

HIGH SCHOOLS

Tests don't score everything

By Dr. Robert S. Boone

School ties us together like no other experience. More than work, war or love, school is a memory we all share. We all have slumped in school desks, listened to teachers, slammed our lockers, completed tests. Some of us took school more seriously than others. Some had more success. Some slipped away earlier. But we were all there at one time. Thus, when people talk about school, we knowingly listen.

Lately, it seems, we have had a lot to listen to—most of it bad. A recent survey depicted Chicago schools as even worse than people imagined. Another asked: "Can the schools be saved?" Last year, two best-selling books argued today's students are cultural illiterates with minds so open that they have snapped shut to anything important.

No wonder so many images of failure and frustration crowd our minds... one-digit ACT scores, out-of-date and tattered textbooks, graffiti-covered walls, picket signs, decaying buildings, vacant stares, bags of marijuana in lockers, exasperated teachers pleading with spaced-out students, dropouts clustered in vacant lots.

And Chicago, according to former Secretary of Education William Bennett, has the worst schools of all. From Rogers Park to Beverly, coalitions, task forces and commissions have been formed to confront the school crisis. Downstate, reform legislation has been passed. In Chicago, Ald. Edward Burke said: "Nobody in his right mind would send his kids to public school."

But are we really that bad? Are we really any worse than other city systems? Are our tests scores that much lower? Are our dropout rates that much higher? Are our teachers in more physical danger?

There are other questions that should be asked:

■ Why have we decided that success in school can be determined only by test results? Do we really want to say that everything can be measured? Do we want to eliminate any course that cannot be evaluated by a standardized test?

■ How can we judge an entire school system according to an ACT exam that doesn't measure the courses that many students take in schools? If test scores suddenly improve, does that mean schools have improved?

■ If test performance correlates more with socio-economic group than anything else, why are we surprised that inner-city students do relatively poorly?

■ How can we be critical of the overall performance of schools whose top students have been skimmed away by the magnet schools?

■ How can we talk about eliminating bureaucracy and then add more committees?

■ How can we demand improved teaching without talking seriously about raising teachers' salaries?

■ Why do we assume that requiring courses will mean the kids will learn the material outside the classroom?

■ By raising the standards and the requirements for graduation,

aren't we encouraging marginal students to drop out?

■ If a free society is what we're after, why do we take away so much of our students' freedom by heaping on the requirements and eliminating electives? Are we looking for the good of society or the good of the individual student?

The last question is especially sticky. To ignore it is to follow the course of recent studies and to examine students as members of groups only. Individual students don't appear as themselves in recent educational writing because the studies are too broad to accommodate them.

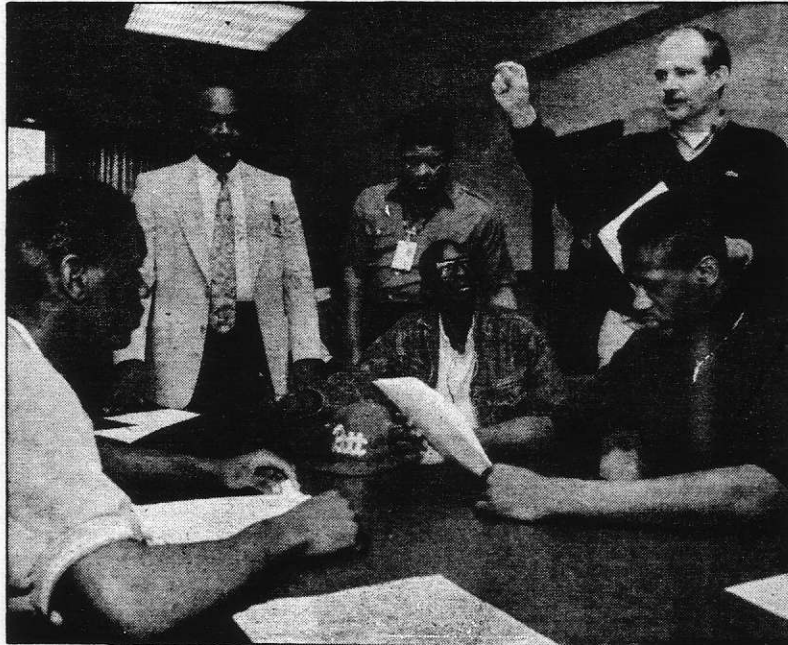
Even if contact with actual kids doesn't prove anything, wouldn't it give us more knowledge to make a judgment? Do we really want to leave everything up to the experts? Isn't it time to meet some real kids?

A year ago, some 200 senior basketball players from Chicago area high schools traveled to Loyola University to participate in a profile scrimmage before dozens of college coaches.

The event, sponsored by Chicago-based Foundation For Student-Athletes, offered uncommitted players one last chance to earn a scholarship. While much was at stake, most found time between games to complete a questionnaire.

They weren't science fair winners, Merit Scholars or valedictorians. They were above-average basketball players who stretched out on the floor of a dance studio

Players' essays leave different image of schools



Dunbar principal Dr. Floyd Banks (from left), basketball coach Fate Mickel and Dr. Robert S. Boone assist Dunbar students in preparing for the ACT test. Boone is director of the Glencoe Study Center. The students (from left) are basketball players Anthony Clark, Saun Jackson and Derrick Patterson.

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at Loyola's Alumni Hall and wrote about themselves, about their future and about their views of the world.

They weren't given much time to develop their thoughts, only to write them down quickly. They weren't graded. And they weren't required to write. Yet what came through should surprise those who have accepted the notion that our school system is worst of all.

Responding to the question "What is one of the most important issues of 1988?" most of the student-athletes named the Presidential election, primarily because of Jesse Jackson.

Warren Williams, Phillips: "... the election because we have a black man running for the presidency. I hope and pray he wins. By me being black, that means that all black men have a chance in life."

Anthony Andrews, Eisenhower: "The reason [the election] is so important is that I feel none of the candidates are qualified for the job. Personally, I can't do anything about it because I'm 17."

Demetrius Dillahunt, Creta-Monee: "The election is important because people must vote for their choice and not be afraid of race or religion. This affects me because it affects our society as a whole. Hopefully, we as people together can get over this problem."

But the election wasn't the only issue.

Charles James, Carver: "Unemployment. This is important because many people have no jobs and are on aid. It doesn't affect

me because I'm still in school and will continue to go."

Herbert Ray, Morgan Park: "Graduation. It is important to me because four years ago I entered high school thinking it was easy and that I didn't have to do the work to pass. High school is really hard but your pay is the knowledge you gain. The effect has shown me what my priorities are and what can be put off until the future."

Joseph Goodrich, De La Salle: "The small war going on in Nicaragua. It is important because it could become worse. If it becomes a major war, our government could start drafting young men and I would be one of them."

Lance Sefcik, Elgin: "Stock market. The stock market is constantly rising and falling. If it has another big dip, like it did in October, there may be another depression."

Asked to explain a learning experience that took place outside of school, the responses tended to be brief but revealing.

Antonio McFarland, Bowen: "A coach saw me working on my game in a gym class alone and he started helping me. If you help yourself, others will help you, too."

Michael Mitchell, Hirsch: "One of my friends started to get hooked on drugs, then soon was dealing them. I warned him that he was making a mistake. Now he has to graduate from summer school."

David Gaston, Gabe-Monee: "The best learning experience I

have had comes from my mother. She has taught me not to drink, smoke or be in gangs. That's why I think I've gotten as far as I have. By doing the correct things, I'll get even further."

Michael Montgomery, Elgin: "All my life, I've learned to live with prejudice of all kinds. This sounds rather negative but this has a point. I've been cheated and hurt by many people because of this and I've learned not to base a judgment on just skin tone."

Lance Sefcik, Elgin: "A coach at a basketball camp wanted direct eye contact at all times when he was talking. This has helped me in communicating with others and paying attention to others."

What will you be doing in five years? Interestingly, only a few talked about basketball only. Most talked very specifically about certain jobs or career objectives. A few expressed humanitarian aims. But nearly all said competition would help them succeed in their lives after basketball.

Kevin Gallery, Loyola: "I hope to be studying in graduate school. Although I am unsure as to what field I wish to study, I feel a graduate program will benefit my future plans."

Lenin Perkins, Proviso East: "I probably will stay in college to learn a little bit more and I'll take classes that will be a challenge for me toward the near future... so I'll be more competitive in life and won't give up so easily."

Darryl Younger, De La Salle: "I hope to be helping kids out to the best of my ability. I'd like to be a child psychologist. I'd like to major in psychology. This will give me a good reason, besides making something of myself, to stay in school."

For just a moment, let's pretend these papers are all we know about Chicago area high school seniors.

After acknowledging these responses reveal nothing about a student's knowledge of chemistry, his ability to deliver a speech, his skill at solving quadratic equations or his aptitude for Spanish, we still can make a few valid observations:

These young people can read and interpret a question, have goals, have plans for reaching their goals, write clearly and generally correctly (at least in familiar areas), have some awareness of the world around them and have an understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses.

People who have read recent articles about our schools are understandably dismayed by the horrendous conditions of some of them. But people who go into the schools or read literary magazines or attend school plays or read about academic team success are also surprised that there's more than meets the eye.

These profile essays certainly don't exonerate Chicago's schools. But they do suggest we must examine carefully those who are tending them.

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