter Six.

tation of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program.[4] In 1996 he told us of his interest in bringing the IB to Washington Irving. It had impeccable academic standards; it could also desegregate the school. Despite being located in the heart of Gramercy Park, white students had disappeared from Irving by the late 1980s. Durkin saw the IB as a means of attracting them back into the building. We began the application process and were approved by the IB organization three years later.

Our efforts paid off, at least in the beginning. For the first few years we graduated scores of students: some with the coveted IB Diploma, others with IB credits for high placement on various course assessments. Three of our students from that first class today are practicing physicians. All of them were first-generation college students, and one of them came to the United States at the age of eleven with no English skills at all. We were proud of the program, and it gave us a reason to stay in a building that chased away teachers with weaker hearts. Despite its successes, however, it failed to desegregate the school. Regardless of the fact that we were the only public high school in New York City that offered the IB at the time, most white parents shied away when confronted with Irving's demographics.

As with most high schools, Washington Irving offered physical education as part of the New York State curriculum and had an afterschool sports program as well. But compared to better-funded high schools in the suburbs, Irving offered fewer extracurricular sports. Despite the constraints working against the coaches—inadequate supplies and an out-of-date physical plant—they managed to see a certain amount of success in the twenty years that I worked in the building. The basketball team excelled, and was lauded by the mayor's office on several occasions. The soccer team, strengthened by the large influx of immigrants to the city, won trophies year after year.

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[4] The IB program is a two-year college-prep program which involves seven courses in the sciences and humanities, plus a thesis at the end of the senior year. They are independently assessed and carry the same weight as AP exams. Its graduates frequently enter college as sophomores.

The school also offered a variety of extracurricular activities. Clubs were supervised by faculty advisors, and sometimes enjoyed the participation of outside organizations which came to work with the kids. These became an oasis for the students, and the clubs served an important option for a child in crisis. At first blush, one wondered why so many students stayed in school long after the average dismissal of 2:45 p.m. When I was appointed AP Security in 2003 and became better acquainted with the difficult lives some of them had at home, I stopped wondering.

Demographic Challenges

There are numerous reasons for poor academic achievement, ranging from the economic to the psychological to the cultural. Whatever the causes, the correlation between socioeconomic status and scholastic performance is strong, and these pressures were evident in much of the student body at Washington Irving.

The school's demographics reflected those of the city. The post-World War II exodus of white, middle class families to the suburbs left a void. It was readily filled not only by the Black migration from the south, but by the endless supply of immigrants who perceived that urban America promised economic opportunity. New York City had always been a beacon for the destitute, and although its manufacturing sector declined after World War II, it still dangled the promise of the American Dream. Of course, their children would have to be educated, and political pressures saw the implementation of education policies that encouraged even the most English-deficient student to go to college.

In 2003, Washington Irving was bursting at the seams with 3,200 students, about 800 above capacity. While the school was in an exclusive middle-class neighborhood, the families of Gramercy Park avoided it because of its racial demographics. Consequently, the students of Irving came from the city's poorer neighborhoods, traveling to school each day on free train passes. By the 1990s the era of the neighborhood high school was coming to

an end, and a mass exodus would occur every morning as hundreds of thousands of middle and high school students flooded the subways.

At this point the most dominant groups to make their way to Gramercy Park were Blacks and Latinos; Asians made up less than 6 percent; white students were a statistical nonentity. This reflected a trend that had been growing steadily in the last few decades. White parents sought schools that were perceived to be high achieving and safe. There were the elite schools like Stuyvesant and Bronx Science; then there were first-tier schools such as Beacon and Eleanor Roosevelt. But these schools were packed, and the city had fewer sites available where white parents felt comfortable sending their children. Many turned to parochial schools, which served numerous families that had little interest in religion; some were not even Catholic. Ironically, while this became an option for white families seeking a segregated venue, numerous Black families with the same concerns flocked to parochial schools as well.

As the racial character of Irving changed, so too did its economic demographics. In 2003 a hot lunch cost $1.50 to those who could afford it, which most Washington Irving students could not. In 2004, the year Irving was designated an Impact school, 77 percent of the student body qualified for free lunch. Less than 23 percent of the student body was above the poverty line, and this statistic spoke volumes about the challenges facing the school.

Poorer students presented numerous academic challenges. The possibility that they were meeting state standards in math and English when they entered as freshmen were low. In 2004 the majority of incoming Washington Irving students could not prove grade-level competency in either subject.[5] Blame could be cast at inadequate primary and middle schools; or it might have been a function of a chaotic home life. We did have students who overcame these constraints and excelled in their studies, but they were in the minority.

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[5] New York State Education Department information and Reporting Services.

Coming from neighborhoods where violence was common, poor students also put strains on discipline and safety. And this was exacerbated by the menacing elements of gangsta rap, (a subgenre of hip-hop which has been embraced by teenagers of all ethnic stripes). Violence, drugs and misogyny are common themes in gangsta rap. Its language is frequently aggressive and foul, and students, in full view of their teachers, gleefully repeated offensive lyrics while roaming the hallways. A more negative aspect of the genre is the use of the word "nigga," bleated by working-class Black teenagers who use it to deprecate and offend. And while a small minority in the Black community defends the word as a term of cultural affinity, I never heard a Black colleague use it. Indeed, one of our deans was a Black Muslim who sported a T-shirt that said: "Hip-hop kills."

The dress code of the gangs has been adopted by this genre, and this was mimicked by many of Irving's students. The well-dressed devotee has a standard uniform: loose, baggy jeans worn so low they barely cover the buttocks; untied, expensive sneakers; a fitted baseball cap with the label of the manufacturer and size still affixed to the brim; and a durag tightly wrapped around the head. More well-heeled aficionados adorned themselves with "bling": fake or real gold jewelry on the ears, necks, fingers wrists and teeth.

Having a large Latino presence among the student body was both refreshing and stressful. Hispanic students come from all over Latin America, although the dominant national group in the twenty years I was at Irving were the Dominicans. They brought a rich diversity to the school; and despite their linguistic challenges and poor academic preparation, (many had only received an elementary education in their own countries), it was enjoyable to work with them. But they were not fully welcomed by Black students, who were offended by the linguistic and cultural barriers. Latino students also tended to keep to themselves, and this reinforced the suspicion between the two groups. Ironically, as Hispanic students picked up English fluency, their speech patterns were influenced by Black teenage id-

iom. Consequently, Latino kids tended to use phrases, clichés and diction common in the parlance of Ebonics.

Parents and Guardians

The majority of the parents of Washington Irving's students had limited education themselves. They worked in various segments of the urban economy: laborers, retail workers, clerks who worked in business or city administration. And many of them were part of the underground economy, such as gypsy cab drivers or other jobs where English communication skills were not a requirement. In some cases, they were unemployable, due to mental illness, poor health or drug addiction.

Frequently, a student would only have one parent—usually the mother—at home. Fathers tended to be out of the picture for many reasons. When they did show up it could be problematic. Some fathers could demonstrate a high level of responsibility for their children. Other fathers could be irrational. In November 2003, before we were declared an Impact school, we called the father of a female student to the school for a conference. She was chronically disruptive and frequently cut class with her friends. Her father, a large man who wore dark clothing and a black durag, was articulate though angry. After meeting with him, we agreed that his daughter would be better placed in a different school. I called her into the office to share this decision with her. She wasn't having it. She had friends at Washington Irving and didn't want to leave them. Her father leaned over to her, came within an inch of her nose and said: "You'll go where the fuck I send you."

Single mothers had an uphill battle. Not well-educated for the most part, their struggles were numerous. Providing shelter, food and a moral compass is difficult enough for two parents. The single mother in marginalized communities must also protect her children's safety, and this is where many single-parent families encounter the greatest hurtles. Teenagers avoid their parents' company as they gravitate towards their peers. In poor neighborhoods, their friends are frequently unsupervised and on the

streets. A single mother's primary challenge is to get her kids back home at night. That done, she needs to tear them away from the internet or cell phones, and get them to do their homework. Many single mothers work odd shifts, and students frequently come home to an empty apartment. Which is to say that many of the city's youth are on their own when it comes to their own safety and academic discipline.

The state child welfare agency, Administration for Children's Services, (ACS), may occasionally remove a child from a home and place him or her with a foster parent. This frequently happens when parents are drug addicts or when the child lives with an adult who has demonstrated a physical or sexual threat. In any case, foster parents were frequent visitors to the deans' office when I was AP Security. And many of them were unable to control their charges at home, let alone influence their behavior at school.

Grandparents play a significant role. They often volunteer, but the courts frequently facilitate the arrangement, usually when the parent has been sent to jail or abandoned the child. The grandparents—most of them were grandmothers—were frequently old, sometimes ill, and struggled to raise the child alone. It gave us no pleasure to insist on a conference that would involve an aging guardian making the trek to Manhattan, navigating the stairs and trains of the subway system.

On the other side of the equation were guardians who were very young. It is not uncommon to see a mother of a fifteen-year-old who is barely 30 years old herself. This is the cycle of teen pregnancy that has frustrated sociologists and city agencies. In many cases these mothers lacked the support of a spouse. They were all undoubtedly concerned for their children. But they differed in their sense of responsibility, and this depended on the stress in their lives as well as their own maturity. Most were inadequately educated and poor. And when their children reached fifteen or sixteen years of age, many of them threw in the towel, allowing the cycle to repeat itself with another generation.

Parents who demonstrated poor impulse control were the most difficult to work with. Generalizations about socioeconomic status can be misleading; there were numerous poor, unmarried mothers who demonstrated stellar parenting skills; and there were as many couples whose commitment to the social development of their children was negligible. There was no way of predicting the level of support the school could expect when a parent walked through the door. But it would quickly become obvious whether the conversation would remain rational.

At times the tone of the conference revealed an undercurrent of racial tension. In 2003 a social worker had been walking in an isolated area on the 11th floor when he witnessed a boy and girl in a steamy embrace with their jeans down to their ankles. The girl ran out of sight. The boy, however, was not so quick; he was identified and brought to the deans' office. After filing a report we called his home, informed his mother of the incident and told her that he would be suspended for three days. She took this in and hung up. She called back several minutes later, threatening to sue the school for defamation of character. A few days later we had a conference with her. She defended her son aggressively and then played the race card: "This is just another example of a white man taking down a Black boy." When we introduced her to the witness and pointed out that he was also a person of color, she quipped: "Whatever."

Racial tension was ever-present at parent conferences, sometimes evident, sometimes subtle. I was sensitive to the fact that I was a white, middle class male who was frequently viewed by students and parents with distrust. We tried to get the parents to understand that the disciplinary consequences facing their children were intended to hold them accountable and make them grow up. But this was not always successful, especially with parents who saw themselves as victims. During the latter part of 2003, when Washington Irving was imploding under the stresses of gang violence, parents swarmed the deans' office seeking transfers for their children. When we couldn't serve one father quickly enough, he screamed at us: "If this was a white child we wouldn't be waiting so long."

Some parents, lacking confidence in the administration, took matters into their own hands, especially when their children were involved in fights. They would first demand to see the other child; that we could not do. Then they would demand a meeting with the other child's parents. This was also poorly advised, considering the challenge of controlling adults in a conference room when they all believed their children to be wronged.

While we were able to prevent confrontations between parents inside the school, it was impossible to control the surrounding streets. In October 2003 we had a conference with the parents of a female student who had been in a fight. We informed them of her suspension. Since she had painted herself as a victim, they cursed us out and took her home. They showed up again a few hours later, this time in a van with several adult males—all bearing baseball bats. Fortunately, NYPD was a permanent presence at the school and arrested two of the men—who claimed that they were only there to guarantee the safety of their niece.

Staff

As the student body changed, the character of the staff did as well. For the better part of the twentieth century, three distinct groups exclusive of white Protestants dominated the ranks of the Board of Education: the Irish, Italians and Jews. By the 1990s, the faculty had become increasingly diverse, with Blacks and Latinos claiming a significant presence. Washington Irving was no exception, and its faculty—frequently topping one hundred and sixty persons—reflected that.

A high school teacher must complete thirty-two college credits in a subject area, such as math or history, as well as twenty-two credits in education. But this does not guarantee that a teacher will have classroom expertise. In New York City high schools, a pedagogue may teach two classes in which they are not credentialed. And desperate principals have been known to assign chemistry classes to English or physical education teachers when they were strapped for staff. In a large school like Washington Irving, this would happen frequently.

Paraprofessionals assist the school in both administration and pedagogy, but their educational efforts are restricted. Their certification only requires a high school diploma, so they are rarely better educated than the students. Family paras work in the offices and serve as liaisons with the students' parents. Education paras work with the teachers in special education classes. They assist with specific students during the course of a lesson, and many of them rise to the occasion. But it was not uncommon to observe some of them reading a newspaper during a lesson.[6]

At Irving, ten assistant principals supervised the academic departments, guidance, management and security. The majority of them were women. The youngest was in her thirties; the oldest was in her late sixties. Many assistant principals would eventually seek to become principals or work in the bureaucratic complex of central administration, (Central). But others were content to remain APs, not hungry enough to pursue the higher pay and headaches associated with school leadership—especially when the Bloomberg administration raised the ante for poorly performing schools.

Washington Irving's guidance counselors were house-dedicated. Their first responsibility was to see that their students had appropriate programs. This was reasonably simple for students in the ninth grade, since the curriculum was determined by the Board of Regents and most took the same complement of classes. Those who had passed the Regents in algebra or biology in the eighth grade, however, would have to be programmed for the subject's more advanced courses. But Washington Irving only had a handful with those skills, so setting up a program for the majority of the cohort was easy. The challenge came with the older students. Considering the poor passing rate, counselors had to contort programs to address their students' previous failures. Summer school complicated this, and there was always a mad dash to fix programs at the end of August. Invariably, mistakes were made and September was chaotic.

[6] This was before the advent of smartphones.

Guidance also deals with students' emotional health. Sensitive and sympathetic, counselors are the first line of defense for a student in crisis. The issues that the counselors deal with are broad, ranging from slight depression over poor grades or a failed love affair, to more serious problems of abuse by guardians. When cases of sexual assault came to the deans' office, it was the guidance staff that brought the issue to us, since the students felt more comfortable relating to them.

Supporting the guidance mandate for mental health were three full-time social workers and a part-time psychologist. The social workers would counsel students on a range of issues, oftentimes seeing a student just once. Sometimes, however, they would meet with a student on a regular basis. We would occasionally recommend to a parent that a student see a social worker, and the parents never refused the help.

Social workers frequently worked with "at-risk" students, a term applied to those who presented chronic disciplinary challenges. One social worker met daily with the students of the Achieve Now Academy, a program for troubled students who were at least sixteen years old and had few credits. Classes met in the afternoons and evenings. The group began their day with a bonding session: the social worker had the students sit in a circle and pound on conga drums in unison to strengthen their egos. Self-esteem achieved, they were then released to class.

Counselors and social workers often found themselves in opposition to the deans, who took a dimmer view of bad behavior. Deans divide their time between teaching and maintaining discipline in the school. The average dean at Washington Irving only taught two classes a day in his subject area; the rest of the time was reserved for security and discipline. The challenge was to post the deans so the entire building was covered. But this was hampered by the UFT contract which restricted work to no more than three periods at a time. If a dean had two classes in a row, he could not be assigned more than one patrol subsequent to that.

This occasionally brought the deans' office into conflict with the assistant principals. Several of the deans taught mathematics and science, the subjects of greatest academic deficiency at Washington Irving. We therefore had to negotiate with the APs of both departments to release these deans during specific periods so that certain floors could be covered.

The deans patrolled the hallways and cafeteria. They also processed detentions, submitted suspensions, supervised entry and dismissal, and worked with a class of kids whose behavior ranged from slightly challenging to criminal. Deans would frequently testify in superintendent's suspension hearings, (held off-site), and occasionally in court. Washington Irving had so many superintendent suspensions that a dean was dedicated to these cases alone. He would investigate the incident, put the charges together, and then represent the school at the hearings—sometimes as many as three in one day.

The best deans got to know the students and their parents well. They frequently conducted conferences, relieving the ambivalent assistant principals of the burden. Several of the deans also coached sport teams. Their role on the field and the gyms allowed them to establish a deep bond with their students. The paradox was that those students who could benefit most from this relationship were automatically excluded from participating in sports due to their poor grades.

Supporting the staff were poorly paid school aides. (In 2023, the average hourly rate was $16.50.) The school depends on them for controlling traffic in the building, buttressing the deans' efforts in the hallways and cafeterias, running the elevators, moving tons of books, furniture and other equipment, and assisting the office staff. One would think that with a pay scale that low their attrition would be high. But most school aides stayed for years because of the generous health insurance that would be unavailable elsewhere.

Numerous outside agencies assisted Washington Irving in helping kids overcome academic and social issues. The Federation Employment and Guidance Service, (FEGS), worked with kids from the evening school,

offering social work, academic tutoring and job counseling. The business community was also a strong presence. Con Edison employees would come to the school during lunch hour to tutor in the library. The Union Square Partnership and YMCA had permanent offices on the first floor and sponsored after-school activities which kept the kids off the streets. The most prominent business partner was the law firm of Cleary Gottlieb Steen and Hamilton, which had a long association with Irving. Their assistance ranged from tutoring to making space available in their offices in the posh financial district for SAT prep classes.

Despite the augmented roles for staff members and input from the business community, Washington Irving continued on its downward trajectory. And many large high schools in New York City had the same issues. Confronting academic malaise, the schools all followed the same prescriptions that came out of Central, and these are examined in Chapter Seven. But Irving's modus operandi for dealing with the tempest in its halls and classrooms would be radical in comparison.

Confronting an epidemic of violence and chaos, the Bloomberg administration quickly lost tolerance for students who were trashing the public school system. It would eventually give school administrators carte blanche—within legal parameters—to deal with those who menaced decent kids and their teachers. And to understand why the mayor and chancellor's offices permitted the school this license, it is instructive to examine in detail the mayhem that had become Washington Irving.

CHAPTER II

THE POVERTY OF DISCIPLINE

> There is no greater evil than anarchy.
> —Sophocles, *Antigone*

IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO EXAGGERATE the menacing environment of Washington Irving leading up to 2004. Visitors to the school were often left aghast at incidents they witnessed. One day several Marines were in the lobby, waiting to organize a recruitment workshop. Observing a dean being cursed out by a violent student, their sergeant later said he wouldn't do that job for a million dollars.

From the perspective of those who were trying to bring order to the school, it sometimes called to mind the right panel of Hieronymus Bosch's triptych, *The Last Judgment*: mayhem waiting in every corner. A kid could still get a decent education if cloistered in the classroom of a skilled teacher, as they were able to shut out the building's disorder for forty-five minutes. But not every student was in class, and not every teacher had those skills. And the lack of viable sanctions for aberrant behavior permitted this chaotic culture to flourish.

ANARCHY IN THE HALLWAYS

A school with over three thousand students has an imposing task: getting kids to class on time, guaranteeing a quality education and ensuring the safety of all. This mandate is easier in a school where students are goal-oriented and self-disciplined. It becomes more difficult in a building where an inner-city teenager is unable to resist the allure of his friends in the hallways.

When kids first come to high school they are reserved—if only because they have yet to assess social boundaries and the viability of sanctions for transgressions. For the first few days, even the toughest teenagers to enter Washington Irving showed self-restraint. They received a program card, had an initial conference with their counselor and made an effort to attend classes. But as time progressed they would assimilate to the culture of the school and realize that its sanction mechanisms were weak. And this resulted in significant behavioral changes that exposed the school's loose grip on tone and safety.

The hallways were the students' social Mecca, and cutting class was endemic. Up until 2004 it carried no sanctions, and the hallways were still mobbed after the late bell. Since the classroom promised humiliation for one who could not perform academically, there was no reason for a student who was doing poorly not to hang out in the hallways or staircases. These spaces offered a social life and peer reinforcement, sex and drugs. And considering the way the gangs congregated in various sites around the building, they also promised violence.

A high school's hallways tell a great deal about its student culture, and those of Washington Irving spoke volumes about the administration's failure to control them. Before my tenure with the DOE, schools were able to place sufficient personnel in common areas to supervise students. In many cases these positions were held by teachers during one of their off-periods. But that ended with the Circular 6 addendum to the 1998 BOE/UFT contract, which eliminated mandatory assignments for teachers. These now had to be negotiated between the principal and the UFT chapter leader, and it served to reduce the adult presence in the hallways and cafeterias.[1] The teachers disappeared into the relative security of their lounges or offices, and the students roamed at will, unchallenged except by the most valiant adults.

[1] Each school elects a UFT faculty representative. They are commonly referred to as the chapter chair or chapter leader.

When boys arrived in the 1980s, some began using the lockers to store narcotics and weapons. The administration's response was to remove the lockers, and this resulted in a further decay in school tone. Students are usually loaded down with heavy books. Added to this their heavy coats during the winter, and a kid is now burdened with a significant load to trudge around the building. Every year the corridors would resemble an exodus of refugees: three thousand hallway Bedouins, walking the building with oversized book bags and heavy coats, eight periods a day.

The tense situation of the hallways was exacerbated by students arriving late. Many came from the outer boroughs, and used the capricious New York City subways to get to school. Anyone who was late blamed it on the trains, and only a slim majority of students ever got to their first-period class on time.

There were also students who were late because it interfered with their social plans. Many students socialized with friends either on a street corner or in one of the many coffee shops in the neighborhood. Others found an inconspicuous area to smoke marijuana. Ultimately, in the early 2000s, only sixty percent of the students on any given day were on time. Of those who were late, some would eventually make it to their class, while others roamed the building. And the staff could do nothing more than repeat the tired mantra: "Get to class."

The tone in the school was also compromised by vandalism. Graffiti was everywhere. Completely incomprehensible phrases—often accompanied by violent or sexual imagery—plagued the bathrooms and staircases. Any flat surface was vulnerable, including floors and ceilings. In response, the custodial office instructed its evening crew to paint over graffiti whenever it appeared. Consequently, Washington Irving's corridors and staircases were a patchwork of disparate colors.

The most costly vandalism at Washington Irving involved an epidemic of broken glass. When the building was constructed in 1910, its scissor staircases were lighted by gas lamps. Divided by glass panels from floor to ceiling, they permitted gas and window light to illuminate both

sides. By the 1990s it was common sport for students to break these panes by kicking or punching them, leaving dangerous shards on the floor and handrails. The panes were wire-reinforced, and this left sharp pieces of glass sticking out from the gaping hole left by the suspect's foot. If this occurred during passing between classes, the danger to the rest of the community was imminent.

The nurse's office saw two types of victims of broken glass: those who had accidentally come into contact with it while using the stairs; and those who had broken it with their fists. The injuries were tell-tale signs of who did what, with abrasions and lacerations on the knuckles raising suspicions. Those students were suspended, but not before they, (and their victims), were patched up in the hospital.

The security of property was another casualty of hallway disorder. As students went largely unchallenged in the halls, some of them searched for anything of value in unsupervised classrooms and unattended offices. Through bitter experience, staff members learned that if desks and closets were not locked, valuables would disappear into greedy teenage hands. If it was worth something, it would be taken. Not every thief stole to convert his plunder to cash, however; some stole to demonstrate their level of moral decay to their peers, (which in gangsta subculture inversely translates into status).[2]

Burglaries were not the only form of theft. Students would be mugged, occasionally in the seclusion of the staircases, and frequently on the school's surrounding streets. These thefts were almost always gang-related. They usually involved one victim, but rarely involved just one perpetrator. Suspects would wait in secluded areas for their prey. They would surround a student and menace him for a wallet or other item of value. If a victim proved valiant, the suspects would pummel him, relieving him of his property and leaving him with significant bruises as a reward for his resistance.

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[2] Throughout this work we use the word "gangsta," which is common in the vernacular of the ghetto, instead of the conventional "gangster."

Bringing suspects to justice was often frustrated by a poor description of the perpetrators or the victim's fear of retaliation. The most common refrain in gangsta culture was: "Snitches get stiches." When the school was outfitted with surveillance cameras throughout the building in 2004, however, our success rate in identifying suspects increased considerably.

Despite the assistance of video surveillance, the hallways remained dangerous, and their safety was further compromised by the school's five elevators. Students would gather in unruly mobs while waiting for them. The SSAs moved closer to the elevators during passing, but there were never enough agents. Fights would frequently break out, and in one case a girl had her hair set on fire, burning her afro down to the scalp.

Fire is a threat the schools take seriously, and this is supported by the state mandate to affect twelve fire drills a year. When the alarm is pulled, strobe lights flash, a harsh sound pierces the halls and everybody exits the building. This takes about ten minutes, an inconvenient though necessary precaution. Those with little commitment to their education would sometimes pull the alarms on a dare, forcing an evacuation. Since every floor had four or more alarm stations, it was easy to pull the lever and not get caught. False alarms went off regularly—sometimes twice a day.

Occasionally, there were real fire events in the building. Vandals knew few boundaries during this period. SSAs confiscated cigarette lighters when they were brought into the building. But matches do not register on metal detectors, and students could bring them in more easily. Their usual targets were in the bathrooms or staircases. It was not uncommon to respond to a fire and find toilet paper burning in a sink. Report cards also met the match with regularity.

There were fires that threatened more than just porcelain sinks. The more troubled student would seek to make a bigger statement, and this would involve a fire on a bulletin board, either in the hallway or inside a classroom. The threat was not so much from the fire or the smoke itself; these were easily extinguished. The danger was in the students' response.

It only takes a little smoke to provoke a stampede, and any firefighter can attest to the hazards presented by a mass exodus through a narrow egress.

The Cafeteria

Stresses in any educational institution can usually be found on a concentrated scale in the cafeteria, a place with the least adult supervision and the fewest boundaries to teenage excesses. Washington Irving's cafeteria was located on the 4th floor, with large tables which could sit ten at a time. Most days, there was seating space for about four hundred students.

As a closed campus, students could not leave the building during lunch and had to go to the cafeteria to satisfy their hunger. With over three thousand students, the school arranged for six lunch periods a day. The first began at 10:10 a.m., and whether you were hungry or not, this was your one chance to eat. And you had to share the space with five hundred other kids—in a site with a seating capacity for only four hundred.

The cafeteria had four doorways, but only one was used for entry; the rest were used as exits. Entry was monitored by school aides, whose only job was to keep out students who belonged elsewhere. The access protocols were weak. Students had to scan their ID cards at the doorway to get in. While this might be adequate for checking nuns into a church, it failed when confronted by five hundred anxious teenagers crowding the hallway. Considering the mob on the other side of the doorway, the aides tried to get the kids in as fast as possible—and cutters got in easily.

The staff expected students to be courteous, which is to say we hoped they would throw away their trash. This was ambitious, however, and long before I became an AP the school had given up on teaching table manners. About fifteen minutes before the end of the period, staff members would push garbage cans around the tables and coax the students to dispose of their trash. Some kids were respectful and left their areas clean. Others were oblivious if not contemptuous of this request and left piles of half-eaten meals and other detritus in their wake.

The most glaring flaw in security in the cafeteria was the weak staff presence. I was assigned cafeteria duty in 1997 and understood my colleagues' apprehensions. Being surrounded by cursing teenagers was stressful enough. Teachers tended to ignore rude behavior, since reproaching an offensive student could invite an assault upon one's dignity. The cafeteria's ambience, therefore, was occasionally just shy of a riot—and it became one whenever a fight broke out.

By the late 1990s, it had become more difficult to assign teachers to the cafeteria, and virtually none of them volunteered for it. Teachers could list up to three possible assignments for their "professional period," and only the rarest would choose the cafeteria. In 2003 the principal tried to address the inadequate staff presence by assigning her assistant principals to the site. But this met stiff resistance, and one AP threatened to grieve it through the supervisors' union, the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, (CSA).

The SSAs also avoided postings in the cafeteria. They reasoned that its chaos resulted from the DOE's poor policies, and they resisted the administration's request for more agents in the site. They maintained a token presence at the doorway, and only went inside when violence erupted. With no SSAs inside—and precious few other adults—the cafeteria was under-supervised. It was a perpetual accident waiting to happen.

Teenage Hormones

Every culture socializes its youth on the boundaries of appropriate sexual behavior, and in most cases these norms involve a regard for privacy and responsibility. These are frequently breached by teenagers, however, and the students of Washington Irving were no exception. Many of Washington Irving's students came from homes with inadequate parental role models. It was not uncommon for a student's father not to be involved in his life. Nor was it uncommon for a student's mother to have an adult male living in her home who assumed the role of stepfather. Some stepparents were excellent guardians, but the consensus among young people on the edge of

poverty was that these adults could be insensitive, cruel, even violent. A common threat among boys was: "I'm gonna treat you like my stepson."

Poor families see a greater transiency among adult partners. Single mothers who are economically destitute frequently attach themselves to partners who offer companionship, economic security and love. But these relationships can be fleeting, and when a mother is left pregnant she has even less stability than before. The cycle ensues, and the message to her children is that sex is common and expected from someone who is vulnerable.

Any teacher in a school with an indigent population understands the pressures on kids to have sex, and has witnessed counter-productive parental influences. When I was a teacher in the 1990s, a dean had discovered two students having sex on the staircase next to my classroom. The boy's parents failed to show up for a conference, but the girl's mother did attend. She was single, clearly overwhelmed, and it was questionable whether she could bridle her child's hormones. Her only regret was that her daughter did not seek more privacy.

The music subculture has created another form of sexual pressure on teenagers. Earlier music genres had prohibitions against frank sexual language. Before the 1970s performing artists used symbolism and metaphor to communicate sexual motifs, which titillated but still satisfied the censors. Today's music, however, can be replete with manifest sexuality. And this is supplemented by the internet, where any child with a cell phone can access the most explicit imagery.

Many public schools took a utilitarian approach to the new sexual mores, campaigning to restrict pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Washington Irving's clinic and nurse's office counseled the students—usually girls—on pregnancy and contraception. They plastered the building with posters of teenagers urging the use of condoms. While the intent was protection, it was also perceived by teenagers to sanction

casual sex. And it sometimes turned ugly.

Washington Irving saw numerous incidents of sexual assault, and the victims were invariably girls. They would report an incident to their counselors first. The AP Guidance and AP Security would then interview the student and determine the viability of her statement. (Only on the rarest occasion did we conclude that no assault took place; the student would be recommended for counseling instead.) Once the school has an idea of what occurred, phone calls are made to the child's home and NYPD. When the police are brought in, there is a sequence of responses. Uniformed officers first speak with the victim. After the initial interview, they call the Special Victims Unit, which will instruct the officers to wait with the girl while they come to the school. They then decide whether she should be taken to the hospital, and this could involve a treatment of injuries as well as a rape test. When they believed the student to be credible, (and this was not always given, as victims sometimes recanted their original stories or refused to testify), they would move to arrest the perpetrator, usually in the school the next day.

As NYPD investigates the allegations, so does the school. A suspect would therefore find himself facing justice in two agencies: the criminal courts and the DOE. This would occasionally confuse the parents, and we frequently had to explain to them that once their son had served his suspension he still had to face the law.

Narcotics

Compared to other issues, the use and sale of drugs in Washington Irving ranked low. Violence was its principle concern, and while drug use occasionally fueled it, narcotics were viewed more as an annoyance. Marijuana was the most common drug. Students would bring in weed either for their own consumption or for sale: the school represented an open market for teenage entrepreneurs.

It was common for students to smoke a quick joint in the bathroom. When that site was unavailable students would find space within the laby-

rinth of staircases. Numerous times during the day the walkie-talkies would crackle with a request to investigate "a strong smell of weed." Deans and school safety agents would respond to the site, usually finding nothing but a haze of acrid smoke.

There were times, however, when students left themselves no means of escape. Three were once caught inside an air-shaft module on the sub-roof. When they heard an SSA coming up the stairs, (he had found it suspicious that the staircase gate on the eleventh floor had been bent outwards), they climbed into the ventilation unit and closed the access port. Inside was a series of shafts that descended twelve stories. The students, dazed by the effects of the weed, huddled in the dark on a couple of wooden planks that stood between them and their Maker.

Most of the weed that came into the building was wrapped in small plastic bags and was easily hidden anywhere on a person. The most common place was inside the sweatband of a cap. Other enterprising students used pants cuffs, while girls would hide weed inside their bras. The most daring hid their contraband in the crotches of their pants, reasoning that no self-respecting SSA would move his hands that far up their legs. They were wrong, and scores of students were relieved of their contraband by uninhibited agents or cops.

Violence

The issue that put Washington Irving in the newspapers was the prevalence of violence in the hallways, classrooms and the surrounding neighborhood. Violent incidents were a daily occurrence, to which nobody in the school was immune. The suspects of assaults were virtually always students, while the victims ranged from fellow students to administrators.

Fighting occasionally happened in a classroom. Teachers knew to call the front desk for help, but the SSAs did not always respond. The building has eleven floors, and before Washington Irving was designated an Impact school in 2004, there were only fifteen SSAs in the building. During morning entry, eight agents were posted to the lobby to handle student traffic. Most of the rest were posted at the building's vulnerable doorways, so there were few agents left to patrol the building until mid-morning. If a fight broke out it could take several minutes before they reached the scene.

The UFT would frequently caution teachers not to get involved when students fought. But they did, especially the male teachers, who reasoned that their status conferred upon them an immunity when coming between two brawlers. And at times this was the case: when teenagers fight, their blows are aimed at each other, not at the adult. However, when the students are too frenzied fists can land anywhere, and the adult would be chastened by his bruises.

The UFT chapter chair frequently ignored his own advice against interference. One day he and I were in the cafeteria when a fight broke out between two large boys. We ran across the room, pushing the voyeurs out of the way in an effort to get to them. We threw ourselves into the mix and separated the two bruisers long enough for SSAs to take over. When I caught my breath I said to him: "I thought you said that teachers shouldn't get involved in fights." He was too winded to respond.

Sometimes violence was directed squarely at teachers themselves, usually by students with profound psychological issues. These students would push a teacher when challenged for an ID card or a hall pass, sometimes causing dislocated joints and contusions. Students believe that they are untouchable, and the more psychotic showed little reluctance in menacing staff members—male or female—with violence. Verbal assaults such as "Get the fuck outta my face" or "I will smack the shit outta you" were common preludes to a blow.

Among the staff, the deans were the most frequent victims of violence. While their job put them in harm's way, many did not shy away

from physical confrontations. When a dean encountered a student hanging out in a staircase, he would ask for a pass. If it wasn't produced the dean would next ask for identification, and this increased the level of tension. Among the students who failed to produce an ID or a program, many of them tried to walk away. The student was now regarded as an intruder, so when he tried to leave the dean would step in front of him; and that is when the ghetto emerged.

"Fuck outta here! Get the fuck outta my face" was the usual response by the student, prompting the dean to radio for assistance. The student would then try to bypass him while cursing and smacking his hands close to the dean's face. Meanwhile the dean would be doing his level best to hold the student until SSAs arrived. The confrontation often became physical, the student chest-butting the dean or pushing him away while screaming: "Don't touch me! Fuck outta here! I will fuck you up! I will smack the shit outta you!"

One dean was pushed by an irate student, which caused him to slam the back of his head against a wall. This resulted in a large contusion and required hospital treatment. I admired his professionalism, since he was larger than the student and could have easily overpowered him. When I asked how he was the next day, he responded: "For this I went to college?"

It was the violence among students, (often three fights a day), that earned the school a distinguished place on the Impact list. Any number of issues could provoke a fight and virtually all of them could have been avoided in a school system with a population that was not in constant crisis. But a majority of Irving students were from the inner city, where the tendency toward violence was ingrained in their subculture. And every day the ghetto would visit the school, bringing its social pathologies with it.

Some of the violence was provoked by insults that students communicated through emails and text messages. Their indignation transmitted like a virus, which grew even worse after the launch of Facebook in 2004. Friends of the offended parties would fan the flames. Taunts would rage

through the night, and explode the next day when the aggrieved parties confronted each other at school. The smear of being "pussy" was the final gauntlet, and no self-respecting inner-city teenager, male or female, would let this slight go unanswered.

Fights among boys usually resulted in black eyes, contusions, even broken bones. But fights among girls, (which accounted for two-thirds of those in almost every school I worked in), were more vicious. Their trademarks were numerous scratch marks on the face, neck, chest and arms, (occasionally requiring stitches), and clumps of hair on the ground. Not content just to ruin a pretty face, girls set about scalping each other, pulling out each other's weaves and braids, which were hailed as trophies by the victor. Girls went into battle with their vulnerable hair wrapped up inside a scarf; they also removed earrings to avoid torn earlobes. Seeing a girl walking down the hallway like this, especially when accompanied by an agitated group of friends, suggested a brawl was about to happen. (When the chancellor gave us carte blanche to tighten up the school in 2004, one of the things we prohibited was the wearing of scarves or bandanas.)

Another source of tension occurred between Black and Hispanic students. This conflict is part of New York City's history of discord among ethnic groups, which predates even the Irish immigration of the 1840s. Representing the city's two major underclasses, Blacks and Hispanics competed for space, resources, attention and respect. While Washington Irving had other identifiable ethnic groups—Asians and South-Asians—they were more inclined to assimilate and less prone to confrontation.

This tension was inadvertently exacerbated by the DOE's bilingual education program, which reinforced the segregation of Hispanic students. They would travel around the school *en masse*, speaking Spanish and rarely socializing with other students. One of Irving's greater failings—and this can be said of many New York City schools—was its inability to create structures in which students were forced to integrate despite their social inclinations. The Hispanic students' only opportunity to mix with those from other backgrounds was in the cafeteria or gym: in the cafeteria they

stuck to themselves; in the gyms the language differences only heightened suspicions.

These tensions would often erupt into violence. There were frequent fights, either between individuals or between gangs. Despite mediation and counseling, there was little success in ameliorating this enmity. This was a broader sociological issue requiring cultural shifts which could only be achieved through institutional changes. As long as the school supported structures that kept these groups separate and distinct, no amount of ad hoc counseling would be effective. And since disenfranchised immigrants saw the bilingual program as an affirmation of ethnic dignity, few politicians or DOE bureaucrats would oppose it.

Some fights involved serious physical trauma, and this initiated a trip to the emergency room, usually at Beth Israel Hospital. This involved split lips, gashes, the occasional dislocated shoulder or broken jaw. (A broken thumb was an indicator that the victim was not completely innocent.) Hospital runs became so frequent in 2003, it seemed as if a child were being put in an ambulance every day.

Gangs

While school should be a refuge, Washington Irving could be a microcosm of the worst elements of the inner city. With the exception of the specialized schools, virtually every large high school in New York City had street gangs. The larger ones had members throughout the city; the smaller ones were loosely organized with indistinct hierarchies. What they shared in common was a sense of alienation from conventional society and contempt for civil authority. Marginalized teens from the ghetto were ripe for recruitment.

These gangs were often ethnically based. It was not unusual to find Latin American students gravitating towards each other because of their patrimony. At other times, however, geographic imperatives were more relevant, and many housing projects produced countless street gangs whose *raison d'être* was the protection of their turf. Ironically, where the

schools had failed to integrate a diverse ethnic community, this type of crew would succeed, if only for self-protection from outsiders—or to commit the occasional felony.

The larger gangs could claim membership in the hundreds. Many of them began in jail, a ripe environment for violent criminal associations. They city's ghettos were receptive to them, and as they widened their membership to include teenagers, they infested the school system.

Washington Irving had three major street gangs in the late 1990s: the Bloods, the Crips and the DDPs, (Dominicans Don't Play). They were a fraction of the student population, but their tendency toward violence made them appear ubiquitous. The Bloods and Crips were Black; the DDPs were Latino. Most of the Bloods and Crips were African-American, although it was not unusual for them to have members of the West Indian community. The DDPs were either recent immigrants or second-generation Dominicans who lived in one of New York's many Hispanic neighborhoods. An organization that offers protection, ethnic pride and the promise of respect to an alienated teenager is irresistible, and many good kids fell for the gangs' allure.

In 2003 it was still fashionable to wear gang colors: the Bloods had red; the Crips, blue; and the DDPs, red, white and blue, (in homage to the Dominican flag). The typical gang uniform involved beads and a bandana in the associative colors. The beads were worn around the neck, wrists or ankles, and their pattern identified the gang member's place in its hierarchy. The bandanas were worn on the head, wrist, ankle, or hung out of the pocket of one's jeans. A durag might be substituted for a bandana, though this was more common among Black students.

The gangs greeted each other with hand signals. After we went Impact in 2004, we would review video of known gang sites in the building and compile dossiers on students who flashed gang signs. The Bloods congregated in the southwest corner on the third floor, directly in front of the English department. They would assemble during passing, appearing as menacing as they could with little intention of going to class. They also

staked out turf outside the building. Sixteenth Street and Irving Place was the busiest intersection in that neighborhood at 2:45 p.m., when most classes ended. Students making their way to the subway station had to pass at least one of the gangs along their way. The Bloods took the corner in front of a surgical store; the Crips took the Chinese restaurant on the opposite corner; and the DDPs congregated in front of what was commonly called the welfare building.

The gangs also wrote graffiti throughout the school, primarily to stake out turf and insult other gangs. The name of the gang would appear on a staircase or bathroom wall. A competing gang would then debase the first graffito, and question the artist's manhood or sexual orientation. And thus would begin a cycle of responses. Tensions between the gangs would frequently culminate in violence, either inside or outside the school. It was therefore crucial to cover the graffiti in order to eliminate sources of conflict.

Not even classroom desks were immune to gang graffiti. Note the despoiled Blood tag in the upper left corner, and the Crip tag in the center.

The gangs' primary signature was their violence. Gangsta "wannabes" had to prove their mettle, and students who shied away from brutality had no prospect of becoming a member. Instead, they faced the possibility of being a victim, especially during October, gang-initiation month. This malicious rite involved hurting someone, and the early 2000s was a period of extreme viciousness. The media was awash with stories of innocent victims being slashed on the streets. Indeed, the most dangerous time for anyone to be on a subway train was not three o'clock in the morning, but three o'clock in the afternoon, when the high schools were dismissing their students.

While some assaults took place in Washington Irving, many of them happened in Union Square Park, one block from the school and right next

to the subway station, (offering the assailants a quick escape). The park was filled with people from all walks of life. It had a farmers market, street musicians, artists and business people enjoying lunch on its lawns and benches. And it had students: either innocent teenagers doing nothing more than socializing; or gangs, waiting for their next victim. And during October, there were many.

As gang violence increased during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations increased police assistance to the schools. This involved instructing school employees in gang identification. Deans or assistant principals would attend training sessions at One Police Plaza, where educators and police officials would review the nuances of gang culture, how to deal with it and when to involve the cops.

The deans attended these conferences every year, which were run by detectives of the gang intelligence units who lived in a world of drugs, violence and death. After a three-hour immersion in gang culture, one always came away with the impression that an apocalypse was moments away. The reality in the schools was somewhat different. Despite the prevalence of gangs, only a minority of students were victimized, though this was little consolation to a parent whose child required medical treatment.

Principals were restricted from imposing sanctions that could suppress gang behavior. If the gangs were not breaking the law or violating serious rules, there was little the administration could do except to call a parent in for a conference. Before 2004, cutting class and menacing others would not merit a suspension. And if a gangsta was not charged with something serious like assault, he could have his run of the place.

Late 2003 saw the greatest surge in violence and exposed the administration's weakness. There were numerous gang fights in the hallways, which the school's security apparatus could not control. Overcrowded at 3,200 students, gang violence brought tensions to a critical mass as brawls erupted while mobs of teenagers passed through the hallways on their way to class.

The Bloods, Crips and DDPs had daily scraps which would begin on one floor and move around the building as each group retreated and counterattacked. Deans would announce the location of a gang and request backup on their radios. Some of these fights became riots, prompting school safety agents to put out a citywide call for police assistance.

In October of 2003, a rumble had broken out between Bloods and DDPs. For fifteen minutes twenty gangstas assaulted each other, moving from the fourth floor to the third, and then to the lobby. The deans and SSAs cornered them several times and noted that a couple of the kids were high. They ignored us and continued to run amok throughout the building. One had lost his shirt but fought on, half naked. The riot eventually spilled out onto the streets, and pedestrians were stunned at the mayhem. The deans and school safety agents pursued them, and NYPD joined the chase. Most of the suspects ran towards Union Square, some running into the park, others ducking into the subway. At that point the deans and agents returned to the school, relieved that there would be a reduced gang presence for the rest of the day.

The incident that pushed the scales closer to Impact was the concurrence of two fights within twenty-four hours, involving the same suspects. In late September a fight erupted between two female Bloods and two female Dominicans. The Bloods fled the building, and the Dominicans were brought to the deans' office by SSAs. One of the girls' fathers came to pick them up. After we assured him that the school would do all it could to stop any further violence between the two groups, he took the girls home.

At this point the institutional inadequacies of the school became most apparent. The proper response following a fight would have been to flag the offenders' ID cards and stop them at entry, keeping the groups separate until Guidance could mediate. But in late September our entry protocols were still weak. Students simply walked into the building and flashed their ID or program cards to gain entry. The following morning the two Bloods entered the building unchecked, and would confront the Dominicans outside the cafeteria at 11:30 a.m.

It was a fight only by the loosest definition. The Bloods quickly knocked the Dominicans to the ground, sadistically kicking both girls repeatedly in the head. The Dominicans suffered crushed noses, fractured eye sockets, and multiple lacerations and contusions. The Bloods fled the building again, leaving their victims semi-conscious on the floor. The Dominicans were rushed to Beth Israel where they spent the next several days in intensive care while the swelling of their heads abated. The *New York Post* managed to get a photograph of them in the unit and ran the story the following day.

Although the administration ran the usual damage control, by four p.m. the phone calls started coming in from the district office. Washington Irving was always sending students to the emergency room. Such incidents brought angry parents to the school, but they rarely caused this level of attention from the district. The girls' injuries were extreme, however, and the aunt of one of them was a secretary to a Brooklyn congressman. The principal was concerned for the victims, but also for her standing with the DOE. This incident came at the beginning of her third year at Washington Irving, and she had endured a rough ride for the first two. The Manhattan safety administrator, (MSA), reviewed the investigation protocols with her and tried to put her at ease. A veteran of a tough high school in Queens who had seen his share of group violence, he acknowledged that Washington Irving's size and student population made it a challenge. Unfortunately, since a congressman's office had gotten involved, the school would now come under greater scrutiny.

At seven o'clock I collected my information, (suspects, victims, witnesses, injuries, police involvement, hospital), and called the Emergency Information Center (EIC), the agency that informs the mayor and chancellor about events before they find out about them on the news. They took my report, asked for some details and then commiserated with me. By the time I finished and made my final report to the principal, it was eight o'clock at night. I got home an hour later and poured myself a stiff Scotch.

Weapons

The administration made the restriction of weapons a priority. The SSAs had been scanning for weapons since 1986 and had a good record of keeping them out of the building. But students rationalized arming themselves for self-defense, and were occasionally successful at bypassing security measures. The most common weapon was a box cutter. They can do significant damage, and students frequently tried to sneak them in. When caught, most claimed they used them at their job at a supermarkets or bodega. But few could corroborate their stories, so most were given a superintendent's suspension for weapons possession.

Knives were also confiscated during scanning procedures, but some got into the building anyway. We had several unguarded vestibules, and it was easy for a kid to find an unsupervised door and let a friend in. A Blood once complained to a school safety agent that a DDP had menaced him with a knife on a staircase. (The code against snitching was the most violated ethos in gangsta culture.) The Dominican student was searched and found to have a folding knife with a 4-inch blade—long enough to get him arrested.

The design of the building presented additional security challenges. Washington Irving's architects could not have imagined the safety concerns that would confront the administration a century later. After doing numerous searches, (known as Phase IIs in School Safety parlance), and finding as many weapons, we sought to plug the holes. The most vulnerable area was the vestibule where students queued before scanning in the lobby. It had two open staircases, which we had blocked off with office dividers. But they were frequently breached for lack of supervision.

This prompted a search for a more permanent barrier. We had a contractor install "bodega gates," the metal shutters that roll down in front of a store. The deans would drop them down at seven o'clock each morning and raise them at five o'clock in the afternoon. And they worked like a charm for the first two months, at least until the fire department paid us a visit.

Five firefighters and a battalion commander confronted me after receiving an anonymous call about the gates. They told me to remove them immediately. They were sympathetic, especially when I told them how students were sneaking weapons into the building. But they said that even a small wastepaper basket fire could incite panic, and that a blocked staircase could kill students as easily as a fire. They would come back in a couple of days; if the gates were still down they would have to arrest me. We never used them again.

The school's vulnerability was highlighted in late 2003 when an incident demonstrated with chilling clarity the dangers that confronted both the staff and students. The morning was uneventful, save for the deans' usual pursuit of cutters in the hallways. One group in particular was making a pest of itself, and throughout the morning their names could be heard over the radio as agents and deans tried to corral them. At 10:40 a.m. I turned off my walkie-talkie and headed to the eighth floor to teach my IB history class.

Although administrative APs were not required to give instruction, I insisted on teaching this class. It was the best part of my day. I would turn off my radio, open my notes and spend an uninterrupted period with the school's best students. I had worked with these kids since they were freshmen, and I was not about to relinquish this one source of pleasure in my work.

At eleven o'clock the classroom phone rang. I ignored it. A minute later it rang again. Annoyed at the intrusion, I picked up the receiver, hung it up and returned to my lesson. Thirty seconds later a para came to the room. She told me that the principal instructed her to stay with my students while I went down to my office.

Five police officers were waiting for me. Sitting on a bench was one of the students we had been chasing around the building an hour earlier. A sixteen-year-old who ran with the Bloods, his hands were now locked be-

hind his back in handcuffs. He was in trouble for more than just skipping school.

The cops were from District IV Transit. They normally spent their mornings on truancy patrol. One of them motioned me to a hooded sweatshirt on a dean's desk. He lifted it, revealing a .22 caliber pistol with all chambers loaded. Next to it was a box containing thirty-two additional rounds of ammunition.

An hour earlier the deans and I had been chasing this kid and his gang around the hallways and staircases. At some point they left the building. The police were patrolling the usual spots around Union Square, and they eventually picked up this crew around 10:30 a.m.

Truants are normally put in a police van and driven back to school where they are turned over to administrators. On this day, both the cops and school safety agents were extra vigilant; these were not the usual truants. (It took a long time for the gangs to appreciate the diminishing returns of flagging their colors. Those picked up with red durags were begging for special treatment from law enforcement.) When the students lined up to scan, this kid got nervous. As his bag went through the x-ray machine a school safety agent yelled out: "Gun!" And that was when this sixteen-year-old earned himself a year at Riker's Island correctional facility. He went through the criminal justice system as an adult, and the occurrence report later stated: "Efforts to contact the student's parents were unsuccessful."

Late in the afternoon I debriefed with the principal and her mentor, (a retired administrator with broad experience). We talked about the incident, what it said about the security of the building, and the immediate danger to life and limb. This was only four years after the tragedy at Columbine High School, and while nobody considered this kid a potential mass murderer, there was also no doubt that he was prepared to use the gun on a rival, if only to enhance his status in the Bloods. After much reflection the mentor looked at me from across the table and said: "You must

be available one hundred percent of the time. This is the last year that you will teach."

CHAPTER III

INSTITUTIONAL DEFICITS

> We look for some reward of our endeavors and are disappointed;
> Not success, not happiness, not even peace of conscience, crowns our ineffectual efforts to do well.
>
> —Robert Louis Stevenson, "Pulvis et Umbra"

CONFRONTED WITH THE GROWING CHAOS in their buildings in the 1990s, many principals adjusted to mayhem as a cultural norm. I confronted this attitude in my first seven years at Washington Irving. The poor discipline in the hallways and classrooms was disturbing, worsened by the administration's denial and tepid response to improve it. That attitude would change when a new principal took charge at Washington Irving in 2001, but she was hampered by the DOE's policies that tied her hands.

This chapter examines the realities facing the new administration as it tried to bring order to the building amidst the restrictive inertia of the DOE. The traditional mechanisms of control that it counselled were old and useless palliatives. Real change would occur, but not until the DOE was embarrassed into allowing a radical shift in one crucial institutional variable.

THE ADMINISTRATION'S FIRST RESPONSE

The degeneration of discipline and security in the fall of 2003 was facilitated by the weak response of the school administration. The new principal had only been on the job for two years, and was dealing with problems she inherited from previous supervisors: over-enrollment and virtually non-existent disciplinary measures. The previous principal, Robert Durkin, had been in office since 1992. A tall, charismatic Irish-American with a quick wit and gracious sense of humor, he arrived when Irving was still reeling from the admis-

sion of boys seven years earlier. Under his tenure the school implemented the house system. Before the introduction of this model, Durkin claimed that because of endless groups of students congregating in the hallways, it would take him over an hour to walk from the eleventh floor down to the first. He thought the house system reduced lateness and cutting. Members of the faculty, however, disagreed and in 1999 UFT chapter chair Gregg Lundahl and I met with Durkin to press him for the creation of a discipline code.

One of his assistant principals turned up a yellowed list of school rules from the 1950s. Nobody else knew of its existence. Discipline was a forgotten concept in Washington Irving, so Lundahl and I lobbied Durkin for a legitimate code of behavior. In a matter of weeks we formed a committee and turned out a two-page set of rules containing what every high school should have: a list of proscribed behavior and related consequence for their infractions. What Lundahl and I did not anticipate at the time was the resistance our efforts would generate.

Durkin met with committee members several times as the discipline code took shape. At one meeting tempers flared. Sitting at a conference table were the chapter chair, a special education teacher and I. At the other side of the table were the principal, one of his assistant principals and a secretary. Durkin would not agree to the consequences, (detention and suspension), we felt necessary to give the code some teeth. He had come from a strict Catholic-school background and associated discipline with the extreme measures for which parochial schools were infamous.

Both sides began yelling. Lundahl, also a big man with a booming baritone, accused the principal of being weak on safety, stating that there were at least ten high schools in Manhattan alone that had better discipline than Washington Irving. Durkin turned several shades of red, jumped up, pulled a pen out of his suit pocket and threw it at Lundahl, demanding the names of those schools. The meeting adjourned.

Despite the principal's resistance, the school leadership team, (SLT), approved the discipline code a few weeks later, and we eagerly waited for the change in school tone.[1] But without the necessary administrative support and consequences, it was not a functioning document. There were no detention rooms, and the principal would not suspend students for anything but the worst offences. Our code was as worthless as the yellowed document buried in a file cabinet fifty years earlier.

Durkin left the DOE a few years later. His replacement had once been the assistant principal of the English department at Washington Irving. She had left in 1998 for a school in suburban New Jersey, but came back to New York to advance her career. Returning to Washington Irving in 2001, she was not only familiar with the school's discipline issues, but open to radical corrections.

Among her first changes was the appointment of an AP Security. Washington Irving had been one of the city's few large high schools not to have one. Durkin had done his own security. But the new principal saw it as a full-time job, and she assigned me to the post in June of 2001. With the new administration, the teachers believed that discipline would finally improve.

But it was not that easy. The principal had inherited her predecessor's cabinet, some of whom equated discipline with fascism. I had clashed with several of them over their ambivalence on school tone in the past, and my appointment met resistance. The superintendent—a man who disdained intra-school conflicts—would eventually reject my appointment, leaving Washington Irving with no head of security for a year.

The principal compensated for this by assigning more deans. But this was ineffective for several reasons. They only dealt with students in their own houses and there was no effort to organize them as a cohesive unit. The new school leader could not do this by herself. Principals of large schools face extraordinary demands: instructional

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[1] Members of the SLT are administrators, teachers, students and parents; they can influence school policy to a limited degree.

and administrative supervision, incessant meetings, and an endless search for resources which leaves little time or inclination to deal with staff members who only bring you bad news. The fact that the deans were not centrally coordinated only made matters worse. They functioned as a reactive force, responding to trouble when it occurred, with no plan to eliminate its sources.

The principal muddled through her first year. But by September 2002 she appointed an AP Security who was agreeable to the superintendent. She set him up with an office on the first floor, complete with a secretary to handle the voluminous daily reports. She introduced him with fanfare at the faculty meeting in the tightly packed library, where his appointment would show the staff that their complaints were being taken seriously. The new AP gave a short speech: he would spend a great deal of his time in the cafeteria to deter the many fights that occurred there. The faculty was enthralled, since they had longed for someone to rescue them from the school's decaying safety culture.

I too was impressed with the new AP, who appeared sufficiently aggressive to handle tough kids as well as a chaotic office. I was concerned that he had no plan, (beyond spending more time in the cafeteria), but I held no prejudice against him. The term began, I resumed my teaching, and we all held our breath in anticipation of the AP's promised changes.

He lasted five months. By February he had resigned, voluntarily returning to his old school. His presence in the cafeteria was noble but useless. While it might have thwarted violence there, it did not address the broader issues throughout the school. The hallways and staircases remained the same and classroom discipline was as poor as ever. It was gratifying to see an assertive figure in one of the building's hotspots, but the school culture and number of violent incidents remained unchanged.

In January the principal found a replacement; he was introduced to the staff at the faculty meeting—the second AP Security in five months. While not nearly as aggressive, he made up in height

what he lacked in machismo. But he still made the same mistake as his predecessor: failing to address the school's institutional weaknesses as they related to discipline. He responded to incidents instead of creating mechanisms to thwart them. Fights would occur; students would disrupt classes; groups would roam the hallways and congregate in the staircases. And the deans always responded the same way: a phone call to a parent or a conference with a guidance counselor. With no viable consequences to their behavior, the school remained unchanged.

It was under this new AP's brief tenure that the lab stool flew out the window. He had only limited support among the faculty at this point, and the principal herself had never developed confidence in him. Despite all the possible explanations for the incident, he became the scapegoat and was gone by the end of June, leaving the post vacant again—the second time in ten months.

By the summer of 2003 there were staff changes in the school administration as well as at the district office. Of the APs who had opposed my appointment two years earlier, one had retired and the other had taken a position in Central. The superintendent of Manhattan high schools also departed. At this point the DOE had created the position of local instructional superintendent, (LIS), to assist principals with pedagogy. Washington Irving's LIS approved my assignment over a phone call: no investigations, no threats, no traumas. I had my formal interview in late June, and was appointed within a matter of weeks. Now I had the protection of due process, and I would not be removed so easily through backbiting or subterfuge.

On-the-job Training

While I had a general knowledge of the protocols for safety and discipline, I had never been a dean, so I was approaching my new responsibilities as a novice. I took over the office in late August and was quickly overwhelmed with the immediate challenges. The school would open in less than a week and over three thousand teenagers would come through the doors—three-quarters of whom were re-

turning students who had already learned that there were few boundaries to their behavior. I was unsure as to the parameters of my authority, not only with the deans but also with the school safety agents. I therefore exercised restraint in the first few months as I hastened to learn the job.

Security problems became apparent immediately. Students needed an ID card to gain entry in the morning. But this system was so dysfunctional that it would take weeks for the school aides to photograph all the new students for the IDs or replace lost cards. By mid-September only about half of the students had them, and each morning we confronted a mob of impatient teenagers clogging 16th Street as entry moved at a snail's pace. But that would be the least of our problems.

The inability of my predecessors to control behavior spoke volumes about the lack of institutional constraints, and this begged the development of a detention regime: a system in which students understood that errant behavior would result in sanctions that deprived them of free time. We created a complaint form that the staff would use to communicate discipline issues to the deans. On the second day of school the social studies teachers informed the students of the standards of behavior and consequences. If a student received a detention, he could serve it from 7:30 to 8:10 a.m. or 2:50 to 3:35 p.m. I naively assumed they would understand it and comply.

A dean logged a detention in the student's electronic discipline file in CAASS, (Comprehensive Attendance Administration and Security System). The student would be informed about it the following day when he came into the school and swiped his ID card. If a student had no detention a pleasant tone would sound, informing the aide that he could enter. Students who had a detention got a different reception: the system blasted a recording of Fred Flintstone's famous "Yabadabadoo," signaling a transgression and its consequence.

There was a three-day deadline for the students to serve, after which the dean would remove it from the system. If the student failed to serve within the deadline, the system would automatically

assign another detention. By mid-fall, some students had over ten open detentions, and only a fraction of those served them. We concluded that our new regime was not worthy of the name. Some students claimed ignorance, but many of them simply refused to comply. While the students of Washington Irving may have had poor impulse control, stupid they were not, and they realized quickly that detentions were unenforceable. Our first step in institutionalizing a discipline regime had failed, since it was only observed by the most compliant students.

The other tool in our system was in-house suspension. This measure was mandated in 2000 by the administration of George Pataki, former governor of New York, when the state legislature passed the Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act, (SAVE). In the past, suspended students stayed at home, (or wandered the streets). SAVE legislation mandated that they should still receive at least two hours of education on-site, (and thus not be denied their 14th Amendment rights). Consequently, all suspended students were to report to the school's SAVE room where they would receive two hours of instruction.

In practice, few students in the SAVE room received any education at all. Schools that took the law seriously set up a room isolated from the rest of the population and assigned adequate teaching staff. But this was Washington Irving, and its budget did not permit such luxuries. Instead, a dean was assigned to remain with the students for two hours. But many suspended students never made it to the SAVE room. Unless a dean was present to collect them and escort them to the site when they came through scanning, they disappeared into the bowels of the building.

The principal had designated a small classroom to serve as the SAVE room. Limited to seventeen students, we could suspend no more than a fraction of those who deserved it. And instead of isolating the students from the rest of the school, this room was in the middle of the building with access to every hangout.

It was impossible to keep these students in the room, and by 10:00 a.m. its attendance was under fifty percent. There was also no guarantee that a kid would get lessons in his subjects. Their teachers were required to send work to the deans' office, but much of what was sent was irrelevant to their studies. The kids, therefore, grew bored and resentful, and rarely did the work. Getting out of the SAVE room was a priority, and one by one students disappeared on the pretext of wanting to use the bathroom or see a counselor. And they would roam the building for the rest of the day.

There was also little incentive for the dean in the SAVE room to try to keep the students there. The kids came from the school's most difficult population, and when they trickled out of the room the stress trickled out with them. It was not unusual for the dean to have only a few students to escort out of the building when their two hours of "instruction" were fulfilled.

With a detention regime that was not a regime, and a dysfunctional suspension system, we in the deans' office searched for other mechanisms, legal or extralegal. In desperation we turned to the one thing that got the students' attention: Metrocards. The school had the authority to cancel the card should it become lost or stolen, and students might have to wait up to one week before getting a replacement. Until then, the school could give the student a single, round-trip card. This would see him home and back to school again where the process would repeat itself until a long-term card was issued.

We used the Metrocard as a mechanism for enforcing parental involvement. And shutting it down proved successful. We would cancel the card in the middle of the morning. At the end of the day the student would try to get into the subway, only to find his card blocked at the turnstile. He would come to our office at the school where we would insist that his parents come in to speak with us. We would then give him a single round-trip card, telling him that if his parent didn't come in the next day he would have to hitchhike to school.

The practice of withholding Metrocards was not without its critics. The students considered it a birthright, and while some reacted to our methods with resignation, others asserted their prerogatives—despite the fact that they never went to class. And some became physically aggressive. We had tried to get a gangsta's father in for a conference since the beginning of the fall term. By mid-October we were more than frustrated with his conduct. When his card was deactivated, he returned to the school and we informed him that his father would have to come in. He cursed us out, snatched the temporary card out of my hand and left the building.

Needless to say his father did not show up the next day. But the student did, at three o'clock, demanding another card. This time we declined. Standing in the doorway, he became agitated, yelling "Don't fuck with me, my niggas, I want my fucking Metrocard now," while smacking his hands and flailing his arms. When we refused to be intimidated, he continued his meltdown, drawing a couple of school safety agents to the office. They escorted him out of the building and his father came in for a conference the next day. (His behavior remained unchanged.)

It was against the policy of the DOE to shut down a Metrocard unless the student had missed more than a month of school. We were on the borders of legality, and I was admonished by more than one principal for this initiative. But at the time it was the only mechanism we had that got recalcitrant students and their part-time parents to comply.

Building the Dean Team

One cannot control discipline in a school without deans. Teenagers will seek out any weakness in an institution and exploit its vulnerability. With an inner-city population, a single dean can handle about two-hundred and fifty students. With a firm grasp of this issue, the principal allowed us to augment the team: twelve deans would be dedicated to houses, with another one assigned to superintendent's suspensions. These positions had to be negotiated with the UFT

chapter chair. Fortunately, Lundahl was also a dean. We had known each other ten years and shared common attitudes about discipline. Together we came up with the additional positions that we thought necessary to enforce security.

They weren't easy to fill. Most teachers felt that dean's work was a fool's errand. With no viable enforcement mechanisms, deans were subject to student ridicule if not hostility, and their day's efforts were at best, frustrating and at worst, dangerous. The man who would one day become the school's head dean, Mark Hayward, (a physical education teacher who stood at 6'7"), turned me down several times in 2003 when I approached him with an offer. Nonetheless, we did enlarge the team, and by late September we had one if not two deans dedicated to every house in the building.

We began meeting on a regular basis—no mean feat, considering the contractual proscriptions against excessive conferences. In 2003, high school administrators were restricted from scheduling department meetings more than once a month. It was considered burdensome to have to work past 2:45 p.m., and teachers who felt overwhelmed would commonly state: "I don't work after school and I don't take work home with me." Supervisors confronted this attitude daily, and it weakened the administration's efforts. We were reduced, in many cases, to communicating policy through emails and memos—which frustrated many attempts at collaboration.

But the UFT was less rigid on the deans' meetings. So in the early days of the new school year, we met frequently to grapple with the policies we hoped would improve things. For the first couple of months the discussions focused on common problems: the failings of detention and the SAVE room; dean patrols in hot spots like the cafeteria and auditorium, (where all late-coming students were placed until the end of the period); and the ambivalent support of school safety agents.

Most of the deans were optimistic, despite our failure to create a system with teeth. I had appointed three new deans in September, and inherited ten others, most of whom were consummate profes-

sionals. A couple, however, were lazy and used the position only to reduce their teaching load. One was assigned to supervise late students in the auditorium several periods during the day. She had no objection to patrolling, (because an unethical person can slack off when they should be cruising the floors). But she resented her posting in the auditorium—where she had to deal with discourteous students who were held for lateness or cutting.

She sought every possible way to avoid difficult assignments, and came to deans' meetings with an ax to grind. And she could quote the DOE/UFT contract chapter and verse. This put Lundahl in a difficult position: as chapter chair he represented her, but as a dean he saw her as manipulative and pernicious. She was once so disruptive I asked her to leave the room. She refused, and I adjourned the meeting instead.[2]

It was crucial to make the deans more proactive. They were given CAASS accounts, which allowed them to access student files, flag students at entry and assign detentions. They also investigated infractions and contributed to occurrence reports. This involved additional work, but it was imperative to heighten their responsibility and to give them a stake in the new culture we were trying to develop.

The lobby was a major challenge. Three thousand students came in through the side doorway; teachers and adult visitors came in from the front, (and all visitors had to be scanned). Until 2003 lobby security was left to the discretion of School Safety, with only a token administrative presence. The area was noisy and tense, and the SSAs resented the administration's limited role. Posting the deans there as a permanent presence broke the ice with the agents who until then were contemptuous of the deans' general ineffectiveness.

I also spent as much time as possible in the lobby during entry since there were many vulnerabilities that needed administrative attention. For the first two hours in the morning, students moved slowly into the building. They tended to back up in a disorganized col-

[2] She would later be removed from the dean's position for dereliction of duty.

umn down 16th Street, which made for cranky teenagers. Once through the door they would swipe their ID cards, which created another point of tension between the students and staff—especially if they had lost their cards and the aides had to key their names into the system. And with simple distractions intruders could breach the site easily.

Since cell phones and other electronic items were prohibited, a dean was posted at a confiscation table about ten feet from the metal detectors. Students under suspicion would have their bags searched by deans who became adept at finding contraband—returnable only to a parent. Of course, this created another source of friction, angering some students to the point of violence, (which sometimes led to an arrest).

One such incident occurred in early November, 2003, when a squad of officers came into the building at 10:40 a.m. with a small group of truants. As a dean signed the police vouchers, the cops sent the kids through scanning. One of them had a cell phone. Rather than give it up, he told the police he was leaving the building. Since the student was a constant challenge in the hallways, the dean did nothing to dissuade him. But the police didn't want him on the streets again, so the squad leader told the student to give the dean his phone. Despite his diminutive size, this student was not about to let a cop tell him what to do, and he apprised him of it in uncharitable language.

Teachers and administrators are used to being cursed out, but the police do not tolerate verbal abuse, especially from a fifteen-year-old. The cops approached the student, who was too witless to see where this was going. He cranked it up a notch by trying to push past them. A scuffle ensued and he lost, falling flat on his face. The cops eventually picked him up off the floor, but not before handcuffing him with his arms behind his back. They handed the dean his phone, took him to the precinct, wrote him a juvenile report, (a record of the incident maintained at the precinct for suspects younger

than sixteen years of age), and released him to his mother that evening. He got his phone back at the suspension conference.

The deans now had posts in the hallways, auditorium, cafeteria and lobby, and this expanded their responsibilities beyond the students in their houses. While this wasn't a cure-all for the building's security deficiencies, it represented the first step in establishing an antidote to the mayhem.

The School Safety Division

The most glaring example of the school's failure to establish institutional mechanisms for discipline could be seen in its reliance on law enforcement. Virtually every police precinct in the city has a schools squad, and as security became more unmanageable the police became an active presence, especially in the big high schools where violence was endemic. Cops visited Washington Irving daily: sometimes at our request, sometimes as a courtesy call. Detectives also visited the school regularly, usually to arrest a student for a non-school-related crime.[3]

But NYPD was not a full-time presence, and the schools relied instead on their civilian surrogates, the School Safety Division. School Safety was once a branch of the defunct Board of Education. That changed, however, in 1998 when the Giuliani administration transferred the agency to NYPD in response to mounting school violence.

Like the student population, most of those who fill the ranks of School Safety are Black and Latino. Many are women, and virtually all of them come from humble origins.[4] In 2003, school safety agents in Washington Irving were battle-hardened. The level of violence in the school was high, and several times a day agents were called to either break up fights or prevent them. There were frequent arrests and a school safety agent was often the first to handcuff a student before transferring him over to the police.

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[3] The role of law enforcement is treated in depth in Chapter IV.

[4] While NYPD requires two years of college, school safety agents only need a high school diploma.

Because of their constant exposure to violence and the DOE's anemic approach to discipline, there was an inherent tension between the SSAs and the school staff. The agents saw themselves as law enforcement and resented requests to deal with non-criminal issues, (such as removing an annoying student form a classroom). One of the Level IIIs in the building was fond of saying: "If it's not a crime, don't waste my time." But teachers wanted more intervention on the part of the agents, and this stemmed from the administration's failure to institutionalize mechanisms to deal with simple behavioral issues.

The faculty relied on the agents to patrol the hallways as a deterrent to violence. They also expected them to keep weapons, cell phones and intruders out of the building. On each of these issues the teaching staff was frequently critical. Any hallway commotion that was not immediately squelched reflected on the agents' work ethic, while the appearance of a cellphone prompted conspiracy theories about agents permitting contraband into the building in exchange for money or sex.[5]

There was a certain class prejudice if not subtle racism that informed the teachers' attitudes toward the agents, though it was rarely articulated. Despite their modest salaries, teachers are professionals, and this affords them a sense of middle-class superiority. This dichotomy fostered contempt among some teachers towards the agents, viewing them as only slightly better than the kids.

In any institution there are those who perform at the peak of their skills; and there are those who simply show up. While many agents were intelligent and professional, it was just as common to find agents socializing in a quiet corner, (which could earn them a reduction in vacation days). The agents would quickly ascertain what kind of Level III they were working for and whether they would have their feet held to the fire.

In 2003, the building had one Level III to handle paperwork, and another who supervised the agents and kept them on task. All

[5] This did in fact occur, but it was an unusual case and is treated in a Chapter IV.

professional, he looked the part with a shaved head and military demeanor. There were fewer staff complaints when he was in the building. But he was reassigned in 2005, and some of the agents tested the limits of the other Level III's tolerance—to the point that the administration would eventually seek to replace him.

School safety agents were equally suspicious of teachers. Classroom management issues were the administration's problem, so the agents responded slowly to calls for classroom assistance if there was no emergency. And while most teachers managed their classes for better or worse, there was always a group that relied on help for minor behavioral issues.

While teachers are occasionally subjected to violence from students, school safety agents deal with it on a daily basis. Aside from the security of their two-way radios and their numbers, there is little to deter an aggressive student from hurting them, and this happened frequently. In November 2003 a female agent was hospitalized after her hand was slashed when trying to break up a gang fight. Five days later, another agent intervened in a rumble, was cracked over the head with an umbrella and sent to the emergency room. And there were occasions where rabid students would assault agents when they had the nerve to ask for the kids' ID cards—all for a starting salary in 2024 of $36,955 a year.

Safety Transfers

As the administration failed to establish discipline, parents sought an escape clause: the safety transfer. Moving a child to another school, however, is not an easy task, since the paperwork is voluminous and involves a labyrinth of DOE departments, not to mention various players within a school itself.

Before 2001, students were only allowed to transfer for reasons of travel hardship—spending over an hour-and-a-half on the subway—or safety. Although the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 allowed a disadvantaged student to transfer out of a failing school anytime, most parents were unaware of the law and ill-equipped to take

on the district office. This left the safety transfer as the only viable alternative.

Qualifying for a safety transfer required proof that a child's well-being had been compromised—and this involved an initial occurrence report. This could involve a fight, a mugging, even a threat of violence—a legitimate concern given the prevalence of gangs in the building. The report contained a narrative of the incident as well as the names of victims, witnesses and suspects. And this complicated things. Most parents saw their children as victims; when the dean's investigation portrayed them as suspects, their applications were automatically denied.

The next step involved law enforcement. The DOE's protocols required proof of a crime, and parents had to have filed a complaint with the police. (Court orders of protection were also accepted.) Those who hadn't were instructed to do so, lest their application be rejected. The 13th Precinct understood its role in this process. And while the necessary forms were filled out and a copy provided to the parent, detectives rarely investigated the complaint.

Additional forms were needed from Guidance, as well as signatures from an assistant principal and the principal, who often resisted such requests, fearing that the district would fill the vacancy with a worse offender. (Nature abhors a vacuum.) When the packet was complete, the parent went to the district office and negotiated with a DOE official who specialized in transferring vulnerable kids. They would offer the parents a choice of three schools, which in some cases were not much different than Irving. Occasionally, the child went from the frying pan into the fire.

The violence that plagued the school produced a parade of parents through my office in 2003. Kids were beaten up in small fights, or they were victims of gang violence. And some were victims of sexual assault. In many cases the victims had a reasonable fear for their safety. We regretted losing them and counseled the parent through the process, especially the art of choosing a new school from the paltry selection on offer at the district office. In some cases, how-

ever, a student qualified as a victim only on a technicality. They may have been suspects in other cases, but they had finally met their match. It gave us no small pleasure to see a gangsta in our office, sulking in a chair while his mother signed his transfer papers. Normally full of bravado, they were reduced to mama's boys. In one meeting, a 16-year-old bully cried in our office as his mother signed papers to move him out of the school—which he opposed. As he and his mother walked out of the office, he smashed a glass partition with his bare fist. With tears staining his cheeks, he resumed his pimp-roll and strutted out of the building. His mother's response: "He's crazy."

There were numerous occasions when parents sought safety transfers just to get their kids into a school with better academic performance. They would initially approach a guidance counselor, who knew that a safety transfer required a police report. Although there had been no incident, they would escort the parents to my office and leave it to me to give them the bad news. The more honest parents were in a bind. They were desperate to remove their child from a low-performing school and bemoaned the irony that they could only do so if he had been injured or menaced. Those with greater initiative marched to the precinct with rehearsed fictions.

Support at the Top

There are two levels of administrative support in any school: the first involves the local players such as the principal and her cabinet; the second involves the massive hierarchy of the Department of Education—Central. Large high schools can have upwards of ten assistant principals, and in 2003 Washington Irving had a full cabinet: a principal, three assistant principals handling building issues, (management, security and guidance), and seven assistant principals handling academic departments.

Although I was the newest member, I had been in the building for nine years and knew every AP. Most of them were women. The only other man was the head of the science department. I was officially welcomed at the first meeting in late August. But this was the

second time in two years, (having been removed by the superintendent in 2001), so I was gracious though reserved.

Cabinet meetings at the beginning of the year can go on for hours. Everyone discusses where they intend to take their department and how they plan to improve passing rates, (which ranged from ninety percent in the arts to thirty percent in the sciences). A large chunk of time is also devoted to professional development.

Security was a topic most assistant principals avoided, and this meeting was no different. Their primary responsibility was to observe teachers and help them improve instruction; the rest of their time was devoted to the administrative demands of their departments and houses. The APs reasoned that teachers should be able to manage their own classes, and most of them avoided discipline conferences with parents. The creation of the AP Security position was the final institutional absolution which allowed them to avoid discipline issues all together. If their teachers had a problem, they could call upon the dean or the APS himself.

The APs were accustomed to hallway anarchy: poor discipline—and its drag on instruction—had become a cultural norm at Washington Irving. And nobody wanted a new player to knock them out of their comfort zone with institutional changes. So I generated little controversy as long as my methods were ad hoc, (and largely ineffective). But when I requested their help in the cafeteria their indulgence waned. And it turned into full-scale resistance when we initiated radical changes in our suspension policies at the end of 2003. Swayed by manipulative students who found themselves in trouble with the deans, some APs actively lobbied against our policies with the principal, the district office and the school's business partners. And my relationship with some of them would decay precipitously as Washington Irving went through the various stages of Impact.

In 2003 Central began to play a more active role in the school affairs. At the district level there were two major players who figured prominently in discipline and instruction. The Manhattan safety administrator trained and advised schools on all security issues, and he

was our first contact with Central. The MSA also served as a liaison with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, (FEMA), which took a more active interest in schools after the Columbine High School tragedy in 1999.

The other player had an academic role. While Michael Bloomberg was tough on discipline, he was equally interested in improving the integrity of New York City's educational product. The LIS was one way that the new administration was going to tackle instruction. Former principals, (who had an impressive track record in running their own schools), they were relieved of the myriad administrative burdens of borough superintendents and focused exclusively on pedagogy. They diagnosed instructional issues in a school and advised the principals on their remedy.

The LIS assigned to Washington Irving was a middle-aged man who had once run a small transfer high school.[6] He came with several ideas on how to improve the school, most of which grew out of his devotion to the new trend in urban education: small learning communities. With Irving's house system in place for over ten years, he envisioned a smooth transition to an authentic SLC model.

This plan involved broader authority for the APs. In the past, instructional APs ran houses but observed lessons in their subject area throughout the school. The math AP, for example, ran the Infotech house; and while she was responsible for the daily supervision of the program, she also observed every math teacher in the building. That would now change. The APs would be given expanded pedagogical responsibilities within their own houses, observing every subject, not just those in their licensed area. And this would stretch them beyond their training.

The LIS also had definite ideas about discipline, which were more tolerant than mine; and he took exception with the policies we would implement when we became an Impact school in 2004. While I

[6] Transfer schools serve the city's more troubled students. They are woefully behind in credits and many have had disciplinary issues.

hoped to implement a take-no-prisoners regime, he defended the kids against the excesses of a zealous administration.

He once accompanied me on a sweep of the building. Executed about five minutes after the third period late bell, school safety agents, several deans, the LIS and I began a vertical patrol. By the time we got down to the sixth floor, I picked up a seventeen-year-old student who was a known Blood. I called him by name and asked for his pass, which he didn't have. Instead, he ran a story so bogus that only the most gullible would believe it. And yet the LIS turned to me and said: "It sounds perfectly reasonable." I countered that I had called the student by name. With over three thousand kids in the building, didn't he think it unusual that the head of security would happen to know this fellow personally?

I took the student's ID card and sent him to the auditorium. To the LIS's credit he did not interfere; but the incident would tarnish his perception of me. Until late November of 2003 none of my efforts were very radical, and he had sympathy for me in this thankless job. But in 2004, when we went Impact and really tightened up security, he and I would butt heads.

The UFT Steps In

In the absence of a resolution to the violence and decay in school tone, the UFT went on the offensive. And the school would eventually be granted extraordinary leverage to secure the building because of this powerful labor group's influence and its street-fighting chapter chair. Lundahl and I were frustrated at the poor results of the deans' office, and we knew that any significant resolution required a change in policy. Since I was untenured as an AP, I had to play by the rules. He, however, had no such restrictions, and artfully annoyed and embarrassed Central until they agreed to legitimate reforms.

Lundahl was popular. He had been reelected by the rank-and-file several times, often unopposed. When Durkin was principal their honeymoon lasted only a few months before descending into acrimony. The new principal, however, got a grace period. She had

known Lundahl from her previous stint at Irving, and was equally frustrated with the tone of the school. So she tried to work with him.

But the administration's failure to put a dent in discipline issues prompted the chapter chair to become more aggressive. He ran frequent meetings which allowed frightened and frustrated teachers to vent. He pressured the UFT hierarchy to lobby Central for effective remedies. He also went to the press, and this was probably the most effective mechanism for motivating a bureaucracy that was wary of reputational damage.

A gregarious man with a large personality, Lundahl had numerous media connections. During the fall of 2003, the school managed to appear in the press several times, and each article made reference to the stool that clonked a woman on the head. The school appeared in the *Daily News*, the *New York Post*, the *New York Times*—even the neighborhood paper, the *Villager*. Regardless of the content, the stories embarrassed the top bureaucrats in Central who were increasingly desperate to avoid negative publicity.

The *coup de grâce* came in mid-November after the school suffered a series of gang riots. Lundahl called for a flash demonstration in front of the building. At eight o'clock in the morning the sidewalk in front of Washington Irving was packed with staff members who listened to speeches and chanted invectives about the DOE. Several news organizations covered the event, and NYPD sent about twenty officers to handle the crowd. The resulting image in the press conveyed a school on the brink, where the chancellor's standard nostrums were woefully ineffective.

The full institutional impotence of the school system was now apparent. With no consequences to constrain student behavior, the school's modus operandi was embarrassing if not laughable. By taking it to the streets, the UFT forced a public-relations showdown which would accomplish what previous efforts failed to do.

A Radical Solution

Frustration was growing throughout the school. We came to work each day having to confront our own professional impotence. The deans faced criticism for failing to control the building, despite the fact that the DOE allowed them no institutional mechanisms to strengthen their hand. Detention was a joke, as we could do nothing to students who refused to serve. And suspension was limited to minor criminals. We were just muddling through, hoping to make it to Christmas.

One afternoon I had a conversation with the superintendent's suspension dean about our dilemma. She was a veteran of the school system and had watched its decline over decades. When I lamented our in-house suspension system, she told me of a school in Queens that used a different model: suspended students were required to come to school for two hours of education—but not during school hours. Instead, they would arrive at three o'clock in the afternoon and do their work in a SAVE room. At five o'clock they would go home. Their only contact with the general population was to pass them on the subway while going in the opposite direction.

This was too good to be true. I told the principal about it and she recommended that I contact the MSA. He met with us the next day but doubted that the chancellor's office would consent to it. Guidance bureaucrats in Central had a lot of influence and would frown upon separating students this way: it would deny them a full education, not to mention damage their self-esteem.

The principal was scheduled to meet with the chancellor, Joel Klein, later in the week, and I asked her to raise the subject with him. It was now mid-December, and with the vacation just ahead of us we expected no decision from him until the end of January. And there was no guarantee he would approve it.

The day after her meeting I was in the cafeteria handling lunch entry. Amid the noise, she walked in to tell me that the chancellor agreed to our plan. This was encouraging. But knowing the bureaucracy, I assumed we'd have to wait until the start of the new term in

February. So I asked her when Klein would let us implement it. She replied: "He said you could do it *tomorrow*."

And thus, the administration would take a large step in the process of gaining control of the building. For the first time in decades there would be real consequences for student transgressions, and the institution would function independently of individual personalities. A light began to shine.

Part II

Desperate Measures to Control Safety

(Please proceed to Chapter Four.)

CHAPTER IV

GOING IMPACT: ADDRESSING THE CHAOS

> Feel by turns the bitter change
> Of fierce extremes, extremes by change more fierce.
> —Lord Byron, *Paradise Lost*

TWO CHANGES HAPPENED ALMOST CONCURRENTLY at Washington Irving that would give the administration greater control over discipline. The first occurred when Joel Klein approved the school's after-school suspension protocols in December 2003. The second occurred the following month when the DOE declared Irving an Impact school. This not only provided the school with support, (additional SSAs, a full-time police presence, security funding), but empowered the staff to assert new authority where little had previously existed. And this would involve a significant cultural change: the development of institutional mechanisms that students understood.

This chapter addresses the new disciplinary measures that were developed as the staff confronted a subculture dominated by disorder. Contrasted against the previous administration's inadequate efforts to control student behavior, it looks at the school's attempt to build a new culture with enforceable sanctions for errant conduct. It also examines the role of law enforcement as an auxiliary partner, and the limitations of the effectiveness of these methods as evidenced in the perpetual violence.

NEW DISCIPLINE PROTOCOLS

After speaking with the principal I called an emergency meeting of the deans. Some were doubtful that the DOE would actually let us implement these changes; others were giddy. We had been having meetings for months without results. This was the first time that we felt we might actually affect some change.

I passed out my hastily composed suspension letter. Printed on our letterhead, it listed the reasons for the suspension and gave a time and date for the parent conference. I told the deans to make multiple copies for their own use, create a list of their worst offenders, fill out the letters and deliver them to the students by the end of the next day. There was no way of telling how many students a dean might suspend. We discussed the infractions that could result in this measure. Never having any real authority to discipline a student at this level, several of the deans were hesitant. But we agreed to follow a policy of zero-tolerance: students whose behavior demonstrated a disregard for the right of others to receive an education, or those whose behavior demonstrated contempt for the staff, would be suspended. This was vague, but it gave the deans a level of discretion needed to control the school. The meeting adjourned, and instead of going home the deans went back to their offices. There was work to be done.

The next day they produced a list of almost two hundred students. This involved incessant hall-wanderers, those with no control over their classroom behavior, and those who were criminally violent. We gave ourselves two days to track down the students, (a challenge, considering many of them never went to class), and log their suspensions in the CAASS system. We didn't want any surprises at entry when the suspensions went into effect.

The following afternoon the principal called a faculty meeting in the library. Rumors had been circulating among the teachers about the new system for the past two days, and virtually all staff members attended. I explained that we had received permission from the chancellor to implement after-school suspension. I discussed the zero-tolerance policy and the urgency of taking back control of our classrooms and hallways. I said that the new protocols would seem excessive at first, but we had to assert our authority. I then told them that the deans had been authorized to suspend close to two-hundred students, and that those suspensions would begin the following day. A

roar erupted as the staff cheered the news, many of them jumping to their feet.

Hallways 101

The school's most challenging issue was cutting, which resulted in irresponsible or predatory students lingering in the hallways and staircases. Removing them from far-off corners of the building and getting them into a classroom would benefit everyone: safety and academic scores could only improve. We therefore became aggressive with our sweeps. We were doing them on an ad hoc basis until early 2004, averaging only one or two per day; and we knew we had to up our game.

The plan would involve more work for the SSAs, committing them to leave their posts at the beginning of every period, go to the top floors and then affect a vertical patrol with the deans. The idea of sweeping eight periods a day would only excite a masochist, and a lesser man would have tried to protect his subordinates from it. But the Level III saw its wisdom. It would be stressful in the beginning, but it would make the school safer and easier to patrol in the long run. He agreed to bring his agents into line.

We also needed to train the faculty. I would wait a couple of minutes after the late bell, confirm over the radio that the deans and agents were in place and announce the sweep on the PA. The staff would then lock their doors and not permit any student to enter who did not have a pass. This too earned points with the faculty, who were tired of the circus in the hallways after the late bell.

Students picked up in the sweep were sent to the auditorium. Depending on the size of the "catch," one or two deans would supervise the site. Considering the prevalence of cutting, it was not uncommon to put fifty or more students there during any given period. Some of the faculty complained that the auditorium was being misused, since rehearsals were frequently going on while deans were trying to subdue disgruntled cutters. Nonetheless it was the most effective spot to hold them.

A zero-tolerance policy allows for no discretion, and there were occasions when innocent students with no discipline history got caught up in a sweep. While one would be inclined to be lenient, we were competing with a culture in which most students did not see the problem. At a minimum, one who was cutting was missing out on instruction; and there was an added level of risk for those who were meek. This was a dangerous high school and children were most secure when under the supervision of a teacher in a classroom. We therefore needed to send a message to everybody—not just the gangstas—that their presence in the hallways after the late bell would be subject to swift consequences.

This should be of particular interest to devotees of history. The French Revolution's Reign of Terror offers an example of a new regime given to excess. And while no Washington Irving students went to the guillotine there are some abstract parallels: no tolerance for violations of the new rules, and dire consequences.

One parent did in fact imagine something close to physical violence against her child. One day the Red Cross was running a blood drive in the school. Students waiting to donate were seated in the front of the auditorium. In the back were the usual suspects: those who had been picked up for cutting.[1] The supervising dean—a man with a macabre sense of humor who looked like Professor Snape of *Harry Potter* fame—told the kids that if they donated blood he would reduce their suspensions, one day for every pint. Most of the kids got the joke. But one informed his Jehovah's Witness mother, who shot off an angry letter to the chancellor, asking "what kind of maniacs do you have working there, that they would coerce a child to give blood?"

A month into the new regime, we were still picking up a good many students for cutting. Though we lamented suspending the guileless, the greater good of the school demanded it. I was visited by a concerned father whose daughter—a good student who had never

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[1] Apologies to Claude Rains.

been in trouble—was now facing a two-day suspension for cutting. I sat down with the father in the lobby so he could see the nature of some of the kids we had. Occasionally, a group of gangstas and their acolytes would pass in front of us. I described the more horrendous incidents that happened to children like his when they were caught on a staircase—not by the deans but by one of the criminals in the building. I told him that his daughter had to be responsible for her own safety since we could not cover all eleven floors. Finally, I said: "When we pick up a kid on a back staircase we make one of two assumptions: they're either a predator, or they're about to become a victim. And we cannot have either." The father gave a weak smile of resolution and left.

Now that the discipline code had some teeth, we focused on tone as well as the gangsta subculture that corrupted it. Our ambition was to eliminate the negative ambiance of the ghetto so that decent students would not be intimidated when they walked into the building. We extended our policy to headgear, banning the wearing of hats, bandanas and durags—many of which were used for gang identification. Those who ignored the proscription would have their items confiscated. If they refused to relinquish them they ran the risk of suspension. Gangstas tried to defeat the spirit of the ban by hanging their durags or bandanas out of their pockets; but these were confiscated as well.

Most students fell into line with the new policy. And some did not. After the first few weeks we had collected a sizeable number of hats, durags and bandanas. To demonstrate that we meant business, we hung about fifteen of them from the ceiling of the student entrance. Attached was a placard which read: "Bag it or lose it." We referred to this as our shrunken heads, which served the same purpose as the real thing in primitive societies: communicate to possible transgressors the consequences for violating norms.

For tougher students the fear of suspension did little to change their behavior. Two years into the new regime, the gangs were still resisting school authority. When a Blood was challenged for his red

cap in a math classroom, he would not be coerced: "Now fuckers, how you like this? I'm wearing my hat, you fuckin' stupid mother fuckers. Now what the fuck you gonna do? Come on, try something, try to take it from me, you fuckin' niggas. Do it. I don't give a fuck, you dumb-ass nigga bitch. I just got off suspension and I don't give a fuck." This earned him an additional suspension, which concerned him little.

We also prohibited gang beads. Every gang had their colors, and we confiscated them with the same modus operandi as headgear: surrender them or risk suspension. Many of the gangstas believed that their beads had been "blessed" by the gangs and carried powers of healing and protection; so they were trained to break the string rather than surrender the strand.

The gangs sought to subvert the spirit of this rule. They replaced colored beads with wooden rosaries, and this created a dilemma for the deans: were the rosaries a display of gang affiliation or religious faith? We developed a litmus test. Presumably, any Christian knows the Lord's Prayer, so we would confront students with rosaries by asking them to recite it. Most could not get past "Our Father," and those beads were confiscated. Those who could were told to put the rosary away. When one student protested that we were violating his religious rights, we instructed him on the separation of church and state.

The prohibition on items that would intimidate or provoke violence was extended to the display of national flags. While one group used it to demonstrate ethnic pride, other groups perceived such displays as an affront, and it sometimes resulted in violence. A big challenge came on February 27, Dominican Independence Day, when every other Dominican student came to school with flags, beads, even makeup to celebrate the event. The deans stood guard at the door and confiscated anything they saw which might provoke conflict. Some students kept their flags in their book bags, only to reveal them in the hallways and cafeteria later on. One creative group paraded around the building with *plátanos*, (the large bananas that fig-

ure prominently in Caribbean cuisine). Imbedded in the top were straws, making them look like ersatz cell phones, which they held up to their ears as they walked around the building. We confiscated the flags. The bananas were too funny to elicit a disciplinary response.

The Cell Phone Challenge

Cell phones remained the most persistent annoyance. The Bloomberg administration had a firm policy of keeping them out of the schools, and those of us on the front lines understood its merit. The moment one appeared in a classroom, instruction stopped. What followed was usually a struggle between the teacher and the student which drew the attention away from the lesson. In schools where the administration failed to enforce the regulation, teachers fought a losing battle.

Cell phones also presented safety concerns. Students were only allowed to use school phones under staff supervision, making it difficult for a kid to gather his allies for a fight. Cell phones subverted the ability of school personnel to control this. In early 2004 a fight had broken out between a female Blood and a member of another gang who fled the building. After being patched up by the nurse, the Blood was left in a guidance office where she managed to get a cell phone and call friends on the outside. I took the phone away from her as she ranted: "Bloods will make history today." Within an hour, about fifteen Bloods—many of them adults—appeared on the next block under the marquee of the Irving Plaza theater. We called NYPD; several cars responded and disbursed the gang.

Students had a hard time getting their phones past the agents. But some tried by hiding them in their crotches, which would set off an alert in the walk-through. The agent would then pass a hand wand around the student and identify the signal's source as the kid's groin. Most protested that they had nothing; some claimed to be sporting genital jewelry. All were taken to the School Safety office where their parents were called. In 2004, a student was brought in, cursing at the agents, protesting her innocence and insisting on calling her mother. An agent dialed her mother's number from the desk

phone, and a few seconds later a ring tone emanated loudly from the student's crotch. Agents wearing rubber gloves confiscated the phone, placed it in an envelope and deposited it in the cabinets in my office.

The "crotch phones" were put in envelopes as a sanitary protocol, but also to identify later on how the student snuck the phone into the building. One mother appeared at my office with her daughter in tow and presented the claim stub for her phone. I went to the cabinets, found the ticket attached to an envelope, gave it to the mother and told her how her daughter tried to beat the system. She was a large woman with excessive makeup, two-inch-long fingernails and a wardrobe a couple of sizes too small. She showed little compassion for her child's modesty as she tore open the envelope, pulled out the phone and put it up to her nose. She exclaimed: "Phew!" Her daughter blushed. The mother continued: "Oh, that's awful," and then offered it to me and said "Smell!" At this point her daughter turned beet-red, and I declined the offer.

Since we returned confiscated phones to parents only, I spent a good deal of time running between the lobby and my office. The principal complained that I was missing meetings, so she allowed us to limit the returns to once a week, and then for only a two-hour period. Before or after that, I would be fulfilling my duties.

Most parents respected this policy. Some even told me that the next time I confiscated their child's phone I could keep it. Others, however, were irate. A parent once showed up with a claim stub at nine o'clock in the morning. The aide at the front desk called me to the lobby. When I saw the ticket in the parent's hand I explained to her that we only returned cell phones between eleven and one o'clock. Incensed, she called 911, telling the dispatcher that someone had stolen her child's phone. When the police came into the building she explained her story. They knew me and went through the motions of taking her complaint seriously. They then told her two things: 1) she should come back at eleven o'clock; and 2) if she ever

pulled a stunt like that again she'd be arrested for making a false complaint.

Zero-tolerance for Minor Offenses

Although we had clamped down on the hallways and staircases, petty larcenies and muggings still occurred. In the course of the day, students would put their personal belongings down and they often disappeared. When thieves were caught we usually turned them over to the police and followed up with a superintendent's suspension. And while it was gratifying to see a crook leave the building in handcuffs, this did little to reduce the number of thefts.

Drug use was another issue that we'd hoped would change. All students suspected of smoking marijuana would be detained. (The scent of it on their person was enough to initiate a pat-down, despite the protests of child advocates who referenced the Fourth Amendment.) If they were found to have weed on their person we would turn them over to NYPD. As the decade progressed, however, the Bloomberg administration had the DOE take a softer approach to students caught with small amounts of marijuana.

Despite the growing reputation of the deans to take no prisoners, it did not dissuade the hard core from getting high in the building. We knew our repeat offenders well, and so did the students. One of them, an immigrant from Senegal, spent most of his time chasing girls, rolling dice or smoking weed. One morning we found him wandering the third floor aimlessly, his eyes glassy, his speech almost incoherent. We liked him; he was not a gangsta, and when sober he was charming. But he was now obviously high, so a dean and I walked him to the nurse's office. We passed a couple of girls along the way. Seeing his condition, one of them offered: "Damn, look at Mamadou. Nigga's high as a motherfuckin' kite."

Incorporating Technology

We turned to technology to support our novel protocols. The success of the new system depended on restricting suspended students from

the building—no mean feat, considering the distractions in the lobby. In mid-2004 we purchased five turnstiles and set them up to interface with the CAASS stations: three were installed in the lobby and two in the cafeteria. Entry changed overnight. When a student with an alert swiped his card the turnstile would lock.

Video cameras were next on the list. Until 2004 the school had virtually no surveillance beyond some grainy black-and-white cameras on the first floor. The city then decided that most of the large schools needed access to modern video technology. In early 2004 a variety of surveillance companies seeking the coveted multi-million-dollar DOE contracts requested meetings with me.

I met several times with a company to discuss strategic spots for surveillance, and we settled on sixty-six sites, (later expanded to seventy-six). Though they were high-quality color cameras, the resulting images were not as good as those seen in crime dramas. The transmission of images from camera to monitor occurred through the building's web network and had to share data space with the school's other internet traffic. Consequently, the resulting image was mediocre. Nonetheless, the closer a camera was to an incident, the better the resolution and the easier it was to identify a suspect.

The cameras were of limited value in preventing crime. We had school aides monitor them when they were first installed, sitting at a screen with the mouse in one hand and a radio in the other. We believed that we could survey the entire building and put a significant dent in misconduct. The aides would put sixteen cameras on the screen at a time. (More would have reduced the size of the tiles, rendering them useless.) After fifteen minutes, however, boredom took its toll and the aide would begin to daydream. And there were times when they would be pulled from the task to fill another post, leaving the monitor unattended.

School Safety also tried to monitor the videos, but this too was capricious. When one of the Level IIIs felt the urge, he would sit at his computer and radio his agents to respond to certain areas of the building. But that usually lasted less than half an hour. He would

sometimes assign an SSA to do the task; but left to their own devices, they often surfed the internet. Ultimately, the videos served a valuable function in gathering evidence, but because of the human element they were ineffective in prevention.

Institutional Responses

The School Administration

In January 2004 the Bloomberg administration announced the creation of the Impact School Initiative. Washington Irving was not the city's only troubled school, and many had the same horror stories. Searching for solutions, the mayor's office worked with the DOE and NYPD to create a list of the city's twelve most dangerous schools. They had several things in common: high crime rates; overcrowding; a large student population, many of them economically disadvantaged; a disproportionate number of safety transfers; low attendance rates, (75 percent at Washington Irving on a good day); and lots of over-aged students due to low graduation rates.

The Impact initiative was a variation on the "broken windows" policy of the Giuliani administration: attack low-level crimes and establish a culture where the rule of law, (or in this case, Chancellor's regulations), was respected. In the Impact schools it reinforced the zero-tolerance approach to discipline that the deans' office at Washington Irving had initiated a couple of months earlier. It now became a citywide policy and emboldened the deans of Washington Irving and other large schools.

The city allowed the Impact schools broad discretion in their application of disciplinary consequences, and this involved an increase in superintendent's suspensions, (which could range from six days to a year). This was a remedy that required more demanding protocols. The dean would initiate a full investigation, gathering statements from the victim, witnesses and suspects. A report would then be filed in the Online Occurrence Reporting System, (OORS), and the deans' office would await the superintendent's approval of

the charges—much as the district attorney's office waits while a grand jury reviews evidence for an indictment. Once authorized, a hearing date would be set and the suspect was sent to an alternative learning center, (ALC), to continue his education until his case came up.

The time between filing a charge and getting the district's approval could be as much as two days. Meanwhile, the suspect was allowed to remain in school, and this presented an imminent danger to victims and witnesses. We were tempted to use a less bureaucratically challenging principal's suspension to get the suspect out of the building while awaiting the district's decision. These were limited to five days and only required approval by the principal. But that would provoke cries of double-jeopardy from the dimmest child advocate, so we held our breath until the superintendent's approval came through.

Special needs students facing this process presented additional challenges. Once their removal is approved by the district the school has ten days to submit a suspension plan, (which guides the ALC in accommodating the student's disabilities). If the child has been found culpable at the hearing, the school must then hold a Manifest Determination Review, (MDR). This conference involves key staff members and the parents, who together determine if the child's behavior was a function of his disability. If so—such as having no impulse control and a tendency toward explosive violence—the superintendent will remand the student back to the school, which will presumably restructure his environment so that the behavior doesn't repeat itself.

We had numerous cases where a special education student was in a gang, assaulted one or more people, got arrested and was suspended. And he would be returned to the school after only a few weeks. In one case, two of our gangstas cut class and were walking near the school. A young couple was walking in the opposite direction and one of the students voiced his admiration for the woman in vulgar terms. Her boyfriend took offense and foolishly confronted the students, who beat him senseless.

We took the couple into my office while waiting for an ambulance, and they identified the suspects from photographs in our enrollment book. Both students were arrested the next day and given superintendent's suspensions. Their parents pleaded "no-contest" over the telephone. (They were veterans of the suspension system, their children having discipline records going back to grade school.) They both received six-month suspensions. But one of them had an IEP; a few days after the case was concluded he was back at Irving

Superintendent's suspension hearings were held throughout the city. Our designated site was on 125th Street in Harlem. It had six separate hearing rooms where deans, victims, witnesses, suspects, parents and the occasional defense lawyer would hear evidence at a conference table. A city attorney served as judge and jury, the proceedings much resembling a criminal trial. One challenge in this process was our dependence on testimony by witnesses and victims—who were often reluctant to present evidence because of the potential for retribution. And once a victim got a safety transfer their incentive to testify waned even further. So video evidence became crucial in getting the parents of suspects to see the light.

A skillful dean could use video to get a parent to plead no-contest for their child before the formal inquiry took place. The hearing officers are aware of the school's desire to avoid a long meeting, and they would encourage parents to preview the evidence before the conference began. They would bring the parents and suspects into a room, then excuse themselves while the dean played the video several times so that a parent could make a decision.

In one gang-assault case where the victim was too frightened to testify, the deans were able to identify five suspects from video. Two of them pleaded no-contest over the telephone. The others, however, showed up with their parents, and we all piled into a conference room to view the tape before the hearing began. One suspect's father was a big man, at least as tall as me and probably thirty pounds heavier. He had a shaved head and looked like a longshoreman. He sat silently, looking at me without expression as I addressed the group. (I

thought he would be trouble.) I sat to the side of the computer and rolled the footage. When it came to the scene where his son was involved, (he told his father he was only watching the fight), I ran the tape in real time. I then backed it up and ran it again in slow motion. It showed his son reaching above other gangstas and punching the victim in the head three times. As he did so I counted out loud: "One, two, three," each time his fist landed a blow. I stopped the tape and turned to the man. I said: "Sir, do you need me to show you this tape again?" He said "No," turned to look at his son, and then down at the floor. He pleaded no contest.

It was difficult to predict how a hearing officer would respond to a case, and their only commonality was their diversity. One officer was an observant Jew who wore a yarmulke; another was a Hindu woman who wore saris. After bringing cases for so many years, one knew who would be sympathetic to the school and who would advocate for the suspect, (called a "respondent," to eliminate the criminal stigma). They were supervised by a lead attorney who ensured that due process was honored. And that seemed to be the bottom line for most of them. As in a court of law, the burden of proof was on the school and hearing officers would not hesitate to find for a respondent if the school could not satisfy that standard.

Years before I was AP Security I was hit by a Peruvian student and brought charges against him. On the day of the hearing I entered the conference room. This hearing officer was a young white woman who wore distressed jeans and a *huipil*, an embroidered Guatemalan blouse. Latin American cultural posters adorned her walls and her desk was covered with small terracotta figures that I recognized from Ecuador. I sat down at the table and surmised that I was about to testify against an Hispanic child in front of a dedicated Latinophile. As a middle-class white male, I didn't stand a chance. After hearing the evidence, however, the officer found for the school.

Sometimes the school wins a case but is disappointed with the length of the suspension. At the end of a dean's summation, the hearing officer asks for the student's records as well as a form stipulating

how many days suspension the school is requesting. If the officer finds it excessive, he'll ask the dean why. Answers could range from consideration of the student's past record to the viciousness of the crime. In one gang assault case the dean asked for a full year for three suspects. When the hearing officer asked him why, he responded that the victim had been separated from his front teeth as the suspects beat him mercilessly. He added that the video evidence showed the respondents kicking the victim so hard that their sneakers went flying off their feet from the force of their blows against his head.

Law Enforcement

One remedy to crime in the schools, at least from the perspective of the mayor's office, was to inundate them with police. January 2004 saw a semi-permanent presence of cops in the building. For the first few weeks NYPD even had a large mobile command post stationed outside. Previous to Impact, the only cops that regularly came into the school were the squads from the 13th Precinct and District IV Transit. During our one Impact year, (we would be removed from the list in 2005), we saw between ten and twenty officers a day. They congregated in the lobby, but occasionally accompanied the deans and SSAs on vertical patrols.[2]

The police did not rely solely on force. Officers trained to work with teenagers would hold seminars on gang avoidance. We provided space where they could meet kids who were most vulnerable to the allure of gangs. The Police Athletic League, (PAL), also came to the school, and they would speak with any gangstas we could produce. The cops were gracious, probing to see what kind of sports the kids enjoyed. They would then invite them for a game of basketball at one of the precincts and attempt to establish a relationship. This went on throughout our Impact year and beyond. But the effect was negligible, though not for want of trying. There were simply too few PAL cops and too many gangstas.

[2] Irving's complement of school safety agents went from fifteen to twenty-two during this time.

When Washington Irving went Impact, detectives began to show up on a regular basis as part of the mayor's initiative. In early 2004 we were visited by two detectives who introduced themselves as members of the task force on graffiti. They spoke of Bloomberg's lack of tolerance for this quality-of-life crime and said that the old policy of hand-slapping juveniles for these offences had passed. Knowing that our school had a graffiti issue, (What school didn't?), they assured me they would arrest any suspect who so much as scribbled his name on the walls. I took their cards.

A week later a sixteen-year-old boy had written his initials in red marking pen on a wall on the seventh floor. He was identified by a dean on the video tape, who pulled him out of class and searched him. A red marker was found in his bag, and that was good enough for me. I called the detectives who told me they would be at the school within the hour. When they arrived a dean went to get the student. He was brought to my office and sat down, the dean closing the door behind him. Meanwhile, I dialed the student's parents.

I expected the good cop/bad cop routine to play out in my office. But these two were bad-cop/bad-cop. The student asserted his innocence, but the detectives were having none of it and wanted a written confession. One told him he would be taken to Rikers Island and placed in a cell with grown men who would visit all sorts of indelicacies on him. When he paused to take a breath the other gave a description of the terrors confronting those awaiting arraignment in the holding cells of Central Booking. The dean and I looked at each other—partly in horror—while I tried to get the student's parents on the phone. But before I could connect with them the student confessed. One of the detectives placed a blank sheet or paper in front of him and told him to write out his statement.

The event left me feeling uneasy. I was gratified to see one of the many kids who trashed the building get his comeuppance. I hoped that word of his arrest would deter other vandals. But I was also troubled by the raw intimidation: four grown men in a dimly lit office—two of whom were no strangers to the use of sanctioned vio-

lence in the course of their profession—subjecting a teenager to what amounted to a psychological assault. But my desire for asserting control over the building overcame my repugnance for this less savory aspect of police work.

The student wrote his confession, signed it, was handcuffed and led out of the office. As the detectives escorted their prisoner through the lobby, they ran directly into officers of the 13th Precinct. A confrontation ensued as they argued over who had the right to the arrest. Eventually, the detectives walked out with the student and the cops followed me to my office, lambasting me for giving the "collar" to somebody else.

Policing School Safety Agents

When cops are accused of underhanded behavior the complaint usually goes to the Internal Affairs Bureau, (IAB). These are detectives who investigate the police themselves, and they were occasional visitors to the school since they also investigate complaints against school safety agents. In most cases the SSAs were exonerated, but not all were innocent, and not all the incidents were easily investigated. In 2006 the AP Guidance told me that she had corroborated reports that a male SSA was requesting oral sex from female students in exchange for letting them bring their cell phones into the building. I informed the principal as well as the Manhattan safety administrator, who instructed me not to share this with the Level III. The complaint immediately went to IAB, which decided to set up a sting operation in the school.

The witnesses were two Latinas, fifteen and sixteen years of age. They wrote statements which were entered into the most secret report my office ever filed. IAB interviewed the girls the next day in the principal's office and were told that the investigation was confidential: no one should know.

Central authorized me to work with IAB, and this began a series of meetings with the detectives outside the school. We once met at the 13th Precinct, once in a coffee shop, and once on Third Avenue

in a Chevrolet Suburban with darkened windows. I thought the precautions a bit dramatic but understood the potential consequences to their safety should discretion be compromised.

Their plan was to have two young-looking undercover female cops infiltrate the school as students. They would establish a level of confidence with the agent and get him to request sex for the privilege of bringing in their phones. I made ID cards for them and briefed their supervisors on school protocols so they would avoid drawing attention. (This was difficult since one of them was Polish-American, not the average demographic for Washington Irving.) At the same time nobody could know about this; I even had to keep it from the deans. The only other people who could be involved were the principal and my secretary.

It is important to understand how defenseless these two cops were. They were both under 5′5″ tall. They carried neither badge nor gun. And they were there to collect evidence against a man which could not only get him fired, but jailed. They were vulnerable, so discretion was essential if their safety was to be protected. Although their ID cards would fool the casual observer, they would not fool the computer when they swiped in. So I had to be on hand to explain to my aides at the CAASS machines that their cards had become invalidated through a data glitch. This was not unusual—ID cards were automatically invalidated when reported lost—so I arranged with IAB for the date and time the cops would infiltrate the school.

On the morning of the sting I waited in the lobby for the alert at the CAASS station. When one of them came in, I recognized her from the photographs IAB had given me. I was surprised at how young she looked: she really could pass for a high school student. When the aide called me over I authorized him to let her in. A few minutes later her partner appeared at the entrance. She too was credible as a juvenile, and when the aide turned to me for authorization I waved her in as well. So as not to draw attention I remained in the lobby another ten minutes, waving in several more students with ID glitches. Then I ran to my office to follow the cops on the cameras, opened up the

video archives and traced their movement across the lobby and down a hallway. Then they entered a staircase and I lost them.

They made several more trips to the school, and then they disappeared. And I never heard from IAB about this again. The agent himself was pulled out of the building shortly afterwards. He was tried in an administrative hearing by NYPD at One Police Plaza, fined $10,000 and was fired.

THE COURT SYSTEM

We relied on the courts to complement our discipline efforts. The road to justice for juveniles depends on their age, and students under the age of sixteen were less likely to suffer the consequences of their behavior. If it was more serious, the minor would have to appear in Family Court where judges were still less inclined to inflict harsh punishment. Students who were sixteen years of age or older, however, were considered adults by the criminal justice system in New York State, (at least until 2017, when the age was raised to eighteen). It was not uncommon for a kid to be arrested and spend the night in a jail cell with hardened criminals.

In early 2005 a sixteen-year-old student was brought into the school by District IV officers with a group of truants. He was awaiting scanning when he started arguing with one of the cops. Exercising his right to free expression, he told the cop where to get off and spit on the floor to underscore his point. He was grabbed by two officers, handcuffed and brought into the school safety office. They ran a check on him to see if he had any outstanding court appearances. When he failed to "pop a warrant," they wrote him a C-Summons for disorderly conduct, then removed the handcuffs and released him to the dean.

Displeased with this treatment by New York's Finest, the student cursed at them and stormed out of the building. When he got outside he vented his fury on a parked police van by kicking it, leaving a sizeable dent in the quarter-panel. There were two cops in the van, and they promptly arrested him—his second time in thirty

minutes. This time he would not be afforded the courtesy of a C-Summons. Instead, the cops took him to the precinct and then to Central Booking where he would be arraigned.

The holding area for suspects is a dreary maze of barred pens that occupy the sub-levels of the court. It is filled with criminals of all ranks, ranging from murderers to homeless people arrested for disorderly conduct. The supervising officer asked the cops where they wanted him to place the kid. They walked up and down the aisles, in between the pens holding the dregs of humanity, until they found the perfect spot for a juvenile delinquent who would not only spit at them but insult their van. They came upon a cell with two deranged homeless men, both of whom were reeking of urine and feces. They threw the kid into that cell and locked it. He began to sob as the cops walked away. He was arraigned the next day.

Parents who could not control their children frequently turned to the courts for a PINS petition, (Persons In Need of Supervision). The Family Court would issue a PINS for an uncontrollable child, which would place him in foster care or assign him a probation officer. Parents could also seek orders of protection against the children of others, and this was more problematic. While they prohibited contact between a suspect and a victim, they were unenforceable in the schools. Parents of a victim would wave the court document at us, demanding that the offending student be expelled. The courts knew we could not do this, and their gesture of support for a victim remained just that.

Real justice came out of the district attorney's office. The assistant district attorneys, (ADAs), prosecuted cases in the Supreme Court of New York, and they sought real punishment. They were frequent visitors to the deans' office, seeking information either for a case that had originated in the school or, more commonly, for a crime that happened off-site. The most common evidence they wanted were the student's transcript, (which usually demonstrated a cavalier attitude toward studies), and his discipline report, (which invariably demonstrated a pattern of contempt for rules).

Occasionally they sought to question a suspect in my office. These were ominous situations. The ADA would show up with two detectives. A dean would retrieve the student, and he was usually accompanied by a school safety agent, lest the kid smell a rat and try to make a break. Once in my office the door would be closed and the kid would be confronted by five or six somber adults. And this is where the student began to engage in risk analysis as he weighed the alternatives to cooperating with the DA's office: the possibility of jail against the inevitability of gang retaliation.

The ADAs that we worked with were varied, but they shared a common attitude that spoke of their professionalism and at times, sensitivity. In early 2007 gang tension was high and there were frequent battles between rival groups. A brawl on 14th Street resulted in numerous arrests, and the Manhattan DA's office was probing resources in an effort to prosecute the ring leaders. An ADA visited us one afternoon and asked to see one of our more prominent Bloods. He was looking for names of the recent participants in the melee, and we anticipated that he would "work" the kid.

But his approach was more social-worker than cop. He looked like Al Pacino and had a rhetorical style that put the kid at ease. After a few minutes of speaking with this gangsta and realizing that he wasn't going to get anywhere, he continued chatting with him like a big brother. The student relaxed. And although he produced no useful information, the ADA did get the kid to talk about the subculture of his gang. It also created a rapport that the ADA might come to rely on in the future. This was clearly a young man whose contact with law enforcement was only going to increase.

I occasionally testified for the DA's office in support of evidence. In one case a pregnant woman was assaulted by four of our students—three boys and one girl—outside of the school. Part of the incident was picked up on our camera overlooking 16th Street. The students punched her and pushed her to the ground, taunting her and calling her a white bitch. She pulled out her cell phone to call 911, but they ripped it out of her hands and ran off.

We identified the suspects within the hour and turned the case over to the Manhattan DA's office. The male suspects took a plea with the ADA. The female suspect pleaded not-guilty. When she went to trial, I was called to speak to the reliability of the surveillance tape. Had I been asked, I could have told stories about the student's troubled history. But I had to restrict my testimony to the video itself.

As I was answering the ADA, and later the defense attorney's questions, I kept looking at the suspect. She was in a modest dress and wore large reading glasses. She looked nothing like the bad news I knew her to be in the school. Instead, she was the picture of innocence and would be found not-guilty by the jury. During the incident the victim had made one mistake. All the kids were Black, and as they ran off with her cell phone she yelled at them "you're a disgrace to your race." She admitted this during cross-examination and it did little to endear her to the diverse jury.

Grand juries were well acquainted with my students. One of them was a drug addict who fed his habit by burglarizing the school. He was finally caught when he was recorded walking into an unguarded classroom—which he relieved of a laptop and cellphone. A month later I testified about the case in front of a Manhattan grand jury. The ADA asked how I identified the suspect on the video. My response: by his signature powder-blue sweats and cap, as well as his awkward gait. With no pretentions to being a tough guy, he never mastered the gangsta's pimp-roll. The jury returned an indictment.

The Persistent Tempest

Violence Among Students

Small squabbles between individuals with scores to settle could happen two or three times a day; but they were quickly extinguished and order was restored within half an hour. Gang violence, however, was a different species. And despite our new-found suspension license, we were unable to put a dent in this social pathology.

One morning in November 2004, students were coming into the building and slowly passing through scanners. Entering through the crowded steps on 16th Street, a Blood tried to push in front of a sixteen-year-old girl. She refused to be intimidated, and he returned the courtesy by smacking her in the face—hard enough to leave a hand-shaped red welt. We identified him through the video and he was subsequently arrested and suspended for one month, after which time he returned to us. The victim, however, immediately transferred to another school, leaving her teachers and friends behind.

Sometimes the victims fought back. A student had been assaulted by four Bloods on a staircase during morning entry. He was brought to my office to scan the faces in our enrollment book. After an hour he settled on one who was well-known to the deans, (the same one who had smacked the girl a few months earlier). I showed him the same picture on my computer screen, (now larger and in color), and he confirmed his identity.

This would result in an arrest, so I needed to be certain before involving the police. We set up a walk-by, a common procedure used to identify a perp while protecting the witness. One of the deans picked up the suspect and placed him in the School Safety office. Its door had a large window, so anyone passing by could see inside. The suspect sat on a long bench against the wall. Meanwhile, the Level III met the victim and me in the lobby. We told the kid to just walk past the door, glance inside at the student sitting on the bench, and keep walking.

The agent and I stood back. As the victim walked past the office he looked at the suspect—who was unaware that he had become a one-man line-up. The victim knew immediately that he had his man. But instead of continuing to walk he bolted for the door, threw it open and started beating the suspect. "You bitch! You not gonna jump me and get away with it," he yelled as his fists pounded the gangsta's face. The Level III and I were stunned. He looked at me and said: "What?!" We ran into the room and pulled the victim off the hapless gangsta. He now had more serious facial wounds than the

ones he and his accomplices had inflicted on the victim an hour earlier. As we took him up to the nurse's office the agent and I started laughing at the irony, which the gangsta was too dazed to appreciate. He was suspended for two months for gang assault; the victim remained in the school with an elevated level of street cred.

School Safety's presence outside of the building did a lot to impede gang violence after school. But it was not always effective, as witnessed in May 2004 when several suburban school choirs came to Washington Irving to compete in a yearly choral contest. In contrast to Irving's students, these kids were white and privileged. They spent the day in the school's auditorium. When the concert was over they gathered in front of the building, waiting for their busses to take them back to the suburbs.

But Washington Irving's students had dismissed only a few minutes earlier and there had been tensions brewing between the DDPs and the Bloods all day. Prepared for trouble, we focused our resources on 16th Street. When the rumble began, however, it quickly moved up Irving Place and its fury erupted right in front of the suburban students. Clubs and chains—even a machete—were swinging in the melee, effectively pinning the visitors against the tall iron railings that surrounded the building. Their eyes wide with terror at the carnage that was unfolding before them, they could do little more than huddle for safety and wait for the battle to move on. Which it did, because as SSAs advanced on the fray it moved away from the visitors and went up 17th Street, leaving the choristers aghast but unharmed. (They never returned to compete at Washington Irving again.)

One of the DDPs was injured, and we took him into the building to wait for an ambulance. We laid him on the floor of the school safety office. He had a few teeth knocked out of his mouth, (the effects of a bicycle chain, which we would later ban from the building), and had various abrasions and lacerations on his face, neck and arms. It was our practice to photograph injuries, and I leveled my camera at him as he lay on the floor, a bloody mess. Seeing this, he raised his

hands in a victory sign, smiled with a hemorrhaging and shattered mouth, and waited for me to snap the shutter. His wounds would earn him higher status in the gang that night.

Racial tensions fueled the violence, and despite all efforts of the DOE to deal with this issue, it made little progress in assuaging the suspicions that Black and Hispanic groups had for each other. And sometimes the violence resulted in death.

In early December 2006 a Black female student was offended by a Dominican male. Words were exchanged and tensions were high. We were aware of the issue and guidance counselors tried to mediate it. But the girl was not satisfied and called in her friends from a local Brooklyn gang. They showed up the following afternoon in the Union Square train station to meet the girl and have a showdown with the Dominicans. The DDPs were expecting this and reconnoitered in the McDonald's on the other side of Union Square. (Within the park itself, vendors from the farmers market sold produce to neighborhood residents, all unaware of the impending violence.)

The Brooklyn gang went into the McDonald's expecting to trounce the Dominicans. But the DDPs were armed with knives and machetes and outnumbered them by a factor of three. The ensuing rumble quickly made its way outside of McDonald's and into the park. And there they fought, fists and weapons swinging wildly to the horror of the farmers and their customers. Someone in McDonald's placed a 911 call, so officers of the 13th Precinct and District IV Transit responded quickly. But not quickly enough. During the melee a member of the Brooklyn gang suffered a stab wound to the chest and died a few hours later on an operating table at St. Vincent's Hospital.

The police arrested several suspects at the scene and continued to make arrests in the school for the next couple of days. They spent a great deal of time in my office, scrutinizing video from McDonald's to identify suspects. Deans were called down to assist the detectives as they scanned the footage. Ultimately, one of our Dominican students was arrested and charged with manslaughter. The victim was

also a high school student, and the *New York Post* included his brief bio in the story on his murder the following day.

A few days after the incident I was visited by the mother of the girl who was at the center of the conflict. Her daughter attended the conference. Angry at the loss of her friend, they were seeking a scapegoat. The girl intimated that the school was responsible for her friend's death because it did nothing to stop the Dominicans from harassing her. I responded that the school did everything legally possible to ameliorate the tensions to which she herself had contributed. I added that she had created the conditions for the fight by calling in her friends from Brooklyn. Had she not made that phone call her friend would still be alive. And at this point, with little patience for ignorant parents or manipulative children, I excused myself and left the room.

Violence Against Teachers

While the staff welcomed the new disciplinary measures they were quickly disabused of the notion that it would afford them greater physical protection. From January to June 2004 alone, there were fourteen cases of assault against teachers, ranging from aggressive pushing to punches in the face. And the victims were not limited to males; female teachers were equally subject to physical abuse.

There are numerous students in the school system who have profound psychological issues. Full of anger, they become easily disruptive in class settings; and the people they most frequently take it out on are those who are struggling to educate them. In October 2004 a student was removed from an English class for disrupting an exam. After a few minutes she returned to confront the teacher, calling her "a stupid fucking bitch." The teacher went to the phone to call for help. The student grabbed it out of her hand, announced that she felt "like punching this stupid bitch" and then spit in her face. The teacher ran out of the room. School safety agents arrived and removed the student, who was cursing and flailing her arms and legs. As they dragged her to their office on the first floor she pushed one of the

agents against the wall, causing her a concussion. The agent went to the hospital; the teacher took the rest of the day off; and the student went to the 13th Precinct in handcuffs.

At times a teacher suffered more than damage to his dignity, and a student's size was no indicator of his capacity for violence. In one case a student went to the program office on the second floor to complain about his schedule. The programming staff recommended that he see his guidance counselor, but he wouldn't leave the area. The staff called security and a dean showed up. This dean was 6'2" tall and weighed about two hundred and fifty pounds. The student stood 5'6" tall and weighed no more than one hundred and thirty pounds. Since he still refused to leave the area the dean picked up his book bag to encourage him along. As he grabbed it the student sucker-punched him in the face, causing him to fall backwards and hit his head on the marble floor. Coming up the staircase, school safety agents witnessed the event. They arrested the student and tended to the dean, who was now laying on his back with a concussion. The student was arrested for assault and went to jail. The dean went to Beth Israel Hospital and was out of school for the next two months.

Students who inflict violence on pedagogues are troubled, generally ill-mannered, and usually unrepentant. Violence serves as a release of tension for them, and it only takes one staff member intent on doing his job to present an opportunity. As AP Security I had frequent confrontations with students which often became physical and occasionally resulted in arrests. On one occasion, however, a student turned the tables and tried to have me arrested instead.

I was coming back from a meeting with the student yearbook committee when I saw a kid on a staircase landing wearing earbuds. I approached her, but she was not about to be hassled and tried to get around me. Holding a camera in one hand, (I had been taking photos for the committee), and my two-way radio in the other, I spread out my arms, blocking her path. Frustrated by not being able to get around me, she pushed me, and I went flying down the steps. While I struggled to get back on my feet, she fled the building.

SSAs apprehended her on 16th Street a few moments later and brought her to my office. She was cursing, spitting, flailing her arms and legs and threatening to "fuck up" the agents and me. She picked up several books from a shelf and threw them on the floor, prompting the agents to handcuff her.

Officers from the 13th Precinct also arrived. The question was whether they would arrest her or take her to an emergency room for evaluation as an emotionally disturbed person, (EDP). Angry at being pushed down a staircase, I argued for an arrest. But the child complicated things. Ranting and raving, she told the cops: "He sexually molested me." The police, in their wisdom, decided that it would be better for everyone if they got a parent in. The cops wrote up a juvenile report and she went home with her mother.

But since a charge of sexual molestation had been raised, the school now had to file a report with Central. These cases are handled by the office of the Special Commissioner of Investigation, (SCI), an independent agency that examines criminal wrongdoing. When they review a case, they determine whether they'll investigate it themselves or pass it on to the DOE's Office of Special Investigations, (which looks at corporal punishment and verbal abuse of students), or a district officer. In my case they routed it to the superintendent. Fortunately, the incident happened in front of a video camera, and the tapes showed that I never put a finger on the kid. It did, however, show her pushing me down the stairs.

Teachers may be subjected to different forms of violence, and some incidents leave no physical scars. But they do result in emotional trauma, and many teachers utilized their sick days to compensate for psychological stress. Some teachers are thick-skinned. Suffering threats to their person and assaults on their dignity, they still return to school each day to focus on the decent kids who make it worthwhile. But many teachers find the stress of dealing with inner-city youth overwhelming. Burn-out is a common complaint and can be heard from veterans as well as those with only a few years in the sys-

tem. And it has little to do with the academic challenges of the profession. Instead, it speaks of the anxiety that an individual endures while trying to educate kids in a chaotic environment.

There have been numerous studies on soldiers returning from battle with post-traumatic stress disorder, (PTSD). I know of no work, however, that examines educators in inner-city schools who have been exposed to incessant psychological violence. For the teachers at Washington Irving, (and many other high schools in urban America), the toll at the end of the day was real, and the Bloomberg administration's Impact initiative in 2004 was its attempt to suppress a subculture that forced so many good teachers to abandon the profession.

Glossary of Acronyms

ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
ACS	Administration for Children's Services
ACT	American College Testing
ADA	Assistant District Attorney
ALC	Alternative Learning Center
AP	Advanced Placement
AP	Assistant Principal
APS	Assistant Principal of Security
ATR	Absent Teacher Reserve
AYP	Adequate Yearly Progress
BOE	Board of Education
CAASS	Comprehensive Attendance Administration and Security System
CFN	Children First Network
CO	Commanding Officer
CSA	Council of School Supervisors and Administrators
DA	District Attorney
DAT	Desk Appearance Ticket
DDP	Dominicans Don't Play
DOE	Department of Education
EDP	Emotionally Disturbed Person
EIC	Emergency Information Center
ELL	English Language Learner
ER	Emergency Room
ESL	English as a Second Language
FEGS	Federal Employment and Guidance Services
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
HR	Human Relations