

SUCCESS IN EAST HARLEM

How One Group of Teachers Built a School That Works

BY DEBORAH MEIER

IN 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 now firmly fixed within New York's school bureaucracy.

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 districtwide 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—sci-

ence, 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.

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*Theodore Sizer is the author of *Horace's Compromise* and the founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

IN 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, after 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

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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.

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

WHAT THEY DO AND HOW THEY DO IT

AS TEACHERS at Central Park East overhauled and rebuilt the traditional school structure, they kept one key aim in mind: to give teachers time to get to know each student and time to tailor the instructional program for each individual. Here are some examples of what they've done:

Time for Students

■ To get the student load way down, all professional staff—including the librarian and the director—teach. Aside from one director, there are no supervisors.

■ The high school is organized into Houses of 80 students, each with a faculty of four. The basic class is 20 students and the student load per teacher is never more than 80. If the teacher teaches two disciplines instead of one, the load is just 40.

■ To maximize the personal relationship between students and teachers, students stay with the same teacher (or teachers) two years in a row.

Time for Teachers

■ Each fall the staff plans a series of semi-monthly faculty meetings. One year, every other faculty meeting considered various approaches to writing. Sometimes, at a teacher's request, one student's progress or

one teacher's curriculum is discussed.

■ Once a week, the staff of each House takes an 80-minute lunch and discusses the progress of individual students and the overall work of the House.

■ One morning a week, while students work in the community, teachers from each department can spend three uninterrupted hours designing, evaluating, and tinkering with the curriculum.

The Curriculum

The curriculum is designed by those who teach it. Teachers can opt to hire consultants.

■ The seventh and eighth grade science sequence includes an interdisciplinary unit on "Light and Sight" that exposes students to both biology (optics) and physics (the properties of light).

■ The eighth grade humanities sequence focuses on "power"—who has it, who doesn't, and how different people have gotten it. The first semester focuses on the English, French, and American revolutions; the second, on nonrevolutionary change in America.

Flexible Scheduling

Because the schedule is in the

hands of teachers, the time allotted the revolutions could be increased when it was discovered that at least one student still thought Boston was in London.

Resources

Once a topic—such as the revolutions—has been chosen, all faculty haunt used-book shops to build a resource library on the subject. Teachers are thus not text-bound, but have access to a variety of materials—some of which will interest every student.

Writing

Working in different settings with different "editors," students get plenty of practice with—and individual attention to—their writing. They write at least once a week in humanities and in a "writing workshop," plus four days a week in regularly reviewed journals.

Parent Conferences

Twice a year, parents must come to the school, review a portfolio of their child's work, and meet with the teacher *and* the student to discuss the student's progress. With everybody in the same room together, parents won't hear one version of events from the student and another from the teacher.

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.

WE 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.

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. 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.

AS WE became more secure with ourselves and our program, the district was expanding its network of alternative schools. In the fall of 1974 we were one of two. Within a half-dozen years there were about 15 “alternative concept” schools, mostly on the junior high level, where schooling had most glaringly broken down.

The district also dispensed with the assumption that one building equals one school. Instead, every building in the district was soon housing several distinct schools—each with its own leadership, parent body, curricular focus, organization, and philosophy. Most of the new junior highs were located in elementary school buildings. Former junior high buildings were gradually turned to multiple uses, as well. Sometimes three or more schools shared a single building. As a result, the schools were all small, and their staffs and parents were associated with them largely by choice.

By the late Seventies, Central Park East was so inundated with applicants that the district decided to start a small annex at P.S. 109, now known as Central Park East II. The district's decision was probably also motivated by the availability of federal funds for the purpose of school integration. While Central Park East has always had a predominantly black (45%) and Hispanic (30%) student population, it is one of the few district schools that has also maintained a steady white population, as large as about 25%. (The population of District 4 is about 60% Hispanic, 35% black, and 5% white.)

In the beginning, this ratio came about largely by chance, but the 25% white population in the school has been maintained by choice. In general, the school has sought to maintain as much heterogeneity as possible, without having too many fixed rules and complex machinery. The school accepts all siblings, as part of its family orientation. After siblings, priority goes to neighborhood families. In other cases, the school tries to be nonselective, taking in most of its population at age five strictly on the basis of parental choice, with an eye to maintaining a balanced student body. Well over half of the students have always qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, and some 15% to 20% meet the state requirements for receiving special education funds.

The demand for spaces still far outstripped available seats, and, a few years later, the district decided to start a third elementary school. This one was named River East.

Thus by 1984 Central Park East had become three schools, each designed for about 250 students, each with its own individual style and character, yet united in basic ways. Then, in 1984, at the 10th anniversary celebration of our founding, Theodore Sizer congratulated the school for its impressive history and asked, “Why not a Central Park East secondary school?” Why not keep the good things going through the 12th grade?

We agreed. Our own study of our sixth-grade graduates persuaded us that starting a secondary school was a good idea. Some of our critics had said that a secure and supportive elementary school would not prepare students to cope with the “real world.” Our study of our graduates had proved them wrong. Regardless of race or social class, our graduates had handled the real world well. They had coped. The statistics we compiled amazed even us. Only one of our graduates, who were hardly an academic elite, had left school prior to earning a high school diploma. Furthermore, half of our graduates had gone on to college.

But our graduates had stories to tell. And their stories were not stories about being educated, but about survival. They told us stories that confirmed what Sizer had written about U.S. high schools in *Horace's Compromise*. But the stories our graduates told us were generally far worse than those Sizer chronicled, since he was often describing wealthy or middle-class schools.

We began negotiations with the district and with the city. In the fall of 1985 we opened the doors to Central Park East Secondary School, which serves grades 7 through 12. We are now back where we began, starting something entirely new. However, the obstacles that block the path of reforming a high school are harder to budge than those that face elementary schools.

For instance, the idea that an “alternative” high school means a school for “difficult” kids is firmly entrenched in the tradition of New York City high schools, and the anxiety about preparing students for the “real world” is more pressing than in elementary schools. Moreover, the Regents exams, course requirements, college pressures, and the usual panic about dealing with adolescents and their problems combine to make the task even more complex—especially in light of New York's recently adopted Regents Action Plan, which runs counter to everything we and the Coalition of Essential

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Schools believe. With its increased number of required courses and standardized examinations and its greater specificity about course content, the Regents Action Plan leaves far less room for initiative and innovation at the school level. Another barrier is the dearth of experience with progressive education at the secondary school level. There is little for us to learn from and not much of a network of teachers or teacher education institutions that can provide us with support, ideas, and examples.

But we have a lot going for us, too. We have our three sister elementary schools to lean on and draw support from. We have the Coalition of Essential Schools and a growing national interest in doing something about the appalling quality of many public secondary schools. And, under its current superintendent, Carlos Medina, the district continues to support the idea of alternative "schools of choice" for all children, all parents, and all staff members. We have also been receiving invaluable support from the citywide high school division and the alternative high school superintendent, who oversees a disparate collection of small high schools throughout New York City.

And we are determined. New York City's high schools are clearly in a state of crisis. The dropout rate is appalling, the fate of many who do not drop out officially is equally devastating, and the decline in college attendance by black and Hispanic students is frightening. Perhaps the time has come for progressive education to tackle the high school again, to demonstrate that giving adolescents and their teachers greater responsibility for the development of educational models is the key ingredient.

The notion of respect, which lies at the heart of democratic practice, runs counter to almost everything in our current high schools. Today's urban high schools express disrespect for teachers and students in myriad ways—in the physical decay of the buildings, in their size, in the anonymity of their students, and in the lack of control over decisions by those who live and work in them.

Although the reasons for the recent national concern over high schools may have little to do with democracy, the current reform mood offers an important opening—if we can resist the desire for a new "one best way." We cannot achieve true reform by fiat. Giving wider choices and more power to those who are closest to the classroom are not the kinds of reforms that appeal to busy legislators, politicians, and central board officials. They cannot be mandated, only facilitated. Such reforms require fewer constraints, fewer rules—not more of them. They require watchfulness and continuous documenting and recording, not a whole slew of accountability schemes tied to a mandated list of measurable outcomes.

Do we have the collective will to take such risks? Only if we recognize that the other paths are actually far riskier and have long failed to lead us out of the woods. Like democratic societies, successful schools can't be guaranteed. The merits of letting schools try to be successful schools can't be guaranteed. The merits of letting schools try to be successful are significant. But allowing them to try requires boldness and patience—not a combination that is politically easy to sustain. □

DEMOCRACY'S ROOTS

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missing is the notion that God holds the individual responsible for the exercise of free will in moral choice. Jews and Christians both deny the fatalism common in the ancient world. Man the individual is responsible; he can act otherwise. His choice is not determined—or excused—by fate, mystery, environment, or collectivity. Absent from these texts, too, is the idea of individual creation of each soul in the spiritual image of God, which to believers is the compelling reason to accept the equality and dignity of every person on earth. Some of the texts touch upon the principle of equality but without reference to the religious source of its power.

In Judaism and Christianity, the fatalism of the ancient world is also defied by the doctrine of amelioration. The world is not to be accepted as it is. God imposes on Jew and Christian the duty to make it better, regardless of obstacles or excuses. Whatever the actual religious beliefs—and nonbeliefs, even antibeliefs—of Western peoples, they have ever since been marked by these ideas: the equality and dignity of all, the need for societies in which moral choice is freely possible, and the duty to struggle for just and decent communities. That religious leaders and believers in positions of power have, throughout history, often betrayed and suppressed such ideas may be regrettable (though, given the basic view of human nature, not surprising) but is beside the point. The egalitarian, individualistic, humanitarian, reformist, and striving ethic rooted in the Jewish and Christian faiths lives on. Coupled with the codes of personal behavior that the Judeo-Christian tradition shared with the pagan Greek and Roman philosophers—fortitude, self-restraint, self-examination, self-respect, and devotion to truth and reason—this ethic has sustained, and been sustained by, the best moments of liberal democracy in nations East and West.

If such commonplaces are absent from elementary texts, it is not surprising to find other important ideas missing as well. Among them is the peculiarly tense, restless nature of Western religion, which imposes countless, frequently competing charges on its followers. Jews and Christians, and those who have absorbed its moral imperatives without wholly retaining the faith, are enjoined to transform themselves but

THE TEXTBOOKS REVIEWED

■ *Scott-Foresman's History and Life: The World and its People*, by Walter T. Wallbank, et al. (1982);

■ *Holt, Rinehart & Winston's People and Our World: A Study of World History*, by Allan O. Kownslar and Terry L. Smart (1981);

■ *Prentice-Hall's World History: Patterns of World Civilization*, by Burton F. Beers (1983);

■ *Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich's People and Nations: A World History*, by Anatole G. Mazour, John Peoples and Theodore K. Rabb (1983);

■ *Ginn's Our Common Heritage: A World History*, by Daniel Roselle (1984)

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- 11 **TIME EDUCATION PROGRAM**: Time and College teaching materials via TIME magazine, including Weekly Reader.
- 12 **VALIC**: Provides tax-deferred retirement savings for more than 8,000 non-profit organizations over 400,000 individuals. Circle No. 12 for information.
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also to transform society; to obey God's law always but also to render to Caesar all that is his; to suffer injustice but to defy unjust laws; to be humble but to show the light of righteousness; to seek truth through faith but also through reason; to aspire to the spiritual but also to use well the things of the earth and the flesh. The main stream of Western religion has not been otherworldly but, as Frost said, ever "risking spirit in substantiation." The results have not always been holy or edifying to look at. Religious warfare and persecution have been as cruel in the West as anywhere, in crusades, pogroms, inquisitions, massacres, and civil wars.

For textbooks to dwell a bit longer on Judaism and Christianity need not imply claims of superiority over

other world religions and need not suggest that others have not inspired admirable ideals of human conduct. Indeed, not a few Westerners have found spiritual comfort in other faiths less bound up with things of the earth. Moreover, the West has never been dominated by any single version of morality and values, except for a short time in the Middle Ages. Out of the legacy of ideas of Greece, Rome, Judaism, and Christianity, Westerners have grappled with multiple questions and quests—sometimes in turn, sometimes several at once. What is beautiful? What is true? What is just, orderly, or merely useful? What is holy? What will save me? What is the full human life? What is success, honor, love? Many historians, trying to account for the West's incessant change and dynamism—for better or worse—have fastened upon the restless, contradictory impulses rooted in its activist, eclectic religious heritage. In this sense, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (a good book for high school students) is a parable about the end of Western civilization: nobody is to ask any more questions or to seek anything but fun and comfort.

Admittedly, the history of ideas cannot bear close measurement. But in a world daily proving to us that ideas have power, textbook writers for high school students could well pay more attention to them—not only because they are important, but because they are more likely to engage students than any other sort of history. Not to explain the religious sources or moral ideas so critical to human rights and free societies is a major pedagogical and intellectual failure in these texts. □

ORDERING INFORMATION

Democracy's Untold Story: What World History Textbooks Neglect, the full study from which this article was excerpted, is available in paperback from the AFT *Democracy's Untold Story* includes chapters on "The Legacy of the Greeks," "The Middle Ages as a Source of Representative Government," "Ideas from the Enlightenment," "The American and French Revolutions," "World War I — Before and After," and "Totalitarianism, Left and Right." To order, send a check for \$4.98, payable to the AFT Educational Foundation, to Democracy's Untold Story, AFT, 555 New Jersey Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20001.