

# Education Report

# THE GEORGE WASHINGTON STORY

## THE AGONY OF AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*Almighty God, we make our earnest prayer that Thou wilt keep the United States in Thy holy protection; that Thou wilt incline the hearts of the children to . . . entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another and for their fellow citizens. . . .*

—FROM GEORGE WASHINGTON'S  
PRAYER AFTER INAUGURATION (1789)

*O revolution! O revolution! O revolution!  
Somebody's tryin' to stab my back,  
ain't gonna take no shit like that.*

—POPULAR SONG AT NEW YORK CITY'S  
GEORGE WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL (1970)

**T**HE SOLEMN marble bust of The Father of Our Country—master of Mt. Vernon and scores of slaves—still rests on its pedestal in a corner of the principal's office, the better to peer into the children's hearts. They come there each day, seeking solace or deliverance from Principal Samuel Kostman, the school's gutsy Moses who would lead both the children and their teachers out of the pedagogical wilderness if he could.

An ordained rabbi and a preordained leader, Kostman came to George Washington High School last December—the fifth principal in seven months, all of his predecessors having been victims of endemic mayhem they could neither quell nor cure. "I'm trying to save a school," he says. "If I can turn things around, maybe there's hope for cities like New York." Then he adds, "This school is suffering from years of erosion. When I got here, it was like watching a car slowly going over a cliff."

One day last February, when Kostman was just beginning to get the car back on the road, a huge brawl broke out in the cafeteria between black and Spanish-speaking students. He plunged into the middle of the melee. "I'm the principal! I'm the principal!" he kept shouting. Somebody tore his pants and somebody else hit him with a chair. But order was restored.

In his office closet Kostman keeps a little black bag full of the paraphernalia of prayer—the tallith, the yarmulka—against any Friday afternoon disturbances that might prevent him from getting home before sundown. But most of the violence took place before he arrived.

April 1970 was the school's cruelest month: Roughly 7 per cent of the 4,500 students in official attendance marched through the halls singing rhetorical ditties of revolt, shattering glass, turning on fire alarms, and overturning furniture. In the principal's office they upended the big desk, but they left the bust of Washington untouched—a sign, said some, that the children were choosy in their vandalism, that they did not want to destroy the school, only to save themselves.

"When will you understand what they're trying to tell you?" demanded Jacqueline McCord, an angry black mother, from the principal and other school authorities as they stood amid the wreckage. "When they paint your name on the door in blood?"

Perhaps it was a cry in the night. But the logic of urban hysteria, of which George Washington is only a small part, often transforms black cries into black threats. In Irving Witkin's *Diary of a Teacher*, a chronicle of confrontations at George Washington published by the

United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and accepted by most of his colleagues. Mrs. McCord's remark is reported differently: "I'll paint the door of your house with your blood."

It is typical of the mess at George Washington that all parties claim to speak the truth—they cannot tell a lie—yet none can agree on what, precisely, took place last year. Not the parents belonging to the "table group," who wanted to preside over a table in the school lobby where students could bring their grievances; not the chapter leadership of the UFT, who viewed the turmoil, by and large, as a move for community control of the school, conceived in part by "outside agitators"; not the Parents Association, some of whose members thought they saw seeds of fascism dropping from the whirlwind; and certainly not the children, most of whom understood less and suffered more than anyone else.

The George Washington story contains all the classic elements of disaster in urban education: frightened teachers; intransigent parents; confused, violent-prone students; a system too rigid to bend and, when confronted with chaos, too scared to get tough. In a long night of rage a handful of well-intentioned parents and some 300 misguided students nearly destroyed their school. Why was this tragedy permitted to run its course? What were its consequences? The questions are worth asking, for the pattern could repeat itself in any of several thousand high schools throughout urban America.

ONCE UPON A TIME George Washington High School was a Promised Land, "the castle on the hill" to which Jewish parents and other "ethnics" living on Manhattan's comfortable Upper West Side proudly sent their children. The castle commands a high bluff on 192nd Street, with a view of the two rivers to the east and west. Inside the huge building are high rococo ceilings, marble staircases, two swimming pools, and a stone tower said to be the highest point on the island.

Years ago these were pleasing amenities to a community as hip to the blessings of status and education as was Washington Heights. By and large, George Washington served the children of displaced burghers—escapees from the Nazi inferno, successful ladder-climbers from the Lower East Side and, in some cases, middle-class Negroes fleeing Harlem. Henry Kissinger, Harry Belafonte and Jacob Javits were precisely the sort of graduates one would expect George Washington to turn out. (Tiny Tim went there, too, but he didn't manage to graduate.)

The school seemed a fulfillment of the American dream; it was even integrated. In 1938, 37 of its 240 graduates were Negroes; by 1950 the parallel figures had increased to 98 out of 697. It was the best of times, an era of harmony, achievement and self-congratulation. "The great '50 Benefit Show," noted the editors of

*Hatchet*, the school's yearbook, was a shining symbol of democracy at work. "Did anybody ask a performer's religion, race or creed? No. He had talent; that was the only requirement."

Gradually the community changed, and so did the school. It continued to be a haven for the children of refugees, but now they were no longer coming from Germany and Eastern Europe; they were coming from Georgia, South Carolina, Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Most of them were poor; many spoke no English. It was a brand new ballgame at George Washington.

In the mid-'60s the school was redistricted to include a portion of Harlem—as far south as 145th Street—and to exclude all of white, suburban-like Riverdale. The new boundaries created new problems as white families stepped up their exodus to the suburbs. The community, it appeared, was losing heart for integration. (Today the school is about 50 per cent Spanish-speaking and 30 per cent black.) Yet no one seemed to notice. The white teachers, a number of them alumni of the dear old school, continued to teach the way they had been taught, the way that had always worked. "We thought we were one big happy family," recalls a teacher. "We were the same old faculty and we were all very nice. When the troubles came, we didn't know what hit us."

Most of the black and Spanish-speaking students were channeled into commercial and "general" courses, dead-end programs barring their way into college. The remnant of white students, meanwhile, sped along traditional academic, college-bound paths. One day—it may have been in 1967—Dorothy Gordon, a white social studies teacher, walked past a room where seniors were taking their college boards. "There wasn't a single black student in the room," she recalls. "I said to myself, 'Uh, oh.'"

In the fall of 1968, during the long teachers' strike, George Washington's "one big happy family" broke up. The city-wide strike had been called by the UFT in protest against teacher dismissals by the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school board, a predominantly black group organized to demonstrate the educational advantages of community control. At George Washington, as elsewhere throughout the city, black parents accused striking teachers of racism, while many of the teachers countered with charges of anti-Semitism.

People on both sides of the picket line remember those times with deep personal pain. "They called me a nigger wench," says a black woman who crossed the picket line. "Two black toughs beat me up and called me a kike," says a teacher who had been on the picket line. The few teachers who crossed the picket line and kept the school open were branded "scabs" by their colleagues and shunned thereafter. More than two years after the strike a secretary at George Washington was able to tell me how I could easily find one of those teachers. "She's

usually in the teachers' cafeteria this period," the secretary said. "She'll be sitting alone."

The strike was prologue. It polarized the races and shattered an old and useful coalition between black parents and white teachers. In addition, it awoke many students, especially blacks, to the possibilities of political action within the school. They were not long in testing the notion.

**I**N THE SPRING of 1969, five months after the strike ended, a group of black students staged a peaceful sit-in to underline their 10 "nonnegotiable demands." These included more black teachers and counselors, new courses in black studies, and an end to the distinction between "general" and "academic" diplomas. (School officials eventually agreed to these demands "in principle," but were either unable or unwilling to enact most of them. To this day, for example, more than 90 per cent of George Washington's 250 teachers are white.)

After the sit-in, notes Dorothy Gordon, "the school popped." In August a few parents got word that some of the students were planning to blow up George Washington's tower. The parents managed to squelch the plot, but not before their sons and daughters had given them an earful. Out of this nonincident grew a loose coalition of children and parents, including Jacqueline McCord, herself an alumna of George Washington (class of '50), and Ellen Lurie (white), a militant advocate of school reform and author of the book, *How to Change the Schools*. "Ellen never told us what to do," recalls Mrs. McCord, "but she kept asking the right questions. She was like a teacher."

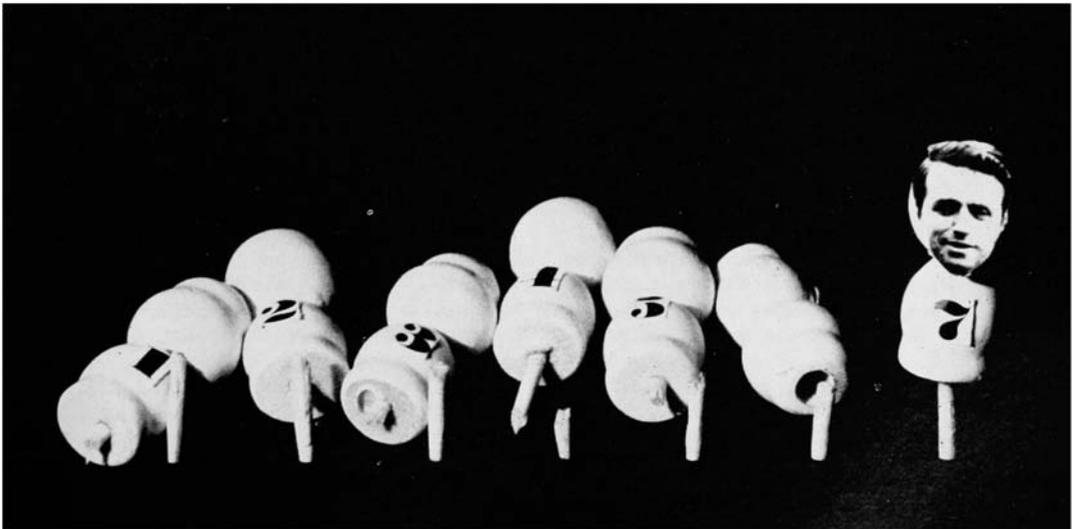
The new group sponsored a mass meeting in January

1970, attended by hundreds of parents and students, as well as a few teachers. It was the students' chance to tell their grievances, and much of what they told focused on the school's apparent inability to give them programs fitting their needs. A boy who had to fix breakfast for all his brothers and sisters because his mother had heart trouble complained he was not permitted to have "a late program," which starts at 10 A.M. A girl who had to support her baby said she worked at the Post Office from 4 P.M. to midnight and did her homework after that. She, too, wanted a late program.

The picture parents got that night was one of de-personalized chaos. Children were not made aware of the courses they needed in order to graduate, or of how to apply to college. In one case, a girl who wanted to be a nurse was informed late in her senior year that she had been taking the wrong courses for prenursing; she would have to stay in high school a fifth year. In another, a girl seeking extra help from her mathematics teacher was told to join the after-school tutoring program. But she couldn't, because she had to get right home and take care of her brothers and sisters. The girl flunked math.

The school, of course, was staffed with all kinds of professional counselors and advisers who were, presumably, ready and willing to help the students. The gulf between teachers and students, however, was already too wide to be spanned by routine bureaucratic bridges. Students had given up all hope of being heeded. "There's no one there who will listen," they kept saying. And their frustration was heightened by a new system of computerized programing, meant to provide instant scheduling, that produced an incredible tangle. Some students waited as long as two months before receiving

AFTER SEVEN MONTHS OF CHAOS: SAMUEL KOSTMAN



their class schedules. While waiting, they wandered through the halls, sat in the auditorium or cafeteria and added to the general climate of educational carelessness.

Finally, some of the black students were convinced that some of their white teachers had racist attitudes. Jacqueline McCord notes that when her son, Noble, walked into a mathematics honors class the first day of school, the white teacher told him, "You don't belong here." "Yes I do," said Noble. He got an "A." (But if the teacher's remark implied racism, what did the grade imply?)

Whatever the merits of the students' case—and the UFT concedes that the school's counseling system needed a thorough overhaul—it appears that at the outset the parents were thinking about education, not politics. But in New York City, as the children had learned earlier, educational problems nearly always elicit political solutions. Inevitably, one of the parents proposed that a table be set up in the school lobby for the purpose of receiving student complaints. The parents would transmit these complaints to the school administration. It seemed like such a simple idea.

The suggestion was passed along to Frank Sacks, the principal at that time, who said he would think about it. As Sacks pondered, the lines hardened. Soon the parents were not suggesting but demanding. Then the local UFT chapter moved in as a counterforce. In a memorandum to Sacks, Chapter Chairman Robert Miller declared there was no need for a parents' table, since the school already had satisfactory procedures for legitimate complaints. The parents' proposal, he said, seemed to be "a power play to gain control of the high school."

Meanwhile, the table group was trying to persuade the Parents Association to endorse its plan. But the Association, dominated by white parents, tended to represent the old bunch, the people who wished George Washington were still "the castle on the hill." Eric Rosenbaum, one of the Association's leaders, recently summed up his attitude toward the table group: "They remind me of what happened in the 1930s in Germany. When you politicize the schools, you are courting dictatorship." The Parents Association turned down the proposal—or tabled it—and so, eventually, did Sacks.

By late February, table-group parents were appealing to school district officials and beyond. They were also distributing leaflets outside the school. "Whose school is this?" the leaflets asked, and then answered the question: "Parent power joins student power!! . . . All power to the people." From that day on, nobody was ever at a loss for rhetoric.

**O**N MARCH 2 demonstrations began inside George Washington. While most of the 4,500 students went to class, about 300 marched through the corridors chanting, "We want a table!" According to Witkin's *Diary*, Mrs. McCord told reporters,

"Now we have to resort to this." Mrs. McCord says she was misquoted. (During all subsequent demonstrations, the initial ratio between marchers and nonmarchers held true. As John Bunzel, chairman of the social studies department, observed, "Most of the kids went to class and tried to keep their minds on their work. But every eight minutes and 17 seconds, the great proletarian cultural revolution would march by.")

A few days later Sacks became ill and Louis Simon, chairman of the English department, was named acting principal. The marching students changed their chant to, "Hey hey, ho ho, fuckin' Simon's gotta go." On March 6 he went, resigning in protest when officials from the city Board of Education seemed ready to yield to the table group. Simon was replaced by Carl Cherkis, former principal of Canarsie High School.

On Monday, March 9, the parents set up their table in the lobby, with the reluctant blessings of the district superintendent of schools, Irving Anker. It should have been a great victory for parent and student demonstrators, but somehow it wasn't. Instead of cooling things down, the table only served to heat things up. Most teachers say it became the eye of the storm, attracting a swirl of obstreperous students who should have been in their classrooms. It soon became obvious that the parents could not control the children any more than could the teachers.

The table in the lobby survived four days. On March 13 Cherkis got a court injunction forbidding the table group from entering the school. UFT leaders had been pressing for such an injunction all along. Twice their members had walked out of classrooms to meet in the teachers' cafeteria and pass resolutions demanding more police in the school and a tougher administration stand. But the injunction solved nothing. The disorders continued, and even spread. Some teachers were physically threatened; several small fires were started in the auditorium, and home-made bombs were discovered tucked away here and there. The police were called in.

On March 15 Cherkis resigned, to be replaced by Sol Levine, the fourth principal in 15 days. There followed two months of intricate negotiations between Levine, the table group, the UFT and the Board of Education. The crux of the issue, by that time, was not whether there should be a table, but who should control it. Teachers and school officials wanted the table to be supervised by school personnel. At the very least, they insisted, the principal should have the right to choose which parents would sit at the table. The table group stuck to its original idea: It was to be *their* table. Otherwise, the group argued, both its symbolic meaning and its actual purpose—to goad the school into instituting reforms—would be compromised.

The negotiations lasted two months, under the least favorable conditions. During this entire period George Washington was intermittently rocked by disruptions,

sit-ins, sleep-ins, arrests and temporary shutdowns. More and more police were summoned, until, as one student remarked, "We had wall-to-wall cops." In the cafeteria, which had become a scene of student anguish, policemen almost outnumbered students. Very few teachers ventured in there, but one who did, Elizabeth Rich, a black substitute teacher and supporter of the militants, was appalled by what she saw. Here is her testimony:

"We had hundreds of police in the building on certain days, and one day there were at least 75 in the cafeteria. Some of the kids liked to see the police exercised. Somebody would scrape a chair or move a table, or make some kind of noise, and all the police would rush toward the noise. Then the kids would move in behind the cops. When that happened the police turned around and chased the kids with their clubs. The kids really got killed, both girls and boys. They were bleeding and crying. It was horrible."

By mid-May everyone was exhausted. More in weariness than in triumph, the table group agreed to a compromise: It would be permitted to man its own table, not in the lobby, but in a little room nearby. A teacher appointed by the principal would collect all grievances from the parents and pass them along to the appropriate staff members. This gave the parents their table, without front-lobby exposure, or any opportunity to deal directly with school personnel; 'twas a Pyrrhic victory.

The table survived the rest of the academic year, and was there again at the start of a new semester last fall. In the interim Levine was appointed principal of John Dewey, presumably as a reward for outlasting Cherkis, and Simon was again pushed into the thankless post of acting principal. But in October the table vanished, perhaps forever, in a cloud of mystery. According to Thea Manley, a table-group partisan, Simon simply took the table away one day, announcing that he was doing so by order of Dr. Harvey Scribner, chancellor of New York City schools. Scribner denies he ever gave such an order.

In any case, the table was gone, and the parents had no heart for another battle. Besides, there was that old injunction prohibiting their entering the school, which officials might try to reinvoke. There may have been still another reason for their surrender, though. Witkin claims it was the parents themselves who dismantled the table. "The kids weren't coming there," he says. "The table had no real use."

It is true that complaints had fallen off considerably since the previous spring. Nevertheless, the table received a total of more than 200 complaints during its short and shaky life. For the most part these were not the grudge-grievances many teachers feared, but real grievances that deserved prompt attention. For instance:

- A girl was transferred to George Washington on February 2. By March 9 she still had not received a program card or an official class schedule. After she complained to the table group she got her card.

- A boy was denied his diploma because he was one week short in gym class. He got his diploma.

- Spanish-speaking students complained that they had to swim naked in the pool during gym classes. The school passed out bathing suits.

- An 18-year-old boy, still in the 10th grade, had asked for reading help several times, and had only been placed on the waiting list. Despite the table, he is still on the waiting list.

**A**FTER SIFTING the evidence, one agrees with Kostman that "George Washington is a tragedy that never should have happened." Yet it is not easy to assess blame.

Administrators and teachers, through a combination of insensitivity to cultural nuances and business-as-usual bureaucracy, alienated many students. "Two years ago I went to a dean to ask her for some personal advice," a black girl recalls. "She said, 'Not while I'm having lunch!' and slammed the door on me." The door may have been slammed too many times on too many students. And when students began to speak up, as in the case of the black sit-in, the most common response was outrage. Even today some faculty members refuse to acknowledge that there was, and is, a serious communications gap between teachers and students. One teacher said to me, "I cannot believe there were children who didn't know what their program was."

Still, the reaction of the table-group parents and of the marching children was out of all proportion to their grievances. Revolution is no substitute for education. Just as the teachers alienated the students, the students succeeded in alienating and intimidating the teachers. "I found out they really didn't want to change the school," notes a teacher who had at the outset been sympathetic to the marchers. "They wanted to change society."

Certainly the bombast of the table group would seem to justify that conclusion. Indeed, each side finally came to see the crisis as political rather than educational—the militant parents aiming at destruction of the system, the teachers at its preservation—with both declaring their monopoly on virtue. "All we wanted," says Saul Kalish, an assistant principal, "was a little peace and a chance to teach." A member of the table group says, "Our children were determined to get that raggedy bit of education if it killed them" (and the education was raggedy).

Table-group adherents insist there was little *real* violence. The damage was largely to property, they point out, and of the few persons injured, most were students—victims of police panic and disorder. To prove their devotion to nonviolence, the parents cite the incident that brought them together: Their first act had been to talk the kids out of blowing up the school tower. According to Mrs. McCord and others in the group, the

children would have been more violent if the parents had not held them in check.

All that may be true. But the UFT is correct in maintaining that intimidation and terror were the table group's trump card. Whatever their peaceful intentions, the parents created a climate of violence that neither they nor the school could control. Ultimately, it became a form of blackmail. It compelled the administrators to yield to at least some of the parents' demands. Viewed in this light, one wonders whether the table (even if temporary) was purchased at anything approaching a fair price. Under violent auspices, no grievance procedure—however crying the need—is likely to pay off in the long run. Thus chaos got the parents their table, and chaos took it away.

Any objective judgment of their actions, though, must include their estimate of the school's ability to change. The parents *thought* the school was hopeless; they felt some rallying symbol was necessary to get it off dead center. The table was meant to be that symbol, and the UFT's negative response to it simply confirmed the parents' worst fears. It is just possible that if the UFT had understood the table proposal as a desperate plea for educational reform, rather than as "a power play to gain control of the high school," the ensuing conflict could have been averted.

**I**T NOW remains to be seen whether Kostman and his still benumbed staff can put George Washington back together again. The new principal is no stranger to crisis, having been part of the city school system for two decades, first as an English teacher, then as chairman of the English department at Wingate High School in Brooklyn. "I took this job because I owed something to the system," he says. "It's bureaucratic and barnacle-encrusted, but it's all we've got."

Kostman's initial instinct in the job was to defend the school, his fortress, against all comers—that is, against reporters, dope pushers, angry citizens, suspended students, or anyone else whose presence might upset the precarious equilibrium. He issued orders that all entrances save one be locked, and that all students be compelled to show their identification cards before entering. The stringent regulations have led to long student lines in front of the school each morning, with attendant mutterings and frustrations. But they have more or less secured the fortress, and they have dramatized Kostman's toughness. "I'm a public servant," he notes, "but I'm not a doormat."

Kostman's next move was to remind everyone at George Washington that teaching and learning are the school's main business. He began to visit classrooms and to write Teacher Observation Reports. "When I got here," he says, "no one was making these reports; no one was helping young teachers. I've visited at least 90 classrooms since December."

In addition, he has cleaned up a large share of the

programming and counseling confusion (kids really do know their programs now), and he has expanded ESL (English as a Second Language) for Spanish-speaking students. To close the communications gap, he has started two weekly "rap sessions," one for teachers and one for students, and although they are sparsely attended, the gesture is appreciated all around.

No one doubts Kostman's good intentions. "If our table group did nothing else," says Thea Manley, "at least it got us Samuel Kostman." Happily, nearly all of the teaching staff would agree. "He's firm but fair," says Witkin. "The school is much better since he got here."

During one of my many visits to George Washington I found Kostman in his office shuffling through a pile of Teacher Observation Reports. To a mathematics teacher he had written: "Your sitting down with pupils at their desks had the twofold value of enhancing pupil-teacher rapport and offering students highly individualized instruction." To an English teacher: "Teachers such as you—young, concerned and conscientious—are of the sort that George Washington High School urgently needs as we labor to restore our school to a position at least resembling its former eminence."

Kostman and I were soon interrupted by Miss Light, his assistant. She ushered in a black girl who seemed to have drawn a veil over her eyes, and her mother, who had skipped work and wages in order to be there. The girl had been "truanting" (at George Washington most problems eventually turn into verbs), and her mother was angry. She told Kostman he ought to expel her daughter. He gently suggested that the girl might be happier in another school, say Benjamin Franklin. "OK," said the mother. But the daughter remained silent, sullen.

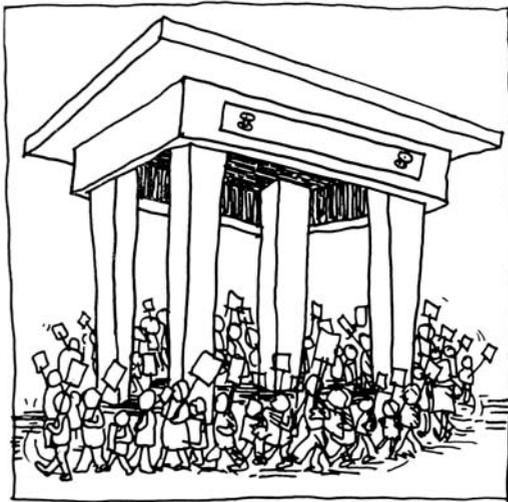
When they were gone, Kostman said, "Did you see the way that little girl swung her hips? Like Anna Lucasta. She's a tough cookie." He was not happy with his solution. Transferring disruptive students to other high schools is a game every principal plays, but it solves nothing in the long run. A better solution would have been to place the girl in George Washington's new Academy, a promising experiment housed in a church and aimed at "turning on" about 40 habitual truants. Organized along "free school" lines, the program substitutes informal, open-ended seminars for conventional classroom instruction. It also gives students a voice in shaping their own curriculum.

The difficulty is that there are a lot of "tough cookies" at George Washington. The school averages more than 500 absences per day, and while the figure last year was much higher, "truanting" continues to perplex officials. Many of the habitual absentees are actually in the building, usually in the basement cafeteria, rapping with friends or dealing in drugs. Some of the pushers, according to knowledgeable teachers, make as much as \$300 a week from their cafeteria clientele. A former student at George Washington, now attending the Harlem Street

Academy, says that among his friends the school is known as "your friendly neighborhood drugstore."

Not all the absentees deal in drugs. Many have simply given up. The place is too big for them, too confusing, too full of challenges they can neither accept nor understand. At least one fifth of George Washington's students read below high-school levels. A senior who reads at the freshman level is not given remedial reading; he is considered competent enough to graduate. But many do not become seniors. The dropout rate at George Washington, as at most other schools, is carefully concealed—it is not even tabulated—but seems to be around 50 per cent. That means half the freshmen never graduate.

On my last visit, there was a ruckus outside the principal's office and he stuck his head out to see what was going on. A tall Dominican boy, stripped to the waist,



was yelling at a teacher, "I'm tellin' ya, man, it ain't gonna stay that way. I don't let *nobody* do that to me." It seems a black student had taken a poke at him and ripped off his shirt.

All the secretaries continued to type, file and sort, carefully ignoring "the incident." But two black men wearing "Security Guard" lapel cards edged closer to the student. (There are 24 security guards at George Washington, hired by the city school system. Students have accused some of pawing girls and beating up boys. Kostman says he has gotten rid of the bad ones.)

The principal beckoned the boy to come in. They made an interesting contrast as they faced each other: the boy big, muscular and bare-chested; Kostman short, slight and dressed like a banker in a dark pin-striped suit with a vest.

"What are you trying to do to us?" he asked. "Do you want to ruin the school?"

The question startled the boy. "No, man, I don't want to ruin the school."

"Well that's what you're doing when you fight inside the school building. No more fights, you understand?"

The boy nodded. Suddenly a dozen other boys appeared at the door. They were there to protect their friend. "Everything's all right," Kostman assured them. "Go back to your classes." All the boys disappeared. Kostman sighed. "This is nothing," he said. "This is routine. If things really broke loose, you'd know."

I LEFT the principal's office and walked down the hallway. It was as quiet as a cemetery. On a stairway a boy and girl were holding hands. "Where do you belong?" a teacher asked them. "We don't belong nowhere," the boy answered with a Spanish accent. "That's not a proper response," said the teacher.

I climbed the stairs and wandered into a class on Western Civilization. The teacher, a pretty brunette, was asking, "What kind of government would you find in an age of autocracy?" Silence. She tried again. "It's an easy question. It's like asking what is the color of orange juice. Beatrice, can you help us out? Myra? Francisco?" More silence. The teacher put her hand to her forehead. "I must be dreaming," she said.

A boy in the front row piped up, "Boy, we smart, ain't we."

Back on the first floor, I stopped at an administrator's office to chat with a secretary. A teacher rushed in, his hands outstretched and bloody. "Oooo!" exclaimed the secretary, "I can't look." The blood was not the teacher's. A student, standing in front of the school, had been stabbed twice in the back by an unknown assailant and the teacher had helped carry him to an ambulance. (It turned out that the stabber was not a student and the boy's wounds were not serious.)

As the teacher was wiping the blood off his hands, the assistant principal came in. "I hope the press doesn't hear about this," he said. "They'll have a field day." It was the first bloody incident at George Washington in several months.

Later I found myself in the spacious, marble-lined lobby. The main entrance, with its row of glass doors, was locked tight against intruders and watched over by two security guards. This is where much of the tragedy occurred last year—where the children screamed and the teachers trembled. This is where the table stood. One sensed now that the school was beginning to recover from that awful time; that if Kostman could effect enough changes in a hurry, it might regain a measure of its former confidence.

Certainly all parties concerned—the parents, the students, the UFT—seem willing to place their future in the principal's hands. They trust him. They do not yet trust each other, but most are ready to put aside former hostilities for the sake of peace.