

Student Struggle: Factions Vie For Control Of Student Council Gavel

By HOWARD KOHN

"Frats" and "greases" still oppose each other in gangland fashion in some Detroit high schools.

"Frats" and "greases" usually line up according to economic and social status -- the upper middle class versus the lower class.

Suburban schools with middle-class students haven't been troubled with class-oriented gang fighting.

But now, two similarly stereotyped factions are invading suburban schools. They are the "jocks" and the "freaks."

"JOCKS" ARE the conservative clean-cut old guard who hold their status from scoring points on the football field or scoring dates with the best-looking girls.

"Freaks" are the radical long-haired punk look who want to make classes and activities more relevant and more exciting.

"Jocks" are supposed to be interested in dances and parties. "Freaks" are supposed to like bull sessions and pot parties.

FEW, IF ANY, high school students exactly fit these stereotyped images. But some suburban students are congregating at political extremes.

Traditionally the "jocks" have assumed positions of leadership. They get elected to student council seats because student elections are popularity contests.

Now the "freaks" who can exploit the popularity of an emerging youth culture, are threatening the security of "jocks."

AT NORTH FARMINGTON High School the two sides squared off this spring in student government elections. Bob Hughes, representing the "jocks" won the presidency.

Mark Kearns, representing the "freaks" was the vice president. However, neither are extremists. Hughes is a self-styled moderate while Kearns is a self-styled radical. Besides being a quick thinker and one of the state's best quarterbacks.

Kearns may be a radical but he's not a revolutionary. He's articulate and intelligent -- he was an A-student until last year when he purposely worked for failing grades to protest the educational process.

The two predict they'll be able to work together.

But this spring's election did mark a watershed in student politics at NFHS. For the first time two candidates campaigned on a party platform rather than on individual appearance.

Jack Mingo and Kearns formed The Peace and Freedom Party. The main plank in their platform was a promise to open special meetings to all students.

Closed meetings became an issue last year when a group of radical students including Mingo and Kearns, challenged the closed doors.

After a series of arguments, the council agreed to test an open-door policy. But the experiment failed.

Tony Garcia, last year's president accused radicals of trying to dominate the meetings.

The radicals retorted that Garcia refused to recognize them and then gazed down when they objected.

THE RADICALS took their case to the students in a schoolwide referendum and won a 3-2 majority but technically lost.

Since the referendum took the form of a constitutional revision, a two-thirds majority was needed.

In a disputed count, they lost by a handful of votes.

Nevertheless, Hughes has taken his cue from the 3-2 result and intends to have open forums every three weeks, inviting all students to voice opinions.

He will also send representatives back from each formal council meeting to report to their homerooms.

Mingo and Kearns point out the council will still be holding closed meetings but admit Hughes is moving in the right direction.

NFHS'S STUDENT council died temporarily last winter when the council voted, 15-13, to abolish itself. The council had been under fire for allegedly rubberstamping administration dictates and ignoring student wishes.

On its resurrection a few weeks later, the council promised to reform.

Now Hughes is actively seeking to put those reforms into force.

"Sure, maybe change was a waste of time," Hughes acknowledges. "But that's going to change."

He's initiating an "action line" -- a box into which students can drop suggestions or complaints -- and he's guaranteeing an answer to be publicly posted within 10 days.

He's also set up a student polling

(Education in the twentieth century has been marked with conflict. Administrators trying to modernize the system, teachers fighting for higher wages and better conditions, parents seeking a tight budget and lower taxes, and students desiring more rights, responsibilities and a better learning experience.

There is disagreement between the factions among them. The methods of each may be different but all are equally dedicated to their goals.

The students' quest for rights and responsibility may be different but all are equally dedicated to their goals.

In the third part in a series of student issues, Howard Kohn talks with student leaders and administrators and looks for the open door.

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Right or wrong, the effort in this era of conflict is that all factions be given equal opportunity to be heard. In this setting, student council is attempting to be heard and at North Farmington High School is undergoing change.

Student council is trying to adapt changes to facilitate communications with the other three factions -- but the students themselves differ on how this should be done.

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only advisory.

"The principal would obviously have to have a veto vote," he says. Mingo and other student radicals say they would agree to an advisory committee if the principals would issue written explanations when a recommendation was over-ruled.

Graham and Geiger are hesitant about such a clause but are not unilaterally opposed.

Richard Frankel, board of education member, has urged principals to answer all student complaints publicly and promptly.

"There's been a problem of communication between the students and the administration as long as I can remember," Frankel charges. "And there's no good reason for it."

UP UNTIL NOW (except for the NFHS picketing against dress rules in March) the board of education hasn't played a first-person role in student discipline.

"I'd like to make certain it stays that way," Frankel adds. "That's why administrators should develop rapport with their students. There should be no reason for students to come before the school board."

Farmington is something of a vanishing breed in this respect. Many of Michigan's school boards have been embroiled in discipline disputes in recent years.

In fact, the State Department of Public Instruction is considering making appearances before school board's mandatory on expelling students.

The department may also recommend the student be represented by an attorney.

GRAHAM was the first local school official to condemn the recommendation as "monkey business." But Graham may also be the first to find himself in an untenable position on discipline.

After feeling the sting of bitter student sarcasm for a year, NFHS's council is determined to prove itself a legitimate and representative student spokesman. So if NFHS students decide they want Graham to give up some of his discipline power, the council may have to actively support the demand.

Graham would then have three alternatives: (1) accepting a grievance committee, (2) appealing to the school board for intervention or (3) ignoring the students and risking another walkout.

As long as Graham avoids unpopular expulsions, however, he stands little chance of invoking controversy.

STUDENT RADICALS admit they need a triggering incident to mobilize their forces around an issue. They headlined the grooming code this spring only after Jeff Cohen was expelled because of a two-day-old beard.

Mingo estimates the radical base at 200 to 300 out of 1,600 students. But only 1,200 students voted in the council elections, he points out, which gives the radicals 20 per cent of the electorate.

Kearns and Mingo are confident NFHS students will become more active as the radical influence grows.

Mingo is likely to be appointed editor of the school newspaper and he's eager to carry school issues to the students.

Besides the grievance committee, he's proposing voluntary student evaluation of teachers, modular study programs and limited pass-fail grading.

GRAHAM SAYS he will wait for the students to make the first move in pressing for any of these changes.

The board of education has been studying some of the proposals. But it has no present plans to enact any of them.

This brings it back to the students who must first overcome their personal political squabbles.

But if Mingo rallies students around an issue, and Hughes leads council in supporting it, then Graham may be faced with a united front.

And that would put the "jocks" and the "freaks" on the same team,

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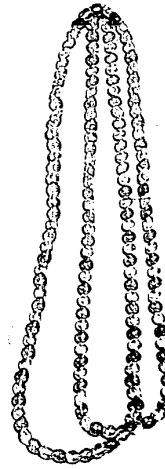
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Behind the stereotyped images of student groups are individual young people learning about the power struggles of a political society. Most people, young or old, are often apathetic about issues until they directly affect them. As long as student fury is the prevailing mood, the "jocks" are able to govern a contented student body. But when controversy arises, the "freaks" become the crusading activists on the side of the students. At North Farmington High School, however, the "jocks" and the "freaks" are not at opposite poles. In fact, they may be joining forces this year to ask for school reforms.



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