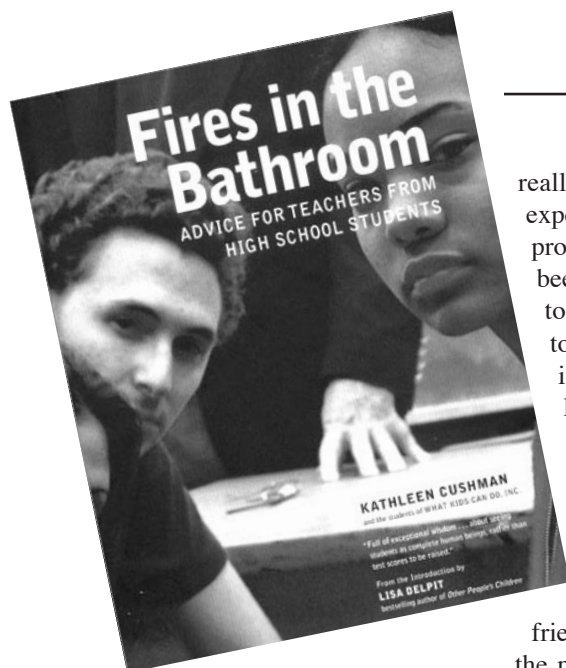


Fires in the Bathroom

A Book Review – Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania



F*ires in the Bathroom* is a must-read for everyone concerned about our children and our schools. If you're beginning to plan your program for the fall, read this book! If you're on a committee charged with rewriting the student handbook, read this book! If you're a parent or an administrator trying to understand our children's thoughts and feelings as they experience "school as something done to them, not by them," read this book, and share it with your students and children!

The title of this just published collection of student voices comes from an Oakland teenager, who asks, "What's a teacher to do when she's trying to be nice and they're setting fires in the bathroom?" According to this book, one of the first things we can all do is listen carefully. We can begin by really getting to know our students, their interests, their lives, their hopes and their dreams. We can stop assuming we know them and spend more of our time learning from and with them.

In this book we hear that our kids want to know about us too. They want to know where we went to school, our other job experiences, and why we became teachers. They're hungry for connections between adults and young people, because these connections can make the difference between anonymously drifting through school and

really benefiting from the learning experiences that we are so anxious to provide. In the words of one girl, "I been looking for a teacher I can talk to..." Students in the book are quick to point out that they're not looking for phony friendships, they are looking for "that delicate balance between adult authority and guidance mixed with a healthy measure of flexibility." Cushman and her co-authors don't just state all the students' desires, they supply us with user-

friendly tools that can help jump-start the process of achieving them. There are sample questionnaires that can be used the first week of school, and there are outlines for contracts that can be used to start conversations about the expectations or norms that will be set for your school or classroom community. There are reflective activities that can be used by individual teachers, or as part of a group. These activities ask us to unpack our expectations for our students — from the high achieving to those that are struggling — but most importantly, the charts and activities ask us for evidence to support our assumptions.

The book goes on to talk about group work, grading, text choice, and the creation of a culture of success, among other things, and it does it all from the student side of the aisle. There are no easy answers in these pages, but there is a wealth of information that can be put to immediate use as we look for the solutions and approaches that apply to our individual situations.

In addition to all of the useful material in the book, there was much that made me smile. In particular, I enjoyed the students' depictions of the student "types" found in typical classrooms. Their list included the "eye-roller" and the "hand-waver," and their descriptions transported me back to my own days as a high school student!

Finally, I appreciated Cushman's description of the thoughtful, collab-

orative process that was used in formulating the questions and collecting the students' responses. As someone who is focused on student voice, I often feel that I'm missing the mark when I visit schools and sit down with focus groups. Reading this account has pushed my thinking and will alter my approach this week as I revisit my schools. Treat yourself to this powerful new tool! ■

Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students by Kathleen Cushman and the students of What Kids Can Do, Inc.

To order, visit your local bookseller, www.amazon.com, or visit What Kids Can Do at www.whatkidscando.org
Contact Debbie Bambino at [<dbambino@earthlink.net>](mailto:dbambino@earthlink.net)

What Kids Can Do
An Interactive Website
www.whatkidscando.org

Integral to **WKCD's** mission is connecting the previously separate fields of school reform, youth development, community development, service learning, and school-to-work. We aim to stand, as well, at the intersection of journalism, research, and advocacy.

WKCD was founded two years ago and its substantial offerings of *Student Work*, *Youth as Resources*, and *Youth in Media* all speak to the successful realization of its stated mission. Navigating around this site is like diving into a treasure chest of ideas for work with students in our schools, or with our broader communities.

I was especially intrigued by the "Writing with a Reason" offerings. This collection of youth publications that serve a public purpose has something that will help you connect with even the most reluctant of your student writers.

But don't just visit the site for ideas, visit with an eye to the future contributions your own students can make. This site's value as a jumping-off point for building the links between students and adults interested in educational reform are without limit! ■