are trying to woo the young with celebrity profiles, fitness features, household tips.

In 1988, the Department of Education published a report—a summary of research hither and yon—on television's influence on cognitive development. The widespread publicity placed the emphasis on television's harmlessness. The Associated Press story that ran in the *New York Times* was headlined: "Yes, You Too Can Get A's While Watching 'Family Ties.'" But the report itself, by Daniel R. Anderson and Patricia A. Collins of the Department of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts, is inconclusive on the question of whether television watching affects the capacity to pay attention. "The possibility that rapid pacing may produce effects over longer exposure has not been examined," reads one typical hedge. "There does . . . appear to be some effect of TV on attention, yet the importance, generality, and nature of the effect is unknown": that is the summary sentence. Someday the grants may flow for the research obligatorily called for. But pending research, one still feels entitled to the pessimism that one must then work to forget. Television may not have eroded all possibilities for democratic political life, but it has certainly not thrown open the doors to broad-based enlightenment.

I have tried to show that there is precedent for a shriveled politics of slogans, deceit, and pageantry. But precedent is nothing to be complacent about when ignorance is the product. And the problem, ultimately, is not simply that Americans are ignorant. On this score, the statistics are bad enough. According to a 1979 poll, only 30 percent of Americans responding could identify the two countries involved in the SALT II talks then going on; in 1982, only 30 percent knew that Ronald Reagan opposed the nuclear freeze; in 1985, 36 percent thought that either China, India, or Monaco was part of the Soviet Union. But ignorance is sometimes a defense against powerlessness. Why bother knowing if there's nothing you know how to do about what you know? Why get worked up? What is most disturbing is not ignorance in its own right but, rather, the coupling of ignorance and power. When the nation-state has the power to reach out and blow up cities on the other side of the world, the spirit of diversion seems, to say the least, inadequate. Neither know-it-alls nor know-nothings are likely to rise to the occasion.

—1990

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good schools are still possible

DEBORAH MEIER

I came to New York City in the fall of 1966, and began teaching in Central Harlem a few months later. Within the next two years the schools were embroiled in two strikes. Parents were organized and vocal; teachers believed their recently won powers to be threatened; the city was divided by race and class. And yet there was a lively sense that the old system was done for: change of some sort was on the agenda. Decentralization, pedagogical innovations, parent control, teacher empowerment, accountability, public access, increased state and federal monies. These were the slogans of the day.

At their worst, the city's schools were never bad in quite the way the public imagined. My friends used to marvel that I had the "courage" to teach in a Harlem public school. They imagined schools disorderly and chaotic, filled with violence, knives flashing. Such things could be seen from time to time, but most of us taught in moderately orderly schools, with generally benign, even at times overly docile, though uninterested, children. It was tension rather than actual violence that wore down most school people. Our working conditions were often intolerable, but in ways that seemed either hard to explain or trivial to outsiders.

The real issues that concerned us were rarely noticed by the press, the politicians, the parent organizations, the school boards, or even by our own teachers' union. Instead, ersatz issues were endlessly addressed, and they exhausted us. Violent children and low reading scores were the symbols everyone agreed to talk about; these made for drama and slogans but little understanding.

Absence of respect for the people who made up the roster of school life—parents, kids, teachers, principals—was what was really driving us crazy. Schools reflected this in many ways—mostly trivial, cumulatively devastating. Inventively humiliating procedures began the moment one applied for a job, as one wandered down the Central Board corridors of 110 Livingston Street hoping not to get scolded as one tried to untangle endless Catch-22s. The headline battles ignored the participants' experiences and their perceived complaints. The conversations that teachers, and parents as well, held among themselves remained private, as though

even they thought them unworthy of exposure, of "serious" people's concern. There was the state of the school toilets as well as the required daily lesson plans, the time-clock and the endless interruptions.

We were never the carriers of our own stories. We never trusted our own voices. Reforms came, but we didn't make them. They were invented by people far removed from schools—by "experts." And somehow teachers were never considered experts. Such reforms bypassed the kind of school-by-school changes, both small and structurally radical, that teachers and parents might have been able to suggest—changes that, however slow, could have made a powerful difference.

Fundamental school-based reform has been the major casualty of the post-1960s reforms. By the early 1970s both teachers and parents, the new actors of the 1960s, had retreated to their more familiar postures. Parents withdrew to their workplaces and teachers once again closed their doors hoping only to be left alone. The "experts" rushed in. Every time a fault was found, a system-wide solution was offered. And only those changes that could be translated into system-wide, replicable programs seemed worth discussing. If it couldn't be marketed on a grand scale, it was hardly worth exploring. The kind of detailed specificity that teachers could offer seemed a mere nuisance to the policy makers.

And so the proposed solutions led teachers to be treated like interchangeable parts. A rule that made sense in one setting had to cover all settings. Every apparently good protest gave birth to a new mandate, a new piece of legislation, a new contractual clause, a new pedagogical or curriculum prescription. And with every "reform" we encountered new nightmares.

Let me be specific.

Our concern for improved literacy (sparked by the exposure of low test scores) created a mammoth drive to improve test scores. Improved test scores, alas, are best achieved by ignoring real reading activity. School libraries were gradually closed and the librarians eliminated in favor of remedial teachers and remedial reading "labs" filled with expensive prepackaged kits and reading programs rather than real books. Federal funds earmarked for libraries were now spent on "software"—filmstrips and computer programs. District reading coordinators focused on finding the "best" reading system and training teachers to

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"operate" it, rather than on understanding how children learn to read and the value of being literate. As the curriculum began to imitate the tests, the test-coaching programs became school norms. Children rarely met books intended to be read from front to back. Paragraphs replaced chapters; predictable multiple-choice questions replaced conversation about books. Reading scores went up; literacy collapsed.

There were exceptions. Many good teachers kept doing what they knew was right, and brave principals plugged ahead at educating kids (they would coach for the tests at the last moment, hoping that their scores would not fall hopelessly behind their neighboring "competitors"). A few decentralized districts used newly won local control to unleashed talent, to support teachers and principals with ideas, to encourage parent/teacher collaboration. But they did so amid a system that was becoming increasingly test-driven, prepackaged, and bureaucratized.

And then, in the mid-1970s, the schools experienced a major trauma—equal in impact to the late 1960s battles for community control. The city laid off more than 15,000 teachers in response to its financial crisis. A stunning blow—though, as critics noted, no one in the mammoth Central Board offices was laid off.

The impact of this layoff has been virtually undiscussed. In a highly personal profession, the sudden disappearance of so many people, and the attendant reassignment of thousands of others, caused pain and then a kind of numbing. Although it's true that money alone won't buy change, the idea that a system can both ruthlessly cut back on its teaching staff and make educational breakthroughs is absurd. Teachers' salaries were frozen during this period of steady inflation. Class sizes went up, support for the remaining teachers was cut, and school principals were hopelessly mired in new administrative tasks.

There was no one to lead an effective fight to save our schools. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT—the American Federation of Teachers local) tried to assume this role. From the 1950s to mid-1960s the UFT had pioneered a whole array of proposed structural reforms. But the community control fight had both undercut the union's educational position and split apart the city's pro-education coalition. Under attack from all its usual allies for not minding its own business—traditional bread-and-butter demands—the UFT had accepted the more modest posture of factory-style adversarialism. This had not won

it friends either. Nor, in face of layoffs, was factory-style militancy useful. In turn, the union's inability to avert such massive layoffs had an impact on teacher self-confidence, as it did on organized parent groups, who saw years of work destroyed overnight. New York's racial minorities had already lost their 1960s enthusiasm and militancy, and were suffering the first stages of official "benign neglect." They too were largely silent. There was no fight left in anyone.

We were back to business-as-usual, but one legacy of the 1960s remained. No one could now publicly acknowledge that "some children" might be less "teachable" than others. This powerful critical idea was, however, translated, as usual, into a simple-minded mandate. All must now score above-grade (however ludicrous such an idea might be statistically)—regardless of race, color, or social class (although class was rarely mentioned). And, as the social problems of families increased, so did the school's burdens—even though the accepted view of the school's role remained strictly "cognitive." Cognitive got translated into "measurable," which led back to test scores.

In this disheartening atmosphere I found a haven in a maverick school district, where a charismatic young superintendent, Anthony Alvarado, supported by the East Harlem political establishment, was unleashing a miniwave of real reform. He called upon teachers to make their own local revolution. Within ten years District 4 established twenty small alternative schools led by innovative teacher-directors. As these twenty were gradually established, they sparked change also in the now less-populated neighborhood schools. Although not all the changes were educationally first-rate, they provided opportunities for teachers and children and a welcome feeling of optimism. Alvarado argued, cajoled, manipulated. He attracted talent, he made schooling seem an adventure. He never downplayed professionalism, didn't knock teachers, avoided looking for villains. He didn't mandate one universal top-down system for improvement. He was a maverick who enjoyed mavericks, and he gave many of them a chance to explore—without pressure for quick results or an eye on the media. In fact, he kept things quiet for us, and thrived on minimal confrontations with the outside world. He was also rare in his calm expectation that he would be with us for a long time. (Few of the city's thirty-two district superintendents have lasted more than a few years.)

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During those ten years we lived in a protected world, doing our work—steadily and sturdily. Five teachers and I founded Central Park East (CPE) in the fall of 1974 as a progressive school at a time when everyone claimed such an "open" style was dead. We began a second school (CPE II) in 1979 and a third (River East) in 1982. In 1986, under Alvarado's successor, Carlos M. Medina, we opened a secondary school, thus providing East Harlem with a progressive educational institution for youngsters all the way through high school.

During this same period, the city got a new chancellor, Frank Macchiarola. He took an opposite tack. Macchiarola handled politicians, corporations, foundations, and news reporters marvelously well. He promised big changes—always system-wide. We had grown accustomed to federal and state accountability schemes attached to various funded programs, but Macchiarola promised a new citywide accountability system. Teachers were the workers, Macchiarola boasted, and students the products. Our products should roll off our assembly line classrooms in uniformly proper condition—with plenty of inspections along the way. In reality, the new systems were mainly more of the same: more tests, more officially sponsored coaching, plus undisguised warnings that test scores better go up.

By hook or crook, most of us complied. It was pretty straightforward, and only seemed "crooked" to those who remembered that good assessment devices should not be taught to or coached for. (Any more than an eye exam—which loses value if examinees are "too well" prepared.) In fact, in the "old days" such test-specific coaching had been rigorously prohibited.

Since we now used exactly the same reading tests every year from grades 2–8, teaching to the test was fairly easy. Many schools did virtually nothing but test practice from January through April. With no new ideas, larger class sizes and the same old teachers, the city's scores experienced a remarkable and steady rise. (By 1986 most New York elementary school students were scoring above average!)

Yet no one in the city's high schools praised us for sending them better readers. In fact, things got worse in the high schools. By the mid 1980s a majority of black and Hispanic youngsters were dropping out without diplomas. But Macchiarola managed the news well enough to keep this data out of the public eye until after he departed in the spring of 1983.

At the same time, new regulations for special educational services for the handicapped were creating an ever larger and more expensive bureaucracy, requiring lots of testing and record keeping to stay in legal compliance. Over 10 percent of the city's pupils were soon labeled "handicapped"—nearly 120,000 children! Thousands of social workers, psychologists, and educational evaluators (former teachers) were hired, not to remediate, not to assist teachers, parents or kids, but simply to screen—to test, assess and prescribe. At the end of expensive (but shoddy, by average professional standards) evaluation processes, children were neatly labeled, and specific written school goals set:

> "Given ten two-digit addition examples, the student will use concrete materials to solve eight correctly"; or "given teacher supervision, praise and positive reinforcement, the student will attend to difficult assignments for five minutes, three times out of four, as recorded by teacher." (Taken from the Division's Manual)

A vast statewide law (called Chapter 53) mandating assessment of all new students for possible handicapping or gifted conditions was instituted in 1980. Thus another vast bureaucracy started testing five- and six-year olds. Finding the results of the first assessment unpalatable (30 percent were found "handicapped" and 2 percent "gifted") Macchiarola allegedly asked for new scoring norms. The result was that children entering kindergarten now had a better chance of scoring "gifted" (30 percent) and very little chance of being labeled "handicapped." Not a bad strategy, since we have few resources available to do anything about handicapped kindergarteners (a child has to be two years behind in reading to qualify for special education monies). Besides, everyone liked being called "gifted." The proliferation of "gifted" kindergarten classes was one result of this screening program. Meanwhile, a straightforward professionally administered hearing and vision exam for every entering student remains a utopian goal in our medically sophisticated city.

From the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, little happened except more window-dressing. A demoralized staff teaching larger classes on smaller paychecks gave the city its rising test scores. It did so both to "look good" and because the pressure on kids to get better scores increased.

Macchiarola's other innovation was the institution of two "gates" at fourth and seventh grades through which students scoring in the bottom 25th percentile could not pass. Inflated scores kept the number of holdovers to manageable proportions, but otherwise the only effect of these "gates" was to increase the number of students entering high school as adults—beyond the school-leaving age.

The good press Macchiarola's reforms received made their spread inevitable. Why not a citywide elementary science test? A social studies test? And by 1983 the N.Y. State Board of Regents got on the accountability bandwagon, instituting one of the most detailed and far-reaching top-down educational packages in the nation. This new plan spelled out a statewide curriculum, complete with grade-by-grade testing mechanisms, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, for every accredited school—public, independent or parochial—in the state.

By a mere stroke of a pen, it solved the most complex educational issues. By regulation there was now a plan uniform for all, more "rigorous" and more detailed than former state guidelines and general graduation requirements. It promised equity and quality if students and teachers did their jobs as they were told.

Unlike the high schools, which the Regents curriculum had long controlled, the elementary schools had had room for considerable diversity. The Central Board for years had encouraged individualized instruction, matching curriculum to the child, and pedagogical innovation. Even though this rhetoric was not backed by structural support, at least it gave schools and teachers some elbow room. Some interesting high school innovations had also sprung up, offering alternate approaches to providing adolescents— particularly those most "at risk"—with academic skills. During Macchiarola's tenure as chancellor it was precisely this elbow room that had steadily been invaded. So while New York City's Board voiced opposition to the state mandates, it had, in fact, already begun to practice what the state was preaching.

All of this was occurring at a time when the employment prospects for New York's "at risk" students—always grim—had reached new lows. A social and political climate hardly friendly to poor minority families left these vulnerable young people with little hope. Even a high school diploma began to seem an unlikely dream. Still, there was no protest.

The union did voice objections, but it had limited clout. Its 1960s

militancy had depended on the capacity to strike. Since most of those directly hurt by a strike were constituents of little political importance, and state penalties on strikers severe, the UFT had abandoned its old style of militancy. New York City's students were no longer a cross-section of its voting population. In 1964 over half the students were white. Twenty years later only 23 percent were white and 60 percent were poor enough to qualify for federal food subsidies. The union now depended on its members' electoral muscle, and on alliances with other powerful groups. It had to worry, also, about its public image. Gradually the union's leadership began to address issues with an eye to that broader public. This made it more flexible about traditional union issues, but it was now in a bind about exposing those deteriorating working conditions that it had no effective way of dealing with. It was now dependent on what "others" thought, not just on what teachers found credible. And these "others" were often corporations, business coalitions, and powerful public figures. Many of these "others" appreciated the union's new statesmanship, but they also wanted quick and measurable "results"—something to show for their support of public education.

Overworked teachers and principals, who never had much authorized autonomy anyway, were too overwhelmed with new city and state regulations to find the heart and energy to fight them off. They ignored some, followed others, were cynical about most. Macchiarola had provided a more friendly press; there was a kind of peace between the union and the world, and the state would now tell us what to do. At least we couldn't be blamed if it went wrong.

Then, for a brief moment in the spring of 1984, there was a flowering of hope and possibility. The mayor and the Board of Education had been forced to select a most unlikely successor to the retiring Macchiarola.

Mayor Koch's choice was Robert Wagner, a respected insider's politician. Wagner is, of course, white. Two minority candidates were also included in the final list of nominees: Tom Minter, a well-credentialed black educator then working at the Central Board, and Anthony Alvarado, superintendent of East Harlem's District 4. The three ran a lively public campaign. Although Alvarado captured interest everywhere, it seemed a foregone conclusion that Wagner would get the job. But the state commissioner, Gordon Amsbach, vetoed Wagner on the technical grounds that he had insufficient teaching experience. Consternation! Disbelief! What to do next? There was talk of starting a new search. But as a *New York Times* editorial noted in response to black and Hispanic outrage, doing so would expose the previous search as a charade. Alvarado was appointed chancellor of the public schools.

Alvarado, who rose from teacher to principal to district superintendent before he was 30, was now positioned to make history in American education. A sense of excitement stirred parent groups and the teachers' union. Within eight months, however, his promising career was tangled in an investigation of possible corruption and misuse of funds. Most of the charges were minor and some merely exposed standard system practices, but the very number of them seemed suspicious. His responses were evasive; media and public alarm grew; Alvarado resigned. The only educational legacy of his brief tenure was the creation of all-day kindergartens.

The board then selected Nathan Quinones as chancellor. Formerly head of the high school division (the only part of the system incontrovertibly still under Central control), he had the additional advantage of being Hispanic, thus averting any accusations that Alvarado's fall might have had racial implications. Quinones was a safe choice. (Ed. note: As we went to press Quinones had just announced that he was taking early retirement.)

The agenda stemming from the chancellor's office has slowed. Neither bottom-up nor bold top-down initiatives were Quinones's style. Nor did he enjoy the public/media "stature" of either Macchiarola or Alvarado. Reducing dropouts, truancy, and absenteeism were his stated major goals—a little each year. These are also the latest federal and state targets. New reports, time lines, and task forces are in place. The state and city have set up teams to "help" schools write plans for how they will improve—higher test scores and lower absentee figures. Lower class size in the early grades is probably Quinones's most important initiative. A subtle campaign to recentralize the city's schools is probably the most dangerous, although it's not clear who is initiating this one.

As I stare at the piles of memos and forms that confront me as a school principal, the job appears somewhere between a joke and an impossibility. The staff and I are directed instantly to implement new programs to resolve current social crises, to use the latest research on

teaching, to tighten supervision, increase consultation, and to report back in detail on all the above. There are pages of new rules and regulations to study: the Regents plan alone would take a few months to make sense of. Responding to it would take a lifetime. Meanwhile, finding the funds to buy paper, repair our single rented typewriter, fix a computer, or tune the piano requires most of my time and imagination.

It's even harder this year. Money to run our school is always tight—an adventure in ingenuity and making do. Now an innovative UFT-sponsored plan to create workplace democracy has created instead schoolwide chaos. Previously principals received a lump sum (approximately $10–15 per student for the school year) to spend on all non-textbook needs. This year, the Central Board directed that teachers receive $200 each to order their own supplies. Sounds good! They were given an abbreviated catalogue, two weeks to complete their orders and no time for schoolwide consultation. Nor was anyone told that the $200 was not in addition to, but largely in place of, routinely available funds. The result: classrooms have gained some well-deserved extras but we have all lost the critical basics: paper, pencils, duplicating fluid, stamps, etc. Once again, a centrally imposed solution defeats an essentially sound idea.

Meanwhile the building in which we work is falling apart. Radiators leak, toilets back up, doors have no locks, windows are broken, fluorescent lights don't work because they need ballasts (which I am not allowed to go out and buy), desks are gouged with graffiti, and because we have too few chairs we have to carry them from classroom to classroom. The payroll secretary has more power over teachers than I do—she can dock their salaries and generally harass them if they are late, or forget to punch out, or are sick without a doctor's note. The custodial engineer is the boss of the building, and can prohibit teachers from coming in early or staying late, or dropping by on off days.

Any halfway decent camp sets aside more time for collective planning for a two-month summer recreation program than teachers are provided to plan a ten-month educational program. We are ordered to stick to "cognitive" (academic) goals, but our students still come to us with the exponential weight of unsolved economic and social family crises. We are ordered to give every child an hour's homework nightly—exact numbers of minutes per child per grade are centrally dictated—

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and expected to also read, assess, and comment on each. All in one twenty-four hour day. We spend more time and energy making sure that no one who doesn't deserve it gets a free or reduced price school lunch than we do on making the lunchroom a decent place. In a system that refers to the midday meal as a "feeding program" (in England, it is called "dinner"), it is clear that the people doing the "feeding" and those being "fed" are not valued too highly.

Prestigious commissions—like Carnegie and Holmes—speak, at last, of the need to improve the status of teaching, of giving the people who must implement programs the power to design them. And they are right. But they often miss the significance of the details that stand in our way. The struggle is not only over weighty academic rights, but also these seemingly small and petty ones. Reform must address both. But it won't until teachers get more actively involved in the reform movement.

One pioneering county in Florida is planning to rename teachers "executives." But the teachers I know do not object to being called "teachers"; it is teaching that they want to get back to! They resent the time spent "managing," scrounging, making do, not the time spent "teaching." Serious, rooted change cannot happen unless the knowledge of those who do the job is tapped. To make this possible requires support, time—and patience. Patience above all. Mandates only seem efficient because they can at least make claim to "quick cures," in time for the next election. But when we speak of educating for democratic citizenship, rather than job training, patience is at the heart. Perseverance, reflection, flexibility, intelligence . . . but also patience. Schools will not become educationally successful by deadlines and mandates. The only kind of mandates that could help would be of quite a different order. Can mandates be designed that support school-based initiative, inquiry, and decision making? Could we mandate that schools provide teachers with time to talk and plan together? Or that schools be required to make their beliefs and practices public? For a starter maybe we could mandate that employers give parents time off to visit school.

School people don't insist on working in a vacuum, "doing their own thing." They want to be "exposed." The more "exposure" the better—so that schooling becomes visible in many ways, not just through numbers and statistics. Formal schooling, after all, occupies at least a dozen of our

most impressionable years, and we are involved again as parents when our children go to school. Nearly half a lifetime; years that have enormous influence on public habits, values, and competencies. Hardly an insignificant topic for public discussion. This kind of attention might produce lots of criticism, not just applause. But while teachers (including me) might not always like informed criticism, we would acknowledge more of it, and it could thus lead to real discourse. Strangling schools with red tape and system-wide mandates—big ones or little ones—is what is truly inefficient. Until those who make decisions, including "the public," can see the specific local connections between policy and practice, we will not make the breakthroughs that our rhetoric demands. There just isn't a faster route.

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why the sandinistas lost

PAUL BERMAN

A few days before the Somoza dictatorship was overthrown in 1979, Anastasio Somoza Debayle called a demonstration for himself in central Managua. A vast crowd descended on the rally grounds. A Nicaraguan journalist tells me that, looking at the immensity and enthusiasm of the crowd, one would never have guessed that most Nicaraguans hated Somoza and that even some of the cheering multitude secretly detested the man and his government.

Why did people who felt that way come to demonstrate for him? Because for anyone who depended on state contracts or employment or needed some sort of favor, attending Somocista rallies was the soul of common sense. Not to mention that, should you ever tilt into opposition, the Somocista government was likely to organize a Liberal party mob to keep you in line—tough characters drawn from the jails and the underworld who could be called out to march in the streets and assault anyone thought to oppose the regime. There was the additional intimidating fact that Somoza maintained a ruthless army of eight thousand men.

When General Somoza asked you to come to a demonstration and cheer at his name, you had good reason, therefore, to give that invitation serious thought. You stood in the sun and chanted, "Viva Somoza!" And when the opportunity arose—you overthrew the bastard.

A few days before the Nicaraguan elections last February, the Sandinista Front for National Liberation held a mammoth campaign rally in the big Managua plaza. There were at least two hundred thousand people, or, by the most common estimate, three hundred fifty thousand (meaning ten percent of the entire country), or possibly more than four hundred thousand. It was the biggest election rally in Nicaraguan history and widely regarded as a sure indication of impending Sandinista victory.

Yet four days later, when the people voted in what was guaranteed to be a secret ballot, only five hundred eighty thousand persons from the entire country put their mark in the Sandinista column. A large percentage of the crowd that chanted the Sandinista slogans must have