Improving New York's Schools . . . An Editorial

Today staff writer George N. Allen details some thought-provoking conclusions he has reached as a result of his experiences as a licensed substitute teacher in one of the city's "difficult" schools.

The objective of Mr. Allen's temporary role as teacher, and of this newspaper's printing his factual reports on classroom conditions as he found them, has been to perform a public service. Before reforms can be achieved, we believe, it is essential that the public have the facts to guide it intelligently.

The public now has these facts. And it is plain that much can be done to ease the plight of teachers and earnest pupils caught in the frustrating, demoralizing web of conditions in difficult schools—and, for that matter, in every school where the same problems exist.

Taking a long-range view, we feel that paramount consideration must be given to intensified stress on the teaching of reading and writing. (Mr. Allen had illiterates in his ninth grade class.) Not only is reading proficiency its own reward, but it is also a factor in preventing disruptive classroom behavior. Studies have repeatedly shown a distinct relationship between delinquency and inability to read. It is axiomatic that renewed stress on reading and writing calls for extension of the present policy of veering away from indiscriminate, 100 percent promotions.

The immediate need, however, is to remove from "difficult" schools the relatively low percentage of children who make the schools difficult—those who refuse to learn anything, who refuse to obey authority and who spend the school day in a steady display of insolent, disruptive behavior that makes a policeman of the teacher and deprives other children of the opportunity to learn.

Who are the problem children in difficult schools?

A few are psychotics. They belong in no school, but rather in mental institutions.

Some are "emotionally disturbed." They belong in the "600" schools established strictly for them. The city is opening more such schools—but even more are needed.

The largest group of chronic trouble-makers are youths who fall in neither of the two previous categories, and for whom there is at present no special provision. They are the ones who are not as badly disturbed as the "600" type, but who need attention and adjustment which the teacher in an ordinary school, even in an adjustment class, cannot give them. They require extremely small clases (10 to 15), psychological treatment and special guidance service.

For most of them, we think a new type of special school—call it an "adjustment school"—is needed. These schools should be readily accessible to most districts of the city. Principals and district superintendents should have the power to make transfers with a minimum of red tape.

For extreme cases, however, an entirely different type of regimen might be the answer. We have in mind a custodial school or a modification of the old CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camps of the '30s—combining useful physical work and classes to give appropriate instruction. Also considerable emphasis should be placed on athletics and competitive contests calculated to develop good sportsmanship and good citizenship.

Neither the proposed adjustment school nor custodial camp need be a point of no return. A transfer back to regular school would be in order when a pupil's satisfactory adjustment was determined beyond reasonable doubt.

In addition to these courses of possible action, we think it would be desirable to amend state law so that principals could recommend 15-year-olds for discharge into supervised employment, sparing everybody concerned the waste of an additional year's time waiting for the present working-paper age of 16.

The net effect of these various proposals, we submit, would be to make "difficult" schools substantially less so for administrators, teachers and average pupils.

It follows, of course, that special adjustment schools would require not only skilled and experienced but also willing teachers. They could be recruited with little difficulty by offering premium pay.

We realize, naturally, that many other factors are involved in improving New York's schools—not merely the difficult schools but all schools. Mr. Allen's concluding article today touches on several other remedies.

All these proposals we commend to the immediate attention of Superintendent John J. Theobald and the Board of Education. And, now that the way has been pointed, we think the public should demand action.