
THE CITIZEN

for Social Responsibility, a Non-Profit Corporation

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FREE

In black and white

Those of us who are white, have the luxury to claim that racism does not exist. What is racism? What is prejudice? To state that one race is superior, (and by necessity that others are inferior), to take actions that impact others' lives, simply on the merit of whether someone's skin is of a different color — that is racism. But words, mere thoughts are not racism... deeds are. In our day, in our age, in this society, racism is no longer defined by placards that define where someone may sit, or eat, or defecate, but rather by the political circumstances, beyond one's control, that surround and define what one's life's limits may be. Thus when circumstances, not of your doing, prevent you from developing the skills necessary for work; when your children are unable to receive an adequate education, a voice of rightful indignation must demand an answer— *why are things as they are, why haven't these things changed?*

We all want to believe that we live in a just society, in a democratic society— our constitution says so, and so do our laws. But why is it that I cannot embrace that notion? Why do generations continue to live and endure in poverty, many simply because they happen to be of a different color.

Throw a man down, step on him and then, others who see him down, begin to believe that simply because he is down, that he must deserve to be there—and so you too, begin to accept the idea that he is not like you, that he must deserve his fate, you too begin to embrace the idea that those like him also deserve the same fate— this is racism. *What else could explain why twenty percent of black youth are either in jail or under some sort of correctional supervision or control in this nation and largely unemployable?*

Newark: an example of the Crises of our Cities

By: Victor Saraiva

(What follows, begins as an interview with Matthew, an addict, Matthew is not his real name, and concludes with a discussion of issues intertwined with substance abuse).

Matthew is twenty one years old and he is a drug addict. He has lived in the City of Newark most of his adult life. In fact, solely in the neighborhoods most ravaged by drugs— the Central and West wards. He is soft spoken and his spoken phrases reflect one not very adept at the English language's grammatical rules. He mixes verb tenses, ignores singular and plural rules... but the context of his expression, the meaning of it, and his humanity are profoundly eloquent. As I listened, I understood his suffering, his plight, and the gross injustice which many are forced to endure, economically and socially. But I also came to recognize that society too must endure the ravages of this plague of drugs; in terms of health costs, services and taxation.

Matthew became a drug user when he was thirteen, and left school soon thereafter. Today he is dying of Aids. Matthew's home life was troubled from early on, his mother was unable to keep a job, partly because she was a single mother and never got much farther than an eighth grade education. He remembers her as one who frequently got drunk to forget her problems. Matthew then grew up with his grandmother, who struggled to maintain a home for six children; Matthew's brothers and sisters.

I asked what contributed most to the problems that have affected him. *"When you're black, and poor, no one cares about you. No one sees you, they look away from you like you is nothing. Teachers don't pay you no mind. They gives up on you likes you isn't of no use. When you can't get a job, when you needs money to eat, when you needs a roof over your head, and you can't get a place for your family, what you gonna do? You're gonna steal if you have to, or if you is a good Christian and don't want to hurt nobody, you goes crazy, because you don't know what to do. Drugs gives you a way out. When you is doing it, you feels good and you forgets about everything that's wrong. You forget about everything! For a long time I hated my mother, but I know what she was feeling now. Many days, I cry inside for her and for my family."* Matthew couldn't talk anymore. His pain visibly present and reflective of the problems that face many youth in our inner cities, not just Newark, but most of our large metropolitan centers.

Matthew's testimony reflects the reality that in many respects, illustrates the drug epidemic as a symptom of larger issues which affect our society, and particularly our city. The issues are by no means new, and in fact are so noticeable and predictable that the true unknown is why so many of the precursors leading to drug abuse have not been tackled more effectively by local, state and federal governments.

Unemployment is one issue. Why are so many people unemployed in poor neighborhoods? As I asked some business owners about employing youth during the coming summer, some were blunt; *"I don't want none of them kids in my store, they'll rob you blind!"* As we continued our conversation, with one individual in particular, it became evident that the kids were often referred to in derogatory and prejudicial tones, as if the color of their skin had as much to do with employment decisions as with other factors like skills.

In Washington D.C. the unemployment rate for black youth is 22%, in New York State it is 28%, while the national rate is in the low single figures. What can explain such high unemployment rates for black youth? As a result of such statistics, it becomes undeniable that racism is a national problem and **thus racism is an issue which needs to be faced, by all citizens.**

The lack of skills that the businessmen spoke about, are noticeable in many of the youth. Youth that frequent a school system which has been proven inadequate in many respects and which today is being managed by the State of New Jersey: a school system that is being returned to local control, even though many troubling issues persist, under state leadership. In fact one teachers' union has recently requested a federal probe of the Newark schools.

If the youth of poor neighborhoods do not receive the adequate training they require, how will they ever develop the necessary skills to obtain employment and thereby maintain their families? If this is not met, the number of people requiring public assistance, section 8 housing, subsidized health costs will continue to rise and by extension so will crime, drug usage and taxation. Educating youth adequately, must be not only a priority, it is essential for the war on the drugs to be effective. **Thus by necessity, education is another issue that we all must consider carefully.**

As Matthew's testimony underscores, the youth of poor neighborhoods face overwhelming odds; troubled family life that is intertwined with the issues of inadequate education, racism and chronic unemployment.

At issue also is housing, especially since this City has continued to destroy existing public housing stock, labeling it problematic and too costly to maintain. Nearly 5,000 families in this city are on the Newark Housing Authority's waiting list for subsidized housing. How many have simply given up waiting, but still need subsidized housing? How many will become homeless? How many children will be subjected to dangerous situations, which will impact their safety, developing self-esteem, and future; as a result of homelessness or substandard housing? From 1980 to 1992, Newark lost 18.6% of its population and 15.6% of its housing, and according to the last census, 10.7% of its housing units were vacant. **Housing then, by necessity, becomes still another issue that needs to be addressed.**

The solution to the drug problem reminds me of that paradoxical question; *what came first the chicken or the egg?* What comes first... drug abuse, or issues of housing, education, unemployment and racism? It is a fact that many drug abusers are employed, however it doesn't take much to recognize that the central ill destroying the inner city is in fact drugs, and that drugs in many cases are "a way out, a temporary escape", to a life of desperation— involving issues related to poverty and racism which we as citizens, all must bear the responsibility for not addressing more effectively.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION in our schools...

Since February we have been attempting to document the current status of substance abuse education at the schools of Newark, both public (77 schools) and the schools within the Catholic Archdiocese, which maintains 15 schools in the City alone. It has been an attempt that has met resistance from many sectors, public and private. However, the unrelenting focus of THE CITIZEN has been to specifically identify, what the current policy is and how it is implemented. In this issue of THE CITIZEN we will begin to provide an examination of the policy, as stated and implemented, by both the Newark Public Schools and the Catholic Archdiocese of Newark.

THE ARCHDIOCESE OF NEWARK

According to statistics supplied by the Archdiocese there are currently nearly 4,500 students enrolled in fifteen of its schools in the City of Newark. Very few additional details were provided to us. In fact, we are chiefly relying on correspondence provided by Sister Patricia Butler, Deputy Superintendent for Elementary Schools, who in a letter dated February 28th, identified what constitutes substance abuse education as; *"The program already in place ...include(s) DARE. The ALERT program which consists of eleven lessons is also used. Additionally, in a Catholic school there is opportunity to address respect for the body in religion class and relevant information on drugs is incorporated in appropriate places in the science curriculum."* In summation, elaboration of a drug abuse program was emphatically placed as a responsibility of each principal.

Placing the prerogative of whether to elaborate a drug education program as a responsibility of the principal, creates great variability within the school system, in fact principals who face budgetary concerns, and all of the schools of the Archdiocese currently face those concerns since they are self funded and average 315 students per school, in Newark, will invariably cut costs where possible.

DARE is a program administered and presented by law enforcement personnel. Due to budgetary constraints that program is not functioning in the City of Newark. Therefore, this program cannot be currently in use by schools of the Archdiocese. Even if it were, statistics from several sources, including the federal government, cite it as a lackluster program.

My son and daughter both attend Archdiocesan schools in the City. My son's science text has one page devoted to drugs, alcohol and tobacco, while my daughter's has no information whatsoever concerning the dangers of drugs or how children can protect themselves from peer pressure.

Only recently, has there been an attempt to provide some literature to students (scriptographic booklets by Channing Bete Co.), 15 page mini-booklets, distributed within a context of workshops that were implemented after February, at the school my children attend, and conducted by personnel associated with Catholic Community Services.

Our attempt to independently examine the specifics of the substance abuse education program of the Archdiocese was not met, even though we submitted

numerous written requests to that effect. However, when we contacted the majority of Catholic schools in the City of Newark, we subsequently verified that none of the schools were using the ALERT program.

The Archdiocese's letter also cited reliance on individual teachers of religion and science as responsible for addressing drug abuse education/prevention. It would be a daunting task to survey all the science and religion teachers in the school district and verify whether they do in fact address this issue with any seriousness. However without centralized policy or direction from the Archdiocese it would be logical to surmise that few, if any, teachers have the well defined and dedicated resources available or the drive to address such a vital issue, without adequate policy and administrative support, which apparently is absent.

We could also not obtain any information regarding the collection of statistics related to disciplinary incidents tied to drugs. Therefore, we could not document the extent of the drug abuse problem affecting the schools within the Catholic Archdiocese. If no such data gathering exists, administrative analysis of the evolution of such problems, and the development of an appropriate solution, becomes nearly impossible. Given the apparent lack of a well structured and dynamic abuse prevention program, children so educated are obviously placed at a disadvantage in terms of being prepared to protect themselves, and are rather at risk.

THE NEWARK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Statistics from the High School Proficiency Test for the Newark Schools are abysmal. In 1998-99, only 53.5% of students passed the Reading portion of the test, 57% the mathematics portion and 63% the writing portion of the exam. During this past decade, there were schools who showed absentee rates in the high teens and some over 20%. During 1998-1999 only 30% of Newark's high schools provided SAT preparation classes for their students. (Source; Newark Public Schools, Annual Report 1998-1999).

During the last three years only one Newark school, Ann Street, was classified as a **Blue Ribbon School**, a federal classification denoting excellence in teaching. In the last three years, none of the Newark Schools have been selected as **Star Schools** or **Best Practices Schools**, classifications for "cutting edge" schools which emulate teaching and academic excellence. Not one. These are

dire statistics when you consider that this is the largest school district of the State of New Jersey.

Given this, the Newark Public Schools district is vying for close to \$400 million dollars for the construction of new school buildings. In fact, public input forums held since the beginning of the year by the Newark Schools have made it known that older existing school buildings will be demolished. Public input suggesting the historical value of some of these structures and deliberation as to their continued viability seemed of little concern. Not all buildings are worthy of demolition, yet the current dialogue ignores this.

Although the condition of that part of schools which refers to buildings, is of course of primary concern, given the current pupil performance statistics, are not issues related to the improvement of teaching excellence, and social support structures of greater concern to the children of Newark, rather than new desks, and new buildings? (*A view recently echoed by Saul Cooperman, former NJ Educational Commissioner, see Newark Star Ledger May 21st, Section 10, page 7.*)

In 1994, reform legislation was passed which specified **Goals 2000: Educate America Act**, and the **Improving America's School Act of 1994 (IASA)**. Within this legislative thrust, clear and mandated guidelines were set forth for educating all of America's youth to the presence of violence and drugs. The **Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act** provides funds under **Title IV** to this end. In turn, states and school districts are responsible for implementing core curriculum standards, which in NJ are specified as standard 2.3. Further, under **section 4117** of this same act; States are mandated to maintain ongoing evaluation activities; to collect statistics related to the prevalence of drug use and violence by youth in schools and communities, *and make this information available for public scrutiny.* Therefore school districts must abide by this statute. Why is this important? Essentially it is a way to document which schools are having a problem with these issues, and identify the magnitude of the problem. Only in so doing can steps be then taken to reverse the trend at such schools.

THE CITIZEN attempted to obtain these statistics reflecting the last three academic years, from the Newark Public Schools. The reports which we received, reflected 96-97 and 97-98 and were incomplete (reporting data for only 19 and 37 schools respectively— the district has 77 schools). We were further informed that the 98-99 report could not be located. Since this data is sent to Trenton,

we made further attempts to obtain copies of these reports from the State of New Jersey's Compliance Section of the Department of Education. Our attempts have so far, been unsuccessful, even though the statutes clearly indicate that this information should be made available for public scrutiny. Once these statistics reach Trenton, they are tallied by county and become part of an aggregate annual report presented to the legislature. Incomplete statistical reports that are not identified as such, will therefore represent an inaccurate picture of the magnitude of the problem. It is incomprehensible, how incomplete reports are compiled and vital reports become "lost." ALL the schools of the district, are mandated by law to file reports documenting drug usage and violent incidents and yet many fail to do so. It is also incomprehensible how this inaccurate reporting has not been identified by the Department of Education, and measures taken to correct it, even though audit procedures are in place and well defined.

More Information

on the drug issue can be found on the Internet concerning symptoms, treatment, referrals, research, and parenting at;

www.drughelp.org

www.casacolumbia.org

www.christians-in-recovery.org

www.redribbonworks.org

www.health.org/mediastudy/index.htm

www.pta.org/commonsense/

MISSION STATEMENT

The Citizen for Social Responsibility was created as an educational tool which seeks to examine critical issues in our society which are not being addressed, by motivating public debate and discussion. It is solely an enterprise which does not seek profit as its reason to exist.

We can be reached, by mail, at:

The Citizen for Social Responsibility,
*a Non-Profit Corporation
Main Post Office
Federal Square
P.O. Box 25496
Newark NJ 07102-9998

NJ Reg. 0100815812

Our next issue

will continue the examination of how our schools are preparing Newark's youth.

Till next time, we bid you well.