

# Central Park East: An Alternative Story

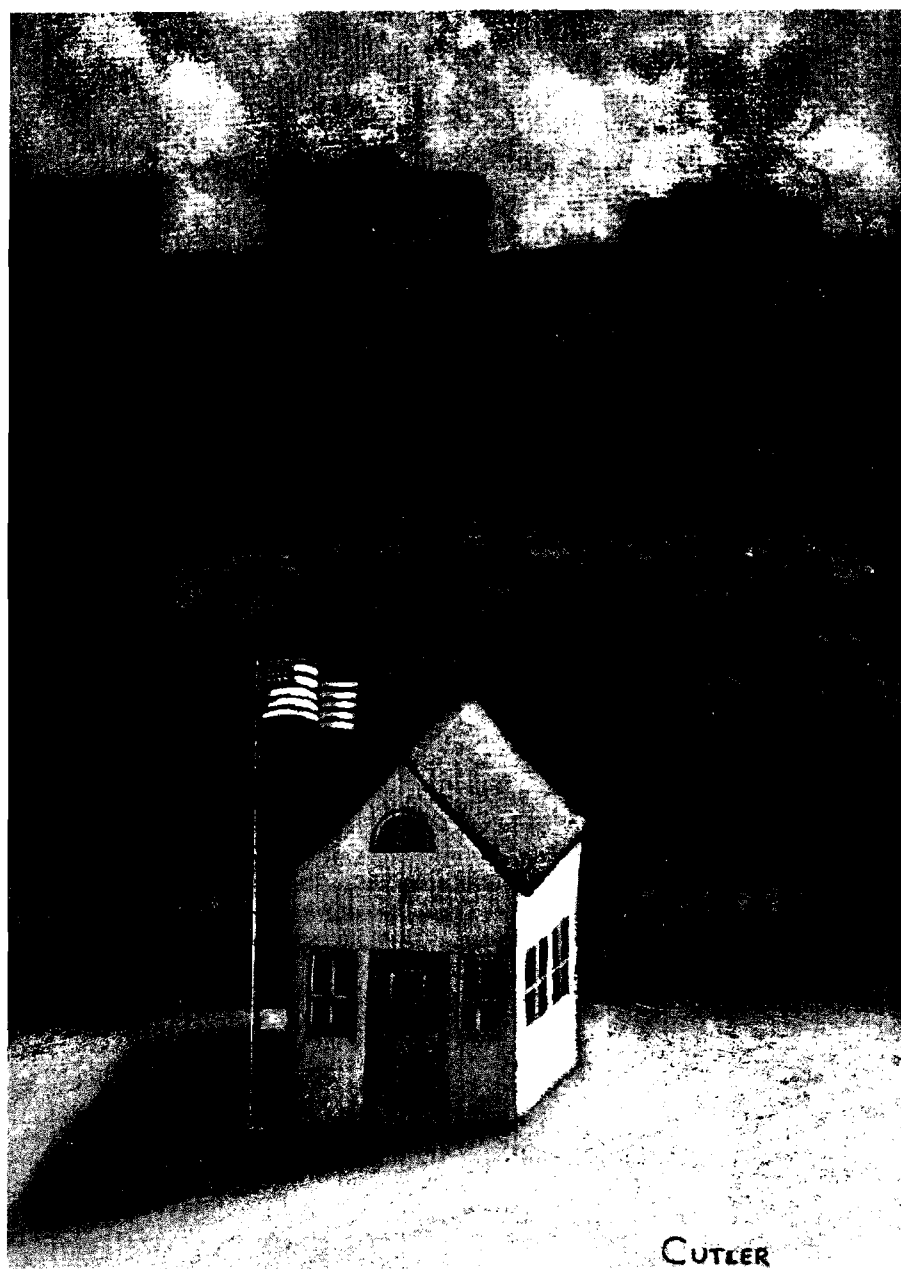


Illustration by Dave Cutler

*If any one school epitomizes the success of choice, it is Central Park East in New York City and the three sister schools that have sprung from it. And yet, says Ms. Meier, what's truly surprising is how few other schools have chosen to break free of the traditional mold.*

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BY DEBORAH MEIER

**I**N THE SPRING of 1991, Central Park East will graduate its first high school students. Some of them will have been with us since they were 4 years old. From age 4 to age 18, they will have attended a school — located in East Harlem in the midst of New York City's District 4 — that many observers believe is as good as any school in the public or the private sector. A progressive school in the tradition of so many of New York's independent private schools, Central Park East is firmly fixed within New York's school bureaucracy. As its founding principal, I remain both ecstatic and amazed. Have we really succeeded?

For most of us on the staff and for many of our parents, well-wishers, and

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friends, the success of Central Park East is a dream come true. A rather fragile dream it has been, tossed by many of the ill winds of this city's tumultuous politics. Today, however, we appear to be sturdier than ever. It would take an unusually strong storm now to uproot us or break us — or even to bend us very much. We are surrounded by a lot of people — within the district and citywide — who would offer strong support if needed.

But it wasn't always so. We have had our share of luck, and we owe a great deal to many different people over the years. We know, too, that our success depended on the success of a district-wide effort to create a whole network of alternative schools. We are, in fact, just one of nearly 30 "options" that are available to families in District 4, aside from the regular neighborhood-zoned elementary schools.

In the fall of 1974 Anthony Alvarado, the new superintendent of District 4, initiated just two such alternatives: our elementary school and a middle school, the East Harlem School for the Performing Arts. Each year thereafter the district supported the launching of several more alternative schools — generally at the junior high level. These schools were rarely the result of a central plan from the district office, but rather tended to be the brainchildren of particular individuals or groups of teachers. They were initiated by the people who planned to teach in them.

It was the district's task to make such dreams come true. The details differed in each case. Most of these schools were designed around curricular themes —

science, environmental studies, performing arts, marine biology. But they also reflected a style of pedagogy that suited their founders. They were always small, and, for the most part, staff members volunteered for duty in them. Finally, when the alternative schools outnumbered the "regulars," Alvarado announced that henceforth all junior high schools would be schools of "choice." By 1980 all sixth-graders in the district chose where they would go for seventh grade. No junior high had a captive population.

On the elementary school level, neighborhood schools remain the norm, though the district handles zoning rather permissively. The only schools of choice on the elementary level are the Central Park East Schools, the East Harlem Block School (founded in the 1960s as a nonpublic, parent-run "free" school), and a network of bilingual elementary schools.

Today, Central Park East is, in fact, not one school but a network of four schools: Central Park East I, Central Park East II, and River East are elementary schools that feed into Central Park East Secondary School, which enrolls students from grades 7 through 12 and is affiliated with Theodore Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools.

The Central Park East schools were founded in 1974, during a time of great educational grief in New York City — just before the schools were forced to lay off more than 15,000 teachers and close elementary school libraries and at a time when the spirit of hope was crushed out of the parent movement and out of the struggles for decentralization, for teacher power, and for structural change. Progressive educators suffered particularly, both because people began to claim that "openness" was "through" (and discredited) and because many of the young teachers and programs that had carried the progressive message were hardest hit by the layoffs.

**I**N THE SPRING of 1974, when Alvarado invited me to build a school in one wing of P.S. 171, it seemed a most unlikely offer. School District 4 served a dismal, bitterly torn, largely Hispanic community. Still, I accepted. Who could refuse such an offer? After struggling for years to make my beliefs "fit" into a system that was organized on quite different principles, af-

ter spending considerable energy looking for cracks, operating on the margins, "compromising" at every turn, the prospect that the district bureaucracy would organize itself to support alternative ideas and practices was irresistible. I was being offered a chance to focus not on bureaucratic red tape, but on the intractable issues of education — the ones that really excited me and many of the teachers I knew.

But this was not a time for having large visions, and I didn't want to be disappointed. I met with Alvarado, began to collect some experienced teachers to help launch our effort, and gradually began to believe that he meant what he said. He offered to let us build a school just the way we wanted. The total allocation of funds (per-pupil costs) would have to be comparable to what was spent on any other school, and our teachers would have to meet the usual requirements of the city, the state, and the union contract. Nor could we be exempt from any city or state regulations. Beyond that, however, the district would support us in doing things our own way.

We began very small and very carefully. First there was the question of "we." Creating a democratic community was both an operational and an inspirational goal. While we were in part the products of what was called "open" education, our roots went back to early progressive traditions, with their focus on the building of a democratic community, on education for full citizenship and for egalitarian ideals. We looked upon Dewey, perhaps more than Piaget, as our mentor.

Virtually all of us had been educated in part at City College's Workshop Center under Lillian Weber. We came out of a tradition that was increasingly uneasy about the strictly individualistic focus of much of what was being called "open."

We were also unhappy about the focus on skills rather than content in many of the "modern," innovative schools — even those that did not embrace the "back-to-basics" philosophy. Many "open" classrooms had themselves fallen prey to the contemporary mode of breaking everything down into discrete bits and pieces — skills — that children could acquire at their own pace and in their own style. In contrast, we were looking for a way to build a school that could offer youngsters a deep and rich curriculum that

would inspire them with the desire to know; that would cause them to fall in love with books and with stories of the past; that would evoke in them a sense of wonder at how much there is to learn. Building such a school required strong and interesting adult models — at home and at school — who could exercise their own curiosity and judgment.

We also saw schools as models of the possibilities of democratic life. Although classroom life could certainly be made more democratic than traditional schools allowed, we saw it as equally important that the school life of *adults* be made more democratic. It seemed unlikely that we could foster democratic values in our classrooms unless the adults in the school also had significant rights over their workplace.

We knew that we were tackling many difficult issues at once. Because of political considerations, planning time was insufficient, but the district tried to make up for this by being extra supportive. Looking back, we were so euphoric that we had the energy of twice our numbers.

We purposely started our school with fewer than a hundred students — in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade only. At the superintendent's request, we recruited outside of the usual district channels, in part so that we wouldn't threaten other schools in the district and in part because one of Alvarado's goals was to increase the pupil population of the district and thus guard against school closings.

Families came to us then, as they still do today, for many reasons. Philosophical agreement on pedagogy was probably the least important. Many families came because they were told by Head Start teachers or principals that their children needed something different, something special. In short, many families came to us because experts claimed that their children would have trouble in traditional schools. Some came because their children were already having trouble in other schools or because older siblings had had trouble in neighborhood schools in the past.

Some families came to us because they had heard us speak and just liked the way we sounded — caring (they told us later), open, friendly, committed. Some came because they had friends who knew us professionally, and some came because they were looking for a different kind of school for philosophi-

cal reasons. Yet even among those who chose us because of our presumed beliefs, there was often confusion about what those beliefs were. Some thought, for example, that this would be a parent-run school, and some thought we didn't believe in any restrictions on children's freedom.

In fact, one of our primary reasons for starting the school — although we didn't often say it — was our personal desire for greater autonomy as teachers. We spoke a lot about democracy, but we were also just plain sick and tired of having to negotiate with others, worry about rules and regulations, and so on. We all came together with our own visions — some collective and some individual — of what teaching could be like if only we had control. Ours was to be a teacher-run school. We believed that parents should have a voice in their children's schooling, and we thought that "choice" itself was a form of power. We also believed that we could be professionally responsive to parents and that, since the school would be open to parents at all times and the staff would be receptive, there would be plenty of opportunity to demonstrate our responsiveness.

Good early childhood education, we believed, required collaboration between the school and the family. This was a matter not only of political principle but also of educational principle, and it motivated us from the start to work hard to build a family-oriented school. We wanted a school in which children could feel safe. Intellectual risk-taking

requires safety, and children who are suspicious of a school's agenda cannot work up to their potential. To create a safe school, we needed to have the confidence of parents, and children needed to know that their parents trusted us. It was that simple. Hard to create, perhaps, but essential.

**W**E STUMBLED a lot in those early years. We fought among ourselves. We discovered that remaining committed to staff decision making was not easy. It was hard, too, to engage in arguments among ourselves without frightening parents and raising doubts about our professionalism. We were often exhausted — sometimes by things that mattered least to us.

By the end of the second year, I had made some crucial decisions regarding the organization and structure of Central Park East. These involved my leaving the classroom to become a somewhat more traditional principal. We have never entirely resolved the tensions over who makes which decisions and how. But the staff continues to play a central role in all decisions, big and small. Nothing is "undiscussable," though we have learned not to discuss everything — at least not all the time. This has actually meant more time for discussing those issues that concern us most: how children learn, how our classes really work, what changes we ought to be making, and on what bases. We have also become better observers of our own practice, as well as more open and aware of alternative practices.

As we have grown in our understanding and in practical skills, we have also reexamined the relationships between school and family. Today, we understand better the many, often trivial ways in which schools undermine family support systems, undercut children's faith in their parents as educators, and erode parents' willingness to assume their responsibilities as their children's most important educators.

Although we have not changed our beliefs about the value of "naturalistic" and "whole-language" approaches to teaching reading, we have become more supportive of parents whose "home instruction" differs from ours. We give less advice on such topics as how not to teach arithmetic or how to be a good parent. We listen with a more critical ear to what



*"That's exactly right, son. This means you won't have to go back to school in the fall."*