

TEACHER'S ROUNDTABLE

04/23/08

I'm Marc Steiner, and welcome to another in a series of podcasts about violence in our Baltimore city schools. We're talking today with three public school teachers: two active, and, one no longer in the city schools, and we'll find out why, Julia Gumminger, who recently wrote the op-ed piece in The Baltimore Sun is with us, as is Ebon Soul, who teaches high school and Bob Keal, who teaches, in elementary school in the city.

Folks, welcome, good to have you all here.

JG: Thank you.

ES: Thanks for having me.

So, we've been talking to a lot of people about this issue of violence in our schools and, uh, we had a long talk with Dr. Andres Alonso, the, the CEO of schools, and we talked to a number of students from two different schools, who went to Poly and Heritage High, and, uh, this is, from your perspective, I mean, I like to hear about this, I mean, there seems to be a disconnect between the policies that, uh, we have around violence and what the reality is and what you face every day. Now, you – you, as you were writing in your, in your op-ed, Julia, where you were, you were physically attacked.

JG: Yes. Twice.

Twice. And, what happened? How long ago was this? Last year? Last school year? Two years, two school years ago?

JG: Uh, fall of 2006 was the first assault, and spring of 2007 was the second assault.

And what were these assaults?

JG: Uh, to be fair, I'd say they were pretty minor, as assaults go, I don't know if that's [laughs] worth saying, but, uh, I was, the first time, I was thrown against the wall by a student. Uh, and I pushed him off of me. So, that was the entire interaction. Um, but he did, with two hands, throw me, against my shoulders, against the wall.

This is a in a middle school?

JG: Middle school. Eighth grader, I believe he was a fifteen or sixteen year old eighth grader.

There are twelve hundred students, we've learned, that are a grade or two above where they're supposed to be in our city middle schools at the moment.

JG: That's right.

I mean, an age or two, above.

JG: That's right. Um, so that child was suspended for two days and then brought back into my classroom, as if nothing had happened. Um, and then in the spring, I was assaulted again, but it was a much more severe incident. Uh, same thing where the boy threw me with two hands against my shoulders against the lockers, and I pushed him off, but he slammed me against the wall again. And it was kind of this like shoving match, to try to get free, and he kept throwing me against the wall, and he picked up a large boulder, about the size of my head, that was in the hallway, um, and threatened me in my face with it, like he was about to throw it at my head. And I pushed it away and it fell to the floor. Uh, but I, that had to be broken up by the hall monitor because he wouldn't stop, and I was kind of trapped in a corner.

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ES: And what... I'm sorry.

MS: Go ahead, Eben, please. Eben, just jump in. Eben Soul.

ES: I was just curious to know what the result of that was, was the child arrested, were they moved, were they...

JG: Um, we, it, it ended up being a longer incident than just his assault against me, um, he kind of ran wild in the building and out in the courtyard and they couldn't catch him, he was kind of like this wild animal running around, uh, I think he had some kind of, either he was on some kind of drugs, or he had some kind of psychotic break, because he just was not acting like a normal child, even an angry child, um, so they kind of corralled him into the office, they called the one school police officer that Waverly Middle School shares with I think two or three other schools, uh, so in about fifteen, twenty minutes he arrived on site, and, uh, I believe he was taken out in handcuffs but I think they just let him go home. And having learned from my experience in the fall, I realized that I should press charges on this child.

Did you?

JG: I did. Uh, I, with the school police officer, uh, I filed paperwork with him, I gave him a statement of the entire incident, with the, you know, event, by, I forget what you call it but moment by moment of exactly what happened. Uh, never heard a thing afterwards from the police. Uh, never got a copy of my official report, I followed up with the officer on his personal cell phone, on his office phone, about three times, I also had my assistant principal call to follow up, and I never received a copy. Uh, so I don't know if the charges were actually officially charged, or if they just had me do the paperwork and that was it. Uh, but the child was removed from the school as a result, uh, he was not put on long term suspension, they moved him to a different school.

ES: Sounds pretty normal. Sounds pretty normal to me.

JG: Yeah. They presented it to the parents as an option.

ES: That sounds very normal to me.

I'd like to hear it from your perspective. You all came from very different schools, I mean, different parts of this community. Uh, and elementary, middle, and high school. And I, how pervasive, A, is this violence, and describe what you think is really going on, I mean, is it violence, is it disruption, is it disrespect, disorder, I mean, what's the real identification of what you see is going on in schools? Eben, and then we haven't heard from our friend Bob Keal yet. Eben, and then we'll go to Bob.

ES: I'll say, E, all of the above.

JG: Yes.

ES: There are extreme cases of violence throughout the system on a regular basis, I mean

What is, what do you mean by a regular basis?

ES: Daily. Daily there are teachers who are assaulted, there are students who are assaulting each other, there's property that's destroyed, and it's kept, you know, quiet. And when it's not kept quiet, of course, you see it on the news, and everybody's surprised, and what's going on in our schools, and I'm almost twenty years in the system, and this is normal for me, so I'm glad that it's getting the attention – it needs it – but this is every day. And in the school I'm in at the moment, Carver, and I taught almost ten years throughout the nineties there, there's violence all the time. Uh, there are all kinds, I mean, you name it. There's rape, there were gun problems, there was knife problems, you know, there was weapons, people beating each other up, teachers were assaulted, and I've broken up many many many fights, with and

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without weapons, and you know, it doesn't make the news and in effect we're not supposed to talk to the news, which really I don't really care about that rule, it's my civil right. No one can mandate me to be quiet about my freedom of speech, and I teach Government and US History, so I think that's funny. That being said, you know, I try to work with my team and my administration, you know, you don't want to alarm everybody, but it's alarming. And, uh, I mean, it's, it's pervasive. And I think one of the other issues, is that just like she said, with the school police and the administration, they're just not following the rules, because they're so worried about liability, and who's responsible, and the bottom line is, if, you know, like the case with Miss Jolita Berry, you know, it's like, immediately that child should have been arrested. I bet you if the CEO or that principal, Ms. Reagan, who used to be at Carver, and has quite a reputation, and not positive.

You're saying she has not a positive reputation?

ES: Not as an administrator. And, uh, this is all hearsay of course, but, you know, if they had been straddled and pounded in their face for three or more minutes on You Tube, I doubt the CEO would be turning the other cheek and saying, "Let's not arrest the child." The child would have been arrested immediately.

You think, you're saying that Dr. Alonso has turned the other cheek?

ES: Most definitely. I've been his biggest fan and supporter up to this point, but on discipline there's no negotiation, and I'm sorry, they're wrong. The child should have been arrested immediately, they assaulted this individual! And it's just like, just like an assault in your case. And no follow up, the child got suspended for a little bit, it just came out today in the news, or yesterday, that she is pressing charges herself. The school should immediately press charges. With or without her. That's just unacceptable. I tell you right now, if I banged a child, I would be arrested, even if I was right, they would have arrested me. So, I'm, I'm confused. I really am.

Well, I want to come back to some issues you raised here because I think they're really important to talk about, what the school system should do, and what policies should be, and what you, we think they should be, and the reality of what they are, and why they say they are what they are, but Bob Keal, we haven't heard from you. Now, you're elementary school.

BK: Well, yeah, elementary/middle, we're in our second year of transitioning to middle school. So we have seventh graders now, we'll have eighth graders next year. And so, um, I'm, I'm experiencing the same things as both the other guests. Basically, it's pervasive, uh,

What's it, how does it play itself out in elementary school?

BK: In the elementary school, I mean you have kids that are coming from very difficult homes, difficult backgrounds, that have emotional issues. Uh, very difficult to get a child, though, at a young age, identified for emotional issues, for, say, a special education IEP, that sort of thing. So, you end up with a lot of kids in your classroom that have these emotional issues and no one to work with them. Uh, we have, a social worker, but she has very, excuse me, very limited time, a lot of responsibilities. In addition to being a social worker and working with the kids and their families she works with, uh, the CST, the Child Study Team, which helps kids become identified for Special Education. But she wears all these different hats, doesn't have a lot of time. We have a psychologist that can only work with a limited amount of students, we even have a Bay View technician – a Bay View physician, but again, they can only work with a limited amount of students at a time. So we have far more students in our building that need someone to talk to, on that sort of a level, that do not have someone to talk to. Um, so, that's what I see on the elementary level, the younger children aren't getting that support at that age. As they get older, it just kind of snowballs.

If the violence is, I mean, exists and is as deep as, as teachers are saying it is, and, and as the students we interviewed from the Algebra Project were saying that it is as well, and I'll get to

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what they said in a minute to see what your response is, but on the administration side it seems that the policy is that it makes little sense to suspend or expel students back into the environment that created the violence in the first place. That somehow you have to find a way to deal with it in the school, or, or do it some other creative way, and, and not, uh, and not put kids out. I mean, so what should be our response, I mean how, what's a policy that should be considered in city schools to deal with violence, or any schools for that fact?

BK: Well, if I could jump in.

Go ahead. Bob Keal.

BK: I, I think it needs to start at both ends. Uh, there needs to be zero tolerance for violence against teachers, there needs to be harder, uh, harder punishment for kids that are violent to other, other kids. I mean, it just needs to happen, the kids need to get either put out of city schools altogether, parents need to understand that there are consequences if their children are violent in schools, that their children are going to get put out. And the parent is going to have to find a way to put their child in school because it's necessary. They have to.

It's the law.

BK: Yeah, it's the law. So they have to find a way to put that child in school. I think if that benchmark was set on one end, parents would know, uh, that they had a responsibility to keep their kids from being violent in schools. But on the other end, as I kind of, uh, alluded to before, there needs to be more programs, not just intervention programs after a problem has started like social workers or psychologists, there needs to be programs that teach kids how to deal with their anger, uh, when it's starting. I mean, if they get angry, whether it's a child with an emotional disturbance or not, they need to have some strategies that they can use to deal with that anger in a positive way. Uh, we need to have programs, whether they're basketball teams or conflict resolution programs for kids after school or during the day, mediation programs, uh, student courts, where the kids then take responsibility for what, what is happening to their communities. I mean, they need to understand that this violence is starting now and it's going to continue later and the future doesn't look bright for a student that's violent in elementary school.

Julia?

JG: Um, I think all of those program ideas are needed and necessary, but before we get to those I think, you know, it's kind of the same thing I've been saying in the last few weeks and also last year, uh, in my experience at Waverly Middle School I noticed that there was really only a few kids in the school that were kind of leading the pack in the disruptive behavior and in the violence, uh, but across the board there were no consequences at all for any infraction of any kind, whether you didn't do your homework, whether you cursed out a teacher, whether you got in a fight with a kid, or whether you started a riot in the hallway, there were no consequences for anything. Little, big, didn't matter. And so it kind of snowballed into more disruptions, and more disruptions, and more kids would get involved because they would see that, oh, well, you know, Bobby's not getting in trouble, I don't have to get in trouble, you know, I'm not going to get in trouble so I can do this too. And it just became this huge chaos. Uh, if there were, like, a framework of consequences in place for small infractions, for bigger, more extreme infractions, I think the snowball effect could be diminished.

EB: Uh, for me it's really pretty simple, we used to have programs called Public School, and it had stuff like arts, and it had clubs, if you look at the schools in the county with their 81 or 83 percent graduation rate, they got tons of clubs, they have intermural sports, they actually schedule things like music and art and all those, dance and those things during the day, cause you can't even get to cognitive thinking in calculus and science without those types of activities – this is simple. Uh, and since we don't fund those things and we think all the kids should be able to do is add and subtract and be able to regurgitate BCRs and ECRs.

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What is a PCR/ECR?

EB: Brief constructed responses. We used to call them "write a paragraph."

[laughs]

EB: Right?!? Extended, constructed, make up all these kind of baloney labels for like, you know you need to learn to write in longer forms and shorter forms, that's all... The kids don't buy in, they don't buy in to public education because we've watered it down to nothing. And if you go out to the counties where they actually pay teachers real salaries and they have, they have lots of support systems and they have lots of clubs, they have lots of things for the kids to do. When I went to public school in New York, we had Regents and they taught us to the test. Because you took a class, just like you take an SAT class. Or an MCAT class, or an LSAT. You have to learn how to take a test – the tests are hard. It wasn't just that you needed to know the knowledge, you also needed to know how to apply it, use it, and there's nothing wrong with that, you're still learning. The other thing is, is we *have* a disciplinary code...

But you're talking about, you took tests for the Regents in New York, you had History, Math, Music, but you took an extra class to prepare for the tests.

EB: Right, right, and they taught you to prepare for the tests, because the material is the tests, it's not teaching to the tests. You're teaching the material. And you're going to be tested on it and these are the types of assessments that you're going to see, and you need to understand how to deal with these. That's not teaching to the test in a superficial way. The other problem is is that we have laws and rules in the school system, and in this city and in this state. And if we actually followed them, because as a taxpayer, I'm pissed off. That child should have been arrested, and every child in that Jolita Berry case, and every child that said "hit her," they were complicit, it's clear in the law. They were in a public, it's like being in a library. You know, if they were out in the street they would have been hauled off to juvenile detention. You know, and all this "we didn't do enough for the kids." You know, I see a kid for ten months if I'm, if they come to school. I'm not responsible for the anger and all the stuff that, you know, that they're bringing to school. I have to deal with them when they get there, and there are mechanisms to deal with them, and everyone's scared to follow through. It's that simple, you know? It's that simple.

Well, let, let me ask you a question about what you just said, and I mean, one of the things that the school system says, that Dr. Alonso said, was that we could not file charges, the teacher has to file charges, because there was no witness to it, to file charges. So the police could not file charges without the teacher filing charges, and she just did. And that's A. And B, the response is, is that, uh, how can you arrest or suspend all those students, what good would that do? And, it would be counterproductive to have suspended or arrested all the other students because they were egging the thing on and cheering, cheering the other student who was beating her.

EB: If I can jump in, Marc, that's bunk. Both of those things. [laughs] That's just ridiculous. First of all, now there's millions of witnesses. Second of all, there were plenty of people in that class who were witness to what was going on. Third of all, put their families and them through the justice system. Help them understand why assault is illegal. Assault with intent to do bodily harm. Why it's illegal to incite a riot, or to be complicit in a violent act. It's illegal! So it's not about, you're not, you're not, it's, it's teaching them something, that you're serious, that you're in high school now, you're almost a fully grown adult, we're going to trust you with driving a car, we're going to trust you with, you know, you're doing adult things, and we're going to hold you and your families responsible for these things. Like everybody else. We're actually doing them a disfavor by not following what the citizens in country have decided is the law, and citizens of this particular state. That's ridiculous.

JG: Also, you mentioned suspension as not being helpful or productive. Uh, I agree, I agree that suspension is probably not the best consequence to give a kid. Uh, however, it is a consequence, and even if you don't want to use suspension, there are other options, so we don't have to suspend every child

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that acts up, we can be creative. We can do community service hours. We can do, uh, you know, we can bring detention back. There's no detention any more. Uh, or, you know, write an essay, or something, some kind of consequence that acknowledges that the behavior happened and that it was a problem.

You all, go ahead Bob.

BK: Yeah, I would agree with both points, the problem being with the latter. Although detention and community service are great, unless it's put through some sort of formalized system, the parents can just say "No, thanks," uh, I just want my child to come home after school, I'll deal with them. And this is what's happened, uh, in our school.

JG: That's true.

BK: I mean, we have tried to do detention, and the parents say, well, you don't need to hold them, I'll take them. You know, and that gives us no power. So I think essentially what's happening, and I think we've alluded to it already, the kids are finding out that our system is a farce. That our authority is a farce.

EB: Right. There is no authority.

BK: Essentially, they figure it out and they rule.

EB: And they'll say to you, "What are you going to do?"

JG: Yeah.

EB: That girl that beat that teacher, the next day she was in school bragging in front of the teacher, that she was beating, that she beat her up. You know, I mean, it's, it's just unconscionable. And the fact is, anything that we do, consequences, has to tie the parents in. That's the only way you're going to get anything that works. The parents are going to have to serve the penalty with the kids, or some way they have to be held responsible, uh, because they're not. And I'll tell you one thing, all, the majority of kids if you ask them what their parents tell them if someone threatens them, or bothers them in any way, shape, or form – "bang `em."

BK: Exactly.

EB: They'll tell you, so you send them home and they're like "Whatever, they shouldn't have suspended you, and, that's right, you did the right thing, you should have banged them, and they, they don't look at you now, they're not going to mess with you." And that's what they tell them. So the parents obviously need, to, they need to be pulled up on that too, because that's not acceptable, you can't just go around, solving your problems by banging everybody.

So, you, you're sitting here, you're talking to me about this school violence and saying that there is no detention, there are no policies set in schools, my understanding is now that North Avenue wants each individual school to set its own policy. That there is no system-wide policy.

EB: Well it's interesting, they're going to site-based management again, and they're going to give the principals all this money, and the union of course is, you know, very apprehensive, and some of it bothers me, because if you have a good principal, you know, it, they're going to make some progressive – but if you have a principal that's you know, power tripping, or they don't like someone and they're handling staffing now, now they're handling discipline, now they're handling 7, 8 million, 9 million dollar budget depending on one of these high schools, right? You know, you, you're, slippery slope. Also you have these SIT teams, School Improvement Teams, who make recommendations, but they don't sign the checks, they don't control the money, so, what's the point of that?

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Well, before I ask you all about what you think needs to happen, and what you would do if you were controlling this, and what you think is missing and how to make it happen, when I interviewed the students, and from the other work we've done in communities here, especially inner city communities, it's clear that the students, even the ones who hated what was going on, lived through the code of "If you disrespect me than I have to get in your face." I mean it seems to me in some ways, the schools are facing a larger cultural issue that's not just something that happens inside the school. The kids say to me, you know they said it in our other podcast, that the streets come into the schools. We're from the street, it comes in with us. We don't leave it out there, we're here. And, you have to stand up if someone disrespects you, and I don't care if it's a teacher or a student, you stand up. So, and then that's pushed even further by all the violence around them all the time, whether it's, you know, whether you, you, you, the most obscene violence and sex is a click away on the computer. And, we beat you up, we put you on the computer, and everybody sees how bad we are, because we do it, and it's there, which is what happened in the Jolita Berry's case.

EB: They're a celebrity.

The teacher was, the art teacher that was beaten up that caused all this ruckus to begin with in the press. So how do you deal with that? How does the school system begin to address the stuff around it? What does it do? What's the response?

BK: Well, I mean, the, I guess what popped in my mind when you started asking the question is, the school needs to be some sort of a filter for these kids. When the kids walk in the school they need to understand that it's different, uh, from the streets, it's different from where they come from. It may not be different from where they come from, and they might come from a great home, but for the kids that come from a home that says hit somebody that steps up to you, the school needs to be starkly different from that environment. And it needs to be set out with consequences for actions, there needs to be ways for kids to, uh, express themselves, as we said earlier, you know, music, arts, sports, programs that help them deal with their anger, and there needs to be ways for the kids to filter all of that junk they get and find out really what it means to be a human, what it really means to be a student. And on top of that, then, what it means to be a student to me is to have responsibility. And responsibility to your community. I don't know much, much about The Algebra Project, but I know they do things that are a little more politicized than is oftentimes, uh, OK in our schools.

Right.

BK: But I think schools *should* be politicized. All throughout history, school has taught children and adults how to think critically, and this is what we're lacking now. Kids aren't thinking critically, they're not able to think critically about their own decisions, and they get themselves into situations, and then they just react, they beat up a teacher, they beat up somebody they go to school with, and they either get locked up or they keep doing it until they get locked up. And until we teach them to think critically, teach them to really consider their own actions, nothing is going to happen, as far as progress goes.

JG: Uh, you mentioned earlier the, uh the fact that principals are going to start having more power. Uh, in my case, at Waverly Middle School I saw from, uh, one school year to the next, a severe decline in productivity, uh, among the students, in discipline, uh, I think that it's, without a system of checks and balances and holding these principals accountable, giving all these principals all of this extra responsibility is a really bad decision. Uh, there's, there's no one checking in on them. They make all of these decisions that impact an entire community, an entire staff, and the, the school is falling apart and nobody's there to check on them. Uh, we have visits from the area offices, and our principal and assistant principal would have us pretend that change of classes

EB: [laughs] It's a special day that day, right.

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JG: That change of classes doesn't actually happen at 12:05, it really happens at 12:25, after they've left the building, so hold your kids for another twenty minutes in class. So, I mean, there's no, [laughs], there's nobody checking in, there's nobody holding these folks accountable. Uh, and both of you mentioned, also the art programs. I think we, I'd like to point out that I was an art teacher, and Jolita Berry was also an art teacher, and we were both assaulted. So these art programs, technically are there, but they're not working...

ES: But they're not, they're not.

JG: I mean, I, I know they're not working. However, I was lucky enough to be in a school that had lots and lots and lots of art supplies, and I was even able to get, uh, a kiln donated and potters wheels donated and all this, all these amazing resources that without a discipline structure in the building, we couldn't use. Because it was all destroyed or used as a weapon. So, I mean, there's a lot of, like, top-down kind of system changes that need to happen before we can be, I think, a little bit more creative. And that's coming from an artist, so...

Well, it seems to me that... Were you going to say something, Ebon?

ES: Well yeah, I wanted to say that I think we sell a lot of our students short, I mean, most of the students in my school, and we have, you know, twelve, thirteen hundred, kids, they're, they're fabulous, even the ones that are evil every day.

JG: Yeah.

ES: They *want* boundaries.

JG: Yes.

ES: They want people to love them, they want people to listen to them, and one of the problems is, is that, you know, we're trying to make them conform, instead of really listening to what they need. And, you know, I have kids who cuss me out every, all day the hallway is just cuss words, vulgarity, all day. And, you know, when you really get to know the kids and they get to know you, and you know how to deal with all the different personalities and you really start, and you set firm boundaries and you are consistent. Any parent or good teacher knows that. Consistency is very important. I always give my students an out. I always give them an opportunity to fix something they've done. But they still have to take responsibility. And I think that's a, you know, the kids in Baltimore city aren't bad kids. They're coming from, a lot of them, bad circumstances and schools that are terrible conditions with no, you know, the teachers are struggling, we have a shortage of teachers, and don't believe all the hype, we've always had a minimal amount of teachers we need. We need a lot more staff, a lot more support system. So we're, we're over taxed, over stressed, the kids are bringing their stresses and social ills in, and, you know, we have a lot of rules in place and we don't, we don't follow them. And the other thing is we don't hold the community responsible. I mean, I have, I had a girl came up to me today, she's been in my class 20 times in the whole year, she's a senior, she needs this history class to graduate, she wants to give me, she wants me to give her three months of work so she can try to do it in a week so she can graduate. Ok? Cause we don't have, we don't hold the kids responsible. And I was like, "No! I can't do that." And she's probably not going to graduate. But the problem is we don't hold the community responsible. She was out most of the year. There's supposed to be changed \$25 a day and 10 days in jail for each, why aren't we fining, now, I don't think they should be put in jail, but, I pay taxes. It's not for free. All of us pay taxes for those kids to be there. If your child's that truant, that means you're failing at your job. You need to be charged. If you own a house, property tax, it gets added to it, the difference, I mean let's be real about this stuff. It's pretty - a lot of this stuff can be fixed. But everybody's passing the buck. It's not my responsibility, it's not their responsibility, who, whose is it?

But I get a sense from talking to Dr. Alonso that uh North Avenue, he and the folks at North Avenue are reluctant to set a school-wide policy. That they want policies to be set school by

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school. I mean I suggested why isn't there like an in-school suspension policy for every school and let the most receptive kids end up in an alternative school and you put them there until they can be reintegrated back into the school system itself. Which I think he liked the idea, but saying...

JG: Did you say that before the city-wide meeting last week? Because he announced that at the city-wide meeting last night, last, last week as an idea.

I wrote him an e-mail the day it happened with all those ideas in them.

JG: Well, guess what? They were spoken to the three-hundred-plus teachers that were there as "We're going to do this, we're going to add more alternative schools." It was your idea.

Well I don't know if that was because of my, my e-mail or not, but I mean, the idea of having an in-school suspension program where kids who are suspended aren't in the street, but they're in a special part of the school, where they go until they can be reintegrated back into the classroom.

BK: Yeah, I mean when I was in middle school I had an in-school suspension for a day. I called a classmate of mine a vulgar name that I won't, that I won't mention here, and I was put in in-school suspension in a small room with a window that I couldn't see out of but people could see in to, and I hated it. I never went back there. I never went back.

ES: But see, these kids, that's like a badge of courage.

JG: Yeah.

ES: A badge of honor for them. "Yeah, I did my time." I mean, that's how they act! I mean, no, they have an in-school suspension program, they need to have something that's remedial, or a program, a martial arts class, yoga, something where they have to get into their body, something where they have to sweat a little bit, or something that they have to, you know, they have to accomplish and prove that they're doing.

Right. Right.

ES: Because they'll just sit there like, "Whatever, is my time up? Whatever, you're hemming me up, you shouldn't even of talked to me, you don't even teach me, why are you in my face, this is none of your business." You know what I'm saying? It's like, it doesn't, jail time to them is like, "Pshaw, so what?" They'll go to jail. And that's their mentality. Even if they're scared or they're just protecting, that's their mentality. They need to be hemmed up in a different way.

JG: And, like, at my school, there's not really enough staff to go around, to staff these rooms. We had an in-school suspension classroom in the basement, uh, they called it the Alternative Learning Center or something like that, uh, the problem is that we didn't have any certified substitute teachers, at all, except for maybe one that would pop up here and there. So, when a regular teacher would call out sick, they had to call on the other staff in the building. So the Alternative Learning Center teacher would then be a substitute teacher. If two teachers called out sick, the main office secretary would leave the main office. That left the main office with the health aide and the assistant principal, so any child who got in trouble and was sent to the principal's office, there was no staff there to deal with them.

ES: And none of the staff are required to do that. They can ask me to be a sub but I'm not required, I can say, no, I'm not subbing, that's not my job. They have to hire a substitute.

So were any of you at the meeting with Dr. Alonso that took place where all those teachers met with him?

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JG: I was.

And? What happened at the meeting? I mean, was it successful? Were teachers heard?

JG: Uh, I was honestly really impressed. And, surprisingly really impressed. Uh, the meeting started off, with, in this large auditorium. There was about three hundred teachers, Mayor Sheila Dixon did a little introduction, Dr. Alonso did a PowerPoint presentation about all these statistics that you mentioned, the overage children that are in grades that they shouldn't be in, the number of alternative schools, uh, all these different statistics that are adding to our problems. We broke up into breakout rooms in different classrooms by grade levels, and we were given a framework of six questions to answer as a community within these rooms. Uh, so all the teachers in the rooms were asked to present solutions to all these different questions. Uh, and the most amazing thing was to experience being in a room, I didn't know anybody in the room, people were from all different age groups, all different race groups, and we all agreed. I mean, we were all teachers in Baltimore City, whether for six months, whether for twenty-five years, and we all agreed on the solutions, we presented them via laptop and wireless internet to Dr. Alonso, and then there was a closing presentation that he did. So we'll see, you know, what happens with these solutions, but it was pretty impressive to be in a group of peers presenting these solutions, uh, and, you know, it was a pretty clean framework of what we were doing.

So what were the solutions the teachers came up with?

JG: Uh, a lot of the things that we've just been talking about. Things that we haven't mentioned so far in this conversation here: increased communication inside the school and between the schools and North Avenue. Uh, most of our schools I think have malfunction-, or malfunctioning PA systems and intercom systems, so most of us can't contact the main office in an emergency, we are using our own personal cell phones, uh, so we're talking about fixing those. Uh, increased communication between teachers, uh, in order to hold our principals accountable, to have increased communication with the area offices and North Avenue. I, I can't think of anything else of the top of my head.

So, so let me ask this final questions, so, so how do you then think, as teachers, you keep the school system accountable. I mean, you guys have to work there. Uh...

ES: And just to cut in, I couldn't go to the meeting, I was, I was so disgusted. Because I've been Dr. Alonso's, you know, one of his, I mean, I think he's fabulous, and he's very impressive in person. I mean, he really, maybe because he was in a school system with over a million children and dealing with, you know, a bigger political type of system, whatever. He's very very good one-on-one and with a group. But the bottom line is, what's really going to happen? If you're trying to negotiate something non-negotiable, which is discipline, all these ideas have been put forth before. This is, we're just continuing to regurgitate the same stuff, over and over, professional development, we've had plenty of meetings with teachers, the union, the CEOs, the school board, all this stuff, and yet the same stuff every year. So, you know, rules are already in place. There's no negotiating assault. So when you want to have a meeting with me, and take out more of my day, when I don't get paid well and I'm under these terrible conditions, I mean, as an employee I feel like having a class action lawsuit. I come in, and all day I'm assaulted with vulgarity, I'm threatened, I was assaulted this year, my tires were slashed, my property was destroyed, I've been threatened, uh, you know I was told by my administration to pull back on discipline, like things like take your hat off, put your phone away, stop using that language, get to class. "Please pull back on that." You know, I'm not sitting in a meeting again like that. If you can't be honest with me and do your job. The school system does not need the teacher to press charges. You're on public property. The administration can call the police, we have school police. You're under arrest. You've assaulted someone. You're now, you're parents are going to be called, you're a minor, you're going to be taken down to juvenile detention. This is what happens, now I don't think we should be so severe all the time, you know, it depends on the, but I mean, it's, it's ridiculous. Now we're negotiating what's already in place and trying to come up with new ideas. It's ridiculous. So I couldn't even be at the meeting, I was that disgusted. I mean, it was really offensive.

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BK: What I like about that he had the meeting, and again, I didn't go either, but I like that he had it because whether the conversations have happened before or not, it's important to get buy in from people that you're working with. So, there could be new teachers that have never been able to be a part of those decisions, those conversations, that now have. And also, the new CEO, who is making a lot of changes, site-based management, this is big stuff, he was part of the conversation too. That kind of, I mean to me it makes me feel like because he had that meeting he is interested in actually seeing this stuff through. Now whether it happens or not, it takes time. And I think it's going to take time to see whether it's effective or not as well. But I think what we've been echoing throughout this conversation is there needs to be zero tolerance for assaults, there needs to be, you know, harder penalties for the kids, and their families need to sort of be forced to be involved when their kids are getting violent, but also there needs to be interventions that happen before the fact, so kids are put on the right track. Or so kids get interested in something other than showing that they did their time, or that they punched a teacher, or that they can beat somebody else up, or get into a gang, I mean there needs to be things on both ends, uh, and you know we won't reach everyone. And I don't think that any school system will ever reach everyone, but I think if given the amount of time, and if someone actually dedicates to the cause, if the CEO is actually part of it, a part of this, and really wants to make this happen, I think it can happen, in Baltimore, just as it can anywhere else.

So, I mean, I'm curious why, uh, Ebon Soul and Bob Keal are still teaching in the city schools, why are you still teaching, and I want to hear from Julia Gumminger about whether or not she may to back ever to teaching ever again.

JG: Uh, I actually haven't left education, I am still working in education, I'm not a classroom teacher any more, uh, I don't know if I'll ever go back to being a classroom teacher, I think I'm much more interested in the policy side of things now, uh, with all the craziness that's gone on in the last year in my life, uh, so I'm considering heading in that direction, which is why I'm here.

That's interesting.

ES: Uh, well, after I was at Carver for about the first ten years, and then at Calverton for many, I was so disgusted I actually left. Dropped out for a year. Went and did, got some other training. And then I have to give credit to, uh, Miss Tisha Edwards, who now is Alonso's, one of his special assistants, she was a principal at the Baltimore Freedom Academy, and she kind of pulled me back into the system, and, uh, I taught one year in the County and I was completely disgusted, it was a kind of complete flip-flop, teachers, I felt like I couldn't be creative, I felt like every single thing I'm looking over my shoulder, they were upset about the way I phrased something on the board in my activity, they were more concerned about that than the fact that the kids in my class were learning and doing really well and they were so anal about, just, administrative stuff that, it just, it wasn't teaching. And everybody kowtowed to the principal, and my, my opinion, we're all a team. This is not the military and you're not my commanding officer. You might be my supervisor and I meet my expectations and you meet yours, but I, you know, I had a hard time with that model. Because the kids, you know, were caught up, it was like cookie-cutter. And I was used to being a lot freer in what I was able to do in the classroom, and I'm not talking, I had lesson plans and all that kind of stuff, but you know, just being able to, you know, get the kids to buy in in ways that wasn't a script. So I couldn't handle the county thing.

Bob Keal

BK: Well I teach, and this is my second year in the city schools, I teach English as a Second Language. And I'm here because, you know, there's a need here, I mean, I think a lot of teachers are in Baltimore City because there is a great need, and they see that as a place where they can make some sort of a difference. Especially in the English as a Second Language, uh, department, I mean, this is a, this is a growing sector of our schools. So many more immigrant families, refugee families, are coming to the schools and it's, it's a place that I find a lot of my colleagues are eager to learn more about their profession, I'm eager to learn more about my profession, so it's a place where I can really learn to grow as an educator and at the same time, you know, work with kids that are in need of someone to, you know,

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be a part of their life, help them learn a language. And also with the kids that aren't in my classes, someone to just pull them aside, help them calm down every once in a while, and it just makes me feel like I'm a part of something bigger, especially when, I am feeling a lot more hope with our new CEO, like, I'm feeling, I'm feeling positive, and the environment in my school this year has been better. And we're working to make changes, and that's good enough for me, I mean, I'm here because I feel like change is possible and it's occurring and it's fun to be a part of something like that.

So it's interesting, you have your, you have your issues about what should be happening in these schools, and what you want to see changed, but you all seem very open and willing to watch and help make that happen.

ES: We're still here.

Well, I want to thank the three of you. Bob Keal who you just heard, and Ebon Soul, and Julia Gumminger. You've been dedicated to our students, and joining us here for this podcast, and it's been great to talk to you all.

ES: Thanks for having us.

JG: Thank you.

BK: Thank you.

I'd like to thank our friends here at 88.9 WEAA, Baltimore's community public radio station, for letting us use their studios to record this today, and we want to thank Zachary Coleman who engineered today's podcast at WEAA, and, Justin Levy and Jessica Phillips, who produce here at the Center for Emerging Media.

-Transcript by Christina Arrison