

The Broken Windows Theory of Schools

by Charles J. Sykes

Frequently, I am asked how parents can tell whether their child's school is good. The bad news is that there is no easy answer because no handy checklist of indices of good schools exists. Even if it did exist, it would be of uncertain value because the information provided by the schools would be uneven and often of questionable validity.

Having said this, I should hasten to say that there are indeed ways of evaluating a school. The technique I propose is borrowed from political scientist James Q. Wilson. Wilson's theory originally was developed to deal with the problem of crime and neighbourhood safety, not education. But the same principles that track the spread of disorder in the streets can also be applied to the breakdown of academic order in the schools. "Social psychologists and police," wrote Wilson and co-author George Kelling, "tend to agree that if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, the rest of the windows will soon be broken. This is as true in nice neighbourhoods as in run-down ones. One unrepaired window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing. Vandalism can occur anywhere once communal barriers — the sense of mutual regard and the obligations of civility — are lowered by actions that seem to signal that no one cares."

Effective schools also rely on communal values and barriers, which is why the theory of broken windows can be applied to academic standards. When evaluating schools, *look for the big picture in the details.*

If you want to find out what is really important to a school, don't ask the principal. *Look to see if spelling and grammar are corrected on a child's paper.* If they are not, it is the

- Do the school's goals or mission statement make any mention of specific disciplines? The failure to say a single word about math, writing, reading, history or science is an educational broken window, a red flag that the people who run the school have, at best, a vague notion of what they are teaching.
- What proportion of an average school day is spent on core academic subjects (reading, math, science, social studies)? If it is less than two-thirds, the school's priorities are questionable.
- Do students receive letter grades? If grades have been abolished or replaced with vague or confusing new measurements, parents should be concerned. They should also be concerned if their children are being awarded A's for work that is substandard or sloppy.
- How much of the day is spent working "cooperatively"? Are gifted students working up to their level? Or are they being used as peer tutors?
- How dumb are the textbooks? If parents find out that the school uses textbooks with the reading level of a farmer talking to his cow, they have a clear picture of the intellectual level of their child's classes.
- Do students discuss values, ethical dilemmas, and sexuality as questions without answers? Do school officials talk about "self-esteem" or instilling confidence?
- Does the school teach reading through systematic phonics? Are teachers candid about their answers?
- Who runs the classroom? The teacher or the kids? Do teachers see themselves as authority figures or merely as "facilitators?"
- How orderly is the school? The best schools would never be mistaken for a Trappist monastery, but chaos is never the sign of an effective school.

equivalent of a broken window: a sign that no one cares whether children acquire basic academic skills. If a child brings home a paper that is sloppy and filled with misspellings, it is a signal that no one cares whether he gets it right.

To the educationists, this may seem a minor detail, but it says a great deal about the educational neighbourhood and where it is headed. If teachers are unconcerned about poor writing, how likely is it they will provide children with the essential intellectual tools or the fund of knowledge they will need? How seriously will they take their obligation to train children in the systematic ways of thinking developed within the various fields of scholarly and scientific investigation? And, ultimately, how serious are they about setting and maintaining demanding standards for academic achievement?

There are other reliable indices.

- How long does it take for graffiti to be cleaned up?
- How does the school react to student insolence to teachers?
- Are parents regarded as distractions or annoyances?

Educationists will dismiss all this as simplistic, but effective schools understand that their ethos is expressed through just such details. They recognize that standards are maintained by insisting on high expectations in *every* aspect of school life. They also recognize that confidence grows from mastering the elementary skills and from the small victories. The details are all part of the fabric of success.

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