

# Can the Odds Be Changed?

BY DEBORAH MEIER

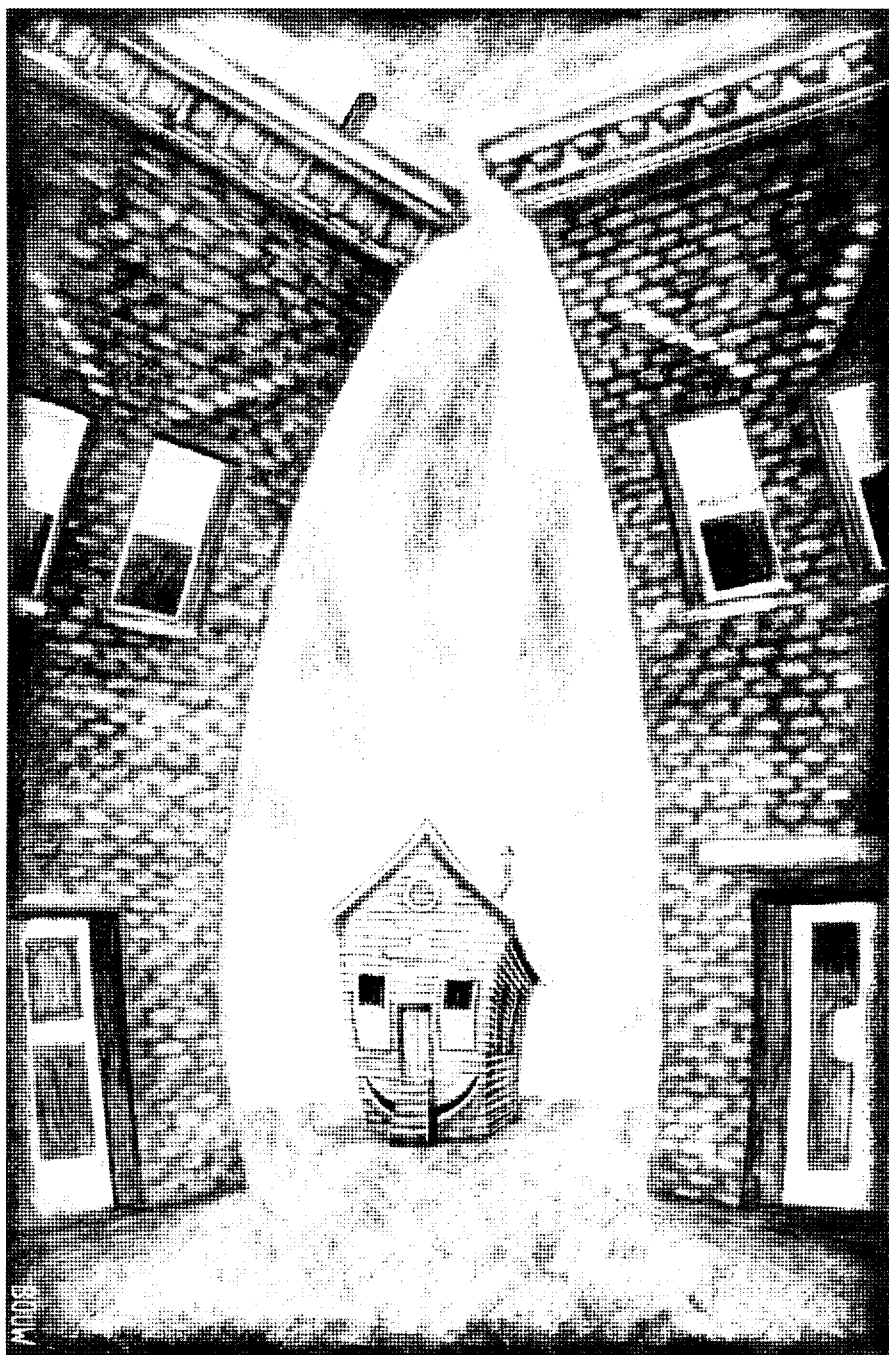
*One-of-a-kind schools flicker brightly. A few manage to survive by avoiding the public's attention or by serving powerful constituents; the rest gradually burn out. Ms. Meier wonders whether we can change that and make the exceptions the norm.*

**T**HERE ARE numerous stories of schools that have been successful with students who would otherwise count among society's failures. However, such school successes rarely set the stage for Big Reform agendas. These one-of-a-kind schools flicker brightly. A few manage to survive by avoiding the public's attention or by serving powerful constituents; the rest gradually burn out. Can we change that? Can we make the exceptions the norm?

## The Search for Silver Bullets

To the vast majority of serious policy makers, the existing exemplary schools offer no important lessons. Most policy makers define *systemic* so that it applies only to the kinds of solutions that can be more or less simultaneously prescribed for all schools, irrespective of particulars. So-

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lutions, in short, that seek to improve schooling by taking away the already too limited formal powers of those closest to the students. Examples range from more prescriptive curricula to new, more centralized testing systems; fiscal rewards and penalties; or changed school governance bodies.

School-level folks are as skeptical about the capacity of any of these top-down recipes to make a significant impact on the minds of teachers or children as policy-level folks are about the idiosyncratic bottom-up ones. Practitioners — in classrooms and central offices — know at heart that “this too shall pass” or can be gotten around or overcome. They wait out the innovators. Policy makers work overtime to come up with ways to circumvent such resistance. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

This is a climate that encourages impatience: enough’s enough! If we can’t do a better job of marrying top-down and bottom-up reform, we’re probably in for big trouble. Giving up on the new thought that all children can learn to use their minds well is hard, especially for those of us who know firsthand that schools as designed are hardly suited to the job and that vastly more children could be well-educated if we came up with a better design. We’ve “tasted” it. It seems both so near and so far. Perhaps if we posed the problem differently, the oddball schools might offer us systemic answers. The Annenberg Challenge gave a substantial boost to a wave of projects around the country that were, on the one hand, fueled by the growing interest in vouchers and charters but that sought on the other hand a response more compatible with public education and equity concerns. By seeking a solution to the systemic through looking at the particular, different possibilities became thinkable.

Good schools are filled with particulars — including particular human beings. And it is these human beings that lie at their heart, that explain their surprising successes. In fact, it is these particulars that inspire the passions of those involved and draw upon the best in each. Rather than ignore such schools because their solutions lie in unreplicable individuals or circumstances, it’s precisely such unreplicability that should be celebrated. Maybe what these “special” schools demonstrate is that *every school must have the power and the responsibility to select and design its own*

*particulars* and thus to surround all young people with powerful adults who are in a position to act on their behalf in open and publicly responsible ways. That may be the “silver bullet.”

Will grown-ups all jump at the chance to be such responsible adults? Of course not. Most have never been asked to have their own wonderful ideas, much less to take responsibility for them. Many will be leery because along with the freedom to design their own particulars must come new responsibilities for defending the outcomes. But the resultant practice, responsible citizenship, is not only a good means for running a good school but also the central aim of public schooling. How convenient.

In designing a way to make it easier to invent powerful and responsible schools, we can stack the deck in favor of good schooling, so that great schools are more likely, good schools become ordinary practice, and poor schools are more quickly exposed and dealt with. This effort will require us to learn how to make judgments about schools with standards in mind, but not with a standardized ruler in hand. For too long we’ve acted as though, in the name of standards, we have to treat students and teachers as interchangeable parts. Nothing could be worse for standards, and nothing would be more unnecessary.

We already know some of the common features of exemplary schools — public or private — that serve ordinary and extraordinary children well. For example:

- *Smallness.* It helps if schools are of a reasonable size, small enough for faculty members to sit around a table and iron things (such as standards) out, for everyone to be known well by everyone else, and for schools and families to collaborate face-to-face over time. Small enough so that children belong to the same community as the adults in their lives instead of being abandoned in adultless subcultures. Small enough to both feel safe and be safe. Small enough so that phony data can easily be detected by any interested participant. Small enough so that the people most involved can never say they weren’t consulted.

- *Self-governance.* It helps if those most directly involved have sufficient autonomy over critical decisions. Only then will it be fair to hold people accountable for the impact of their decisions. This will entail creating democratic adult communities that have the power to make decisions

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about staffing, leadership, and the full use of their budget, as well as about the particulars of scheduling, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

- *Choice.* It helps if there are sufficient choices available for parents, students, and teachers so that schools can afford to be different from one another — to have their own definite characters, special emphases, and 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.)

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

Two different historic endeavors in New York City — the 22-year experiment with schools of choice in District 4 and the Alternative High School Division’s 12-year effort that created dozens of small alternatives, came together in the 1990s to challenge “business as usual.” These ventures caught the public’s fancy, stimulating a movement on behalf of small schools of choice for all ages and types of students. The genie was out of the bottle and hard to put back. The idea of small alternative schools attracted the attention of families who did not see themselves as “at risk.” Word of mouth suggested that students in these schools matched their counterparts academically and surpassed them on many critical dimensions: college atten-

dance, work preparedness, and ability to perform socially valued tasks. They were also achieving improved scores on typical academic assessments. The research community gradually confirmed such impressions. The studies suggest that such schools provide for the possibility of a community powerful enough to be compelling to young people — a club worth joining.

The skeptics say it still can't work en masse. Whether we create another 100 or 200 small schools of choice — some starting from scratch, others carved out of existing schools — they can't be built to last. Everyone agrees that, under present circumstances, such schools have a limited future. The reformers argue, however, that "present circumstances" are not engraved in stone.

### Why Exceptions Can't Become the Norm

Without deep-seated changes in the system that surrounds these small schools of choice, history suggests that the critics will be right: most will water down their innovations or give up altogether. As their numbers increase, so, oddly enough, does their vulnerability. This is one case in which there may not be more safety in numbers. For one thing, these maverick schools tax the capacities of the existing institutions — both the formal system and the godfatherly individuals and organizations that spring up to provide nurturance and cover.

Second, as their numbers increase, they're more noticeable. This visibility, in turn, creates new demands to bring them into compliance. Their mainstream counterparts ask why the mavericks are allowed to "get away" with this or that. Who do they think they are? Third, as new roadblocks appear, which require new Herculean responses, school folks begin to complain of weariness — the original fire in the belly that fueled the pioneering spirit begins to wane. Doing the new and the old at the same time seems more and more unfair, an imposition rather than an opportunity.

The existing system is simply not designed to support such oddball entities. It believes in its mission of control and orderliness. The people who operate the present system do not see themselves in the business of trying to best match teacher to job, child to school. Nor could they do so if they wanted. Instead, whenever they look at a problem, they've been trained to seek, first and foremost, ways to solve it by rule. If it's not good for everyone, it's not good for anyone. To make exceptions smacks of favoritism and inefficiency. Each exception must thus be defended over and over again. How else can we hold everyone accountable?

The results of such rule-boundedness are well-documented — above all by such thoughtful critics of public education as John Chubb and Terry Moe. (We all know that the expression "to work to the rule" describes a form of job sabotage.) Except

for small enclaves within the large institution, in which special constituencies carve out their own intimate subschools (the ones designed for the top students or for the most vulnerable), the school as a whole remains remarkably anonymous and unchangeable, the model of a nonlearning institution. But there is an alternative. It means changing the "circumstances" so that those three magic bullets described earlier — small, self-governing schools of choice — can be in the mainstream, not on the sidelines, of the system.

If nearly all good schools in the private sector share these three characteristics, why can't we offer them publicly for all children? Because, it's said, it's not politically feasible when public monies are at stake. If that's the nub of the argument, then we should either roll over and admit defeat or *make* it politically feasible. That means inventing a system of accountability for public funds and aiming for educational results that don't require bad educational practice. It's as simple — and every bit as hard — as that.

### Changing the Present Circumstances

Small, self-governing schools of choice could be encouraged to flourish, grow like Topsy, spread like weeds, if we built our system *for them*, not them for our system. To create highly personalized schools, however, we have to be willing to shift both our practices and our mindset cautiously and relentlessly over many years. Present practice isn't inevitable. What we have, after all, is a human invention that's only a hundred years old. But just because it's one of those newfangled ideas that doesn't work doesn't mean it will fade away naturally. In fact, it's got a tenacious hold. But our current practice is not the inevitable product of our human nature. In fact, it's peculiarly in conflict with our humanity and with everything we know about rearing the young.

Until the *relationships* between all the people — parents and teachers — responsible for raising our children are changed, changing the parts (curriculum, pedagogy, or assessment) won't matter very much. But it's 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 Theodore Sizer wisely said when Cen-



"What makes you think you need a sabbatical?"

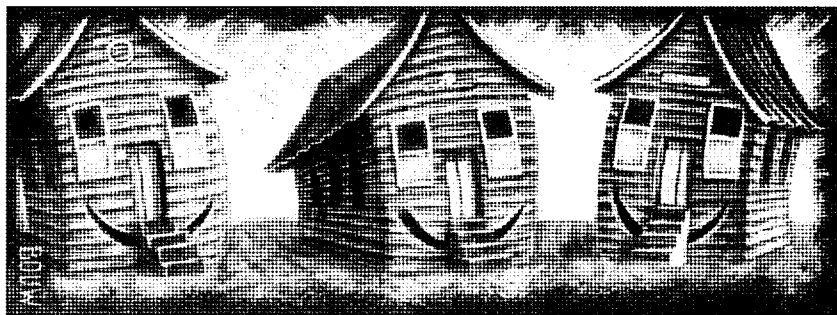
tral Park East Secondary School was started, "Keep it simple, so that you can focus on what will always remain complex — the mind of each individual learner and the subject matter we're trying to help her master." Schools have been doing the reverse for far too long.

We shouldn't declare all schools independent tomorrow. We shouldn't remove all rules and regulations by fiat. We shouldn't even downsize all schools by fiat. Until we have more parents clamoring for change, more teachers with the skill and confidence to try out new approaches, and more living examples of schools that are both independent and accountable, we need to keep our ambitions in check. We're aiming at a change that sticks, not another fad.

On the immediate agenda, for example, is creating a series of large-scale pilot "laboratories" 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'll need a lean master contract between these schools, the union, the city, and the state — a contract covering the most basic obligations as well as those unwaivable local, 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 — then we'll 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're accustomed to them, so we barely notice. This time, let's notice the mistakes and the disasters — with equal charity. As a way of noticing, let's honor forms of accountability that support rather than sabotage the very qualities such independence is trying to achieve: accountability through the responsible exercise of collective human judgment.

The "magic" three — smallness, self-governance, and choice — provide some of the necessary basic ingredients for more responsible individual schools and thus for more accountability. 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 while these three elements appear to undercut some of the pressure for more

## A Response to Deborah Meier



BY SEYMOUR SARASON

*The odds had better be changed, Mr. Sarason points out, because — if they are not — the situation will only get worse.*

THOSE WHO know Deborah Meier personally expect her to be direct and even blunt. Her article "Can the Odds Be Changed?" is an example of that candor in print. The upside of the article is that she makes short work of those who talk as if we have learned little or nothing about the features of good schools. The fact is that we have learned a great deal about the difference between productive and unproductive contexts for learning, and Meier's practical accomplishments and writings have mightily contributed to what we have learned. She is no bleeding-heart liberal who oversimplifies what is involved in creating classrooms and schools reflective of productive learning contexts. She makes it plain that a classroom or school is embedded in and influenced by a larger system of governance, a system currently inimical to creating and sustaining those productive contexts.

For me the question that her article raises is, Why is what we have learned so difficult for people (especially the policy makers) to implement? I say "implement" because many of these people would not disagree with what Meier says are the features of a good school. The answer is that they know — truly know — that to take what she says seriously would require a radical transformation of schools as we know them. In recent years, I have been asking educators this question: If you were starting from scratch, would you come up with the system we now have? Almost all say no. At the same time that they have seen the current system as fatally flawed, they have reluctantly resigned themselves to tinkering with the system as it is.

Let me offer a personal note. It took me years to articulate and directly confront the conclusion — resting on years of thinking and experience — that the present system cannot be rescued. I overcame my reluctance and wrote a book, *How Schools Might Be Governed and Why*, which was published by Teachers College Press last spring. After that book was in production, Meier sent me her article. I had two reactions. First, I felt more secure in the belief that I was right to write that book. Second, I realized that she had managed to state the guts of my book in an incomparably pithy way.

Can the odds be changed? They had better be changed. I have monotonously said about education reform that the more things change, the more they remain the same. I was wrong. If the odds are not changed, the situation will get worse — a conclusion implicit in Meier's article. **K**

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and more external accountability, there's a strong argument for adding several other ingredients that will support the development of a more responsible community of schools. Not just because it's politically smart — but because without a powerful system of public accountability, good individual schools can too easily become stuck in routines, parochial, smug, and secretive. Even tyrannical. Smallness, for example, makes it harder to hide from the impact of bad leadership as well as good leadership.

There are several forms of public accountability that are not only compatible with but actually supportive of school-based initiatives. One way to improve the odds, compatible with the three magic bullets, is to increase constituents' voices about the work not only of their own schools but also of other people's schools in terms of student outcomes, equity, and fiscal integrity. 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?" 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. For this to happen, we need to create instruments that are consistent with the very quality that led us to propose small schools in the first place: responsiveness to often nonstandard ways of maintaining high standards. What strong democratic schooling needs are new forms of horizontal accountability focused on the collective work of the school.

The first step involves creating stronger internal accountability systems, such as those pioneered at Central Park East Secondary School, Urban Academy, University Heights, and International High School, which use both peers and external critics — college faculty members, parents, community members, and other high school teachers — to examine their students' work. It's the job of the teachers, for example, to grade their own students and to determine when they meet schoolwide standards — a task too few schools take seriously today. But the teachers, in turn, need to be publicly accountable for such judgments — both to their internal constituents and to the larger public.

At the next step, schools must answer to one another for the quality of their work.

Through the creation of networks of sister schools, not uncommon in private schooling, we can learn how to look at one another's work as critical friends. Such networks can also serve to make up for any problems of scale, if schools choose to use them in that way. Schools that provide feedback on the work of sister schools are creating built-in professional development tools, as well as a powerful form of parent and community education. There is nothing better for one's own learning curve than to formally observe and give support to others.

Third, networks need "cooler," noncollegial audiences to answer to. For this we need formal review panels — public auditors — composed of both critical friends and more distanced and skeptical publics, to attest to the credibility of the networks and the work of their schools. It is such bodies that must demand convincing evidence that the network of schools under review is doing its job, is on the right track, and is acting responsibly. Such review panels must ultimately be responsible to the larger, democratically chosen public authorities.

And finally, everyone — teachers, parents, assessors, legislators, and the public — needs a shared body of credible information (actual student work as well as statistical data) as evidence on which to build reflections and judgments. These are the essentials for creating public credibility, but they are also the essentials for producing good schools. The task of these varied groups of observers — the school's immediate community, the networkers, and the external review panels — is not to find the "one right answer" but to push those closest to the action to act with greater enlightenment.

This is no idle dream. In New York City in 1995, with the support of funds from the Annenberg Challenge, nearly 100 small schools broke themselves down into more than 20 such self-chosen networks and began the work of shared support and accountability. More of these schools were in the works within a year. Simultaneously, a system of review panels to accredit such networks and to maintain audits of their work was being developed, as was a system for collecting credible and accessible data. In return, both the union and the city agreed to negotiate new freedoms and greater flexibility. The largest city in the land was on the brink of the biggest experiment on the potential of smallness.

But New York City's inability to keep the same chancellor for more than a few years soon put the more risky and experimental aspects of the project on the back burner.

On a smaller scale, also with support from Annenberg, Boston launched a similar approach — called pilot schools — and throughout the country at other Annenberg sites comparable efforts were begun. Not surprisingly, system folks are always tempted by apparently easier solutions that do not change the locus of power and are simpler to implement — at least on paper.

**W**E PERIODICALLY imagine that we can avoid the messiness of human judgments and create a foolproof "automatic" system to make everyone good or smart or intelligent. At least, we pretend to believe it is possible. Then we get upset at the bureaucracy it inevitably spawns. But if juries of our peers will do for deciding life-and-death matters of law, why not juries of our peers to decide life-and-death matters of education? As Winston Churchill once said about democracy itself, nothing could be more flawed — except all the alternatives. Of course, juries need guidelines, a body of precedents, rules of procedure, evidence, and the requirement to reach a publicly shared decision. This will not come easily or overnight, and, like democracy itself, such an approach rests on restoring levels of mutual trust we seem inclined to abandon altogether — to our peril.

The criterion we need to keep at the forefront of our minds is clear: How will this or that policy affect the intelligent and responsible behavior of the people closest to the students (as well as the students themselves)? That's the litmus test. 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. It may not even show up as a blip on next year's test scores. But shortcuts that bypass such relationships are inefficient.

If we do it right, we might in the process help create responsible and caring 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. The problem we face is, after all, more than "academic."