

Samantha: "The buses going to Fairview Heights would all be full. The buses coming to East St. Louis would be empty."

"What if East St. Louis had the very best computer classes in the state—and if there were no computer classes in the school of Fairview Heights?"

"The buses coming here," she says, "would still be empty."

When I ask her why, she answers in these quiet words: "I don't know why."

Sam Morgan, principal of East St. Louis High, was born and raised in East St. Louis. He tells me he didn't go to East St. Louis High, however. "This was the white high school in those days," he says.

His office was ruined in a recent fire, so he meets me in a tiny room with space for three chairs and a desk. Impeccably dressed in a monogrammed shirt with gold links in his cuffs, a purple tie and matching purple handkerchief in his suit pocket, he is tall, distinguished-looking and concerned that I will write a critical report on East St. Louis High. When I ask, however, what he'd do if he were granted adequate funds, he comes up with a severe assessment of the status quo.

"First, we're losing thousands of dollars in our heating bills because of faulty windows and because the heating system cannot be controlled. So I'd renovate the building and install a whole new heating system and replace the windows. We've had fire damage but I see that as a low priority. I need computers—that's a low priority as well. I'd settle for a renovation of the typing rooms and new typewriters. The highest priorities are to subdivide the school and add a modern wing, then bring the science laboratories up to date. Enlarge the library. Buy more books. The books I've got, a lot of them are secondhand. I got them from the Catholic high school when it closed. Most of all, we need a building renovation. This is what I'd do to start with, if I had an extra \$20 million."

After he's enumerated all the changes he would like to make, he laughs and looks down at his hands. "This, of

course, is pie in the sky. You asked me what I need so I have told you. If I'm dreaming, why not dream the big dreams for our children?"

His concerns are down-to-earth. He's not pretentious and does not appropriate the cloudy jargon that some educators use to fill a vacuum of specifics—no talk of "restructuring," of "teacher competency" or any of the other buzzwords of the decade. His focus is on the bare necessities: typewriters, windows, books, a renovated building.

While we are speaking in his temporary office, a telephone call from the police informs him that his house has just been robbed—or that the theft alarm, at least, has just gone off. He interrupts the interview to try to reach his wife. His poise and his serene self-discipline do not desert him. I gain the impression this has happened before. He's a likable man and he smiles a lot, but there is tremendous tension in his body and his fingers grip the edges of his desk as if he's trying very hard to hold his world together.

Before I leave the school, I take a final stroll along the halls. In a number of classrooms, groups of children seem to be involved in doing nothing. Sometimes there's a teacher present, doing something at his desk. Sometimes there's no adult in the room. I pass the cooking class again, in which there is no cooking and no teaching taking place. The "supervised" study hall is still unsupervised.

In one of the unattended classrooms on the second floor, seven students stand around a piano. When I stick my head into the room, they smile and invite me to come in. They are rehearsing for a concert: two young women, five young men. Another young man is seated at the piano. One of the students, a heavysset young woman, steps out just before the others. When she sings, her pure soprano voice transforms the room. "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child," she begins. The pianist gazes up at her with an attentive look of admiration.

The loveliness and the aesthetic isolation of the singer in the squalor of the school and city bring to my mind the words of Dr. Lillian Parks, the superintendent of the East St. Louis schools. "Gifted children," says Dr. Parks, "are everywhere in East St. Louis, but their gifts are lost to poverty and