Creating the climate for safe, effective schools

By Nathan Quinones

For schools to be effective, they must be safe. To make schools safe, we must make them effective. It appears to be a dichotomy. The answer involves taking a broad approach which makes schools safe and effective at the same time.

Nathan Quinones is chancellor of the New York City Public School System. As the chief administrator, he is responsible for the education program of almost one million students, with an annual budget in excess of $3½ billion. The school system is the largest in the nation, with over 100,000 employees.

"Law and Order" has been a popular political slogan for several years now. All of us are concerned about safety in our communities, on our streets, and in our schools. For the past 16 years, the Gallup Poll of the "Public Attitudes toward the Public Schools" has consistently found that lack of discipline is the major concern of those questioned.

But we educators face other important problems too. Too many students are dropping out of school before they graduate. Too many of the students who do graduate are not adequately prepared for the job market.

There is no simple answer to the complex educational problems that face us; nor is it easy to balance apparently conflicting demands. In fact, all too often we embrace a single approach or issue as if it were the only thing that mattered. Clearly, we cannot achieve excellence in education without orderly schools. It is my belief, however, that to focus on safety alone is to miss the point. We should focus our attention more broadly: if we create more effective schools, we will also create safer schools.

This may sound self-evident. Obviously, students cannot perform well in an unsafe environment. If one is afraid to go to the bathroom or walk in the halls or eat in the cafeteria, then clearly one cannot concentrate on the business of learning. We can begin by establishing clear and consistent discipline codes, installing new security devices, instituting stricter security

measures, locking school doors and hiring and training additional security personnel. But we may find ourselves running prisons instead of schools if we do not simultaneously pay even greater attention to the established principles of effective education. We may find that we have traded away intellectual curiosity and academic achievement for the sake of compliant student behavior.

In New York City, the student population we serve has changed quite dramatically in recent years. We educate almost half of New York State's handicapped pupils, more than three quarters of the students with
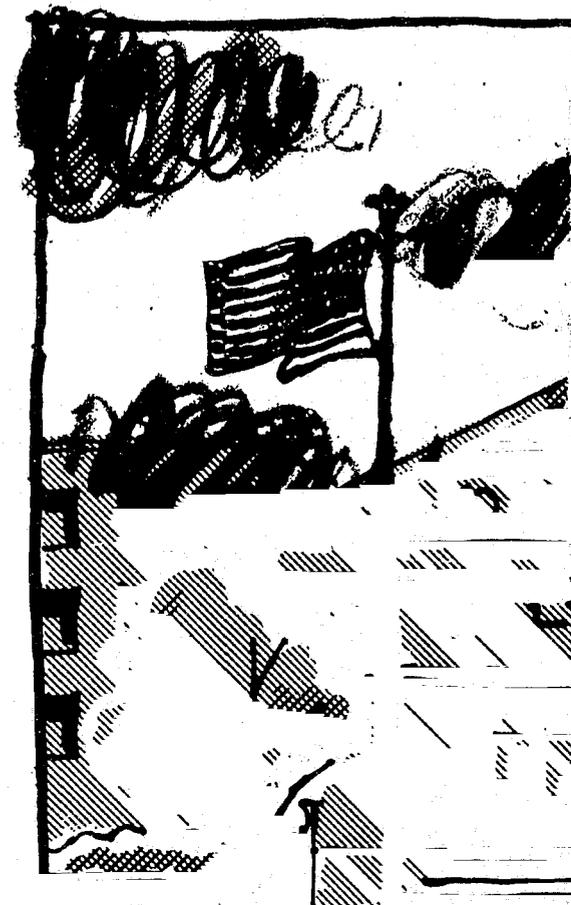
limited English proficiency, and half of the students with other special educational needs. In addition, more than one fourth of the city's children are supported by public assistance, one third are living in single-parent families, and well over half of the mothers with school-aged children are working. Between 1970 and 1980, minorities became the majority in the city's five to seventeen age group. Our population is richly diverse, yet often underprivileged or unsupervised at home. Its education presents unique challenges and difficulties.

Another fact about our students is that many of them bring weapons to school. In New York City, as in other urban school districts, we have seen a steady improvement in school safety in recent years. The number of so-called "incidents" has declined due to the kinds of measures described earlier. In contrast to this trend, the number of incidents of weapons possession has continued to rise among students, although at progressively slower rates. Many students say that they

carry weapons in order to protect themselves, both in and on the way to and from school. Obviously, safety remains a major concern for these students also.

Lack of safety also affects teachers directly and often profoundly. Several recent reports suggest that disruptive student behavior is a major factor contributing to teacher stress and job dissatisfaction. Most teachers are not prepared to be confronted, cursed and threatened by their students.

There are, however, major disagreements about discipline and safety in the schools: how serious is the problem? is it increasing, decreasing, or remaining fairly stable? Answers to these questions often seem to vary according to one's familiarity with the public schools. On the Gallup Poll, for example, parents of public school students see discipline as a less serious issue than

either nonparents or parents of non-public school students. A study released last winter by the New York City Alliance for the Public Schools also demonstrated that parents of children in the public schools are more positive about our schools than the public in general.

My point is that, while safety does remain an important concern, our public schools are most definitely not the chaotic jungles that they are often portrayed to be. The most important question asked by educators and others who care about the
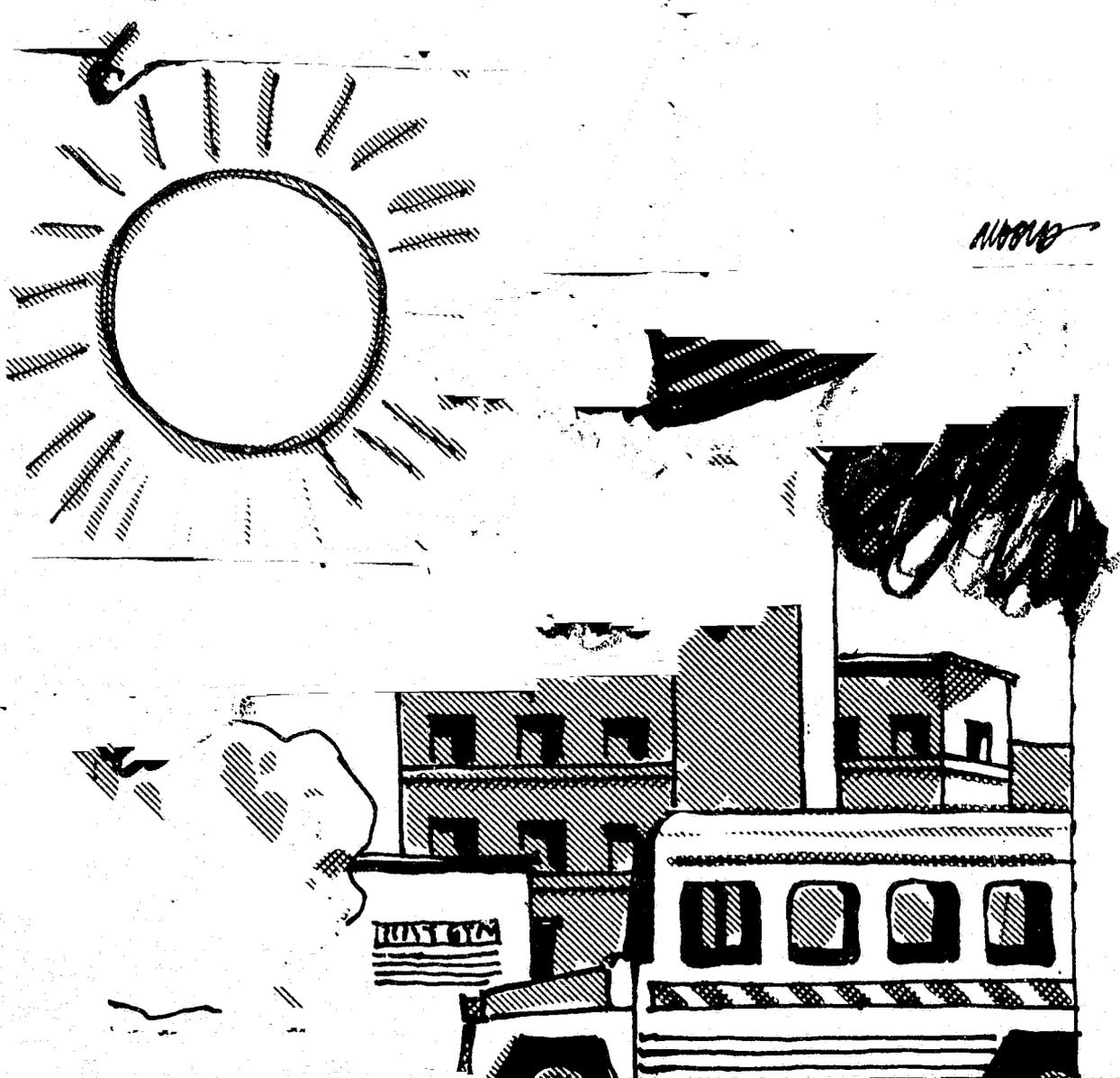
safety of our teachers and young people is: how can we make our schools safer and more disciplined places of learning?

Researchers have discovered that classroom environments determine to a great extent how students will act. The majority of disruptive students do not misbehave in all their classes – leading one to the conclusion that specific teacher practices and policies influence school behavior.

This conclusion is consistent with the literature on school climate – a significant characteristic of effective schools, dropout prevention programs, and safe schools. School climate refers to the quality of life and human interaction in a school. It can be seen in how students and teachers relate to each other, how the principal treats both teachers and students, how parents interact with school staff, what kinds of expectations there are for both students and teachers, how problems are solved and who is involved in solving them, and all the other elements that add up to how the people in a school view themselves and others. Needless to say, a school with a positive climate is also an orderly school.

Another way to see the relationship between positive climate, safety, and excellence is to look at schools and classrooms in which students express positive feelings about learning and where student misbehavior is limited. Generally, these schools and classrooms are characterized by higher student achievement.

There is no recipe for building orderly and effective schools. But research and experience combine to indicate some of the steps schools and districts can take. These include:

1. Developing better teaching strategies and classroom management techniques. Teachers and administrators need to develop strategies that take into account the social and cultural backgrounds of their students and effectively address student needs. Often, misbehavior is an expression of frustration, anger, or self-blame by students who feel ignored in school. When traditional approaches don't work, new ones must be developed and tried.

2. Emphasizing prevention while preparing for intervention. Teachers and administrators as well as security personnel need training in how to identify and address a range of problems – educational, social, emotional, familial – before they become critical. It is clear that when this is done, security is integrated into the life of a school, and the number of incidents decreases. When and how to intervene if there is a crisis is another training need, particularly for teachers and administrators.

3. Developing alternatives to suspension and expulsion. Both court cases and advocacy reports have shown that there are dangers inherent in these traditional disciplinary tools. Sometimes they are applied unfairly. In many communities, a disproportionate percentage of minority children are suspended and expelled. Sometimes these punishments are used inconsistently or inappropriately. Children are often kept out of school for misbehavior that doesn't

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warrant this reaction. In all cases, however, teaching and learning suffer. When children are not in school, they cannot learn. We must, therefore, examine the concept of in-school suspension more closely. When this is a safe and appropriate alternative to traditional punishments, it can be a much more productive form of discipline. In-school suspension refers to a whole range of activities, including simple isolation, individual counseling, academic remediation, group or individual problem-solving, and more. Its advantage is that it keeps children in school. We need to explore and assess much more thoroughly this alternative method of keeping order in schools.

4. Studying the problem more closely. We are literally inundated by data about school safety. Beginning with NIE's 1978 study, *Violent Schools*

– Safe Schools, and including last winter's report by the Working Group on School Violence/Discipline, there are numbers covering nearly every kind of occurrence that could possibly happen to anyone in or around a public school. Not only are these numbers often inconsistent, but their interpretation is not at all clear. We need to take a fresh look at the data and perhaps gather more information. We need to look at trends, and ask what they tell us. In New York City, for example, in the school year 1982-83, high school incidents were highest in October, middle school incidents in October and January, and elementary school incidents in May. Is this a consistent pattern? What does it mean? In addition to counting incidents, we need to ask: what happened? when and where did it happen? who was involved? what was the response? Analysis of the answers to these kinds of questions will help us to predict behavior, define offenses and responses, decide what is appropriate, and other matters that are truly useful to people in schools.

5. Maintaining high expectations. This last step is the most important, and sometimes the most difficult. We must continue to establish more rigorous standards for staff and students. We must continue to focus on the quality of teaching and learning that occurs in classrooms. We must emphasize the development of critical thinking skills through such proven practices as mastery learning. I am convinced that if we focus on academic success, if we expect *all* of our students to achieve this, and if we provide the support systems that they need, behavioral problems will be reduced. An effective school is a place where learning is considered exciting, where productive activity is valued, where curiosity and creativity are evident everywhere. It may be noisy, but this will be the sound of growing minds; there may be teacher-student arguments, but these will be respectful disagreements about issues that matter. This is the kind of orderly school that I would like to see, where order has not erased intellectual passion and compliance has not usurped individual talent. □