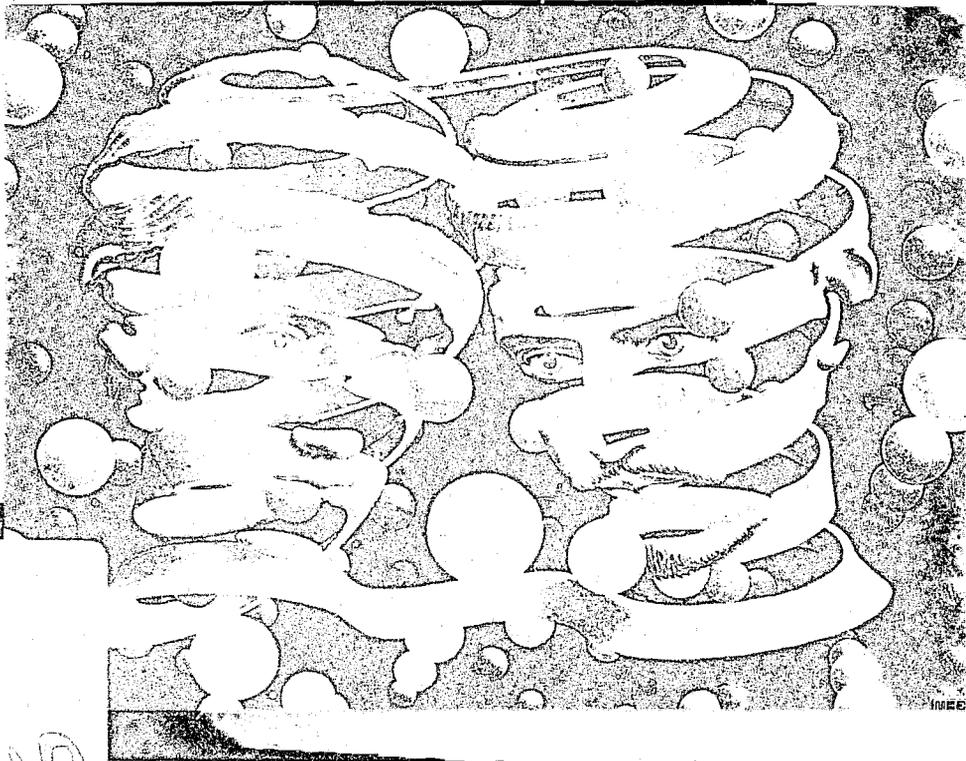


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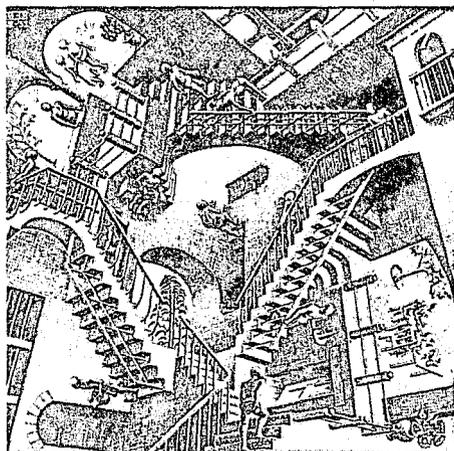
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ACQUISITIONS

Dropouts and drug abusers challenge the future

By Lawton Chiles

When students turn on to drugs and drop out of school, it creates a national problem. Those in the nation's capital must join with those in the nation's classrooms - everyone has an obligation to do something about it.

I don't suppose it's easy being a youngster these days. It probably wasn't easy when I was young, either. But it's been so long ago, it's hard to remember.

But I do recall that in my school days students had to deal with temptations. Today's children must deal with genuine danger.

Every year thousands of children are abused. Many vanish altogether. In an era of explicit advertising, young people get all sorts of invitations and are under all kinds of pressure.

It wouldn't make much sense to try to rank the threats. In fact, it would be hard to list them all. But I would like to focus on just two. One is the problem of dropouts. The other is the question of drugs.

On dropping out . . .

Years ago, the great American poet Langston Hughes began a poem about a troubled child with these words:

"Lonely little question mark on a bench in the park . . ."

I think that's a pretty powerful image. The child was all alone watching the people, the planes and the birds pass him by. And he wasn't in school.

Unfortunately, today in the United States that little boy isn't alone anymore. There are thousands of little boys and girls, thousands of young men and women standing on street corners watching their world pass them by. And these young question marks may never find answers unless they find help.

These people are the dropouts from school. It is a national problem. More than one-fourth of this country's youngsters between the ages of 17 and 18 do not complete high school. Think of that. One out of every four children who start out as freshmen never become seniors.

In a personal sense, that's tragic and costly. Only six out of every 100 black teenagers not in school are employed full time. Many of the girls who drop out marry or have babies. Last year 650,000 babies were born to unwed mothers, and the odds are small that either the mother or the child will have a clear shot at joining the mainstream of the American economy.

Over the past year or two, I've thought a lot about the dropout situation. While I don't have all the answers, it seems to me, from what educators are telling me, it is a very tough challenge facing us.

It's hard to define a "dropout." And it's even harder for states and local officials to determine who drops back in somewhere else, such as earning a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) or completing an adult education program.

Local officials face financial disincentives to fully count all dropouts. After all, federal and state reimbursement is based on an average daily attendance. And what can be done with the student who drops out through truancy or becomes a push out through suspension and expulsion long before he or she reaches the age of 16?

Lawton Chiles is a U.S. Senator representing Florida.

What happens to the at-risk student, who never masters the basics in elementary school? What do they do in the face of longer school days, minimum competency tests and more academic courses along with fewer electives? Sometimes these elective courses are the only real links the child sees between school and his or her "real" world.

I'm not saying we can't or shouldn't raise standards. But real reform of public education must include not just those who would excel or get by on their own, but the chance for all students to benefit from reform.

Many states are concerned as are local educators. That is why the states ought to be cooperating to develop a model definition of *dropout* and to share their enrollment data to determine characteristics and profiles of high risk students. Local school districts ought to find different ways to keep kids in school, or get them back if they've already left. And the federal government can help spread the information.

Evidence suggests people who eventually drop out of school start thinking about it in the middle grades and junior high. Ways must be found to focus on these age groups and to make school the best thing they have going so they may successfully seek good jobs in the future.

Even though urban dropouts are most visible, the rural dropout rate is no less serious. There is also work to be done with the unique dropout problems of migrants and rural areas where tradition works against getting a higher degree.

Last October I introduced the "Drop-out Retention and Recovery Act" in the United States Senate. It is aimed at getting hold of those people who are already going nowhere and giving them another chance to make something of themselves.

I can't help but remember one of those sayings they had back in the days of the flower children. I can recall hearing young people say, "Tune in, turn on, drop out." I've never had much problem with the idea of tuning in. But I hope it's clear we've got to do something about dropping out.

The threat of drugs

Perhaps the most pervasive threat to today's students is the temptation to turn on to drugs. Those who live in Florida and in other key border and coastal states know the threat of drugs smuggled into our country first hand. At the local, state and federal level, we are in a real battle to choke off the narcotics flow. We have invested tens of millions of dollars on law enforcement and uncounted man hours to keep out heroin and cocaine.

Americans have developed all sorts of public education programs to warn young people against drug use. There are stiffer federal laws to make the penalties tougher and more certain of imposition for drug runners.

But in this long fight, we have uncovered a new source of killer drugs. And this time, it's not coming from a foreign nation but from our own basements. Any basement or garage or laundry room in America can become a drug factory. All it takes is a couple of thousand dollars worth of equipment and chemicals.

These new chemical threats are called "designer drugs." In the summer of 1985 I conducted a hearing on the issue and I asked a University of California professor to describe how this works. He reported on a drug used in perhaps as many as 70 percent of all surgical operations in the United States. It's a lifesaving drug, but, in the words of the professor, "Somebody has taken advantage of the fact that you can make very small alterations in the chemical structure of a drug and produce large changes in its biological activities."

It makes a change, all right. The change makes it many times more powerful than heroin.

Just how massive the problem could be is illustrated by these examples. It would be possible to take a chemical substance, make small changes and produce 200 million doses of potential death with a value of as high as \$70 billion on the streets. A single chemist working an 8-hour day could provide the whole nation's heroin supply on an on-going basis. A six-month supply could fit in a closet.

During the hearing in July 1985, we were shown a videotape of several vic-

tims of these designer drugs. We saw young people changed to virtual zombies by these chemicals. They froze up. They couldn't move. Many of them will never recover. Many others could develop these symptoms overnight and be doomed to a lifetime of anguish.

All of this may come from a basement where someone with a little bit of knowledge about chemistry and a little bit of money can become a drug baron and a killer.

Obviously, the implications are terrifying. And, something has to be done. The legislation I introduced in 1985 urges the administration to develop a law enforcement plan to halt the spread of designer drugs. Attorney General Edwin Meese III has promised the administration will move quickly on this. The process is under way, and the legislation already has been approved unanimously by the Senate Judiciary Committee. When this finally becomes law, people convicted would be subject to 15 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

The government is moving. But one step isn't enough, and the federal government can't do it alone. To keep the pressure on, I have added language to another bill which requires the Attorney General to come up with a comprehensive strategy on designer drugs.

That strategy must include state and local authorities, medical groups and educators, so America can smother this threat before it goes any further.

These are some of the things going on in Washington. But the real effort goes on right here in the states and in the communities. The work done in our schools to safeguard our children is beyond price. Tomorrow's nation is passing before the eyes of America's educators, and they must keep a sharp lookout. But educators should not have to do that job alone. Government at every level can help. The communities and the businesses of this nation can get involved. Everyone has an obligation to do something.

Our basic challenge is to help kids mentally and physically in school. An even greater challenge is to insure that every school has a safe learning environment. □