



Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

Study Says School Atmosphere Fosters Abuse of 'Nerds'

By Julie Blair

Many American teenagers are so afraid of being labeled "nerds" or "freaks" by their peers that they undermine their own educational experiences in an attempt to avoid such tags, new research says.

The study, "nerds & Freaks: A Theory of Student Culture and Norms," appears in the book, *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, 2003, which may be ordered for \$24.95 by calling (800) 275-1447.

That's understandable, because such distinctions invite brutal abuse, often verbal and sometimes physical, said John H. Bishop, an economist and professor in the school of industrial and labor relations at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. He conducted the study, "nerds and Freaks: A Theory of Student Culture and Norms," released earlier this month by the Washington-based Brookings Institution. Secondary students conform to their schools' norms, he writes, which are set by a popular crowd that often discourages high achievement.

"We found that there is an optimal amount of studying," Mr. Bishop said. "You tend to be harassed if you exceed that level, or if you perform substantially below."

Schools reinforce those sentiments because they foster competitive cultures that pit students against one another and highlight the achievements of individuals, he said. Teenagers simply want to have fun, he asserts, and those who excel in the classroom are perceived as spoilers.

The solution is to craft an environment in which learning and academic achievement are prized by the "in crowd," and its admirers, Mr. Bishop concludes. Schools should make college competition a common goal, encourage academic teams such as debate clubs, institute "no pass, no play" rules, and use standardized tests that judge students on a fixed criteria, he argues.

"This is an important study that reinforces what we know about this issue" of school culture and bullying, said David F. Labaree, a teacher-educator at Michigan State University, in East Lansing, Mich., who teaches the history and sociology of the profession.

But Mr. Labaree criticized the solutions laid out in the study as simplistic. American society has a long history of anti-intellectualism, he said, and it is difficult to sell the love of learning as an end in itself.

"We want to get the most education we can for the least effort and investment," he said.

Bullying in middle and high schools is pervasive, the report concludes.

Of the 100,000 middle and high school students surveyed by researchers for Mr. Bishop's study and others from 1998 to 2001, more than one-third of boys and 20 percent of girls said they were "teased, insulted, or made fun of to [their] face" at least once a week. The students were enrolled at 350

schools in the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic regions, as well as California, Illinois, North Carolina, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

Branded Early

Most "nerds" or "freaks" are branded as early as the first weeks of middle school, researchers found, and such identities tend to stick for years. Noting those unflattering labels, other students aim to distance themselves from such youths and, in turn, further harass them.

The abuse initially happens because the unpopular students are bucking the norms established not by teachers and administrators, but by trend-setting teenagers, Mr. Bishop says. The trend-setters put a much higher priority on fashionable clothes, a sense of humor, athletic prowess, and self-confidence than they do on academic ability.

Dangling Incentives

Students who invest their time developing social networks are rewarded with more power in school, he said. They become role models and validate the importance of others in their circle.

The way to dispel such an atmosphere is to foster rigorous, demanding schools while avoiding a competitive environment, Mr. Bishop believes.

"If the leading crowd is taking learning seriously, peer norms ... will shift up and the whole school will be pulled to a higher level," the report says.

Dangling incentives to achieve—eligibility on sports team and college admission—is seen as key. Schools should also celebrate academic teams and configure study groups that give ambitious students the opportunity to shine as well as supportive friendship networks, the report suggests. Students who identify with a specific group, it notes, are less likely to be picked on by others.

Administrators and teachers must also banish the "winner" and "loser" mentality that is pervasive in many schools, according to Mr. Bishop. "Two of the things that work against this is grading on a curve and handing out class rank," he said. "You don't want rewards in which one person wins."

Standardized tests are helpful because everyone can earn similar scores on them, he said, adding that preparing for such assessments creates an "us versus the test-maker" mentality. Students are free, then, Mr. Bishop suggests, to establish relationships with educators who guide them toward their goals.

Such strategies are helpful in improving the culture, but the reliance on standardized tests could pose problems, said Mr. Labaree of Michigan State. "For some, the pressure is going to increase the amount of time they're studying," he said. "For others, there will be greater disengagement and a 'to hell with it' attitude."