

WHY THIS SCHOOL WORKS



By **George F. Will** January 2, 1997

If minnows could make merry sounds, a teeming pond would sound like this. It is 7:15 a.m., dark, cold and drizzling when, from the sidewalk in front of the winding stone steps that lead to the door of St. Ignatius Loyola Academy, the noisiness begins. It is the sound of young males boiling with an exuberance undampened by the damp, the hour or the fact that this is a day for final exams.

They come from 19 Zip codes, some leaving home before 6 a.m., some taking three buses. They head for home at 5:15 p.m. with several hours of homework ahead. The 58 boys (49 African Americans, two Africans, four Hispanic Americans, three Caucasians) at this inner-city middle school, now four years old, that offers grades 6, 7 and 8, begin their day with a ritual of civility. They shake hands with their 31-year-old headmaster, Jeff Sindler, and with the Rev. William Watters, S.J., 62, and with any other adult in the vestibule, looking each in the eye and saying, "Good morning." Poor enunciation is corrected.

After demolishing -- but with table manners monitored -- stacks of waffles, two-thirds of the boys clean the school with mops and vacuum cleaners. The other third practice public speaking. "Ebonics" -- the patois of America's meanest streets -- is not spoken here.

This day the boys take turns reading from newsmagazines. After each finishes, the teacher invites comments from the others, "supportive" comments first ("great eye contact"; "good level pace"), then "constructive" criticism.

The technical language describing the academy's student body is "adjudicated and at-risk youths." Forty-three of the boys come from homes with at most one parent, and many come from scarring conditions, but they all come dressed neatly in the school uniform (white or blue shirt, dark tie, dark slacks, no sneakers, no exceptions). Their seven full-time teachers -- median age, 27; pay, from \$12,000 to \$22,000, with lodging at the Academy's Xavier house -- address the boys as "gentlemen." Graduates go on to some of the area's best schools, usually private schools.

Only 18 of the boys are Catholics. The rest probably never will be. The rest of America should be grateful that the church devotes scarce resources (a large building, and \$120,000 in start-up funding) to proving a nonsectarian point about religious observance as a predictor of the capacity to resist the myriad pathologies of modern metropolitan living. It is a point David Brooks makes in the current issue of the Public Interest concerning why religious institutions do better than secular

institutions at molding character. It is not only that they have a particularly powerful sense of mission, and hence are especially demanding, but also that "they place human life in a transcendent context."

Brooks notes that, whereas in the 1960s policy intellectuals talked like economists, nowadays they talk like ministers. For example, Prof. Glenn Loury, an African American economist at Boston University, who says:

"I doubt that the cleverest economist . . . could design an incentive scheme for responsible parenting that would be as effective as the broad acceptance among men and women that they are God's stewards in the lives of their children. The best pregnancy deterrent may be to inculcate in the heart of each adolescent the belief that, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. . . . Therefore honor God with your body.' "

What is the significance of Loyola's little swarm of 58 boys in the larger scheme of things? Just this: Enough micro-solutions, and there will be no macro-problems.

Recently, many religious organizations have been denouncing governmental reductions of welfare services. Columnist Cal Thomas notes that if each of Maryland's 5,000 places of worship became responsible for 10 welfare families, or 37 individuals, all of Maryland's caseload would be covered.

It has been said that whereas religion once was an agency for socializing people by teaching them the seriousness of what were called eternal verities, it has become just another choice of leisure activity. If so, Loyola Academy is splendidly, proudly stuck in the past and determined to remain so.

Tuition is \$5,000. The Parent-Student Handbook, noting that all students receive their education virtually free, thanks to the generosity of sponsors, says students shall write to their sponsors from time to time, because "gratitude is the hallmark of a gentleman." The handbook says the school aims to impart to students a desire to be "competent men for others." If the language strikes contemporary sensibilities as stilted, and as a faint, quaint echo from another century, so much the worse for ours.

George F. Will writes a twice-weekly column on politics and domestic and foreign affairs. He began his column with The Post in 1974, and he received the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary in 1977. 🐦 Follow @georgewill

