PERSPECTIVES

Nine ways to improve public schools

Ever since Sputnik, *we've been hearing that American public education is on the skids. Lately, the critics have become more insistent and the proposed remedies more drastic: home schooling, vouchers to pay for private education, for-profit corporate-owned academies. For now, these are mostly still fringe solutions—the majority of Americans remain committed to public schools, just unsure how to make them stronger.*

Here, then, are nine ideas for improving the public schools. Not everyone will agree with every one of them, but they're a start. And if we are to succeed, one more element is required. As political scientist Benjamin Barber put it in the November 1993 issue of Harper's Magazine, *"When the polemics are spent and we are through hyperventilating about the crisis in education, there is only one question worth asking: Are we serious? If we are, we can begin by honoring that old folk homily and put our money where for much too long our common American mouth has been."*

Drop the false image of education's golden past

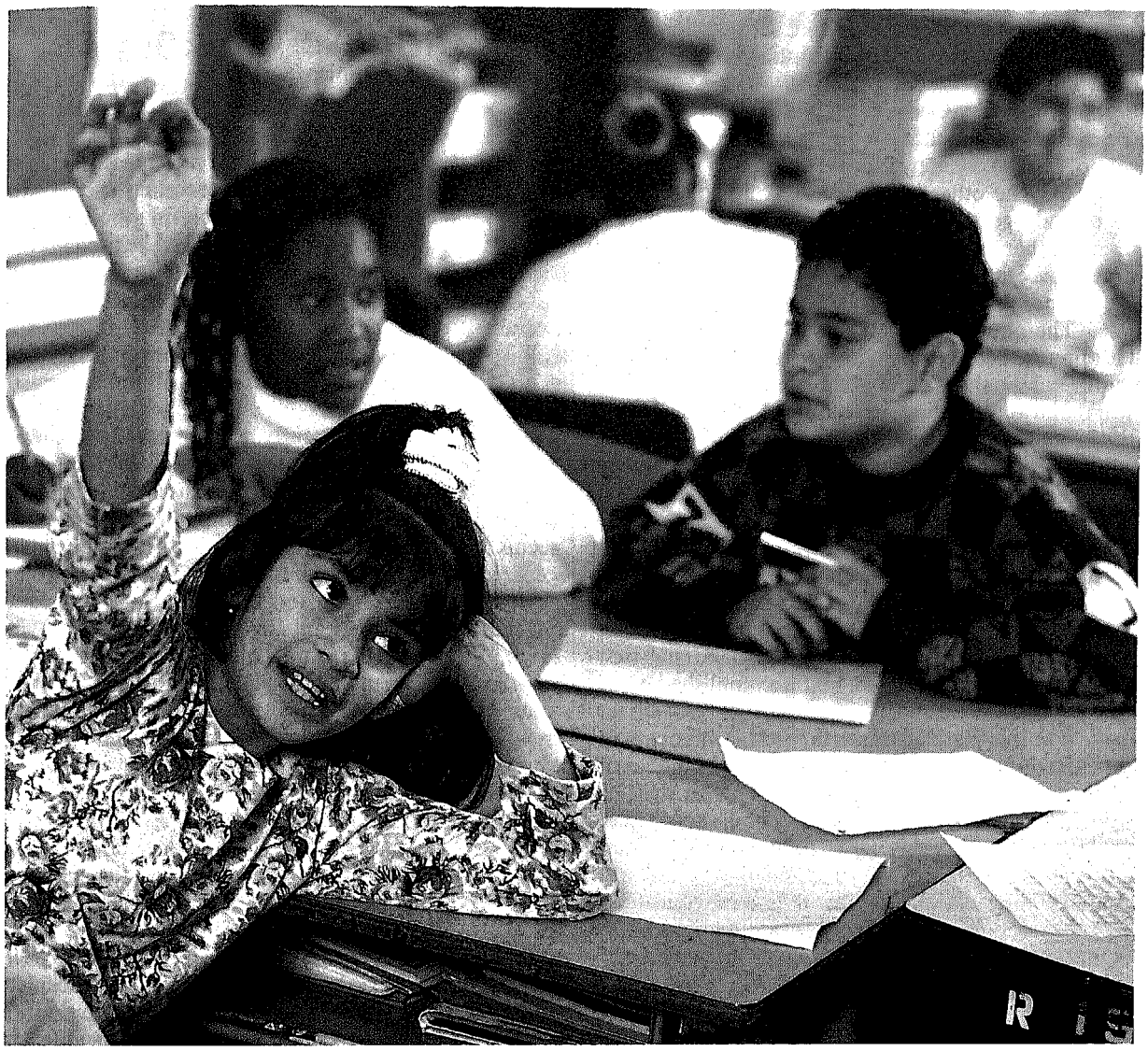
It is not hyperbole to say that today's school reform debate is critical to our national destiny. The challenge is a thrilling one: to make every child the possessor of a kind of intellectual competence once available only to a small minority. This inspiring—and new—task means granting all young citizens the conviction that they can have wonderful ideas, invent theories, analyze evidence, and make their personal mark on this most complex world. Such a transformation of the idea of why children go to school would in turn transform the American workplace, as well as the very nature of American democratic life.

Yet given the opportunity to join in this exciting debate, the public has offered responses that are often troublingly sour and cynical. Citizens have largely dismissed any hope that their ideas on education might be heard and implemented. Most discussion now takes place within the most narrow professional and policy-making circles. Why?

The answer lies in a story the nation tells itself so forcefully and so often that mere historical fact has little power to intervene: the myth that, in the past, schools taught more effectively and children learned more. And this myth of the past, in turn, props up some equally pernicious myths of the present and hobbles our national discussion of the future. The widely held view that our public school system has declined from some golden past is causing some serious mischief. The ground must be cleared of such myths and lies.

In fact, until World War II the average American did not graduate from high school. Most teenagers were expected to leave school for unskilled or semiskilled work. The average American attended school for only nine years, and 20 percent attended for less than four. On the eve of the war, fewer than 10 to 20 percent of teenagers in many Southern communities were in school at all. A majority of New York City high school students were unashamedly labeled as either "subnormal" or "normal." Most were not given an academic, college-bound curriculum. The demanding academic track was reserved for those deemed "talented" and bound for college. In 1950, the term "dropout" did not exist.

The cultivation of critical thinking, and the development of sophisticated math and science skills, were possibilities for only a few. And even those few were often poorly prepared by today's standards. In the 1940s, even elite, "talented" students rarely took more than two years of high school math, science, or history, and virtually none took calculus—a college course in those days, but today a staple of moderately advanced



high school seniors. A recent study by Dale Whittington Winter in *American Educational Research Journal* compared how well 17-year-olds from the 1930s until today answered questions concerning the names of presidents, the dates of wars, the laws of science, and other basic information. There was virtually no change in the past 50 years—and what's more, the students tested in those earlier years were overall a far more elite group than today's general student body.

[*According to* LA Weekly *(May 22, 1992), there's still more evidence we're not doing so badly now. A Bush administration-commissioned study by Sandia National Laboratories documented that our 75 percent high school graduation rate becomes nearly 90 percent if we include those who later earn equivalency degrees. It also found that in 1971, SAT takers who scored at the median were in the top 21 percent of their class; they're now in the top 27 percent.—Ed.*]

It was not until the 1960s that the nation first acknowledged, at least rhetorically, the obligation to educate all students equally. And rather than accept the idea that educating all children well was a task as complex as going to the moon, one that would require enormous financial resources as well as a revolution in the way we organized teaching and learning, the nation quickly turned its back.

The myth of a golden past allowed many people to ignore the reality of inadequate public commitment to education for nearly three decades. But some myths of the present were needed as well. If schools are broken, who is at fault? The scapegoats are the usual suspects: teachers' unions, TV, drugs, divorce, "diversity" (read: too many African-Americans and Latinos), welfare, permissiveness, single motherhood, sexual revolution, feminism, relativism, lack of patriotism. The implication is clear: Just toss out those troublemakers, and the task of creating good schools is no big deal.

Today the myth of a golden educational past has

led to two simple reform ideas that are popular among educational opinion leaders—solutions that are seemingly easy to enact but that speak to a cynical and despairing vision. One is to increase the power of professional experts at the state and federal levels to require school reform, whatever local communities might say about it. The other is to abandon public control of schools altogether in favor of the magic of the marketplace. Either local control or public control (or both!) must go because, today's impatient reformers argue, they impede needed change.

The nation's schools are at a pivotal moment. Holding fast to the democratic promise of education requires a steadfast belief in the process of democracy, warts and all. It requires rejecting both the dictatorship of the marketplace and the dictatorship of the expert.

Those committed to public schools must confront the public's cynicism head-on. Schools, after all, are but one example of a broader malaise: People are cynical because they feel they cannot influence public life or institutions. Education reformers, regardless of political persuasion, have too often embraced a version of the same cynicism, viewing local school boards as irrelevant or as the domain of conservatives, and thus viewing school reform as a task best accomplished by national policy makers.

The irony is that schools in fact stand as one of the few remaining institutions that can easily be influenced at the community level. The fundamentalist right has systematically pushed its national school agenda at the local level, aggressively instigating battles over textbooks, sex education, desegregation efforts, and other matters. Now it is time for liberals and the educational left to enter this arena. The debate over education reform belongs in local communities. Only such a community-centered debate will restore to the public a sense that it has a stake in public schools.

Most of all, since democratic schools are impossible without an aware and supportive public, defending them requires us all to tell the public the truth. Schools never did the needed job for many people. Most Americans didn't get the education they deserved. The nation tolerated it as long as the economy offered the poorly educated a measure of dignity and hope through unskilled or semiskilled industrial work. But the fact remains that schools sold short those Americans who were not members of the elite. Schools did the job they were asked to do—but they've never before done what is needed today. If America can commit itself to this next task—educating all children well—the historic promise of free public schooling will finally, for the first time, be fulfilled.

—Deborah W. Meier
The Nation

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Eliminate violence in the classroom

"Peace works!" the secretary of the Milwaukee elementary school where I teach reminds callers as part of her telephone-answering routine. Based on the events of the past few weeks, however, her greeting seems ridiculously naive.

This morning's paper reported that a 9-year-old stabbed a substitute teacher with a pair of scissors; two teachers in *our* elementary school have recently been physically assaulted by students (one was bitten and kicked, the other punched); and the usual array of daily violent acts (hitting, kicking, shoving, and otherwise tormenting) seems to be on an upward spiral. In this context, suggesting that peace works sounds more sarcastic than sincere.

As a society, we are struggling to deal with violence. We all must confront it at times, but it feels worse in schools. Elementary schools in particular are intimate places—places for nurturing and mothering as much as for formal learning. Maybe that's why the violence hits so hard here. Perpetrators of violence in schools are not outsiders—they are our own students.

For teachers, violence doesn't just upset our psyches—it threatens us physically. For most of us, attending to violent acts is a large, uncomfortable part of the teaching reality. Outbursts are frequent and severe. We see it from kindergarten on. What are schools doing about it? What are school systems doing about it? What are families doing about it? What are the disrupters having to do about it?

Five years ago, I noticed that the topics at teachers' conventions had begun shifting from curriculum matters to coping skills. Workshop sessions had cute names and suggested strategies like redirecting aggression, signing good-behavior contracts, and letting the group decide the consequences of inappropriate behavior. As the years passed, session names became a little more serious and so did the topics—"coping skills" became "survival skills." Now, sessions like "Legal Rights of Teachers," "Sex Harassment in Schools," "Dealing with Violent Students," and "Gang Signs and Symbols" get more attention than ever before.

Intolerance of violence is being voiced more and more in teachers' meetings and virtually anyplace teachers gather to talk. Teachers are frustrated and burned out from the constant strain of student aggression and violence. The teachers' union is pushing to remove "chronic disrupters" from schools and put them in "alternative sites." With full knowledge that putting violence out of sight won't end it, educators are still rallying around this last resort, admitting that they