

“Young man, you get out of here!”:

Historical Perspectives on School Discipline Policy

Rachel Lissy, PhD

Why do we suspend?

What's the function of or rationale for suspensions?

- In 1958 **1,550** students were suspended from NYC public schools.
- In 1968 **14,000** students were suspended from NYC public schools
- In 2011 **73,411** students were suspended from NYC public schools

“No principal has the right to suspend a student, nor has any local school board that power. We try to run our schools under different principles from those of forcible suspension and harsh measures... and try not to resort to such awful measures if we can help it.”

— Superintendent O’ Shea, 1930

“It will be a sad day when policemen must be stationed in America’s public schools.”

— United Parents Association, 1957

Placing police in schools *“is neither practical nor morally desirable.”*

— NYC Police Commissioner, 1957

- In 1958 **45** police officers were stationed in NYC schools.
- In 1968 **300** police officers were stationed in NYC schools.
- In 2011 **5,000** School Safety Officers and **192** police officers were stationed in NYC schools.

Students of color--more precisely Black and Indigenous students--are disproportionately impacted by these trends and harmed, excluded and criminalized by these practices.

In New Jersey:

- Black students are 16% of population but 42% of students suspended.
- Students of color are 53% of population but 77% of students suspended.

“Resolved, that it is the policy of the Board of Education that any pupil who shall be charged with a violation of a law involving violence or insubordination shall be forthwith suspended from regular school attendance...the Board recognizes that in such cases under existing conditions, no instruction can be provided for such pupils.”

- February 6, 1958

HOW NEW YORK SCHOOL SYSTEM HANDLES DELINQUENTS



SUSPENSION: Principal can send child either to court through police or to further action in school system.



HEARING: Assistant Supt. of Schools can reassign the child within school system or recommend his expulsion.

Regular School: Child goes to another school where he may be less disruptive.

'600 School': Child goes to a special school set up for problem children.



EXPULSION: Supt. of Schools may decide child cannot be educated in city's school system and expel him. If so, the case is referred to court.

TRIAL: Children's Court may send child to one of several upstate training institutions.

State Institution: State-supported training school for 24-hour care of delinquents.

Private Institution: Similar to state schools but run by private organizations.

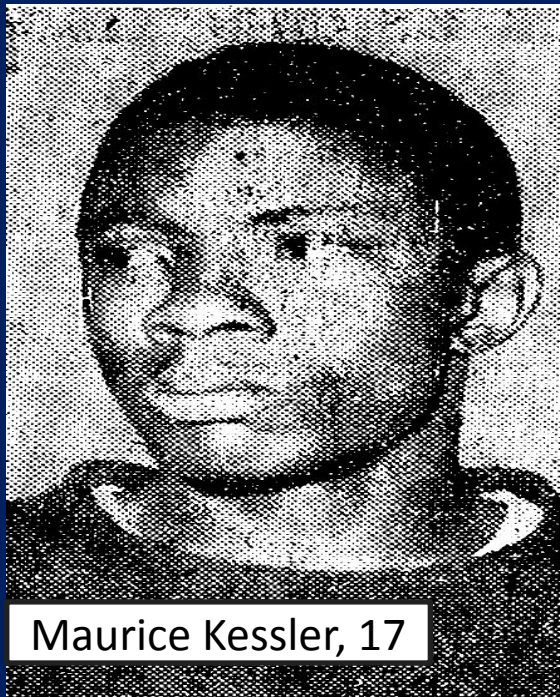
Boy Hurls Lye in Classroom; 20 Hurt, One May Be Blinded

September 19, 1957

Thomas Jefferson High School
East New York, Brooklyn



LYE ATTACK VICTIM—David Ozersky, 16, is comforted by his mother, Mrs. Hilda Ozersky, in a New York hospital after he was badly burned by lye thrown by a classmate in a Brooklyn high school. Doctors are fighting to save his sight. AP Wirephoto



Maurice Kessler, 17

November 1957 Judge Samuel
Leibowitz convenes a Grand Jury
Investigation into *“crime and
lawlessness in and about
schools.”*



*Policeman for Each City School
Urged by Brooklyn Grand Jury*

**JANSEN OPPOSES
POLICE IN SCHOOLS**

**Calls Proposal 'Unthinkable'
—Leibowitz Backs Idea**

**LEIBOWITZ SCORES
SCHOOL OFFICIALS**

**Informs Jury It May Indict
Them if Delinquency Facts
Support Such Action**

**EDUCATION BOARD
DENOUNCES JURY
ON SCHOOL CRIME**

**Holds Panel and Leibowitz
Guilty of Personal Abuse
and Misrepresentation**

JUDGE SCORES CRITICS

SCHOOLS AND THE BAD BOY

EDUCATION IN REVIEW

**Proposal for a Policeman in Every School
Is Strongly Resisted by the Board**

The Schools, the Children, the Dilemma

**Beset by a small but dangerous minority of delinquents, New York schools are
caught between conflicting needs—to help the troubled and to protect the innocent.**

CRIMINALS IN NEED OF PUNISHMENT

*“Schools are hotbeds of crime, violence and depravity”
where “wild animals,” and “hoodlums, rapists, thieves,
extortionists, arsonists and vandals... occupy rooms
where decent kids go for an education.”*

— Leibowitz & Grand Jury

VICTIMS IN NEED OF REHABILITATION

“The suggestion that children ought to be paddled into learning is against all principles of child psychology.”

— John Marshall, Former BOE President

“Treat the delinquent as a sick child, rather than demand vengeance on the wrongdoer.”

— Associate Superintendents' Report on Juvenile Delinquency

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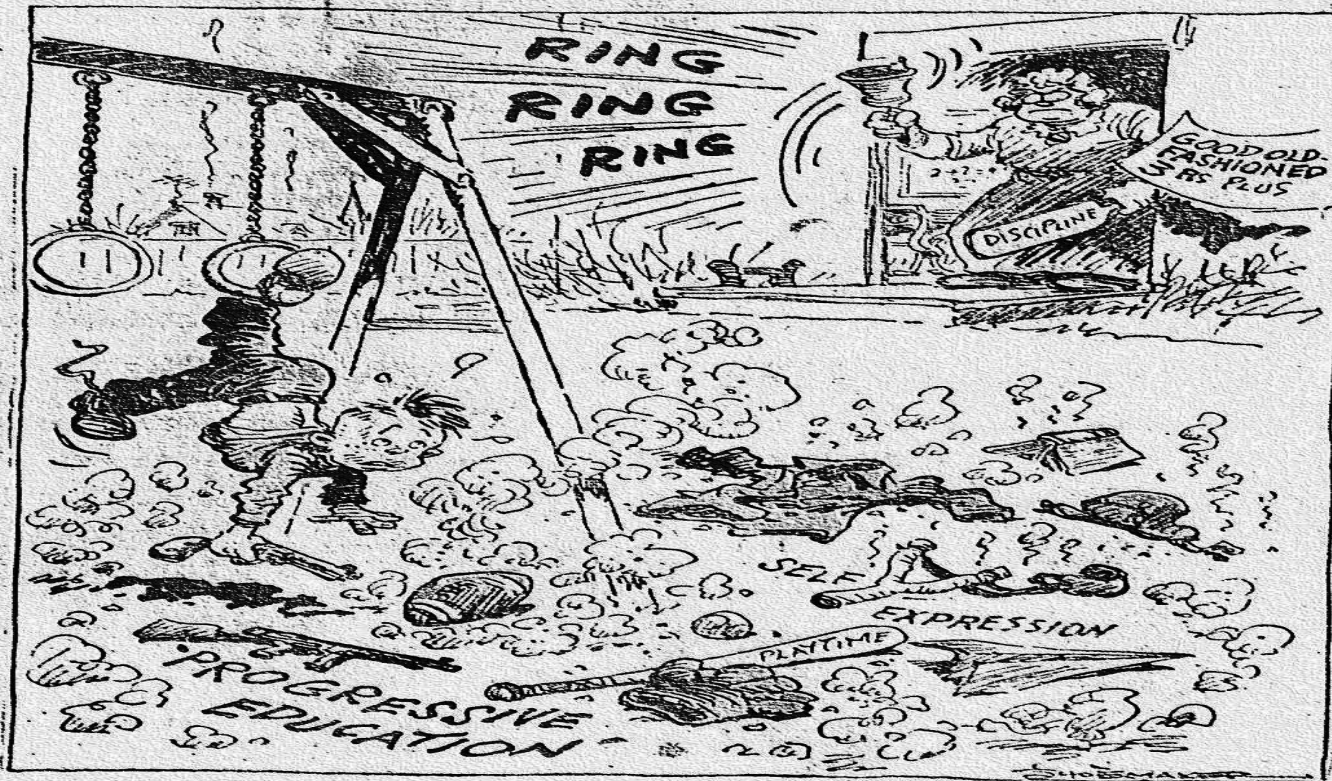


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Sorry Junior,
Recess Is
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What about this debate about discipline sounds familiar?

Where do we hear echoes in current policy debates?

In our own experience?

RIGID & PUNITIVE



Authority is hierarchical/positional
Young people as unruly yet rational
Sanctions & Rewards

VS

NURTURING & REHABILITATIVE



Authority is personal/nurturing
Young people as vulnerable yet off-track
Guidance & Psychology

- “Cycles of outrage” about school disorder and crime recurred throughout 20th Century
- Blame typically placed on media, broken homes or “maladjustment”
- Emphasis on “mental hygiene,” children as vulnerable and expanding social supports

WHY WAS 1958 DIFFERENT?

SCHOOLS TO EXPEL PUPILS ACCUSED OF BREAKING LAW

**Board Says ‘Other Agencies’
Must Provide Custody—
Acts to Shield Innocent**

OLD POLICY IS REVERSED

**Justice Fears Children Will
Be Forced Into Streets
While Awaiting Trials**

COMMISSION ON INTEGRATION

May 1956 released recommendations regarding:

- School Zoning
- Curriculum and Resources
- Teacher assignment
- Overcrowding & Facilities

OVERCROWDING & FACILITIES

- In 1939 **15** schools in Harlem served a population of **41** schools
- Crumbling “prison like,” “archaic and unsanitary” school buildings
- One school in Harlem had 1 set of bathrooms for **1,700** students

TEACHER ASSIGNMENT

- 1956 report found Harlem schools staffed by more than **50%** substitutes and non-certified teachers
- Fall of 1957 **80%** of the city's **1,450** new teachers were placed in segregated schools

Integration Difficulties Embarrass New York

By Robert E. Baker

"She hasn't been taught to hate — campaigned not at all—the Negro has

Different 'Dirty Word'

THE controversy is particularly embarrassing to New York City because nowhere has racial bias been more thoroughly attacked. "Integration" is a dirty word in the South today, but in New York City the dirty words are "discrimination" and "segregation."

INTEGRATION RESISTANCE

BOE INCOMPETENCE

“...ill advised and unnecessary...a program of questionable merit.”

— Queens Chamber of Commerce

CRIME & DISORDER

“[would involve] dangerous bus transport” and “produce new hostilities, conflicts and resentments.”

— Associate Superintendent Queens

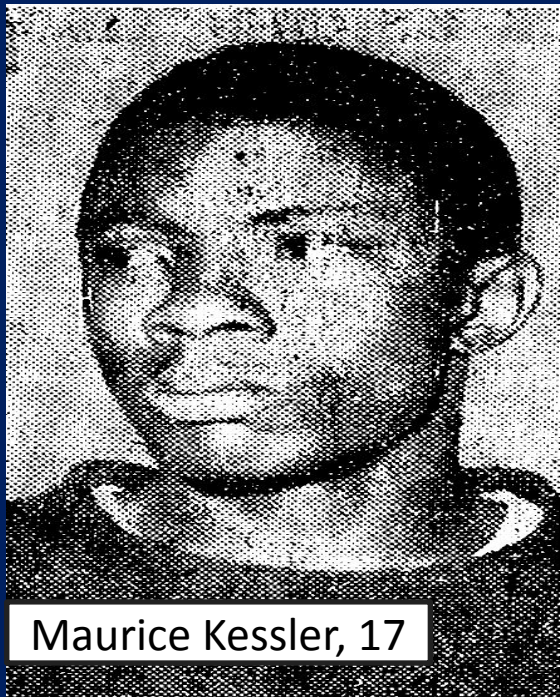
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Maurice Kessler, 17

Front Page of New York Times September 20, 1957

Parents Picket City Hall Over Delay in Integration



The New York Times (By Edward Heffernan)

While children sat on the sidelines, their parents demonstrated yesterday at City Hall

An increase in the Bank of England's bank rate, upon which most other interest rates depend, makes borrowing more

Continued on Page 4, Column 1

Boy Hurls Lye in Classroom; 20 Hurt, One May Be Blinded

A vengeful boy hurled a bottle of caustic liquid into a Brooklyn high school classroom yesterday morning. It splashed nineteen students and a teacher, possibly blinding one of the students.

The caustic — probably lye — was aimed at David Ozersky, 16 years old. It caught him in the face, burning his eyes. The other students in the American history class at Thomas Jefferson High School, in the East New York section, were terrified. Some of those who had been splashed even ran to the fourth-

its sale to the Rockefeller corporation. The city would have the same option if the Dodgers did not purchase by the end of

Kessler had been in a fight with the Ozersky boy on Aug. 19, and the police believed today's attack was a result of that fight.

Kessler, who denied the charge, was booked for felonious assault. He will appear in Adolescent Court this morning.

One other boy among the thirty-five in the classroom was badly burned in the attack, which occurred at 9:15 A. M.

The incident, latest in the recent epidemic of juvenile crime, took place about the same time the Board of Education

BOE INCOMPETENCE

“If I had little children going to school today, a girl of 13 or so, for example, I would absolutely take them out of the public school system.”

— Foreman of Grand Jury, 1957

“Thank god for our people who...have brought to light...this horrible, miserable mess that is now called our public school system.”

— Judge Samuel Leibowitz

**LEIBOWITZ SCORES
SCHOOL OFFICIALS**

Informs Jury It May Indict
Them if Delinquency Facts
Support Such Action

CRIME AND DISORDER IN SCHOOLS

“These are not instances of childish misbehavior but acts of criminal violence in the basest degrees.”

— Grand Jury, 1958



“A satellite jockey who had lived on the moon for 10 years could tell that the ‘certain people’ Leibowitz’s grand jury foreman talks about...are Negroes.”

— Councilman Earl Brown

“When violence occurs in any school attended by Negroes the tendency is to exaggerate it in the press. When it occurs in white schools or white neighborhoods they are treated differently.”

— Reverend Milton Galamison

January 1958

PS 210, Brooklyn



The New York Times (by Robert Walker)

HEAD OF SCHOOL BESET BY CRIME LEAPS TO DEATH

Brooklyn Principal Had Been
Scheduled to Testify on
Violence by Students

“Resolved, that it is the policy of the Board of Education that any pupil who shall be charged with a violation of a law involving violence or insubordination shall be forthwith suspended from regular school attendance...the Board recognizes that in such cases under existing condition, no instruction can be provided for such pupils.”

- February 6, 1958

“MASS SUSPENSION”

- **650** pupils suspended the next day
- **1,330** suspended between Feb-June
- Only **219** suspended between Sept-Feb of 1957
- Increase of more than **600%** in suspensions following policy change
- **45** police officers placed in “difficult schools”

Suspension policy was response to pressure and criticism from whites resistant to integration.

Origins are POLITICAL not PEDAGOGICAL.

THE “PRINCIPAL’S SUSPENSION”

“It's important that the principal have the authority to say to a youngster: 'young man you get out of here. We cannot have you disturb the other youngsters.’”

— Superintendent Theobald, September 1958

What did you learn? What was new or surprising?

How are current debates about school policy POLITICAL and not PEDAGOGICAL?

What connections can you make between this history and your current experience?

“The United States did not face a crime problem that was racialized; it faced a race problem that was criminalized.”

— Naomi Murakawa

THANK YOU!

Rachel Lissy

rachel.lissy@gmail.com

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