

Corridor of Shame

Student photographers in South Carolina and Baltimore documented deplorable conditions in their schools, from exposed electrical wires to creeping mold. But will anyone take notice?

By Alexandra R. Moses

In rural South Carolina's Allendale-Fairfax Middle School, a slab of wood atop concrete blocks serves as a makeshift desk. At Estill High School, Elements of Literature textbooks, with their spines shredding from overuse, are too torn and fragile to be sent home with students. And at Rains Centenary Elementary School in Marion County, thick scum coats the basin of a drinking fountain.

These school images, all captured by student photographers, tell a tale of decay and disrepair—conditions that a South Carolina judge ruled in December 2005 to have no detriment on the education of the 132,000 affected rural students (in Abbeville County School District v. the State of South Carolina). While “not optimum or ideal,” he wrote, they meet the standard for safe and adequate. School leaders and other concerned citizens disagreed. To dramatize the weakness of the judge's decision, advocates handed disposable cameras to students and gave them the discretion to photograph whatever they wanted.

The result is an exhibit called “But What About Us? Student Photographs From the Corridor of Shame,” consisting of 60 photos taken last spring inside rural schools along South Carolina's Interstate 95 corridor (www.corridorofshame.com). In May 2006, the exhibit was unveiled at the South Carolina state house to get lawmakers' attention. Advocates contend that many years of underfunding have made South Carolina's decrepit rural schools inappropriate and even dangerous learning environments for students.

A State of Disrepair

The “Corridor of Shame” photos are the culmination of a long effort to boost funding for rural school districts, many in the state's poorest areas, where school funding is directly tied to property taxes. In the 16-month Abbeville trial that began in 2003, eight school districts designated as plaintiffs (on behalf of a total of 40 districts) argued that the condition of their school buildings were worse than the “minimally adequate” required by law, citing examples of rotting ceilings, mold, flaking plaster, and classrooms that boiled in summer and froze in winter.

Early in 2005—as the trial was in progress—local leaders approached Bud Ferillo, president of the public relations firm Ferillo and Associates, who had donated a year of pro-bono services to the legal team representing the plaintiffs to help get media attention for the trial. Encouraged by school advocates and funded by donations from organizations and individuals to the South Carolina Christian Action Council, Ferillo produced Corridor of Shame, a 58-minute documentary about the conditions in the eight districts designated as plaintiffs for the trial.

After the judge's ruling, says Ferillo, the student photo project was born. “Even more than the lawsuit, these photos speak eloquently to the neglect of the students,” Ferillo says.

“We have gotten used to it so that we don't see it,” says Bob Huff, Jasper County School District's public information officer. “You know—rust, maybe somewhat unclean-looking situations, or stopped-up drains. It's sad to say that some of these things have become the norm, and we don't see it as clearly as the kids do.”

In his district, students will attend new schools in August 2007, thanks to a referendum passed a few years ago. But for other districts, Huff says he hopes the students' photos and words will make an impact as the exhibit travels the state.

“You're messing with students' self-esteem when you can't keep your building maintained,” he says.

Baltimore's Critical Exposure

“Corridor of Shame” isn't the only attempt by students to document the state of their schools. Two years ago, in Baltimore, students took similar actions to attract attention to their decaying schools. Their photos show mousetraps scattered on a lunchroom floor, a basketball backboard with no hoop, and ceilings rotting from water damage.

A nonprofit organization in Washington, Critical Exposure (www.criticalexposure.org), spearheaded the project, which has a mission similar to that of “Corridor of Shame.” Critical Exposure teaches students photography to help them tell the stories of their schools, with a goal of bringing about public education reform.

Adam Levner says he and cofounder Heather Rieman wanted to illuminate the problems facing schools. “It was extremely difficult to get people who weren't setting foot inside low-income schools to know what it was like,” Levner says.

Critical Exposure worked mainly with youth groups and after-school programs, taught students the basics of

By The Numbers

The last time the federal government did a survey of school facilities was in 1999. According to a 2000 report by the National Center for Education Statistics:

- The average age of school buildings in the U.S. is 40 years old.
- 25 percent of all public schools report at least one of their buildings is in poor condition.
- 50 percent of schools report at least one building feature is in poor condition.
- 75 percent of schools report they need more money to make repairs.
- About 11 million students are enrolled in schools in need of repair.
- The average amount per school needed for repairs is \$2.2 million.
- The average cost per student to make renovations, repairs, and modernizations is \$3,800.
- Nationally, schools need to spend \$127 billion in repairs. For 2006, according to the National Education Association, that figure has grown to \$288 billion.

photography, then handed them 35mm film cameras and black-and-white film. A similar project is under way in schools in Washington, D.C.

Like "Corridor of Shame," the Baltimore student photos also made the rounds before state and local officials. Levner says they had some positive results. The exhibit, combined with efforts by such groups as the American Civil Liberties Union, helped secure a \$100 million funding increase from the state assembly for school facilities, tripling Baltimore's share, from \$7 million to \$21 million.

Kids Make the Difference

Students should be at the forefront of movements to change their school conditions, says Marc Borbely, who runs an advocacy web site, FixOurSchools.net. When confronted by children, "politicians can no longer make excuses," says the former Washington high school French teacher.

But Ray Telman, head of the Lansing, Michigan-based Middle Cities Education Association, warns that using students as a public relations strategy can backfire. In both South Carolina and Baltimore, adults drove the projects forward. "If you have a loyal opposition, they'll exploit your utilization of children," Telman says.

Both students and proponents of the program, however, say they reaped benefits beyond making a political point about deteriorating school buildings. "It gave me a chance to be exposed and have the world exposed to me," says 16-year-old Ian Starks, a Baltimore student who participated in the Critical Exposure project.

Helen Washington, a seventh-grade teacher at Chinquapin Middle School in Baltimore, watched students who didn't have that much interest in their schools become empowered by the photo experience.

"They had power in their words, they had power in their pictures," says Washington. "They were passionate about what they had to say." @

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