

# Depression racks schools, students

by Joyce Fredman

In Arlington, Virginia, alternative public schools are the latest fad. Advertised as schools "that allow students a different kind of experience," it is not out of the question for a student to pick his own reading program. At one of these schools, Woodlawn, students need no hall passes, coming and going as they please; teachers and administrators are known by their first names.

In Ypsilanti, Michigan, the atmosphere is more Wall Street. Willow Run High School began offering bonuses for performance in 1989. All A's can get a student free records at local music stores, discounts at local sporting-goods stores, one day off a semester, and a 30% discount at local orthodontics centers. A's, B's, and C's mean a 5% discount at the local jewelry chain, an annual pizza party, and free tickets to social and sports events.

Such gimmicks cannot substitute for the effect of the depression on the collapse of funding for education (see *EIR*, Feb. 7). What neither Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander nor Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), the primary sponsor of the Neighborhood School Improvement Act which passed the Senate in January and which allocates \$850 million for poor schools with "experimental" programs, address in a substantial way, is that the living environment of students has deteriorated over the past 30 years even more than the schools themselves. The financial and emotional support from a family, once taken for granted, has dwindled away for all but a privileged few. This is the reality of our "Education President" George Bush's kinder, gentler America.

The insanity is not limited to the secondary and elementary level. In *Illiberal Education*, Dinesh D'Souza gives an account of how bad the campus scene has become:

"New approaches to teaching now enjoy prominence and acclaim on campus. Speaking at an October 1989 conference in Washington, Houston Baker of the University of Pennsylvania argued that the American university suffers from a crisis of *too much reading and writing*. 'Reading and writing are merely technologies of control,' Baker alleged. They are systems of 'martial law made academic.' Instead of 'valorizing old power relations,' universities should listen to the 'voices of newly emerging peoples.' Baker emphasized the oral tradition, extolling the virtues of rap music and holding up as an exemplar such groups as Public Enemy and NWA. NWA stands for Niggers With Attitude. The group, among other things, sings about the desirability of violence against white people. Baker himself is regarded as one of the most

promising black intellectuals in the country, and a leader of the movement to transform the American academy" (emphasis added).

Is it surprising, in this atmosphere, that serious teachers are being driven out of the field? When Dr. George Nelson testified before the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology last summer, he gave an indication of just how serious the exodus is: Some 20% of new teachers leave during their first year, and more than 50% leave before their sixth year. At that time (July 1991), 13 math and science teachers were leaving the field for each one entering the profession. And for those who do stay, the working conditions are far less than adequate: About 30% of high schools offer no course in physics, 17% none in chemistry, 38% of elementary school teachers have no science materials or facilities available in their schools, and 50% of secondary science teachers have no access to a general purpose science laboratory.

A national survey by Tulane University criminologists found that over 30% of high school students interviewed had carried guns. One boy in 10 said he carried a gun most or all of the time.

## Social environment destroyed

Out of 64 million children in America, 15 million subsist at or below the poverty level. But they are not the only ones who have borne the brunt of this depression. Incidents of teen-age rape, teen-age pregnancy, and drug abuse have all risen. Reported cases of child abuse have risen 226% over the past decade; 35% of these cases were substantiated. Even more harrowing, is the tripling of the suicide and homicide rates among teens.

"What we're seeing is the complete destruction of the social environment for these kids," said Dr. Joyce Lashof, professor of public health at the University of California at Berkeley and the president of the American Public Health Association. "Economic opportunity, stable relationships, housing, safety at school, hope for the future: Everything that makes up living has kind of disappeared for them."

A survey commissioned by the National Endowment for the Humanities of college seniors discovered that 25% had no idea when Columbus discovered America, or that a majority could not match up Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton with their major works. And these are the ones who made it to college. When the Bush administration advertises that drug usage is down in schools, what is not broadcast is that more and more kids never make it to high school. Official dropout rates are not calculated in many places until years after the majority have hit the streets.

Unless serious curriculum changes are made, test scores will continue to plummet. More important, if the depression, which allows our inner-city schools to exist in Calcutta-like squalor, continues, if the families of students continue to join the ranks of the homeless and unemployed, then the Senate may as well shut down all 80,000 schools themselves.