
OVERVIEW

There have been flamboyant attempts to turn troubled urban schools around with megaphones, padlocks, and baseball bats. Whatever the merits and dangers of such methods, here is a positive role model of urban education. Respect from New York City’s Board of Education and Washington’s Department of Education for Jimmie Warren stem from his track record as principal of four troubled New York schools in the 1980s.

When Warren came to Taft High School, "it was near the top of every negative list the city produced."

* 84% of the students on public assistance.
* 16% could not read English proficiently.
* Only two of 2500 students scored well enough to earn a Regents’ diploma—in contrast to 90% in some top New York City schools.

According to Warren, "It had one of the highest dropout rates, just about the lowest attendance and achievement rates, nearly the highest suspension rate. The school had a very bad reputation."

"I had kids coming into my office with tears in their eyes, saying, ‘We don’t think we’re that bad,’ " Principal Warren continues. "I said, ‘Let’s prove it.’"

I was shocked (at how rough kids there had it, Warren says). I had a teacher complain to me about one student who was not doing his homework. I said, ‘Bring him in. I’ll read him the riot act.’

They brought him in, and I said, ‘James, I want you to bring your mother in.’ He said, ‘I can’t. She’s a drug addict. The court took me away from her.’ I said, ‘Okay, bring your father.’ ‘My father’s a fugitive,’ he said. ‘I haven’t seen him in four years.’ I said, ‘Who are you living with?’ He said, ‘I was living with my aunt. She threw me out.’

In working on placing James in a foster home with a social worker, Principal Warren saw the challenge he faced at Taft. And he realized some of the programs that were needed to supplement the classroom learning situation. He soon developed

* An "Adopt-a-Student" program in which faculty members and administration (including Warren) would attach to a student at particular risk, inviting them to their homes, calling them during vacations, and constantly encouraging them.
* A Parents’ Association and Community Support Program.
* Program for pregnant girls.
* A tutoring program for students with low reading scores.
* An in-house GED program offering older students general diplomas.
* Make-up classes for those with high absenteeism.
* Extra periods of math, biology, and chemistry to prepare students for standardized tests.
Warren encouraged teachers to volunteer extra time. Smiling, he says, "I wanted those teachers to think their middle name was Taft."

How far did Warren turn Taft around?

* 11% now receive Regents’ diplomas.
* 80% go on to some form of further education.

Warren adds, "Don’t get me wrong; we didn’t solve all the problems at Taft. The dropout rate is still too high; the attendance rate is still too low. But we made some dents in the problems."

Because of his successes, Warren has now been assigned to troubled Monroe High School in the Bronx. Once a fine school, its test scores and graduation rates have been falling for years:

When I see a kid walk through the door at Monroe, I see high potential...These kids have to work harder than other kids. I’m not telling them it’s fair. I’m telling them they can make it...All they need is proper encouragement.

The author, Ryan, describes the principal:

There are few better role models than Jimmie Warren, who lives north of the Bronx with his wife, Freda, and their two sons. He was raised in Harlem. He worked his way through college, acquiring a bachelor’s degree from Long Island University and a master’s from City College of New York. (He is now working on a doctorate at Columbia.) By his own account, he was the only kid in his neighborhood to make it through college; many of his friends ended up dead or in jail. Still, he knows the kids at Taft and Monroe today have it rougher than he ever knew. Jimmie Warren is going to make sure.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How close to the picture of Taft and Monroe are the students and schools you know?
2. To what do you credit Jimmie Warren’s success? What would it take to produce that success in your situation?
3. What would you like to ask a student at Taft or Monroe? A teacher at one of these schools? A parent in the area? Jimmie Warren himself?
4. How do you describe the difference between urban leaders who spend all their time talking about negative problems and Jimmie Warren who concentrates on possible answers?
5. What would you say is the first step in turning around a troubled school in your (or such a) situation?
6. What would you add to the suggested answers and programs of article?

IMPLICATIONS

1. The educational system continually receives negative publicity—even in more affluent towns—because of the dollars required to run programs that meet all the needs of the kids. People expect schools to teach kids more than academics, but they are not willing to pay for the services.
2. We, as a society, have shirked our responsibilities in the home and throw more responsibility on the schools to meet youth’s needs.
3. Is this a trend or cycle that can be broken? What is happening? Where is the emphasis in the school
systems of the kids with whom we are involved? Who is watching out for the kids? We have a responsibility not just because we have a heart for kids, but also because we are the taxpayers.

4. This is a great program model for a desperate situation. We need to be aware of our own situations and do something before they deteriorate to the level cited above.

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