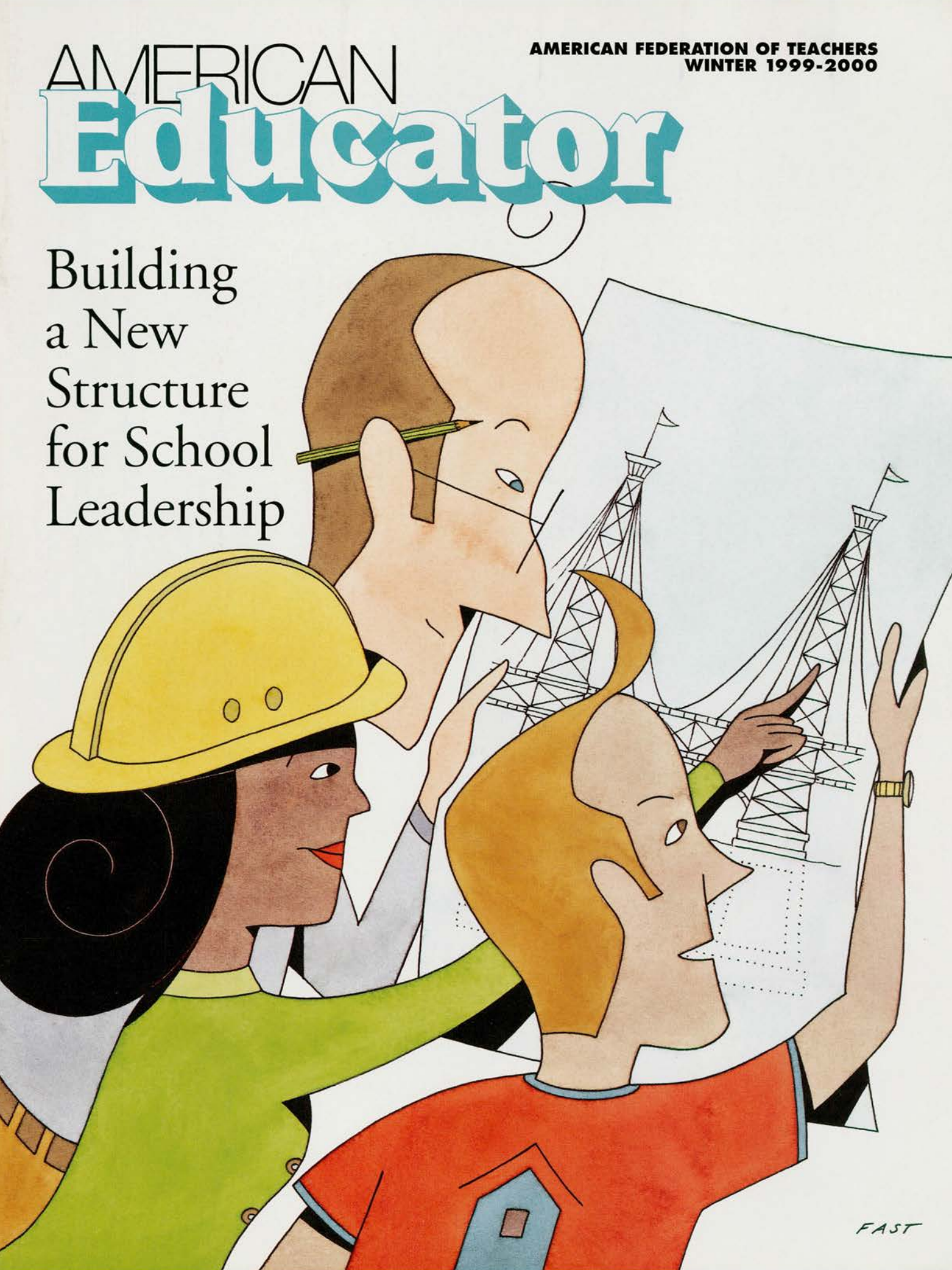
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
WINTER 1999-2000

AMERICAN Educator

Building a New Structure for School Leadership



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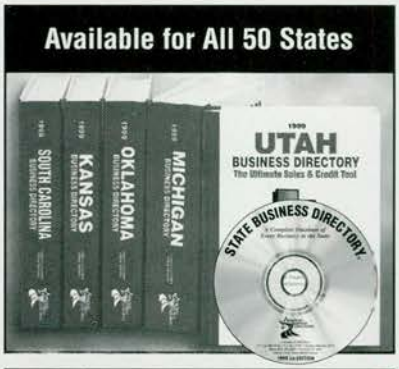

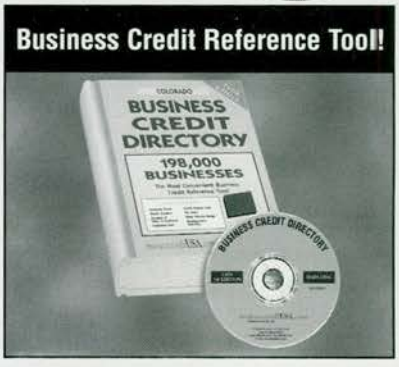

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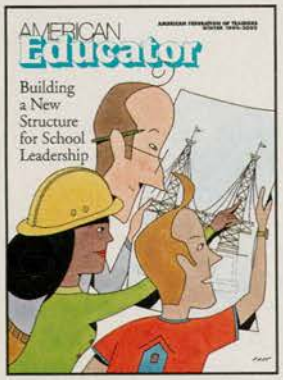

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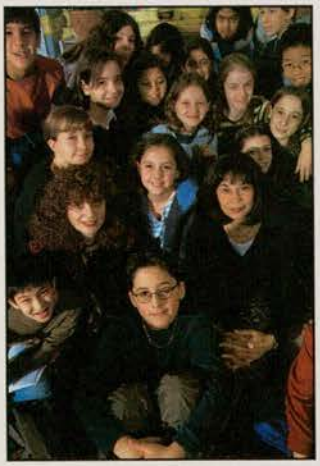

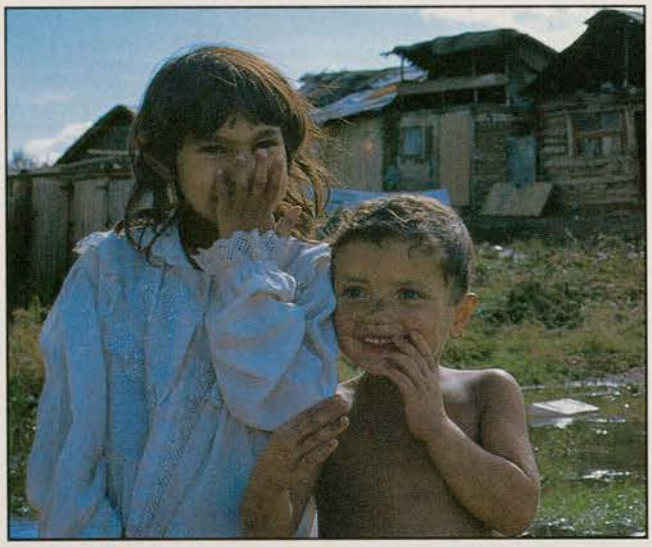

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LETTERS

I just finished reading the Fall 1999 issue of *American Educator* and want to take a moment to tell you what an important role your efforts are having in informing American teachers and other educators about current advances in knowledge and practice. The articles by Askey and Wu provide uniquely useful information and a level of discourse seldom found in writings about instruction. Where else would the typical teacher find such a lucid, interesting introduction to the mathematics instruction reflected in the new, highly praised book by Liping Ma than that appearing in Askey's and Wu's commentaries?

This is another issue of your magazine that breaks new ground for the American reader. The discussion does not end with a lamentation about the current state of mathematics education in the United States, but offers well-considered ideas to guide the discussion of effective ways of teaching mathematics at the elementary school level. In contrast to the common practice of deploring American teachers' weaknesses, criticism is followed by positive, productive ideas illustrating how reform in instruction really is possible.

—HAROLD W. STEVENSON
PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

At a time when educational research is often contradictory, unrealistic, and just plain wrong, the Fall 1999 issue of *American Educator* provided three exceptional articles: "Knowing and Teaching Elementary Mathematics," by Richard Askey, "Basic Skills Versus Conceptual Understanding," by H. Wu, and "Different Strokes for Different Folks?: A Critique of Learning Styles," by Steven A. Stahl.

These articles provide sensible alternatives to the educational extremism that leads to ideological entrenchment, and a much needed reaffirmation of the value of classroom experience. Each article is a beacon that will help guide teachers trying to find their way through a sea of educational chicanery.

I applaud these authors' efforts to introduce reason to the educational debate and hope the AFT will continue its leadership for the sake of education and of our profession.

—JOHN J. WEVER
WELLS, NEW YORK

Three years ago, as a sixth-grade elementary school teacher, I piloted a highly controversial mathematics curriculum that encourages students to discover mathematical algorithms to the virtual exclusion of skills development. My district adopted this curriculum with little public debate. Over the last two years, many of my colleagues and I have struggled with following the district mandate to teach the adopted curriculum while attempting to teach basic skills with supplemental materials. I therefore found great solace in H. Wu's article "Basic Skills Versus Conceptual Understanding—A Bogus Dichotomy in Mathematics Education."

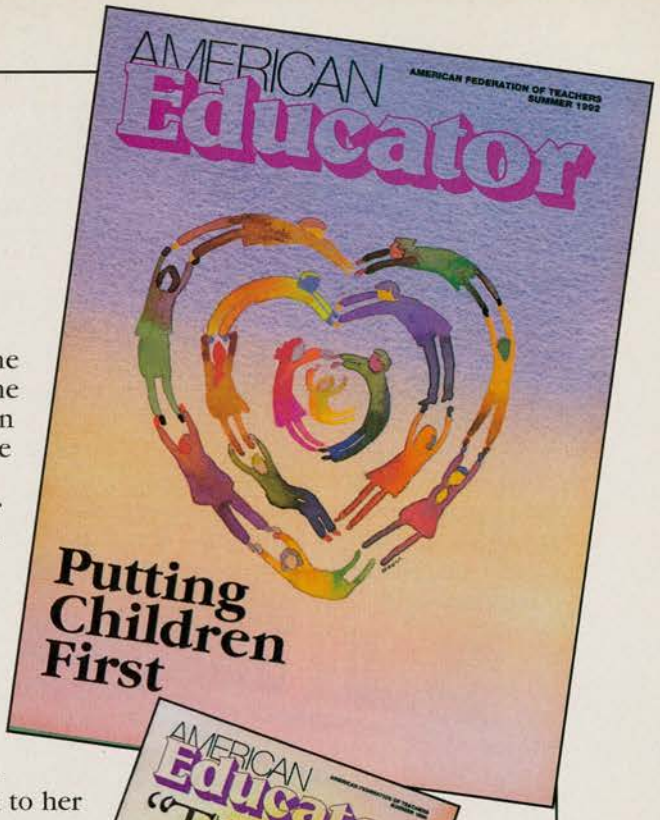
Wu's article precisely highlights the struggle that my colleagues and I are currently experiencing. I wholeheartedly concur with Wu's assertion that asking a teacher to check the algorithms created by 30 students is indeed "a Herculean task." I further agree with Wu that students can only develop a superficial understanding of mathematical concepts if there is little or no rein-

(Continued on page 48)

Write Us!

We welcome comments on *American Educator* articles. Address letters to Editor, *American Educator*, 555 New Jersey Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 or via e-mail to shendric@aft.org. Letters selected may be edited for space and clarity. Please include a phone number or e-mail address so we may contact you if needed.

In Memory: Susan Davis

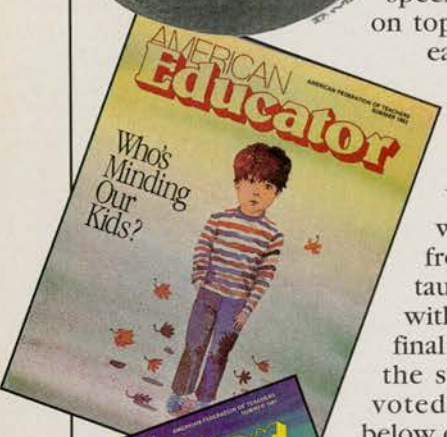


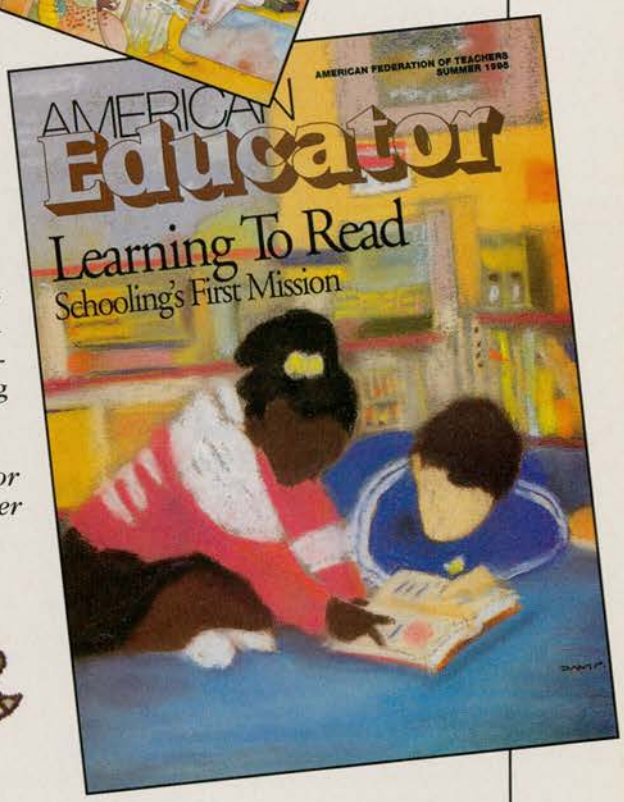
ARTIST SUSAN DAVIS—one of the people most responsible for the way this magazine looks—died on Dec. 20, 1999, just a month before her 52nd birthday.

Her contribution to *American Educator* can be seen in this small but representative sampling of her work. Her paintings graced 19 covers. Her last cover (Summer 1996) transported us to the mythical, magical world of Merlin. She drew countless other illustrations that filled our pages over the 23 years this magazine has been published.

Her work also appeared in the *American Teacher* and many other AFT publications. Susan was prolific. In addition to her work for the AFT, she illustrated numerous other publications, including 15 *New Yorker* covers, the weekly gardening column for the *Washington Post*, murals, posters, children's books, and greeting cards.

Her images were frequently playful, often profound. Children were her specialty; whether depicted standing on top of the world (as in one of the earliest illustrations she did for us in the Spring 1979 *Educator*) or floating in heart-shaped circles on the cover of the Summer 1992 issue, she drew them lovingly.





When the malignant brain tumor that was to take her life prevented Susan from drawing with her right hand, she taught herself to draw left-handed. It was with her left hand that she carried out her final assignment for *American Educator*—the special Spring-Summer 1998 issue devoted to reading—including the drawing below of a girl flying over flowers.

We will miss her art—and we will miss her.

—Liz McPike, editor
—Andrew Bornstein, designer

NOTEBOOK

Join a New Survey on Cheating

THE RECENT stories of cheating by teachers and principals in the New York City school system were shocking because this kind of dishonesty is relatively rare. We just don't expect teachers to cheat. Unfortunately, it's a different story with students. There's widespread agreement that cheating is a big problem in schools and colleges—everything from copying homework to buying term papers or simply downloading them from the Internet. And there is evidence that cheating has increased markedly in the past 20 years. For example, a longi-tudinal study found that the number of Georgia high school students who admitted to using a cheat sheet on an exam grew from 34 percent in 1969 to 68 percent in 1989.

Cheating also seems to increase in the course of the K-12 years. It is relatively rare in the early years, begins to pick up in middle school, and seems to reach epidemic proportions in high school. Yet most of the information we have about cheating in elementary and secondary schools is scattered and anecdotal. This, says Professor Donald McCabe of Rutgers University, who has done extensive research on academic dishonesty, is largely because national studies of cheating in middle school and high school have been limited to a few small surveys.

It's hard to do anything about a problem until you have a handle on how extensive it is, and, in the case of cheating, what students have to say about its causes and cures. So McCabe is planning to embark on a nationwide study of student cheating during the 2000-01 school year, and he is looking for schools willing to participate. His study will be the first step in a project to be carried out by the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University. The center, which was founded by McCabe in 1992 and includes almost 200 U.S. colleges and universities, promotes academic honesty on college campuses but it hopes, in the next few years, to develop some guidelines on academic integrity that will be useful to secondary schools. The center has recently completed the first phase of such an initiative at the college and university level.

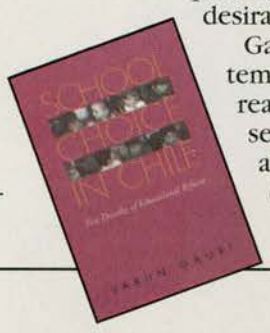
Schools participating in McCabe's study will be asked to submit a copy of their policy on academic integrity and administer a relatively short, anonymous survey to several hundred students. The survey will ask students how they feel about certain forms of behavior that might be considered cheating, whether they have ever engaged in them, and how their teachers and school typically react when they suspect someone is cheating. The results for individual schools will remain completely anonymous, but participating schools will get a summary of their own results as well as the results of the entire survey. Schools will also get an assessment of their academic integrity policies, highlighting the features that are likely to be most effective.

For more information about the study, call McCabe at 973/353-1409 or send him an e-mail (dmccabe@andromeda.rutgers.edu). To find out about the center, go to its web site (www.academicintegrity.org).

Twenty Years of Vouchers

In 1980, the government of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet dismantled the country's highly centralized system of public education and created a national voucher system. It allowed children to attend any school, public or private, that would accept them. This sounds like a voucher advocate's dream come true, but according to Varun Gauri, an economist with the World Bank, turning the schools over to a market system did not create the educational revolution we are often led to expect.

In his book, *School Choice in Chile: Two Decades of Educational Reform* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), Gauri finds that vouchers did not result in a big improvement in the quality of the schools or in student performance. Schools, he found, were far more likely to change superficial characteristics that would make them more immediately attractive to customers than to engage in difficult and expensive reforms like changing curriculum.



The voucher system also seemed to increase social stratification. Parents who were "motivated and informed"—typically those from the middle or professional classes—tended to seek out better schools. These schools were also motivated to admit more advantaged children, so children from poorer and less privileged families were likely to remain in less desirable schools.

Gauri's findings about Chile's voucher system support many of the criticisms we've already heard. And since he is an impartial observer and an economist—someone who really understands how markets work—his comments on Chile's 20-year experiment are particularly interesting and important.

ILLUSTRATED BY SONJA LAMUT

What's Your Story?

THE NATIONAL Story Project wants to know.

The first Saturday in every month, novelist Paul Auster, author of *New York Trilogy, The Music of Chance,* and most recently, *Timbuktu*, reads three or four stories he has selected from the many sent in by listeners to National Public Radio's *Weekend All Things Considered.*

Most of them are tiny, vivid bits of narrative, combining the ordinary and the extraordinary, and most describe an incident in the writer's life. Some are funny, like the story of how a Ku Klux Klan wizard's beloved pup Rascal rushed out into the street during the annual KKK parade and unmasked his owner as the whole town watched. Some are mysterious, like the story of a girl who watched a white chicken walk purposefully down a street in Portland, Ore., hop up some porch steps, knock on the door—and be admitted. Many talk about the closing of a loop, like the one about the woman who lost her mother's ashes in a burglary and recovered them five years later from the mortuary of a local church, or like this one about a little, lost bird. It comes from Corki Stewart, who lives in Phoenix, Ariz. She writes:

> In 1956, Phoenix was a city with boundless blue skies. One day, as I walked around the house with my sister Kathy's new parakeet on my finger, I got it into my head to show Perky what the sky looked like. Maybe he could make a little bird friend out there. I took him into the backyard, and then, to my horror, Perky flew off. The enormous, relentless sky swallowed up my sister's blue treasure, and suddenly he was gone, clipped wings and all.
>
> Kathy managed to forgive me. With fake optimism, she even tried to reassure me that Perky would find a new home. But I was far too canny to believe that such a thing was possible. I was inconsolable. Time passed. Eventually, my great remorse took a modest place among the larger things of life, and we all grew up.
>
> Decades later, I watched my own children growing. We shared their activities and got to know the parents of the kids' friends, the Kissells. The two families went camping around Arizona together. We all piled into the van to go on outings to the theater. We became the best of friends.
>
> One evening, the game was to tell Great Pet Stories. One person claimed to have the oldest living goldfish. Someone else had a psychic dog. Then Barry, the father of the other family, took the floor and announced that the greatest pet of all time was his bird Sweetie Pie. "The best thing about Sweetie Pie," he said, "was the way we got him. One day, when I was about eight, out of the clear blue sky, a little blue parakeet just floated down and landed on my finger." When I was finally able to speak, we examined the amazing evidence. The dates and the locations and the pictures of the bird all matched up. It seems that our two families had been connected long before we ever met.
>
> Forty years later, I ran to my sister and said, "You were right! Perky lived!"

The National Story Project can be heard the first Saturday of every month on *Weekend All Things Considered.* You can read the stories on the NPR web site (www.npr.org/programs/watc) or, better yet, hear Paul Auster read them. The web site also gives information about how people can submit their own stories.

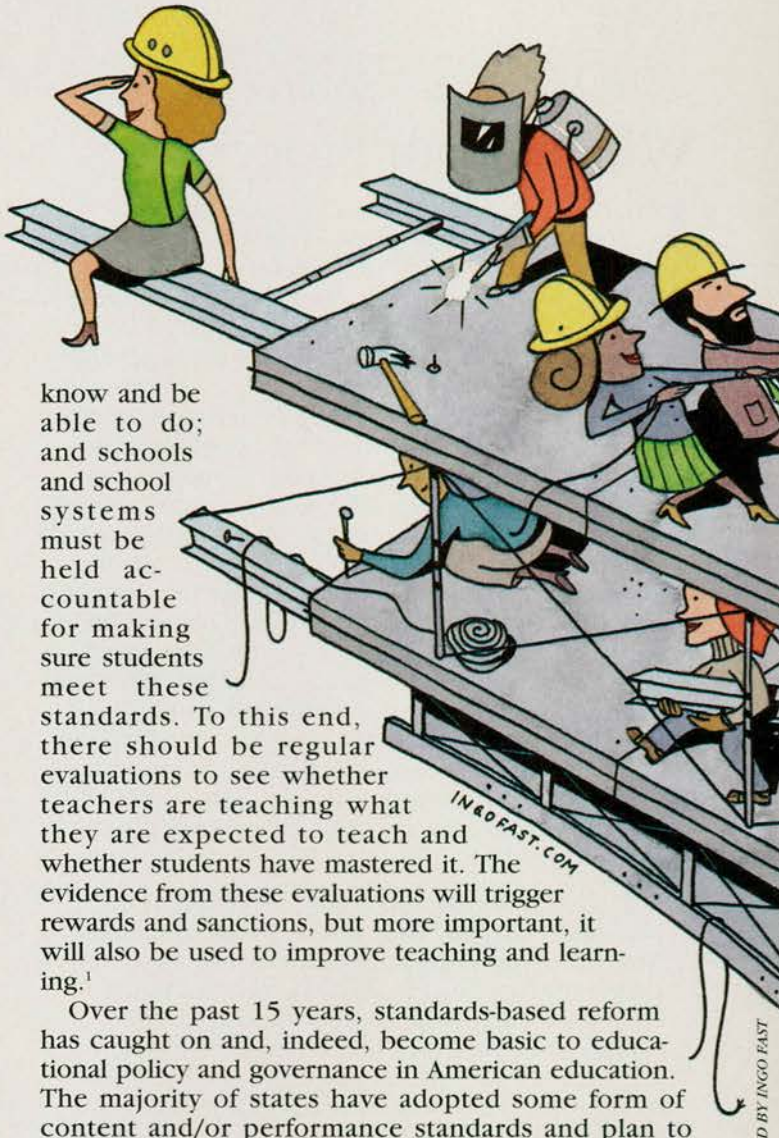
BUILDING A NEW STRUCTURE FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

BY RICHARD F. ELMORE

STANDARDS-BASED reform seems to be thriving. Although it has its detractors, the reform enjoys strong backing from the groups whose support is necessary for its success: legislators and other policymakers, as well as school administrators, teachers, and members of the public. However, a dangerous paradox threatens the standards movement. Most public schools and school systems, as they are now organized, are not equipped to meet the demands of standards-based reform. If our schools fail, and the public loses confidence in them, the results for public education could be devastating. The answer to this problem is to figure out how to improve teaching and learning in whole systems instead of merely in isolated schools or classrooms. We can accomplish this given what we know about teaching and learning, but to do so we will have to make a dramatic change in the way leadership is defined and practiced in public schools.

Which Standards?

Standards-based reform sounds very simple: Society must make clear what it expects from schools by setting standards that describe what students should know and be able to do; and schools and school systems must be held accountable for making sure students meet these standards. To this end, there should be regular evaluations to see whether teachers are teaching what they are expected to teach and whether students have mastered it. The evidence from these evaluations will trigger rewards and sanctions, but more important, it will also be used to improve teaching and learning.[1]



ILLUSTRATED BY INGO FAST

Over the past 15 years, standards-based reform has caught on and, indeed, become basic to educational policy and governance in American education. The majority of states have adopted some form of content and/or performance standards and plan to evaluate schools based on student performance. While the design of these policies still leaves much to be desired, the idea of standards has a great deal of political

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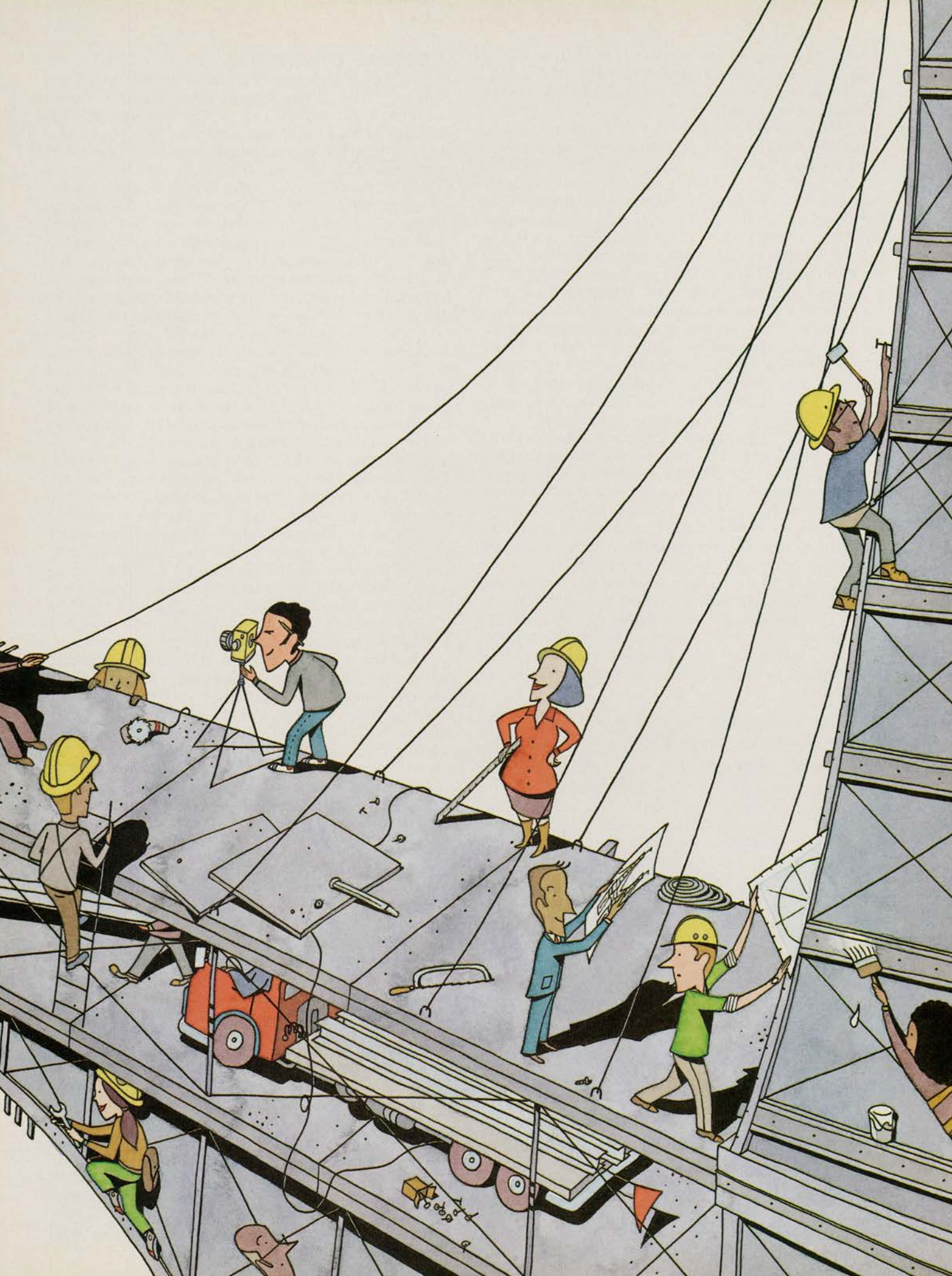
Richard F. Elmore is a professor in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University and senior research fellow at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education. He is author of numerous books and articles, including Restructuring in the Classroom: Teaching, Learning, and School Organization, *with Penelope Peterson and Sarah McCarthey (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).*



power. That means we will get standards-based reform. But what kind is in doubt. Will it be the version that proponents envision or a corrupted and poorly-thought-out evil twin?

If standards are bent so they fit comfortably into schools as they are currently organized—and this has been the fate of every other major education reform in the 20th century—standards will be weakened, adulterated, and unrecognizable by the time they arrive in the classroom. In this case, the consequences for public education will be severe. I think the idea of a strong basic education for all children will be lost—although some people will continue to pay it lip service. But it is also possible that public schools will find a way to incorporate the standards-based reform that its proponents envision into their way of doing business. If so, the institutions that emerge will probably also not look anything like the current ones, but the idea of a strong basic education system for all children is more likely to survive and even flourish. So, as the famous Chinese proverb says, we are living in interesting times.

The current organization of U.S. schools—local bureaucracies governed by elected boards—developed early in the history of public education. This system employed relatively low-status (largely female) teachers who worked in relative isolation from each other. The supervisors were (largely male) administrators whose main expertise was thought to lie in administration rather than in pedagogy.[2] As the scale of public education grew, the structure became more elaborate and rigid. School districts got larger, and schools themselves grew in size and complexity, especially when compulsory attendance was extended to include the secondary grades, and schools became responsible for educating the students who used to drop out by eighth grade.

The Albert Shanker Institute

In September 1999, a small group of elected leaders, policy analysts, business representatives, researchers, and AFT leaders met under the auspices of the Albert Shanker Institute to talk about the progress of standards-based school reform and to consider the supports and professional development teachers and principals need to make standards live up to their promise.

As a spur to thought and discussion, the Shanker Institute commissioned a longer version of the article that appears here. The original paper can be ordered by sending a $10 check made out to the Shanker Institute to Eugenia Kemble, Director, Albert Shanker Institute, 555 New Jersey Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20001.

The Albert Shanker Institute is a nonprofit organization committed to promoting a vibrant democracy, quality public education, a voice for working people in the decisions that affect their jobs and lives, and free and open debate about these issues. The institute commissions original analyses, organizes seminars, sponsors publications, and subsidizes selected projects.

A Serious Disconnect

People who analyze the structure of institutions have a term for the way our schools are organized: "loose coupling."[3] Put simply, this means that people who manage such an organization do not, in fact, manage the way its basic functions are carried out. In school terms, administrators have little to do with the "technical core" of education—the decisions about what should be taught at any given time, how it should be taught, what students should be expected to learn, how they should be grouped within classrooms for purposes of instruction, how they should be required to demonstrate their knowledge, and, perhaps most important, how their learning should be evaluated. All this is left to teachers, with little guidance or support from the organizations that surround them. Furthermore, the knowledge that guides these classroom decisions is not formalized or generally agreed upon.[4] It is not organized into patterns that others can follow because teachers invent it for themselves. And because its use is a matter of individual judgment, it cannot be reliably evaluated by anyone from outside.

Administrators, then, do not manage instruction. They manage the structures and processes that surround instruction; they protect, or "buffer," the technical core from outside scrutiny or interference; and in order to assure the public of the quality and legitimacy of what is happening in the technical core—the classroom—they give the impression that they are managing it. This buffering creates what institutional theorists call a "logic of confidence" between public schools and their constituents. Local board members, system-level administrators, and school administrators perform the ritualistic tasks of organizing, budgeting, managing, and dealing with disruptions inside and outside the system, all in the name of creating and maintaining public confidence in the institutions of public education. Teachers, working in isolated classrooms, manage the technical core. This division of labor has continued unchanged over the past century.

The institutional theory of loose coupling explains a great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of public education.

- *It explains why most innovations in schools are about maintaining the logic of confidence between the public and the schools—and decidedly not about improving the conditions of teaching and learning for actual teachers and students.* It explains the mistaken practice of creating extraordinarily large high schools where anonymity discourages students from being engaged with learning; the tracking systems that condemn low-performing students to low-level academic work instead of giving them the help they need to raise their performance; the athletic programs that exclude large numbers of students from participation in extracurricular activities; the special programs that remove students from regular instruction in the name of remediation; and the site-based management reforms that engage in decision-making about everything except the conditions of teaching and learning. Although most of the people who institute these practices believe they have the best interests of the students in mind, each

Schools are almost always aboil with "change," but they are rarely involved in any deliberate process of improvement.

practice is really directed to a particular constituency in an effort to make its members feel that "good things are happening" in their schools.

- *It explains why successful instructional practices that grow out of research or exemplary practice never take root in more than a few classrooms and schools.*[5] Because school administration exists to buffer the instructional core, not to disturb and certainly not to improve it, and because teaching is isolated work, improving instruction is strictly a matter of individual initiative. This leads to (1) innovations that are highly personal and thus tend to be adopted only by a few receptive teachers who happen to hear of them and (2) innovations that are not connected to any larger goal or purpose belonging to the school or the school system. So, although schools are almost always aboil with some kind of "change," they are rarely involved in any deliberate process of improvement where progress is measured against a clear and well-understood instructional goal.

- *It explains the largely unsuccessful quest over the past century for school administrators who are "instructional leaders."* Instructional leadership is the equivalent of the holy grail in educational administration. Most programs that prepare superintendents and principals claim to be in the business of training the next generation of instructional leaders. Most professional development for school administrators at least refers to the central position of instruction. This is mainly just talk. In fact, few administrators of any kind or at any level are directly involved in instruction.[6] Principals who develop the skills and knowledge required to become instructional leaders do so because of their own preferences and values—and often at some cost to their own careers. The institutional structure does not promote, or select for, knowledge and skill in the area of teaching and learning. At best, it tolerates the few who cultivate them.

- *It explains the instability of politics and leadership in most large school systems.* Local politics are often factional, and it is no surprise that school boards reflect these political divisions. A smart board member, then, is one who spends most of his or her time using issues to consolidate political support. A smart superintendent is one who can count the number of board members, divide by two, and, if necessary, add one. Superintendents come and go based on their capacity to maintain a working majority on a relatively unstable elected board. In this context, their ability to focus the schools on their core function of teaching and learning and make steady improvements over time is irrelevant.

- *It explains the infatuation of educators and the public with "trait theories" of competence.* What I mean by this is that teachers, principals, and superintendents are considered "good" because they have certain personal qualities, not because they have mastered some body of professional knowledge or because they have proved they are competent at what they do. This reliance on personal qualities for judging competence is to be expected with loose coupling. If an organization has little or no influence over its core functions, all it can do is select people on the basis of qualities that are considered desirable—and pray. Reliance on personal traits instead of verifiable competence also means there is no premium placed on improvement. The expectation that people will become more competent over the course of their careers, or that the organization will systematically invest in helping them become so, hardly exists, if it exists at all, in organizations that are loosely coupled.

Standards and the Status Quo

It is not hard to see why standards-based reform, however willing a reception it seems to be getting, creates certain fundamental problems for public education. It conflicts with the way public schools are currently organized, and this difference is not likely to be resolved in the usual way, by bending the new policy until it fits into the existing institutional structure.

Standards-based reform, by concerning itself with teaching and learning, tries to reach directly into the instructional core. Content standards, even in their current rather crude form, require that students receive instruction in certain subject areas and certain topics. This threatens the technical core. And performance standards are even more threatening because they assert that schools should be held directly accountable for what students learn. Moreover, standards-based reform hits at a critical weakness in the current system—it cannot account for the fact that some students master academic content while others do not. In the absence of any generally agreed-upon

explanation, school people, and the public at large, have been free to invoke their favorite theories: weak family structures, poverty, discrimination, lack of aptitude, peer pressure, diet, television, etc. Standards-based reform offers a single explanation—the school and the people who work in it are accountable for student learning. Whatever one may think about this theory, it has a strong political, economic, and social appeal; and its logic is clear. The black box is open, and what teachers teach and students learn is increasingly a matter of public scrutiny and debate, and subject to direct measurement and inspection.

Standards-based reform also undermines the basic premise of local control: school districts governed by elected community school boards. In virtually all state accountability systems, the individual school, rather than the school district, is the primary unit of accountability. It's true that governors and state legislators are careful to include local school boards and superintendents in any description of how school accountability works. But the stark reality is that little more than a decade ago, most states were not able to collect, analyze, and report data on individual schools; now they can. With the individual school as the unit of accountability, it becomes difficult to defend dysfunctional local politics and the usefulness of locally centralized governance and administration.

These conflicts between standards-based reform and the current structure of public education may bode ill for public schools and the people who work in them. If schools fail repeatedly to meet standards, the traditional arguments that have been used to defend the existing institutional structure will probably become weaker and less persuasive. And if schools also deal with these external threats in the usual way—that is by bending the new policy requirements to the existing structure—the standards movement will probably fade away. Policymakers and the public will come to accept the arguments that the core technology of education cannot be understood in any systematic way and that instructional quality and performance in education are mostly matters of personal preference both for educators and for their clients. The idea that schools should meet certain specified standards of quality and performance will then recede into the mists of policy history. The problem with this scenario, of course, is that the demand for school accountability will not go away, even if standards-based reform does, because policymakers are still left with the problem of how to account for the public expenditures they are making and what to do about the governance structure of public education.

But what if, instead of letting this scenario play itself out, we seize the opportunity that the standards movement offers? What if we remake the way schools are organized so they are tightly focused on the core functions of teaching and learning? We know how this can be done—some school districts have already embarked on the process. And, as I will point out, we even have the resources to carry it through.

The Market Solution

Many people who read this analysis of the poor fit between public education as we know it and standards-based reform will have a ready suggestion for a cure—market schools. But schools based on that model are just as subject as the current public schools to the problems associated with loose coupling. Indeed, the notion that quality and performance in education are strictly matters of personal taste is best exemplified in market schools, whether they are based on vouchers, capitation grants (in which schools get public money based on the number of students they attract), or charter schools. Because whatever form they take, these schools imply nothing about either the content or the quality of instruction. In fact, a major part of their political appeal, both to educators and policymakers, is that they do not require any clear thinking about what will actually happen inside the structure, and thus they reproduce, in another form, the buffering of the technical core that we've already seen in the public schools.

> Leaders are responsible for helping to make possible what they require others to do.

When market models enter the picture in any number and education becomes even more a matter of personal taste and preference than it already is, the structure and governance of local schools will become increasingly weak and the schools themselves irrelevant to many educators and their clients. That is what people who choose market schools, whether as teachers and administrators or parents, want. Entrepreneurial schools have no wish to operate under local governance systems if they can attract enough clients to function as free agents. Nor do active choosers—the parents and students who have strong school preferences—wish to stay with centrally administered schools when they can go to individual schools that suit their tastes. Increasingly, then, the only children in centrally administered and governed public schools will be the ones whose parents are not active choosers or who are not chosen. I frequently tell my students that if they want to see a possible future for the public schools, they should visit a public hospital—a poorly financed subsystem of the health care market that specializes in clients no one else wants to serve.

So if public educators insist that the instructional core is inviolate and the role of administra-

tors is to support it, they are inviting policymakers simply to agree, and then to shift public education by degrees into a system based entirely on personal taste, preference, and judgment. This will mean that public responsibility for education will only extend as far as distributing the available money to individual families or schools. What happens afterwards will be up to the individuals and schools, not the state. And many issues that we now believe to be of importance to society will become matters of individual taste, preference, and judgment: whether students are exposed to high-quality teaching and learning as a consequence of public expenditures; what students know as a consequence of the teaching they have received; and whether certain groups of students routinely have access to more powerful knowledge than others. So there are reasons why public educators should be measured in their criticisms of standards-based reforms. Indeed, they might even be grateful that the standards movement, by laying open the long-standing weaknesses in the system, gives us an impetus to change them.

Leadership Redefined

For those interested in improving public schools, the local governance and administration of education hold a trump card, which can be played to bring about broad improvements in teaching and learning. Individual schools, which operate largely as individual firms, have difficulty finding money to spend on improving the skills and knowledge of their teachers and administrators. Individual schools that are part of larger corporations also have incentives, in markets largely defined by taste and preference, to underinvest in skill and knowledge, since they market their reputations for quality rather than any specific service or result.[7] However, most public school systems still have access to money—most of it now spent on administrative overhead—that could be invested in improving the skills and knowledge of principals and teachers.

Standards-based reforms are delivering a relatively clear signal to schools and school systems that their main business should be to improve teaching and learning. Will they be able to respond to this demand? Only if we have a clear understanding of what we mean by "improvement" and "leadership."

"Improvement" is change that can be defined in terms of time and direction. It takes place when an organization can demonstrate that it has made progress toward a goal by doing certain things; and it engages people in analyzing and understanding why some actions seem to work and others don't.

A school leader? Quite simply, he or she is a person who can guide this kind of instructional improvement. Reading what has been written on principalship can be daunting because it suggests that principals should be heroic figures who embody whatever is necessary to remedy their school's every defect. Somewhere on the long list of exemplary qualities, one usually finds a reference to instruction. It is probably vague, in order to include both those who care about instruction and those who regard it as a distraction from their real job. The definition I offer focuses on instructional improvement; and the skills and knowledge that matter, under this definition, lead to the improvement of instruction and student performance.

Writings about management generally describe leaders, or higher-level managers, as exercising "control" over an organization, but this term is misleading when applied to improvement. Control implies that the controller knows exactly what the controllees should do. Because teachers, the people who deliver instruction, will have the best grasp of how to improve it, a school leader does not control improvement as much as guide it. "Guidance" and "direction"—better terms for what should be going on—imply that expertise is shared. They also imply that there are different kinds and different levels of expertise in an organization. And if knowledge is distributed, we must also think in terms of what I will call "distributed leadership."[8]

The basic idea of distributed leadership is not very complicated. People in any system develop specialties that reflect their interests, aptitudes, and skills; but competence varies considerably among people in similar roles. Harnessing these varied skills and talents so they complement each other is a tricky job. Equally challenging is the task of figuring out when there is not enough competence inside an organization to solve its problems, thus requiring a search outside. In a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform the complex tasks involved without distributing the responsibility for leadership and creating a common culture that makes this distributed leadership coherent. It is the "glue" of a common task or goal—improvement of instruction—and a common set of values for how to approach that task that keep distributed leadership from becoming another version of loose coupling.

Across-the-board agreement on basic aims and values is a precondition for leading an organization toward instructional improvement. Collaboration and collegiality are important, but they alone are not enough. Distributed leadership seeks to parcel out responsibility and authority for guiding and directing instruction, and learning about instruction. The point is to increase the likelihood that the decisions of individual teachers and principals add up to collective benefits for student learning.[9] Standards-based reform creates an enabling context for all this.

The New Model

Creating a new model of distributed leadership consists of two main tasks: One involves describing the ground rules that leaders would have to follow in order to carry out large-scale improvement; the other describes how they would share responsibility. Here are some principles for distributed leadership that focus on improving teaching and learning in a school system.

- *The purpose of leadership is to improve practice and performance.* Thus, the skills and knowledge that matter are those which contribute to creating classrooms, schools, and districts where there are clear expectations about performance.

- *Improvement requires continuous learning, both by individuals and groups.* Collective learning needs an environment in which learning is the normal activity. The current structure of public education encourages isolated and individualistic learning. Distributed leadership needs to create an environment that views learning as a collective good. Individuals should expect to have colleagues look critically at their personal ideas and practices; and groups should expect the same thing from individuals. Privacy of practice produces isolation, and isolation is the enemy of improvement.

- *Leaders lead by exemplifying the values and behavior they want others to adopt.* If learning is their central responsibility, leaders must model the learning they expect others to engage in. They should also expect to have their own practice subjected to the same scrutiny that they turn on others.

- *People cooperate with one another in achieving their goals when they recognize other people's expertise.* Large-scale improvement requires a relatively complex kind of cooperation among people in diverse roles. The key to creating this cooperation is understanding that learning grows out of differences in expertise. If collective learning is the goal, my authority to command you to do something doesn't mean much if I don't have the knowledge and skill which, when joined with yours, make us both more effective.[10]

- *Leaders are responsible for helping to make possible what they are requiring others to do.* A boss can command whatever she likes. A leader gets her authority from making sure that people have a chance to learn to do what she asks.

This model of distributed leadership assumes that what goes on in the classroom is a collective good—a common concern of the whole institution—as well as a private and individual concern. It posits a theory of leadership that, while respecting, acknowledging, and capitalizing on differences in expertise, locates failure in isolated practice and success in the creation of interdependencies that stretch over these differences.

Improvement is about developing and distributing knowledge. Hence, leadership roles have to represent those who create and engage people in learning new forms of practice. These roles develop in systems that are engaged in large-scale improvement, as we shall see below. Where they don't exist, they will have to be created or redefined from existing roles.

Learning How To Do the Right Things

Many well-intentioned reformers argue that large-scale improvement of schools can be accomplished by finding good people and freeing them from the bonds of bureaucracy. However, improvement is more likely to come from what people learn on the job than from what they knew when they began it. Organizations improve because they agree on what is worth achieving and then create processes that help their employees learn what they need to meet these goals. Moreover, such organizations select, reward, and retain people who are willing to embrace the purposes of the organization and learn how to achieve them. Improvement occurs through organized social learning, not through idiosyncratic experimentation and discovery.

The idea of learning how to do the right thing—collectively and over time—is at the core of the theory of standards-based reform. There are major problems with the design of most state standards and accountability systems. One would expect such problems with new policies that are discontinuous with past policies and that deal with complex processes and institutions. But as important as these problems are, the problems of institutional design and educational practice implicit in standards-based reform are much more serious. If the theory of distributed leadership outlined in the previous section is correct, these problems of institutional design and practice cannot be solved through policymaking alone. Policy can set targets for practice and performance; it can stimulate public discussion about content and performance in schools; and it can alter the incentives under which schools and school systems work. But the closer policy gets to the instructional core—to how teachers and students engage with content—the more policymakers lose their comparative advantage, the more they become dependent on the knowledge and skill of practitioners to mold and shape the instructional core.[11]

We are still learning how to bring about large-scale improvement of instruction and performance. However, it seems evident that some schools and districts are better at the task than others. Murphy and Hallinger, in a study of California school districts with high student achievement, found evidence of common management strategies. Superintendents in these districts were knowledgeable about curriculum and teaching strategies, and they were key initiators of changes in these areas. Together with other central office people, superintendents took an active role in monitoring curriculum and instruction. They were also active in supervising, evaluating, and mentoring principals, and they were more likely to fire principals who performed poorly. These successful districts were clearer in their goals and more willing to decide what would be taught and what would constitute evidence of performance. On the other hand, these districts were also more willing to let the schools decide how to carry out an instructional program, and, despite strong leadership, they were less bureaucratic than their counterparts. They tended to rely more on common values, which typically focused on improvement of student learning. They showed evidence of steady, sustained improvement; a positive approach to problem-solving in the face of unforeseen difficulties; a view of structures, processes, and data as instruments for improvement rather than as ends in themselves; and a heavy internal focus by administrators on the de-

A major principle in school improvement is getting people at all levels focused on instruction.

mands of instruction, rather than a focus on events in the external environment.[12]

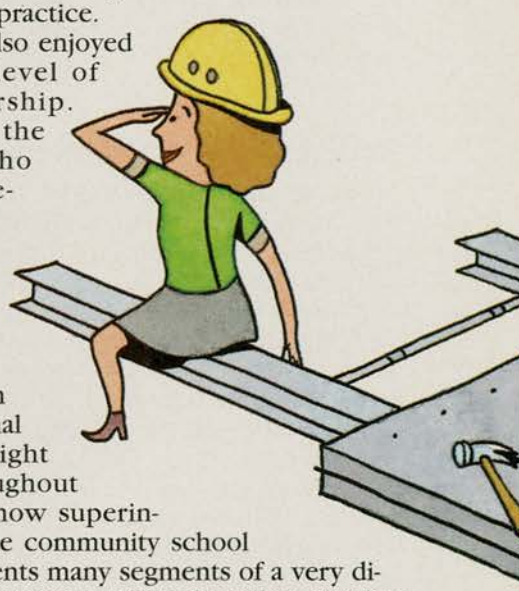
Knapp and his colleagues, in their study of high-quality instruction in high-poverty classrooms, found that the pattern of district involvement in instructional improvement was either to avoid high-quality practice (pushing teachers toward less ambitious, lower level, more structured practice) or, more commonly, was chaotic and incoherent. "Most teachers," they conclude, "received mixed signals [from the district] about what to teach." Further, the researchers found that the instruments most districts use to influence instruction—guidelines, textbook adoptions, testing and assessment, scope and sequence requirements by grade level, etc.—were almost entirely disconnected from the learning that teachers had to do in order to master more ambitious instructional practices. Districts were, in the researchers' words, long on pressure and short on support, with the predictable effect that most of the efforts to adopt ambitious instructional practice were idiosyncratic by school and classroom.[13] This research tracks with earlier work on what determined content and pedagogy in a large sample of schools, which concluded that, for the most part, district influences on instructional practice were diffuse and ineffectual and usually peripheral to teachers' decisions about what to teach or how.[14]

Focusing on Practice in District Two

My own work on instructional improvement in Community School District Two, New York City, reinforces many of the themes in these studies. (See article on page 14.) District Two is, by any standard, one of the highest-performing urban school systems in the country, with fewer than 12 percent of its students—60 percent of whom are low-income—scoring in the lowest quartile of nationally standardized reading tests. A comparable figure for most urban districts is the 40 percent to 50 percent range. The District Two story is a complex one, but the main themes are consistent with what I've been saying about leadership and long-term improvement. Over the past 10 years, District Two has pursued a strategy to improve teaching and learning that has involved:

- Long-term focus on core instruction, first in literacy and then in mathematics
- Heavy investments in professional development in the fundamentals of strong classroom instruction both for teachers and for principals
- Strong and explicit accountability for principals and teachers for the quality of practice and the level of student performance, backed by direct oversight of classroom practice by principals and district personnel
- The expectation that adults will take responsibility for their own, their colleagues', and their students' learning.

District Two comprises a wide variety of schools in widely varying neighborhoods. As a result, the schools embody different problems of practice, enroll very different student populations, and are at different places in their improvement processes. The district adjusts for these differences by treating the schools differently: More oversight, direction, and professional development are concentrated on schools with the lowest-performing students; professional development plans are adapted to the particular instructional progress of specific teachers in each school; and high-performing schools are granted more discretion than low-performing schools in both practice and professional development. Principals are the linchpins of instructional improvement in District Two. They are recruited, evaluated, and retained or dismissed on the basis of their ability to understand, model, and develop instructional practice among teachers and, ultimately, on their ability to improve student performance. At all levels of the system, isolation is seen as the enemy of improvement, so most management and professional development activities are specifically designed to connect teachers, principals, professional developers, and district administrators with one another and with outside experts in regard to specific problems of practice.



District Two has also enjoyed an extraordinary level of stability in leadership. Anthony Alvarado, the superintendent who initiated the large-scale improvement strategy, was in the district for eight years, and his former deputy, Elaine Fink, who served as the main source of instructional guidance and oversight in the district throughout Alvarado's term, is now superintendent. Similarly, the community school board, which represents many segments of a very diverse community, has been relatively stable and has served as a steady source of guidance and support for administrative leadership.[15]

Considering the magnitude of the task posed by

(Continued on page 42)

IT'S ALL ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

New York City's District Two Puts the Focus Where It Belongs

Richard F. Elmore's discussion of school leadership and standards-based reform in the previous article poses many questions. What has happened—and what continues to take place—in District Two begins to answer these questions. In the article that follows, participants in the remaking of District Two—Elaine Fink, Shelley Harwayne, and Judy Davis—talk about their experiences. Fink, who is now superintendent, was Superintendent Anthony Alvarado's deputy; Harwayne, now a deputy superintendent, was a principal; Judy Davis was—and is—a master teacher. Their comments were part of discussions at the Albert Shanker Institute seminar held in September 1999 and are edited from the seminar transcript.

—Editor

Elaine Fink: A Districtwide Plan

When we entered District Two in the late 1980s, fewer than 50 percent of our students were reading above grade level, and between 20 percent and 30 percent were in the bottom quartile. We had 14 Chapter 1 schools, as we still do, and more than 50 percent of the children were at the poverty level, which is still the case. For me, the 20 percent to 30 percent in the bottom quartile registered as "cannot read." Math was not that different, but reading was at the lowest ebb. We looked at those statistics, and then we started walking around to see what was going on in the schools. We saw teachers working very hard, but when we looked at the kids' faces, we saw they were up in the clouds somewhere.

As we talked about what needed to be done, we realized that everything had to be about teaching and learning. We had to create a system that taught the adults because we clearly weren't getting to the kids. So, we started doing research on who had the highest literacy rates in the world and where we could find the best practices. Tony Alvarado [former superintendent of District Two] kept passing along books and articles to me and saying, "Look at this, look at this! We've really got to work on this!" We sent teams of people to places where good work was being done so they could see it and find people to talk to us about what they were doing.

We had to come up with a plan for the district, and that meant a big change in organization. It was clear that the traditional district-office structure would not be capable of making changes across the district. We had to flatten the organization and eliminate the coordinators of this, that, and the other because, as we realized, they were not affecting student achievement. Money had to be put, instead, into teacher development and principal development—learning for all of us—because that's what would make the changes we were looking for. That first year, we put 1 percent of our budget into teacher learning—a very small amount.

We started working with universities and bringing in consultants—some came from as far away as New Zealand or Australia—so we could talk with them and have them start educating us. Then we looked at how we could reach the principals. What Dick Elmore says about the importance of leadership is right: Principals are the ones who are in a position to guide and move teachers. So we changed the principals' conferences into learning experiences, where we read together, studied together, and listened to experts and responded to their work. The principals then took what they had learned back to their teachers; and their staff conferences began to change.We modeled change for them, and it worked.

We still needed a districtwide professional development plan. But what would such a plan look like if its

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRUCE GILBERT

Fifth-grade students at District Two's Manhattan New School surround their teacher Judy Davis (right) and Deputy Superintendent Shelley Harwayne (left).

goal was to improve teaching and learning for everybody? What structures would we need to make learning continuous? It all came down to the fact that adults learn the same way kids do: with whole-group learning, small-group learning, individualized learning. So we set up study groups and support meetings for principals and teachers, which allowed them to get out of their own schools and classes and see what was going on in other places. We set up a buddy system so one teacher could help another and small networking groups where principals and teachers could work together. In short, we changed every piece of the existing professional development scheme.

Our plan incorporated answers to questions, as we saw them, about how children and adults learn; but we continue to question what we are doing. If something isn't working, we ask why. What didn't that person get? Did she work with another teacher? Did the two of them look at children's work together? Did they observe each other's teaching? Maybe they need to have a third party come in or perhaps videotape a lesson so they can analyze it. And we ask the same kinds of questions for principals.

For us, professional development means providing a particular teacher with what she needs to teach a particular kid. And if that teacher is not successful, we have to come up with something else because we are failing. That's the whole premise: If the kids aren't learning, we haven't done our job. We don't know how to teach them, and we have to learn how. So we go back to researching, reading together, studying together, observing, visiting classes. We find out where what we're trying to do is being done well, we make a videotape there, and we reflect on what we see. We have a staff developer come in and do a demonstration lesson. We try every answer we can think of.

We've increased the percentage of the budget we spend on professional development: It's now between 7 percent and 8 percent. Unfortunately, this school year I had to cut it by $1.5 million because a $2.5 million federal magnet grant we got when we began this program was not renewed last year. So we're really dying for that $2.5 million, and we've tried to make it up by working with other districts and charging for our expertise. This year we put $11 million into professional development, but last year we had $12 million. Every year we need more and more because as our expertise becomes deeper, we need to spend more and more to become better at what we're doing. We also have many new teachers and principals who must be brought up to speed.

Much of the money we spend goes for staff developers and consultants. Some we bring in under contract; some are teachers who have become staff developers. It also goes for substitute coverage. Individual schools decide how to spend the money that is allotted to them. Most schools buy a minimum of 150 to 200 sub days. Those days allow teachers to go out and visit other teachers and other schools. Then they can come back and model what they've found. Most schools hire one or two extra people who are certified teachers and who become part of their school staff. Then when regular teachers go out on inter-visitation or some other professional development activity, the students have substitute teachers who know them and have worked with them. In terms of staff development, the executive leadership of the UFT has always been supportive of the changes we have made in District Two, and I don't think we could have accomplished all we have without the union's help.

Just as we don't do staff development for the sake of doing staff development, we don't pick just anyone to do it. The biggest mistake you can make is to bring in someone average or below average to demonstrate for a teacher who's trying to learn. In a lot of places, I think that administrators pick people to be staff developers because they get along well with others or they did an OK job in their classroom. That doesn't work. Teachers want to gain expertise, and if a staff developer can't offer it, teachers are likely to decide that professional development is a sham. But when they start getting real knowledge and see their kids making progress, then they want to be involved in professional development.

What's important is the quality of the professional development, the amount of time you give to it, and

Elaine Fink, superintendent of District Two.

the resources that you put in. The professional development we have provided for teachers in District Two has made a difference, but we have to continue, and funds are an issue and time is an issue. All day long you're learning, right beside your kids. But there has to be time for professional conversations after school, before school, at lunchtime. Every minute you're at work has to be about learning because that's what we expect of kids.

What results have we had? As I've said, between 25 percent and 30 percent of our kids were in the bottom quartile of readers when we started out. This year, we have 9.6 percent. That's a number we're very proud of because the kids in the bottom quartile are ones that almost nobody ever gets to. But we target those kids. Also, 45 percent of the children in the district are now in the top quartile, in comparison with the 20-odd percent we started out with. That, too, is a real achievement.

When the year begins, the principals and I talk about goals and objectives. And the principals ask each teacher how many kids from the bottom quartile she thinks she can push over into the next quartile and what kind of work she needs to do with them. After all this, the principals estimate how many kids they think they'll move this year. And then I make my projection for the district. That's how goals are set. We do it very realistically, working with each teacher on every kid in her classroom and figuring out how that teacher's going to push those kids to the next quartile.

I think that what has made the difference is the very clear focus and the amount of support the teachers and supervisors get. Now that we're down below 10 percent in this bottom quartile, we have to keep adding to that support because it gets harder and harder to improve the kids' achievement. The teachers need more expertise, and it's not the same expertise as it is with kids who find it easier to learn. Pacing needs to be different, and our understanding of how those children learn has to be very specific and detailed.

But the strong professional development system to support teachers and principals is not enough. There is also a very clear accountability piece. You get as much support as you need. We will go to the wall for you, but you need to be an active participant in learning and becoming better at what you do. I mentioned the goals and objectives that principals write for their schools at the beginning of the year. Well, they are incredible pieces of work—descriptions of what a school looks like, feels like—and what the people there are going to work on. And the people in a school are held accountable throughout the year for staying with the goals and objectives and getting the results they expected to get.

I hold myself accountable, too. For example, I saw a school last year that I knew was going to do poorly, but I didn't step in during the year. When I saw the results, I said to myself, "Look what happened to those kids because you didn't do what you should have!" I go into every classroom in every single school in the district. Out of 1,400 teachers, I probably know 1,000 of them by now. I know their weaknesses and their strengths. I know what professional development they've gotten over the years. I know what lesson I saw last year, and where that teacher needed to go. And it's the same thing with the head of a school. I try to learn how to push a principal in the direction she needs to go, and I think that principals need to do the same thing with teachers. What's going to make them work harder? What's going to make them want to know more? And so, I hold myself and my staff accountable for working with heads of schools and teachers, and I hold the heads of schools accountable for knowing their teachers well and knowing what makes them tick, and what will make them better teachers.

> If the kids aren't learning, we haven't done our job. We don't know how to teach them, and we have to learn how.

Now, we try to help other districts to move along the same direction we've taken. Even though they have entirely different cultures, I start by remembering where District Two was 10 years ago. We were all about isolation. Classrooms were isolated; principals were isolated. And learning was inconsistent and sometimes nonexistent. We "taught a curriculum," which meant covering what you were supposed to in the textbook you were assigned. The principal was the administrator of the building and rarely walked into the classroom to get involved in instruction. One of the first things I talk about is how the superintendent and deputy need to know instruction. I know some people disagree, but I believe that superintendents and principals not only have to be evaluators and supervisors, but coaches as well. They have to understand what's going on in a classroom so they can make suggestions—including suggestions about the professional development in a particular school. Professional development cannot be and should not be done from a district office; it has to come from the people in that school. And a supervisor has to know what's going on.

Shelley Harwayne: Principals and Teachers

One of the wonderful things that happens when a district spends $11 million a year on professional development is that excellent teachers want to teach in the district because they know they're going to stay alive

professionally and get cutting-edge information.

One of my first jobs as principal was to be a kind of switchboard operator. I had to connect the teachers in our school to one another, as well as to people and places elsewhere in the district—and all over the country—where they could learn. But I want to talk especially about what happens within the four walls of one school building. The question I had to answer was: How do you create a scholarly setting? Thinking of teachers as scholars is almost unheard of, but every decision I make is about how I can create a scholarly community.

The first thing to do is to hire principals who know how to teach. It's not enough to watch a teacher teach before you hire her; you need to do the same thing with principals. This is important for a lot of reasons. A principal who knows how to teach can, if necessary, cover a teacher's class when the teacher goes to work with a colleague. And a principal with that kind of knowledge will be careful about who substitutes for a teacher. That's important. Many teachers don't want to leave their classrooms for staff development because they're worried that the kids are going to be in an auditorium watching a video. The way we cover for teachers has to be worthwhile; otherwise teachers are not going to leave their classrooms to learn more.

A principal who can teach—and who does some teaching, even if it's for short amounts of time—can put herself into a teacher's shoes in other important ways. For instance, she can understand the effect of interruptions during the school day; she can assess whether there are decent teaching materials in the building. She can understand that some children require very specialized techniques, and she can get to know children who are struggling.

Even if you look for and hire the best principals, you have to be careful about the paperwork taking over because then they'll never have time for anything else. When I first took this job, a principal told me that she didn't do paperwork when the kids and the teachers were in the building because her job was to improve instruction, and I think that's essential. In District Two, we keep the same focus on instructional issues at our principals' meetings. People from other districts are probably stunned that the administrative stuff is squeezed into the last 20 minutes of a meeting and that we are talking about curriculum all day long.

We expect principals to know subject matter. When our master teacher in math gives us a math example to do, I'm humbled if I can't get as far with it as the kids can. But this focus on subject matter also helps us to realize that there are lots of ways to be excellent, and it encourages us to draw on what other people know. My field is literacy, but there are principals in District Two who are experts at math instruction and others incredibly knowledgeable about science or social studies. When you realize that there's all this expertise in any one district, relationships among colleagues change.

The third thing I have to do is keep professional learning on the front burner all year long. When teachers go to summer institutes, they get excited about what they're learning; and they feel like scholars. Then, the school year starts, and some of the enthusiasm

slips. My job is to keep teachers' excitement high by creating the time and the opportunity for that kind of learning to continue. They need to keep reading professional literature, attending professional conferences, engaging in professional conversations throughout the school year. Student-teacher is not an oxymoron; we are all students and teachers at the same time. In fact, the issue of professional development informs every decision we make about time, space, personnel, how money is used. It is our main filter. We write our goals and objectives by asking what we need to learn this year, and everything else follows from that.

It's important to give teachers time and space in which to learn and arrangements that reflect their status as professionals. There's no profession in the world (except for teaching) where you're on every minute you're at work—lawyers do not spend all their time in the courtroom. But many teachers don't have any down time. Teachers need white space; they need time built into the school day for professional conversation and reflection. Even an hour for lunch would do a lot. Just think about what teachers pull off as they eat their tuna fish sandwiches—they counsel a parent, set up a bus trip, and so on.

It's up to us to rethink our use of time and space and personnel. I live part time on Staten Island, and our local cultural center has recently added a Chinese scholars' garden because that's what scholars

K-2 teachers at P. S. 126M in Chinatown and their principal Daria Ragney (top left) meet with Deputy Superintendent Shelley Harwayne (top center).

need—a place to meditate and reflect. I know I can't give teachers that, but the staff room has to be the equivalent of a scholars' garden, a place to pause. Nothing makes me happier than to go into a school and see a beautiful staff room with a professional library for teachers. If we're going to treat them as professionals, we have to tend to the details.

Finally, I think that the at-risk student has to be at the heart of all this. A principal might think long and hard about where to place the PTA president's child, but at-risk kids should be getting the same kind of special treatment. The kids who are struggling the most should get the red carpet treatment—the best teachers, the most time in class, and the most effective interventions.

Judy Davis: A Teacher's Growth

The first 10 or 12 years of my teaching career were spent largely behind closed classroom doors. I wasn't concerned with my professional growth but rather with how my performance compared to the teacher in the classroom next door. Like almost everyone, I worried that if my students' test scores weren't higher, I wouldn't get a good class next year. None of us shared ideas for fear of giving someone else the edge.

My outlook changed, however, the day that someone invited me to a staff development program at Teachers College. Suddenly, the door to my classroom was opened as well as the door to a whole new world. It was a world of professional men and women who, like me, had been teaching for 10 or 15 years. But unlike me, they realized it was OK to say "I don't know" and "I want to learn." They shared experiences, techniques, and resources that made them better teachers and their classrooms better classrooms.

I think people underestimate the willingness of even seasoned teachers to change their practice when they find a better method. At least, that's been my experience. I had the benefit of the very best in staff development. I worked with principals who were educational leaders rather than dictators. They told me I could have the tools I wanted, as long as they were within reason. They told me I could study in someone else's classroom if I wanted to. They helped me find the best workshops. They listened to what I had to say, and as I became more knowledgeable, they supported my decisions. They told me, "We don't want to order just any books. Judy, you do the homework and then tell us what you need." This is in sharp contrast to many administrators who simply hand you the materials without asking what you are comfortable with and what you want for your classroom.

In addition to the outside staff development I had with college professors and researchers, I had professionals come into my classroom to watch me teach. They were able to say to me, "You did this well, but this other thing could use some improvement." It was a slow process. First, I focused on reading and writing. Then, when I felt comfortable with literacy, I was able to add professional work in math.

After teaching more than 25 years, I often think about all the students who have passed through my classroom and how I may have made a difference in their lives. But now I also think about how many teachers' lives I can influence by opening up my classroom so they can benefit from my experience. This is part of a program, a professional development forum for teachers, that has been instituted throughout the district. Teachers visit once a week for about three or four weeks. They watch what goes on in the classroom and then we talk together and process what has happened. I really don't feel as though I am "teaching them"—it is more like we are studying and learning together.

After the teachers have had an opportunity to try out what they have learned in their own classrooms, they have a chance to come back and talk about what worked and why. These sessions also help us refine our methods and improve our approach.

My daughter is a teacher now, in District Two. There was a time when I would have counseled her against teaching because of the lack of opportunity to grow. Today, I don't feel that way. I am proud to be a teacher, and I am proud to be able to help other teachers become better teachers. I hope that we can make a difference by inspiring teachers to also become lifelong learners. □

DON'T DISCARD THE CLASSICS

But Be Prepared To Guide Your Students Through Unfamiliar Terrain

BY CAROL JAGO

LIKE MANY other teachers in the early 1990s, I was an indefatigable optimist. I believed in a kind of literary field of dreams. Build the ideal classroom, and they will come. Offer them books, and they will read. Although teachers elsewhere have made such classrooms work, I was having trouble ignoring the fact that many of my 36 ethnically diverse urban scholars were not growing as readers the way I hoped they would. In my own English department, I saw teacher after teacher abandon *Great Expectations* and *Huckleberry Finn*, insisting that second-language learners simply didn't have the reading skills to comprehend these difficult texts. Honors students, of course, continued to be assigned both.

In her disturbing book, *Other People's Children,* Lisa Delpit raises the thorny issue of what happens to minority and underprivileged students when skills are devalued in the classroom, and she suggests an alternative to child-centered and process methods for minority children:

> I do not advocate a simplistic "basic skills" approach for children outside of the culture of power. It would be (and has been) tragic to operate as if these children were incapable of critical and higher order thinking and reasoning. Rather, I suggest that schools must provide these children the content that other families from a different cultural orientation provide at home. This does not mean separating children according to family background, but instead, ensuring that each classroom incorporates strategies appropriate for all the children in its confines.[1]

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How a Story Works

Delpit got me thinking. Maybe the reason non-honors students didn't have the "reading skills" teachers declared necessary for negotiating the classics was that we hadn't taught them very well. I am not speaking here about teaching students how to read but rather about teaching students how stories work. In our urgency to abandon the lecture format, literature teachers may have adopted too passive a role. Clearly we want to continue to make genuine student response the cornerstone of the classroom, but withholding information about how a story works may make it impossible for some students to have any response at all.

One has only to consider Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz* or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* to see that truly "novel" texts continue to be written. But writers build stories with a common set of blocks, drawing from a stock of possibilities familiar to any experienced reader: A hero/heroine engages the reader's sympathy. A problem develops. A foil appears to allow the reader to see the hero/ heroine more clearly. The problem gets worse. Help appears. More complications arise, but the hero/heroine prevails. All is resolved. Sometimes, in the words of the Prince at the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet,* "All are punish'd."

While such story structures may be so familiar to an English teacher that they hardly bear comment, this is not the case for many high school readers. Some of my students have touched only books that teachers put in their hands and have never, in fact, read a single one from cover to cover. One approach to solving this problem is to create a vibrant outside reading program

The first pages of Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein, *which consist of letters from an explorer adrift in the Arctic sea, pose a real problem for inexperienced readers.*

ILLUSTRATED BY NENAD JAKESEVIC

for every English classroom. Another is to use the classics to teach students how stories work. I do not believe it is a matter of either/or. Students need both.

Let me use Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or *The Modern Prometheus* as an example. Now I am quick to admit the weaknesses of the lecture format when used day after day with teenagers. But the first pages of Shelley's novel pose a real problem for inexperienced readers. The story opens with a group of letters written by Robert Walton, an explorer adrift in the Arctic sea, to his sister in London. Without a few words from me about the epistolary format and about how Walton becomes, like us, the listener to Victor Frankenstein's strange tale, many students are lost before they have even begun. The simplest of clues and guiding questions seem to help:

1. What do you notice about the dates of these letters?
2. Why do you think Robert writes to his sister if there is no way to post the letters?
3. What does Robert reveal about himself here?
4. Where does Mary Shelley (through Robert) explain to the reader how the format of her story will now change?
5. Can you think of any other stories or movies that are structured like this?

My questions aim to tease out from students an understanding of how Shelley's story is structured. I think it unrealistic to assume that most of them will figure out the structure for themselves. Victor Frankenstein doesn't start telling the story students thought they were going to hear until page 30. If I don't offer some guidance through the first 29, too many give up.

It also doesn't seem fair to teach novels like *Frankenstein* only to students who instinctively understand how a series of one-sided letters like Robert Walton's works. When my colleagues in the English department urge that we simplify the curriculum for struggling students and replace the classics with shorter, more accessible novels, I know they are motivated by kindness. But the real kindness would be to give all students the tools to handle challenging texts. We aren't being paid simply to assist students who hardly need us. We're being paid to find a way for all students to develop as readers.

So I *tell* my students about how stories work. I *remind* them to pay close attention to who is narrating the story and to whom. Where appropriate, I *point out* foreshadowing. I don't monopolize the classroom conversations, but neither do I hold back when I feel that students are lost.

Connections Beyond the Story

Students had read about half of *Frankenstein*, but they were restless. I can always tell when their reading is losing momentum by the snippets of conversation floating up to my desk. "Nothing happens." "I fell asleep and missed the part where the monster came to life." "Victor Frankenstein just rambles." And most ominous of all, "Boring."

I love this book and thought I had been doing a pretty good job of teaching it, but something was missing. The students weren't hooked. I knew they were doing the reading because our discussion the day before about Victor Frankenstein's passion for his research had gone very well, but their hearts just weren't in it.

My questions aim to tease out from students an understanding of how *Frankenstein* is structured.

The lesson I had planned was going to be a close look at how Mary Shelley uses syntax and diction to create the story's tone. But experience told me that I had better think fast if I didn't want to spend the hour asking questions nobody except me cared much about. Rummaging through my *Frankenstein* files, I found a magazine article about cloning that raised the question, "Are there some scientific experiments that should never be conducted?" Handing out copies of this essay to the class, I asked students what they thought.

Hands flew into the air. Students saw at once the connection between the moral dilemma of cloning and Victor Frankenstein's creation. They argued that even the obvious medical advantage of being able to clone new hearts or livers would soon be outweighed by the cloning of super-soldiers. The science fiction buffs in the room had a field day telling tales of genetically engineered races destroying the world. Many students had recently read *Brave New World* and used Aldous Huxley's dystopia as an example of what can happen when scientists rather than humanists run the show.

My role as teacher shifted from Grand Inquisitor to traffic controller. "First Allen, then Melinda, then Andrew. We'll get to you, Joe. Hold on." The hardest part was making sure students were listening to one another rather than simply waiting their turn to expound. I complimented those who began their comments with a reference to something someone else had said. This helped. When the conversation turned to the question of whether science might someday make religion obsolete, I thought the windows might explode from the passionate intensity of my students' arguments. They had so much to say.

At the bell, the room erupted into a dozen conversations. A handful of students bolted to the bookshelf where I had copies of *Brave New World*. I collapsed at my desk, reasonably certain that the big ideas in Mary Shelley's novel had finally come alive for these readers. The rest of *Frankenstein* should make better sense

now. And to think that some people consider teaching literature genteel, scholarly work.

I resolved that tomorrow we would review our rules of classroom discussion:

- Students must talk to one another, not just to me or to the air.
- Students must listen to one another. To ensure this happens, they must either address the previous speaker or offer a reason for changing the subject.
- Students must all be prepared to participate. If I call on someone and he or she has nothing to say, the appropriate response is, "I'm not sure what I think about that, but please come back to me."

Yvonne Hutchison, a master teacher at one of the most challenging middle schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, helped me create this set of coherent guidelines for classroom discussion. She asserts that we must assume that all students have important things to say but that many are unfamiliar with the rules of scholarly discourse. A few students seem to know these rules instinctively. But if we want all students to participate in civil classroom discussion, we need to teach them how.

Student-run Discussions and Projects

One method that has worked for me has been to put student desks into a circle and call the day's lesson a "seminar." The word itself seems to lend an air of importance to the discussion. I then do the following:

1. Tell students that everyone must participate at least once during the seminar.
2. Explain to students that no one needs to raise a hand to be called on, but all students should be sensitive to each other, noticing when someone seems to have something to say but may be too shy to jump into the conversation. I give them the words they might use: "Luke, you look as though you disagree. What are you thinking?"
3. Teach students how to deal with the compulsive talkers in their midst. Pointing out how even motormouths must at some point inhale, I tell them that this is the moment when others can politely interrupt.
4. Tell students that silence is a part of the seminar, too. It means people are thinking. If the silence goes on for too long, they might want to open up *Frankenstein* and see if there is a particular passage they would like to ask one another about. They might want to read the passage aloud.
5. Let students know that I will be sitting outside their circle and that I must remain silent until the last five minutes of class. I will be taking notes of things I observe during the seminar and will be sharing these with them. My comments will not be about the content of their discussion but rather about how students have conducted themselves. I focus on the positive behaviors, the subtle ways in which students help one another join in the discussion.

Last fall, after students had finished reading both *Beowulf* and John Gardner's *Grendel* (the Beowulf story told from the point of view of the monster), I told students that instead of taking a test or writing a comparison/contrast essay about the two books, we would hold a seminar. Since this was to take the place of a formal assessment, everyone would have to speak up and participate.

Melinda began: "The last line in *Grendel* made me think again about how I felt about the monster. I mean the whole book sets you up to sympathize with him, but look how he finishes: 'Poor Grendel's had an accident. *So may you all.*' That's really mean and malicious."

"I agree. It's blood lust," remarked Joe. "This is an evil monster who deserved to be killed." But Nicole saw it differently. "Wait, look at how he was treated in his life, no mother he could talk to, Beowulf out to get him, no friends, no one to teach him how to behave."

Jorge interrupted, "Grendel was just something in the hero's way, something for the hero to slay so he could win fame and have lots of people sing about him."

"That's how it was in *Beowulf*," Nicole continued, "but in Gardner's book you could see how the monster felt. You knew what he was thinking. In a way, I think Grendel was trapped in a role. I feel sorry for him."

The conversation continued in this vein for the next 40 minutes. Students listened to one another, probed each other's observations, pointed to the text. When it was over, I let them know that this was as good as the study of literature gets. All the other activities and exercises we complete along the way are simply preparation for just this kind of conversation among readers about texts.

Scaffolding for Diction and Syntax

These students were caught up in the lesson. I can't remember anyone asking me for a grade on the project. The quality of their production was recompense enough. They saw their work and knew it was good. But I don't believe most of these students would have been able to move beyond the text with such confidence without considerable instructional scaffolding along the way. Young readers are unused to negotiating sentences like this:

> I was hurried away by fury; revenge alone endowed me with strength and composure; it mounded my feelings and allowed me to be calculating and calm at periods when otherwise delirium or death would have been my portion.

The help students needed was simple enough to provide: "See all those semicolons? For a minute, pretend they are periods. Does the passage make sense to you now? Why do you think Shelley chose to string those ideas together? What effect does the longer sentence have on you as a reader? How is this different from the effect created by a series of shorter ones?" I drew students' attention to the way in which punctuation is often a guide to negotiating complex syntax. We needed to unpack only a few sentences like this before students found that they could manage Shelley's syntax on their own.

Diction was another challenge. Borrowing the idea

(Continued on page 44)

If Tracking Is Bad, Is Detracking Better?

By James E. Rosenbaum

People have been debating the merits of tracking—grouping students by ability for the purpose of instruction—at least since Plato's *Republic.* More recently, sociological research of the 1970s, including some of my own, identified many problems that result from high school tracking, among them inappropriate criteria for selecting students, overrepresentation of poor and minority students in lower tracks, and rigidities that prevent students from moving into higher tracks.[1] In the 1980s, some researchers, building on these criticisms, advocated "detracking"—getting rid of high school tracking.[2] In a remarkable testament to the political potency of that idea, a number of schools, notably in California and Massachusetts, have followed this advice.

Tracking as it is usually practiced does have serious problems, and the claims that detracking will increase equity and achievement—especially for poor and minority students—are appealing. However, these claims have been tested mostly by detracking advocates, and few people have examined the effects of detracking in the classroom.[3] One notable exception points out some potential difficulties. A large study of restructured schools found only one detracked school that showed clear signs of educational success.[4] However, this school also enjoyed some extraordinary advantages: small classes, additional foundation funding for Saturday programs, and enormous latitude in selecting students and faculty. Because few schools can recreate these conditions, the study's findings do not provide strong evidence for the success of detracking.

The discussion that follows examines the experiences of teachers in a detracked high school in more ordinary circumstances. Although a small study cannot be definitive, it raises questions about the practical realities of detracking that were not anticipated by the advocates of detracking or by the teachers in this school.

"Progressive High" Detracks

This study consisted of interviews with eight of the 10 teachers in the social studies department of Progressive High School, a suburban public high school in the Midwest. The school is relatively homogeneous: Students come from largely working- and middle-class families and a few from low-income families. The majority of the student body is white, with very few black students. There are some Hispanic students, most of whom are proficient in English. The school has few special needs students and few upper-middle-class families (who are usually quick to complain about detracking), so it was an excellent candidate for detracking.[5]

The entire school went from a tracked system with three ability groups to a completely detracked system,

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except for foreign languages and math, which were still taught in distinct levels. Detracking began with the lower grades and was carried out in the early 1990s over a four-year period. By the time these interviews were conducted in 1999, the detracking reform had been in full operation for five years.

The study focuses on social studies because there is general agreement that, unlike math or foreign languages, it is not hierarchical—that is, it is not a field in which one of the conditions of success in a given year is having mastered the material from the previous years. This made it a good testing ground for detracking. Also, because every student must enroll in U.S. history and one of two world social studies courses, all students in the school at a given grade level were mixed in the detracked classes.

Detracking was generally well implemented at Progressive High. All the teachers in the social studies department began the reform with great enthusiasm. They believed strongly in the principle of detracking and were eager to raise the performance of *all* students in their detracked classrooms. They also devoted a great deal of effort to making detracking work. Indeed, the teachers made a point of using many of the practices that supporters of detracking advocate: simulation activities, flexible (block) scheduling, small group activities, projects, thematic instruction, and extra help periods.[6] If these teachers' perceptions were tainted by any prejudice, it was in favor of this reform. They firmly believe in the ideals of detracking even today.

Moreover, the school accomplished many of the goals of detracking. Teachers were pleased to see that detracking "diversified" their classes in terms of ethnic composition and socioeconomic status, just as detracking advocates had predicted.[7] Three teachers stated that detracking removed institutional labeling of students as "low ability" and reduced feelings of "ostracism and isolation" among slower students.[8]

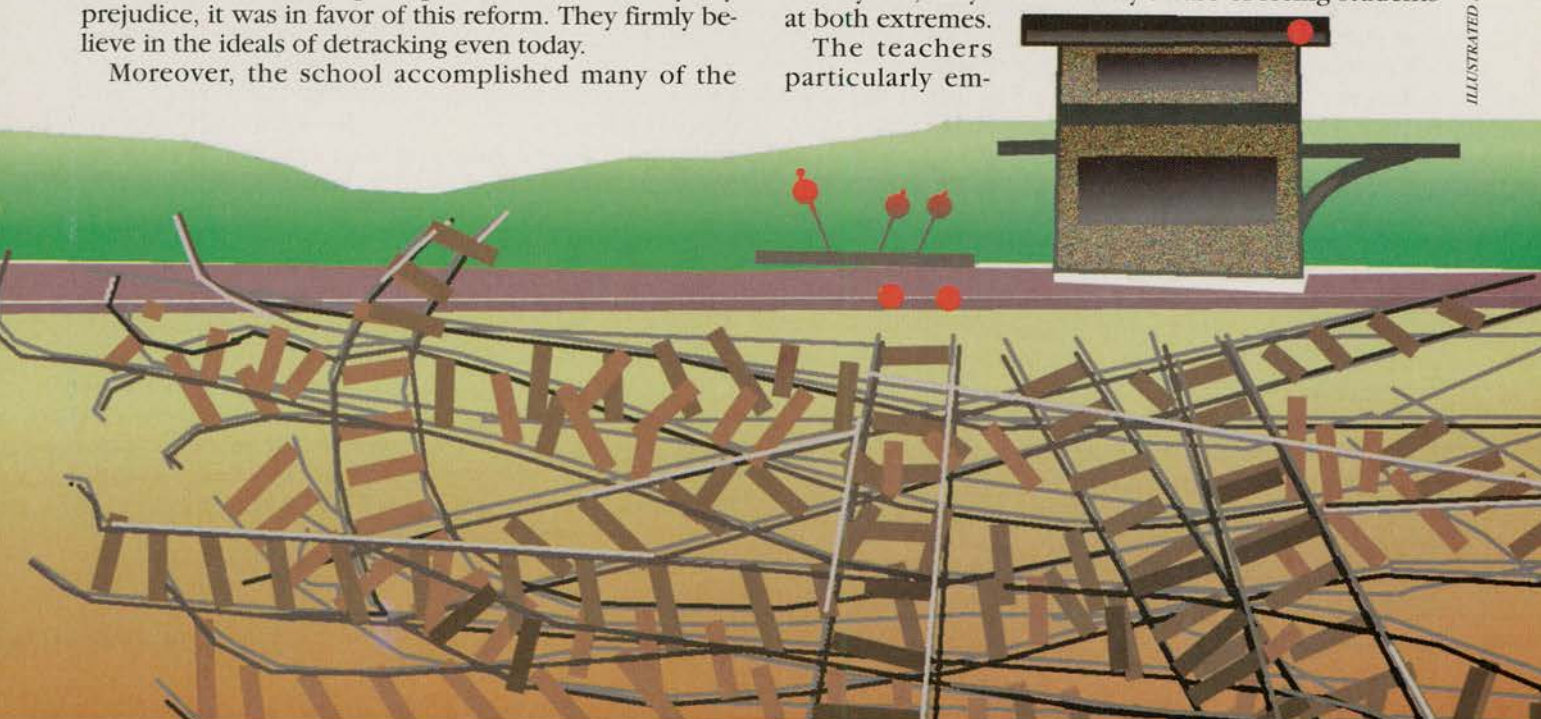
However, teachers were also disappointed by detracking because of three important outcomes that they had not anticipated:

- Detracking presented them with irresolvable conflicts.
- It imposed a uniformity that deprived faster students of challenge and slower students of mastery.
- It raised doubts about the legitimacy of the class, even in the teachers' own minds.

Irresolvable Conflicts

First, teachers reported that detracking pulled them in conflicting directions. Increased variation among students made extra attention to the various groups a necessity, but when teachers offered this help to one group, students in the other groups tended to become restless and disengaged. Teachers tried to steer a middle ground by teaching to the middle of the class; but as they did, they were acutely aware of losing students at both extremes.

The teachers particularly em-



ILLUSTRATED BY BRU ASSOCIATES

phasized the impact on faster students. Every teacher stated that detracking poorly served the needs of these students, who were often bored and rarely challenged. Initially, teachers believed that making some simple adjustments would keep faster students engaged. However, when tracks were merged, teachers found themselves pulled in conflicting directions—in regard to the tasks they assigned, the topics they covered, the language and pace of lessons, and the standards for judging students' achievement. They tried to resolve these conflicts, but in every case they discovered obstacles that they (and the detracking literature) had not anticipated.

Tasks. The problems here were especially difficult to resolve for faster students. For example, when teachers found that the tasks they assigned did not challenge faster students, they tried to give those kids extra assignments. This failed because the teachers had not anticipated how much extra preparation time it would take and because the students themselves resisted doing extra assignments. As one teacher put it, "Piquing the interest of the brighter kids would require extra readings, extra writing assignments, and extra discussions that we would have to schedule outside of class. It's too hard to do all of this. I really don't do enough for them. There's not enough time."

In addition, teachers found that their faster students were rarely receptive to doing more work, especially when they knew that teachers couldn't reward them for it. These students already had an easy A in this class. What incentive did they have for doing extra assignments?

Topics. Teachers initially expected that they would enrich the material covered in class when they responded to questions raised by faster students. In fact, detracking advocates see this as a way of raising the intellectual level of slower students. However, teachers had not anticipated that two-thirds of the class often did not understand the questions. Explaining the faster students' questions would take time that was needed to help the rest of the class understand the key issues of the lesson, and teachers concluded that they could not devote class time to topics that served only one-third of the class. So if faster students asked questions, teachers tended to give only brief answers and quickly return to the lesson before losing the interest of the other students.

Teachers were also surprised at how often they had to ignore many topics that are regularly covered in upper-track classes and many approaches to history—including interpreting evidence and dealing with conflicting views of historical events. One teacher said, "Social history is what draws the most students in. So we really stay away from political and economic history, except at obvious points, like the early presidents or the Great Depression." In detracked classes, teachers did not feel they could present demanding topics or approaches without confusing most students and failing to help slower students with basic topics they had not understood.

Language. Although teachers faced difficult choices about tasks and topics several times during a class period, they faced a conflict about language virtually every minute. Because they had to be intelligible to all students, teachers used language that was generally far below the vocabulary of faster students. One teacher initially tried to solve the problem by explaining the big words she used, but this was distracting to everyone. She eventually reverted to using only words that the slowest students could understand.

When faster students used difficult words, teachers had to decide whether to interrupt the ongoing lesson to explain the word; they often decided not to. When they did explain, they were conscious of being translators. "The bright kids often speak on my level," said one teacher, "and then I rephrase what they have said to the whole class." The faster students did not fit into the class, except by translation.

Pace. Running a classroom with students at different levels created a constant tension over how quickly to move. If the pace was too fast, slower students became confused. However, when teachers slowed the pace and rephrased a point three or four times to make sure that everyone understood, faster students gave up. Several teachers mentioned the problems associated with giving directions. One teacher said, "I quickly learned to give verbal and visual instructions and to repeat them and have a student repeat them." Often, the faster kids tuned out after the third round of instructions: "They stop raising their hands." Nearly every day, teachers watched with frustration as some students shifted from active engagement to disengagement.

Standards. But as difficult as these classroom issues were, they were dwarfed by the problem of what level of performance to expect of the students in the detracked class. One standard? Several? The bind the teachers were in is obvious, and I'll take it up in detail later on.

Thus, while teachers initially believed that students' disparate needs could be handled with some simple adjustments, these needs created conflicts in the detracked class that could be resolved only at the expense of one or more groups, and faster students were the biggest losers.

Slower Students and Kids in the Middle

For slower students, teachers thought detracking brought clear social benefits: They "feel more comfortable in a detracked class. In a tracked low-level class, they knew they were labeled as 'the dumb ones.'" Another teacher said, "The labels these kids used to have really hurt them; their attitude was 'I'm in the low track, it's over for me.'" With detracking, all the teachers agreed that these labels lost their force.

However, regardless of detracking's social benefits, nearly all the teachers said they believed that detracking harmed slower students academically because teachers could not retard the pace of the class enough to allow the slower students to keep up or give these kids the individual attention they needed. If teachers answered faster students' questions very briefly to avoid boring most of the other students, they gave slower students' questions the same treatment so they could return to the main lesson before the middle-level students tuned out. As one teacher said, "When the middle students start to get impatient, that's the signal to us that it's time to move on." Overall, the teachers

Students do not wait patiently through presentations that are not aimed at them.

found that the slowest students needed extra help the teachers could not give during the class period, and they urged these students to come after class. Few ever did.

Middle-level students were the least likely to be neglected in a detracked class. During whole-class instruction, tasks, topics, language, and pace were generally geared to them. Teachers also said they spent more time on these students' questions than on questions from faster or slower students. However, when it comes to individual attention, middle students are often overlooked in schools,[9] and detracking may make this even worse. When classtime activities were done individually or in groups, the teacher went to the slower students first to make sure they understood the task and could get started. By the time the teacher was finished answering their questions, the faster students were done, so the teacher had to run to help them, perhaps giving them an additional task to make sure they didn't become behavior problems. What became clear in teachers' accounts was that middle-level students rarely got individual attention even when they needed it. Detracking creates a situation where teachers can't use whole-class time to meet the needs of faster or slower students and can't give individual attention to middle students. It is hard to find any winners in terms of instruction.

When the school shifted to detracking, the social studies teachers at Progressive High School thought they would be able to address each topic *sequentially* on multiple levels. They discovered that students do not wait patiently through presentations not aimed at them, so they tried to present topics *simultaneously.* Insofar as they were able to pull this off, their classes were like United Nations sessions simultaneously translated into three languages, with this difference—everything was done by a single translator. At every minute of class, these teachers felt pressure to employ language, pace, tasks, topics, and standards appropriate to three different audiences. When the teachers settled for trying to reach the kids in the middle, they had the frustration of watching the slower and the faster students drift away and of knowing they were not giving these students what they needed. No wonder some teachers reported that detracking imposes impossible demands.

Bright Minority Students

One of the strongest arguments against tracking is that it harms minorities.[10] Minorities do tend to be underrepresented in upper tracks.[11] However, social studies teachers at Progressive High reported an opposite problem—shortchanging bright minority students. Progressive High has many Hispanic students, mostly from poor families. One teacher said that there were 10 Hispanic students in her world history class, three of whom she would classify as "high ability level," and they were "slowed down and bored, just like the other bright kids." Moreover, "the brighter Hispanic students seem to face a lot of peer pressure in the class from other Hispanic kids who aren't doing well in the class." Here we are seeing the potential for harm to minorities from the policy that is supposed to help them. These minority students come from working- and lower-class families; their parents do not have strong educational backgrounds. If these students do not find academic challenge at school, they may not find it at all.

Equality Is Not Equity: Standards and Grading Practices

The teachers' second big disappointment was finding that they could not expect all of their students to meet the same standards. Teachers felt it was unfair to demand as much from slower students as from their classmates: Students who struggled many hours over an assignment deserved some reward for effort even if they didn't finish. The pressure to adjust standards was so great that seemingly objective systems were not exempt. One teacher who uses a clear rubric (skills checklist) for grading writing admitted that a "rubric can be skewed. I can fix the numbers given my expectations. An advanced student will get a point off for not formulating a proper topic sentence because he should know that by now. A slower student would not lose points for that."

Some teachers who said they initially maintained high standards could not continue to do so. Because detracking creates a situation in which 20 percent to 30 percent of a class have difficulty meeting standards that mid-level students can manage, it may force teachers to lower the minimum acceptable standards. Unknowingly echoing Theodore Sizer's statement about how the composition of a class affects standards,[12] one teacher said "I can't fail half of the class, which is what would happen if I kept the same standards, so I'm more lenient when I grade the lower-level students if they show up, are trying, and come in for extra help."

When teachers tried to give faster students extra assignments to make sure they were working up to their level, this also raised questions of equity. Extra assignments take teachers' time away from planning lessons for slower and middle-level students, and many teachers felt it was unfair to sacrifice their planning time for the whole class to help a few faster students.

In addition, the students themselves thought that extra assignments were unfair. Everything they could see indicated that they had already learned more than

they needed to know. Indeed, when they exhibited a better vocabulary or asked a more complex question, the teacher couldn't or wouldn't respond. So when a teacher offered an extra assignment to a restless faster student, the student replied, "Why do I have to do it? No one else does." Another teacher reported that out of 25 faster students who were offered an extra assignment, only two actually did it. As a result, all students got the same homework. Faster students finished most of it at school and did little homework at night.

Although advocates speak confidently about creating higher standards for slower students, detracking creates a situation where equity argues against high standards for faster and slower students alike. For faster students, extra assignments that would challenge them seem unfair and arbitrary. For slower students, high achievement standards are unfair unless the class can wait while they master the material—and this would be unfair to the rest of the class. As a result, faster students rarely need to exert much effort, and slower students rarely get enough time to meet achievement standards.

Detracking increases the conflicts between challenge, achievement, and effort. These teachers responded by grading faster students on achievement, and slower students on effort. This deprived faster students of challenge and slower students of mastery. Moreover, the teachers' use of different standards for different students created an ambiguity about what was an acceptable level of work that undoubtedly left many students unaware of their deficiencies. Despite its intentions, detracking creates inequities.

The Loss of Legitimacy

The third disappointment was that detracking raised doubts about classroom legitimacy, even in the teachers' own minds. Teachers are charged both with providing challenging instruction and keeping order. However, as Waller[13] noted, the two goals sometimes conflict. Detracking increases this conflict so that teachers often feel compelled to diminish challenge in order to keep all students involved. As already noted, this takes its greatest toll on faster students.

Teachers do not know how to respond to the anger of faster students. When less-motivated students are neglected, they respond with passive disengagement or active disruptions, which teachers can punish as deviance. But when motivated students are ignored or given material that bores them and their discontent turns into open conflict and even anger, teachers find it harder to punish them. Ignoring interesting questions makes teachers feel that they are not doing their professional duty, so many teachers agree with students' challenges to their legitimacy.

These statements from two Progressive High teachers indicate the extent of their uneasiness. One confessed to embarrassment about some assignments: "The high-level kids sometimes laugh when I pass them out.... If I were in my own class,...I would be bored." Another said that sometimes she apologizes to the high-level kids: "It's sort of like 'I'm sorry kids, but bear with me.'" Teachers found that sort of teacher-student exchange embarrassing and said it raised doubts about the class's legitimacy among students at all levels—especially since teachers agreed with students' impatience and were reluctant to criticize their challenges.

Apathy and deviance are the ultimate indicators of the breakdown of legitimacy. Some of the faster kids in the classes displayed their frustration quietly, taking out books from other classes to get started on their homework for the night. Others were more disruptive, talking to other students or passing notes. One teacher reported, "Lately, I've had trouble with the gifted students, who are bored and make trouble." Most of the students' bad behavior did not amount to insurrection, but it was a clear signal to all that the class was losing its legitimacy. One teacher observed that a slower student who frequently misbehaved found a new ally in a faster student who was also bored. If detracking's goal is to democratize the classroom, it succeeds in a perverse way—by democratizing apathy and deviance.

Looking for Solutions

Oakes[14] has noted three possible barriers to detracking: technical—it is hard to do; normative—teachers' beliefs prevent it; and political—vested interests of faster students' parents prevent it. Oakes addresses only the latter two. She seems to regard technical obstacles as trivial. However, in Progressive High School, teachers believed strongly in tracking, and there was no political opposition in the early years. Instead, the difficulties were "technical"—teachers could not figure out how to teach all students in detracked classes. These findings support and elaborate the conclusions of a previous study which found that, except in the case of a school that had extraordinary resources,

> the technical challenges of providing high-quality instruction to students at diverse performance levels are formidable obstacles for many teachers who wish to reduce the reliance on grouping and tracking....most teachers were not able to provide a challenging, engaging curriculum to an academically diverse array of students.[15]

Indeed, the experiences of teachers at Progressive High suggest that detracking raises a number of problems that no teaching strategy can easily solve:

- *Detracking did not abolish inequality among students; it ignored inequality as much as possible—and therein lay its successes and failures.* Ignoring differences among students when placing them in classes reduced the institutional labeling of students. At the same time, teachers who ignored these differ-

Detracking raises problems that no teaching strategy can easily solve.

ences as they conducted lessons and graded students came to feel that, as educators, they were poorly serving both faster and slower students. Equal treatment deprived the first group of challenge and transformed them from positive models to disengaged and disruptive influences. It also deprived the second group of mastery. Ironically, equal demands led to serious inequities.

- *Detracking forces teachers to ignore high-level topics.* Most teachers subscribe to the ideal of setting standards that challenge all students. Detracking puts them in the position of delegitimizing high-level language, sophisticated questions, and challenging subject matter in order to keep most students interested and on track. In the process, teachers begin to doubt the legitimacy of their own classes. Moreover, in ignoring faster students' questions, they send clear signals that such additional knowledge is irrelevant or inappropriate. No wonder these students see no reason to learn more than the unchallenging mid-level material.
- *When standards are lowered, students' further education may suffer.* While detracked schools can brag that all their students enter college, this is not much of an accomplishment since almost anyone can enter open-admissions colleges. Studies of these colleges find that more than one-third of students lack basic competencies and must take remedial college classes. As a result, many of these students soon drop out of college.[16] If detracking gives the impression that slower students have basic mastery, but prevents teachers from slowing the class enough to make sure that they do, then students will only discover their poor preparation when they get assigned to remedial college classes, where it may be too late to remedy their achievement gaps.
- *Detracking may be harmful to low-income and minority youth who are high achievers.* These kids cannot afford extra tutoring or summer enrichment programs, and their parents often cannot help them with homework, so these students are especially at the mercy of the instruction provided in school. If detracking reduces the challenge for bright low-income youth, they won't get it elsewhere.

One cannot blame teachers' efforts for these failures. The social studies teachers in Progressive High worked very hard to make detracking succeed. They put in long hours: With the ordinary school day beginning at 8:15 a.m., they came to school 60 minutes earlier than that to set up simulations and meet with students who had special needs. They also followed the practices endorsed by tracking advocates. This was an effective implementation of detracking, and teachers found that it just did not meet their expectations.[17] Nor can one question the teachers' competence. Though detracking made them feel inadequate, they were all successful teachers before the reform. Dreamers may hope for super teachers who could do better, but policy cannot be built on the assumption of super teachers.

What it comes down to is that if tracking is bad, detracking may be no better. Indeed, it may be more harmful than tracking in some respects. Although tracking as ordinarily implemented has many problems, that does not mean detracking solves these problems or has better outcomes.

In the past, researchers who presented negative findings about popular programs have been criticized as being biased or even intending to scuttle a program they didn't like. However, when this study began, I hoped detracking at this high school would be successful. I have written about the problems of tracking for many years and have been interested in finding solutions. But regardless of my hopes, it is a serious disservice to students to pretend that detracking has no problems or that it solves problems when it does not. The interviews did not ask teachers to express reservations. I was unhappy to hear them—and teachers were unhappy to state them. These were unanticipated outcomes, and they caused former advocates to want to end the detracking reform.

Of course, the problem of inequality is created before high school. If students enter ninth grade with vast disparities in achievement (often ranging over five grade levels), then a high school is faced with only bad choices. Policymakers should not wait until high school to begin addressing these problems. Inequalities are evident in the earliest grades, but they increase over time.[18] It is essential to make major additional efforts to remedy achievement gaps before fourth grade, and Farkas[19] and others have shown that considerable success can occur in reducing inequalities at this early period. However, this requires identifying students at risk and giving them extra help during part of the school day or after school.

What can be done in high school? Researchers sometimes fail to make an important distinction. When research shows negative effects of tracking, it is showing the effects of tracking as ordinarily practiced. If tracking dumps low-performing students into classes where little is asked of them and no effort is made to help them deal with their deficiencies—where indeed they are expected to fail—it is no wonder if they do. But this problem with tracking as ordinarily implemented is not inevitable.[20] It is possible that modifications of tracking may reduce negative outcomes.[21] For example, Gamoran[22] showed that successful lower-track classrooms can effectively present high-level material if they do it at a slower pace—a strategy that would be difficult to manage in a detracked classroom without losing the attention of middle and faster students.

In another tracked high school, students whose achievement was below the ordinary cut-off for honors track were admitted to the honors track if they were highly motivated. The school gave them supplementary help in a special summer class (before ninth grade), a special study hall which offered extra help, and a special help session after school. These students had to exert extra effort to keep up with the honors classes, and the extra sessions helped them to do so. Without lowering the standards in honors classes, this program helped large numbers of students enroll in honors track and led to a vast increase in the number

(Continued on page 47)

Romani Children Go to School

By Burton Bollag

HERMANOVCE, SLOVAKIA: Large, stucco-covered houses sit on the hilly green contours of this pleasant village in the agricultural east of the country. This is where the white people live. At the low end of town, in a hollow where a stream flows, is a collection of small shacks with mud-covered walls and scrap-metal roofs. There is no running water or electricity. Little children run naked along the narrow muddy paths between the shacks in the warm autumn sun. This is where the Gypsies live.

The village's 140 white children attend an elementary school located on top of the hill. All but three of the 73 Gypsy—or Romani—children, as they prefer to be called, are sent to a separate, smaller school near the general store and pub in the village center. It is known officially as a "special school," meaning it is for children with mild mental retardation, and it uses a greatly simplified curriculum.

"They want to be among themselves," says Mária Marková, director of both schools, referring to the Romani children. "Discrimination? No. We have three Romani children from better families in the normal school. But the others come to school with nothing, no pens or notebooks. Their families aren't interested in their education. They could never manage normal school."

The village's white children are being educated to compete for jobs. Most go to high school, and some go to college. Special school, on the other hand, qualifies graduates for little more than pushing a broom; when they finish, students are not eligible to attend

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high school. After graduation, virtually all of the village's Roma go on welfare.

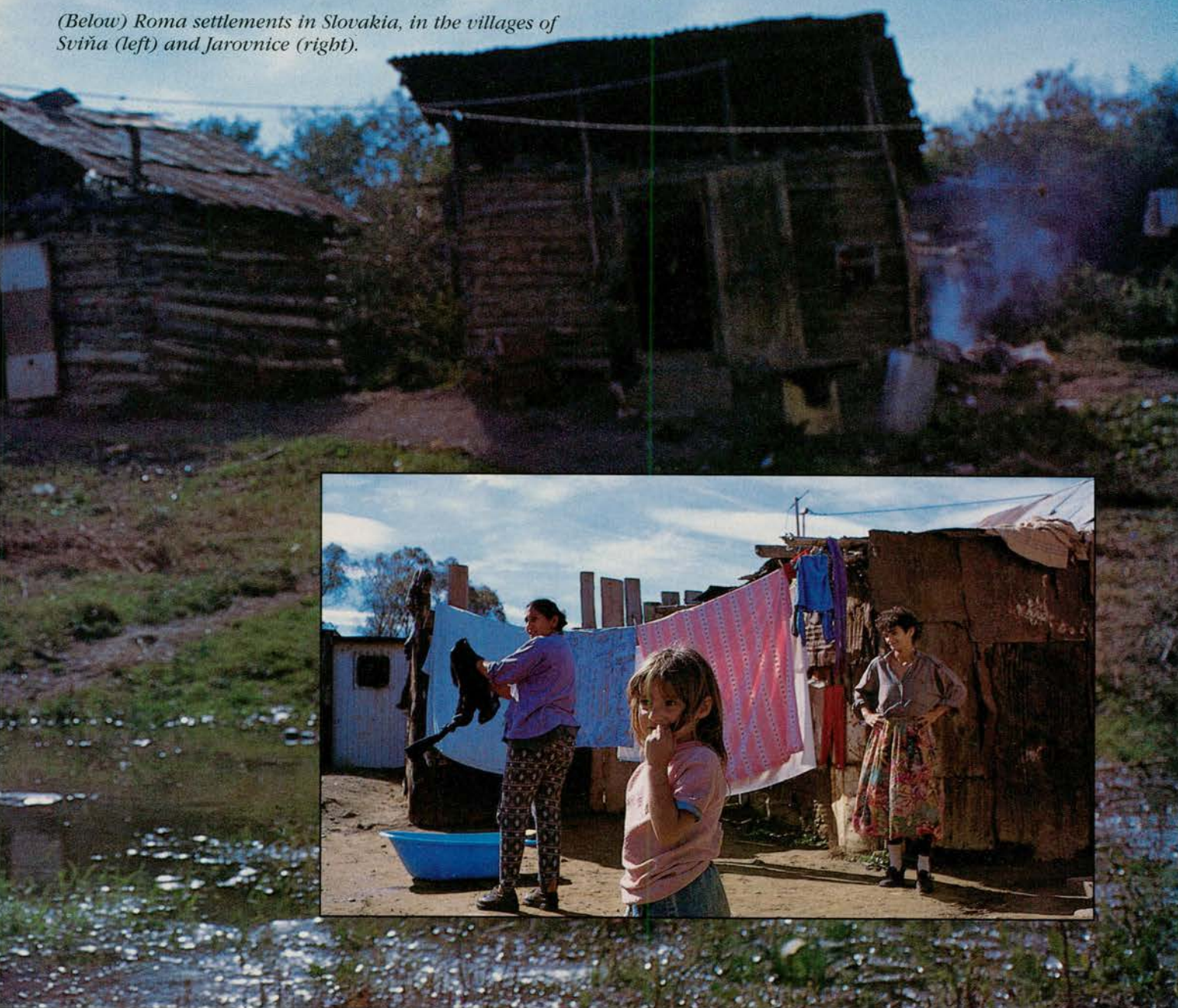
Throughout former Communist Eastern Europe, Romani children are getting a raw deal when it comes to getting an education. Even where they attend normal schools, their classes—or the schools themselves—are frequently segregated, leaving Romani children with an education that is separate and very unequal. In some countries, especially Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, special schools for the mentally handicapped serve as collective dumping grounds where substantial numbers of Romani children receive a grossly substandard education. In the poorer Balkan countries, like Bulgaria and Romania, school attendance by Romani children is reported to have dropped significantly during the last decade, the result of the post-Communist impoverishment of the Roma and the more openly anti-Gypsy attitudes of some local authorities who find excuses to avoid enrolling Romani children.

In normal schools, where they are in the minority, Romani children, who sometimes cannot afford books or proper clothes, are subject to racist abuse, and sometimes violence, from classmates and teachers. With minor exceptions, lessons designed to teach ethnic tolerance, or to celebrate elements of Romani culture, do not exist.

AT THE elementary school in Bogács, a village in the poor agricultural northeast of Hungary, white and Romani children are taught in separate classes. The lunchroom tables and the lavatories are strictly segregated "for hygienic reasons," says school director Erzsébet Szezencsi. Regardless of what her students may be learning about living with members of other ethnic groups, Szezencsi says separation is the best solution. "Hungarian parents don't want their children to study with Gypsies. It would bring down the teaching level too much."

Since their ancestors set off on several waves of migration from northern India about a thousand years ago, the Roma have remained outsiders in Europe. Sometimes valued as skilled craftsmen, often despised, persecuted, even enslaved, the Roma have managed to hold on to their unique language and culture over the centuries. Eastern Europe's Communist governments forcibly settled the once nomadic Roma in specified

(Below) Roma settlements in Slovakia, in the villages of Sviňa (left) and Jarovnice (right).



areas but offered a degree of paternalistic protection and guaranteed employment. The collapse of Communism 10 years ago has led to a sharp worsening of their situation. A majority of Eastern Europe's 5 million Roma are now unemployed. Discrimination against Roma in hiring is commonplace; so is denial of access to public facilities like restaurants. Physical attacks by skinheads are troublingly frequent; dozens of Roma have been murdered in such attacks over the last decade.

The Czech Republic, which separated from Slovakia in 1993 in a peaceful, negotiated divorce, has been embarrassed by the exodus to Western Europe of hundreds of Romani citizens fleeing what they say are discrimination and racist violence. The erection of a controversial six-foot high wall in the northern Czech city of Ustinad Labem last fall, separating a group of Romani apartment houses from an adjoining white neighborhood, has only added to the country's worsening international image.

The situation has pushed the authorities to look more closely at the situation of the country's 250,000 Roma. In a spring 1999 resolution on how to promote their integration into Czech society, the government admitted that "approximately three-quarters of Romani children attend special schools for children with mild mental defects." The resolution goes on to warn that this situation is increasingly seen abroad as "an evil foretaste of a tendency towards apartheid." Only 3 percent of non-Romani children attend special schools.

"You can't get three-quarters of a population mentally retarded" says Deborah Winterbourne, a British human rights attorney employed by the European Roma Rights Center in the Hungarian capital, Budapest. "This is clear racial discrimination." Last June, Winterbourne jolted the Czech authorities when she filed an unprecedented legal challenge on behalf of the parents of 14 Roma children attending six special schools in the Czech city of Ostrava. The lawsuit, which is being heard by the country's constitutional court, names the ministry of education and the local school authorities as defendants, accusing them of practicing illegal racial discrimination. It asks for the establishment of a compensatory educational fund and the adoption of a plan to achieve racial balance in Ostrava schools within three years.

"We had people working for three months trying to find families who would be able to withstand the pressure" and join the lawsuit, says Winterbourne. One of the couples they signed up is Berta Červeňáková and her husband.

Three years ago their eldest daughter, Nikol, was transferred without their permission from first grade in a normal school to a special school. After the parents joined the lawsuit, the local school authorities offered to test Nikol again. This time, she was found to be of normal intelligence, and officials agreed to transfer her back to normal school.

"It's quite hard for her to catch up," says Berta Červeňáková. Twice a week, a tutor comes to their house to help Nikol learn the large amount of material she missed during those three years. "It seems right," says Červeňáková of the lawsuit. "Someone has to start, and then the other families will follow. I'd like Nikol to go to high school and then university. It all depends on her and on the support I give her."

The overuse of special schools does not represent an attempt to save money. On the contrary. With an average of 9.8 students per class, compared to 22.3 students per class in normal schools, the special schools cost the Czech authorities about twice as much per pupil. Their overuse represents, rather, an unwillingness to deal seriously with the education needs of Romani children, an easy way to get rid of the problem.

In Hungary too, where more than a half million Roma live, the misuse of special schools is under at-

Romani children in the primary school in Bogács, Hungary, where the lunchroom tables and lavatories are segregated.

tack. In September 1999, Hungary's ombudsman for minority rights (who, like an American ambassador, is named by the president and approved by the legislature) issued a scathing report condemning the practice under which more than half of all Romani children are placed in schools for the mentally defective.The ombudsman, Jenő Karltenbach, an ethnic German law professor from Szeged University concluded, "This system which negatively discriminates and segregates has proved to be a failure." He went on to reject claims that placing Romani children in special schools "protected" them. "Children...cannot be 'loved' while we participate in their exclusion and labeling." Karltenbach called on the government to review and modify regulations on placing children in special education. As in the Czech Republic, critics say intelligence tests are often culturally biased and trip up young Romani children for their incomplete knowledge of the national language. The authorities, Karltenbach said, should help parents understand the consequences of

Rózsa Mendi (left), a Romani psychologist with the Roma Civil Rights Foundation in Budapest, talks with one of her clients.

special education for their children, and the parents' right to intervene. He also said Romani issues should be incorporated into teacher training programs.

Hungary's education minister, Zoltan Pokorni, reacted surprisingly positively to the report, promising to organize a conference to look at the issue with the participation of international experts. He said he would take steps to encourage more Romani parents to send their children to kindergarten so they will be better prepared for first grade. He also pledged to begin monitoring how the country's public schools use the $40 million allocated per year to help improve the performance of Romani children. Critics say many schools simply add the money to their general budgets, where it is used for such things as heating and repairs.

The report, and the minister's reaction, received considerable press coverage, most of it favorable. But critics say the authorities are still not taking the problem seriously enough. "I don't think we need more conferences," says Gábor Bernáth, a gadzo, or non-Rom, who heads the Roma Press Center. The Budapest-based center runs a Romani news service and trains young Roma to become journalists. "Every day the fate of more and more pupils is being decided in a way which makes it impossible for them to get a job." He says, "The education system continues to educate masses of future unemployed Roma."

Not far away from Bernáth's busy and airy third-floor center is an unassuming ground floor office at the back of a little courtyard. This is the headquarters of the Roma Civil Rights Foundation. On the wall is a large picture of Martin Luther King Jr., and text (in English) from his "I have a dream" speech. There are also large, vividly colored paintings depicting flowing people and fairy-tale scenes—typical of modern Romani art. Two years ago, the foundation launched an unprecedented lawsuit against the principal of a primary school in the town of Tiszavasvári in northeastern Hungary. The suit challenged the school's segregated dining facilities and separate graduation ceremonies for white and Romani students. Last spring, the court ruled in the foundation's favor, and the school was forced to end the practices and pay damages.

THE POSSIBLE impact of this widespread discrimination on Romani children has rarely attracted the interest of the region's social scientists. Rózsa Mendi, a psychologist working at the foundation, says the few Hungarian studies that have looked at the issue have found devastating psychological effects.

"Romani children generally first meet with prejudice at school" she says. "It is especially the teacher who conveys this prejudice. It can reduce students' academic motivation to a minimum. The children easily feel: This is a place where I don't belong." A 1975 study of one class in a village near Budapest "showed big differences between IQ and academic performance. Ro-

mani children stayed on the margins of the class. They wanted to belong, but the teacher never chose them."

Mendi, whose fine features and unblemished cocoa-colored skin belie her middle age, is one of the few Roma to be working in a highly qualified profession. Yet the prejudice she had to endure has left unhappy memories. In her kindergarten class in Budapest, the other children refused to play with her. "It was very embarrassing and painful to stand alone in the schoolyard," she recalls.

A recent survey of attitudes of Hungarian young people found that 37 percent of university students favored expelling the Roma from the country. Among high school students, more than half expressed a similar opinion. "Being Romani is a highly stigmatized identity," says Mendi.

Before taking her job at the foundation two years ago, Mendi worked for the social services department of Budapest city. There she established and ran a "personality development" program for promising but troubled Romani high school students from around the country. They would gather four days each month, sometimes enjoying the unheard of privilege of spending a night in a hotel and eating in restaurants. She used role playing and other techniques to build up the students' self-esteem and improve their communication and conflict resolution skills. All 15 participants in the program's first year finished high school—something few Roma do. Three went on to university. Then funding ended and the program stopped.

Mendi is currently carrying out personality studies of 40 young Roma attending university. Hungary probably has more Roma in higher education than any other Eastern European country. Still, Mendi says they number no more than 500. She wants to understand what special qualities have enabled them to go this far, and what costs they have paid in psychological terms.

One thing the participants have in common is particularly strong family ties. "Love from their families is what sustains them," says Mendi. Psychological testing and deep interviews show they tend to have strongly functioning egos. They are very spontaneous and creative, with strong inner control: 'I determine my own goals and how to achieve them.' "The functioning of their superegos is below average," says Mendi. "They can't follow strict rules; they need a certain degree of liberty."

She has also found that these children all had to deal with difficult conflicts during their lives. "But this gives them greater problem-solving abilities than non-Roma," she says. These successful young Roma "tend to choose constructive solutions to conflict rather than emotional or self-destructive ones."

Yet there is a downside. "They control their behavior and emotions even when they don't have to," says Mendi. "In the short term, this is positive; they can adapt to conflict situations better. But in the long term it can lead to psychosomatic problems." It turns out that almost all of the 40 have undergone bouts of loneliness, depression, even physical problems—stomach ailments or arrhythmic heartbeats. The whole process of making it in the dominant white society is inherently stressful, says Mendi.

Mendi also heads an innovative program at the foundation called Romaversitas. Established two years ago, it currently provides special academic support to 33 Romani university students. It is modeled partly on the "Invisible University," small institutions which provide tutors and other support to the best university students in Hungary and several other ex-Communist countries. Romaversitas has more modest goals: to prevent dropping out in the first year and to build self-esteem. It also provides private tutors, monthly lectures for participants, and small stipends since most Roma come from poor families.

Most of the students are doing studies in the social sciences or teaching. "We would like them to develop themselves *and* to help bring about change in their communities," says Mendi. "Unfortunately, the kind of conviction that was behind the U.S. civil rights movement doesn't exist here yet among the Roma. We don't have a charismatic leader like Martin Luther King. You can find self-destruction; you can't find much self-sacrifice."

Despite Mendi's pessimistic assessment, a number of small education projects across the region have been set up by Roma and their gadzo supporters since the end of Communism. While they reach relatively few children, they serve as models, showing that there are alternatives to the current dismal undereducation of the Roma. Some of the projects receive funding from the European Union, UNESCO, or other donors. The open society network established by the Hungarian-born American financier and philanthropist, George Soros, is probably the single largest source of support and encouragement.

GANDHI HIGH School is located in a leafy suburb of Pécs, a historic southern Hungarian town known for its mosques and minarets—today used as Christian churches—that have survived from Ottoman Turkish times. The high school is an island of normalcy in a region where failure is the rule.

It is mid-afternoon and the school's 200 students, ages 13 to 18, are lounging around the premises of the modern, four-story brick building—the converted former headquarters of a state-owned mining company—where they board and study. The day's classes have ended, and the students, all Roma, have a couple of hours' break before the start of the 4 to 6:30 p.m. "silencium" period when they are all required to be in their rooms studying.

The atmosphere is relaxed. Students are mostly in little groups. In one, a student is playing the guitar while others are singing. Sixteen-year-old László Petrovics, in 11th grade, wants to study acting and directing at university. In the small Romani village he comes from, his former elementary school classmates have all ended their schooling. "They do seasonal work in the fields," he says ruefully, in quite passable English. "They rob, they do nothing, they have babies."

Fifteen-year-old Kálmán Bogdán, a dark-skinned boy with curly bangs who is in ninth grade, wants to go to military academy and become an army officer after he finishes high school. "In elementary school, the teachers always got angry with the Gypsy children quicker," he says. "They would hit them on the side of the head

and say: 'Stupid Gypsy.' "It made me feel so bad. The teachers are supposed to help all the students." Yet he sees a bright future for himself now. "If I really study hard," he says, "everything is possible."

Gandhi High School was established in 1994 as a private initiative with funds from Soros and other donors. The following year, the government agreed to take over the $400,000 annual budget, which covers school operations as well as room and board and books for students. The government generously, and wisely, left management in the hands of the Gandhi Foundation. The school follows the standard Hungarian high school curriculum, including mandatory English and German. It also teaches Romani culture and two Romani languages, Lovari, a Sanskrit-based language like modern Hindi, and Beash, an old dialect of Romanian that is widely spoken by the Roma in the surrounding community.

Richard Karsai (left) and some of his students at Gandhi High School, a model school for Romani students in Pécs, Hungary.

The school has a group of three or four educators who spend three days each week visiting elementary schools in villages and towns in the surrounding region, recruiting promising new students. Up to 100 sixth-graders are invited to attend a weeklong summer school; the best are offered a place at Gandhi for the start of their seventh grade. Of the 54 students who were enrolled in the first year of the school's operations, only 18 have stuck it out. But admissions criteria have been tightened, and more recent students have done much better. The first 12th-grade class will graduate this spring.

"The aim of Gandhi school," says deputy director Richard Karsai matter of factly, "is to send students to university." Karsai, a gadzo German teacher who sports a dark brown beard and ponytail, lets the older students address him by his first name. "We want a Romani intelligentsia to develop," he continues. "We want them to be leaders of their people: lawyers, doctors, social workers, politicians." Currently only eight junior-level members of the school's 42 full- and part-time academic staff are Roma. "I personally would like all our teachers to be Roma in 10 years," he says. "If we do our work properly, we should be out of a job by then."

Elsewhere, private groups have established pre-school programs to help Romani children deal better with the shock of entering first grade. "There is great liberty in Romani families," says psychologist Mendi. "They are very child-centered. It's just the opposite of the discipline at school." In some Eastern European countries, including Slovakia, there is the added problem that, at home, many Roma speak a language other than the national language, which is the language of the education system.

ON THE beautiful elongated main square of the eastern Slovak city of Prešov are two cozy, little, brightly colored rooms. This is a pre-school center—one of three run by the Foundation for Romani Children, a private Slovak organization. The teacher, Juliana Nagyová, hands out simple percussion instruments to six young children, ages 4 to 6, sitting on the carpeted floor. "What are these?" she asks in Slovak. "Yes, sticks. And what do we say? That's right: Thank you." Then she leads the children in a song. Parents are invited to attend the daily, intensive two-hour sessions, and quite a few do, bringing away educational tasks to do at home with their children.

"My older son Andrej had to repeat first grade at school," says Milan Kiňa, an occasional laborer with a sixth-grade education, who is here with the youngest of his three children. "He had a problem with the language; he wasn't prepared for school. Here they learn Slovak and how to get on with the teacher. It's great. Our daughter Monika spent one year here, and she's had no problem in elementary school."

That is, no problem until yesterday. That's when Kiňa and his wife went to a parents' meeting at school and discovered that their daughter had been transferred from a mixed class to an all-Romani one that is at a lower level. "I went to the school director," says Mrs. Kiňa angrily, "and she said that Monika has to go there because the better Romani pupils must help the weaker ones."

"We can't accept that," says Edita Kovařova, founding director of the pre-school center. She promises to intervene with the school director.

"We hope our children will go on to high school," says Mrs. Kiňa. "They will go," she corrects herself. "And they will find work. They will have a better life than we do."

Even in the normal school system, there are exceptional teachers who have made a real impact on the lives of their Romani pupils. Jan Sajko, a gadzo, has had extraordinary success awakening the artistic talent of his students in an all-Roma public school in Jarovnice, the largest Romani settlement in Slovakia. The vividly colored paintings and drawings of Sajko's

Milan and Monika Kiňa with their daughter at her preschool in Prešov, Slovakia. The Kiňas plan to dispute their daughter's transfer from an integrated class where she was doing well to an all-Romani class that is less advanced.

students have won prizes around the world. He lets pupils work at their own pace, dealing with them "from their own starting places," and encouraging them to paint about things from their own lives.

Large paintings of Sajko's students line the halls of their school in the impoverished community. He takes students to visit museums and on other trips. It is essential, says Sajko, to "do everything possible so that the models for the children are no longer family members who drink, sit around playing cards, or use drugs. The most active students must be well rewarded, for example, with trips abroad, so the children realize that those who work and achieve certain results, have much to gain."

In Prague, the architecturally splendid capital of the neighboring Czech Republic, the New School Foundation is training Roma to work as teachers' assistants. Educators increasingly believe that assistants can play a crucial role in helping young Romani students adjust to the alien culture of public education. Last year, 37 assistants were trained and employed in Czech public schools. About a dozen more are being trained and monitored under the foundation's auspices in Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria. Assistants are most often women between age 30 and 40 who have their own children attending school. They receive 80 hours of training comprising lectures, observing elementary school classes, and discussing how to help children overcome learning difficulties.

Assistants have been recruited through personal contacts. To be accepted into training, they must present a written agreement from a school, which says that they will be able to work there after completing training. In many cases their salaries are paid by international donors. "The entire program works on enlightened goodwill," says David Murphy, an American who runs the program at the New School Foundation. "You need a school director who has genuine interest in the students, and teachers who do not feel threatened by having someone else in their class."

Assistants earn about $175 per month in the Czech Republic, half of a teacher's starting salary. "We insisted the assistants be paid and not work as volunteers," says Murphy. "We want gadzo children to be forced to look at a Romani person in a position of authority. That is something extremely rare in Eastern Europe."

For the third year in a row, the New School Foundation is holding a Romani language poetry and prose competition for school children in the Czech Republic. The contest, called "Romani Dream," is a way of celebrating the culture of the country's largest minority and helping to awaken a pride in themselves that has been pushed down for centuries. One of the past winners was 10-year-old Michal Husak for his poem, "The Romani Language"—

Each people have their own tongue
So they can speak and discuss
With their own words.
Listen, children, we do too.
When we have something to say,
We say it in our own words,
The same way our fathers
Spoke with their fathers.
Tell me, which language
Is better than ours?
I'll tell you—there is not one language.
There are no words
More beautiful than our own. □

THE SAT TRAP

Why Do We Make So Much of One 3-Hour Test?

BY CLIFFORD ADELMAN

IT WAS quite a year for a test that we have all known for decades as the SAT. From talk shows to op-ed pages to the covers of *Newsweek* and *The New Republic,* those three letters were too much with us in 1999. In public communication, the word "SAT" is now shorthand for all standardized testing. Irrespective of the nature, purposes, virtues, and limitations of the test itself, our use of the shorthand has created a symbolic monster. There are far more valid and productive metrics for judging educational attainment and potential.

As teachers already know, the SAT is a proven measure of general learned abilities. Student performance on the test is influenced as much by the nature of household dinner-table conversation as it is by formal school instruction. That is, the vocabulary of households with a high socioeconomic status is the vocabulary of the examination. Even though more than 70 percent of students entering four-year colleges take either the SAT or ACT exams, perhaps 200 (out of 1,800) four-year colleges place enough weight on those scores in admissions decisions to make a difference in students' lives.

The scores are not used at the 1,200 community colleges in this country nor in hundreds of other open-door postsecondary institutions. At most, SAT scores have influenced the fate of one out of six students in four-year colleges, and one out of 13 undergraduates altogether. To pay as much attention to SAT scores as we do seems like letting an awfully small tail wag a very big dog.

The justification for using SAT scores in admissions decisions is that they are a decent predictor of first-year college grades. True, but so what? That criterion has nothing to do with the principal goal of students at four-year colleges and their families: completing a bachelor's degree. Nor do state legislatures give a hoot about grades when they judge the performance of public universities: Performance means *graduation rates.*

No three-hour test on a Saturday morning is anywhere near as strong a predictor of college graduation as the academic intensity and quality of the four-year high school curriculum that a student has completed. And high school grades and class rank are even weaker predictors than standardized tests. In an analysis of long-term degree completion (by age 30) in the most recently completed national longitudinal study (1980-93) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, with statistical controls for all major background characteristics of students, I've found that curriculum beats everything.

Not only is curriculum the best predictor of a student's graduation from college, it's the only factor educators can do anything about. But people rarely talk about it. The symbol of the SAT has become so powerful that it blocks any other conversation. How did that happen?

In the mid 1980s, my own employer, the U.S. Department of Education, pumped up the SAT's status with something we called the Wall Chart, which displayed year-to-year changes in the mean SAT score, by state. Those judgments, along with other indicators, such as high school dropout rates, were presented in annual press conferences as a "national report card." Minnesota up three points, Arizona down two. The Wall Chart read like the stock tables, but it was far, far less faithful to the realities it purported to represent. Never mind the fallacy of using a test of general learned abilities to judge schools, let alone whole state

ILLUSTRATED BY MARTIN JARRIE

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MUARRIE

systems of public education. Anyone who knows a smidgen about test scores knows that you do not represent change by metrics such as "up three, down two."

Until its final appearance in 1990, the Wall Chart made for good showtime visuals and gave the public easy-to-digest news bites. The annual hoopla beat the SAT into the consciousness of readers and viewers as the sole indicator of student potential and school system performance.

In the early-to-mid-1980s, there also was a proliferation of commercial guides to American colleges and universities that played up the test scores of entering freshmen as a basic indicator of institutional quality. The annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings emerged in 1985, and are now awaited with the kind of anticipation usually reserved for the Oscars. At the core of the ranking system are—you got it—SAT scores (or ACT scores, where appropriate).

The colleges and universities report the scores of their entering freshmen to all the symbol-making handbooks, and their strategy is to look as good as their niche allows. As a former associate dean at a non-selective institution, I know that we played razzmatazz when we excluded our "special admits" (a euphemism for marginal students) from the SAT reporting pool, until our academic vice president worried that our scores were getting too high for our niche. SAT was image, even though, as a practical matter, many non-selective institutions did not use the scores for admissions.

With challenges to affirmative action, the symbolic status of the SAT has moved onto a very different stage. Wherever people have argued about race-based preferences in college and university or graduate- and professional-school admissions, a standardized test score has been at the center of the dispute. For example, in *Regents of the University of California* v. *Bakke* and *Hopwood* v. *State of Texas,* the white plaintiffs claimed that admittance of minority students with lower test scores than theirs had denied them a place in limited entering classes. The defendants (universities) argued that race could be a more important factor in admissions than test scores (which the universities nonetheless required).

While those two familiar legal decisions involved graduate professional schools and examinations such as the Law School Admissions Test, the media-consuming public does not discriminate either by test or by level of higher education. The public sees every standardized admissions test as essentially the SAT. The ironic consequence of that perception is that the mass of minority students continues to be hurt or demeaned.

For former Ivy League presidents William Bowen and Derek Bok, authors of a defense of affirmative action at highly selective institutions, *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions,* (Princeton University Press, 1998), the SAT is the dominant indicator of institutional quality. The authors spin their arguments for race-conscious admissions with constant reference to that icon. In their view, the haves in our society, are divided from the have-nots by virtue of the SAT scores of their college companions.

Push messages such as that across enough op-ed pages and through enough television cameras "into the air"—in the words of the French social critic Jacques Ellul—and one sees what Ellul describes as the formation of sociological propaganda: It has become our unconscious habit to judge individuals by the SAT company they keep. The message tells most students, and the mass of minority students among them, that they were turned into have-nots in the college admissions line at age 18. That message is neither wise nor kind.

Claude Steele, a psychologist at Stanford University, has done pioneering research on the damage done to minority students by the dominance of SAT consciousness. African-American students, in particular, have been repeatedly told by public propaganda that they are not expected to perform well on such tests. Steele has documented that, as a result, minority students freeze up when taking *any* high-stakes test. Excessive public SAT-talk, then, damages the life chances of minority students everywhere.

Recently, my own department's Office for Civil Rights issued *draft* guidelines that, if applied, might limit the use of SAT and other standardized-test scores in decisions about college admissions. The draft guidelines were an attempt to address the fact that, in my colleagues' words, minority students don't do as well as others on standardized tests and are disproportionately affected by colleges that overplay test scores in their admissions.

The message the public received from the ensuing controversy was illustrated at a roundtable discussion of policymakers at the 1999 convention of the Education Commission of the States, where one legislator moaned that "just at the moment when we are working even harder to close the SAT gap, minority students are being told that they don't have to take the test seriously." Although not an accurate interpretation of the intent of the guidelines, that's the kind of intimation that can result from keeping the SAT at the altar of public consciousness.

The latest public flurry over test scores concerns an SAT statistical simulation called "Strivers." Developed in a research project by Anthony Carnevale, a vice president of the Educational Testing Service (the developer and publisher of the SAT), the simulation takes the major background characteristics of a student (such as socioeconomic status, family income and structure, high school location, and, in one model, race) and, based on past performances of those with similar characteristics, predicts the student's SAT score. If the actual score is notably greater than the student's predicted score, an honorific Strivers label is attached. In other words, on the basis of a three-hour test on a Saturday morning, the student's stock jumps a dozen points in the hypothetical admissions line where the SAT is at the eye of judgment, and everybody feels good.

Of course, Strivers was only a simulation, but as Nicholas Lemann wrote in the *New York Times,* it generated "a major media feeding frenzy." Typical of the feeders in the pool was *The New Republic,* whose cover story trumpeted "The End of Meritocracy: a De-

bate on Affirmative Action, the S.A.T., and the Future of American Excellence," and whose interior pages pretended that "Strivers" was a real program rather than an interesting piece of research. Reflect on the collocation of words in that cover-story headline: Only one word refers to anything concrete—"S.A.T." The others are emotively loaded abstractions that glom onto the icon. Our nation, it is implied, will stand or fall on the SAT. Has it come to that?

It's time to stop talking about the SAT. All we have done with all this SAT jabber is to manipulate minority sensibilities, without doing anything substantive for the mass of minority students. Analysis of high-school and college transcripts of the generation that attended college between 1982 and 1993 tells us that getting one step beyond Algebra II in high-school mathematics doubled students' chances of completing a bachelor's degree. The same analysis tells us that 72 percent of African-American students who got beyond Algebra II, took Advanced Placement courses, and subsequently attended a four-year college or university earned bachelor's degrees. For Hispanic students, the percentage was 79 percent. No jiggling or juggling with SAT scores, class rank, or grades can accomplish those results.

Our principal tasks should be to provide minority students with curricular opportunities, to ensure that minority students are not "tracked" away from those opportunities, and to secure family and peer support for academic effort. Those tasks require real sweat, not feel-good simulations.

Just as important, the metrics of those tasks must become our principal propaganda, too. Imagine what would happen if the college rankings dropped the SAT as a criterion of institutional quality. Instead, what if they told us the percentages of entering students who had reached the pre-calculus level in high school, had taken three laboratory science courses, and had demonstrated competence in a language other than English? We might then be able to establish an alternative symbolism that would reflect what education is really about and what we hope to do for all students. ☐

(Continued from page 13)

standards-based reform, there is shockingly little research about institutional design and practice in high-performing school districts. The work does point to common themes, which I will treat in a moment. However, educators are fond of responding to any piece of research that demonstrates a promising approach with a host of reasons why "it"—whatever it is—would never work in their schools: Their students are different; their communities would not tolerate such practices; their union contract would never permit such actions; their teachers are too sophisticated (or unsophisticated) to accept such improvements, etc., etc., etc. Public education is, in the default mode, astonishingly, perversely, and ferociously parochial and particularistic; all significant problems are problems that can only be understood in the context of a particular school or community.[16]

The most effective response to this parochialism, which is a direct outgrowth of the isolation of teaching as a vocation, is to surround practitioners with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of examples of systems that have managed to design their institutional structures around large-scale improvement. We can get those examples by substantially increasing the research and documentation of high-performing systems with high proportions of low-income students. We can also use policy to stimulate demand for such knowledge by investing in inspection activities among high- and low-performing districts. The states with relatively high proportions of high-performing districts seem to be the ones that have invested in an infrastructure to capture, examine, and disseminate information about these successes.[17] Still, in the short term, the lack of knowledge about the practical issues connected with large-scale improvement is a big problem. However, it is possible to state a few principles.

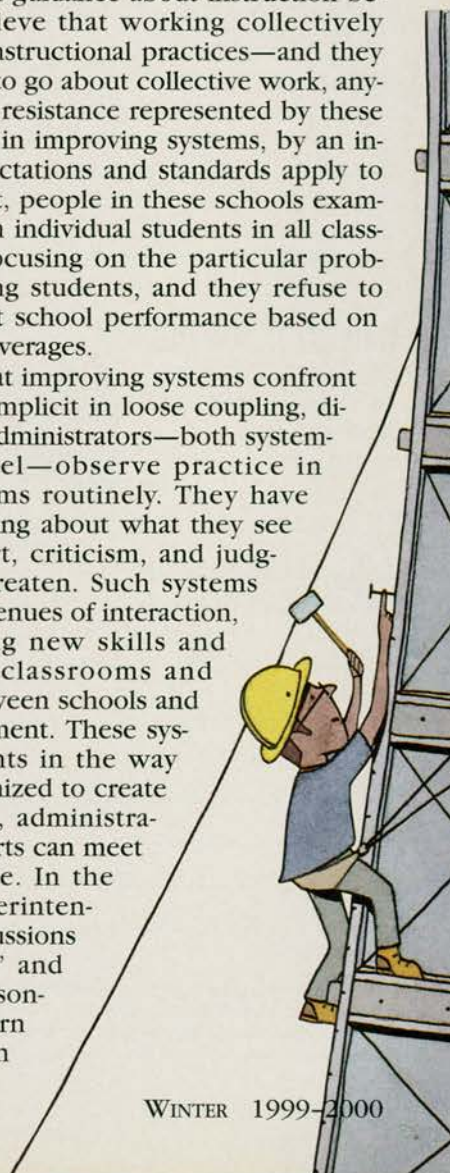
Improve Practice and All Else Follows

A major principle in large-scale improvement is getting people at all levels of the system focused on some aspect of instruction. Low-performing schools and systems generally start with literacy. They focus on that area until practice in most classrooms approaches a relatively high standard and performance begins to move decisively upward. This could take a number of years. Then, they add another instructional area—typically mathematics—which increases the level of complexity in practice and learning that is expected of teachers and principals. Focus also has to be accompanied by stability—in leadership, in the language that high-level administrators and board members use to describe the goals and purposes of the organization, and in monitoring the policies and structures that are supposed to bring about improvement. The principle of tight focus and stability in message should apply to everyone: Superintendents and board members should be just as subject to criticism for straying off-message as principals and teachers.

Another major design principle has to do with developing the accountability relationships in schools and school systems. People in improving systems seem to buy into standards-based accountability largely because leaders set examples of commitment and focus and use face-to-face relationships rather than bureaucratic controls. Basically, what they need to do is to unlearn the behaviors and values that accompany loose coupling, and learn the new behaviors and values associated with collective responsibility for teaching practice and student learning. People make these fundamental changes when they are frequently exposed to the new ways of thinking and acting, have a chance to argue these new ways into their own systems of belief, observe other people practicing them, and, most important, become successful at practicing them in the presence of others (are seen to be successful). Business-as-usual in schools is what sustains the current loose coupling. Unless new values and behaviors alter the way business is carried on, there will be no real change in the schools.

The early evidence also suggests that schools and systems with weak collective values and atomized organizations look for the easiest way of solving accountability problems within the knowledge they have.[18] Schools teach to the test, because they have no better ideas about how to improve content and pedagogy. They focus on students who are closest to meeting standards because they do not have any strategies for reaching the students who are harder to teach. They give vague and general guidance about instruction because they don't believe that working collectively would produce new instructional practices—and they would not know how to go about collective work, anyway. The path of least resistance represented by these responses is replaced, in improving systems, by an insistence that the expectations and standards apply to all students. As a result, people in these schools examine assessment data on individual students in all classrooms and schools, focusing on the particular problems of low-performing students, and they refuse to make judgments about school performance based on school- or grade-level averages.

It is also the case that improving systems confront the issue of isolation implicit in loose coupling, directly and explicitly. Administrators—both system-level and school-level—observe practice in schools and classrooms routinely. They have mastered ways of talking about what they see that allow for support, criticism, and judgment—but do not threaten. Such systems also create multiple avenues of interaction, focused on acquiring new skills and knowledge, among classrooms and schools as well as between schools and their broader environment. These systems make adjustments in the way the school day is organized to create times when teachers, administrators, and outside experts can meet to talk about practice. In the words of former superintendent Alvarado, all discussions are about "the work," and all non-classroom personnel are expected to learn and model in their own



Schools teach to the test because they have no better ideas about how to improve content and pedagogy.

interactions with others in the organization the practices they want to see in the classroom. A corollary of this principle is that if anyone's practice is subject to observation, analysis, and critique, then everyone's practice should be. Supervisors should be just as subject to evaluation as their supervisees. The principle of reciprocity applies to all accountability relationships.

It should go without saying that in systemwide improvement, schools don't get to choose whether they participate. Some systems have allowed schools to enter various phases of an improvement process at different times. Some systems allow schools to choose among various instructional approaches as the focus for improvement. But allowing schools to choose whether they participate is tantamount to returning to loose coupling, in which improvement occurs in small pockets and never influences the rest of the system. It is not coincidental, I think, that most of the current examples of improving districts occur in states that have relatively strong standards-based accountability systems in place. Local school systems in those states are discovering that they don't have the option of using volunteerism, because ultimately their performance as a system will be based on the performance of all classrooms and schools in the system.

As I said earlier, I offer these design principles based on my own work on large-scale improvement and my reading of the little research that exists on this subject. The main point here should be the urgency of learning more about these issues in many school districts, in many different settings, and in pushing hard for more concrete knowledge about how large-scale improvement processes work.

The Road Ahead

Standards-based reform poses problems of the deepest and most fundamental sort about how we think about the organization of schooling and the function of leaders in school systems and schools, as well as an opportunity to make necessary and fundamental changes. In the current reform period, the stakes are high for the future of public schooling and for the students who attend public schools. Change, as it has been conceived and carried out in the past, is not an option in responding to these problems. Large-scale, sustained, and continuous improvement is the path out of these problems. And this kind of improvement is what the existing institutional structure of public schooling is specifically designed not to do. Improvement requires fundamental changes in the way public schools and school systems are designed and in the ways they are led—changes in the values and norms that shape how teachers and principals think about the purposes of their work; changes in how we think about who leaders are, where they are, and what they do; and changes in the knowledge and skill requirements of those who work in schools. We are in an early and perilous stage of this process. It is not clear whether public schooling will actually respond to the challenge of large-scale improvement or will simply adapt the reform to the way schools currently do business.

The pathologies of the existing institutional structure are all being addressed in some school systems that are seriously at work on the problems of large-scale improvement. It's essential that other school systems, operating in an environment of increased attention to student performance and quality of instruction, discover that they need to learn, not just different ways of doing things, but very different ways of thinking about the purposes of their work, and the skills and knowledge that go with those purposes. □

Notes

[1] Elmore, R. F., C. H. Abelmann, et al., *The New Accountability in State Education Reform: Holding Schools Accountable,* H. Ladd, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1996.

[2] Tyack, D., and E. Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980,* New York: Basic Books, 1982, and Tyack, D., *The One Best System*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974.

[3] Weick, K. E., "Educational Organizations as Loosely-Coupled Systems," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21(1) (1976): 1-19.

[4] Bidwell, C., *The School as a Formal Organization. Handbook of Organizations,* J.G. March, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965, and Lortie, D., *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

[5] Cuban, L., *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms*, New York: Longman, 1984, and Cuban, L., "Reforming Again, Again, and Again," *Educational Researcher* 19(1) (1990): 3-13. *And* Elmore, R. F., "Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practice," *Harvard Educational Review* 66(1) (1996): 1-26.

[6] Cuban, L., *The Managerial Imperative and the Practice of Leadership in Schools,* Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988, and Murphy, J., "Principal Instructional Leadership," *Advances in Educational Administration 1* (Part B) (1990): 163-200.

[7] If Edison is successful in creating a national network of schools, it will also have the resources to bring about the large-scale changes I discuss here. Whether it will have the inclination to do so is open to question.

[8] For a more extensive treatment of the theoretical underpinnings of the idea of distributed leadership, see Spillane, J. P., R. Halverson, et al., *Distributed Leadership: Toward a Theory of School Leadership Practice*, Annual Meeting of the

American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada, 1999.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Elmore, R. F., *Accountability in Local School Districts: Learning To Do the Right Things. Improving Educational Performance: Local and Systemic Reforms*, P.W. Thurston and J. G. Ward, Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 5: 59-82, 1997.

[11] This discussion owes a great deal to Susan Rosenholtz, especially *Teachers' Workplace,* New York City: Longman, 1989.

[12] Murphy, J., and P. Hallinger, "Characteristics of Instructionally Effective School Districts," *Journal of Educational Research* 81(3) (1988): 175-181, and Murphy, J., P. Hallinger, et al., "The Administrative Control of Principals in Effective School Districts," *The Journal of Educational Administration* 25(2) (1987): 161-192.

[13] Knapp, M. S., P. M. Shields, et al., *The School and District Environment for Meaning-Oriented Instruction: Teaching for Meaning in High Poverty Classrooms*, M. Knapp, 1995.

[14] Floden, R., A. Porter, et al., "Instructional Leadership at the District Level: A Closer Look at Autonomy and Control," *Educational Administration Quarterly,* 24 (1988): 96-124.

[15] Elmore, R. F., and D. Burney. "Investing in Teacher Learning: Staff Development and Instructional Improvement in Community District Two, New York City," *National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and Consortium for Policy Research in Education*, 1997, and Elmore, R. F. and D. Burney, "School Variation and Systemic Instructional Improvement in Community School District Two, New York City," *University of Pittsburgh, Learning Research and Development Center, High Performance Learning Communities Project 1997,* and Elmore, R. and D. Burney, "Continuous Improvement in Community School District Two, New York City, *University of Pittsburgh, Learning Research and Development Center, High Performance Learning Communities Project 1998.*

[16] In my own attempts to explain my work in District Two to practitioners from other districts, I have heard what I think must be every possible explanation of why the District Two experience could not be useful in other settings: District Two is a small district, therefore its lessons don't transfer to large districts; actually, at 23,000 students, the district is larger than the average school district and about the same size as many districts with high proportions of low-income children. District Two has exceptional teachers (one of my favorites), therefore one can't expect "ordinary teachers" to do what teachers in District Two do. Actually, District Two has attracted exceptional teachers by being good at what it does. District Two must have a different union contract than the one in my district in order to get teachers to participate in so many professional development activities. Actually, District Two operates under the same union contract as all other community districts in New York City; it has developed exceptionally strong working relations with the union; and it has its share of union/management issues. District Two must spend an inordinate amount of time "teaching to the test" to get such high scores. In fact, teachers spend very little time preparing students to take standardized tests; the performance gains are mostly produced by high-quality instruction. After a while, one begins to think that the source of questions is not curiosity but its opposite.

[17] Grissmer, D., and A. Flanagan, "Exploring Rapid Achievement Gains in North Carolina and Texas," Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel, November 1998, and O'Day, J., M. Goertz, et al., "Building Capacity for Education Reform," Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, 1995.

[18] Abelmann, C., and R. F. Elmore, "When Accountability Knocks, Will Anyone Answer?" Consortium for Policy Research in Education Research Report RR-42, 1999.

(Continued from page 23)

and the butcher paper from a first-grade teacher, I posted a word wall. As we read through the novel, students posted words whose meaning they did not know. As I wanted to make this a lesson in building meaning from context clues, I asked students to indicate the page number in the text where the word could be found. From a single night's reading, they collected more than 20 words.

My goal was to encourage students to explore the range of Mary Shelley's vocabulary. They shared the words they found and tried to figure out what each word meant based on how it was used in the sentence as well as on what they knew about what was going on in the story at that moment. Quite often their guesses were on target. We turned to the *Oxford English Dictionary* only to verify our estimations. Doing this kind of word study together teaches students strategies for negotiating a passage full of unfamiliar words. Making connections between unfamiliar words and familiar words—for example, *mutability* with *mutant* and *prognosticate* with *prognosis*—also demonstrates to students that they know more than they think they know. It helps build their confidence as readers of difficult prose.

I also hoped that students would begin to see how the more words an author has at her disposal, the more subtle her prose can be. Was I teaching "basic skills"? I suppose so, but it never felt as though I had distorted Shelley's text as I did so.

Teaching about Reading Theory

Another method for working with challenging texts is to teach students about theories of reading. Most students have no idea that reading is a much-studied act and that entire schools of thought have grown out of this primary skill. In *You Gotta BE the Book*, Jeff Wilhelm describes research that he conducted in his middle school classroom. Wilhelm challenges teachers to consider:

> Why do some kids love reading? What is rewarding and engaging about reading for these students? What do these engaged readers "do" as they read that makes the experience fun, satisfying, and engaging for them?
>
> Why do other kids hate reading? What in their experience has contributed to their negative view?[2]

Pursuing answers to these questions, Wilhelm experimented with incorporating discussions about reading theory and literary conventions into his lessons. What he found was that as students became increasingly aware that they were actually going to have to "do" something to make a text comprehensible, their frustrations with reading decreased. Suddenly it wasn't that anything was wrong with them (or with the text) but that they simply weren't doing the things that good readers do when they read. As Umberto Eco explains, "Every text is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work."[3]

Without diminishing the importance of good early reading instruction or the difficulties children with disabilities face when reading, I would like to assert that

many "poor readers" are actually lazy readers. This is not a reflection on their character. It's simply that no one ever told these children that reading was going to be work. Even when students dutifully eyeball the assigned pages, few think the homework assignment has asked them for anything more. Students turn on their stereos, kick back on their beds, and expect the book to transfer information from its pages to their brains. While such a passive stance might work perfectly well for reading *Surfer* magazine, it is grossly inadequate for texts like *The Odyssey*.

An exchange between two of Wilhelm's students—one an engaged reader, the other a struggling reader—demonstrates how broad the chasm is between students who don't and students who do know what a text demands of a reader:

JOHN: I can't believe you do all that stuff when you read! I'm not doing...like nothing...compared to you.

RON: I can't believe you don't do something. If you don't, you're not reading, man.... It's gotta be like wrestling or watching a movie or playing a video game...you've got to like...be there![4]

Reading as a Creative Act

I want students to know that it is not enough simply to eyeball a page of print and expect the story to come alive or even make sense. A reader needs to act. Louise Rosenblatt explains:

> The benefits of literature can emerge only from creative activity on the part of the reader himself. He responds to the little black marks on the page, or to the sounds of the words in his head, and he "makes something of them." The verbal symbols enable him to draw on his past experiences with what the words point to in life and literature. The text presents these words in a new and unique pattern. Out of these he is enabled actually to mold a new experience, the literary work.[5]

The challenge for any literature teacher is to make these "creative activities" visible to students. Struggling readers often have no idea about the things that expert readers do inside their heads when they read. According to Rosenblatt, good readers conduct a transaction with the text. The reader creates meaning from the words on the page while the text causes the reader to reexamine what he or she knows. The text and the reader interact.

What is so powerful to me about Rosenblatt's work is how she situates the study of literature at the center of every child's life. It is not only the college-bound or future English teachers who need the nourishment that literature can provide, but all students.

Last, year I taught a class of extremely reluctant ninth-grade readers. In this small class of 20, there were seven special education students and five ESL students. The four girls in the class staked out their territory in the desks near the door. As I handed out copies of *Romeo and Juliet*, I told the class that this story was going to remind them a lot of people they know and situations they've experienced. We worked our way through the play—acting out scenes, discussing the characters, drawing parallels to teenage life as they knew it. In their journals, students wrote about arguments they had had with their parents and fights they had witnessed. We studied the formal elements of Shakespeare's play, but only as they functioned in the total literary experience. Feeling and connection had to come first.

Rosenblatt theorizes that literature is a form of personal experience and that as such it "has many potentialities that dynamic and informed teaching may sustain."[6] I interpret her discoveries as follows:

1. Literature fosters the imagination that any healthy democracy needs—the ability to understand the needs and hopes of others and the ability to see how our actions affect other people's lives.
2. Literature offers readers images of behavior and attitudes other than their own.
3. Literature teaches teenagers about the many possible ways of life and philosophies from which the reader is then free to choose.
4. Literature can help readers make sound choices through experiencing in the text the consequences of characters' actions.
5. Literature can assist readers to view their own personalities and problems objectively and so to handle them better.
6. Literature, through which teenagers meet a wide range of temperaments and value systems, may free them from fears, guilt, and insecurity engendered by too narrow a view of normality.
7. Literature can offer socially beneficial avenues for impulses that might otherwise find expression in antisocial behavior.

Many of the students in my ninth-grade class were adept at antisocial behavior. Getting them to sit still for more than 10 minutes and to participate in classroom discussion without putting one another down was a daily challenge. But as we made our way through *Romeo and Juliet*, I felt that what Rosenblatt describes was occurring before my eyes. As we talked and wrote about how the Montagues and Capulets as well as gangs on our campus behaved toward one another, students seemed to expand their sense of normalcy. Carlos, a bilingual student who has attended several different schools both in Los Angeles and in Puerto Rico over the course of his 14 years, compared the Prince's final speech with our school principal's rule that anyone involved in a fight will automatically be expelled. Here is the speech:

> Capulet, Montague,
> See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
> That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love!
> And I, for winking at your discords too,
> Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punish'd.
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act 5, scene 3)

And here is our dialogue:

CARLOS: I don't think the principal's rule is fair because if someone disrespects me I'm not going to let it go, but I guess she doesn't want to be caught "winking at" our fights.

ME: Why do you think that is?

CARLOS: Oh, she probably feels responsible when any-

body on campus gets hurt, which I don't agree with either but I think that's just the way she is.

DIANA [the most excitable and outspoken of the four girls in the class, also bilingual]: You know Lettie who was in this class the first week? She got kicked out for fighting and sent to Uni [University High School]. The principal didn't care who started it. She just expelled everybody.

CARLOS: I think she wanted to make an example for other kids. If the principal says "community" one more time, I think I am going to hit somebody.

ME: Don't, Carlos. You know it would break her heart to lose "a brace" of students.

The Importance of Close Reading

Careless interpretations of Rosenblatt's theory of reader response have led some teachers to abandon the practice of close reading. What is unfortunate about this loss is that student responses, however heartfelt, that are based upon casual or inaccurate readings often lead the reader into confusion rather than to understanding. Teachers need to take time in class to show students how to examine a text in minute detail, word by word, sentence by sentence. Anne E. Berthoff claims that the chief means of teaching critical reading and writing is to "offer students assisted invitations to look and look again at words, sentences, paragraphs."[7] Only then will they develop the skills they need to be powerful readers. The kind of close reading that Berthoff describes does not come naturally to teenagers. The challenge for the teacher is to help students refine how they examine a piece of literature without destroying their confidence as readers. I start with students' responses but then ask prodding questions—like these dealing with some difficult passages in *The Odyssey*—that encourage students to return to the text for answers:

- You say you hate the way Odysseus lies to everyone he meets when he returns to Ithaca (Book 19). Let's look at that scene with Penelope again. What is Odysseus trying to find out with his lies?
- The scene where Odysseus's dog dies of a broken heart upon seeing his master is one of my favorite scenes, too (Book 17). What does this moment tell you about Odysseus? Read those lines again. What does the state the dog is in tell you about the state of Odysseus's kingdom?
- It is indeed "gross" when all the unfaithful serving maids are hanged. Look at the epic simile Homer uses to describes this scene: "As when either thrushes with their long wings or doves/Rush into a net that has been set in a thicket/As they come in to roost, and a dreadful bed takes them in/So they held their heads in a row, and about the necks/Of all there were nooses, that they might die most piteously/ They struggled a little with their feet, but not very long" (Book 22). Why do you think Homer compares the serving women to birds?

Teachers need to go beyond encouraging responses from student readers and push them to understand exactly what the author has done with words and sentences, syntax, and diction that elicited such a response in them as readers.

As I reflect upon my own metamorphosis from nonjudgmental facilitator to a more assertive readers' guide, I think that what prompted my changes as much as Lisa Delpit's research was the realization that most student readers are nothing like me. When I was growing up I did little else but read. I read indiscriminately, helter-skelter, with no thought for improving my mind. I believed everyone and everything around me boring. Everything except for books.

When I became a teacher, I quickly realized that most students are unwilling, to do the amount of reading that I had taken for granted. I adjusted. But what took me much longer to figure out was just how much help students needed in order to be able to negotiate classic texts. I had come to these books with considerable reading experience. I didn't know how much I knew and had no names to put to the things I knew, but in a very deep way I understood how stories worked.

The students I teach, for the most part, have no such background. They have enormous experience and vast knowledge about a range of things that I was totally ignorant about at their age and about many aspects of life I continue to find baffling. I also assure you that every year I teach at least a half dozen avid, addicted readers. But apart from making sure that these students always have a book to read, they are not the ones who most need my help and expertise.

Most teenagers will read exactly as much as is demanded of them. My own 16-year-old son would think nothing of stopping on page 43 if that was where the homework assignment ended even if he knew that the mystery was solved, the gun went off, and the girl was saved on page 44. Discouraging? Yes. But as a teacher I need to learn to work with this.

Having a more realistic sense of my students' attitudes toward reading and their need for scaffolding when reading challenging texts has made me a better teacher. Does this make me a weakling for changing my mind about my methods? I don't think so. As long as I am a teacher, I intend to keep unlearning and learning anew what I thought before. It's my professional responsibility. It's also my passion. □

NOTES

[1] Delpit, L. *Other People's Children.* New York: The New Press, 1995.

[2] Wilhelm, J. D. *You Gotta BE the Book.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1997.

[3] Eco, U. *Six Walks in a Fictional Woods.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994.

[4] See note 2 above.

[5] Rosenblatt, L. *Literature As Exploration.* New York: The Modern Language Association, 1983.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Berthoff, A. E. "Reclaiming the Active Mind." *College English,* 61 (July 1999), no. 6: 671-680.

(Continued from page 29)

of minorities in honors.[23] Similar enrichment programs were noted in some of Oakes's detracked schools and in Gamoran and Weinstein's[24] Cibola High School, so one must wonder whether this enrichment, and not detracking, should be the focus of reform. Instead of "tracking as usual," such enrichment efforts can modify tracking in ways that help all students. These programs demand more time and effort from students and more resources from the school district, but they can have great benefits.

This is a study of a single department in a single school told from teachers' vantage point, and it does not present test scores or other outcomes. But it began without a preconceived opinion about detracking, and Progressive High was an unusually promising place for detracking to succeed. It clearly did not serve any students well. While some readers will probably dismiss these results as an aberration, I do not know any reason to believe they are. Rather, these results are a warning to reformers and researchers.

In the eyes of the social studies teachers at Progressive High School, detracking accomplished many transformations in a few short years. It transformed teaching from difficult to impossible. It transformed the ideal of equal instruction for all into practices offering less instruction for all. It transformed faster students from motivated allies to disengaged threats. And it transformed teachers from detracking enthusiasts into advocates for a return to tracking.

These results pose challenges for researchers and practitioners. While tracking often has bad outcomes, detracking is not necessarily better. Researchers who have played a role in criticizing tracking must also consider the potential problems of detracking. Until such studies are done, high school practitioners should be cautious about proceeding to detracking reforms just because they sound appealing. There is too much at stake, and there is great risk of unanticipated negative outcomes. These teachers' experiences indicate that good intentions and hard work are not enough to make detracking successful. □

NOTES

[1] Rosenbaum, J. E., *Making Inequality,* New York: Wiley, 1976. *See also* Alexander, K. and E.L. McDill, "Selection And Allocation Within Schools," *American Sociological Review* 6 (1976): 963-980; Cicourel, A. V. and J. Kitsuse, *The Educational Decision-Makers,* Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964; Heyns, Barbara, "Social Selection and Stratification Within Schools," *American Journal of Sociology* 81: 364-394.

[2] Oakes, J., *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

[3] Oakes, J., and A. S. Wells., *Beyond the Technicalities of School Reform,* Los Angeles: UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, 1996.

[4] Gamoran, A., and M. Weinstein, "Differentiation and Opportunity in Restructured Schools," *American Journal of Education* 106 (3) (May 1998): 385-416.

[5] See note 3 above.

[6] See note 3 above.

[7] See note 2 above.

[8] Teachers used various terms to distinguish among students ("high/low ability," "high/low achievement," "faster/slower"). Except when I quote from teachers' own words, I use the terms "faster" and "slower," which focus on teachers' observations of how quickly a student learns new material. Students may be "faster" because they have more ability or better previous preparation, because they prepare for class by reading ahead in the textbook, or for other reasons.

[9] Powell, A., E. Farrar, and D. Cohen, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.

[10] Braddock, J. H. II, and R. Slavin, "Why Ability Grouping Must End: Achieving Excellence in Equity in American Education," in H. Pool and J. Page, eds., *Beyond Tracking,* Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1995, and see note 2 above.

[11] Heyns, B., "Social Selection and Stratification Within Schools," *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (1974): 364-394, and Rosenbaum, J.E., "Track Misperceptions and Frustrated College Plans: An Analysis of the Effects of Tracks and Track Perceptions in the National Longitudinal Survey," *Sociology of Education,* April 1980, 74-88.

[12] Sizer, T. R., *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984.

[13] Waller, W., *The Sociology of Teaching,* New York: Wiley, 1965.

[14] Oakes, J., "Can Tracking Research Inform Practice? Technical, Normative, and Political Considerations," *Educational Researcher* 21 no.4 (1992): 12-22.

[15] See note 4 above.

[16] Grubb, W. N., *Working in the Middle,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

[17] We noted two departures. First, teachers were not given special instruction in how to teach detracked classes. Second, while detracking proponents urge that small group work be done in mixed-ability groups (of three to five students), the six teachers who initially tried mixed-ability groups stopped using this procedure. Some reported that fast students did all the work, and it wasn't clear that slow students learned anything. After a while, all eight teachers let students choose their groups, which tended to vary by achievement level. Detracking advocates will focus on these points to explain the failures, and they may be right. But altering these features will not address all the problems teachers noted. Moreover, it is not clear how to alter these features. The often-dismissed technical questions are fundamental: How can detracking be done and under what circumstances? Available models for instruction in detracked classes are mostly for elementary and middle schools (where skills are simpler and variation narrower), so they may not be appropriate for detracked high school classes. Nor have detracking advocates stated what conditions would prevent detracking from being effective. Does detracking work equally well in classes with high and low variation in student achievement? Should teachers do the same activities when achievement ranges across many grade levels (e.g., seventh- to 12th-grade achievement) and when all students are at the same level? These are the kinds of "technical" questions that some detracking advocates have tried to ignore, but they cannot be dismissed as mere technicalities.

[18] Farkas, G., Human Capital or Cultural Capital? Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine, 1996.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] It should be noted that it is not clear whether the best studies (the ones using randomized designs) are applicable to high schools, since they were done in elementary and middle schools.

[21] Hallinan, M.T., "Tracking: From Theory to Practice," *Sociology of Education,* April 1994: 79-91.

[22] Gamoran, A., "Alternative Uses of Ability Grouping in Secondary Schools: Can We Bring High-Quality Instruction to Low-Ability Classes?" *American Journal of Education* 102 (1993): 1-22.

[23] Rosenbaum, unpublished.

[24] See note 4 above.

LETTERS

(Continued from page 2)

forcement with basic skills. We need mathematics texts and professional development that combine both conceptual understanding and basic skills. To do otherwise is a disservice to our students, their parents, and the community.

—ANDREW S. COBLENTZ
DALY CITY, CALIFORNIA

Hung-Hsi Wu includes many inaccuracies and misconceptions of his own in his article discussing the debate over basic skills versus conceptual understanding in mathematics. His first error is made in the opening paragraph and is reflective of many people who are unfamiliar with the goals of the whole language movement. Phonics is not the opposite of whole language—it is a "subset" of whole language; that is, it is a sub-skill that one must have, in addition to many others, in order to understand a piece of written work. The "whole language" movement was never about eliminating phonics instruction; rather, it was meant to provide emerging readers with many cognitive tools beyond simple phonics in order to derive meaning from writing.

Mr. Wu's second inaccuracy concerns his shallow understanding of the work of Constance Kamii. Ms. Kamii does indeed advocate children inventing their own algorithms, but one of the facts Mr. Wu overlooks is that this is to stimulate children to discuss mathematics among themselves and then adopt those algorithms that they find most comprehensive and useable. As most parents know, children will remember and use things that they have personally chosen. It is highly unlikely that a class of 30 children will come up with 30 different algorithms for multi-column addition (and if they did, I would say their understanding of mathematics greatly surpasses mine!). Those of us who have used Ms. Kamii's methods know that children will find their own way to the most efficient algorithms and use it because they invented it together, not because a teacher told them to "do it my way."

—ROBERT M. BERKMAN
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