

## The struggle for better schools in São Paulo and New York

# Order and disorder in the schools

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Students in a public school, downtown São Paulo

School reform means improvement in teaching and learning. But disorder in many schools—notably in New York and São Paulo—often obstructs advances in the quality of education.

The routine of violence and disorder in São Paulo's public schools reached a low point on the afternoon of April 1, 2002 when Edi Greenfeld, principal of a municipal school in the poor community of Guaianases, was murdered as she left work, with two bullets to her head fired by unknown

assailants. Press reports said that she had resisted drug trafficking in and around the school. The head of the narcotics department of the Civil Police advised the teachers: "It is very dangerous to confront these bandits." That was the only official response.

The murder of a public school principal is rare in São Paulo. In any civilized city in the world, the murder of a school principal would invoke a rush of outrage, bringing the Mayor and the Secretary of Education to the school to give comfort and reassurance to the teachers and pupils, to visit the victim's family, to attend the funeral. But in São Paulo no city or state official came to offer condolences. The murder of Edi Greenfeld was treated as a routine occurrence, reflecting the neglect of public education in our society.

Because of social conditions, both New York and São Paulo must deal with threats of violence and disorder in public schools for the foreseeable future. However, while New York invests heavily in school security, São Paulo invests almost nothing. Although São Paulo State operates one of the world's biggest school systems, with six million pupils, and the city of São Paulo runs a parallel system for another 1.1 million pupils, about the same size as New York's, neither Brazilian system assigns a single professional dedicated to problems of school security.

Around the time of Edi Greenfeld's murder, New York also was suffering episodes of school violence. A student at Lafayette High School in Brooklyn was attacked by three adolescents who held a knife to his throat. A day later, at Evander Childs High School in the Bronx, a student was stabbed in the back. Weeks later, teachers at a junior high school in Queens threatened to abandon their jobs after three assaults on teachers in a two-day period.

Nearly 15,000 school safety incidents were reported in 2002, although school crime in New York decreased by 8% that year, thanks to a major mobilization of resources by city officials. The most common offenses were harassment, weapons possession, assault, sex offenses, drugs possession and trespassing. The city was spending \$120 million a year on security to pay for metal detectors at school entrances and surveillance cameras in corridors, lunchrooms and staircases as well as salaries for 4,200 civilian school safety agents, supervised and trained by the police. But all this was barely enough to control crime and violence in the schools.

During our five weeks of research on the New York school reform, a team from the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics met with Rose DePinto, a veteran teacher and high school principal whom Chancellor Joel Klein first appointed to head secondary school reform in 2002 and then to coordinate school security. "The schools were decaying for a long time," DePinto said. "Between 2002 and 2004 we saw a very strong surge of disorder and violence in our high schools. The kids were running these schools. You cannot turn your back when you see a problem. I am an educator, not a police officer. In my 32 years in education, experience taught me that it's all about leadership. If there is no strong leader in charge, things start to crumble." In both New York and São Paulo, school principals face complex challenges demanding management skills in both raising the quality of instruction and avoiding eruptions of violence and disorder.

In New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg ordered a major escalation of interventions in troubled schools. "We created intervention teams composed of experienced educators and police officers," DePinto said. "We looked at 11 indicators. All these schools had low graduation rates, high absenteeism, many suspensions of students. We found that the physical environment of the school is very important. In these schools we found broken locks and doors, poor lighting and almost no vision for teachers from within a classroom. There was poor thinking in school construction, with 20 to 25 entrances to a school, a major safety issue. We looked at everything from how students entered the school on mornings to how electronic scanning was working, to who was supervising the hallways and

the cafeteria. The city had a discipline code for many years, but nobody was enforcing these rules, nor did the kids know what the rules were. We looked at the quality of instruction. If instruction is good, kids will not want to be in the hallways. Instruction in many schools was a big problem.”

While the occasional murder of a principal or the stabbing of a student may be reported in the press in Brazil, a greater danger to the quality of education is the endemic disorder in the schools, which gets little attention. Chronic disorder in schools can be as harmful to education as violence.

As in New York, there are big differences in São Paulo between good and bad schools, often in the same neighborhood. In some São Paulo schools, students report that a law of silence governs complicity between school employees, including principals, and drug dealers. In one case, a principal was prosecuted for hiding a drug dealer from police detectives inside the school. Teachers and principals receive no institutional support upon receiving death threats or when their cars are vandalized outside the school. Fear obliges teachers and principals to tolerate disorderly conduct, such as disrupting classes, sexual offenses and carrying weapons inside the school. A common occurrence is explosion of home-made bombs inside school bathrooms, leaving toilets without doors, seats or flushing mechanisms. Robbery of classroom and office computers also is commonplace. Compounding this disorder is the chronic absenteeism of teachers and principals, which not only deprives children of instruction but also leaves them to congregate in the hallways, creating an infernal noise that makes it difficult for other teachers to conduct their classes. For both teachers and pupils, there are no consequences for disruptive behavior.

Authorities in São Paulo do little or nothing to overcome these difficulties. In New York, at least, they are trying, despite additional challenges. While São Paulo schools can teach only in Portuguese, New York must deal with large numbers of immigrant children who must be taught English in at least 12 languages, including Urdu, Bengali, Arabic, Russian and Chinese. Also, New York schools are plagued by a highly developed gang culture, which is only incipient in São Paulo.

The New York Department of Education has created a gang intelligence unit, defining gangs as “a group of three or more people using common identifying signs, symbols and colors demonstrating their common purpose to engage in criminal, violent or anti-social activity such as graffiti, vandalism, extortion, intimidation, robbery, theft, drug sales and use, and violence (e.g. drive by shootings).”

“Gangs are expanding globally,” said Norbert Davidson, head of the unit. “Younger people are now involved, especially those who left school, as well as more females. Some have structures like religious orders and use sophisticated sign language and numerical codes. When a male gang leader is imprisoned, his woman often acts as a go-between with his followers outside. Girls are ‘sexed’ into gangs, initiated by being passed from one member to another, although some girls prefer to fight their way into membership. Girls form their own gangs, specializing in identity theft and shoplifting. They want to make money, using the Internet and investing in legitimate businesses. Important gangs, like the Bloods (Brotherly Love Overriding Oppression & Destruction) and Crips (Can’t Rest in Peace), started in Los Angeles. Now there are fewer incidents inside the schools. Our main concern now is for what happens outside. The critical times are from 3:30 to 8pm, when kids have no supervision. Our interventions are based on education. We have no silver bullet. It’s lots of basketball, football, baseball, YMCA and boys club activities. I meet kids at 7 am to play basketball at P.S. 147 in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.”

There are methods for dealing with school disorder that are internationally recognized and practiced but remain virtually unknown in Brazil. One of the best known is Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) [Intervenção e Apoio para Comportamento Positivo], supported by the U.S.

Department of Education with a website ([www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)) using translation software that produces Portuguese versions.

PBIS stresses collaborative efforts by school staff, operating on three levels: (1) Primary, developing, explaining and enforcing simple school-wide rules for safety; (2) Secondary, intensive or targeted interventions to develop new skills for a smaller group of students who repeatedly engage in disruptive behavior; (3) Tertiary, focusing on individual students with more dangerous and disruptive behavior that impedes learning by others and can lead to exclusion from the school. Teams of PBIS advisers visit troubled schools to diagnose the problems and to help staff develop a plan of action. Prior to meetings with principals and teachers, they use a detailed checklist to analyze the school's physical infrastructure, human resources and routines.

With all its problems of school security, New York City has developed a disciplinary code, Best Practices for Creating and Sustaining a Safe and Supportive School, which is distributed in several languages and is updated yearly after public hearings and consultations with parents, principals and teachers. São Paulo's school systems have no codes of behavior, leaving each school free to develop its own code. Nor does the system have a uniform curriculum, making it harder for pupils and teachers to know what is expected of them, to prepare for standard tests and to keep learning after transferring from one school to another, especially since teachers arbitrarily choose the content of each lesson. Also, most troubled São Paulo schools lack the institutional stability needed to benefit from systemic programs aimed controlling violence and disorder, given the frequent absences of principals and teachers and their transfers from one school to another, often every year and sometimes two or more times each year.

Behavior of teachers as well as pupils in São Paulo has few consequences, for either good or bad. Good teachers are not rewarded for the quality of their work. Bad teachers suffer no loss of pay or employment, no matter how badly they teach or how many times they are absent. Students must be kept in their school, no matter how disruptive or aggressive their behavior. Principals and teachers pay so much attention to disruptive students, making so many concessions to them, that the quality of teaching is sacrificed and pupils who want to learn are overlooked. In São Paulo, the human rights of a few disruptive students have greater weight in official policy than the human rights of teachers who want to teach and students who want to learn.

Many principals and teachers in São Paulo face situations as dangerous and disruptive as the one faced by Virginia Connelly, principal of P.S. 123 in the Bronx. "This building used to be a dumping ground," Virginia said. "In 2004-05 the school received an unexpected influx of gang activity. The Bloods came here from Los Angeles and Detroit. Suddenly we had not only gang fights between rival Hispanic groups but also a racial conflict between blacks and Hispanics. In the same year, we received over 30 'safety' transfers of kids who were kicked out of their schools." How was she able to impose order? "It's a matter of establishing who's in charge," she said. "I saw that just three kids were causing most of the trouble. Those three kids had to go. My supervisors supported me. When those kids were taken out, that sent a message to the other students."

To control the endemic disorder in many public schools, and to protect those who want to teach and learn, alternative places must be found for disruptive or threatening pupils, who are a small minority of the student population. New York enforces two levels of suspension: a principal's suspension for minor offenders and a superintendent's suspension for more serious cases. In a principal's suspension, unruly students are assigned to a separate classroom within the school where they do academic work under supervision. Under a superintendent's suspension, they are assigned to classes in a separate building where they study together with other offenders under closer supervision.

“We’ve increased school safety but now must strengthen guidance and clinical support to take care of kids’ mental health problems,” said Andaye De La Cruz, Senior Senior Youth Development Director in the Bronx, who came to São Paulo in 2005 to give seminars in school culture and security with our Institute. “We have to create different environments inside schools for problem kids. Right now we still send most of our high-risk kids to suspension centers. The most important elements in a school are structure and leadership.”

Kathleen Cashin is a tall, energetic regional superintendent who once studied to be a nun. She achieved notable academic progress among her students while supervising one of the roughest and most desolate regions of New York’s school system, with 85,000 students in Brooklyn-Queens. Two students there were shot dead last year. Despite the violence and poverty of Region 5, she raised reading and math scores dramatically of children in the third to eighth grades over the past three years and was promoted recently to head one of the city’s four new Learning Support Centers that help schools overcome teaching difficulties.

“We have three of the toughest high schools in the city,” Kathleen told us. “Many kids live in housing projects where there are conflicts between blacks and Hispanics. Many kids have nothing to do after school and feel they need to belong to gangs to strengthen their identity. We have one of the poorest regions in the city, yet with the fastest growth in literacy. We need a rich curriculum and clear expectations. It’s wrong to give them overdoses of English and math. Rich content avoids boredom and misbehavior among kids. We must continually upgrade teachers and provide them with an integrated curriculum.”

Behavioral and learning standards are intimately linked. The school reform in New York demands that school principals become educators as well as managers. In São Paulo today and New York until recently, few principals act as instructional leaders. They are fully occupied with management tasks such as scheduling, reporting, relations with parents, finding substitutes for absent teachers and preventing and dealing with outbreaks of disorder. Traditionally, most principals spend little time in classrooms and less in analyzing instruction with teachers.

Teachers and principals must not be allowed to feel isolated and without support when faced with disorder and academic failure. They need to view sharing problems in meetings with colleagues and supervisors as a positive process of professional engagement. “Problems become the intellectual ‘currency’ of the meetings,” said Elaine Fink, who was superintendent of New York’s District 2 on Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

Many New York schools face an ongoing threat of children ages 12 and 13 joining gangs. “We have to catch kids as soon as they come to middle school,” said Irene Rogan, a Bronx principal for three decades before becoming an instructional superintendent. “We have to upgrade their reading and math. If not, they’ll fail in high school and then drop out. If we don’t get them early, they’re lost.”

P.S. 302 is on Kelly Street in the South Bronx, which General Colin Powell attended as a boy, as did my father a generation before Powell. The neighborhood around P.S. 302 has been degraded by the burning of old tenement buildings in the 1970s and 1980s, by a flourishing gang culture and drug trade and by severe poverty among new migrants to the city, especially Hispanics. “Many kids are in homeless shelters or in foster care,” said Evelyn Figueroa, a clinical social worker. “Many come to school just for a hot meal. That’s one reason why we have 93% attendance. To deal with gangs, our security people brought in former gang members to tell the kids what it’s like and how to leave a gang if they feel trapped. They showed blown-up photos and newspaper clippings of gang killings to eighth graders. When we find kids with drugs, they are taken to rehabilitation centers for one-on-one counseling and talks with former addicts. Teachers are sent out for professional development to learn classroom management techniques. We have a Pupil Personnel Committee that meets weekly to discuss how to handle kids with problems.”

The problems in many New York and São Paulo schools are roughly the same, but São Paulo has no strategy and invests no resources to deal with these dangers. At the least, an educator should be trained as a school security specialist to develop a team and, after a careful diagnosis, a strategy to concentrate resources on the most troubled schools.