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ENVIRONMENT FOSTERS MEDIOCRITY DOING WELL IS NOT 'COOL' AT INNER-CITY SCHOOL

PURSUING THE LEGACY

By Athelia Knight

Washington Post Staff Writer

There was the usual chaos last Dec. 19 when the students of McKinley High School in Northeast Washington gathered in the gymnasium for the annual Christmas assembly. They talked loudly among themselves, paying little attention to the McKinley choir's gospel performance. But when Dwayne Hall stood at center court to read the names of the honor roll students, the crowd quieted enough so that his voice could be heard.

"Please come forward as I call your names," said Hall, who had been invited to the special ceremony as McKinley's top graduate from the previous year. "Valerie Allen. Lisa Anderson. Tracie Andrews. Monica Barnhill"

No one came forward. "Are these people here?" Hall asked. A few students snickered. He continued reading from the list. Still, no one stood up. School Principal Bettye W. Topps took the microphone. "I want those people whose names have been called to come forward," she said, almost barking a command. "Front and center, now!" Several students began coming down from the bleachers. When Hall finished reading the names, 53 in all, about 20 students stood at center court.

As the assembly ended, Topps glowered as she surveyed the 1,000 or so students in the gym, occasionally adjusting the maroon scarf on her gray dress. A minute went by. The crowd grew silent. Topps, a 43-year-old Alabama native whose childhood dream was to become a teacher, scolded them for being "the poorest audience I have ever been a part of" and said:

"There is something strange . . . when people who have obtained excellence are embarrassed to come forward. I don't understand why you would rather be mediocre than excellent. I don't understand how those of you who have worked to be excellent can let some of you manage to make people feel bad You should not be the exception. You should be the rule."

What Topps saw that day was a dramatic example of how academic values have been turned upside down at McKinley. Somehow, an environment has emerged that discourages excellence and encourages mediocrity, that inhibits creativity and fosters complacency. McKinley has its share of smart and energetic students, but they are not the strongest force in the school.

It is common to walk into a classroom and find that a majority of the students have come to class

unprepared, neglecting to bring with them the most basic tools of learning -- textbook or pencil or paper or homework. Frequently, the teachers chastise them; often, the students return to class unprepared, as if nothing had been said. Teachers seem to accept that many students have a nonchalant attitude toward learning, turning their attention instead to those who show an interest in doing well.

To be smart at McKinley, to do well, is to be different. To be different is to stand out. And standing out, calling attention to oneself, is not cool. "They want to do well," Topps said of her honor roll students. "But they don't want to be identified as people who do well."

Being cool is being able to skate by, to pass with a minimum of effort. "Nobody cares if I'm smart," said 11th grader Irvin Kenny, an honor roll student whose friends call him "undercover smart" because he camouflages his academic talents. "I hang with people who are not smart. People see me in the hall a lot. I'm loud in class I make a lot of noise. But I still get my work done."

This is not the McKinley of the 1960s, when some of the best young students in the District competed for admission to the school's preengineering, science and music programs. Its graduates from that period include men and women, nearly all of them black, who went on to distinguish themselves as doctors, lawyers, nurses, research scientists, educators, corporate executives and government officials. To attend "Tech," as it was known in those days, was considered an opportunity, a first step to a bright future.

That legacy is hardly in evidence now. McKinley's curriculum still includes preengineering and science courses that are not available at most D.C. high schools, but the best students go elsewhere, to Wilson High School or Banneker High School (a special academic school created six years ago) or the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, bypassing the imposing Georgian brick building on the hill that overlooks Second and T streets NE.

Among the District's 14 high schools, McKinley is neither the best nor the worst; it falls squarely in the middle on test scores and on the percentage of graduates who go on to college. Like many other urban schools, its enrollment has declined dramatically; in 1967, it had 2,442 students, twice as many as it had when the new school year began last week.

And, according to several experts who have studied urban schools, it shares many of the characteristics -- and problems -- usually found in an urban high school. It is part of a school system in which the majority of students come from poorer families than most of those who attend public school in Washington's more affluent suburbs, the result of several decades of migration from cities to the suburbs.

Although a significant number of black and white families with higher incomes have remained in the District, many have chosen to send their children to private or parochial schools. About 15 percent of school-age D.C. children attended nonpublic schools last year, according to D.C. government statistics. Several years ago, the D.C. school system took steps to recapture those families, implementing special programs at the elementary school level and creating Banneker.

I spent nearly all of the 1986-87 school year at McKinley, attempting to answer some basic questions about today's urban high school: How do teachers motivate their students? How do the students cope with the pressures they face? Is the school helping the students to learn -- or standing in their way?

The answers came from learning about incidents such as this: One day last fall, teacher Beulah Smith told her first-period senior English class that she was disappointed because more than half of the 30 seniors had done poorly on a writing assignment. She decided to read aloud the best paper, bringing groans from the class. "I know you're going to read Kenny's first," one student said, a reference to Kenneth Jackson, whose work was regularly praised by Smith.

After class, Kenneth stopped by Smith's desk and asked her not to read his papers aloud again. She tried to dissuade him, but Kenneth insisted. For the remainder of the year, she tacked his best papers on her green-covered bulletin board near her desk, but she did not read them to the class.

In an interview later, Kenneth said it wasn't the teasing that bothered him, it was that he saw no reason for the teacher to read his work to his classmates. "It wasn't of interest to them," he said. Getting 'the Whole Picture'

On Friday morning, Oct. 10, my second full day at the school, Topps took me on a tour of the 59-year-old building, which was undergoing its first major renovation. She stepped around a dusty plastic sheet hanging from a ceiling in a first-floor corridor and complained: "You won't be seeing a typical school year."

As we made our way past several closed-off areas, including some marked "Asbestos Dust Hazard," Topps pointed out some problems: The auditorium, which was supposed to be finished soon after school opened, was nowhere near completion. The public address system still wasn't working. The main office was closed and its occupants, including Topps and her four assistant principals, were working out of temporary quarters on separate floors. Fifteen classrooms were unavailable and the heating system wasn't working properly.

Nonetheless, Topps said, she was pushing ahead with her goals for the year. She felt that the school was at a critical stage. The faculty, which had been badly splintered when she took over as principal in 1982, finally seemed to have some momentum. They even had a slogan for the year, a theme that seemed to sum up Topps' hopes: "Renewing the Legacy -- Listening to the Past, Working for the Future."

The tour was a mixture of grandeur and griminess. The school was designed to fit with the rest of monumental Washington: It has a Greek revival facade, including six 30-foot columns and a balcony with a spectacular view of downtown Washington. Inside the main entrance is a marble foyer, which opens onto corridors with terrazzo floors made of polished marble chips set in cement. There is a greenhouse and a dramatic oval skylight in the library, and most of the classrooms have hardwood floors.

But the greenhouse hasn't been used in years and is now filled with debris. The library's skylight is intact, but a 50-year-old mural featuring scenes from American history was removed and replaced with wallpaper during the summer renovation. In some classrooms, the window panes were so dirty -- or had been replaced with plywood or a brownish-looking opaque plastic -- that teachers showed films without drawing the shades.

On the second floor, Topps ran into music teacher Beatrice Gilkes. In the days when McKinley attracted top-notch music students, Gilkes had more than 40 students; with the decline in the school's enrollment and the scaling back of the music program, she now has 18. Inside her classroom are three pianos -- two baby grands and a concert grand -- that were once used freely by her students. She now keeps them locked unless a student asks to use them.

Gilkes has seen the school change dramatically since she joined the faculty in 1954, the same year that the U.S. Supreme Court issued its *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling, ordering an end to the segregated school systems that existed in Washington and throughout the nation. Within a few years, as white families began leaving the neighborhood or sending their children to private school, the all-white school became nearly all black. She saw the introduction of the "track system" in 1956, which grouped students by academic ability, and the demise of that system in 1967 when a federal judge banned such groupings as discriminatory against poor blacks.

McKinley's students come primarily from a wide area of Northeast Washington that encompasses several poor and middle-class neighborhoods, from public housing on Montana Avenue and Edgewood Terrace, from well-appointed town houses in Fort Lincoln near the Maryland border, from shingled and brick homes in Woodridge and Brookland. After school, many students head off to work; more than half of last year's senior class had half-day schedules so they could work part time.

Several times during the tour, Topps stopped to handle a disciplinary problem. She corralled two boys who were in the hall without permission and ordered them to class. She caught two "outsiders" -- two boys who were not McKinley students -- peeking into a second-floor classroom.

Later, she played down the significance of the incidents, saying it was easy to make too much of disciplinary issues. It was more important, she said, to establish a certain decorum and make clear to students that you expect them to behave appropriately. When she first came to the school, she was so disgusted with student behavior at assemblies that she held practice sessions on the proper ways to sit, to applaud, to enter and leave.

The key to a good school, she said, is good teaching. The best teachers -- the ones who can motivate the least interested students -- are the ones who are knowledgeable, well-prepared and creative. "Doing the same thing, the same way, will not make it," she said.

At the same time, she said, a good school could be hurt by a bad image. In the spring of 1986, she said, McKinley was unfairly branded as a drug school after seven McKinley students were

charged with selling drugs to a police officer posing as a student. (Another undercover officer posed as a student last year, too, I learned at the end of the year. No arrests, however, were made at any time during the year.) Topps blamed the media for the way the issue was covered.

The tour was over and we were back at her office. She said, almost coldly, that if I wanted to write about "bad" teachers and "bad" students, she could give me names and save me time. Was I willing to look at the total picture?

I told her that I wanted to learn all about the school, but I particularly wanted to find out what was happening inside the classroom. "Fine," she said. Then she reminded me again: "The whole picture." 'You Need to Learn It'

The heating system wasn't working again and Room 107, where Anne Harding's senior English class met, was chilly. Although it was Oct. 14, some students were bundled up in sweaters and coats.

Harding, a slender, dark-haired woman who has taught at McKinley for 20 years, was irritated. The school year was six weeks old and the class hadn't finished a refresher section on grammar. She couldn't seem to get anyone to do the work, even though the class was a requirement for graduation. "It might be elementary and boring," she told them, "but you need to learn it. You should have learned it in the fifth grade."

Leaning against her desk, in front of a "Renewing the Legacy" sign tacked above the blackboard, Harding asked the class for an example of a sentence with a subordinate clause. No one responded. "I'm waiting for the sentence," she said, tapping one of her black pumps on the hardwood floor. Unable to get anyone to volunteer, Harding had to call on someone before she could get an answer. Later she said, "Part of the reason you don't understand is your attention span is too short. You are waiting for the commercial."

She hoped that the literature part of the course would stimulate their interest. As a first step, she assigned them to write a brief paper about a "hero" -- anyone they admired. The paper was due Wednesday, Oct. 22.

But in class that day, only 25 of the course's 38 students were there and only eight said they had written a paper. Harding was annoyed. She turned to Katrice Barnes, who usually did her homework, and told her to read her paper aloud.

"Are you ready?" Harding asked.

Katrice pulled her paper out of her notebook. "Don't you all laugh," she said, turning to her classmates.

"Don't worry about the laughing," Harding said, picking up her pen and indicating that she planned to make a note in her grade book of anyone who teased Katrice. "I got that covered."

Katrice twisted around in her seat and started to read. Her hero, she said, was Sylvester Stallone. A couple of boys put their hands over their mouths to muffle their laughter; Harding looked at them in disgust.

No one said anything as Katrice described how she admired Stallone because he played tough and macho characters in his movies. Although it was not the classic definition of a hero, Harding praised Katrice, saying she had tried to identify certain heroic traits and had done the assignment as required.

After four other students read their papers -- their heroes were members of their families -- Harding closed her grade book and addressed the students who had not done the homework.

"I can't conduct my class if you don't do what you're supposed to do," she said. "You will need more than a high school education if you're going to succeed in life. You will need more than what I have and what your parents have I don't like my class unprepared. I want you to learn something in this class."

Constant Interruptions

On a wet and gloomy Thursday morning, Dec. 18, teacher David M. Messman peeked through the double doors of Room 224 and saw only nine of 30 students in his 9 a.m. first-year Spanish class. Attendance had been dropping as the Christmas holiday approached, but this was worse than usual. Messman had a quick explanation. "It's raining," he said.

Class began with a brief exercise: Messman wrote a paragraph in Spanish on the blackboard and led the students through a translation of it, writing the English version on the board as they went. At 9:15, 15 minutes into the 45-minute class, a boy walked in and strutted to a seat in the back, saying nothing to Messman about being late. Two minutes later, another latecomer arrived, without a tardy excuse or books.

Messman asked the class to open their books to a Christmas carol on Page 204. "I don't have my book," one girl called out. A boy who didn't bring his book moved to sit next to a boy who did. Finally, Messman asked how many students had their books. Four of the 11 raised their hands.

Messman shook his head, more resigned than angry. He handed out photocopies of the song, which he had handy because he was planning to use it in another class that did not have the same book. It was now 9:20. A few minutes later, a boy and a girl walked in empty-handed. He gave copies to them. At 9:27 a.m., another girl arrived, also without her book, and he gave her a copy.

The class was 27 minutes old, nearly two-thirds over, and the students had hardly done any work.

On another day, teacher Liliana G. Chiappinelli stood in front of a student's desk in her 9 a.m. second-year Spanish class, her head bowed as she read from an open book. The lights were off. One girl of the 21 students present seemed to be responding to her questions; the rest were doing

something else.

One girl at a front-row desk was reading a paperback romance novel. Four girls were having a lively conversation, another was painting her fingernails, another was asleep, another was sipping a canned soda through a straw, and two girls near the windows were looking at separate photo albums. At 9:15, a boy arrived late, took his seat and immediately struck up a conversation with a girl next to him. A few minutes later, another boy got up, walked across the room to borrow three small photo albums from a girl, then returned to his seat.

Chiappinelli, head still bowed, continued to read. At one point she looked up and said, "I don't have many people answering questions. I only have one."

The scene in Chiappinelli's classroom that day was one of the more chaotic I saw during my year at McKinley. It was more typical to see teachers constantly interrupting their classes to deal with students who weren't paying attention.

One day during one of his French classes, teacher Vernon Williams was drilling his students on certain phrases when he heard a faint melody. He looked around. He shouted to a boy sitting in the rear, earphones on his head and Walkman on his belt. The boy did not hear him. Some students laughed. Williams shouted louder. The boy finally looked up. He took his earphones off.

"I'm really surprised at you," Williams said, confiscating the Walkman, which is prohibited in the school. At the end of class, he returned the Walkman with a warning: "I don't want to see that in McKinley any more." Earning Extra Credit

On the last morning before the winter break just before Christmas, the halls and classrooms at McKinley were like a ghost town. Only 50 of the school's estimated 1,200 students were in school. About 500 were at the Cinema Theatre in Northwest Washington, watching the Eddie Murphy movie, "Golden Child," as part of a school fund-raiser. The whereabouts of the rest was unknown.

Movie fund-raisers were popular. The students liked them because they were a break from the classroom and because some teachers gave extra credit to those who went. The teachers liked them because they could usually choose a movie that raised important social issues, which could then be discussed in class.

But "Golden Child" was primarily a fund-raiser, not an educational tool. Tickets cost \$4, split between the theater and the school. Most teachers didn't actively promote the fund-raiser, which was sponsored by the social studies department. In some classes, it was just written in a corner of the blackboard.

Some teachers were bothered by this link between fund-raisers and grades. Still, it seemed harmless enough; during the course of a school year, extra credit for going to a movie wasn't going to change anyone's grade. But then came the incident in which Topps asked students to help the PTA pay off a \$500 debt.

It began when the PTA held a Friday night dance in the gym and fewer than 100 students came. It was the same night that McKinley's top-rated basketball team played its arch-rival Dunbar at Dunbar's gym. A victory might have turned the dance into a celebration. But McKinley lost and no one felt like dancing. The PTA found itself with a band costing \$1,000 and a lot of unsold \$8 tickets.

At school the following Monday, Jan. 12, Topps told the faculty that "we've got to find a way" to pay off the debt. She held a round of meetings with students. The seniors, who offered to donate money, suggested that students get extra credit -- just as some got for going to movies. Topps liked the idea.

She came up with the following plan: For a \$1 donation, students would receive a "ticket" that could be exchanged for extra credit in a class of the student's choice. Limit: One ticket to a student.

The next day in Anne Harding's senior English class, students seemed even less prepared than usual. Only four of the 21 seniors present handed in a two-page homework assignment. Harding stapled the papers and said: "Nobody can make an 'A' if you don't pass your work in today."

At one point, a boy held a ticket aloft and said, "Mrs. Harding, I got a ticket."

She glared at him. "That doesn't mean anything to me," she said.

A few days later, an 11th grader came to Topps' office to complain that his algebra teacher, Juliana Parker, wasn't accepting the tickets.

Topps said she could not force a teacher to accept the ticket. "Isn't there another class in which you can use it?" she asked.

"I need it in her class," the boy insisted.

Topps said there was nothing she could do. Disappointed, he said he would use it in another class.

Other teachers did accept the tickets, however, and sales were brisk. Within two days of Topps' announcement, 358 had been sold. The final count was short of the \$500 needed; the PTA sold T-shirts at a basketball game to make up the difference.

The episode created some bad feeling among faculty members, some of whom confronted Topps and accused her of "selling grades." Others, however, said they saw the plan as a way to promote citizenship and participation.

Topps said that some teachers told her that their consciences wouldn't allow them to accept the tickets. Topps said she told them: "That's fine." Preparing for the Test

In late spring, Topps and the faculty turned their full attention to preparing ninth and 11th graders for the national standardized tests, the measuring rod that many parents use to judge the city's schools. One of Topps' primary goals was improving test scores; it was also a primary goal of the school system itself.

Topps directed her math, science and English teachers to spend part of their class time on Tuesdays and Thursdays getting the students ready. On Tuesday, April 14, English teacher Beulah Smith was having trouble with her 11th graders.

The students were using copies of old tests to do several reading comprehension exercises. Irvin Kenny, the honor roll student who says he intentionally tries not to act smart, wasn't paying attention. He whispered in the ear of a boy who was seated in front of him. He blew big bubbles from his gum. He made no effort to do the exercises.

Other students weren't paying attention as well. Finally, Smith had had enough.

"Instead of paying attention, you are doing other things," Smith said, angrily. "This is typical of what happens at McKinley. Some of you are looking around in space. The test is the 5th, 6th and 7th of May. We have not taken this test very seriously."

There was silence.

"You hurt my feelings," Irvin said, feigning a sad look.

"I'm sorry but that is the way it is," Smith snapped.

"You make me feel low," he said, placing his head on his desk.

Smith went on to another exercise. More students were paying attention now.

A few minutes later, Irvin lifted his head. He turned to several others and began talking. Smith shot him an angry glance. Irvin went right on talking.

NEXT: Topps' campaign

Thursday, Oct. 16, 1986

Teacher Margaret Allen had a question for the seniors in her 8 a.m. job skills class, a special course designed to teach students how to find and hold jobs.

"What should you do if you are fired?" Allen asked the six students in attendance.

"Start looking for another job," one girl answered.

Allen pointed to LaJuanda Hill, who was sitting at a desk near the front of the room. "What should you do?" she asked.

"Go to your mother," replied LaJuanda, fingering the gold block nameplate, ARCHIE, hanging from her herringbone necklace.

Allen smiled. "Suppose your mother isn't around."

"Go to your father," LaJuanda said quickly.

"Suppose your father isn't around," Allen said.

"Go to your uncle or other relatives," LaJuanda said sharply.

"No," Allen said. "I'm trying to get you away from that . . . attitude."

The students seemed perplexed. Finally, Lynda Faulk asked: "What's the answer, Mrs. Allen?"

Allen paused, looking at each student. "Well, first of all," she said, "I think you should try to evaluate why you were fired." ABOUT THE SERIES

Washington Post reporter Athelia Knight spent nearly all of the 1986-87 school year on assignment at McKinley High School, where school officials allowed her to sit in on classes, attend faculty meetings and interview students and teachers about the problems confronting today's urban high school. McKinley was selected because it is an average D.C. high school, as measured by its scores on standardized tests and by the percentage of its graduates who go on to college.

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LOSING THE BATTLE TO RAISE ATTENDANCE LACK OF FOLLOW-THROUGH THWARTS PRINCIPAL'S YEARLONG CAMPAIGN

PURSUING THE LEGACY

By Athelia Knight

Washington Post Staff Writer

McKinley High School Principal Bettye W. Topps shuffled through the 1,500 white and green attendance sheets and cards spread out on the dining room table in her Northwest Washington home. It was the end of a three-day holiday weekend in October 1986, and she had been poring over the records since Saturday morning, trying to find out if her new plan to improve attendance was working. The more she sifted through the records, she recalled later, the more she realized that they made no sense.

Improved attendance had been one of Topps' major goals for the 1986-87 school year. She was tired of students going to school late or not bothering to show up at all, and she was certain that poor attendance was hindering her efforts to create a better academic climate. If she was ever going to "renew the legacy" -- a school slogan that conveyed the faculty's desire to return to the days when McKinley was one of the best D.C. high schools -- she was going to have to lick the attendance problem first.

She unveiled her new attendance program at a faculty retreat just a few weeks before school opened. It called for a dramatic new approach: Official attendance would no longer be taken just in homeroom at 10:40 a.m. That was nothing more than an invitation to go to school late. Instead, attendance would be taken at 9 a.m. and again at 12:35 p.m., and school officials would call parents of students who were repeatedly tardy or absent.

In the first few weeks of school, Topps heard some teachers complain that the new system went beyond the job descriptions in the teachers' labor contract. But it wasn't until she sat down with the records during the holiday weekend in October that she realized the plan was a shambles. Some teachers had refused to participate, turning in blank sheets. Some had filled them out incompletely. Other sheets were missing, making it impossible to compare morning and afternoon attendance.

The next week, Topps conceded defeat and returned to taking attendance only in homeroom. She worried that she was setting a bad example by reversing herself too quickly. "Even the good kids are standing by to see how much you can get away with," she said during an interview later.

As the school year wore on, a pattern emerged. Plans were often announced, only to be withdrawn. New disciplinary rules were put in place and sometimes only loosely enforced. Violating the rules often carried little or no penalty, and the students knew it. "Our kids know from the start that whatever you start, they will wear you out," social studies teacher Leroy A. Swain said after school ended in June. "They have time on their side."

Topps knew that maintaining a sense of discipline was crucial. It defined a school's atmosphere. If a few troublemakers were allowed to break the back of authority, it would send a clear signal to the students at the margin, which was where the battle would be won or lost.

Having started a campaign to improve attendance, Topps was not about to give up. She made clear to the faculty that she wanted them to follow through on the six-page "action plan" that listed 22 "critical tasks" intended to increase the daily attendance rate to 92 percent -- up from 90 percent the previous year. On a typical day, that meant no more than 100 students absent out of the 1,227 listed on McKinley's official rolls when school opened.

In 20 years as a teacher and administrator in the D.C. public schools, Topps, 43, had acquired a reputation for toughness, an image that she likes to project. She rarely smiled, often fixing students with a stony gaze and addressing them as "Angelface" because she has a hard time remembering names. When she felt it necessary, she could be just as tough with parents.

At the first PTA meeting in October, she warned about 100 parents who showed up that she was not going to tolerate tardiness or repeated absences. Standing amid red-and-white Coca-Cola signs, donated by the soft drink company and imprinted with the slogans "Renewing a Legacy" and "Striving for Excellence," she told them: "Expect a telephone call during the day if your child is not coming to school on time, attending class or doing well in class."

To let the students know that she meant business, Topps walked the halls, armed with a walkie-talkie. One day, she confronted two students, a boy and a girl, just outside their lockers on the second floor.

"Why are you in the hall?" Topps demanded.

"We're just getting here. I got up late," said the boy.

Topps looked at them sternly. They waited politely, sensing a lecture coming. Topps said, "You have to learn to be on time. When you go to work and they fire you for coming in at this time of day, you'll say, 'They fired me because I'm black.' " Topps let her words sink in. Then she said, "If I catch you in the hall at this time again, I'm going to give you a little vacation."

One morning in November, however, there were so many students leaning against the light brown lockers in one first-floor hallway that Topps said it reminded her of a convention. When the students saw Topps, some began making their way to class. Others ignored her, continuing their conversations, until Topps prodded them to get moving.

It was clear that her efforts weren't making much of a dent. During the Thanksgiving holiday, she turned the problem over in her mind and decided she needed to do something dramatic, something that would catch everyone's attention.

It was time, she decided, for a "Code Blue." Surviving Code Blue

At 10:05 a.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 2, the bells rang three times in brief bursts. Teachers shut the doors to their classrooms. Topps' staff, stationed at strategic corridors, fanned out to round up any students in the hallways without a valid pass. Code Blue was under way. By the time the "hall sweep" was over, 50 students had been handed two-day suspensions and sent home.

Code Blue was one of the oldest weapons in Topps' arsenal. She first employed it five years ago, shortly after arriving at McKinley. It immediately became the talk of the school. The following year, upperclassmen warned new students about it. Another year, the senior class raised money by selling buttons that said: "I survived Code Blue."

At 10:57 a.m. the following day, the Code Blue bells went off again. Another 30 students were suspended. Afterward, Assistant Principal Donald Wills toured the first-floor hallways. "It works," he said. "See how clear the halls are now."

By Friday morning of that week, however, the halls were crowded again. At 9:10 a.m, 10 minutes after the start of class, about 30 students milled around a second-floor corridor, just yards from the teachers' lounge. No one moved them along to class.

Topps said she couldn't run a Code Blue every day. "Any time you run something and it starts to be a joke to the children, it's no good," she said. Instead, she announced at the annual Christmas assembly that she, herself, would monitor the front door, which is the only permitted entrance to McKinley. Also, she ordered her attendance counselor, Kimberlyn Dean McKenzie, to compile a list of students with excessive absences, contact their parents and make clear that the school intended to drop them from the rolls if the absences continued. On Jan. 16, McKenzie circulated a tentative "drop list" with 86 names; more were added later. Few were dropped, however. They were "readmitted" after meetings between their parents and school administrators.

Then, on Jan. 28, a fight broke out just inside the gray metal front door. Barbara M. Green, a security aide who monitors the entrance, watched as a crowd began to form, including "outsiders" who did not attend the school. The crowd spilled onto the concrete plaza in front of the building. Uncertain about how to stop the fight, she tried to get the McKinley students to come back inside. At least a dozen ignored her.

The fight moved into the parking lot, ending up on the snow-covered athletic field at Langley Junior High School next door. Before police could break it up, an 11th grader was pistol-whipped and several shots were fired, although no one was struck. Police said later that the fight involved rival drug dealers and stemmed from a dispute over a girl.

The following Monday, Feb. 2, Green got into a shouting match with a senior girl who came to

school late and refused to answer Green's questions. They cursed each other and nearly came to blows, Green said later. Green was so upset that she did not go to work the rest of the week. 'An Adult Makes Decisions'

Concerned about these incidents, Topps called an emergency faculty meeting for 8:30 a.m. Wednesday. At 8:40, as teachers continued to straggle into Room 130, a 150-seat lecture hall, Topps decided not to wait any longer. "None of you has overlooked the fact that we have had a series of fights in the school over the last few weeks," she said, before asking English teacher William S. Jones to explain Topps' latest disciplinary plan.

From then on, Jones told them, anyone who arrived at school late, anyone caught in the hall without permission, would be required to go to school early for a week of 8 a.m. detention, where they would do extra lessons in math and English.

Anyone caught fighting would get the maximum suspension allowed by the school system: 25 school days.

Some teachers squirmed in the straight-back wooden chairs, offering several reasons why it would be difficult to enforce the new rules. Topps, impatient, cut off the discussion. Finally, math teacher Wellington Wilder spoke up in support of the plan and warned: "It's only going to work if we have 100 percent participation."

The next step was to meet with the students directly. She scheduled a series of meetings in Room 130. Only the 11th grade girls challenged Topps about the wisdom of the detention plan.

"If {we} can't get here by 9, what makes you think we can get here by 8 a.m.?" asked one girl, prompting applause from 100 or so girls in the room.

"We believe you can," Topps said. "And if you can find your way here by 8, you can make it here by 9. We are going to show you that you can."

"When teachers come to school late, do they go home for two days without pay?" another asked, to more applause.

"There are employment regulations for teachers," Topps said. "Employment regulations are not to be discussed with you. I will discuss that matter with the teachers."

Another girl suggested that Topps was mixing her messages. "You stress coming to school . . . {but} if you come to school late and you get suspended, then you're not here in school," the girl said.

"You are right," Topps said, leaning forward at the lectern. "I stress coming to school every day. But for some of us, there seems to be a problem coming to school on time. We have to teach you that you have to get to school on time."

"Some students might stay home when they realize they are going to be late," another said. There were murmurs and hand claps.

Annoyed, Topps stood up to her full 5-foot-6 height and placed her hands on the sides of the lectern. "These are choices you have to make," she said. "Choose the road that leads to the best consequence. You have to learn to make decisions. An adult makes decisions. I want you to go home and talk to your parents about what we have discussed here. And if you and your parents decide that you cannot live by these rules, I will be more than happy to make the proper arrangements for you to find a place where you and your parent can feel comfortable. But if you are here on Monday morning, I expect you to abide by these rules." Serving Time in Room 130

The detention system went into effect Monday, Feb. 9, under Jones' supervision. Throughout the first week, he patrolled the halls and Green sat at the main entrance with a yellow legal pad, recording the names of late arrivals. By Friday at 8 a.m., 25 students sat in Room 130, doing extra work under Jones' watchful eye.

The following Monday was a holiday and school was closed. On Tuesday, detention ended 30 minutes early so that the faculty could have its weekly meeting. At the meeting, Topps called the program "a success." The next day, a handwritten note appeared on the door of Room 130, saying without elaboration that detention had been canceled until Monday, Feb. 23.

On Monday, Feb. 23, school was closed because of snow.

As the weeks went by, fewer and fewer students showed up for detention. Enforcement became looser. Some students signed Green's tardy list when they came in late, some put down fictitious names, others refused to sign. Some teachers conscientiously passed along the names of students who arrived late to class, but others did not. At one point Jones said, "We're only catching the good kids. For some reason, the teachers aren't sending the names of the other kids."

On Friday morning, March 20, I sat at the front desk to count how many students arrived late. No one was supervising the desk.

Between 9 and 9:45, while first-period classes were in session, 161 students went in. The breakdown went this way: Between 9 and 9:05, there were 74. Between 9:05 and 9:20, another 61. Between 9:20 and 9:40, nine more. After 9:40, another 17.

At 9:25, security aide Calvin Hamilton appeared after tending to several illegally parked cars on the school's lot. At 9:45, he had 20 students on the tardy list. Only seven of the 20, however, went to 8 a.m. detention the following Tuesday.

Two months after it had started, 8 a.m. detention ended. There was no formal announcement. Just before Easter vacation in mid-April, Jones told the few students still in detention that they did not need to come the rest of that week.

On the first morning after Easter break, only one 11th grade girl showed up, but Room 130 was

empty. When she saw Jones later, he told the girl that she didn't need to come any more.

Topps said the detention plan just "petered out It started out with a bang, {but} as the year got closer to the end, we began to get consumed with seniors and graduation."

But some students said the program was undermined because the faculty played favorites, penalizing some violators while letting others go. "Some of the administrators were too lenient," said senior Hubert W. Steptoe III after graduation in June. "They need to start enforcing it {fairly}. I can say that now that I'm not there."

Jones said the program ended because "it had become futile." Teachers weren't handing in names of students who arrived at class late, and some students weren't showing up for the detention anyway.

"In general, there was very little cooperation from the teachers," he said. "No follow-through." Record-Keeping Problems

When three school officials from "central" -- school system headquarters -- came for an annual review in April, Topps confessed that she was worried. Attendance in recent months had been good, averaging 90, 91 and 92 percent, according to the official attendance reports. But, she told them, "In the last two weeks, I have become very concerned about attendance. I was disappointed in the number of students at the school last Friday for an assembly. I don't know what's happening. {But} on the whole, we're not doing bad."

How well they were doing depended on which records they used. Official reports filed with the regional office showed better attendance than the daily absentee lists compiled and distributed by McKenzie's office. It is difficult to determine which records are accurate.

On Feb. 13, for example, there were 208 names on the daily absence sheet, but the report to the region listed only 109 as absent that day. Shown the Feb. 13 list, McKenzie took a pencil and drew lines through 64 names. "These were transfers and drops," she said.

Some of the others, she said, had come to see her after homeroom period that day to say that they were late, not absent, so she had marked them as tardy. She could not explain the rest.

A closer examination of the 208 names does not clear up the confusion. Fewer than 20 of the 64 names appear on any of the official lists of drops and transfers that McKenzie sent around to teachers before Feb. 13. And in crossing names off the Feb. 13 list, she had deleted several students who I saw attend school through the end of the year.

In all this confusion, perhaps it is easy to understand how Hubert Steptoe got a perfect attendance award when his homeroom teacher's records showed him with eight absences.

McKenzie said the awards were based on nominations from homeroom teachers. But Antonin Svehla, Hubert's homeroom teacher, said he had not sent Hubert's name to McKenzie.

The culprit was Hubert. He said he saw a "perfect attendance" list one day in a class- room and added his name. He figured that someone would check the records and discover his prank.

He was surprised when his name was among the 43 called at an April 29 award assembly in the gym. His reward was a six-pack of Coke.

Later that day, a second assembly was held to hear speeches by student government candidates. Students had been told that attendance was mandatory. Teachers were expected to escort their classes to the gym.

Fewer than 250 students went. Unwilling to believe such a low turnout, Topps systematically asked first-floor, second-floor and third-floor teachers to raise their hands.

"I don't know what the problem is," she said. "Either we aren't all here or something terrible, a plague, has hit this school." 'We Had Goals'

On Wednesday morning, June 17, the teachers gathered in Room 130 for the last faculty meeting of the year. The room was hot -- there was no air conditioning or even a fan -- and the teachers waited uncomfortably for the disappointing news that they knew Topps was about to deliver. The test scores for the ninth and 11th graders were back, and the rumor was that they weren't good.

At the lectern, Topps looked grim, standing in front of the "Renewing a Legacy" sign.

"What did I say about having goals?" she asked.

"We must have them," someone whispered loudly.

"What's worse than not meeting your goals?" she asked.

"Not having any," another teacher said.

"We had goals," she said. "We did not meet them."

Topps felt their goals had been modest, a true reflection of what the students could achieve.

For the ninth graders, the goal was grade level, which is considered to be 9.8 because the test is given in the eighth month of the school year. For the 11th graders, the goal was 11.0.

As she wrote the scores on a portable chalkboard, the ninth-grade teachers winced: Reading, 8.9. Language Skills, 9.0. Math, 9.1. Reference Skills, 10.0. Science, 8.5. Social Studies, 9.4.

The 11th-grade scores were worse: Reading, 9.5. Language Skills, 10.1. Math, 9.6. Reference Skills, 10.1. Science, 8.9. Social Studies, 11.0.

Not only did the scores fall short of the goal, but also they were slightly lower than the previous year.

Other schools throughout the District experienced the same pattern, which school officials said was the result of using a newer and slightly tougher version of the test.

But the McKinley faculty was still unhappy. French teacher Vernon Williams asked Topps, "How much do you feel attendance had to do with the test scores?"

"My feeling is that one cannot achieve if one isn't here," Topps said.

"Unfortunately, the responsibility of getting a child to school is not in the home anymore. That responsibility now lies with the principal."

She paused, then continued. "What is going on in this building should be so stimulating that the children will want to leap forward and come to school. We have to get some challenging programs for our children."

She urged them to think about the problem over the summer, to come up with ways to improve their teaching and get more kids interested in school.

"Have I beat you to death on this?" she asked.

"Yes," a few said.

She smiled and said: "I'm going to beat you again in August. Beat you again in September. Beat you again in December"

NEXT: Pressures on a star athlete

ABOUT THE SERIES

Washington Post reporter Athelia Knight spent nearly all of the 1986-87 school year on assignment at McKinley High School, where school officials allowed her to sit in on classes, attend faculty meetings and interview students and teachers about the problems confronting today's urban high school. McKinley was selected because it is an average D.C. high school, as measured by its scores on standardized tests and by the percentage of its graduates who go on to college. MCKINLEY NOTEBOOK

Jan. 5, 1987

It was Monday morning, the first day after the winter break, and Principal Bettie Topps was catching up on some work when Cynthia Moten appeared at the door, unannounced and unhappy.

Moten, who had her two teen-aged sons with her, wanted Topps' help. Her son, Everet, an 11th grader at McKinley, was skipping classes regularly. She was tired of arguing with him about it and didn't know what else to do. He was almost 18 and she had four other children to care for; she didn't have time to go to school to check on him.

And to make matters worse, her other teen-aged son, a ninth grader at the adjacent Langley Junior High School, was picking up Everet's habits. If he passed, he would be at McKinley in the fall. She pleaded with Topps to do something, anything, to get Everet to stop skipping school.

Topps looked up at Everet, who was leaning against her book case. "What grade are you in?" she asked.

"Eleventh," he said.

"You're above the compulsory school age," she said. "If you don't start going to classes, I'm going to have to drop you from our rolls. We're trying to obtain 92 percent attendance, and you're bringing it down."

There wasn't much Topps felt she could do. She couldn't make Everet go to class. She could only warn him of the penalties.

For the remainder of the year, Everet frequently went to the school but rarely went to class. He hung out in the halls or outside on the plaza. Whenever his English teacher, Kevin Strachan, saw him on the school grounds, he asked him why he wasn't attending his class. Everet would promise to go the next day, but he rarely did. At the end of the year, he was told he had to repeat the class because he had not done the course work.

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A STAR ATHLETE SURVIVES SPOTLIGHT

CORRECTION: IT WAS INCORRECTLY REPORTED IN SEPT. 15 EDITIONS THAT MCKINLEY HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL STAR ANTHONY TUCKER ATTENDED ONE SESSION OF A SAT REVIEW COURSE LAST YEAR AT SIDWELL FRIENDS SCHOOL IN NORTHWEST WASHINGTON. TUCKER ATTENDED THE SESSION AT A PRIVATE FIRM IN THE DISTRICT.

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PURSUING THE LEGACY

By Athelia Knight

Washington Post Staff Writer

One Saturday morning in the fall of 1986, McKinley High School basketball star Anthony Tucker pulled on a T-shirt and a pair of shorts, laced up his sneakers and tucked his books under his arm. His destination: Sidwell Friends, an elite private school in Northwest Washington, where he had recently signed up for a course that would help him prepare for the SAT college entrance exam.

Anthony had taken the Scholastic Aptitude Test once the previous spring, scoring 740 out of a possible 1,600 -- just over the minimum of 700 required to play ball as a freshman at major colleges. But that wasn't good enough for Anthony, who already was considered one of the top high school prospects in the country. He wanted to do better.

The classroom at Sidwell was filled with students when he arrived. He looked around in surprise. Nearly everyone was wearing shirts and ties, and everyone in the classroom was white. Anthony slid into a seat. After that class, he never went back, and he did not retake the test.

The following Monday, he was back at McKinley in Northeast Washington, back where he is a familiar figure and stands out only because he is 6 feet 8 inches tall, 205 pounds, and the best basketball player who has ever worn the school's maroon and gray uniform. He realized how comfortable he felt there, where he had a coach who helped him with his studies and handled the recruiters who called him day and night, where most teachers understood the pressures on him and didn't question him too hard if he came in late or missed a class.

At college, he knew, it would be different. At college, he would be on his own, at least at first. But he said he wasn't worried. "It's an environment I have to get used to," he said.

For Anthony Tucker, the 1986-87 school year, his senior year, his last year to impress the recruiters, was a year filled with pressure. For many seniors, graduation is a blessing and a curse, a time of reckoning and anxiety about entering the job market and getting into college. For Anthony, the pressures were magnified. Just 17 years old, he found himself the object of attention from the opening day of school until the day in April when he announced, at a news conference, which college he had selected from the more than 200 schools that showed interest in him.

All that stood in Anthony's way was his own performance. He had to maintain a C average, both to be eligible for his remaining year of high school and to play his freshman year in college. He had no trouble during his first two years and his coach, biology teacher Charles Perry, wanted to make sure he had no trouble now.

Perry required all his players and tryouts to attend study hall for an hour and a half every day after school, even during basketball season. It started in September, two months before basketball practice officially began, and it continued after the season ended in March. Perry ran the study hall in a no-nonsense fashion. If someone came without a book, Perry sent him back to his locker to get it. If someone didn't have a homework assignment to do, Perry told him to read something, anything, a book, a magazine, a newspaper.

"This is a business for us," he said one October afternoon during the study hall session, which about 20 team members and prospective players were attending in Perry's second-floor biology classroom, Room 250. "Where do we want to go after our senior year?"

"College," they responded softly.

"This is a means to an end," Perry said. "If you're not looking to go to college, you shouldn't be here." *A Player With Options*

The telephone calls from recruiters began in early September 1986, soon after school opened. At first, Anthony liked the attention. But the phone rang so much in the one-bedroom Northwest Washington apartment he shared with his grandmother and father that he couldn't concentrate on his studies. "They ask you the same questions," he said one day. "'Can I come to visit you?' . . . It's like selling something. They are selling a product."

Within a few weeks, Anthony stopped taking calls himself. His father, Elroy Tucker, answered the phone if he was home. If his father, a commercial painter, was at work or away, his grandmother would politely tell the callers that Anthony wasn't home. Sometimes, Anthony would just take the phone off the hook.

Then, the letters came. One was from Nancy Thurmond, wife of Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.), who wrote last Sept. 18 on behalf of her college alma mater: "I understand you will be graduating from McKinley High School this year and Strom joins me in wishing you and your coach, and teammates best of luck for a successful senior year and a victorious basketball season.

With your bright future in athletics, I hope you will consider the University of South Carolina when looking for a college."

Interest in Anthony became so intense that Anthony and his father asked Perry to screen the recruiters, who were all trying to meet Anthony before Oct. 10 -- the last day that NCAA regulations allow college coaches to recruit high school players face-to-face until the end of the high school season. After that, they would have to limit any contact to phone calls or meetings with Perry.

McKinley's Principal Bettye W. Topps set down a few rules: Recruiters could visit the school only after classes had ended for the day, and they had to talk to the team as a group, not just to Anthony. "I didn't want the other kids feeling jealous," Topps said. "I was trying to maintain camaraderie on that team."

Some coaches met with the team in late afternoon after Perry's study hall, but most wanted to meet Anthony alone. Those meetings generally took place at night, usually at Perry's house, and lasted an hour or two. The coach from Ohio State University went an extra step: He showed a videotape that included shots of the campus, the basketball arena and a taped message from the university's president.

It didn't take long for Anthony to become wary of what he was hearing. "They tell you everything, and some of it you know is not true," he said one day in study hall. "A coach will tell you that you will start when he has 20 other players already playing that position. You have to look at the team and see what they need and then you see how you will fit in. You have to look at the coach. Will he care about you? If I couldn't play basketball, they wouldn't talk to me."

Perry, who has been coaching for six years, had had nationally recruited players in the past. But none like Anthony. He was an outstanding athlete, a natural shooter and a tough rebounder who dominated the game from his forward position. But he was more than an athlete. He was a team leader who had developed from a shy 15-year-old sophomore to a mature, soft-spoken young man. In short, he was the kind of player that college coaches liked to build their programs around.

Perry liked to describe Anthony as both a good student and a great athlete. He was quoted in a Washington Post article in February as saying that Anthony "did well in SAT boards"; Anthony's score of 740 was higher than the 704 average for D.C. public school students last year but lower than the 906 national average and much lower than the average for students accepted at the colleges on Anthony's list, including Georgetown, Syracuse and Maryland.

Perry encouraged Anthony to visit some of the colleges, but he told him not to rush into his decision. "When you have a kid who has options, he doesn't have to make that decision right away," Perry said. "His market value is going up as the deadline gets closer." Handling the Pressure

Once the season began, Anthony stopped meeting with the college coaches himself, but he still

felt their presence.

"Just a short note to let you know I was here," said a handwritten note from Stu Jackson, who was recruiting for Providence College. ". . . We are on the verge of being a top 20 team. We are in a good situation for someone like you to grow and to be a major part of helping Providence regain national recognition."

And there was this letter from Syracuse Assistant Coach Wayne Morgan: "This is just a note to remind you that you are our #1 priority recruit, and there is not a day that goes by, that we don't think about you as our starting small forward for next season. I'll be down to see you soon. Anthony, think orange, 30,000 fans a game & National Championship."

At every game, home or away, Anthony's father sat alone in the stands, reliving his own days as a key player on the 1963 team at Cardozo High School. When Anthony was a child, his father took him to the playground, taught him to shoot, coached him in a league in Cheverly, where the Tucker family was living. He remembered how Anthony began recording his height on the bedroom door and how proud Anthony was when, at age 14, he surpassed his 6-foot-4-inch father. But the elder Tucker often reminded him: "You may be taller, but you ain't bad as me."

He didn't hesitate to drive that message home. On Feb. 3, after Anthony broke one of his father's rules by staying out too late, the elder Tucker benched him for a game with Roosevelt High School. Perry tried to talk him out of it, telling him that college coaches would be in the crowd, but Anthony's father stood firm. "I had to get him where it hurts," he said later. "I had to show him where he was hurting not only himself, but others . . . He's just a 17-year-old kid who can play ball."

His father felt pressure to keep after Anthony, especially after he and Anthony's mother separated in 1984. Anthony, an only child, was 15 at the time and had lived in Prince George's County all his life. After the separation, Anthony and his father moved to his grandmother's apartment in the District, and Anthony transferred to McKinley from Fairmont Heights High School, which he attended for ninth grade.

Anthony's father worried that his son wasn't being challenged academically at McKinley. It bothered him that Anthony had taken senior English in summer school rather than during the nine-month school year. Although the summer course was only six weeks long, Anthony had to spend four hours a day in class rather than the customary 45 minutes. Nonetheless, Anthony's father thought it was the easy way to pass the required course. "I think he does just enough to get by," he said one night at a game.

Students usually go to summer school to pass a course that they have failed during the regular year, not to take a required course early. It was Coach Perry's idea for Anthony to take English during the summer. "We knew that English was a tough course," he said. "We wanted to make sure that he had his core curriculum out of the way so it wouldn't interfere with his senior year and graduation."

As a result, Anthony's courses last year were geometry, chemistry, graphic arts, economics/government, typing and computer science for one semester. Unlike many of the students, Anthony generally did his homework, usually under the watchful eye of Coach Perry during study hall. "I got to be careful. People are always looking at what I am doing," Anthony said.

Throughout the season, Anthony struggled to balance his school work, the games and the recruiters. The team played at night, usually at 8, at least twice a week; the day after a game, Anthony was tired and had trouble making it to his first-period geometry class on time. Some days after a game, he was absent.

His geometry teacher, Anderson Ridley, wasn't satisfied with his performance. "When he comes, he does his work," Ridley said one day. "I told him, 'Man, if you want a scholarship, you've got to come to class to pass.'" Ridley gave him a failing grade for the second advisory, a nine-week period that ended in late January, the middle of basketball season.

The failing grade did not affect Anthony's eligibility because his other grades were good enough to maintain his C average. Still, Perry was upset and told Anthony to bring the grade up. At various times during the year, he warned Anthony and the rest of the team about doing their work and getting to class on time. "How can you walk past your teacher and speak and grin and not go to your teacher's class?" he said during study hall one day. "Some of you have some gumption and nerve."

As the end of the season neared, Topps became worried. "He's under too much pressure," Topps said Feb. 16, the day before McKinley's most important game of the year. "A girl who is performing at Tucker's level will not get that attention. Everytime I pass Anthony . . . I ask him how he's handling the pressure."

At a faculty meeting the following morning, Topps urged everyone to "put on your maroon and gray and come out tonight and cheer." The game was a sellout. Students arrived in designer jeans, expensive jogging suits, gold necklaces and bracelets. The recruiters were out in force, including Georgetown's John Thompson and the University of Maryland's Bob Wade.

Anthony's last-minute heroics nearly brought McKinley a victory -- he scored 23 points, including two crucial baskets to force the game into overtime -- but Dunbar won. The next day, Topps met with the players in her office. "You're still No. 1," she said. "I'm proud of you You are probably the best team we have had since I've been here." As she talked, Anthony looked at the floor and fingered his Walkman, which was not turned on.

The season ended with McKinley and Dunbar tied for the interhigh championship and Anthony as the league's leading scorer with a 24-point average. He was selected for several All-America teams and invited to play in a nationally televised all-star game in Philadelphia on Sunday, April 12. Topps announced at a March 23 faculty meeting that Anthony might have to miss several days of school because of the all-star game.

At that point, geometry teacher Ridley said loudly, "He may be failing from me." Topps stopped

and turned to Perry. "Tell Anthony to see Mr. Ridley quick," she said.

When the third advisory grades came out the following week, Anthony just escaped failing. Ridley gave him a D, and at the end of the year, Anthony passed the course. 'The Best School for Me'

A few days after the faculty meeting, a rumor swept through the school that Anthony had made up his mind on which college to attend. It was spurred by an article on The Washington Post sports page about Dennis Scott, another area All-America who was considered by some as the best high school prospect in the country.

Scott announced that he was going to Georgia Tech, bypassing Georgetown and several other basketball powers. But in the same story, Georgetown Coach Thompson said he had not offered Scott a scholarship and that his No. 1 priority was Anthony -- who was his pick for best player in the nation.

The school was buzzing with the Thompson quote. "He better go to Georgetown after what Coach Thompson said about him," teammate Orlando Vega said. Everyone knew that Anthony had narrowed his choices to Maryland, Georgetown, Old Dominion and Syracuse, but Anthony wasn't saying anything more. Only Perry knew the winner.

Anthony's father thought he knew. He was most impressed with Syracuse's basketball program, which seemed perfect for Anthony's style of play, and he was certain his son had decided to go there. His son hadn't mentioned Georgetown much, so he thought Georgetown was out of the running.

Perry scheduled a news conference for Wednesday, April 1. Anthony's father was unaware of the news conference until he read an article about it in a newspaper on Monday, March 30. "I nearly hit the ceiling," Anthony's father said. But he decided not to bring it up.

At 8 a.m. on April 1, Assistant Principal Leroy Butler picked up Anthony and his father, and drove them to school in Butler's steel gray Mercedes for the 10 a.m. announcement. They arrived before classes began, and Anthony and Perry met to go over a two-page speech that another teacher had written for Anthony. "That's pretty good," Perry said, handing the pages back to Anthony, who rolled them up in his hand.

Students began arriving for Perry's first-period class. Anthony was sitting in a chair, looking out of place in his gray slacks, blue blazer and white shirt. "I can't believe it," said Niccole Ragins, a 10th grader, placing a hand on Anthony's shoulder and lightly turning him around so she could get a full view of his outfit. "Tucker in a suit . . . He even has on dress shoes. I can't believe it. He always wears tennis shoes and jeans."

Downstairs, Topps, walkie-talkie in hand, was trying to clear the halls. Anthony's father was pacing outside the 150-seat lecture hall, Room 130, the site of the news conference. He still did not know which school Anthony had chosen. He spotted Perry, and the two men went back to

Perry's classroom.

Anthony was waiting. His father asked him, "Where are you going?"

Anthony looked at him and said: "Georgetown."

When Anthony came down to Room 130, his father was nowhere to be seen. Anthony ascended the podium. Behind him, placed so the television cameras could pick it up, were several McKinley signs, including "Renewing A Legacy," the slogan the school had adopted for that year. Anthony steadied himself by resting each hand on the side of the lectern and spoke without referring to the rolled-up pages he had been holding in his hand.

"I am about to embark on a dream," he said to the half-dozen reporters and about 75 teachers and students who had been invited to the event. "I am about to make the biggest decision in my life . . . to go to a university where I hope I will fit in and make a difference I think I fit in very well both academically and athletically "

He paused, drawing out the suspense. "This place is the university of . . . "

He paused again, leading some in the audience to believe that he had chosen the University of Maryland.

". . . Georgetown."

The teachers and students screamed and applauded. Everyone beamed as Anthony took questions from the reporters.

"Anthony, you said you had two other schools. What were they and why did you drop them?" one reporter asked.

". . . I dropped Syracuse," Anthony started, then stopped. "Well, it really wasn't a matter of dropping Syracuse. It was a matter of choosing the best school for me, and I think Georgetown is the best school for me because of the coach."

Someone asked if he hoped to play professional basketball.

"That's a dream," he said. "That's another reason why I picked Georgetown. If that dream doesn't become a reality, then I will have a life after that."

Another reporter said, "John Thompson believes in discipline on and off the court. Do you think you can handle it?"

"McKinley believes in discipline on and off the court," Anthony retorted. Topps and the rest of the crowd cheered.

A Sympathetic Principal

In the all-star game in Philadelphia, Anthony was a standout, scoring 9 points in 17 minutes, blocking four shots and grabbing five rebounds. At the faculty meeting the next morning, Topps said she had watched the game on television and that Anthony had done "particularly well."

Because Anthony had missed an entire week of classes to attend practices for the game, Topps asked his teachers to let him make up the work. She reminded them of a student who had failed several years earlier because she had gone to Israel and missed a lot of work.

She said she didn't want that to happen to Anthony.

"You can't use the attendance rule for students who do this," she said. "Though it is not official school business, it is an opportunity that few McKinley students have. They said McKinley Tech a whole lot of times" during the television broadcast.

NEXT: Successful teachers

McKINLEY NOTEBOOK Athelia Knight

Thursday, May 14, 1987

It was the annual McKinley sports banquet, a night to celebrate the successes of the past year, and 142 student athletes and their parents had gathered at the Officers Club in the Navy Yard to eat, drink and listen to a special guest speaker -- John Thompson, the head basketball coach at Georgetown University.

Thompson had his own reasons for celebrating. A month before, he had won the recruiting battle for McKinley star Anthony Tucker, an All-America who was pursued by more than 200 colleges. But when he stood to speak, he said he had other things on his mind. He wanted to tell them about Sametta Wallace Jackson, his sixth-grade teacher at Harrison Elementary School in Northwest.

She was strict, tough and strong. She was hard on Thompson, and he didn't like it. He couldn't wait to graduate so he could go on to junior high at nearby Garnet-Patterson, where he would fit in better (he was the tallest kid in his class) and where he could "show his latest moves" to the junior high girls.

But Sametta Wallace Jackson changed all that. She flunked him because he couldn't read well. "It was not a popular decision for me," Thompson said. Over the years, he learned to accept it and now believes "it was the best thing that happened to me."

He paused. "All those folks who stroke you on the back may be good to you, but not for you," he said. "I was lucky enough to find one person in my life who told me this is what you will do."

He concluded: "You have to take the responsibility for your own education. You can't blame your teacher, your coach, McKinley Tech If you want it, you better go get it. The challenge is yours."

ABOUT THE SERIES

Washington Post reporter Athelia Knight spent nearly all of the 1986-87 school year on assignment at McKinley High School, where school officials allowed her to sit in on classes, attend faculty meetings and interview students and teachers about the problems confronting today's urban high school. McKinley was selected because it is an average D.C. high school, as measured by its scores on standardized tests and by the percentage of its graduates who go on to college.

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EXPERTS, OFFICIALS AGREE URBAN SCHOOLS SHARE PROBLEMS

PURSUING THE LEGACY

By Athelia Knight

In the final weeks before the publication of this series, several people who are knowledgeable about McKinley -- its principal, a former PTA president, a member of its alumni association and the superintendent of D.C. schools -- were interviewed about the information to be included in these articles and what, if any, changes they would implement. Several experts who have studied urban high schools also were interviewed. Bettye W. Topps, principal

Several times during the school year, Topps spoke out at school assemblies and faculty meetings about her concerns -- honor roll students who did not want to come forward to accept their award because they were "embarrassed," students who came to school late and unprepared, the difficulty of motivating and stimulating today's "television-oriented" students.

On the last Sunday in August, sitting in the living room of her Northwest Washington home for the last of several dozen conversations we had during the course of the school year, she said she was "frustrated, angry and mad" by the end of the school year. McKinley "is not anywhere near where I would like it to be," she said. "There has not been enough follow-through. I haven't gotten the results. It's not because I haven't tried."

In her 20 years as a teacher and administrator in the D.C. school system, including five as McKinley's principal, Topps said she has seen a variety of approaches to solving the problems inherent at an urban school -- many of which are the result of social and economic conditions that the schools cannot control.

Today's high schools, she said, are feeling the effects of some of the educational methods that were in favor 10 years ago. "We fail to remember that in the '60s and '70s, there were all of these experimental things about education -- letting children choose, letting kids work at their own pace, open education, open classrooms. Now that the kids have formed this {blase} attitude, we can't understand why We can't blame the kids."

Teachers, she said, have to decide every year how to handle students who are not ready for high school courses. She gave an example: An algebra student cannot do long division, a necessary skill to start algebra. His teacher works with him, and by the end of the year, he has mastered it -- but he still can't do algebra. What grade should he get? she asked.

"If you say he got a D because he was only at the long division level, the parent complains that you were supposed to teach him algebra and not long division. The teacher knows if she had taught him algebra, he would have failed," she said.

Teachers who want to fail students don't get enough support from parents or the school system, she said. "We have gone through a period where if a child doesn't succeed, it's the teacher's fault. Pretty soon, you get teachers who bend over backward to give a kid a D. The child may not have to do much for that D. Over the years, he does less and less and still gets that D."

These issues rarely get discussed at educational conferences, she said. At the same time, she said, she was worried that publicizing some of these problems would hurt the school. "If you keep destroying the institution that is doing the training -- you've already said the home isn't doing it, now the school isn't doing it -- the kid comes to me and says, 'Why should I listen to you?' "

She said that McKinley has a number of "exceptional" students. The others, she said, want to learn and will "rise to the occasion" with the help of school officials and teachers.

"Right now, we're trying to force learning on kids," she said. "Until the child becomes an active participant, they aren't going to reach their fullest potential. To be excellent, an individual has to go the extra mile . . . It has to be something that {the individual} wants to do." Betty Thomas, 1986-87 PTA president

As the mother of a 10th grader at McKinley, Betty Thomas said she knows about the peer pressure. "It's not popular now to be bright," she said during an interview Sept. 3. "I don't know why."

To overcome such attitudes, teachers and parents must forge a "stronger bond" than now exists, she said. Last year's PTA meetings drew fewer than 100 parents. Thomas said her recruitment efforts failed to increase the organization's membership. "I don't believe there is a lack of interest," she said. "I get the same response from parents: 'I'm working two jobs.' Or, 'I'm working a split shift.' It's never, 'I'm not interested.' "

She believes that Topps is a "good administrator" and that McKinley's good teachers are the school's most important asset. "We don't show enough appreciation to our teachers," she said. "It seems like it's a thankless job . . . Now that you mention it, I'm sitting here thinking how often have I sent a teacher a note to say 'thank you' or 'You are doing a good job.' " Margo Johnson Kelly, Alumni Association

A 1961 McKinley graduate, Margo Kelly is a busy woman -- she is the mother of three teen-aged boys, all in school in Montgomery County where they live. She is also a computer specialist for the General Accounting Office, an independent real estate broker, a part owner of a travel agency and an active member of McKinley's Alumni Association, founded in 1982.

She remembers her high school days as less complicated and more sheltered. "Adult problems didn't reach us, adult problems of joblessness, pregnancy . . . improper diet, not enough food, not

the proper clothes Children in 1987 are striving to feel comfortable in the world that surrounds them, a confusing world. Often, the requirements for their learning surpasses their abilities or the time that the family has" to work with them, she said.

Since 1985, she has been trying to start a "mentoring" program, in which McKinley alumni from varied careers would volunteer to take from one to 10 students under their wing, and meet with them at least once a month. After getting support from the alumni association members, Kelly made a formal proposal to Topps in October. No follow-up meetings were held, however, so Kelly now hopes to get the program going this year. Floretta D. McKenzie, D.C. school superintendent

Where others see the students' nonchalant attitude toward learning as a true indication of their lack of interest, Floretta D. McKenzie said it's a "cavalier facade {that} masks feelings of hopelessness."

What should be done? She, too, favors a mentoring program, putting students in close contact with successful role models. "I think {the} alumni can do a wonderful job at that," she said.

McKenzie, who recently announced that she planned to leave the superintendent post after six years to head her own consulting firm, said McKinley has an opportunity to lick some of its problems because Topps "is a good person, and she is smart. She has tried . . . to get students to be responsible for their behavior."

Asked about the school's failure, at times, to follow through, she said: "You never completely have the answer." Turning the question around, she emphasized the school's achievements -- the students who are doing well and exhibiting leadership despite "negative peer pressure."

She concluded, "I'm one of the few paid optimists in the city. You've got to believe. You've got to. If you give up, the consequences are much too great." Several experts who have studied urban schools

None of the experts was surprised by the the information outlined in the series. They see it as a common problem that could be found in almost any urban high school -- not a McKinley problem or a D.C. problem. Recognizing the universality of the problem, they said, is critical to coming up with solutions.

Many students at urban schools come from neighborhoods in which they have seen, or perhaps experienced, the effect of unemployment, drug abuse, teen-age pregnancy and crime. These urban students see fewer examples of people who have done well in high school and gone on to successful careers.

"The middle-income kids have much better evidence that a high school degree has high economical consequences," said Michelle Fine, a University of Pennsylvania professor who spent the 1984-85 school year at a New York City high school, where she studied dropout rates.

Dr. James P. Comer, a child psychiatrist at Yale University who wrote a book based on a long-term study of New Haven, Conn., public schools, said high school students are the most difficult to reach and that it is critical to establish a sense of discipline in the early grades.

"In elementary school, they pretty much do what you say," Comer said. "In high school, they are pulling away. The fact you want them to bring in their books has to be internalized . . . It has to be their goal."

Henry M. Levin, professor of education and economics at Stanford University, agreed. "We should be putting much more emphasis on elementary schools than secondary schools," he said. "That's where the learning, motivation and excitement about school takes place. We have to deliver the kids into secondary schools as good people, people who can learn."

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MCKINLEY NOTEBOOK FRIDAY, MAY 29, 1987

PURSUING THE LEGACY

By Athelia Knight

The graduating members of the 1987 senior class, boys dressed in maroon gowns and girls dressed in white ones, marched down the aisles of Constitution Hall and took their seats in 12 reserved rows. Their parents and friends sat behind them and above them, leafing through the official program that marked the 87th annual commencement for McKinley High School.

The program included the following "Class Statistics:"

College, 162 students or 63 percent;

Business or Trade School, 28 students or 11 percent;

Full-Time Work, 22 students or 8 percent;

Part-Time Work/College, 27 students or 10 percent;

Apprenticeships, 5 students or 2 percent;

Police Cadet Training Program, 3 students or 1 percent;

Military Service, 12 students or 5 percent.

TOTAL CLASS, 259 students.

Several teachers were surprised to learn that 63 percent of the seniors were college-bound.

Beulah Smith, who was responsible for mailing grade transcripts to colleges last year, said a few hours before the ceremony that she had sent transcripts for only 105 students; nearly all colleges require such transcripts for admission.

Why the discrepancy? Because the "statistics" were the results of an informal questionnaire distributed to seniors and additional information from guidance counselors, said Deidre Cheeks, a school aide who collected the figures.

The 63 percent figure was misleading in another way. There were 287 graduates, not 259, from a senior class that had 360 students at the beginning of the year.

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THREE TEACHERS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

PURSUING THE LEGACY

By **Athelia Knight**

Washington Post Staff Writer

Charles (Master Gunny) Washington looked at the two dozen students in his Navy ROTC class and thought to himself how little they knew about their own history. None of them was alive when civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was gunned down; none of them had any firsthand knowledge of the sit-ins, the protest marches, the violence of the 1960s.

He couldn't do anything about that, but he was determined to make them think about it. He already had planted the seeds at their last class meeting, showing them a videotape of some of King's followers being taunted and beaten by whites as they tried to integrate a restaurant counter in Nashville. King's followers never fought back. At the end, a student turned to Washington and asked: What would have happened if the nonviolent movement had been violent?

That gave Washington an idea. At the next class, he divided the class into two groups, violent versus nonviolent, and told them to argue the following question: Which approach was the best way to desegregate schools?

Quickly, the two sides became embroiled in a free-wheeling shouting match, with Washington egging them on, moving around the room in his gray pinstriped suit and matching gray cowboy boots, either challenging an illogical statement or acting as a devil's advocate.

"We're going to use some psychology . . ." began Taurice McMillan, leader of the nonviolent group.

"Damn the psychology," Washington chimed in. "My thing is, if we can't get it, let's blow up their stuff."

McMillan shook his head, saying violence was senseless, that it solved nothing. The leader of the violent group, Lionell Ben, interrupted. "I'm tired of getting hit over the head singing 'We Shall Overcome,' " he said.

Delighted, Washington slid into a chair and let the debate go on without him. As the class neared the end, he posed a final question: "Have we {blacks} ever in history accomplished anything through violence?" As the bell rang and the students filed out into the hallway, the debate raged on.

If there is a secret to success at McKinley, it seems to be shared by teachers such as Washington, social studies teacher Leroy Swain and French teacher Vernon Williams, who are able to motivate their students to come to class, turn in their homework assignments on time and participate in discussions.

These three are not the only teachers who are recognized as having a special ability to push their students to higher levels. The rest of the faculty members are able to do it occasionally, but Washington and the others do it consistently. The difference shows up in their classrooms: They are better run and better attended, the students rarely come late and disruptions are not as common.

Yet they are hardly cast from the same mold. Washington, 45, is loud and profane, prancing around the classroom, tossing off anecdotes from his Marine Corps days and his three tours of duty in Vietnam. Swain, 39, is soft-spoken and reassuring, always soliciting his students' opinions and ready to share a story from his moonlighting job as a cabdriver. Williams, 42, is energetic and friendly, greeting his students with an easy smile or a "Hi, doll baby," occasionally tapping a student playfully on the head to get his attention.

Stylistic differences aside, there are strong similarities in their teaching methods. They are well-prepared and organized. They rarely come to class late, they start working as soon as the bell rings, they hand out homework assignments and never fail to collect them, grade them and hand them back.

They are blunt and willing to give their students realistic evaluations. They tell students when they have done poorly, praise them when they have done well, and don't pretend that one student's achievements cast glory on the rest of the class.

Frequently, they take a personal interest in their students. Washington, for example, has intervened on behalf of several failing students, persuading them to attend summer school, then making sure they get to school by taking them there in his car. Carolyn Mosby, an English teacher whose ninth- and 10th-grade classes are well-attended and lively, adopted a 10th grader in one of her classes several years ago. The boy, who was having family problems, later transferred to a school in Prince George's County, where Mosby lives.

They take little for granted, least of all their relationships with their students. "As a teacher you rate a certain amount of respect that goes along with the position," Washington said one day after class. "All over and above that, you have to earn. You have to go a little further all the time That kid has to respect you as a person You have to respect that kid."

If McKinley is to "renew the legacy" -- a slogan adopted last year to convey the faculty's desire to return McKinley to its place as one of D.C.'s best schools -- it is probably going to be teachers such as Washington, Swain and Williams who will make it happen. "They're good kids," Swain said one day early in the school year. "They are just begging for help. They all want discipline. They all want guidance. It's up to us to do it."

ABOUT THE SERIES

Washington Post reporter Athelia Knight spent nearly all of the 1986-87 school year on assignment at McKinley High School, where school officials allowed her to sit in on classes, attend faculty meetings and interview students and teachers about the problems confronting today's urban high school. McKinley was selected because it is an average D.C. high school, as measured by its scores on standardized tests and by the percentage of its graduates who go on to college.

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CHARLES WASHINGTON 'YOU CAN BE ANYTHING YOU WANT'

PURSUING THE LEGACY

By Athelia Knight

On Monday, March 2, Charles Washington opened his second-period ROTC class by telling his students some "disturbing news": of 75 college scholarships awarded to high school ROTC students that year, only two were offered to blacks.

Some teachers rarely bring up race as an issue. Washington refers to it constantly, using it as a motivational tool, a way to challenge his students. His class is more than a course in military science; he spends a month teaching black history and the entire year offering his views on what it means to be black in today's world.

"You're not going to tell me that our kids can't achieve," Washington said. Then, trying to drive his point home, he joked: "{You} know something about numbers. You can tell me how much some Air Jordans {basketball shoes} cost. You can tell me how much those Coca-Cola jeans you got on cost What we got to do is try to put ourselves in a situation where we become academically sound. If you can't compute, you will be a welfare generation."

Then, he grew more serious. Walking down the aisles of the neatly arranged rows of new desks, past the wall with the slogan, "Lead, Follow or Get Out The Way," and the posters of famous black Americans, he asked each student: What kind of job do you want to have?

Almost everyone ticked off a career that required education beyond high school -- accountant, pediatrician, teacher, nurse, barber, FBI agent, Marine Corps officer, surgeon, veterinarian, lawyer. Washington bluntly warned them: "You can be anything you want to be. But, if you're not achieving academically now, how are you going to achieve in college?"

He used himself as an example. "Don't believe I graduated summa cum laude or magna cum laude. I graduated 'thank the Lordy,' " he said, bringing a chorus of laughter from the class.

During the course of the year, Washington's students learned a lot about him. He described himself as someone who never would have graduated in 1960 from Phelps Vocational High School in Northeast Washington without the help of several teachers who kept after him. He then enrolled in Howard University, where he lasted only one semester. "I failed everything but

lunch," he said.

He enlisted in the Marines, got serious about his life, was promoted several times and earned a college degree at Prairie View A&M, a predominantly black college in Arkansas. After serving and getting wounded once in Vietnam, he taught a college ROTC course for five years at Prairie View, then was transferred to various posts at Marine bases on the East Coast. He retired in 1983 after nearly 24 years with the rank of master gunnery sergeant -- thus his nickname, Master Gunny -- and joined the faculty at McKinley.

As part of the ROTC course, he takes his students to military bases for field trips and competitions. Those trips have made him realize how sheltered McKinley's students are. "When we put you on a bus and take you down to Norfolk {a Navy station in Virginia} or Camp Lejeune {a Marine base in North Carolina}, what do you do?" he asked rhetorically during class one day. "All the blacks gather over here" -- he motioned to a corner of the room -- "because you've never been exposed to white people."

For the most part, he manages to keep his students interested and they respond by doing their work. When they don't -- and they are more lax than he would like -- he minces no words and spares no profanity.

One of those times was Feb. 12. As soon as the roll was called for his second-period class, he stood up and all eyes fell on him. He was a picture of controlled anger.

"You had an assignment on Marcus Garvey due yesterday," he began, pronouncing his words slowly and carefully. "You told Chief {another teacher who was handling the class alone because Washington was away} that the assignment was not due."

"I make the decisions when assignments are due," he said, glaring at them. "It was due yesterday. Not today. Not next week. But yesterday, damn it." He was shouting. "I am not senile. You don't decide when to turn in my assignments. When I say an assignment is due, it is due. Now the next time you don't turn in my assignment, I expect your asses to be carried by six {pallbearers} . . . and your mamas to be crying"

The students sat motionless. No one snickered. Washington wasn't finished. He even criticized some of those who had done the assignment.

"Some of you just went to a book, found a paragraph on Marcus Garvey and copied it word for word," he said. "Where is your thirst for knowledge? Where is your thirst to show off what you know? We do it half-ass. We do enough to get by."

Then, the tirade over, he asked 11th grader Ivan Fitzgerald to read his paper aloud, telling the class that Fitzgerald's report was "excellent" because it showed that Fitzgerald had thought about the material and had not just copied facts from a book.

Later, the students talked about the outburst. "Everybody forgot the assignment so we just said it

wasn't due," said Jonathan McKinley, an 11th grader. "We are used to getting hollered at. He's like "

He stopped in mid-sentence. "What's that man's name that they talk about on TV?" he asked. "You know that man that everyone stops to listen to," he said.

"E.F. Hutton," a girl at the table said.

"Yeah, that's who Master Gunny's like," he said. "E.F. Hutton. When he talks, everybody listens. Even the teachers. He knows what he is talking about."

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LEROY SWAIN 'REACH FOR THE SKY

PURSUING THE LEGACY

By Athelia Knight

Social studies teacher Leroy Swain usually arrived at McKinley early, about 7:30 a.m., in plenty of time for his 8 a.m. government class. But one winter morning, his black-and-orange taxicab -- which he uses to earn extra income after school and on weekends -- was nowhere to be seen in the school parking lot.

A few minutes before 8, a car pulled into the parking lot. Out jumped Swain, whose cab had broken down on the way to work, forcing him to find another way to work. Swain raced across the parking lot, sprinted up the two flights of stairs and arrived for his class in Room 315 just as the bell rang.

This was typical of Leroy Swain, a teacher whose dedication to his job stands out in a school where some students -- and even a few teachers -- have a casual attitude toward getting to class on time. Swain has little patience for tardiness; when several students in his second-semester government class had trouble getting there by 8 a.m., he told them to transfer to a later class. It was his way, he said later, "to shake the fat out."

He is just as aggressive about getting his students to participate. Trying to spark some discussion among the 23 students present one Friday morning in early February, he asked someone to list the various forms of government. A boy sitting in the corner timidly raised his hand, holding it slightly above his shoulder. Swain walked over to the boy's desk and gently grabbed the boy's arm. "When you raise your hand, I want you to reach for the sky," he said, demonstrating. "I want people to see who you are."

Swain is part disciplinarian, part cheerleader. His students comment on his willingness to listen, his persistence in asking for their opinion, his open manner. Almost every day, students came to his classroom before school started to talk to him about a family or school problem.

His style has worked particularly well in his "dynamics of relationships" class, a new course taught at McKinley for the first time last year. It is a kind of crisis prevention course that covers a wide range of issues confronting today's teen-agers: sexuality, suicide, how to talk with a parent, the importance of friendship. "In here, we can talk freely," said Brigette Moore, the senior class president last year.

Swain's class was so popular that students occasionally cut other classes to attend. Although Swain did not want to encourage any rule-breaking, he let them stay if he thought they had a

personal problem that had to be dealt with immediately.

The discussions often turned into free-flowing exchanges on morality and values. Principal Bettye W. Topps was impressed with the way he handled the class, often bringing visitors from other school systems to observe.

One day last December, he asked the students if they had shared with their parents some tips found in the textbook on how to improve communication between parents and teen-agers. No one had.

"Mr. Swain, you act like you're trying to solve every problem with this book," said one girl, who had previously described her stormy relationship with her mother. "Everybody can't solve their problems with this book."

Swain suggested that the book was the means to an end -- the way to open up a difficult conversation. "I would appreciate it if you would show those 12 tips . . . to your parents tonight. This could be a start."

He often drew on his own experiences in talking to his students. A D.C. native, he graduated from Roosevelt High School in 1966 and ended up in D.C. Teachers' College only because, he told his class, the father of his then-girlfriend insisted that if he planned on dating his daughter, he had better enroll in "somebody's college."

He often runs into his students after school, while driving his cab through neighborhoods in Northeast and Southeast Washington, where he prefers to look for customers. One hot Friday night in July, several weeks after the end of the school year, I rode with Swain as he drove his cab through the streets of Southeast.

It was a night to reflect on issues large and small, on how the year had gone and on the state of education in today's urban high school. He picked up a young man in gray shorts and T-shirt near the corner of Alabama Avenue and Stanton Road, where a crowd of more than 50 men and women gathered along a sidewalk leading to an apartment building. Swain asked the man why the crowd had gathered. "That's where they sell nar-co-tics," the man said matter-of-factly.

That led Swain to a discussion of the lure of drugs for some teen-agers. "Deep down these kids aren't bad," he said. "They want to do right. But there's no incentive to do it. They can sell drugs. Hang on the corners. Socialize. Wear the finest clothes and make easy money. Nobody bothers them. It's a good life."

Swain said he fears that life for these kids "is over," that they will not rise beyond where they are now if the school system doesn't acknowledge the extent of the problem and get tougher on both teachers and students. "The system should step in with some firmness," he said. "If you come down hard, the results will be well-known."

It was time, he said, to stop graduating youngsters who aren't prepared, even if that meant failing

a significant number of students. He paused, reflecting on the impact of what he was proposing. "You don't know how much the system could stand," he said. "That might be the most difficult part." But he said there was no choice. "You can't back off," he said. "It's going to take time."

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VERNON WILLIAMS 'I HOLD YOUR PARENTS RESPONSIBLE'

PURSUING THE LEGACY

By Athelia Knight

Of all the new students in French teacher Vernon Williams' first-year classes last year, ninth grader Nichole Tobias stood out as one of the best. Williams, pleased with Nichole's enthusiasm and aptitude for the language, went out of his way to praise her. After a few weeks, however, he realized that the attention was causing resentment among the other students.

The issue blew up one day last fall when Williams reprimanded a girl for not being prepared. Nichole and another of Williams' favorites, ninth grader Barbara Grant, giggled, leading to a confrontation the next day among the three girls. When Williams heard about it, he felt guilty.

He made a pact with Nichole and Barbara. He told them that he planned to "jump on them" more if they made a mistake in class to make them blend in with the rest of the students. "I had given {them} so much praise that I was alienating them from their peers," he explained.

This is teaching according to Vernon Williams: Be flexible, be creative, be conscious of your own mistakes. Aware that students usually find foreign languages difficult or irrelevant, he is endlessly searching for ways to hold their attention. Last year, he decided to take advantage of the proliferation of Walkmans among today's teen-agers and sent his students home with an unusual homework assignment: French language drills on tape cassettes. It was a popular move.

He walks the line between being a friend and being a mentor. He seems almost like a student himself: Slender and youthful-looking, he frequently wears sweaters without a tie. A D.C. native, he is a 1962 graduate of Roosevelt High School and has taught at McKinley for eight years. "Vernon can find a way to motivate every kid in his class," said Principal Bettye W. Topps.

At lunchtime, it is common to see students hanging out in Williams' classroom, asking his advice or telling him about a family problem. Even students who have never taken one of his courses come by. He takes extra steps to praise his students -- after the honor roll is announced, he puts up signs congratulating those who make it -- but he is just as quick to show his disappointment.

One day last December, only four of 20 students in his fifth-period class -- the one that included Nichole and Barbara -- arrived with their homework completed.

"This period is in bad trouble," Williams said. "You think you can come in here two days a week and smile at me and not do my work but still pass. That's not going to happen here. Somebody at home is supposed to tell you that education is important. I hold your parents responsible."

He then went on with his lesson. At the end of the class, he still was not satisfied. "We haven't done our work for today," he said. "Be here {after school} to do our work." He excused the four students who had done the homework and kept the others after school for an hour.

During the next several weeks, he struggled to motivate the class, but nothing seemed to work. Most of the students still came unprepared. Finally, he came up with a way to get them more involved: Let each student teach the class for 10 minutes a day.

The idea seemed to work. The student who was designated to teach was usually well-prepared. The rest of the class, unwilling to look bad at the hands of a peer, seemed better prepared, too.

On March 17, it was Nichole's turn to teach. She called on one of the girls who had been angry with her earlier in the year when Williams was praising her. Nichole pronounced a phrase and the girl wrote it on the blackboard. Williams beamed at the way the two of them got along.

After class, he said his pact with Nichole had worked. "Now Nichole is no longer a threat to them," he said.

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