Rational Argument

Soft Measures

You don't always need a standardized test to know a school is in trouble. Just look in the boys' john.

By: Folwell Dunbar  |  August 21, 2009  |

Whenever I evaluate a school, my first stop is the boys’ bathroom because, without an unflushed urinal of doubt, it is every school’s least common denominator. Its sticky floors, calcified wads of toilet paper and juvenile-yet-timeless graffiti (“Here I sit broken hearted...”) are generally not what a principal shows off. Then again, I once visited a school run by the Knowledge is Power Program which focuses on preparing students in underserved communities for college and found fresh cut flowers next to an automatic recycled-paper-towel dispenser. At another school, there were toilet targets. (Apparently, research shows that they increase accuracy by as much as 70 percent.)

My all-time favorite positive indicator, though, was a school that posted weekly "Stinky Animal Fun Facts" in the stalls and on the walls. For example, did you know that dung beetles, using polarized moonlight for navigation, roll up balls of No. 2 to use as nurseries for their babies? This school's educators saw even the potty break as a teachable moment.

In today's data-driven world of No Child Left Behind and high-stakes accountability, administrators and lawmakers tend to obsess over hard measures. Adequate Yearly Progress determinations and School Performance Scores are based on precise formulas—formulas made up of clean, cold and supposedly foolproof numbers. In this highly calculable place, soft measures are rarely factored in. Nonetheless, after my "inspection" discovers the good, the bad and the ugly of the boys' john, I usually have a good sense (or scent) of how a school is doing. Though I wouldn't necessarily hold the bathroom test up against SAT scores as a measure of school success, I do consider it a telltale sign of either problems or promise.

Here are a few more "soft" indicators that a school might be in trouble:

- The faculty parking lot fills just minutes before class and empties immediately after the final bell.

- The entrance is distractingly disheveled. Plants are dead or dying, the marquee is missing letters, cigarette butts speckle the lawn.

- Classroom windows and/or the vertical slits on school doors are covered over with dark construction paper. Trust me, it's seldom for purely decorative purposes.

- Children clutch long pencils with ground-down erasers. If this is the case, chances are students are more concerned about making mistakes than taking chances.

- When you ask students, "What are you learning?" they respond, "Chapter Eight." And then, when you ask, "Why are you studying Chapter Eight?" they say, "Because our teacher said so."
Students continually ask, "Will this be on the test?" (The unstated premise: "If not, we'll just ignore it.")

Civics teachers don't keep up on current events. Science teachers aren't excited about the latest scientific breakthrough. English teachers don't read for pleasure. Physical education teachers are overweight and/or smoke.

Adults frequently YELL belittling language. Or: Like a restaurant with bad acoustics, the school's overall sound quality—whether too loud or too quiet—is just downright unpalatable.

Administrators are unwilling to let credentialed visitors roam. Instead, they insist on "giving a tour" of the usual, safe suspects.

Teachers read newspapers and take cell phone calls during professional development events.

Teachers play solitaire on their computers during planning periods (or class). Or: the Web sites most visited by teachers include eBay, ESPN and Monster.com.

Teachers and staff talk more about their latest degree or certification program than what they are doing with the kids.

Administrators speak solely in the future tense ("We are planning to...") and dwell on process rather than outcomes.

Classroom maps still show the Soviet Union, Rhodesia and British Honduras. Computers are shrouded in a patina of dust. Bulletin boards haven't been updated since the Eisenhower administration.

There are more athletic trophies on display than academic accolades or exemplary student work.

In the course of a single day, you hear reams and reams of unsubstantiated jargon and excuses—lots and lots of excuses!

All of these indicators are potentially fallible. No single one warrants CSI-like scrutiny of a school. I rely almost exclusively on hard evidence when evaluating a school. Still, soft measures can and often do matter. As David Whitman notes in his 2008 book, Sweating the Small Stuff, for troubled schools to improve, they need more than just better curricula and teachers. They need to teach kids how to behave in the learning environment and even the bathrooms that are part of it.

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