Transforming Public Education

A New Course for America's Future

EDITED BY

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1997

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CHAPTER TWELVE

How Our Schools Could Be

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We stand poised between alternate ways of imagining the schools of tomorrow. The tough part is that to some extent each of these ways is often espoused by some of the same people, and teachers and citizens alike are led to believe that they can both be carried out simultaneously. Or people try to weave in and out of each, with the result that they end up never decisively setting course.

The two that interest me most are, not surprisingly, often seen as close cousins. This is due to the fact that they are both espoused by people who come out of a similar tradition—progressive and liberal-minded. The kinds of schools they'd both probably like to see are, indeed, in some ways quite similar, with a focus on critical inquiry, curriculum depth, and collaboration and a downplaying of multiple-choice testing, rote memorization, and highly competitive classrooms.

What they disagree about is how to get there, and as a corollary to this, what must be sacrificed for "later" in order to get there "sooner." Faced with what may be a more imminent danger from the far right, it is tempting to forget these differences. But that would be a mistake because, in fact and despite their often complementary intentions, *these two ways stand in chilling contrast to each other.*

One way, the position of the supporters of Goals 2000 and, indeed, the entire standards-driven reform movement, rests on the assumption that top-down support for bottom-up change—which both positions are rhetorically for—means that the top will do the critical intellectual work of defining purposes and content as well as how to measure them, while the bottom does the "nuts and bolts," the "how-to"—a sort of "men's work" versus "women's work" division of labor. This approach seeks a consensus of academic expertise and mainstream political correctness, reinforced by high-stakes testing to discipline unruly kids, teachers, and local school boards. (While it now tends toward a liberal/mainstream consensus, it's worth noting that it's an approach that could just as easily tilt toward a very different, radically right-wing political consensus.)

The Goals 2000 agenda and the state-mandated versions that are flowing from it, with their focus on measurable goals and standards and their vision set by international competition and the emerging global economy, are weighted down with the assumption that the task of school reform is far too important to leave the critical intellectual work to those responsible for implementing school practice. While much of the work emanating from the standard-setters is worthy, it cannot lead either to high-level intellectual work in our classrooms or to solving our global economic crisis.

There is another possible set of assumptions, based on a different vision of human capacity. This way of thinking leads to rejecting top-down reforms unless they are useful to the creation and sustenance of self-governing learning communities responsible for collaboratively and publicly deciding really important issues. The kind of education we want for our young requires schools that see themselves as membership communities, not service organizations. In such communities ideas are discussed, purposes argued about, and judgment exercised by parents, teachers, and students because that is at the heart of what it means to be well educated: having one's own wonderful ideas. Students can't learn, nor can the adults who must show them the way, unless they can practice what they preach.

At the moment, many political conservatives are also arguing against the creation of a national, standards-driven system. The trouble is not only that the political Right may support some rather horrendous locally driven standards, but also that they are also focused on eliminating the whole problem by abolishing public responsibility for all children's education. They seek, in fact, the elimination of a public system of schooling and its replacement by a free market of private schools. Thus, while the opposition to the imposing of national standards is alive and well these days, those in opposition are not all of one mind. It would be unwise, however, to drop the argument just because of the sometimes unlikely alliances it has created. In fact, some of those who are attracted to the Right's antifederalist cause are motivated by many of the same concerns I have.

I've been told, during the past few years, that I'm ignoring the train that's already left the station and is coming down the line, the "do-it-or-else" express. This new wave of the future, it is suggested, is not dependent on any central congressional bodies. (The power of the SATs or the Carnegie unit, for example, is not derived from any legislative act.) But if history is any guide, the kind of fast-track solutions being proposed will often turn out to be expensive dead ends. Designed in heady conference centers, the blueprints are usually too unwieldy, covering everything but the kitchen sink, a patched-together consensus that satisfies no one, and finally just too susceptible to local resistance to produce what their architects had in mind.

One imagines a countermandate to the "all students will" dictums being invented by expert, university-based task forces: for example, how about insisting that standards be phased in only as fast as the school can bring its adult staff up to the standards it expects of all 18-year-olds? 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 a new set, generally laid right on top of the old one, and then moves on to other things. New York teachers are experienced and inventive saboteurs of the best and worst of such plans. We are home, therefore, to some of the greatest as well as some of the worst of schools.

But an alternative to the Goals 2000 approach that rests squarely on a strong system of public schooling and a commitment to democracy is gathering surprising national momentum. The movement to empower teachers with the capacity to make professional judgments and the creation of small schools in which parents, teachers, and community can work closely together are two of the promising developments that may undermine the top-down plans. Support for a more open system of standards-setting comes also from unexpected places—for a skeptic like me. For example, the New York State Board of Regents (New York's state board of education) is embarking on a new and more promising approach. So 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 like the folks who invented the team approach to building the Saturn car or the Deming way of managing creative businesses.

We also have some hardheaded real 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 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 Four 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 Four. This revolutionary autonomy, referred to locally as "creative compliance" or "creative noncompliance," was simply doing

publicly and collaboratively what many of us had long done behind closed doors.

Central Park East (CPE), along with more than 30 other small schools of choice begun by District Four over the next 10 years, was and remains an amazing success story. We lived a somewhat lonely existence for a decade, but today both the CPE schools and the District Four "way" have been roughly replicated in dozens of New York City school districts and are now part of accepted citywide reform plans. What they share is a way of looking at children reminiscent of good kindergarten practice. Put another way, they are based on what we know about how human beings learn as well as a deep-seated respect for all of the parties involved—parents, teachers, and kids.

Kindergarten is the one place—for many children maybe the last place—where such mutual respect has been a traditional norm (even 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, just because kids come that way—no two alike. They know that parents and the community must be partners or kids will be short-changed. Kindergarten teachers know that helping children to learn to become more self-reliant is part of their job definition—starting with tying shoes and going to the bathroom on their own.

Alas, it is the last time children are given such independence, encouraged to make choices, and allowed to move about on their own. Having learned to use the bathroom by themselves at age five, at age six they are then required to wait until the whole class lines up at bathroom time. In kindergarten, parent and teacher meet to talk and often have each other's phone numbers. After that it's mainly a checklist of numbers and letters. The older they get, the less we take into account the importance of their own interests, their own active learning. 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, grab their interests, and engage their minds and hearts. Teachers in kindergarten are editors, critics, cheerleaders, and caretakers, not just lecturers or deliverers of instruction. What Ted Sizer calls "coaching" is second nature to the kindergarten teacher, who takes for granted that her job description includes curriculum as well as natural ongoing assessment. What's true for students is true for teachers: they have less and less authority, responsibility, and independence as their charges get older. Until, of course, they make it into an elite college or graduate school. Then both teachers and students go back into kindergarten.

Indeed, it was Ted 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 the right moment, 1984, 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 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? 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 kids in groups of at least three. We knew also that high school kids wouldn't like to see themselves as "like kindergartners" or even sixth graders. We needed to create new rituals that symbolized their new maturity. We knew also that as the school was "growing up," it meant a concern for 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 break 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 the elementary school tradition of respect for the wholeness of both subject matter and human learning intact. 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, and that would evoke 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 classroom life could certainly be made more democratic than traditional schools encouraged, we saw it as equally important that the school life of *adults* be made more democratic. It seemed unlikely that we could foster democratic values in our school unless the adults had significant rights over 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 (Duckworth, 1987). Indeed, one of our most prominently stated, upfront

aims was the cultivation of what we came to call "habits of mind," habits that apply to all academic and nonacademnic subject matter and to all thoughtful human activities.

THE FIVE HABITS OF MIND

The five habits we came up with are not exhaustive, but they suggest the kind of questions that we believed a well-educated person raises about his world:

1. How do we know what we think we know? What's our evidence? How credible is it?
2. Whose viewpoint are we hearing, reading, seeing? What other viewpoints might there be if we changed our position?
3. How is one thing connected to another? Is there a pattern here?
4. How else might it have been? What if? Supposing that?
5. 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 five habits as the backdrop and the specific "essential" questions at the core of everything the students study and do. We couldn'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, and so forth. This is known in Coalition of Essential Schools jargon as 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), to think, and to discuss their ideas with many different people. We expect them to share their knowledge with each other 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 take most of the standard city and state competency tests, and we provide coaching for such tests, including the SATs and College Boards. But we don't see these 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 are no less critical, no less rigorous. They are part of the "hard" stuff.

Twenty years of documented evidence—rates of high school graduation, dropouts, 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 get 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 federal lunches, and at least 20% are labeled as "special ed" or "handicapped." They come to us looking remarkably like the city as a whole. They leave, however, with substantially greater life choices.

NOT A ONE BEST WAY

But, proud as we are of these schools, we do not see what we do as the "one best or only way" to educate children. As Seymour Fliegel, a former deputy superintendent in Community District Four, 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. (Fliegel, 1987)

While it has taken time for the District Four ideas to "catch on" or for CPE's particular approach to spread, today both are "in the mainstream." Everyone is imitating District Four's system of choices. There are more than 50 small public schools in New York City created in this tradition, and plans are afoot to vastly increase this number over the next five years. This time plans are also afoot to introduce innovations in the ways in which we hold schools accountable to better match these new, less standardized approaches to teaching and learning.

In addition, as schools develop a variety of obviously different solutions, it will not be possible to arbitrarily assign students to schools by lottery or

street address. Parents and students will have to be involved in making choices about which school they think best suits their needs, talents, and interests. Eventually all school districts may wish to develop schools of choice, even as they may also (as in District Four) give priority to parents on the basis of residence. Small schools sharing the same building will, however, lessen the problems of transportation that add difficulty to many choice plans. Both teacher and parent choice plans will require creative revisions in our current rules and regulations.

It was the creation of a broad and diverse set of new schools, not the reforming of existing schools, that was the crucial decision made in District Four's "revolution" of two decades ago. It meant the district could focus on encouraging school people, not 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, as mentioned earlier, is another central issue. Choice offered a way of providing for increased professional decision-making without pitting parents and teachers against each other in a useless power struggle. Furthermore, small schools of choice offered everyone vastly increased time to meet together and work out differences—teachers, teachers and families, and parents through their formal and informal structures. The time needed is considerable but definitely worth it. One top-down mandate we'd have no trouble with would be legislating that employers 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. The schools otherwise are crippled, 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. Those students are always warily looking for hidden traps. And they will find plenty of such traps, as 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. It's a misreading of what keeps the two apart. Unless and until parents and teachers 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.

Schools must essentially share some of the qualities of what are now being called "charter" schools: administrative, curricular, staffing, and fiscal autonomy to pursue their approach to the education of children and young

people. We need such small autonomous schools so that democratic governance systems become possible—systems where it doesn't seem silly to talk of "everyone" getting together. Just as the Empire State Building contains dozens of companies, so could our big school buildings contain many schools. They could, in addition, contain schools serving different age groups. They might hire a building manager to deal with strictly building matters, as the Empire State Building does.

The educational life of each school would remain distinct and independent. Simple changes that are impossible to make in a megaschool 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 twenty, is about optimum size for effective, democratic schooling. This lends itself quite well to placing a half-dozen or more schools in one building. If small schools don't actually share a building, the quality of their work would be enhanced by insisting that schools join together in loose networks. Such networks can provide needed support; where economy of scale matters they can join forces; and, most importantly, they can become critical friends to each other, creating mutual accountability to good practice. Networks of small firms in the business world are—like shared decision-making, flatter hierarchies, and flexible staffing—of growing interest in the economic sphere for many of the same reasons that they may offer advantages to us in the school world. They are, for instance, the basis for New York City's Annenberg challenge proposal for eliminating the need for a huge central bureaucracy by granting networks of small high schools autonomy to control their own decision-making processes.

Teachers will not have a major impact on the way kids use their minds until they come to know how their students' minds are working—student by student. 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.

What about the loud cries for "accountability" that play such a major role in 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 each other nationally and internationally in the great race to see who's first?

The capacity to create schools that are accountable to their own immediate community—parents, kids, and fellow staff members—is far easier in

small, self-governed communities. However, the ways in which schools that set out to be independent and idiosyncratic can meet the legitimate needs for broader taxpayer accountability requires new thinking. 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.

To respond to democratically established norms with regard to equity, access, outcomes, and fiscal integrity that are in sync with our non-factory schools is a task that lies ahead of us. Given that few if any of these legitimate needs are currently met, we needn't expect a miracle answer as we design our better mousetraps. We're not catching mice now. But that doesn't mean that mouse traps are not needed.

The danger here is that we will cramp the needed innovations with over-ambitious accountability demands. Practical realism must prevail. Changes in the daily conduct of schooling—whether it's new curriculum or pedagogy or just new ways of collaborating and governing—are hard, slow, and above all immensely time-consuming; they require qualities of trust and patience that we are not accustomed to.

The structural reforms—changes in size, the role of choice, and shifts in power relationships—may be hard to make. To some degree these are the changes that can be "imposed" from above. The trouble is that they merely lay the ground for the slow and steady work that will 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 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, ID cards, automatized lateness calls, automatic expulsions, and holdovers. Instead, these ills require an assault by school people on the culture of anonymity that permeates our youngsters' lives. Our children need stable personal relationships more than ever, and our schools offer 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. They seem too messy and too hard to track. They cannot be initiated on Monday and measured on Friday. They require fewer constraints and 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 it is we value so dearly that we incarcerate our children for 12 years to make sure they've "got it." Not just to house them while we're busy, not just to keep them from taking our jobs, not 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. Such habits, in fact, can be troubling and uncomfortable to have, but, we hope, hard to shake. Openness to other viewpoints, the capacity to sustain uncertainty, the ability to act on partial knowledge, the inclination to step into the shoes of others—these are the controversial requirements, for example. Until we face such questions, 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. Just hard work, keeping your eyes on the prize, and lots of patience for the disagreements that inevitably arise.

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