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The mischief and terror of hoodlum gangs
is a big item in the school budget these days,
equaling the cost of employing
50,000 teachers for a year

North, South, East, and West Side Story

BY STORY MOOREFIELD

No teacher made the assignment. Jimmy and five of his classmates conceived and developed the idea entirely on their own. And for a group of 16-year-olds, girls along with boys, it was a rather ambitious project. During the four-month planning phase, the project demanded some skill in map-making and in handling tools, not to mention a knowledge of building design and construction, with particular attention to doors and windows. The task called for the boys and girls to understand in some detail the operation of lighting and security systems, which required them to work beyond the normal high school day. In fact, this phase was better done at night. Then, too, there were odd-hour strategy meetings, which usually had one team member or another expressing concern about the consequences of failure. All this was done under a cloak of secrecy, which avoided arousing the suspicions of parents and friends and gave the project the added kick of a TV spy thriller.

Although the project obviously had a certain educational value, it was not a part of the formal high-school program. Or part of any approved high-school activity. The students' target was the 48 file cabinets full of confidential student records in the transcript room. The objective: destruction. The young vandals knew that destroying the records of 4,000 students would disrupt the school's routine and distress the principal and the teachers. It would also do away with all those nasty comments put in the files by teachers and guidance counselors that other-

wise could follow students the rest of their lives, so the theory went. It seemed worth the risk.

"We broke in through the incinerator-room window about 11 o'clock one night," Jimmy recalled later. "We had large plastic bags. We were going to stuff the files in the bags and haul them down to the incinerator room and burn them."

All went well until the teenagers reached the transcript room, at which point a serious flaw in the plan was revealed. Four months of careful planning had not taken into account a logistical problem: The night lacked sufficient hours for the students to drag scores of heavy bags down two flights of stairs to the incinerator room.

"Lucky for us," Jimmy said, "the janitors had left the elevator open. Next to the elevator were a lot of empty trash barrels on wheels. With those it was easy. It took only five hours. They handed it right to us."

An anonymous letter published in a student underground newspaper claimed this incident happened a few years ago in a large high school in the Northeast. The letter concluded, "It's been a year now and we haven't been caught, though we burned two flags and left a note. The administration probably didn't want the students to know what they can do."

Commenting on the letter, one official said a second, less obvious crime had been committed—the waste of talent. Bright young people had worked together, learned new skills, and devoted many hours to a cause. A destructive cause. The official wondered what the youngsters might have accomplished if they had put the same energy, patience, and skill into a constructive academic project. Like others, he ques-

tioned where and how the system had failed these young people to such an extent that they felt compelled to turn against it. By "system" he made it clear that he meant all relevant social institutions—family, churches, schools, police, and juvenile courts. He also blamed the antisocial behavior so often glorified in rock music, magazines, television, and other media that influence young people.

Educators agree that vandalism and violence have become two of the most serious problems confronting the nation's schools. Students who vent their frustrations by destroying school property and terrorizing teachers and fellow students have brought learning to a virtual standstill in some school districts.

Vandalism alone, ranging from wash-room graffiti to arson, now costs schools more than a half billion dollars a year. That's more than the country's 16,000 public school districts spent on textbooks in a recent year. It's enough to hire 50,000 experienced teachers without increasing taxes by a single cent. And it's money that's desperately needed for more useful purposes. In financially pressed school districts, funds diverted to security systems and property repair can force teacher layoffs and cutbacks in instructional programs, athletic activities, and field trips. For example, Los Angeles County spends \$4 million a year to prevent vandalism. Its school security force is the second largest police department in the country.

In Congress, Senator James Eastland's Internal Security Subcommittee recently heard testimony to the effect that there may be a national underground movement to encourage student vandalism. To acquaint

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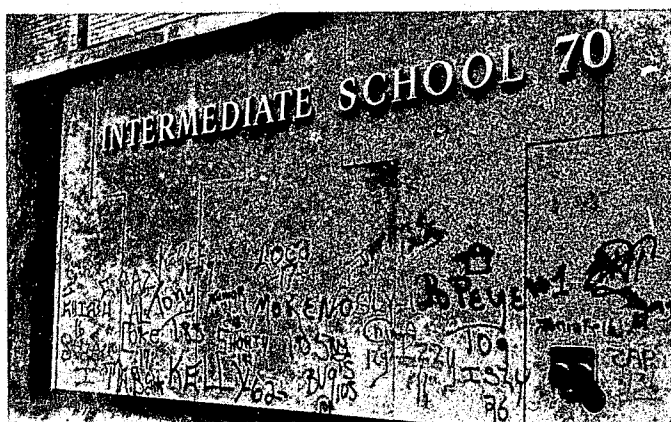
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school administrators and others in positions of authority with the nature of the threat, the subcommittee last summer published a limited edition of a pamphlet that's been available to students for some years. Called "The School-Stopper Textbook—Handbook for School Disruption and Violence," the pamphlet sells for 25 cents a copy through a Michigan post office box. It lists 84 ways to harass school personnel. Students are encouraged to impersonate their parents in irate telephone calls to the principal. Or to turn loose all the animals in the biology laboratory. Buried in the long list of harassment tactics is the suggested felony that especially disturbed Senator Eastland's subcommittee: "Break into your school at night and burn it down."

Unlike vandalism, no dollar value can be placed on violence. There is no way to price human conditions like fear, apprehension, tension, and nervous exhaustion. Each year there are some 70,000 physical assaults on teachers and hundreds of thousands of assaults on students. Security people in many big-city schools advise teachers never to remain alone in their classrooms, even with the doors locked, and never to send an unaccompanied child on an errand through unguarded hallways. After extensive hearings by his Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, Senator Birch Bayh undoubtedly spoke for many teachers when he said, "The primary concern in many modern American schools is no longer education but preservation."

Who are the young vandals? Many are students in the school they terrorize. Some are suspended or expelled students bent on settling a grudge. Others are outsiders, usually jobless dropouts with too much time



on their hands and too little money in their pockets. Most are boys, although girls have been known to perpetrate vicious attacks on other girls. Whoever they are, the young hoodlums seldom act alone. They join forces for mutual protection and greater effectiveness.

Twenty years ago youth gangs, after the fashion of the "Jets" and the rival "Sharks" of *West Side Story*, staked out a neighborhood "territory" and protected it against competing gangs. In gang wars fought with knives, chains, and clubs, members were injured and even killed; but outsiders were seldom the victims. Youth gangs today are different. They prey on innocent bystanders, and their weapon is usually a handgun. A recent study carried out for the U.S. Department of Justice's Law Enforcement Assistance Administration reported that youth gangs in some large cities regularly take control of school cafeterias, playgrounds, and hallways, shaking down students for permission to use these publicly supported facilities and threatening teachers and administrators who try to intervene.

It is estimated that New York City by itself has 350 gangs with up to 20,000 members. The city spends \$13 million a year to replace damaged school property and to pay for security systems. Still, it has 200 gang-related homicides annually.

Other large cities have similarly high homicide rates. Superintendent William Johnston of the Los Angeles Unified School District says the public attitude toward firearms is partly to blame. "People come out as patriots and defend the gun," he points out, "but kids are shooting one another with those guns."

In November of 1976, the sponsors of American Education Week—the National

Education Association, American Legion, and U.S. Office of Education—felt compelled to focus national attention on the havoc being wrought in the nation's schools. As a slogan for the week-long observance of education's importance to America, they selected "The schools are yours. Help take care of them." The sponsors called on school administrators, teachers, parents, students, law-enforcement organizations, and business and civic groups to work together in an effort to eliminate the causes of rage and frustration that set young people to wantonly destroying property and violently attacking teachers and students.

In an effort to identify some of the causes and offer possible solutions, Senator Bayh's subcommittee had already surveyed more than 750 public-school districts and taken testimony from over 400 witnesses. As expected from the large sampling of opinion, no single cause and no simple solution emerged.

Parent groups seemed to feel that schools had gone too far in relaxing academic and disciplinary standards in the late 1960s in response to student demands for "relevant" education and fewer personal restrictions. When schools began to ask less of students, contended many parents, the youngsters lost their sense of direction and began to drift academically and socially. The result was a decline in academic performance and a corresponding rise in the school dropout and juvenile-crime rates.

That academic failure and crime go hand-in-hand was supported before Senator Bayh's subcommittee by a California juvenile-court judge who said that increasing numbers of young people coming before juvenile courts are functionally illiterate. These juvenile offenders, the judge re-

ported, are often four to eight grades behind their age group in reading.

Responding to the criticism of parents, educators told the subcommittee that school vandalism and violence reflect the growing permissiveness of society itself. The old rules and values governing family life, parental responsibility, and codes of conduct no longer seem to apply to any age group. Educators said it's small wonder that immature young people have pursued the new social freedoms to excess. They explained that schools must often deal with the destructive actions of students growing out of the pressures and frustrations generated in the home, and that parents are oftentimes unable or unwilling to help.

Wherever the new permissiveness first got out of hand, whether in home or school or both simultaneously, nearly everyone agrees that long-term solutions must focus on a return to discipline and on citizenship education—in both school and home. Parents need to set moral and ethical guidelines, because they, not the schools, are primarily responsible for the beliefs, attitudes, and convictions that are passed on to their children. Still, schools with their structured curriculums can do much to support parental efforts. Ewald B. Nyquist, New York State Commissioner of Education, says flatly, "The biggest curriculum change in the next decade will be citizenship education... it's time we realize the schools have done very little to make kids think about moral values."

Over the short-term, many education leaders see the need for tighter security and more discipline even as schools gear up for expanded citizenship training programs. John Ryor, president of the National Education Association, says



but "stricter discipline procedures are being sought [by NEA affiliates] through negotiations with school boards, through legislation, and through community relations programs in cooperation with parents." And Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, holds a similar view. "We need to crack down directly on the problems of assaults, extortion, and vandalism through better discipline and security measures," he says, "but we also need to start reaching children early enough to foster positive learning attitudes that will head off the syndrome of failure."

Although vandalism and violence have become grave problems nationwide, the overwhelming majority of local school districts are acting decisively to deal with their own problems. Combining tight security with programs designed to appeal to students after school hours, many districts have had a steady decline in juvenile crime statistics and costs.

School security. Since vandalism-related repairs became a major budget item about 10 years ago, most school districts have taken steps to reduce "targets of opportunity." Window glass, traditionally the number-one target, is being systematically replaced in older buildings with nonbreakable plastic panes. New schools are designed with windows only on the upper floors, out of the reach of rock throwers. Television sets, movie projectors, and other valuable equipment are either bolted to the wall or locked up at the end of the school day. And most schools now have night-time lighting on building exteriors and electronic security systems that automatically alert police to after-hours intruders. Flint, Michigan, has had some success in reducing vandalism by keeping schools open for com-

munity activities in the evening, though school officials acknowledge that most vandalism occurs after the evening activities conclude at 10 o'clock. Fairfax County, Virginia; Osseo, Minnesota; and Brooklyn, New York, are among the communities that have asked residents living near schools to report night prowlers to police. And a few districts are experimenting with around-the-clock residents on the school premises, usually a family living in a trailer with the responsibility of reporting any unusual noises or activity in or near the school at night.

Student involvement. While security for school buildings is obviously needed, it's not the answer that security people like to emphasize. Peter Blauvelt, school security chief for Prince George's County, Maryland, says, "If you build a better mousetrap, you only create a smarter mouse. If you grow so security-conscious that you're creating a prison atmosphere, you get to the point where you actually challenge vandals. It becomes a 'let's break the system at any cost' attitude."

Knowing that students who steal cars, rob lockers, and pilfer wallets, purses, and other personal property, and who physically assault others do so mostly at the expense of other students, Prince George's County has organized student security advisory councils in most of its high schools. These volunteer groups are chosen by the student body to patrol parking lots and locker areas, monitor school dances, and generally to work with the principal and school security force in developing overall security measures. Council members also brief their classmates on the security responsibilities of every student.

The student security councils seem to be

working. From June 1975 to June 1976 the county reported a 27-percent decline in personal-property thefts and a 65-percent decrease in physical assaults. Unfortunately, the statistics also revealed a serious new problem in student behavior: Incidents involving narcotics in the 12-month period climbed 79 percent.

Police as partners. Minneapolis started a Police-School Liaison Program a decade ago that has significantly reduced juvenile crime in its schools and community. A police officer specially trained in youth psychology and delinquency prevention is assigned to each of the city's high schools. He wears no uniform or badge and carries no side arms. His primary job is to get to know the students, their families, and neighborhoods so well that he can sense trouble and head it off before it starts. This officer visits homes and makes the rounds of hamburger shops, basketball courts, youth centers, and other places where teenagers congregate. He is also alert to other opportunities that would keep him in close touch with youngsters. He may volunteer to be a ski instructor, for example, or a boxing coach, or camping guide. Because students come to trust him, he is likely to hear about the newly formed youth gang or the student peddling marijuana before the situation gets out of hand.

Parental responsibility. Still another way to combat vandalism is to hold parents responsible for the cost of replacing damaged school property. The drawback here is that the youthful offender needs to be identified, and that rarely happens. School districts usually recover only a small part of their losses due to vandalism, but it's the precedent that counts. As one security officer explains, "The only way to get the attention of



some parents is to hit them in their pocket-book."

A cheerful environment. In addition to a police-liaison program similar to that in Minneapolis and after-hours use of schools by senior citizens and other community residents, Arlington County, Virginia, is fighting vandalism with a paintbrush. Banished are the dull gray walls that invite graffiti and dim the spirits of impressionable young people. From classrooms and hallways to library and gymnasium, Arlington County schools are now light and airy, with wall sections of vivid orange, blue, and yellow, interspersed with sparkling white panels displaying student artwork. The carpeting matches the walls. And the buildings are air-conditioned. Assistant Superintendent Joseph Ringers, Jr., laughs at the notion that the county has created country clubs instead of schools. "Even more than adults," he says, "young people respond to a cheerful environment in positive ways. They will protect what is beautiful just as they will deface what is ugly. We believe the upbeat approach has kept vandalism from becoming a major problem in our district."

Alternative schools. Severely alienated teenagers don't often respond even to color and carpeting. For them the high school with a thousand or more students is too big and impersonal. To reduce classroom disruptions, school officials with no other option are forced to suspend or expel these pupils. This in effect leaves them free to wander the streets and sometimes to contribute to the mounting juvenile-crime rate.

For these troubled youngsters a small alternative school may be the answer. For instance, Los Angeles has established seven

alternative schools, each serving about ten pupils who have records of suspension or expulsion. These schools offer intensive tutoring in the basic learning skills and stress confidence-building activities. They prepare pupils to enter a regional occupational center for learning job skills rather than return to the high school that most likely contributed to their problems. The thought is that, given the ability to hold a job, these formerly intractable youngsters will seek employment instead of getting their spending money by extortion. The alternative-school program costs about \$3,000 per pupil, as compared with \$10,000 for each youngster sent to a maximum-security detention home.

Generally, school officials feel they are on the right track in dealing with juvenile

crime. They hope the need for security forces and electronic alarm systems will rapidly diminish as citizenship education, alternative schools, and other student-oriented options take hold. They emphasize the role of parents in teaching their children respect for the sanctity of other people's lives and property as well as their own. At the same time, they know that growing up in America these days is hard on children. Youngsters need all the understanding and support they can get—from parents and from schools.

It may very well be that, through acts of vandalism and violence, young people are trying to tell us something. Though we may not approve of their unconventional methods for attracting attention, it would not be improper for us to listen. □

Last month, in response to pressures from educators around the country who want additional help in fighting school violence and disruption, the U.S. Office of Education in cooperation with the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration began a \$3.2 million program that will draw together resources from four sectors: the public school system, community, university or college, and correction agency. The program has two parts:

OE's Alcohol and Drug Education Program will use one-third of the grant to launch a one-year experiment using the school-team approach. Teams of seven will be trained from 80 schools yet to be selected. Each team will have an administrator, a teacher, counselor, school security officer, local juvenile justice system representative, and two community members (one to be a

student). The teams will study strategies which have proved effective in reducing school violence.

OE's Teacher Corps will carry out the second part of the program, enlisting junior and senior high-school students, public school and university educators, law enforcement persons, and community members in ten low-income areas located in Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, and Vermont to demonstrate ways that student-based efforts can reduce crime, violence, and disruption in schools. The students—many of them with histories of disruption—will design and implement their own programs. The separate Teacher Corps Youth Advocacy projects in the ten low-income areas will coordinate their efforts with the new program.

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