

CHANGING SCHOOL

Frustration Fills Hamilton High Academic Life

"We used to brag about the number of kids who won science awards and other contests," reminisced a longtime administrator at Hamilton High School.

"We used to claim it was one of the outstanding academic high schools in the city. And although we still have some very outstanding students, we don't usually say that any more."

What they do say sometimes is that Hamilton has "gone downhill."

It is no illusion that Hamilton once enjoyed a glowing reputation of academic success in the Los Angeles city school system and even on a national level to some extent.

The question is how all that may have changed and why.

"People and teachers have a lot of delusions about the past."

—A Teacher

The so-called decline of Hamilton High is commonly traced to about 1967-68, when—not coincidentally, in the minds of many whites—the number of black students at the school climbed above 10% for the first time.

But the deterioration since then, which is so often taken for granted, is not easily borne out in facts and figures.

For example, the grade point average for seniors at the school in 1968 was 2.4 (2.0 is a C and 3.0 is a B). Last year it was still 2.4.

All indications are that nearly as many Hamilton graduates are going on to college now as before. And Hamilton youngsters still do as well as they ever did at the University of California — considerably above average.

Hamilton student scores on state reading and arithmetic tests have held about steady for the past five years and remain above average.

This is the second in a five-part series on life in a Los Angeles high school by Times education writers Noel Greenwood and Jack McCurdy and Times staff writer Celeste Durant.

Five students earned perfect A averages in 1971-72, the most ever in a single year.

It is true that black students have had an impact: a larger number of blacks than whites come to Hamilton less prepared, less skilled in reading and writing.

The school says an estimated one-third of the students read far enough below average to need remedial help, and most of these are black.

The social studies department used to have one basic government class for slower students. "Now we have four or five," one teacher says.

But Hamilton's reputation—and the academic lifeblood of the school—was linked to something else, and that is a much more complex issue.

"Ten years ago in a senior composition class, a teacher might have gotten everyone to enter an essay contest. He would have said, 'Look, we have a good chance to win some money and recognition.' Students would have felt it was something they wanted to be involved in, something worthwhile. Today, if a teach-

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Frustration Rises, Academic Status Dips at Hamilton High

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er urged this, he would get a lot of assistance."

—A teacher

Hamilton students once carried off a remarkably large share of awards in English, essay-writing, math and science contests. Their triumphs contributed mightily to the school's high academic standing.

But the competitive drive that produced those winning entries has seemingly waned.

This new attitude—call it less pride in achievement for achievement's sake—seems to be at the very heart of what has happened to Hamilton and perhaps to other high schools as well.

"Today," says a counselor, "I hear statements (from teachers) like, 'I don't want honors classes. Who wants to do the work?' I used to have problems of getting everyone in."

A long-time Hamilton teacher recalls what it used to be like on report card day. "If they didn't get an A, it was devastating. Today, you don't have that kind of pressure on many students."

Says another teacher:

"We used to be able to say, 'Read this chapter and answer the first five questions at the end.' I don't think we can do that now. Students are more willing to express disapproval of what they consider poor teaching and irrelevance. When I was a student we kept our thoughts to ourselves."

Impact of Militancy

Perhaps the new attitude is in part an outgrowth of the student revolt in the late 1960s, which touched Hamilton as it did many other high schools.

Although much of that student militancy has subsided into apathy, students at Hamilton seem to have emerged fundamentally different.

"They are more cynical, more questioning and less willing to take your word for everything," says one teacher.

They also seem to take a tougher, more critical view of Hamilton itself, and many find the school seriously lacking.

"Day in and day out it's the same thing over and over again," says one student. "Every day you walk into class seeking something new but it's the same routine."

"Students don't care for school generally—that's not a big departure from the past," argues one teacher.

But most teachers—even this one—also agree there is more to it than that.

Attitudes Veiled

(What may surprise them is how bitter some students have become. One teacher rated the attitude of her students generally excellent. Then she read their answers to questions posed in a survey by The Times. "The negative feeling that was given hardly seemed like it could have been from the same enthusiastic, interested group of students that I have worked with for 10 weeks," she said.)

(On the surface, students do appear to be passively contented about school. But just because they are not out demonstrating, one student remarks, "doesn't mean many students are not disturbed" about academic life at Hamilton.)

When students are asked what they don't like about Hamilton, some of their most intense feelings are reserved for teachers. Says one student in a typical comment:

"Some teachers don't seem to give

a damn about whether you learned the subject matter or not. Some teachers do nothing but run their mouths all period. Some teachers talk or lecture in a monotone. Some classes are outright boring."

But it works both ways. Teachers—good ones—and some classes are also what seem to turn on students most about school.

"The few teachers that are excellent, know their material, know how to present it and get everybody involved make this school worthwhile most of the time," one student sums up.

Significantly, Hamilton students generally do not doubt that most teachers prepare well for classes and know their subject matter (although a good many want that subject matter to include more present-day issues).

"But," says one student, "they don't know how to present it. All they do is recite the book."

"I find most of my subjects like Spanish or history seem to drag," says another, "and I become very uninterested and usually end up daydreaming or not going to class the next day. I wouldn't blame my boredom on the subjects alone. These teachers seem to make the class just as boring as the subject suggests."

Student Proposals

Comments a third student: "The subject matter is presented in such a way it puts you to sleep. No variety. No new ideas or teaching methods."

(And yet, paradoxically, when asked who is to blame for students not doing well at Hamilton, they blame themselves overwhelmingly.)

There is a fair share of youthful exaggeration and restlessness in all these statements. But they come with such frequency from so many students that they cannot be easily dismissed.

What would students do to make classes more interesting? Here is a typical suggestion:

"More student involvement in class; letting them choose subjects within a course that interest them. If a student doesn't like what a class offers, his lack of interests prevents him from getting anything out of it."

Perhaps the most perceptive comment, though, is this one:

"Show them (students) how what they're learning is relative to prob-



Dress code is thing of the past.



Except for the cranial adornments, library scene is much the same. Times photos by Joe Kennedy

lems now, by examples and discussions. That way, students would understand why they're learning it and have a better understanding."

More than a few students are also concerned about the quality of life inside classrooms. They want to be liked by teachers and be able to like the teachers in return. They want a relaxed classroom.

Says one student: "Many times, teachers treat students like computers. (If I were a teacher) I'd relate to kids more. Man, we'd have a wonderful time. Crack a few jokes, be firm, yet make them feel at home . . . I have a teacher like that. Fantastic!"

Counseling Problems

One of the most sharply criticized aspects of the school by students (and teachers as well) is the counseling of students. Hamilton youngsters say the five counselors at the school are insensitive to students, fail to understand their problems and are hard to reach (the case load ranges from 357 to 516 per counselor).

"They give me a runaround every time I go to check on matters which concern me. 'We don't have time to see anyone,' or 'We can't help you' are common answers to my questions," one student complains.

Despite the loss of some of its academic luster, Hamilton is still proud of the preparation it gives its students for college—and probably rightly so.

However, less than one-third of the students think they are being adequately prepared for college.

"It's not nearly as good as it used to be. Anyone halfway motivated wants out and when the day comes I will gladly walk out."

—A teacher

Six teachers are sitting in the teachers' lounge during sixth period after their last classes, waiting for the bell to go home.

spend money on improvements for such things as books and audiovisual materials, we would not be a babysitting institution," says one.

Not every teacher shares in this malaise, of course. Some are generally contented at Hamilton.

"Although students feel they need more freedom," one teacher said, "I feel that all is OK. This is a content, happy, efficient, self-disciplined school."

But most probably would side with this teacher's assessment: "I don't think Hamilton has an old faculty, but it's a tired faculty—tired of beating their heads against the wall so many times. You just give up."

Few appear to have actually "given up" at Hamilton. But there is a suspicion among teachers that their unhappiness has had an effect on what happens in classrooms.

Faculty Walkout

Unrest has been swelling among school teachers for years, and at Hamilton it seems to have crystallized after the strike of Los Angeles teachers in 1970.

The 23-day walkout left Hamilton's faculty (most of them on strike) deeply divided over whether the action was too drastic. It also left the strikers disillusioned after the strike failed to win for teachers the voice in decision-making they had sought.

"We were prepared to come back and help solve problems," another teacher recalled. "We were very idealistic. But we were put down. People on The Hill (the school board and administration) said, 'This is our province—keep out.' They lost a chance at tremendous creative power. Now we do our job, but the spark is gone."

There are students who sense something is missing.

Student body President Craig Erlich, for example, says teachers are reluctant to involve themselves in student activities outside the classroom. Says Erlich: "I have a feeling it has something to do with the strike."

In the classroom, exciting teachers and unstinting effort can still be

found. And there are teachers who spend untold hours of their own time counseling youngsters or helping them with schoolwork.

(One science teacher spent her lunch hours teaching a failing youngster basic math so he could tackle electronics and their distribution. The boy's grades now are satisfactory.)

But students are heard to complain about the teachers who "are just here to get paid" or "who don't care—They are bored and impatient and just want to get it over with and then go home."

Says one veteran teacher: "It's never been the same since the strike. We just do our work and get the hell out. I haven't given up on the job and I'm not just going through the motions. But there is less enthusiasm. It's not the same thrill."

But there are other things that frustrate teachers—their students, for example.

Racial Differences

Black youngsters have been particularly difficult for more than a few white teachers to deal with after whole careers spent teaching white, mostly Jewish students.

"Many of us find it hard to reach black kids," one of the white—and most capable—teachers conceded.

The teachers tend to blame black students for the need for security at the school. And although a large number of teachers have not transferred, a few have left because, as one put it, "I went into this to teach, not to be a policeman."

Teachers also have distinctly mixed feelings about the different attitude of students in general toward school.

"This is a much better quality of student in a lot of ways," one teachers says.

But a majority tend to see it in a negative way. They think student interest and motivation have gone down. And there is a strain of skepticism among teachers that says student complaints of boredom are so much rhetoric—that students are

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Teachers' Complaints

A combination of things seems to trouble them. They believe the school system wants to keep teachers subservient and its bureaucracy is irrelevant actually a hindrance to their doing a better job.

Says one teacher: "We don't feel we are part of the system. The board hires outside experts to develop curriculum guides which bear no relation to what teachers feel should be taught."

A significant number of teachers believes the Hamilton administration—while fair and generally supportive—could profit by teachers' contributions but begrudges them an effective voice in school affairs.

"I'm tired of my 'voice' being heard but disregarded by administrative committees," comments one teacher.

There also is resentment over what teachers consider the low status—reflected in part by their level of pay—that society attaches to educating children.

"If the public were willing to

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Says one teacher whose course is among the most popular:

"The kids still won't read the chapters. If I mention an exam, they cram for it. I assign a nine-page chapter to read. I tell them if you want a meaningful discussion, you must read it. Three or four read it."

Some teachers declare this reluctance to study—coupled with more poorly skilled students—has forced them to lower their grading standards.

Finally, there is a widespread conviction that students are not really interested in being taught anything.

"I believe they (students) expect to be entertained," one teacher says, "to have it handed to them on a silver platter. They do not appear to understand that school is a working situation, and sometimes work is repetitious and even boring when necessary."

Impact of TV

Says a counselor:

"Youngsters today have literally grown up in front of a TV screen. They have been able to change channels at will. If they are bored by something, click goes the switch."

A rationalization Perhaps. The fact is there are teachers—particularly older ones—who do lecture from the book much of the time. Furthermore, it is questionable whether some are as really up on their subject as the youngsters think they are.

It is also a fact that there are some teachers at Hamilton High who have little trouble with "bored" students but could in no way pass as entertainers. The existence of such teachers strongly indicates that the students are not demanding miracles in the classroom.

Perhaps the saddest part of this tangled picture is the emotional price some teachers pay. Says one:

"I think that a large proportion of us have given up trying, and many feel antagonistic—especially where the kids' apathy and hostility are unbearably frustrating. I used to be much more caring to kids than I am now. I'm weary—and I want some care to come my way."

A kind of professional renewal is badly needed by some teachers. But—and if there is failure it lies here—no one is really helping them become more successful.

"Tracking. We haven't mentioned that word 'track' for so long I'd almost forgotten it. We don't say 'track.' We don't say 'ability group.' We say 'correct placement.'"

—A counselor

In some ways, Hamilton High is three schools in one.

The first is the school

that the high-achieving youngster (mainly white) knows. He tends to get the best teacher and the most exciting classes (some of them college-level).

The second is the school that the average student (black and white) knows. He, too, is probably planning on college, but he gets a more spotty collection of classes, and while he is likely to encounter some good teachers, he will also draw some mediocre ones.

The third Hamilton is the one that low-achieving youngsters (mainly black) know. Their Hamilton is made up of so-called basic classes. They tend to get the less interesting and less exciting teachers—and even when they draw a first-rate teacher, the teacher's approach may change noticeably.

How it happens is not at all clear. But it is, in effect, tracking—students programmed into different classes according to ability.

"Philosophically, I do not believe in tracking," principal Josephine C. Jimenez says. "Realistically, some things have to be accomplished."

Students' Abilities

What she means is that teachers find it very difficult to get students to learn when there is a wide range of ability levels and backgrounds in the same classroom.

"It's not unusual to have a kid who is the son of a doctor and another who is from a family of seven and does not know who his father is in the same class," a teacher said.

"When you teach, their backgrounds are miles apart. It makes it really tough to try to relate to all of them and make the class a cohesive unit."

The danger with tracking is that students usually get a different quality of education and once in the lower classes, those students rarely seem to get out and back into regular classes.

The tracking at Hamilton is far milder than that found elsewhere, and the school is trying to bridge the gap by improving the low achievers' performance so they can profit from more advanced classes.

One way is by upgrading skills through a remedial reading program, which has been set up for the first time at Hamilton. But the program can handle only about 100 of the 600-plus students who are thought to need help.

Hamilton also has an "opportunity room" and "continuation school"—

featuring smaller classes and more individual attention—for students with greater difficulties in school. But these programs, too, have limited capacities.

It is clear that Hamilton has many more youngsters who need extra help but are not getting it. And that is one of the tragedies of the school.

It leaves teachers frustrated.

"We have 11th and 12th graders who can't read and write," says one. "But at this level, I tell you I don't know how to teach young adults to read and write."

What it does to these youngsters is more regrettable. Says one 11th grader, explaining why she gets bored in classes:

"Because I already don't understand what the teachers are talking about but they let the people that do understand talk and do what they want and the teachers keep saying (to me), 'If you talk one more time I will send you out.'"

Ironically, Hamilton apparently has some problems at the other end of the scale as well. There are high-achieving youngsters at the school who say they are not being challenged.

"I entered Hamilton as an eager student," says one. "I've maintained a 3.5 grade point average by doing as little as possible in most of my classes. Getting As and Bs at Hamilton has been a joke for me. I'm leaving Hamilton this June a bored and lazy student. That is all I've had to be."

"Compared to some schools, we're in good shape. Compared to what we have been or could be, things are bad."

—A teacher

Hamilton is not a dollar-poor school as schools in the Los Angeles district go. Four years ago, it was declared an inner-city school, which brought extra funds.

The teacher-pupil ratio is down to about 1 to 25, lower than in most other city high schools. Not all classes are small—this semester, 74 contained 32 or more students. But 46 classes had 15 students or less.

Enrollment also is down to about 2,350 from its peak of around 3,300 a decade ago. As a conse-

quence, physical and material conditions, while not ideal by any means, are comparatively good.

There is one major exception. Budget cutbacks in the school district over the past few years have caused the elimination of many elective courses, which were the real bright spots in the curriculum.

"We've cut the heart out of the program," a teacher says. "Once we had 30 elective courses in English and now we're down to 10."

"We have fostered unwittingly the attitude that the fewer units you need for graduation the better; the sooner you get out, the better."

Fewer Classes

Eighty per cent of Hamilton's students have only five classes a day now, whereas virtually all students had six classes a few years ago.

But with the teaching positions still available, the school—particularly the faculty itself—has succeeded in introducing new courses such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, ecology-biology and American cultural minorities. It has added timely minicourses dealing with the juvenile and the law, consumer protection, the supernatural in literature, contemporary music and cinema.

The new classes are an outgrowth of planning sessions by teachers who have been granted time off from their classroom work.

The school also is taking the first steps to improve the counseling of students, particularly in the 10th grade, as part of a plan to reorganize the administration.

Teachers who tackle assignments to revamp courses or help plan other changes complain frequently that they are not given enough time to do the job right.

There also is some cynicism over how many of the changes are educational gloss.

"A great deal of lip service is paid to this concept," says one teacher. "But after the dust settles, everything seems to be as before—though sometimes under fresh nomenclature."

Even so, the school deserves credit for trying to respond, however limited by school district restrictions, to some of the pressures it senses are upon it.

Hamilton is making an effort a lot of other high schools may not make.

In the end, despite the changes it has undergone, Hamilton High remains heavily oriented toward college-going.

Its college counseling is one of the best things about the school, and blacks seem to have benefited liberally.

This year, the school has started an "early identification program," aimed primarily at getting promising black students to consider college and to take the necessary classes at Hamilton.

But college emphasis is one of Hamilton's problems, too.

"Everybody's going to go to the University of California," said a counselor, shaking his head.

The school has modern, well-equipped shops but parents—and counselors, too—are accused of steering youngsters away into academic majors.

"I've had cases where kids who want to stay in shop leave," says one shop teacher. "When I ask them why, they tell me, 'Mom and Pop won't let me' or, 'My counselor won't let me.' They think I can do better than take a shop class."

That much about school hasn't changed.

(Next: The racial problems at Hamilton High.)