

Whatever Happened to The Class of 2005?

They entered Cardozo High with hopes and dreams. Now, some regret their unfulfilled promise.

By V. Dion Haynes and Aruna Jain
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Danielle Chappell had no reason to doubt she was a solid student. She earned decent grades, even scoring some A's in English and math, while balancing schoolwork with basketball, track and a spot on the dance team.

Then she graduated from Cardozo High School and arrived at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, where she bombed the placement tests so badly that she had to take remedial English and math. She failed the makeup math course twice before passing it. Low grades overall put her on academic probation. Finally, mid-sophomore year, she was forced to withdraw.

Chappell sometimes thinks back to the Cardozo math teacher who, instead of assigning algebra homework, would have students clip photos of motorcycles from magazines and do other projects unrelated to math. "I thought it was strange and weird," Chappell said, but she did not complain because the class was "an easy A."

She wishes now that she had demanded more from Cardozo, and that Cardozo had demanded more from her. [Listen to Danielle.](#)

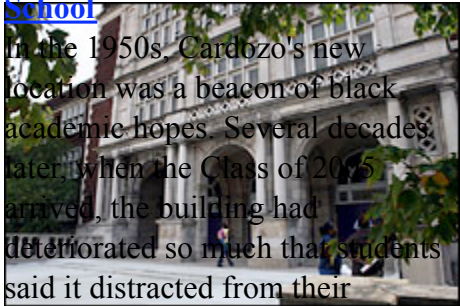
To examine the fate of one graduating class of D.C. high school students is to find multiple stories like Chappell's -- stories that illustrate how a struggling urban school system often fails to shepherd its students and set them on a promising path to adulthood.

Efforts to fix the District's public schools have long been hampered by an inability to collect accurate information about many aspects of the system, such as a reliable dropout rate or a way to track how students have fared after leaving.

[The Washington Post](#) surveyed Cardozo's Class of 2005 with those questions in mind, reaching 127 students or their families, just over half of the 243 who began as freshmen. Cardozo, which overlooks the city from a hill in [Columbia Heights](#), was chosen because it falls between the highest- and lowest-performing schools in the District.

GALLERY

[The Evolution of Cardozo High School](#)



In the 1950s, Cardozo's new location was a beacon of black academic hopes. Several decades later, when the Class of 2005 arrived, the building had deteriorated so much that students said it distracted from their academic education.

Over four years, the class had its share of bright spots -- hints of what might be possible given more resources, better management and more family support. But the survey showed that, despite heroic efforts by some teachers and administrators, Cardozo's generally low academic standards led to disappointment in college. Other students said they suffered from the failures of a city public school system that could not keep records straight, classrooms orderly or hallways safe.

More than one third, or 49, of the students surveyed had dropped out of high school, often citing their inability to keep up, their need to get a job or the absence of efforts by school officials to keep them in. Three students are still in high school -- one at Cardozo.

Fifty-five are working, in jobs that include firefighter, carpet cleaner and parking attendant, but the vast majority are earning just about the minimum wage. Eighteen are unemployed.

Three students in the group are dead -- one from natural causes, one was fatally beaten by her boyfriend and the third was the victim of a distressingly common urban scenario. He was shot 19 times in a drive-by, his killer never found. One young man is in jail, awaiting trial on charges of armed robbery.

But other students proudly reported their successes. They described digging for every opportunity they could find at Cardozo or elsewhere, graduating and making their way to college. Seventy-eight of the 127 students The Post contacted graduated from high school and 39 of those surveyed are attending a trade school or college, many at the [University of the District of Columbia](#) and other nearby institutions.

Many students, reached over the past few months, link their current situations to what happened to them at Cardozo -- both good and bad.

A Guatemalan immigrant said he survived only because a counselor stayed after school to teach him English. A former honor student who dropped out said it was her desire to fit in at the school that kept her from studying.

"I would pretend I didn't know certain things," said Ayana Butler, who left Cardozo during junior year.

The 'One Percenters'

Reginald Ballard, who was principal while the Class of 2005 moved through Cardozo, said he was not surprised that some students found themselves blindsided or unprepared for college or the application process. "It was hard for us to get kids to understand how much it would take to get to college," he said. "Everyone who walked through that door did not necessarily want what we were giving."

Administrators were challenged by demographics alone. About 60 percent of the students were poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Forty percent spoke English as a second language, and many of them were recent immigrants who would

attend for a time, then leave when their families returned to their native countries. Tensions broke out between blacks and the growing number of Latino students.

One reason why Cardozo's test scores fell below citywide averages may be because the school enrolled a higher than average number of students with special needs when a nearby special education center closed in the 1990s.

Still, Ballard said, the school tried its best with limited resources. Cardozo offered 10 Advanced Placement classes -- rare for a D.C. public high school -- and a "construction academy" to teach building skills. One of Ballard's teachers created a legal-aid program to help students, including immigrants who wanted to become U.S. citizens.

Students with a 2.5 grade-point average or better could join the school's "TransTech" program, which offered higher-level classes and internships and helped students with college applications.

When the school was built in 1916 as Central High, all of its students were white. Enrollment declined as the neighborhood integrated and the white students left for other schools. In 1950, the Board of Education reassigned the remaining whites, moved in black students and renamed Central for their old, deteriorating school, Francis L. Cardozo.

Half a century later, when the Class of 2005 arrived, Cardozo's enrollment had dropped from nearly 1,800 in 1950 to about 770. Apartment buildings were being converted to upscale condos, forcing low-income families to move. And the growing number of publicly funded charter schools was pulling away dozens of students.

Once again, the Cardozo students were trying to learn in a crumbling environment, a point mentioned frequently in their interviews. The school's swimming pool had long since closed. Lockers were rusty. The school won two city basketball championships while the class was there but the team couldn't play in its own gym because it was not regulation size and the floor had buckled under a leaking roof.

English teacher Frazier O'Leary said the building forces unacceptable choices. If all the air conditioning units are running, the power inevitably goes out, crashing computers while students and teachers are in mid-task.

The school has just two copy machines, one of which is broken, he said.

"That printer doesn't work," he said, pointing to an aging, bulky machine in his classroom. It has been out of commission for five weeks, he said, and "I don't know when it's going to be fixed."

The Class of 2005 had a nickname for the school: "Cardirty."

The classmates shared some difficult times. Sophomore year, a boy snuck a gun through an unlocked door and fired shots outside the cafeteria, wounding a student. Senior year, a mercury spill closed down the building, and for three weeks students were shuttled to empty classrooms at UDC.

Ballard, now a regional superintendent for the D.C. public schools, said the biggest problem at Cardozo was the troublemakers -- he called them the "one percenters" -- who monopolized school staff: One percent of the student body took up 99 percent of the staff's time and resources.

He said he had to cope with gangs -- particularly African American girl gangs and Hispanic boy gangs -- which he tried to manage with police officers and security guards and with regular sessions between students and counselors.

"Whatever's happening in the community happens in the school," Ballard said.

Just 63 of the original 243 students -- slightly more than a quarter -- would walk across the stage and graduate from Cardozo in the spring of 2005. Over the four years, they were joined by an almost equal number of students who transferred in, for a total graduating class of about 140.

Not Ready for College

Danielle Chappell was among the proud graduates in 2005. The youngest of three children, she said she was the first to go to college on time and to go away to school. She said her parents had wanted her to attend a local college. But eventually her father, a truck driver, supported her desire to go to the University of Maryland Eastern Shore even though it meant he'd have to pay more.

Math wasn't her only obstacle. At Cardozo, "English was one of my best subjects," said Chappell, 20, but she soon realized that she was weak in grammar. "We were learning about [sentence] fragments, compounds and pronouns at Eastern Shore. We didn't learn that at Cardozo."

Chappell also was mystified when her professor assigned a paper with footnotes and a bibliography.

"I didn't write a research paper at Cardozo," she said. "I heard about it, but I never done it until I got to Eastern Shore."

She said that she didn't let her social life distract her from her classes at UMES -- "I'm what they call a good girl" -- but that she still couldn't keep up. Her GPA fell below 2.0 and she was put on probation. Now she is stocking shelves at a department store and taking a few courses at UDC.

When she had to leave UMES, "I took it kind of hard," she said. She was upset about the prospect of letting down her friends and especially her family.

"My father thinks I should have done a whole lot better," Chappell said.

A 'Nerd' If You Achieve

When Ayana Butler arrived at Cardozo, she was shocked by the poor condition of the building, the one working bathroom for girls and the profanity and slang used by her peers. "I would ask someone, 'Huh -- what does that mean?' They would look at me like: 'Where is she from?' "

Butler's family had just moved back to the District from [Newport News](#), Va., where she had been on the honor roll often and was surrounded by friends who excelled in school.

At Cardozo, her English lessons focused on "Romeo and Juliet" and the writings of [Edgar Allan Poe](#) and [Maya Angelou](#) -- all of which she had studied in the seventh grade.

Angry that she had been forced to leave her friends behind and bored with the curriculum, Butler said she slacked off. She found it easier to blend in with the other students than to stick out for achieving. She remembers thinking: " 'I should ace this -- it's easy.' But the rebellious side took over," she said.

Butler failed several classes and was told to repeat the ninth grade. That woke her up and she improved her grades for a time, but then started hanging with a rowdy crowd.

O'Leary, her Advanced Placement English teacher, reached out to her. "He said, 'Is there something going on at home -- do you need guidance?' " she said. "'You are a good student.'"

She rebuffed his efforts, and in the middle of the 11th grade she dropped out so she could work full-time. "I thought I was too cool for school -- there was money to be made," she said.

But when she applied for jobs at Pepco and at animal clinics, she was told she needed a high school diploma. The only jobs she could get were at [McDonald's](#) and [Wendy's](#).

Butler, 20, said she is trying to get her life back on track. After giving birth to twin girls last year, she enrolled this spring at Everest College, a trade school in [Arlington](#) where she is studying criminal justice. She plans to take the GED test next year.

A classmate of Butler's at Cardozo, Laura John-Toussaint, also struggled with the culture there.

She said she begged her mother to let her transfer out because she was continually heckled for being smart. If you achieve "you're a nerd. You're not cool," said John-Toussaint, who grew up on the island of Trinidad.

Her mother told her to stick it out. "Anywhere you go, it will be the same as long as you excel. So you have to cope with it," said Sharon St. Clair, her mother and a teacher at a special education school in Northeast Washington.

John-Toussaint joined the debate team, which brought her new friends and lifted her spirits. When the team traveled to other schools across the country, John-Toussaint couldn't help but note the better facilities such as science labs stocked with gloves and goggles -- basic equipment lacking at Cardozo. She and her teammates would see "what they had and what we didn't have."

John-Toussaint followed her mother's advice. She became president of her class and graduated among the top 10 students. Her classmates voted her most likely to win a Nobel Prize and most likely to become president. She won a debating scholarship and is attending the [University of Oklahoma](#).

But like some of her classmates, she has been reminded in college of what she missed in high school: University officials told her she needed to take remedial math.

'I Could Have Graduated'

The deficiencies that have plagued the D.C. public school system did not go unnoticed at Cardozo. Across the city, principals have waited more than a year on average for urgent repairs to be made. Among them was Ballard, who said he waited two years for the system's maintenance department to install a simple connection so he could update the internet server for the school's computers. It still was not done when he left the school in 2006.

A 2003 audit found mistakes in student transcripts at every high school. At Cardozo, Pedro Peña received a letter from his counselor a month before commencement notifying him that he didn't have enough credits to graduate and that he would have to go to summer school. Peña said he was devastated. He had long dreamed about the day he would walk across the stage in his cap and gown.

But when he showed up to register for summer school, he said, an assistant principal asked why he wasn't at graduation the night before to pick up his diploma. His name was called out, he was told.

"I could have graduated," said Peña, 20. The counselor had been mistaken, but Peña had not been able to straighten out the confusion beforehand.

"Every day I'd go to the counselor and she wouldn't be there," said Peña, who is studying engineering at [Montgomery College](#).

A Fight Every Day

Most days his freshman year, Edwin Andrades pushed past his fear and went to school, focused on learning English and playing soccer in the afternoons with his friends. He was careful to avoid the racial battles and the bullies.

"Every day there were fights," said Andrades, 22. "There were fights inside and outside, fights in the bathroom."

Much of the trouble, students said, was between blacks and Hispanics. The freshman class had 153 black students, 85 Hispanics and five Asians.

Even with all his caution, Andrades was accosted in the most public of places -- the cafeteria. Three black students, he said, pushed him, punched him in the face and stole his

wallet. "They were laughing and saying, 'Don't tell nobody. You tell somebody and we'll do something more.' "

Other students and even the security guards, he said, "didn't say nothing. They looked like nothing happened."

Then his car was broken into on campus. His mother, who worked at a restaurant, asked if he wanted to change schools and they moved to [Prince George's County](#), where he enrolled in high school.

The change was dramatic, he said. "They got a lot of security cameras everywhere," he added. "You don't see discrimination."

Teachers of English as a second language were better, said Andrades, who moved with his mother from [El Salvador](#) in 1997. "They talk in Spanish and English. They tutored me; they explained."

Still, the improved school environment was not enough to keep him from becoming another dropout. During his junior year, his girlfriend got pregnant and they married. He quit school and took a full-time job as a road stripper. He said he has no plans to resume his education and wants to return to El Salvador in five years.

Father Figure

Rafael Rivera, a Guatemalan immigrant who lived largely on his own during his years at Cardozo, said he found the school to be a welcoming place because of a dedicated counselor. Rivera lived with a cousin in the District and bused tables overnight at a Mexican restaurant to support himself. When he arrived, he could neither speak English nor write or read in Spanish.

He said his counselor, Leonel Popol -- originally from [Guatemala](#), too -- stayed after school with him every day, first teaching him to read and write in Spanish and then to communicate in English. Popol invited Rivera to spend weekends and holidays with his family.

"I thought, 'Oh, my God. You have no idea how much you have to go through' " to learn the language and succeed in high school, Popol said recently. "I explained, just take it one day at a time. This can be done. You have to believe it." [Hear more from Rafael.](#)

When Rivera contemplated dropping out because he needed to work full-time, Popol gave encouragement and money to help pay the bills, Rivera said. By the 11th grade, Rivera could read and write in both languages; by the 12th grade he had a 2.78 GPA and received a one-year scholarship to UDC.

But when his scholarship money ran out, and he lost his job, he left college. He fell into a depression and attempted suicide, he said. Popol has remained a father figure to Rivera, who is seeing a counselor and looking for work.

Popol "doesn't give up," said Rivera, 21. "I'm feeling myself lucky to find people to do whatever it takes to see me successful."

Diego Mejia, a classmate of Rivera's, is grateful for another Cardozo experience.

For most of his high school years, Mejia was a right guard on the football team and dreamed of an [NFL](#) career. But in his senior year, he took a carpentry class and learned about drafting.

Mejia knew about carpentry from helping relatives build houses, but he took the class so he could learn the English names for tools. The students were required to design a house and build a scale model of it. Mejia earned an A-plus.

"You have a gift," Mejia said his teacher told him. "He saw the drawings and said, 'Focus on that.' "

Mejia was intrigued by the thought, and since graduating has been drawing houses in his spare time and putting aside money from his sales job. He plans to enroll in a technical school in December to study architecture.

Determined to Finish

When Anthony Michaux dropped out during junior year, there was no one who could intervene to solve his problems.

He had struggled with his reading, which was around a fifth-grade level, and he had been placed in the school's special education program because of a learning disability.

Meredith Cole, who was Michaux's homeroom teacher, said she attributed his low reading level not to his disability but to a lack of proper instruction in D.C. elementary schools.

Then, when he was a sophomore, his older brother Abdul died in his sleep, and Michaux was devastated. "Me and my older brother was close," said Michaux, 20. "I was hurt for a while."

His attendance became erratic, alarming some of his teachers, and the next year he quit altogether. Michaux's school career "went downhill," Cole said. [Watch a video about Anthony.](#)

He explored earning a GED while he worked as a cashier at a convenience store, but his mother, Wanda Michaux, convinced him that wasn't good enough. "I told him he couldn't stay in my house without his high school diploma," she said.

And so last year, Michaux tried returning to Cardozo. But school officials refused to take him because of his poor academic record and his age. He decided to fight -- he appealed to the school system's central office -- and won. The school was ordered to re-enroll him because he is entitled under federal law to receive special education services until he turns 22.

This semester, he is carrying a full load with help from a special education teacher -- English, algebra, Spanish and world history -- and he rarely misses class, his teacher said. His plan is to graduate in June 2008 -- three years late and seven years after he started with the Class of 2005.

"I got to be more serious," said Michaux, who wants to attend Clark Atlanta University to study computer technology. "I want to get out."

Researchers Alice Crites and Meg Smith and database editor Dan Keating contributed to this report.