

1

Introduction

THE DRIVERS ARRIVE before sunrise; morning fog still drapes the school building and the creek alongside it. They are here for the vans. These are special vans, painted white like the ones used in this city to ferry prisoners. By 6:30 A.M., they are fanning out on their morning pick-up routes. One heads west from the school and then traces a southward arc around the city limits, stopping to collect children from the string of cluttered trailer parks that fringes the pine woods. Another heads downtown, cutting a jagged line through a district of ramshackle wooden houses, mostly rentals, and abandoned lots dense with wisteria and kudzu. Several encampments of homeless men and women are warming themselves around drums of burning trash; revitalization plans have been proposed for this area. The third van heads north, beyond the sprawling new suburbs, along the edges of fenced-in former cotton and tobacco fields now converted to private quail-hunting estates. A few children will be picked up from the smaller surrounding rural towns. One of the vans makes a quick stop at the city homeless shelter, where a fourteen-year-old boy is already waiting at the door. This is a booming Southern city. With a large number

2 Chapter One

of federal and state government offices and two universities, unemployment is low; the suburbs are expanding rapidly northward. But here are the neighborhoods of the poor. Forty teenagers, mostly black males, some wearing electronic monitors strapped around their ankles, are still wiping the sleep from their eyes as their vans pull into the school parking lot around 8:30 A.M. Teachers are waiting to greet them at the gate; homeroom starts in about twenty minutes.

This book is a study of a private alternative school program for troubled teenagers in a midsize Southern city. Under contract jointly with the local public school district and the state juvenile justice agency, the school, referred to here by the pseudonym Academy,¹ enrolled between forty and fifty students, all repeat lawbreakers expelled or temporarily removed from their public schools either by juvenile courts, public school officials, or state agency case-workers. This study focuses on the organization and culture of the school, on issues of curriculum, pedagogy, behavior management, and classroom environment, the mundane features of everyday internal life that frame students' experiences and, ultimately, program outcomes. The aim was to grasp the forms of social and cultural knowledge and self-understanding being fostered among the students and to see what processes inside and outside the building were helping or hindering the attainment of the educational and rehabilitative goals set forth by official policy.

Alternative Education Programs as Subjects for Research

Several factors have combined to enable a recent expansion and proliferation around the United States of a variety of

alternative educational programs, like Academy, affiliated with or managed jointly by a combination of educational, juvenile justice, and social service agencies. First, teacher union leaders and parent groups in the late 1980s gave voice to a growing sentiment that violent or difficult-to-manage students should be removed from regular classrooms. Before his death in 1997, Albert Shanker, longtime president of the American Federation of Teachers, called upon school districts to establish alternative placements for these students (Hill 1998). Despite fears about the cost of such programs and long-standing concerns about the potential for educational inequality that might result from segregation of the most challenging children (Lawrence, Steed, and Young 1984; Coulby and Harper 1985), school administrators responded aggressively, seeking placements that might be more successful for the students and would not lead to politically damaging increases in reportable dropout rates (Young 1990).² A host of private entrepreneurs entered the picture as subcontractors, offering a menu of program options and features. During the 1990s, legislation was introduced in more than half of all states, including Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming, to enable or regulate the provision of alternative educational services to violent or disruptive students (National Conference of State Legislatures 1999a). A few states, including Arizona and Kansas, had had such legislation on the books already.

4 Chapter One

Meanwhile, a series of civil rights lawsuits and the subsequent administrative restructuring of juvenile justice systems in many states in the 1980s and early 1990s (Feld 1993) was leading to the replacement of a long-standing but trouble-plagued “reform school” system with a network of smaller-scale community-based programs and services for troubled children (Lerman 1984; Miller 1998). Private entrepreneurs in those years became a large and growing proportion of the providers of such programs (Leone, Rutherford, and Nelson 1991; Bakal and Lowell 1992; United States Department of Justice 1988). Federal laws passed in the 1970s and 1980s guaranteeing the provision of educational services to handicapped children, regardless of legal or custody status,³ moreover, meant that new juvenile justice programs would require some formal educational focus or component (Coffey and Gemignani 1994; Leone 1990); many delinquency services formerly classified as “treatment” or “rehabilitation” now had to be framed as specifically “educational” as well, and could become subject, in at least some cases, to explicit management, accreditation, or regulatory scrutiny by state or local education agencies (Leone, Price, and Vitolo 1986). Lawsuits regarding the availability and adequacy of educational services in juvenile justice settings began to multiply (Robinson and Rapport 1999; Warboys and Schaffer 1986). In the wake of studies suggesting that few juvenile justice programs were actually in a position to comply with the new laws, the federal government in the 1990s introduced policy initiatives calling for increased coordination among federal, state, and local agencies as well as private subcontractors providing educational services to delinquent children (National Association of State Directors of Special Education 1998; Ingersoll and LeBoeuf 1997; Hellriegel and Yates 1999; Robinson and

Rapport 1999; Tapper, Kleinman, and Nakashian 1997; Gemignani 1994). Between 1994 and 1998, in response to the growth and diversity of community programs and facilities and questions regarding oversight responsibility, legislatures in eighteen states introduced measures regulating the provision of educational services to delinquent youths in state custody, in some cases specifically requiring coordinated efforts by juvenile justice and educational authorities (National Conference of State Legislatures 1999b).

What has resulted from a decade of developments in this area is a complex patchwork of thousands of local juvenile justice programs that offer educational services through a variety of joint institutional and agency affiliations.⁴ Increasingly, such programs are small and privately managed; the public generally has little access to what goes on inside them and little knowledge regarding how—or in fact whether—they achieve any of their stated goals (Coffey and Gemignani 1994; Leone, Rutherford, and Nelson 1991).

Our culture emphasizes contrasts between childhood and adulthood. The adult has a job, a car, a vote, and in some cases a gun. The child is unemployed and propertyless; he or she has few public, legal, or political obligations. The adult strives to be a leader and to assert dominance over others or at least equality with them. The child must display deference or submission to elders and even strangers. Adults drink, smoke, and engage in sexual activities and parenthood. To these the child is exhorted to “just say no.” Noncompliance becomes grounds for punishment. At the border of these discontinuities is adolescence. Even for children born to families with wealth and social success, adolescence can be fraught with personal trials. It is all the more so for those who enter life in poverty or family instability or both, and espe-

6 Chapter One

cially so for those who break the law, drop out or are removed from public school, or enter the often maze-like network of state social service and criminal justice agencies. For society as a whole and for the children and adolescents themselves, much depends on what can be accomplished by the educational, social, and civic institutions charged with guiding the transition to adult life. As new institutional forms emerge, it becomes increasingly important to investigate their character and the qualitative effects they might have on the people who come into contact with them. Whatever is promised in the name of such institutions, whether by educators, judges, agency caseworkers or legislators, it is in fact only the day-to-day lived reality of these places that ultimately fixes their meaning for those on the inside.

Each generation, in education and in criminal justice as in other areas of civic and political life, works to some degree from the assumptions, institutional and political structures, and linguistic and ideological conventions it inherits from the past. Academy's structure and official techniques drew from formal procedural rules as well as professional conventions given by the public bureaucracies charged with managing and regulating the program. At the school's core, however, were the struggles of teachers—most of them very young and new to the work, many of them steeped in the unique evangelical religious traditions of Southern culture—to derive moral meaning, job satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment from a demanding and frequently painful work setting. There were also the strivings of the young students—black and white, male and female, many of them living in extreme poverty and under conditions of almost breathtaking family strife—to become adults with the style, power, and grace to which teenagers everywhere aspire.

Cultural and organizational processes in schools are always related in some way, directly or indirectly, to processes and structures in the broader society, to the constellation of values, beliefs, and institutional dynamics in the world outside the school (Apple 1979; Apple and Weis 1983; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Carnoy and Levin 1985; Everhart 1983a, 1983b; Weis 1988; Willis 1977). This study of one school building is, in this vein, a study of what can happen between students and teachers more generally in an intensely politically charged atmosphere and under conditions where long-term outcomes are highly uncertain. In the chapters that follow, it will be seen how students and teachers negotiated a path through the conditions that framed their encounters with one another.

The Setting

Academy opened its doors in 1993. The city and its surrounding countryside, like many urban areas in the South, had seen rapid growth in recent decades; population had nearly doubled by 1990 to almost 200,000, according to local planning commission statistics. More than 40 percent of city workers in 1995 were employed in federal, state, or local government offices, with another 25 percent in services, predominantly health care, and 19 percent in the retail sector. Median family household income, comparatively high for the South due to the prevalence of government employment, neared \$37,000 in 1995. The city was home to 50,000 students, a community college, and two universities. One fifth of city residents were under age eighteen, another fifth age eighteen to twenty-four. Average annual unemployment hovered below 3 percent, considerably lower than in the rest of the nation,

8 Chapter One

but the large population of students seeking part-time work created conditions of widespread underemployment. Housing and community development officials reported that many workers seeking full-time jobs, including, for instance, the teenagers at Academy and in many cases their troubled parents as well, were persistently unable to find them.

Several ambitious public projects had been launched in recent years in tandem with population growth, including construction of a major research and business office park complex, a new jail, and a public sports arena. The city was experiencing a housing boom reflecting its bifurcated wage structure. About 40 percent of housing units added after 1980 were single-family homes, mostly aimed at middle-class homebuyers settling predominantly in the northeastern sections. Another 20 percent, according to planning commission reports, were mobile homes catering to lower-income residents; these were located for the most part in the city's south side. The surrounding rural countryside was marked by high unemployment and long-standing poverty typical of the region as a whole, with much of the work involving seasonal employment in farming, fishing, or logging industries or temporary work in a recent rural growth industry, prison construction. City and county planners and political leaders occupied themselves with the issues of road improvement, housing construction, school crowding, and solid waste management that accompany rapid urban growth.

The city was widely recognized as having been one of the centers of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s; activists had staged sit-ins at whites-only lunch counters, and local church leaders had gone on to take key positions in national civil rights organizations. Cross burnings by the Ku Klux Klan had made national news headlines, as had

vigorous attempts by local white citizen groups to maintain segregated swimming pools, bus stations, and movie theaters. But racial divisions continued to be the norm well into the 1990s. Police had recently scuffled with black residents of a public housing project, who claimed excessive force had been used against them. A white university employee on a drunken rampage killed a black teenager by intentionally ramming his truck at high speed into the back of the teen's car on one of the city's major traffic arteries, according to news reports. The region had made national and international news headlines in recent months when white administrators of a church in one of the nearby rural towns allegedly demanded the disinterment from the church cemetery of a deceased biracial infant; they later reneged and, in front of television cameras, apologized to the baby's parents.

Though in 1995 almost a third of the city's residents and a fourth of the county's residents were black, blacks had been elected to public office for the first time only in the 1990s, as in much of the South, after activists won rancorous court cases requiring the replacement of city- and county-wide voting arrangements with a system of smaller representative districts in school board and local government elections. Median annual family household income among blacks was only 53 percent that among whites; 30 percent of all black residents were living below the federal poverty level. In 1990, according to the U.S. Census, one in four black households had no car, and one in twelve had no phone.

Schools had been legally desegregated by court order in the early 1970s after decades of local white opposition to integration, but of the two dozen public elementary schools in the city, three older facilities in the highly racially segregated central city had student populations more than 95 percent

10 Chapter One

black. A number of private schools had been built during the desegregation era to accommodate white flight from district schools; their enrollments continued to be nearly exclusively white. Enrollment was predominantly white in the newly opened public schools serving the expanding and mostly white suburban developments. Reports of apparent racial bias in school discipline had made headlines almost from the first days of integration. In 1973, a much-publicized statewide study revealed that large numbers of black students were being suspended from newly integrated schools in many towns. In the wake of national media attention, the state's school systems began to experiment with ways to circumvent suspension and expulsion, devising innovations such as special detention rooms or other out-of-classroom programs, antecedents in some ways to some varieties of contemporary alternative school.

Overall student achievement in local schools was low. In the 1994-95 school year, according to district figures, the graduation rate was less than 73 percent; school retention rates averaged 15 percent. At one district high school with a predominantly black student population, a fourth of the students had been held back. Among the several hundred local high school graduates who had enrolled in community colleges or universities in the state, fewer than 60 percent had passed a state-administered postsecondary readiness exam, according to district statistical reports. The state as a whole ranked among the lowest in the nation not only in terms of student achievement but also in terms of per-pupil educational spending.

The region was politically and socially conservative, mirroring much of the rest of the South, with church attendance high and the dominant religious affiliation Baptist and evan-

gelical. Most summer weekends it was possible to find a tent revival in some part of town. Long dominated in the political arena by conservative Southern Democrats and more recently by New South Republicans, both the city and the county had turned somewhat rightward in recent years. Elections had brought to local government several self-proclaimed Christian fundamentalists, including a creationist who had joined the school board. Voters elected law enforcement and court personnel who advocated an end to the “coddling” of criminals, state legislators had recently talked of reinstating the “chain gang” for state prisoners, and administrators in the local sheriffs office were implementing a plan by which jail inmates would be required to work for their food.

A legislative restructuring of school discipline was under way in the state, with important consequences for private entrepreneurs in juvenile justice and in education. A “safe schools” law had passed in the mid-1990s with the support of a broad coalition of teachers, parents, and political leaders. It facilitated the legal removal of disruptive children from public school classrooms, waiving key school-system rules in order to enable the establishment of alternative educational programs—“last chance schools,” as they came to be called—to which the students could be assigned. There was evidence, however, of racial bias in public school discipline and, as a logical consequence, in the patterns by which students might potentially be ousted to alternative placements. An investigation sponsored jointly by the state education and juvenile justice agencies found that one out of every five black high school students in the local school district and more than one out of every four black middle school students had been suspended out of school at some point during the year, compared with 12 percent of white high school and

12 Chapter One

middle school students. Investigators noted that in the state overall, for the same offenses, black students seemed more likely than whites to receive harsh disciplinary action and ultimately to be expelled from school entirely.

In 1992, a group of regional business and civic leaders convened a juvenile crime study team. Statistics indicated a problem: with a more than 240 percent increase in juvenile felony arrests between 1983 and 1993, the county had experienced one of the nation's largest increases in juvenile crime, particularly felony crime. The biggest increases, moreover, were among juveniles thirteen to fourteen years old. Rates of arrest for car theft, burglary, concealed firearms, and cocaine possession had skyrocketed so that by 1992 the rate of arrest among juveniles was higher than in practically any other county in the state. On the street, getting arrested had become practically a rite of passage among some segments of the population. Team investigators noted that there were limited sentencing and local programmatic alternatives for lawbreaking children: the county had relatively few rehabilitation programs or halfway houses. They called upon state and local government officials, as well as private investors, to expand the options.

The Political Context

The state's juvenile justice system was in the midst of a major reorganization. Plagued historically by low standards of accountability and a track record of violence and brutality against young lawbreakers, the system had promised justice but for many years delivered something considerably less. Some years earlier, a federal class action suit had been filed on behalf of a young teenager confined in one of the

state-run reform schools for delinquent children. Alleging severely overcrowded conditions, beatings by supervisors, denials of food, overuse of solitary confinement, and inadequate medical and educational services, the suit named as defendants the governor, the head of the state social services agency, the education commissioner, and the reform school superintendent. The state had not complied with a 1974 federal law requiring the separation of violent criminals from petty offenders, with the result that rapists were being held alongside school truants in very crowded conditions. Students were subjected to continuous threats of physical as well as psychological harm, and disproportionate numbers of them were black. To the students and their families, the criteria for getting released from the reform schools seemed as inconsistent and elusive as the criteria for getting in.

After years of wrangling, the parties had entered into a consent decree approved by the federal court.⁵ The plan was to reduce the number of children housed in the reform schools, provide formal procedures for admission and release, and establish educational and health programs in line with the children's needs. A court monitor was appointed to report on compliance. Overnight, hundreds of children were transferred out of the reform schools as the state began efforts to comply with the federal court. The children quickly filled to capacity the existing limited array of smaller community-based drug or rehabilitation programs; those in the "overflow" were either released to the community, where some committed new crimes, or were placed in detention facilities to await new court processing or program assignments. Studies by watchdog organizations soon revealed a host of new legal violations. Delays in case processing resulted subsequently in detention lasting far longer,

14 Chapter One

for many children, than what state civil rights laws formally allowed. Once again, facility overcrowding was accompanied by reports of physical violence by supervisors against the children in their charge.⁶

State legislators responded to the crisis by passing a law that, on paper at least, promised to modernize the juvenile justice system in line with reforms that had been implemented elsewhere in the country. The law required the state social service agency to develop additional small-scale, community-based programs for the many nonviolent petty offenders who were still awaiting institutional placement. It called for the development of a formal instrument to assess young lawbreakers' educational and social service needs, and it mandated that medical and educational services be made available, as federal laws already required, in all rehabilitation programs and detention facilities. It called on judges to assign children to programs near their homes so as to facilitate their integration into the community after their release.

But legislative appropriations were slow in coming. Actual payments to the state's embattled social service agency were about half of what was originally promised, and once ambitious plans for program development and new facility construction were scaled back. Soon the list of children awaiting placement in rehabilitation programs had jumped again to 1,000 names; children were spending months locked in overcrowded detention facilities. Pressured to cut short the state waiting list, administrators at existing treatment programs started releasing juveniles after very short lengths of stay. Police departments, in turn, stepped up surveillance on the streets. Juvenile arrest rates went up, perhaps not surprisingly. In a political milieu where juvenile crime was now

dominating daily news headlines, state attorneys began bypassing the juvenile courts entirely and transferring young lawbreakers into the adult criminal system. The situation amounted to precisely the opposite of what had been intended by federal juvenile justice reform legislation of the preceding two decades. The state corrections agency had recently embarked on a spree of prison-building; attorneys were making use of the available resources.

By the mid-1990s, a new crop of conservative legislators had been elected to public office throughout the state, including a coalition of religious fundamentalists, representing both political parties, who vowed to “get tough” on youth crime. Soon, with promises about injecting “moral principles” into political affairs, the legislature passed a massive, controversial bill signaling an unprecedented ideological break from what had been a twenty-year-long national trend toward rehabilitation-oriented programming for delinquent children. With tough-sounding language and new, harsher penalties for young lawbreakers, the law promised “sure punishment” of child offenders. It revised prevailing court sentencing structures, lowering the age at which children could be sent to adult criminal court and tried and sentenced as adults. It provided for the expansion of military-style “boot camps” for what criminologists call the “shock incarceration” of young repeat lawbreakers. For critics who complained that young people sent to adult court were receiving a youth “discount” (that is, sentences lighter or shorter than those given older lawbreakers), it also added a jail option—up to three years in an adult-style lock-up—as a new high-end penalty that could guarantee jail time for the most violent juvenile offenders even while segregating them, as federal law required, from adult criminals. The law increased the amount of time a child

16 Chapter One

could be held legally in a detention center awaiting placement and enabled a no-time-limit detention of children considered “high risks” to the community. It restored judges’ ability under certain circumstances to place status offenders—runaways and school truants—in detention centers alongside more violent offenders.

For all its harshness, however, the new law also offered legal and social reforms that hinted at increasing procedural rationality and, it was hoped, protecting children from some of the inconsistencies that had characterized sentencing and delinquency programming in the past. It established a computerized state-wide network of assessment centers where newly arrested children would undergo standardized batteries of psychological and physical tests as an ostensibly uniform basis for subsequent treatment and processing. It also mandated the development of a formal instrument by which delinquency treatment programs could be monitored and evaluated. It provided that formal educational services be delivered and monitored regularly in every delinquency program, with coordination among a variety of state and local educational and justice agencies, and it created a commission to design means for improving the training of youth workers. The law called for cost-effectiveness studies and set up an advisory board to collect statistics and evaluate annually the bottom-line outcomes of what were by now an increasing number of small-scale programs, many of them privately run, serving delinquent youths.

Old problems persisted, however, at least in the beginning. Almost from opening day, reports started emerging of physical violence against juveniles being held at the state’s newly created boot camps. Guards were suspended from at least one such facility for what supervisors termed “exces-

sive use of force.” Assaults against juveniles were reported at one of the new jail-like facilities for repeat offenders. State investigators noted staff underqualification and high turnover rates at a variety of programs, and high-level administrators at a detention center were fired when investigators charged that older children had been pressed into service as a kind of surrogate police force to discipline the younger inmates; according to newspaper reports, children told of having their heads shoved into toilets and their bodies whipped with damp towels. Hundreds of children, meanwhile, continued to languish on the waiting list for placement, and juvenile detention centers were still severely overcrowded, a few centers nearing 200 percent capacity at some points during the year, according to state reports, placing acute supervisory burdens on program staff aware from experience and from national surveys that twenty-five per thousand juveniles held in detention will physically mutilate themselves or threaten or attempt suicide (United States Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 1995a).

Delays in court processing of juvenile cases continued to be a state norm, worse in some judicial districts than in others, and surveys by a state oversight board pointed to what criminologists call a “justice by geography” wherein similar cases were being handled differently, and with varying degrees of delay, across judicial regions and counties, with children in some areas experiencing apparently harsher treatment than children in others. Widely publicized local studies indicated possible race and gender inequities as well, with older children and black children in some regions tending to receive apparently harsher sentences than younger children and whites, and girls receiving somewhat harsher

18 Chapter One

treatment in at least some cases than did boys with similar records.⁷

Moreover, treatment-program placements continued evidently to be guided as much by the whims and personal political orientations of judges and state attorneys as by any consistent formal policy standards or good-practices rule.⁸ A searing state audit in 1995 indicated that more than half of all the children enrolled in one very large juvenile justice program had been legally eligible for a far less intensive regimen than had actually been prescribed for them. Four of five judges surveyed in the report claimed no knowledge of the most recent program-placement criteria promulgated by state agency staff; instead, they had opted to get as tough as possible on the children they sentenced. There were few checks on such caprice: not wanting to jeopardize good working relationships with judges and state attorneys, according to the audit, the children's case managers had in most cases agreed to the tougher sentences even when they contradicted official policy. Similar inconsistencies were revealed in internal evaluations of a sister program: state investigators found that the program was bringing into the criminal justice system large numbers of children whose crimes were too minor to trigger eligibility for government intervention. More than three-quarters of enrollees did not even meet the program's own placement criteria.⁹

Deficiencies plagued attempts to institute new educational programming. Surveys in 1995 by teams from the state education and juvenile justice agencies revealed a pervasive shortage of qualified personnel running what were being called educational services in programs for delinquents; there were widespread shortages of materials and classroom space and a dearth of procedures for assessing children's

educational needs and progress. In violation of federal law, special-education students, by some estimates 30 to 40 percent of the national juvenile justice population,¹⁰ were among the most severely underserved, with program staff displaying little knowledge, according to the report, of local, state, or federal educational policy or of the children's legal rights, and no grasp of what might constitute special educational needs or appropriate instructional strategies.¹¹

Yet in numerical terms and as a proportion of all crime, youth arrests and detentions continued to rise.

Academy

Academy was run by a private nonprofit firm based outside the city. Just under thirty people worked in the building, seven of them full-time teachers supervising between forty and fifty students at any given time. Oversight by school district officials was handled under the umbrella of the local dropout prevention administration, which ran, at the same time, two public four-year alternative high schools, one of them a "school of choice" for students who were generally academically successful (this school was popular and well regarded and had a waiting list of applicants) and the other a "last chance" or "discipline" school for children permanently expelled from mainstream classes. The principal of the local "last chance" school held supervisory responsibility for the educational program at Academy and for the accreditation of its curriculum. The district was also providing or supervising subcontracted educational services at the regional juvenile detention center, a drug rehabilitation program, a program for "at-risk" teenage girls, and a number of other private rehabilitation or treatment facilities in the area

that, like Academy, were contracted by the state juvenile justice agency and catered to children in various forms of custody or caseworker supervision. In total, almost 900 teenagers in the district in the 1995-96 school year were enrolled in programs affiliated with and funded jointly by the district and the state juvenile justice agency. Academy was part of the continuum of local educational programming being provided by this combination of institutions under laws mandating multi-agency coordination of educational services.

Roughly a third of the students at Academy had been legally “committed” for rehabilitation and treatment directly by the courts or by juvenile justice caseworkers, mostly for felony crimes such as burglary, car theft, or illegal weapons possession. All were what the state termed “low-risk youths”—people age fourteen to eighteen who posed no apparent immediate threat of violence to themselves or others. Another third, roughly, were public school students who had been on some type of probation, primarily for drug possession, but who subsequently had violated or threatened to violate probation rules, in most cases by skipping school repeatedly or failing to meet state-imposed bedtime curfews. The final third of Academy students had been assigned to the school as a transitional “step down,” as caseworkers referred to it, from a reform school or residential rehabilitation or treatment program for violent or repeat lawbreakers. The local “last-chance” high school occasionally bumped over a particularly unruly probationer or two on a temporary basis, for only a few days or weeks. School staff referred to this small overflow population as “coming in for a tune-up.”

The program at Academy was designed, ideally, to last six months, during which students were to take five classes a day and earn high school credit in preparation for a job or