

# EDUCATION WEEK

Education Week  
November 2, 1994

## **Learning the Hard Way** By Elena DeVos Binder

Recently I visited one of the better inner-city Chicago public elementary schools and got my heart broken. Even the armor of being a former urban teacher didn't protect me from the clouts of reality. In this district of Chicago, only 10 percent of the kids get their high school diplomas.

Almost 100 percent of the school's 1,200 students eat government-provided breakfasts and lunches there. For many, these are their only meals all day. Almost 100 percent of their parents are at the official poverty level. Four armed school police roam the halls with walkie-talkies. The children have no recess or physical education outside. Their gym class is held in the school auditorium, and it meets only once or twice a week. The kids eat lunch in their classrooms or the cafeteria. It is too dangerous for them to ever be on the playground because the school is in the middle of a gangland, one in open warfare. I was told that the children feel safest at school and actually don't miss being outside because they aren't allowed to play outdoors at home, either.

Imagine 1,200 students, grades K-8, cooped up inside a building all day. You don't need to be a professional educator to know that kids need to run off their energy. Given that, it amazed me that the children in the 2nd-grade class I observed were so well behaved. They all eagerly participated in a lesson where they figured out different ways to subtract seven from 22.

As I watched these children--deeply involved in their learning--I tried to imagine them in 10 years. Community statistics predict that only two or three of those 25 2nd graders will ever graduate from 12th grade. This math defies understanding.

How can a 90 percent dropout rate be? How can any of what I saw there really be happening?

In this school, bathrooms have no doors, no privacy. Not just the stall doors are gone--the hallway doors to the bathroom itself, too. The smells waft down the hall and envelop the classrooms. Toilet paper is bolted down in the hallway, right before the entrance, so kids can take their allotted two pieces of paper in with them.

During summer session--in the humid, scorching temperatures--the water fountains are turned off because the heat increases the lead content in the water. (One must assume, though, that there is still lead in the water when the fountains are on.)

One seasoned teacher told me the latest initiation rite for the older kids is defecating in the classroom when the teacher's back is turned. She keeps this a secret from her husband because if he knew, he'd forbid her to work there.

Other teachers told me some parents complain that school personnel recommend children talk their problems out. As one father angrily phrased it, "I'm trying to teach my son to fight and you're confusing him!"

Young teachers at a meeting I sat in on discussed how to enforce classroom rules when they conflict with what some students learn at home.

During my visit, school administrators were writing a "school-improvement plan," which they asked me to edit. They were setting goals for the next two years and listing all the methods they'll use to reach those goals. I felt as though I was reading a transcript of the Mad Hatter's tea party.

Hello?! When nine out of 10 kids will eventually drop out, what kind of goals are possible? Keeping the 10th one in school? Talk about putting your best china out for a visit from Attila the Hun.

I couldn't stop thinking about the opening scene in the movie "The Paper Chase." The professor advises the first-year Harvard Law School students to take a good look at the people on either side of them. "In three years," he growls, "only one of you will graduate." His announcement about a 66 percent dropout rate is meant to terrify the beginning students at one of America's most prestigious graduate schools--and it does.

Imagine telling a kindergarten classroom of 30 kids on their first day of school, "Look around, boys and girls. In 12 years, only three of you will graduate." One plus: If they ever do make it to Harvard Law School, a little competition isn't going to bother them.

It's not just Chicago's problem. From what urban educators in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York City report, schools there aren't much different.

I told you it was heartbreaking.