

## EDITORIAL

# OUTSIDER'S CHANCE

The dead-in-the-water campaign for the 1992 Democratic presidential nomination is suddenly lively and animated. It's an alien life form, however, of marginal or unknown creatures who on the face of it have little base and smaller prospects, and are therefore objects of ridicule or scorn.

There's former Governor Jerry Brown, who can't escape his Zenny past and spacey reputation. There is a trio of other "formers": peace activist Larry Agran, a three-term Mayor of Irvine, California; Paul Tsongas, a one-term Senator from Massachusetts; and Lyndon LaRouche, a former Trotskyist and con (for scamming money from fans). Then there's Governor Douglas Wilder of Virginia, whose main attraction seems to be his (slight) potential for drawing black support away from Jesse Jackson, and a few other sitting politicians of medium merit: Senator Tom Harkin, Governor Bill Clinton, Senator Bob Kerrey. And now there's a nascent movement (announced in an ad in this issue) to draft Ralph Nader.

Some of the above are intriguing and progressive politicians, some are merely suffering from bland ambition, LaRouche is a nut case, and here at *The Nation* there's more than a soft spot for brother Nader.

The conventional wisdom is that, lacking a clear front-runner, the Dems should pick a conventional candidate at their party convention. But voters are bored with the smarmy neoliberals touted by party insiders. The quirkiness of the current candidates symbolizes public dissatisfaction with traditional candidacies. What's needed is an unconventional candidate, an outsider who will motivate other outsiders—that 50 percent who have turned off and dropped out of the political system with good reason—to go to the polls and vote. Otherwise we face the depressing prospect of four more years of Bush and maybe fourteen or forty more of Reagan, Bush, Quayle, ad infinitum.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

**E.P. Thompson**  
**Richard J.**  
**Barnet**

**Joanne Landy**

**Boris**  
**Kagarlitsky**

**Aleksandr**  
**Tsipko**

**Zhores A.**  
**Medvedev**

**Roy Medvedev**

## WHY WE READ

**Katha Pollitt**

## BLACKS, JEWS AND SURVIVAL

**Letty Cottin**  
**Pogrebin**

## THOMAS, NO!

**Bruce Shapiro**

## ANNE SEXTON

**Grace Schulman**

## UP AGAINST THE SYSTEM

# THE LITTLE SCHOOLS THAT COULD

**DEBORAH W. MEIER**

"Too Good for Its Own Good? Bronx School Backs Quality" ran the front-page August 10 headline of *The New York Times*. The story was about the threatened closure of the Bronx New School, a small, highly innovative elementary school in New York City, on the eve of moving to its larger site. The new District Superintendent, John Reehill, was quoted as saying that the school was too autonomous, that its effort to maintain a racial balance and its insistence on being different made it "elitist," too much like a "private school." He said he intended to dismiss its teacher-director and merge it with another, more traditional school.

All over the country efforts similar to the Bronx New School face or have met similar fates. The question is, Why? What's puzzling is not that such schools make enemies but that their enemies are so successful in today's presumably pro-reform educational climate. Brave groups of parents and teachers stick their necks out, but their work rarely gets off the ground, or if it does get off the ground the schools they invent rarely survive the founding fathers and mothers. They get subtly or not so subtly transformed by bringing in new leadership more "compatible" with the system and less "abrasive," more beholden to the authorities above, not to the school's own constituents. And where they succeed in avoiding all these pitfalls, they know enough to keep a low profile.

Rather than contributing to the reform movement, such schools have quietly gone underground, praying just to sneak through another year. The innovators shun the

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approve not just Thomas himself but his far-reaching commitment to unravel the fabric of community and social responsibility. □

## Little Schools

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news media. Fame they don't need. Instead of helping to revitalize public education, their short-lived success stories help breed cynicism about public institutions. The movement to privatize American education, which has gathered considerable momentum in the past decade, thrives on their stories [see Meier, "Choice Can Save Public Education," March 4].

The Bronx New School's record of achievement is not in dispute. It served a largely "at risk" population but also attracted some middle-class families. Begun three years ago by a group of Bronx parents dissatisfied with the local public schools, it operated out of the small cramped basement of a local church while it awaited and helped redesign a larger space that would enable it to expand from under a hundred students to several hundred. It always intended to stay small, at least in comparison with the huge size of the average New York City public school, and envisioned gradually adding a middle or secondary school. But it didn't intend to change its style, roughly modeled after the successful Central Park East schools in East Harlem, to which some parents had earlier bused their children at considerable inconvenience.

The Bronx New School operated on the basis of a close collaboration between school and family, under a teacher-director who had many years of experience as director of a nursery coop. It was characterized by inter-age grouping and it didn't separate children by academic ability, two currently much-approved reforms. Children learned at their own pace in a classroom community in which depth rather than superficial coverage of material was emphasized, and children were encouraged to work both collectively and individually, depending on the task and their preferences. The curriculum was built around the interests of young people, and the school's small rooms were alive with activity—hands-on use of scientific and mathematical materials and lots of creative writing and art work, which covered the walls. The parents and staff built their own library by collecting used books and buying new ones with private funds—a practice that Superintendent Reehill criticized, charging them with creating a "private" library. They painted their drab space and built or scrounged for "extras." A parent coordinator to help maintain the high level of family participation, a part-time curriculum specialist and additional library materials were the result of the school's skill at seeking private-sector grants. The additional "riches" that offended the Superintendent were thus not taken away from other district schools. The district's per-pupil expenditure on the Bronx New School was approximately the same as it spent on any other school. The school struggled over the appropriate division of labor between parents and professional staff

but didn't give up its belief in the importance of each having a say in the school.

The school's parent body was predominantly low-income; two-thirds were either Latino or African-American. By design, a third were white or "other." Families applied for admission and were selected by lottery; many more than there was space for applied. Both parents and their children loved it. Few students left and none were kicked out. Attendance was nearly perfect. While technically an annex of an existing traditional neighborhood elementary school, in fact its teacher-director reported to the former superintendent and the school had considerable autonomy.

But, as Evelyn Nieves of the *Times* reported, "such success . . . may be the school's downfall." The current plan is to eliminate its leadership, merge it with classes from the nearby neighborhood school and place it under the direct control of that school's principal. That will be the end, parents and staff agree.

The most interesting part of the story is that few school reformers get exercised over such events. The people who kill such schools count on this. The death of the Bronx New School seems a small matter in the larger scheme of things. The reformers find such small-scale, homemade changes of little importance—after all, the Bronx New School affects only a few hundred kids. New York, they say, has a million pupils. What is needed, they claim, are macro reform measures that affect all schools equally and reach desperate millions, rather than highly personalized inventions of a small group of practitioners, parents and kids. Some reformers even agree with Superintendent Reehill that such schools are inherently unfair because they provide for a lucky few a quality education that remains inaccessible to the vast majority. But that's like attacking a low-income housing project because it hasn't solved the housing problems of *all* low-income people.

It's precisely this mindset, not the authoritarianism of a particular superintendent or the political ambitions of a particular school board member, that is killing the Bronx New School, and by extension hundreds of others like it. What Reehill found most offensive may have been the Bronx New School's independent style: hiring a director who hadn't come up through the system, creating the alleged "private library," developing a different form of decision making. "They have to realize that in New York City they have rules and regulations. . . . It is a public school, not a private school," he told the *Times*. That bureaucrats should resent schools that thrive on acting with unauthorized autonomy is understandable. That bureaucrats can get away with dismantling these schools at a time when educational reform is such a popular cause is less understandable. Why so little protest from those education policy-makers busy attending conferences and joining task forces? They are not likely to be sympathetic to Reehill's distaste for autonomy. But when he charges the Bronx New School with being "unfair," he hits a responsive chord.

How else to explain the indifference of educators over the past fifteen years to the kind of reforms that occurred in the now-famous East Harlem District 4, and the mere trickle of efforts to replicate the success of the Central Park East schools, with which I have been intimately involved over the past eight-

een years? The lessons of hundreds of successful alternative schools are always dismissed in the same way: "It's really very nice; in fact it's really even remarkable; it's clearly a success story and deserving of praise, but . . ."

What's the but? They aren't reproducible models that can be imposed on unwilling participants. They won't change those who don't want to change. Such schools offer no detailed blueprint for success; they depend too much on idiosyncratic individuals, the right mix of parents and staff, dedicated teachers, unusual families.

What these critics seem to be looking for is a model that mediocre people can carry out, that's standardized and factory-made, that anyone can duplicate by implementing the new curriculum, the latest tests or a new form of governance. "We want reforms that will produce schools like yours," they insist, "but we want ones that are replicable by people who aren't like you."

They're both right and wrong. They're right in saying that the Bronx New Schools of this world are by nature replicaproof. That's the secret of their success. They're wrong, because a good school is by definition unique. The Bronx New School may have been inspired by East Harlem's Central Park East schools, but what people created in the Bronx was not another C.P.E. school but a school that fit their own needs. What the "system" can do is create the structural conditions that encourage people to want to change and give them sufficient autonomy to do so, and that provide support and encouragement even when they blunder in the course of creating their interpretation of the "good school." But in the end the change must be home-grown.

Such a reform agenda won't unleash a massive movement to remake schools overnight. Until we have a sufficiently large number of such different and successful schools we can't and shouldn't win over the skeptics. You can make temporary improvements by decree . . . perhaps. But without substantially increased resources even this is dubious. None of the reforms being touted today in pedagogy, curriculum or governance will in themselves create schools for the future. The essential ingredient for schools that produce intelligent adults is the presence of a community of people exercising their intelligence on a daily basis, coming up with ideas for change and then having the freedom to act on the conclusions they reach. Nothing less than that will work (although more than that is also needed). That's what's so special about the Bronx New School. The people who founded it argued over ideas—the design of a new curriculum, the place of rote learning, noncompetitive ways of evaluating student performance, homework that doesn't baffle parents, the difficulties that can arise between parents and teachers when both want more power.

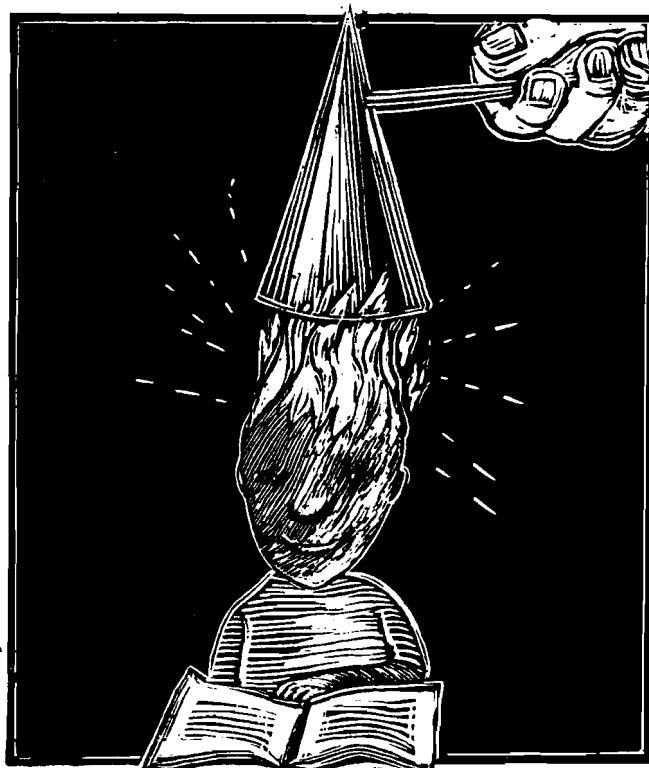
The only way to produce schools like the Bronx New School is to encourage that sense of "specialness," not attack it. It's a specialness that grows out of the fact that the school is the hard-won and carefully crafted creation of a particular group of people: an act of willed intelligence. A good school is always particular.

But there are potential macro strategies that encourage such

innovations. In New York City, Chancellor Joseph Fernandez's "school-based management/shared decision making" concept is not an end in itself, as critics who have followed its history as a national reform agenda have been quick to point out. But it is intended as a strategy, not a solution. The Chicago plan, which turns schools over to a council of parents and teachers with considerable freedom of action, is another macro strategy that can provide a framework for innovation. What is needed is a legislative strategy designed to nurture such particularity, that offers parents and teachers an incentive to break the mold, and some protection once they get under way. To have national impact the new schools must be open to criticism from without—careful and thoughtful responses to their pedagogy and curriculum, and close attention to how well their students are learning.

A good school is always "experimental," always learning from its own experiences. It's a place in which the "having of wonderful ideas," as educator Eleanor Duckworth noted in a book by that title, becomes the essence of education. Not only does such an environment encourage wonderful ideas by its staff, it creates a community powerful enough to convince young people that having wonderful ideas is at the heart of a good life.

The impact upon young people of such an education is long-range and powerful. This is not conjecture; it has been proved time and again. The latest study of the graduates of the Central Park East elementary schools showed that almost every one of them finished high school and most went on to college. In interviews the students described how much it had meant to them to study in a climate in which their ideas were taken seriously. The success of the C.P.E. secondary school in transforming the lives and hopes of its overwhelmingly low-income African-American and Latino students is equally in-



disputable. What the C.P.E. schools, like the Bronx New School, are about is the creation of powerful communities of people who know one another well and take one another seriously (which involves quarreling).

Above all, what such communities produce is lots of face-to-face exchanges about the meaning of their institutions, and the power and autonomy to change them. They reproduce a powerful public discourse on what it means to be a well-educated person. Weekly staff meetings generate lively discussions over everything from the appropriate dress code to improved ways to report students' performance to their parents. What, if any, common set of facts all students should know is the kind of topic that in the context of a real school setting, focusing on real young people, engenders thoughtful discussion that enriches not only teachers but parents and students. A school community that together looks at samples of student work and argues over its merits, as well as ways to respond, is engaged in the most effective form of staff development. The debate over multiculturalism and Eurocentrism takes place publicly in such schools and can't be sidestepped with generalities. In designing a one-year curriculum around the "peopling of the Americas," the Central Park East school system spent considerable time thinking through the differences between voluntary and forced migrations, ways to tell the Columbus story and so on. It worked out ways to focus on essential "habits of mind" that made it possible to use a wide variety of texts, even many traditional Eurocentric ones, as stimulants to deeper thought on the part of the C.P.E. faculty and students. Such schools are living examples to their students of the power of ideas and the value of education.

For those of us who believe that public education is feasible and essential to democracy, the capacity of public institutions to allow for autonomy is critical. There is no reason that public schools can't be as imaginative and exciting as independent schools. Public doesn't have to mean drab and uniform, standardized and bureaucratic. Let's give reform a chance by letting parents, students and teachers invent their own schools. When critics say "not fair," let's respond by offering them the same deal, rather than taking it away from those who are using it so well. □

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of the abortive coup—the strong leadership of the Russian Republic coexisting with the powerless leadership of the central government. There is no clear idea of the respective rights of these two centers or the conditions for their coexistence.

The main task of democracy at this stage is to neutralize as quickly as possible the points of stress, the sources of conflict and the possible growth of dissatisfaction of the population in Russia. All resources must be utilized for rapid improvement of the food situation in Moscow, Leningrad, Sverdlovsk and other industrial centers. Privatization and the involvement of millions of people in economic operations must be accelerated. The status of the Russian Republic and its vision for further changes in the country must be finally determined.

The West must know what will remain and what will develop in the territory of the quondam Soviet Union. Yeltsin must broaden the social base of his power, he must use the growth of Russian national consciousness in the interests of democracy and he must stand upon a base of historical legitimacy.

*Aleksandr Tsipko, a philosopher, is a leading figure in the democratic movement.*

ZHORES A. MEDVEDEV  
AND ROY MEDVEDEV

**W**ithout doubt, it was conservative forces in the Communist Party and the K.G.B., along with some generals in the army, that attempted the coup d'état. The coup d'état, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, was clearly anti-Communist. But Yeltsin has no constructive democratic program. He has the support not only of democratic reformers but of Russophiles, the Orthodox Church and even monarchists. Signs of a new cult of personality and a tendency toward dictatorial decisions are showing up in Yeltsin's camp.

However, an unquestionable weakening of the central administration and a strengthening of the role of the republics have taken place. The disintegration of the Communist Party in its traditional form will result in the emergence of a parliamentary party (renamed the Socialist Party). Under conditions of increasing financial and economic dislocation, real democratic reforms will be difficult.

The main thing the reformers need to understand is that they are dealing with a complex economy, especially in the area of production. A higher level of productivity in the new union can be achieved only through technical modernization. Up to now, we have seen a struggle for power; the needs of the economy have been secondary. The reformers must understand that in a country as large as this one, changes in productive forces and productive relationships must proceed slowly and gradually in order to avoid chaos.

*Zhores A. Medvedev, a biologist, was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1973. Roy Medvedev, a historian, is a member of the Congress of People's Deputies.*



## SPIES, RECONSIDERED

*The Moscow news has made it quite a strain  
To contemplate Guy Burgess and Maclean,  
For now their party's over, always will be.  
And think of all that spying! Think of Philby!  
We have to ask ourselves: 'Twas all for naught  
They did those things they really hadn't ought?*

Calvin Trillin