Can the Odds Be Changed?

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There are plenty of examples of small, self-governing schools of choice that successfully serve high-risk students in both the public and the private sector. If we pose the problem differently, their examples can offer systemic solutions. To do so we need to rethink how public institutions are held accountable. We need, for example, to rely on instruments of accountability that are consistent with our ends: increasing the intelligent and responsible behavior of the people closest to (and including) the learners. In New York City, an experiment in developing such a systemic alternative is currently under way with support from the Annenberg Foundation. Unless we find a way to match what we know works on a small scale with what we do on a large scale, we are likely to end up concluding that public education itself is the culprit.

THERE ARE numerous stories of schools that have been successful with students who would otherwise count among society's inevitable failures. The Central Park East (CPE) schools in East Harlem, which I have been closely involved with for more than 22 years, are one of the foremost examples of such apparent success (see Bensman, 1987, 1994, 1995).[1] The lessons they suggest are rarely fodder for the broad national public school reform agendas. The explanations normally given by wary critics for the success of such schools lead critics to put them aside when trying to solve the "big problem": unusual leadership, a special curriculum or pedagogy, a more motivated or gifted student population, extra resources, or questionable data. Ordinary school people are generally skeptical too; most probably believe such

schools' reputations are built on a combination of clever public relations and manipulated data. Researchers and policy makers are often actually friendlier but in the end equally dismissive, viewing them as aberrants from which little can be learned. They are, such critics claim, too good to be true and have few positive lessons to offer if we are talking about public school reform (Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996). It is the privatizers and the voucher advocates who have instead used them to prove their case.

The suspiciousness and skepticism directed toward the usefulness of such schools in thinking about large-scale public school reform are not wholly unwarranted. How else can the short life span of so many of yesterday's heroes and their heroic schools be explained? Many do not outlast their original pioneers or godfathers. Those focusing on dropouts are most likely to survive, but precisely for that reason, data from such schools are hardest to compare. The most elite exemplars often called magnets may also survive, given the status of their constituents. But they, in turn, only demonstrate the critic's complaint. You can only cream off so many kids. Of course, elitism remains a charge hard to disprove. For example, even after expensive research demonstrated that the CPE schools took, if anything, a more at-risk population and spent less money per capita, the schools continued to be viewed otherwise. And even if such schools escape the charge of elitism or extra resources, detractors argue that they require too much rule bending and too much extra time and energy to serve as examples for large-scale change. These one-of-a-kind schools flicker brightly, a few manage to survive by avoiding the public's attention or by serving powerful constituents, and the rest gradually burn out.

THE SEARCH FOR SILVER BULLETS

The vast majority of serious policy makers, therefore, look elsewhere for their answers. They define systemic so that it applies only to the kind of solutions that can be more or less simultaneously applied to all schools within their particular jurisdiction. Each solution is heralded as the engine that will drive thorough-going rapid change regardless of the population, the faculty, the leadership, or the resources available. Examples range from new and better mandated curricula (e.g., Hirsch's [1987] *Cultural Literacy* or one or another version of local, state, or national frameworks), a particular pedagogical concept (mastery learning, direct instruction, cooperative learning, Socratic seminars), a new assessment tool (national testing, curriculum alignment, or standardized portfolios), or revamped school governance (school-based management, incentive pay, choice, parent councils, more centralization, or less centralization). Sometimes internal structural changes

are the focus: houses, block scheduling, clusters, new grade configurations (K-2, 5-8, multiage, looping, etc.).

If people at the school level are as skeptical about the capacity of any of these well-intended top-down recipes to affect deeply the minds of teachers or children as policy-level people are of the idiosyncratic bottom-up ones, the situation looks bleak. Schools people know at heart that this too shall pass, or be gotten around, or be overcome. They wait out the innovators. Policy makers, not unaware of this, work overtime to come up with ways to circumvent such resistance. They invent new and better monitoring systems, high-stakes rewards, and state mandates. They go round and round.

The more things change the more they stay the same. Citizens and teachers alike begin to wonder. Maybe, after all, the old sorting-machine factory-like school was not such a terrible thing after all. We did not do so badly. Maybe all this talk about innovation is unproductive and resource draining. Maybe we just need to stop coddling the losers, hire a tougher overseer, and get on with rewarding the winners. It does not actually look as though the economy really needs all its citizens to be so well educated anyway; and maybe we should acknowledge reality and siphon off the less motivated at an earlier age into job-training programs. Enough is enough. Those who are not satisfied with such answers look outside the public sector for solutions.[2] These are inevitable responses if we cannot marry the two concepts of top-down and bottom-up reform better.

Giving up on the possibility that all children can learn to use their minds well and be intellectually serious is difficult, especially for those of us who have seen it done and who know firsthand that vastly more children can be well educated, if only here and there. It is especially difficult for those of us who believe that democracy as well as the marketplace will suffer from our failure. Perhaps if we posed the problem differently, those oddball schools that broke the odds might offer us systemic answers. Perhaps there are ways to look at the successful one-of-a-kind schools that can help us see a new way of designing schooling at large, for all children.

POSING THE PROBLEM DIFFERENTLY

Good schools are filled with particulars; it is these that lie at their heart, that explain their surprising successes. Reform advocates get fascinated with these particulars but miss the main point. In fact, equally successful schools have been inspired by and have operated on the basis of different and sometimes incompatible particulars. It is these differences that inspire the passions of those involved and draw on the best in each. Underlying commonalities are, in fact, often ignored precisely out of its members' affection

and pride in their uniqueness. To dismiss the commonalities, however, is to miss the heart of it: the capacity to have such striking particularities (Bryk, Holland, & Lee, 1993).

Maybe what these "special" schools demonstrate is that every school must have the power and the responsibility to design their own particulars. That is the common, secret "mandatable" ingredient. We cannot get ourselves a different generation of kids. We cannot get all teachers and parents, much less the broad fictional Mr. and Mrs. Public, to agree on what is best for every Johnny. What one citizen thinks is a trivial matter—memorizing poetry or good penmanship—is a basic skill to another. But we can surround all kids with powerful adults in a position to act on their behalf in open and publicly responsible ways. And this may give us such an enormous head start that all else fades in importance.

Will grown-ups all jump at a chance to be such responsible adults? Of course not. Most have never been asked to have their own wonderful ideas used much less to take public responsibility for them. Many will be leery because with the freedom to design their own school must come new responsibilities for defending the results. But the resultant practice, responsible citizenship, is not only a good means for running a good school, it is also the central aim of public schooling. How convenient. We so rarely consider ends at all. Getting the connection between means and ends right is bound to help, over the long haul.

It is in designing a way to make it easier to invent powerful and responsible schools that we can stack the deck in favor of good schooling, so that great schools—although still rare—are more likely, good schools become ordinary practice, and poor schools are more easily visible and more quickly dealt with. It will require us to learn how to make public judgments about schools with standards in mind but not with a standardized ruler in hand. Democracy ultimately rests on an assumption that fallible human judgment deserves respect. We have forgotten about this in educating our young. We have acted as though we were forced, in the name of standards, to treat each other like interchangeable parts. In doing so, we have gutted the heart of democratic schooling. But it is not necessary.

SOME SILVER BULLETS: WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW

We already know some of the features of schooling that can improve the odds that schools become responsible educational communities in which decisions are daily made by adults on behalf of children. They are the features that run through exemplary schools—whether public or private—that serve ordinary and extraordinary children well:

- It helps if schools are of a reasonable size, small enough for their faculty members to sit around a table and iron things out, for everyone to be well known by everyone else, and for schools and families to collaborate face-to-face over time. They should be small enough so that children belong to the same community as adults, not abandoned in adultless subcultures; small enough to both feel and be safe; small enough so that phony data can be easily detected by any interested participant; small enough so that the people most involved can never say they were not consulted (i.e., schools of much less than 400 students) (see Fine, 1984; Meier, 1995;[3] Raywid, 1996).

- It helps if those most directly involved have sufficient autonomy over critical decisions. Only then will it seem fair to hold people accountable for the impact of their decisions. This will entail having the power to decide on staffing, leadership, and budget, as well as particulars of scheduling, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. (By *school* we do not necessarily mean *building*, but we do mean all the key constituents.)

- It helps if there are sufficient available choices for parents, kids, and teachers so that schools can afford to be different from each other and have a definite character, special emphases, styles of operating that appeal to some but not all. Responsibility flows more naturally from willing and informed parties. (If schools are small, they can share big old buildings, and choices can be easily available.) (Nathan, 1988).

These three qualities—schools that are small enough in size, sufficiently self-governing, and self-chosen—offer a good beginning. They will not in themselves solve anything, although together they will help solve everything.

IS IT PIE IN THE SKY?

This is not an idle dream. What I am describing is already under way throughout the country, in bits and pieces and in pockets here and there. In New York City alone we have nearly a hundred small public schools of choice—and nearly a hundred more in the wings waiting—that fit this description, although without the official autonomy or sufficient financial flexibility to fully use their knowledge and expertise. Between them they are serving a population larger than most American school "systems." Further, they bring together children of all classes and racial and ethnic backgrounds, without regard to past academic success and with no more extras in terms of resources than the large zoned schools that serve the same population.

Two different historic developments—District 4's 22-year experiment with schools of choice (CPE being the first of two) and the city's alternative high school division's 12-year history of creating dozens of small alternatives—came together in the 1990s. They caught the public's fancy, creating a movement on behalf of small schools of choice for all ages and types of students (Fliegel, 1993; see also Bensman, 1987, 1994, 1995). The genie was out of the bottle and hard to put back. The idea attracted the attention of families who did not see themselves as at risk. Word of mouth suggested that the kids who come out of these schools matched their counterparts academically and surpassed them on many critical dimensions: college attendance, work preparedness, ability to perform socially valued tasks, as well as improved scores on typical academic assessments. The research community gradually confirmed such impressions (MacMullen, 1996; Newman & Wehlage, 1995). The studies suggest that such schools provide for the possibility of a community powerful enough to be compelling to young people, a club worth "enlisting" in.

And the evidence suggests that there are many ways to go about creating such schools. In New York City, the majority began as new schools, starting from scratch under the impetus of some good ideas, a few key people, and some external godfathers. But some success stories were carved out of existing big schools or created as replacements for big high schools. Andrew Jackson, Julia Richman, and James Monroe schools are three famous examples, all well on their way to reversing decades of decline and crisis as new campuses of small schools (Darling-Hammond & Ancess, 1995).

Still, the skeptics say it cannot work en masse. There are not enough good people with good ideas or the time to waste, allowing each to grow in this higgledy-piggledy way. (Of course 25,000 kids—the number now attending such schools in New York—is as large as many small cities, even if it is still a drop in the bucket in a city with more than a million public school children.) In fact, both supporters and critics agree that under present circumstances such schools are fragile; where they part company is on what to do about it. The reformers argue that "present circumstances" are not written in stone.

SCALING UP: CHANGING
PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES

Without deep-seated changes in the system that surrounds them, past and present history suggests that the critics will be right; most will gradually water down their innovations (sometimes as a way to prove their replicability) or give up. As their numbers have increased, so, oddly enough, has their

vulnerability. This is one case in which there may not be more safety in numbers. For one thing, they tax the capacities of the existing institutions— both the formal system and the various godfatherly individuals and organizations that have sprung up to provide nurturance and cover. Second, as they increase in number they no longer go unnoticed. They pose a bigger threat. How will we know if they are not out there teaching racism or religion? This, in turn, creates new demands to bring them into compliance. Mainstream colleagues ask, Why are they allowed to "get away" with this or that? Who do they think they are? Third, as new roadblocks appear requiring new Herculean responses, school people begin to complain of weariness; the original fire in the belly that fueled the pioneering spirit begins to wane. (Critics call this the loss of the charismatic leader.) Doing the new and the old at one and the same time seems more and more unfair, an imposition rather than an opportunity.

The regular system is not, after all, designed to support such oddball entities. It believes in its mission of control and orderliness. The people who man the present systems do not see themselves in the business of trying to best match teacher to job, child to school. Instead, whenever they look at a problem, they have been trained to seek—first and foremost—ways to solve it by rule. If it is not good for everyone, it is not good for anyone. To make exceptions smacks of favoritism and inefficiency.

The results of such rule boundedness are well documented, above all by the critics of public education. What begins as an attempt to undo past wrongs, prevent corruption, assure equity and fairness, and save money ends up, in practice, being both inefficient and unfair. What seems sensible on paper only appears unreasonable out there where the messy teachers and kids are forced to play it out. (We all know that the expression "to work to the rule," for example, describes a form of job sabotage.) Such schools have produced, as a result, the model of a nonlearning institution. Except for small enclaves within the large institution where special constituencies carve out their own intimate subschools, the school as a whole remains remarkably anonymous and unchangeable. But there is an alternative. Regardless of where one is starting from, it simply requires taking those three helping steps listed previously in this article and then building ways to support their public accountability!

BUILDING MORE POWERFUL
FORMS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Small, self-governing schools of choice appear at once both attractive and foolhardy. Attractive because we know, from years of experience with non-

public schooling, that each of the three components has a documented history of success. It is foolhardy, at least for those of us most wedded to preserving public education, because it sounds like a call for privatizing schools. And, indeed, it does borrow from the litany of the privatizers. They are not all wrong. After all, many of the policy makers most vocal in defense of public education are using such private schools for their own kids. That is the challenge: If these are the features most commonly found in widely different successful schools, than why can we not accommodate them publicly for all children?

Because we are doing it with public money? That is why we cannot do it right? If that is the nub of the argument, then we either should roll over and admit defeat or invent a system of accountability for public monies that does not require bad educational practice. It is as simple as that—and as hard as that.

Small, self-governing schools of choice could be encouraged to flourish, grow like topsy, and spread like weeds if we built our system for them, not them for our system. To create highly personalized schools, we would have to be willing, however, to shift both our practices and our mind-set, cautiously and relentlessly over many years. What we have, after all, is a human invention that is only a hundred years old. But just because it is an invention that is outdated and ready to go does not mean it will fade away naturally. What it is not is the inevitable product of our human nature. In fact, it is peculiarly in conflict with our humanity and everything we know about the rearing of the young.

Until the relationships between the people responsible for raising our children are changed—which is what the magic three are all about—changing the parts (curriculum, pedagogy, or assessment) will not matter very much. Besides, contrary to what some critics seem to think, there are already plenty of all three—"perfect" curriculums, pedagogies, and assessment systems— from which to choose. It is precisely because, in the long run, these professional details matter a great deal that we need to create a system of schooling that allows us to spend our time and energy honing them, close to home. As Ted Sizer wisely told me when we started Central Park East Secondary School, "keep it simple, so that you can focus on what will always remain complex—the mind of each individual learner and the subject matter we're trying to help her master."[4] We have done the reverse for far too long.

The change required involves treating learners, teachers, and their families with a mutual respect that people are quite unfamiliar with. Even the ways they are "held accountable" must be respectful and in keeping with our definitions of good learning. Good education will grow out of debates over subject matter and pedagogy, as well as scheduling and use of resources (not

to mention rules about hats and chewing gum). It will grow out of getting to know our children well. It is the hard-won outcome of requiring adults to act like adults. It is the outcome of having the time and space to reflect on our shared work without losing track of the main purpose: the kids in front of us. What matters most is not what the public thinks, but what each particular public thinks on the basis of open and informed engagement with their own schools and their own children.

Although aspects of this changed mind-set can be implemented instantly, others will take patience. We should not, for example, declare all schools independent tomorrow. We should not remove all rules and regulations by fiat. We should not even downsize all schools by fiat. To do any of these would be a political distraction. Where schools are working moderately well and internal and external resistance to dramatic change is likely to be greatest, we can afford to sidestep and invest in tinkering and housecleaning. Why sidestep? We cannot do it all at once anyway, so let us acknowledge that up front. There is no point in picking a fight if we cannot take advantage of victory even if we win. Education for democracy has a major drawback: It cannot be imposed against the will of the governed. Thus, although increasing site-based management may be doable by fiat—and even useful and democratic and, thus, a good first step—by itself it does not lead to the kind of responsible school communities that research suggests make such a powerful difference. What site-based management does do is produce a different, and more congenial, set of people to manage and monitor centrally established mandates.

Until we have more parents clamoring for change, teachers with the confidence to try them out, and living examples of how we would make schools that opt for greater independence also more accountable, we need to keep our ambitions in check, but no more in check than the number of volunteers ready and willing to accept the challenge—with our blessing this time, not our resigned irritation. We are aiming at a change that sticks, not another fad.

On the immediate agenda are large-scale pilots to see how it might work if we let the existing idiosyncratic schools, with their already eager stalwarts, officially break loose and be different. Add to them all those interested in staffing new schools to replace the worst of our current enterprises. Then we will need to invent lean master contracts between these schools, the union, and the state, covering the most basic contractual obligations as well as those unwaivable state and federal rules pertaining to health, safety, and equity. If those on the sidelines can sit back and watch—not rush in as the pioneers develop their own answers, including mistaken ones—we will learn something. The present system of schooling and accountability is chock-full of mistakes, after all, not to mention disasters that are perpetuated year after year. Of course, we are accustomed to them, so we barely notice. This time, let us notice both, *with equal charity*. What we will need to build, systemically, are ways to make the work of such schools openly and publicly accountable. But this time let us honor forms of accountability that support, rather than sabotage, the very qualities such independence is trying to achieve: the exercise of responsible human judgment.

HEIGHTENED ACCOUNTABILITY:
SOME HOW-TOS

The magic three—smallness, self-governance and choice—may provide some necessary basic ingredients for more responsible individual schools and, thus, for more accountability also. Smallness creates self-knowledge, self-governance allows for a range of voices now often missing, and choice permits disgruntled parents and teachers to vote with their feet. But although these three qualities appear to undercut some of the pressure for external accountability, there is a strong argument for adding another new ingredient that will support the development of a more responsible community of schools: school networks—and not just because it is politically smart. Without them, good individual schools can too easily become stuck in routines that are parochial, elitist, smug, and secretive, not to mention being ideologically unsupportable. Smallness, for example, makes it harder to hide from bad leadership as well as good leadership and can produce personal and ideological tyrannies incompatible with publicly funded and endorsed schooling.

One way to improve the odds, compatible with good schooling, is to increase constituent voices about the work not only of their own school but also about other people's schools. Experience suggests that networks of schools can offer us an opportunity to have the best of both worlds: individuality and close external accountability. We need ways to hold schools up to a mirror and ask, Is this what you meant to be doing? And is what you meant to do publicly acceptable? We need to tackle professional myopia and defensiveness. We assume that schoolchildren learn by being exposed to criticism, but we have not transferred that to the way teachers and schools learn (Ancess & Darling-Hammond, 1995).

What strong democratic schooling needs are new forms of horizontal accountability, focused on the collective work of the school. Such networks parallel the accountability approach pioneered at places like Central Park East Secondary School, which uses external committees composed of college faculty, parents, community members, and other high school teachers to

proponents of new approaches to early childhood education in such a faraway place as northern Italy[6] that we are then better able to look at the standards of work we have grown accustomed to for our own 6-year-olds. That is the most powerful form of standard setting. There is probably no avoiding the tendency to believe we need frequent standardized assessments rather than more thoughtful long-range ones. But we can begin the task of focusing some resources on the latter. Every time we give in to the immediately expedient, we just postpone the day of reckoning.

We periodically imagine that we can avoid the messiness of human judgments and create a foolproof system to make everyone good or smart or intelligent (or, at least, pretend to). But if juries of our peers will have to decide life and death matters of law, so too will juries of our peers have to decide life and death matters of education. Both need guidelines, a body of past precedents, rules of procedure, lots of living evidence, and the requirement to reach a publicly shared decision. In contrast, nationally imposed curriculums aligned to nationally imposed tests aligned to national high-stakes consequences will not do much for basic skills; meanwhile they will do great harm to democratic—read intellectually serious—education.

What the state and federal government can do is ensure greater resource equity; that is their first and foremost obligation. It is patently unfair to hold people publicly accountable for outcomes but give them vastly different incomes to work with. Providing schools with comparably well-educated faculties accustomed to thinking of themselves as responsible adults, for example, will require substantial public intervention. Well-intentioned but distant authorities can also promote mandates regarding who must be served—so that we do not once again forget those most in need and hardest to educate, which can easily reoccur as we seek greater autonomy and flexibility at the school level. After they have accomplished these tasks, it might be time to talk again. Meanwhile, they can and should intervene all they want to increase the public visibility of children and their schools (and thus increase the kind of informed, opinionated, and compassionate debate that schooling should always engender in a democratic society).

CONCLUSION

Are we describing a variant of what is now called charter schooling? Yes and no. The New York network project would, for example, dwarf all existing efforts at one-by-one charters and demonstrate instead what the idea behind chartering might look like if it were at the center of the system, not its periphery. We are imagining in practice how the idea behind charters could become the norm for public education: what it would look like if we stopped

trivializing the schools that have worked well for all our children, treating them like sideshows rather than the "real thing." They did what they did because good work is always needed. But their work has something to teach us all. In ignoring its lessons we have made it seem inevitable that the kind of solutions powerful and wealthy parents demand for their own children cannot take place inside the system. We have turned publicness into a safety net for losers. Charters as they have been viewed in current parlance are just more of the same: a way out for a few. In that sense, this is not a variant of charters.

The principle we need to keep in the forefront of our minds is clear: How will this or that policy affect the increased intelligence and responsible behavior of the people closest to the kids (as well as the kids themselves)? That is the litmus test. Being tougher—making the parties to schooling pay a heavier price for failing—may or may not create a temporary blip on the charts; but a blip is not what America's schools need. Creating forms of governance and accountability that are mindful first and foremost of their impact on effective relationships between teachers, children, and families will not be an easy task. These kinds of changes may not influence next year's test scores, but they may be the fastest route to substantially improved schooling. Shortcuts that bypass such relationships are inefficient. If we take the time to build practices consistent with our ends, we can perhaps end the gloomy record of lost opportunities and make the exceptions the norm. We might, in the process, create communities of adults and children for whom our new knowledge about how human beings best learn might be a source of strength, not grounds for endless bitter debates. We might, in the process, create communities that are more powerful than those adultless subcultures that dominate far too many of our children's lives and that endanger our larger common community.

NOTES

1. David Bensman, a researcher from Rutgers University, was funded by several foundations interested in the work of these schools to both tell their stories and examine the data regarding their success. Bensman (1995) presents early data on high school graduates as well as reflections.

2. The argument against public education is well summarized in Chubb and Moe (1990).

3. Meier (1995) covers a wide range of the same issues dealt with in this article. Chapter 5 focuses on why small is better.

4. Sizer's (1993) *Horace's Compromise* is the book that launched the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Central Park East Secondary School. The argument in this article is motivated by the kinds of issues addressed by Ted Sizer rather than on more narrowly focused economic imperatives.

5. New York Networks for School Renewal's Annenberg Challenge grant proposal is an example of how a system might otherwise be designed. For details on this project, write for its various brochures, testimony to the state assembly, speeches by Deborah Meier, and the grant

proposal itself to New York Networks for School Renewal, 1573 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10029.

6. This refers to the work going on in Reggio Emilio; see Gandini, Forman, and Edwards (1996).

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