

How Our Schools Could Be

Although the reasons for the current national concern about schooling may have little to do with democracy, the reforms described here by Ms. Meier have everything to do with it.

By Deborah Meier

WE STAND poised between two alternative visions of the schools of tomorrow. The tough part is that these two visions are often espoused by the same people, and teachers and citizens alike are led to believe that both can be carried out simultaneously. In fact, they stand in chilling contrast to each other.

One vision rests on the assumption that top-down support for bottom-up change — which everyone is rhetorically for — means that the top does the critical intellectual work, defining purposes and content as well as how to measure them, and the bottom does the “nuts and bolts,” the “how-to” — a sort of “men’s work” versus “women’s work” division of labor.

The second vision rests on a different assumption — that the only top-down reforms that are useful are those that help to create and sustain self-governing learning communities. When schools see them-

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selves as membership communities, not service organizations, parents and teachers discuss ideas, argue about purposes, and exercise judgment, because taking responsibility for making important decisions is at the heart of what it means to be well-educated. Students can't learn unless the adults who must show them the way practice what they preach.

The Goals 2000 national education agenda, with its focus on setting measurable goals and standards, is weighted down with assumptions that the top does the critical intellectual work and the bottom is left with doing the how-to. But that second camp, with its alternative assumptions of what schools could be, is showing a surprising capacity to thrive these days. At least for a time. I've been told that I'm ignoring the train that's already left the station and is coming down the line, the "do-it-or-else" express. But if history is any guide, such fast-track solutions often turn out to be expensive dead ends.

Can we post a counter-mandate to the "all students will" dicta being invented by expert, university-based task forces? Let me propose a mandate saying, "Standards shall be phased in only as fast as the school, the district, and the state can bring their adult staff members up to the standards they expect of all 18-year-old students." That might delay the train just a little.

We in New York have historically lived under the imposition of an awesome array of local and state curricular mandates and outcomes assessments. (Except for private schools, which were always free to ignore them and always have.) Every so often someone gets the idea to create still another set, generally laid right on top of the old ones, and then moves on to other things. New York teachers are experienced and inventive saboteurs of the best and worst of such plans. Our state is home therefore to some of the greatest as well as some of the worst of schools.

But the second alternative described above is staring us in the face. And it is gathering surprising national momentum, even from such unexpected (for old cynics like me) places as the New York State Board of Regents (New York's state board of education). The state authorities are now embarked on a new and more promising approach, as are the governor, the mayor, and the local New York City board

of education — despite contradictions all over the place. That so many are now marching to a different drummer in the name of a different vision of "systemic" reform is heartening. This different vision has the support this time around not only of child-centered romantics like me, but also of hardheaded corporate and management reformers, such as the folks who

East schools and the District 4 "way" have been roughly replicated in dozens of New York City school districts and are now part of accepted citywide reform plans. What the schools that have adopted this model share is a way of looking at children that is reminiscent of good kindergarten practice. Or, put another way, they operate according to what we know about

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invented the team approach to building the Saturn car or the Deming way of managing businesses.

We also have some hardheaded history of school reform to point to, on a scale that should make it hard to dismiss this "other" way as suitable only for the brave and the foolish, the maverick and the exceptional. It's no longer "alternative," but almost mainstream.

When a handful of like-minded teachers in East Harlem's Community School District No. 4 started a "progressive, open education" elementary school, Central Park East, in 1974, we were encouraged by the then district superintendent, Anthony Alvarado, to pay little heed to rules and regulations. We were told to create the kind of school we believed would work for the children of District 4. This revolutionary autonomy, which in local circles was referred to alternatively as "creative compliance" and "creative non-compliance," was simply a public and collaborative version of what many of us had long done behind closed doors.

Central Park East, along with more than 30 other small schools of choice begun by District 4 during the next 10 years, was and remains an amazing success story. We lived a somewhat lonely existence for a decade, but today both the Central Park

how human beings learn, and they are guided by a deep-seated respect for all the parties involved — parents, teachers, and students.

Kindergarten is the one place — for many children it may be the last place — where such mutual respect has been a traditional norm (if not always practiced). A kindergarten teacher, for example, is expected to know children well, even if they don't hand in their homework, finish their Friday tests, or pay attention. Kindergarten teachers know that learning must be personalized, because kids come that way — no two alike. They know that parents and the community must be partners, or kids will be shortchanged. Kindergarten teachers know that part of their job description is to help children learn to become more self-reliant — starting with tying their shoes and going to the bathroom on their own.

Alas, it is the last time that children are given such independence, that they are encouraged to make choices and allowed to move about on their own. Having learned to use the bathroom by themselves at age 5, at age 6 they're required to wait until the whole class lines up at bathroom time. In kindergarten, parents and teachers meet to talk and often have one another's phone numbers. After that, communica-

tion is mainly one-way and impersonal. In kindergarten, we design our rooms for real work, not just passive listening. We put things in the room that we have reason to believe will appeal to children, things that will grab their interests and engage their minds and hearts. The older that children get, the less we take into account the importance of their own interests, their own active learning. In kindergarten, teachers are editors, critics, cheerleaders, and caretakers, not just lecturers or deliverers of instruction. What TheodoreSizer calls "coaching" is second nature to the kindergarten teacher, who takes for granted that her job description includes curriculum development as well as ongoing assessment.

But what's true for students is also true for teachers: they have less and less authority, responsibility, and independence as their charges get older — until, of course, the students make it into college or graduate school. Then both teachers and students go back to kindergarten.

It was Sizer who, when he came to visit our school, pointed out to us that the kindergarten principles of Central Park East were the same principles he was espousing for the nation's high schools. He suggested that we start a secondary school, beginning with seventh-graders, as a continuation of our elementary school. It was 1984 — the right moment for such an idea. And even though community school districts in New York City are not supposed to operate high schools, the idea was approved. Central Park East would just keep going from kindergarten through the 12th grade.

So we made the decision to see if we could use the principles of a good kindergarten as the basis for running a good high school. We opened Central Park East Secondary School in 1985 with a seventh grade and grew one grade a year each year thereafter.

We were not without great trepidation. Running through our minds were thoughts such as: Dare we? Could we take on teenagers? Aren't teenagers impossible to handle? I had spent a lot of years avoiding adolescents in groups of more than two, and I realized that it would be hard to build a secondary school without bumping into them in groups of at least three. We also knew that high school kids wouldn't like to be compared to kindergartners — or even sixth-graders. We

needed to create new rituals that symbolized their new maturity. Finally, we were aware that, as the school was "growing up," it meant that we needed to be concerned about the expectations at the other end — what colleges and employers might want. Was there such a thing as being *too* nurturing or giving kids too much independence and too great a sense of empowerment?

One thing we very much wanted was to get away from the contemporary mode of breaking everything down into discrete bits and pieces — whether subject matter or "thinking skills." We were determined to keep intact the elementary school tradition of respect for the wholeness of both subject matter and human learning. We were looking for ways to build a school that offered youngsters a deep and rich curriculum that would inspire them with the desire to know more — that would cause them to fall in love with books and with stories of the past, that would instill in them a sense of wonder at how much there is to learn.

We also saw schools as models of the possibilities of democratic life. Although students' classroom lives could certainly be made more democratic than traditional schools encouraged, we saw it as equally important that the school lives of *adults* be made more democratic. It seemed unlikely that we could foster democratic values in our school unless the adults had significant rights within their workplace. We wanted not just good individual classrooms but a good school.

Another priority for us was creating a setting in which all members of the community were expected to engage in the discussion of ideas and in the "having of their own wonderful ideas," as Eleanor Duckworth has put it. Indeed, one of our most prominently stated, up-front aims was the cultivation of what we came to call "Habits of Mind" — habits that apply to all academic and nonacademic subject matter and to all thoughtful human activities. The five we came up with are not exhaustive, but they suggest the kinds of questions that we believed a well-educated person raises about his or her world.

- How do we know what we think we know? What's our evidence? How credible is it?

- Whose viewpoint are we hearing, reading, seeing? What other viewpoints might there be if we changed our posi-

tion — our perspective?

- How is one thing connected to another? Is there a pattern here?

- How else might it have been? What if? Supposing that?

- What difference does it make? Who cares?

In order to carry out our basic mission of teaching students to use their minds well and preparing them to live productive, socially useful, and personally satisfying lives, we approach curriculum with these habits as the backdrop and specific "essential" questions at the core. Clearly, we can't depend on textbooks. Many courses don't use them at all, except perhaps as reference books. We cover less and, we hope, uncover a lot more. We integrate different academic disciplines — history with literature, science with math. In the jargon of the Coalition of Essential Schools, this is the "less is more" principle. We spend, for example, two years on biology, mostly focused on a few central biological issues, and two years on American history — and we don't pretend to cover it.

We do more "hands-on" experimental work. We expect kids to read many different sources on the same subject, to use the library a lot, to write a lot (preferably on a computer), and to think and discuss their ideas with many different people. We expect them to share their knowledge with one another and to work in groups as well as on their own. Our curriculum is designed to reinforce the connection between "school" knowledge and "real world" knowledge and to include multiple perspectives.

Most of our students do take most of the standard city and state competency tests, and we provide coaching for such tests, as well as for the SAT. But we don't see these tests as a measuring rod. They capture neither essential intellectual competence nor the demonstrated capacity of our students to use their knowledge, to care for others, to imagine how others think and feel, and to be prepared to speak up and be heard. These skills are no less critical, no less rigorous. They are part of the "hard" stuff.

Twenty years of documented evidence — regarding high school graduation, dropout rates, and college acceptances, for example — are hard to dispute. The Central Park East schools are demonstrably successful. Over 90% of the graduates of the

elementary school go on to earn high school diplomas, and 90% of those who enter the high school not only receive high school diplomas but go on to college — nearly double the rate for the city as a whole. Furthermore, it is hard to attribute our remarkable statistics to having selected an elite or favored group. The student body of both the elementary and the high schools has always been about 40% Hispanic, 45% African American, and 15% other (Asian and white). Over two-thirds are poor enough to be eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, and at least 20% are labeled as “special ed” or “handicapped.” They come to us looking remarkably like the assortment of students in the city as a whole. They leave, however, with substantially greater life choices.

But, proud as we are of these schools, we do not see what we do as the “best or only way” to educate children. As Seymour Fliegel, a former deputy superintendent in District 4, has put it, “The aim here has been to create a system that — instead of trying to fit all students into some standardized school — has a school to fit every student in this district. No kid gets left out, no kid gets lost. Every kid is important, every kid can learn if you put him or her in the right environment. But since kids have this huge range of different needs, different interests, and different ways of learning, we’ve got to have a wide diversity of schools.”

While it has taken time for the District 4 ideas to catch on and for Central Park East’s particular approach to spread, today both are “in the mainstream.” Everyone is imitating the system of choice used in District 4, and there are more than 50 small public schools in New York City created in this tradition. Plans are afoot to vastly increase this number over the next five years. There are also plans to introduce innovations that will better match these new, less standardized approaches to teaching and learning with the ways in which we hold schools accountable.

It is clear that choice plans will require creative revisions in our current rules and regulations. As schools develop a variety of obviously different solutions, it will not be possible to assign students to schools by street address or lottery. Parents and children will have to be involved in making choices about which school they think will best suit the student’s needs, talents,

and interests. Eventually all school districts may wish to develop schools of choice, even as they may also (as in District 4) give priority to parents on the basis of residence. Another way of lessening the transportation problems that are inherent in many choice plans is to locate several small schools in the same building.

The crucial decision made in the District 4 “revolution” of two decades ago was to create a broad and diverse set of new schools, not to reform existing schools. This meant that the district could focus on encouraging schoolpeople to innovate, instead of on monitoring them for compliance with district-mandated reforms. The next phase will do well not to ignore the lessons learned: it’s easier to design a new school culture than to change an existing one. And it’s the *whole* school culture — not this or that program — that stands in the way of learning.

The role of parents in the new schools was another central issue. Choice offered a way of providing for increased professional decision making without pitting parents and teachers against one another in a useless power struggle. Furthermore, small schools of choice offered everyone — teachers and families — vastly more time to meet together and work out differences through both formal and informal structures. The time needed is considerable but worth it. One top-down mandate we’d have no trouble with would be legislation requiring employers to provide time off for parents to attend school meetings.

Indeed, no school can complete its educational task without the support and trust of a student’s family. Such trust rests on mutual respect and is never a luxury. Without it, the schools are crippled — and all the more so where differences in race, religion, and language between school staff and community are greatest. Young people sent to school with a message of distrust for the motives and methods of the school are fighting an uphill battle. They are always warily looking for hidden traps. And they will find plenty of them, since teachers too often don’t hear the mixed messages they send out regarding their respect for children’s families and communities.

Teachers rate “parental indifference” as their number-one complaint. That’s a misreading of what keeps parents and

teachers apart. Unless and until the two groups feel able to join together as advocates for the common good of youngsters, such apparent “indifference” will remain. We will not create serious educational breakthroughs until we can meet as allies.

Schoolpeople must learn to share with parents some of the autonomy associated with what are now being called “charter” schools: the control over administrative, curricular, staffing, and fiscal matters that allows them to pursue their own special approach to the education of children and young people.

We need such small autonomous schools so that democratic governance systems become possible — so that it doesn’t seem silly to talk of “everyone” getting together. Just as the Empire State Building contains dozens of companies, so our big school buildings could contain many schools. They could contain schools, furthermore, serving different age groups. They might hire a building manager to deal solely with building matters, as the Empire State Building does. But the educational life of each school would remain distinct and independent. Simple changes that are impossible to make in a mega-school can be decided in one afternoon and implemented the next morning in a small school. You can even dispense with all permanent committees and representative bodies if you get your numbers right. It’s our guess that a few hundred students with a faculty of under 20 is about optimum size for effective, democratic schooling. (Those figures don’t preclude a half dozen or more schools in one building.)

Teachers will not have a major impact on the way students use their minds until teachers come to know how their students’ minds are working — one by one. Teachers cannot help young people make sense of things if they do not have time to answer their students’ questions — and time to really hear the questions. They cannot improve a student’s writing if there isn’t time to read it, reflect on it, and then occasionally meet with the student to talk it over together. They cannot find ways to connect new ideas with old ones if they have no control over curriculum or pacing. Nor can they influence the values and aspirations of young people if they cannot shape the tone and value system of their classrooms and schools.

But what about the loud cries for “accountability” that play such a major role

in the support of top-down schemes? Who will tell us if it's "world class"? How will we know for sure how students stack up against one another nationally and internationally in the great race to see who's first?

Small, self-governed schools are at an advantage when it comes to being accountable to their own *immediate* community — parents, students, and fellow staff members. But we need to turn our attention to the question of how schools that set out to be independent and idiosyncratic can meet the legitimate demands for broader accountability to taxpayers. We've built our current system of public accountability on the basis of the factory-model school with its interchangeable parts. It's no wonder that we get almost no useful or honest information back. The task that lies ahead of us is to respond to democratically established norms for equity, access, outcomes, and fiscal integrity without sacrificing our educational principles. Given that few if any of these legitimate needs are currently being met, we need not expect a miracle answer as we design our better mousetraps. We're not catching any mice now. But that doesn't mean that mousetraps are not needed.

The danger here is that we will cramp the needed innovations with overambitious demands for accountability. Practical realism must prevail. Changes in the daily conduct of schooling — whether they relate to new curriculum or pedagogy or just to new ways of collaborating and governing — are hard, slow, and above all immensely time-consuming; they require a level of trust and patience that goes beyond that to which we are accustomed.

The structural reforms — changes in size, the role of choice, and shifts in power relationships — may be hard to make. But to some degree these are the changes that can be "imposed" from above. The trouble is that they merely lay the foundation for the slow and steady work that will have an actual impact on young people's intellectual and moral development. That's the tough realization. Some claim we can't afford such slow changes. They are wrong. There is nothing faster. If we try to go faster we may get somewhere faster — but not where we need to go.

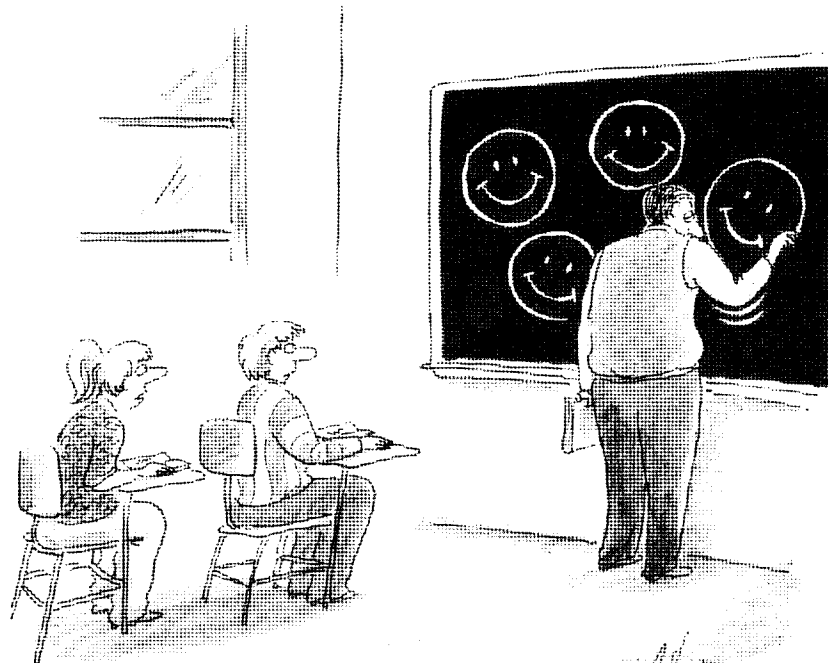
Vandalism, assault, truancy, and apathy on the part of students cannot be eliminated by more of the same — metal detectors, identification cards, automated

lateness calls, automatic expulsions and holdovers. Instead, these ills require an assault by schoolpeople on the culture of anonymity that permeates youngsters' lives. Our children need stable personal relationships more than ever, and our schools offer such relationships less than ever.

Although the reasons for the current national concern about schooling may have little to do with democracy, the reforms described here have everything to do with it. Giving wider choices and more power to those who are closest to the classroom are not reforms that appeal to busy legislators, politicians, and central board officials. Such reforms seem too messy and too hard to track. They cannot be initiated on Monday and measured on Friday. They require fewer constraints, fewer rules — not more of them. They require asking why it matters and who cares — not lists of 465 skills, facts, and concepts multiplied by the number of disciplines academia can invent. They require initiating a debate in this nation that might shake us to the roots, a debate about what we value so dearly that we incarcerate our children for 12 years to make sure they've "got it."

There *has* to be a better reason than to house them while we're busy, to keep them from taking our jobs, or merely to socialize them into packs or sort them into their proper pecking order.

A democratic society has a right to insist that the central function of schooling is to cultivate the mental and moral habits that a modern democracy requires. These include openness to other viewpoints, the capacity to sustain uncertainty, the ability to act on partial knowledge, and the inclination to step into the shoes of others — all habits that can be uncomfortable to have but, it is hoped, hard to shake. Until we face the fundamental question of the purpose of schooling, it makes little sense to keep asking for better tools to measure what we haven't agreed about. "What's it for?" the young ask often enough. It's time adults took the question seriously. There are no silver bullets when it comes to raising children right, no fast-track solutions with guaranteed cures. The only sensible course involves hard work, keeping your eyes on the prize, and lots of patience for the disagreements that inevitably arise. K



"I think we'd better get the school nurse."