

# AMERICAN Educator

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS  
FALL 2000

## Children and Writing

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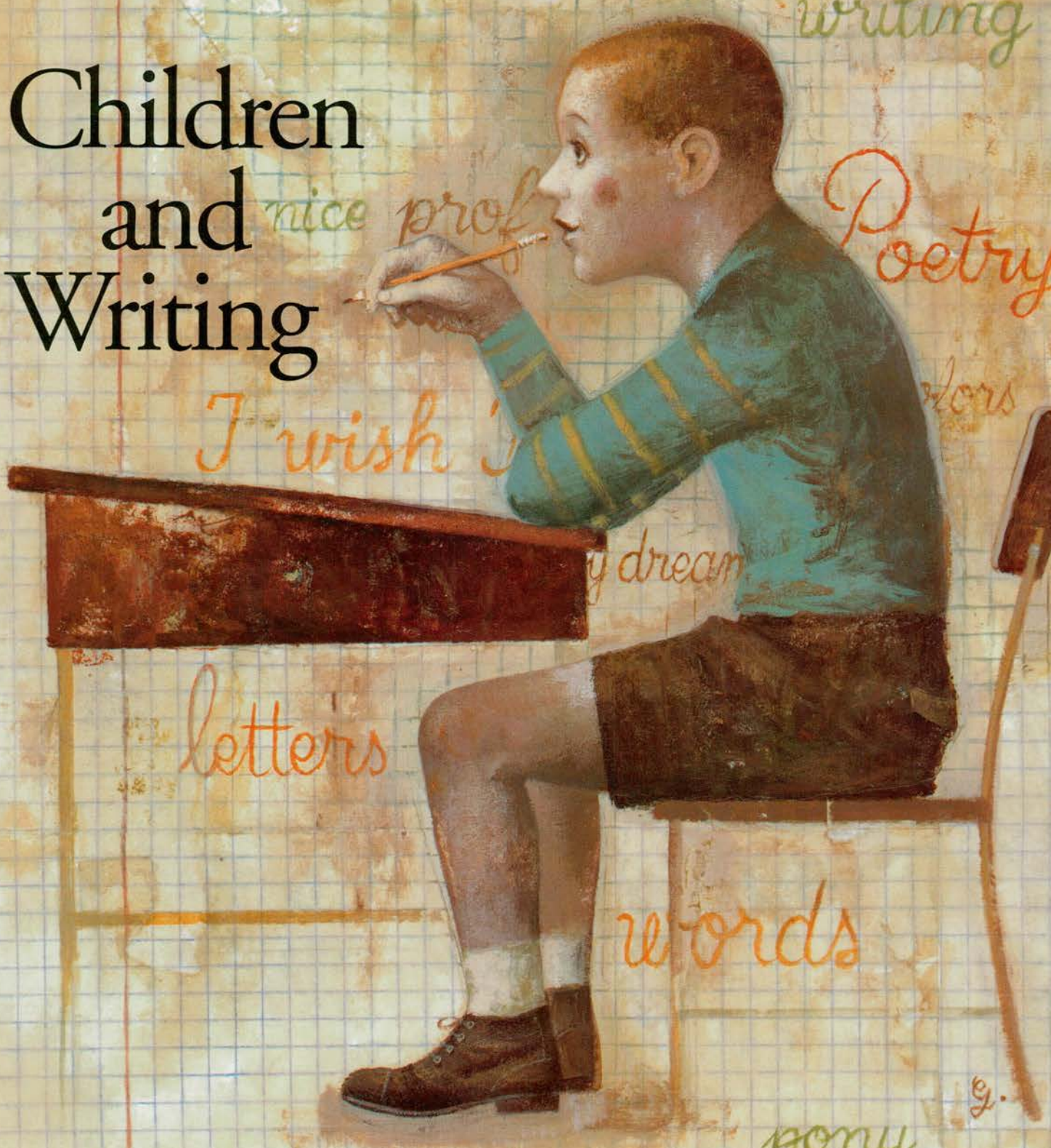
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**LOST IN ACTION**

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It is with heartfelt thanks and renewed hope for the restoration of scholarship in schools that I write this letter in response to the timely article "Lost in Action," by Gilbert T. Sewall, (Summer 2000, *American Educator*). To see in print the very statements that I have been making in all educational circles of which I am a part gave me solace to at least know that my very vocal attacks against abandoning rigorous learning in favor of entertaining reluctant learners were not the laments of a reactionary educator who cannot accept the contemporary ideas of the movement to put fun over hard work in schools. I, too, have witnessed a disenchantment in students with the shallowness of the project-oriented curriculum. The time spent on these projects is disproportionate to the amount, depth, and breadth of learning acquired in completing these superficial projects, which are often shared with the class in presentation form only to eat up weeks of more ill-spent time. Students are subjected to learning from peers whatever little knowledge they were able to glean from doing their projects in an endless parade of presentations. All this replaces the time that could be spent learning from the masters and reading books, yes, the maligned textbook where knowledge is organized and presented in vocabulary-enriching language causing students to use language to grow intellectually rather than reduce big knowledge into cute commercials, funny videos, or colorful posters filled with misspelled words. Unfortunately, this project-oriented approach to learning has invaded the teacher preparation colleges and universities that are promoting and using these methods of teaching as desired practice. I was subjected to this myself in my master's program in counseling, where in many classes the

entire courses were handed over to groups of students who "presented" in shallow, botched-up, boring, incomplete, lighthearted, entertaining ways the very complex counseling theories that serve as a basis for one of the most delicate processes there is: to help heal a human soul. I hated every minute of those presentations, resentful that I had spent time and a lot of money to learn from those who were no more knowledgeable than myself.... Sewall's article got to the root of the problem: Education has become fun and games, and the students are tired of it just as they tire of all games. The malaise we see in disengaged students has evolved from our failure to tap into what makes them human: the ability to learn and to derive joy from learning.

—MARY ANN SEMENTELLI  
WEBSTER, NEW YORK

Thank you so much for the article "Lost in Action." It was uplifting to finally read that traditional teaching methods are not necessarily ineffective. The push by administrators to force the experienced teachers to adopt and utilize group activities, cooperative learning, portfolios, etc., in our lessons in order to receive positive evaluations and even financial support, has left many of us doubting our value as educators. I have been teaching mathematics to high school students in New York for 26 years with excellent results. My methods are traditional, but I do like to try new ideas from time to time. However, I still believe in the value of being taught concepts in a concise manner, memorization of important facts and formulas, and using the 40 minutes of class time to share my knowledge and love of math with my students. I was not trained to "entertain," nor do I believe that students need to feel that their job in the classroom will always be "play time." The real world just isn't like that. I see many

(Continued on page 46)



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# STANDARDS ARE WORKING

## *But States and Districts Need To Make Some Mid-Course Corrections*

BY SANDRA FELDMAN

**A**FT IS DOING its part and more, and our locals are working very hard. But, my friends, it shouldn't have to be so hard. The fact is, too many of our political leaders and school officials are not doing their part. Too many of them have reneged on their end of the bargain in the standards movement: that they would support our teachers in undertaking the hard work of teaching to much higher standards—not deny them the tools they need or seek to deprive them of their dignity and rights; that they would support our students, especially our neediest children, in their efforts to reach much higher standards of achievement—not drag their heels on early childhood education or class-size reduction, or other help youngsters need.

They promised we'd get new curriculum aligned with new standards. Where is it? They said tests would be better and used more responsibly. In how many places is that true?

Of course, what worries us about these stumbles, unintended or otherwise, is the effect on teaching and learning. What worries us, too, is that they have provoked a backlash, especially among parents, that is understandable but also threatens everything

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*This is an excerpt of the keynote speech delivered by AFT President Sandra Feldman at the 76th convention of the American Federation of Teachers, July 3, 2000, in Philadelphia, Pa. The full text, with related documents, can be found on the AFT Web site, [www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org).*

that's right and working in the standards movement—a movement that parents, the public, and, not least of all, our members still strongly support.

It is time for elected officials and school officials—not just educators and their students—to be held accountable.

So, I'd like to lay out a few proposals for how they can go a big distance toward being accountable.

First, in the area of curriculum: We cannot continue to tolerate teachers' being left to fend for themselves with a list of state standards and without curricula, or any other materials, that are based on those new standards. State standards do not curricula make.

There is absolutely no other profession whose practitioners are denied their most basic tools and expected to invent them and try them out, all on their own, while simultaneously practicing their profession. It would be considered intolerable. It is equally intolerable for our teachers and grossly unfair to the children they serve.

How to get the job done?

While we know that the federal Department of Education is prohibited from developing curriculum, it is not prevented from inviting the states to enter into a national consortium that solicits proposals to develop, try out, and evaluate new curricula, including high-quality educational software.

I'm not talking about an effort to get one, so-called best curriculum, because one size won't fit all students. I'm talking about developing a variety of outstanding and effective curricula in each subject area, each of which is based on high standards.

This would be federalism in action. The federal



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We support testing,  
but there is way too much of it going on,  
at the risk of kids' not getting truly educated.

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government would contribute funds, but so too would the states. Plus, the states would have the added benefit of comparing their standards and following the example of the best. And by working together, they would have more resources, more intelligence, and more checks and balances than if any or each of them were to do it on their own.

Now, maybe there's a better idea for how to do this. But if there is, I challenge our public officials and school officials to come up with it, because our teachers and our students need this work to be done—and done well.

There's another important job this consortium can do: work together to straighten out the problems in testing.

Obviously, if we had curriculum, then the problem, in too many places, of tests becoming the curriculum would substantially disappear. No test, no matter how good—and all too many of them are not—can possibly capture the sum of education, let alone be a substitute for real education.

Yet, in too many places, that's what our officials are encouraging because they have lined up the incentives in all the wrong directions.

Let me be clear. I personally, and the AFT historically, support testing; it's a legitimate and necessary tool of diagnosis and evaluation. We also unequivocally support reporting out test results, fully and accurately, to parents and to the taxpayers who fund our public schools. And we support fair accountability for schools, for educators, for students—and for our officials.

But it is we and our students who are bearing the full and, sometimes, unfair brunt of accountability. It is therefore time for our officials to be accountable, too—and we'll be fair by just asking them to act responsibly.

So, let me add something to my proposal that federal and state officials form a consortium to spur curriculum development. Because curriculum and testing are related—I mean, should be related—I propose they use the occasion of such a partnership to sort out and fix the problems in testing.

I urge those officials to listen to the voices of parents and teachers. They are telling you, loud and clear, that they support testing but that there is way too much of it going on, at the risk of kids' not getting truly educated. They—not to mention the testing experts—are telling you that some tests do not reflect high standards and actually undermine high

standards teaching and learning. Look into this and correct any problems.

They are also asking you whether cut scores on some tests, challenging tests, have been set so high that they go beyond world-class standards into the world of the supernatural. Take these serious questions seriously. Look into them, and correct any problems you find.

I ask these officials to keep an open mind. Be open to other honest questions that have been raised about the misuse and abuse of testing, including, in some places, how it has become an instrument to punish students and teachers, rather than a guide to doing better, an incentive to work harder, and a basis for legitimate accountability.

But, do not back off from high standards, challenging and good tests, and legitimate accountability. Because, along with the problems, they have also done a lot of good—including showing us progress and which schools and which kids are struggling and spurring efforts to get them help.

Above all, I urge these officials not to succumb to extremes in the testing controversy. Because both those who just want us to stick with the status quo in testing and those who are basically anti-testing will place the standards movement, our public schools, and, most of all, our students—especially our neediest ones—at risk.

The need to address these curriculum and testing issues is urgent. I know that the delegates in this room and the people you represent understand the urgency very well. And I pledge that the AFT will work with parents and others who share our commitments and concerns to get our federal and state governments to act on these urgent needs.

I would like to make one more proposal. It is about how the standards movement can better reach secondary school students who are struggling. But since I'm on the subject of accountability, I would like to pause to say something about charter schools.

Now, we all remember what charter schools were *supposed* to be. They were supposed to be like laboratories that tried and tested innovative structures and strategies for educating students, which, if proven successful, would then be applied to other schools that could benefit. They also were supposed to be models of accountability and for treating teachers professionally. In fact, in the original vision, charter schools were going to be initiated by teachers and parents; and the original ones were.



Well, it was a good idea. And there are some good charter schools, including ones we've fostered and support.

But, in too many instances, that good idea has been anything but good in practice: little or no innovation or evaluation; little welcome of high-need students; a strategy for denying teachers voice and rights; and a travesty of accountability.

It is high time for our public officials to hold charter schools to the same standards of academic achievement and accountability that they are demanding from every public school. And that is what the AFT executive council resolution demands.

**F**inally, I'd like to raise something that doesn't get much attention and make a proposal for action.

I am worried, as many of you are, about those secondary school students who were not the beneficiaries of high standards during the earlier years of their schooling. I am specifically talking about students who are dropping out, or at risk of dropping out, because they feel they have little or no chance of meeting new, tougher high school graduation requirements. And I don't have to tell you what being a high school dropout means in today's economy.

My friends, the plain, painful truth is that most of these youngsters are still not benefiting from higher standards. In fact, they are being victimized. But let me be equally blunt: They would be just as victimized if standards were lowered for them.

Overcoming this problem requires understanding it. The problem is that the middle and secondary school students I'm talking about do not have the reading, math, and other basic skills they need. And you and I know that it is almost impossible to teach, and for students to master, high-standards, secondary-level courses when students don't have secondary-level skills.

Their teachers are in a terrible double bind. On the one hand, if they teach material at a lower level that reaches these young adults and from there try to move them up, they are criticized for not "believing" in their students and for being "resistant" to high standards. But if, on the other hand, they teach material at a higher level, they are criticized for failing to reach their students, thereby discouraging them and causing them to drop out. Of course, they also get slammed for being "resistant" to reform.

This double bind has terrible consequences for students. So, let me expose some other blunt facts. First, most secondary teachers don't know how to overcome these skills deficits in young adults, and it's for the most legitimate of reasons: They were never trained to do so; they never signed up for it in

the first place.

Second, the body of knowledge and practice for raising the basic skills of these youngsters, who are neither children nor adults, has never been pulled together and is still incomplete.

What we know for sure is this: If knowing how to get all young children to learn to read is "rocket science," which it is, knowing how to bring up the basic skills of these older kids to a point where they can achieve real, high-school level standards is "rocket science plus."

So, I first propose that the federal government stimulate an all-out effort to get programs that have already made some inroads into this problem up and running in middle and high schools where these kids are concentrated. The Talent Development Model and High Schools That Work are two examples of how to start making a difference now. And let's keep on evaluating these models and developing and testing new ones.

Second: I propose that we give these youngsters the time they need to catch up by guaranteeing them after-school and summer-school programs. And for those kids who may need even more help to meet the necessary standards to graduate, I propose a transitional-year program—either before they enter high school or during high school, as soon as they are identified. And I propose that such programs be staffed by teachers especially trained to accelerate the basic skills of young adults.

Third: I propose a federally sponsored effort, through the Department of Education or Labor—or, preferably, through their partnership—to pull together the knowledge and practices that exist in the adult literacy community and turn them into programs that can be applied and evaluated in our secondary schools.

Fourth: I also urge that educators in the military be centrally involved in this federal effort. Surprised? Here's why.

There have been three times, including and since World War II, when the military admitted young adults who failed the required aptitude tests for entry into service. Getting what was termed these "cast-off youth" up to the skill levels—including reading and math—necessary for them to perform was a challenge the military took on.

The results were spectacular—not only during their military service but when these people returned to civilian life. To quote from the evaluation of this experience: "Given an opportunity to prove themselves, and with support along the way, thousands of previously discarded youth...found a way to break the cycle of poverty that caught up their parents and themselves." (See article, page 8.)

My friends, there is a wealth of knowledge and experience—and results—in the military, and we need to tap into that. We need to do whatever it takes to rescue these kids. □



# SWORDS AND PENS

## *What the Military Can Show Us About Teaching Basic Skills to Young Adults*

BY THOMAS G. STICHT

WHEN WE think about military might, we usually summon up images of the technologies of war—tanks, ships, airplanes, guns, and bombs—and the men who employ them. We see soldiers crawling on their bellies, dodging bombs and bullets, to cross battlefields. We see battleships and aircraft carriers, fighter planes, and bombers. We see the heroes of these wars—the flag being raised at Iwo Jima, the stark, long darkness of the wall that makes up the Vietnam Memorial—and we remember the tens of millions of veterans who fought and the hundreds of thousands who died to protect our nation's heritage and future.

But we should also appreciate that military leaders have long understood that freedom and democracy are not guarded by armaments alone. When General George Washington ordered chaplains at Valley Forge to teach reading, writing, and computing to soldiers, he initiated a practice that our military services have continued to this day. Over the years, they have armed hundreds of thousands of men and women not just with guns and bullets but also with another and more powerful technology for preserving democracy and liberty—literacy. And this is not only an American idea, as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) makes clear in its recognition of "...the increasing number of nations

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*Thomas G. Sticht directed the R & D team that developed the military's functional literacy programs during the latter part of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the All Volunteer Force. He served as associate director of the National Institute of Education in the U. S. Department of Education and as a member of the National Commission on Working Women and the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills; and he has written and consulted widely on youth and adult literacy education. This article is an adaptation of one that appeared in The CORPS Report, a journal of the Youth Policy Institute, in 1997.*

making available their armed services for the promotion of literacy."

### **The Battle Against Illiteracy**

Today, the lessons of the military's fight against illiteracy need to be brought to bear on an internal threat to our nation's security. Recent surveys of adult literacy indicate that as many as one in five, some 40 million American adults, possess literacy skills that are so low they could not qualify for military service. According to economists Richard Murnane of Harvard and Frank Levy of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, workers need ninth-grade reading and mathematics skills in order to get and hold jobs in business and industry. Murnane and Levy also estimate that as many as half of recent high school seniors have not attained these basic skills. Although many people are aware of this problem, resources and programs to help semi-literate adults or students who reach high school without high-school level skills have been scarce.

Fortunately, the military's methods for fighting illiteracy have been adapted for civilian use. Called Functional Context Education (FCE), these methods have been tried and proven successful over the last decade by adult educators throughout the United States and in Great Britain, Canada, and Australia. As a result, Functional Context Education has been recommended as a strategy for teaching literacy skills to youth and adults by organizations including the American Society for Training and Development; the National Workplace Literacy Program of the U. S. Department of Education; the Work in America Institute; Wider Opportunities for Women of Washington, D.C.; and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS).

### **Origins of Functional Context Education**

In his history of the training of illiterates in World War II, Samuel Goldberg describes how the military ser-





vinces conducted extensive programs aimed at providing recruits with the reading skills they needed to do their jobs. Because time was very limited—usually less than three months for a new soldier—the instructional materials were pitched at the level children typically reached by the end of fourth grade. However, the materials did not have the breadth of content that a fourth-grader would encounter. Literacy programs taught reading by emphasizing a relatively narrow body of knowledge about the military, and they used reading books designed to build on a new recruit's prior experiences. For instance, the Private Pete series starts with Pete at home on the farm. Then Pete goes to a recruiter and signs up to join the Army. Then he rides a train to camp and is assigned to a barracks, etc. Because the vast majority of new recruits went through these steps when they joined the Army in the 1940s, this was content (prior knowledge) that the soldiers who were not readers could comprehend and talk about, even if they could not yet recognize words like "farm," "recruiter," "train," and "barracks" in the written lan-



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## Prospective cooks learned word recognition and comprehension skills by reading from cooks' materials.

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guage. Thus, getting them to recognize the familiar terms as words on a page was a relatively easy step.

Because of the severe time constraints, the programs were designed so the recruits would only have to learn what they did not know. For soldiers who already had some basic decoding skills and could recognize some words in print, study materials emphasized reading in order to give them practice in word recognition and help them develop the new vocabulary needed for military life. Soldiers who required more training in word recognition learned techniques for sounding-out and recognizing words in the written language, using vocabulary that was already familiar to them in the spoken language. These soldiers did not have to learn decoding skills and a new vocabulary at the same time. They practiced word recognition during reading instruction using familiar vocabulary, and they learned new vocabulary and concepts through discussions and "hands-on" training.

### The Vietnam War Era

During the war in Southeast Asia, the U. S. Army recruited more highly literate personnel than it had in World War II, but the new soldiers also needed higher levels of literacy because of the increased technological complexity of warfare. To help recruits whose literacy fell below the required level, Army literacy specialists developed programs that continued the practice of focusing on a narrow body of functional content. However, the new programs used materials about specific jobs rather than general military life. For example, recruits about to become cooks learned word recognition and comprehension skills by reading from cooks' materials that included recipes; illustrations of equipment such as large, automatic dishwashing machines; and instructions for setting up a field kitchen as well as rules and regulations for establishing, operating, and maintaining a cafeteria-type food (mess) hall. Soldiers who were going to be automobile mechanics read mechanics' materials; and those becoming medics read medics' materials.

Because most of the new recruits in the military's literacy programs of the late 1960s and 1970s were not beginning readers—generally their skills were at the fourth- to sixth-grade level—emphasis was on reading for comprehension and thinking. For instance, soldiers read passages about first-aid procedures and were taught to draw pictures about what they read. Because drawing is a way of representing information that people acquire before they learn to write, drawing pictures allowed semi-literate students to express the extent of their comprehension of what they read better than writing. Students also learned to make flow charts of the first-aid procedures (see figure, page 43), and they made classification tables using information culled from passages of connected prose in order to compare and contrast various types of materials,

equipment, or methods. For example, if they were reading about various communication techniques, making classification tables might help them think more clearly about the differences between hand and arm signals, messengers, telephones, and radios. Transforming information from text into a picture, a flow chart, or a table encouraged students to think about what they read and fix it more firmly in their minds than would have been possible had they simply read the material; the technique thus improved long-term recall.

When researchers compared the new, job-related, functional literacy programs of the Vietnam era to general literacy programs the Army already had in place, they found the job-related programs to be much more effective. General literacy programs, which allowed six weeks of full-time study, made only small improvements in soldiers' ability to read and comprehend their job-related materials. On the other hand, the job-related literacy programs made four to five times as much improvement in job-related reading as the general literacy programs and as much or more improvement in overall reading skills. In addition, the troops in the job-related programs felt they were getting job training, not "remedial" training, with all the stigma attached to that concept.

### Applications to Teaching and Learning for Civilians

The military work has applications to teaching and learning in adult literacy education as well as for youth in the K-12 school system. Most adults do not want to attend literacy programs labeled as "remedial" any more than military personnel wanted to. Adults generally want to learn to read better in order to pursue some goal, such as getting a job or getting into a job training program. Certainly, this is true for the millions of adults who wish to get off welfare and find a good, well-paying job.

The military research and experience indicate that reading can be taught in the context of job training—as well as other contexts such as parenting or religious study—right from the beginning. Adults who want job training to qualify for a better job and who are beginning readers can learn and practice decoding skills during part of the study period. During the rest of the period, they can learn job-vocabulary and concepts through audiotapes, working with job tools, demonstrations, conversations, illustrated books, and so forth. Adults who have difficulty using phonics in decoding may need training in phonemic awareness, so they can hear the different sounds in the oral language, before they proceed with using phonics. Those who have fair decoding skills can develop their word recognition and comprehension skills by reading job-related materials. They can improve their analytical

*(Continued on page 43)*



# AT PLAY WITH WORDS

*Kenneth Koch's book about his first experience teaching children to write poetry, Wishes, Lies, and Dreams, appeared in 1970. Over the years, his account of how he helped the children in P.S. 61 discover the excitement of making poetry—and discovered, to his surprise, how well they could do it—has given pleasure to many readers and courage to teachers who wanted to open up the pleasures of poetry writing to their own students. The children in P.S. 61, whose poems appear in this excerpt from the introductory chapter of Koch's book, are now in their forties, but their poems and Koch's description of the lessons that inspired them are as fresh and useful as they were 30 years ago.*

—EDITOR

BY KENNETH KOCH

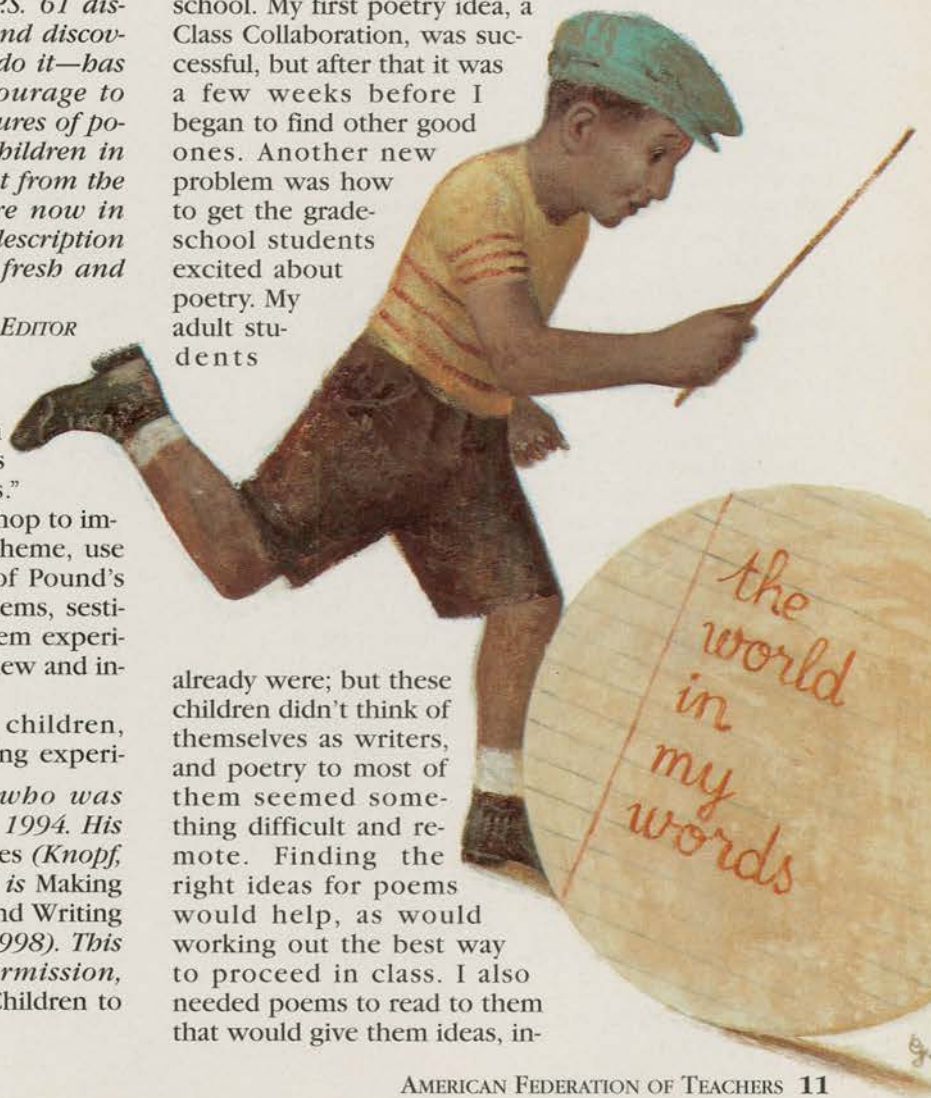
MY ADULT writing courses relied on what I somewhat humorously (for its grade-school sound) called “assignments.” Every week I asked the writers in the workshop to imitate a particular poet, write on a certain theme, use certain forms and techniques: imitations of Pound’s *Cantos*, poems based on dreams, prose poems, sestinas, translations. The object was to give them experiences which would teach them something new and indicate new possibilities for their writing.

I thought this would also work with children, though because of their age, lack of writing experi-

*Kenneth Koch is a poet and teacher who was awarded the Bollingen Prize for poetry in 1994. His most recent book of poetry is New Addresses (Knopf, 2000). His most recent book about poetry is Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry (Simon and Schuster/Touchstone, 1998). This essay is excerpted, with the author's permission, from Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry (Harper Perennial, 1999).*

ence, and different motivation, I would have to find other assignments. I would also have to go easy on the word “assignment,” which wasn’t funny in grade school. My first poetry idea, a Class Collaboration, was successful, but after that it was a few weeks before I began to find other good ones. Another new problem was how to get the grade-school students excited about poetry. My adult students

already were; but these children didn’t think of themselves as writers, and poetry to most of them seemed something difficult and remote. Finding the right ideas for poems would help, as would working out the best way to proceed in class. I also needed poems to read to them that would give them ideas, in-





spire them, make them want to write.

I know all this now, but I sensed it only vaguely the first time I found myself facing a class. It was a mixed group of fifth- and sixth-graders. I was afraid that nothing would happen. I felt the main thing I had to do was to get them started writing, writing anything, in a way that would be pleasant and exciting for them. Once that happened, I thought, other good things might follow.

I asked the class to write a poem together, everybody contributing one line. The way I conceived of the poem, it was easy to write, had rules like a game, and included the pleasures without the anxieties of competitiveness. No one had to worry about failing to write a good poem because everyone was writing only one line; and I specifically asked the children not to put their names on their line. Everyone was to write the line on a sheet of paper and turn it in; then I would read them all as a poem. I suggested we make some rules about what should be in every line; this would help give the final poem unity, and it would help the children find something to say. I gave an example, putting a color in every line, then asked them for others. We ended up with the regulations that every line should contain a color, a comic-strip character, and a city or country; also the line should begin with the words "I wish."

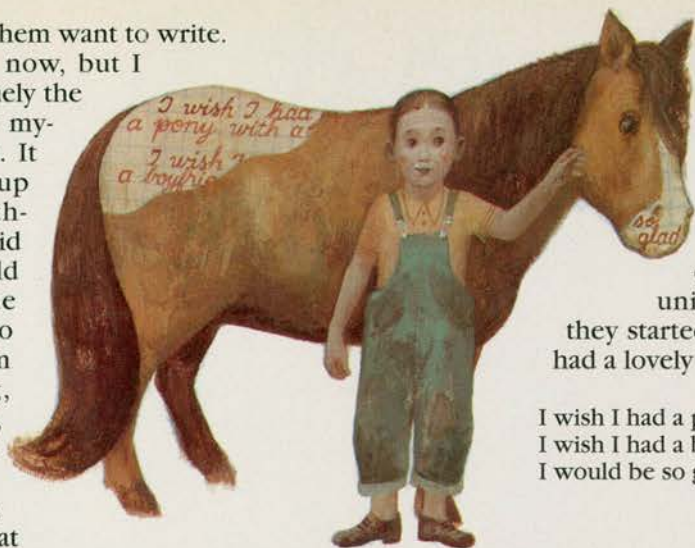
I collected the lines, shuffled them, and read them aloud as one poem. Some lines obeyed the rules and some didn't; but enough were funny and imaginative to make the whole experience a good one—

I wish I was Dick Tracy in a black suit in England  
I wish that I were a Supergirl with a red cape; the city  
of Mexico will be where I live.  
I wish that I were Veronica in South America. I wish  
that I could see the blue sky...

The children were enormously excited by writing the lines and even more by hearing them read as a poem. They were talking, waving, blushing, laughing, and bouncing up and down. "Feelings at P.S. 61," the title they chose, was not a great poem, but it made them feel like poets and it made them want to write more.

I had trouble finding my next good assignment. Fortunately for me, Mrs. Wiener, the fourth-grade teacher, asked me to suggest some poetry ideas for her to give her class. Remembering the success of the Collaborations, I suggested she try a poem in which every line began with "I wish." I asked her to tell the children that their wishes could be real or crazy, and not to use rhyme.

A few days later she brought me their poems, and I



was very happy. The poems were beautiful, imaginative, lyrical, funny, touching. They brought in feelings I hadn't seen in the children's poetry before. They reminded me of my own childhood and of how much I had forgotten about it. They were all innocence, elation, and intelligence. They were unified poems: It made sense where they started and where they stopped. And they had a lovely music—

I wish I had a pony with a tail like hair  
I wish I had a boyfriend with blue eyes and black hair  
I would be so glad...

*Milagros, grade 4*

Sometimes I wish I had my own kitten  
Sometimes I wish I owned a puppy  
Sometimes I wish we had a color TV.  
Sometimes I wish for a room of my own.  
And I wish all my sisters would disappear.  
And I wish we didn't have to go to school.  
And I wish my little sister would find her nightgown.  
And I wish even if she didn't she wouldn't wear mine.

*Erin, grade 4*

It seemed I had stumbled onto a marvelous idea for children's poems. I realized its qualities as I read over their work. I don't mean to say the idea wrote the poems: The children did. The idea helped them to find that they could do it, by giving them a form that would give their poem unity and that was easy and natural for them to use: beginning every line with "I wish." With such a form, they could relax after every line and always be starting up afresh. They could also play variations on it, as Erin does in her change from "Sometimes" to "And." Just as important, it gave them something to write about that really interested them: the private world of their wishes. One of the main problems children have as writers is not knowing what to write about. Once they have a subject they like, but may have temporarily forgotten about, like wishing, they find a great deal to say. The subject was good, too, because it encouraged them to be imaginative and free. There are no limits to what one can wish: to fly, to be smothered in diamonds, to burn down the school. And wishes, moreover, are a part of what poetry is always about.

I mentioned that I had told Mrs. Wiener to ask the children not to use rhyme. I said that to all my classes as soon as I had them start writing. Rhyme is wonderful, but children generally aren't able to use it skillfully enough to make good poetry. It gets in their way. The effort of finding rhymes stops the free flow of their feelings and associations, and poetry gives way to sing-song. There are formal devices that are more natural to children, more inspiring, easier to use. The one I suggested most frequently was some kind of repetition: the same word or words ("I wish") or the same kind of thing (a comparison) in every line.

Once I understood why the Wish Poem worked so well, I had a much clearer idea of what to look for. A poetry idea should be easy to understand, it should be



immediately interesting, and it should bring something new into the children's poems. This could be new subject matter, new sense awareness, new experience of language or poetic form. I looked for other techniques or themes that were, like wishes, a natural and customary part of poetry. I thought of comparisons and then of sounds, and I had the children write a poem about each. As in the Wish Poems, I suggested a repetitive form to help give their poems unity: putting a comparison or a sound in every line. Devoting whole poems to comparisons and sounds gave the children a chance to try out all kinds, and to be as free and as extravagant as they liked. There was no theme or argument with which the sounds or comparisons had to be in accord: They could be experimented with for the pleasures they gave in themselves. In teaching painting an equivalent might be having children paint pictures that were only contrasting stripes or gobs of color.

In presenting these poetry ideas to the children I encouraged them to take chances. I said people were aware of many resemblances which were beautiful and interesting but which they didn't talk about because they seemed too far-fetched and too silly. But I asked them specifically to look for strange comparisons—if the grass seemed to them like an Easter egg they should say so. I suggested they compare something big to something small, something in school to something out of school, something unreal to something real, something human to something not human. I wanted to rouse them out of the timidity I felt they had about being "crazy" or "silly" in front of an adult in school. There is little danger of children's writing merely nonsensical poems if one does this; the truth they find in freely associating is a greater pleasure to them—

A breeze is like the sky is  
coming to you...  
*Iris, grade 4*

The sea is like a blue  
velvet coat...  
*Argentina, grade 4*

The flag is as red, white,  
and blue as the sun's  
reflection...  
*Marion, grade 3*

Children often need help in starting to feel free and imaginative about a particular theme. I asked my fourth-graders to look at the sky (it was overcast) and to tell me what thing in the school-room it most resembled. Someone's dress, the geography book—but best of all was the blackboard which, covered with erased chalk smear, did look very much like it. Such



question games make for an excited atmosphere and start the children thinking like poets. For the Noise Poem I used another kind of classroom example. I made some noises and asked the children what they sounded like. I crumpled up a piece of paper. "It sounds like paper." "Rain on the roof." "Somebody typing." I hit the chair with a ruler and asked what word that was like. Someone said "hit." What else? "Tap." I said close your eyes and listen again and tell me which of those two words it sounds more like, hit or tap. "It sounds more like tap." I asked them to close their eyes again and listen for words it sounded like which had nothing to do with tap. "Hat, snap, trap, glad, badger." With the primary graders I asked, How does a bee go? "Buzz." What sounds like a bee but doesn't mean anything like buzz? "Fuzz, does, buzzard, cousin." The children were quick to get these answers and quick to be swept up into associating words and sounds—

A clink is like a drink of pink water...  
*Alan, grade 5*

A yo-yo sounds like a bearing rubbing in a machine...  
*Roberto, grade 6*

Before they had experimented with the medium of poetry in this way, what the children wrote tended to be a little narrow and limited in its means—but not afterwards. Their writing quickly became richer and more colorful.

After the Comparison Poem and the Noise Poem, I asked my students to write a Dream Poem. I wanted them to get the feeling of including the unconscious parts of their experience in their poetry. I emphasized that dreams didn't usually make sense, so their poems needn't either. Wishes and dreams are easy to doctor up so they conform to rational adult expectations, but then all their poetry is gone.

Their Dream Poems contained a surprising number of noises, and also comparisons and wishes—

I had a dream of a speeding car going  
beep beep while a train went choo choo...  
*Ruben, grade 4*

I dream I'm standing on the floor and  
diamonds snow on me.  
I dream I know all the Bob Dylan songs  
my brother knows...  
*Annie, grade 4*

My students, it was clear, weren't forgetting things from one poem to the next; they had been able to write more-vidid poems about their dreams because of the other poems they had recently written. To encourage them in combining what they knew, I next asked them to write a poem deliberately using wishes, noises, comparisons, and dreams all together. A poetry theme that all my classes were ready



for at this point was the contrast between the present and the past. To give their poems form and to help them get ideas, I suggested that they begin every odd line with I Used To and every even line with But Now—

I used to be a baby saying Coo Coo  
But now I say "Hello"...

*Lisa, grade 3*

I used to have a teacher of meanness  
But now I have a teacher of roses...

*Maria, grade 3*

Some of the content brought into their poetry by this theme surprised me. Among the primary and third-graders metempsychosis was almost as frequent a theme as the conventionally observed past—

I used to be a fish  
But now I am a nurse...

*Andrea, grade 1*

I used to be a rose but now I'm a leaf  
I used to be a boy but now I'm a woman  
I used to have a baby but now he's a dog...

*Mercedes, grade 3*

I used to be a design but now I'm a tree...

*Ilona, grade 3*

I had forgotten that whole strange childhood experience of changing physically so much all the time. It came very naturally into the children's poems once I found a way of making it easy for them to write about change—that is, by suggesting the pattern I Used To/But Now.

These poetry ideas, and others that worked out well at P.S. 61, had some things in common. Each gave the children something that they enjoyed writing about and that enabled them to be free and easy and creative. Each also presented them with something new, and thus helped them to have, while they were writing, that feeling of discovery which makes creating works of art so exhilarating. The success of these particular assignments, as well as of some I gave later, was due partly to their substance and partly, I think, to the accident of my finding an effective way to present them. A child's imagination can be reached in many ways. Some ideas that didn't turn out so well, such as a poem about mathematics, would doubtless have worked better if I had been able to find a way to make them suggestive and exciting. In these first poems, in any case, I thought the children had come to like poetry, and had become familiar with some of the basic themes and techniques that make it so enjoyable to write.

The repetition form, which I often suggested they use, turned out to have many advantages. Repetition is natural to children's speech, and it gave them an easy-

to-understand way of dividing their poems into lines. By using it they were able to give strong and interesting forms to their poems without ever sounding strained or sing-song, as they probably would have using rhyme. And it left their poetry free for the kind of easy and spontaneous music so much appreciated by contemporary poets, which rhyme and meter would have made impossible—

I wish planes had motors that  
went rum bang zingo and  
would be streaming green as  
the sea...

*Argentina, grade 4*

One of the saddest things are  
colors because colors are sad  
and roses are sad  
two lips are sad and  
having dates is sad too but  
the saddest color I know is  
orange because it is so  
bright that it makes you  
cry...

*Mayra, grade 3*

Children can be fine musicians when the barriers of meter and rhyme aren't put in their way.

Another strategy I'd used more or less instinctively, encouraging the children to be free and even "crazy" in what they wrote, also had especially good results. They wrote freely and crazily and they liked what they were doing because they were writing beautiful and vivid things. The trouble with a child's not being "crazy" is that he will instead be conventional; and it is a truth of poetry that a conventional image, for example, is not, as far as its effect is concerned, an image

at all. When I read "red as a rose," I don't see either red or a rose; actually such a comparison should make me see both vividly and make me see something else as well, some magical conjunction of red and rose. It's another story when I read "orange as a rose" or even "yellow as a rose"—I see the flower and the color and something beyond. It is the same when one writes as when one reads: Creating in himself the yellow and the rose and the yellow rose naturally gives a child more pleasure and experience than





repeating a few words he has already heard used together. As I hope I've made clear, the best way to help children write freely is by encouragement, by examples, and by various other inspiring means. It can't be done by fiat, that is, by merely telling them to be "imaginative and free."

My first December visit to the school was during a snowstorm, and I thought there would be considerable sentiment for a snow poem. To help the children avoid wintry Christmas-card clichés I proposed that instead of writing about the snow they write as if they were the snow, or rather the snowflakes, falling through the air. I said they could fall anywhere they liked and could hurt and freeze people as well as make them happy. This made them quite excited. Children are so active and so volatile that pretending to be something can be easier for them than describing it—

If I were the snow I would fall on the ground so the children could pick me up and throw me into the air...  
*Ana, grade 6*

We would cover the sun with clouds so it could not melt us...  
*Carmine, grade 6*

A Lie Poem worked out very well. I asked the children to say something in every line which wasn't true, or to simply make the whole poem something not true. I know "lie" is a strong word; I used it partly for its shock value and partly because it's a word children use themselves. "Fantasy" is an adult word and "make-believe" has fairytale and gingerbread associations that I wanted to avoid. The Lie Poem, like the Wish and Dream Poems, is about how things might be but really aren't—though, as in Jeff Morley's "The Dawn of Me," it can lead to surprising truths.

Color Poems—using a different color in every line, or the same color in every line—were a great hit. The children had been using colors in their poems all along and they liked devoting whole poems to them—

Yellow, yellow, yellow. The sky is yellow. The streets are yellow. It must be a yellow day...  
*Elizabeth, grade 5*

I also had the children write poems while listening to music. The school had a phonograph on which I played for my different classes records by de Falla, Ravel, Mozart, and Stravinsky, while they wrote images and lines which the music suggested to them. The immediacy of the music, like that of the snowstorm earlier, was inspiring—

This whole world appears before me.  
I wish to soar like a bird in the yellow-green sky...  
*Ruben, grade 6*

I was looking at the sun and I saw a lady dancing and I saw myself and I kept looking at the sun then it was getting to be nighttime then the moon was coming up and I kept looking at it it was so beautiful...  
*Reana, grade 4*

A poetry idea which, like I Used To/But Now,

brought a new part of their experience into the children's poetry, was one about the difference between how they seemed to other people and how they felt they really were. I suggested a two-line repeating form, as in the Used To poem: I Seem To Be/But Really I Am. The sixth-graders were particularly affected by this theme, being at an age when private consciousness and social image are sometimes seriously different. For one thing, there are hidden sexual and romantic feelings which one doesn't confess—

I seem to be shy when she passes by but inside of me  
have a wonderful feeling—  
As we went for a walk in the park I felt a wet kiss hit  
my dry skin.

*Robert, grade 6*

Other contrasting themes I thought of but haven't yet tried are I Used To Think/But Now I See (or Know); I Wish/But Really; I Would Like/But I Would Not Like.

I asked my students to write poems using Spanish words, which delighted the Spanish-speaking children and gave the others an experience of the color and texture of words in another language. I chose Spanish because so many children at P.S. 61 speak it, and I wanted them to be able to enjoy their knowledge of it. There is such emphasis in the schools on teaching Spanish-speaking children correct English that the beauties and pleasures of the Spanish language are usually completely forgotten. I chose 20 Spanish words in advance, wrote them on the board, and asked the children to include most of them in their poems. This worked out best in the fifth-grade class, where I asked the students to invent a new holiday (it was near Christmas) and to use the Spanish words in describing its main features—

On my planeta named Carambona La Paloma  
We have a fiesta called Luna Estrella ...  
We do a baile named Mar of Nieve ...  
*Marion, grade 5*

... the estrellas are many colors  
And the grass is verde.  
*Esther, grade 5*

The children were not limited to the words I wrote on the board; I told them they could write their whole poem in Spanish, and some did.

The educational advantages of a creative intellectual and emotional activity that children enjoy are clear. Writing poetry makes children feel happy, capable, and creative. It makes them feel more open to understanding and appreciating what others have written (literature). It even makes them want to know how to spell and say things correctly (grammar). Once my students were excited about words, they were dying to know how to spell them. Learning becomes part of an activity they enjoy—when the fifth-graders were writing their Poems Using Spanish Words they were eager to know more words than I had written on the board; one girl left the room to borrow a dictionary. Of all these advantages, the main one is how writing poetry makes children feel: creative, original, responsive yet in command. □



# PROMPTING KIDS TO WRITE

BY TRACI JOHNSON MATHENA

*Crunch. Crinkle. Swoosh. Off the rim and on the floor:*

"I messed up," says my student, looking at the paper ball near the wastebasket. "How am I supposed to start this thing, anyway?"

On numerous occasions, I've waded through the piles of balled-up theme paper and considered the plight of my student writers.

I know they have ideas because I've read their imaginative musings in notes I've confiscated. I know they can tell a story because I've listened to their lunchroom conversations, filled with detail and description. I know they can get their point across because I've mediated their arguments.

They communicate in those ways without self-consciousness.

So how do I get them to stop worrying *about* writing and just start *writing*?

Have you, too, pondered this as you absentmindedly toed a paper ball toward a wastebasket?

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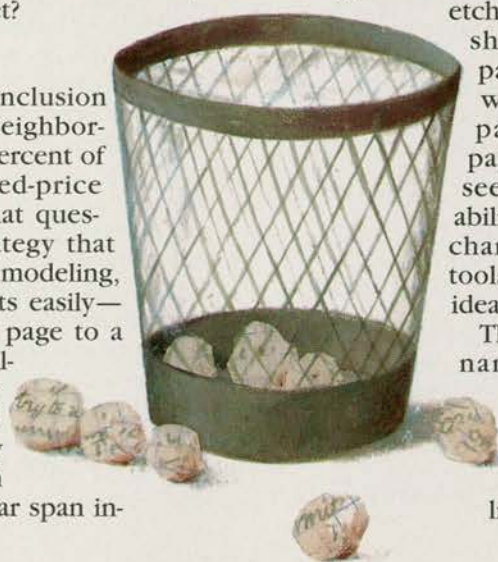
At Canton Middle School, a full-inclusion school located in a working-class neighborhood in Baltimore, where nearly 90 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch, we've found an answer to that question. It comes in the form of a strategy that uses a predictable formula, full-class modeling, and guided practice to move students easily—and with confidence—from a blank page to a decent, workable piece of writing. Although it started out as a way to get our students to pass the Maryland Writing Test (which definitely worked, as our 20-percent increase in pass-rate during the program's five-year span in-

dicates), we also ended up with a dependable way to take the anxiety out of writing for our nervous novices.

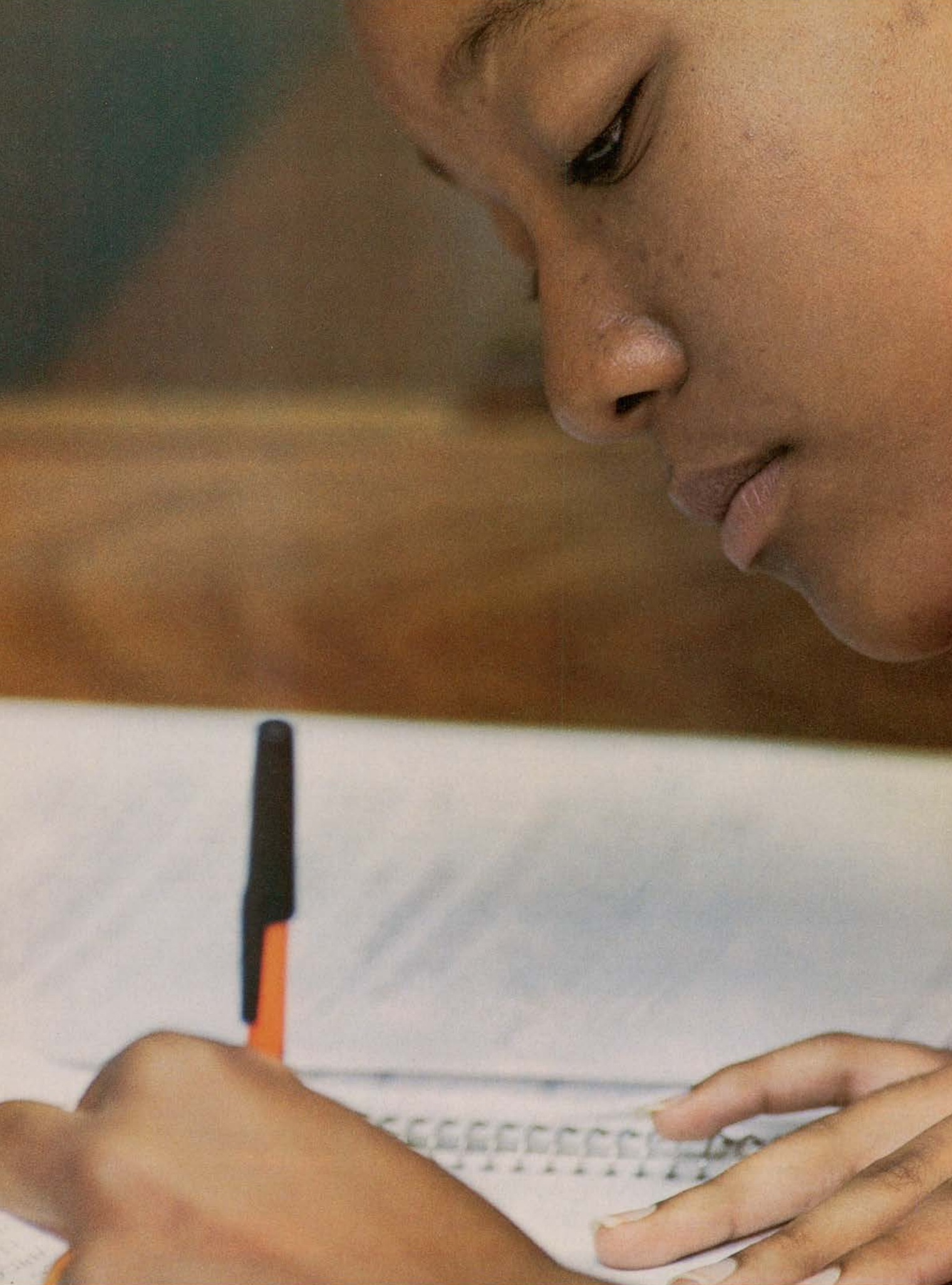
"It enables the teacher to give students the feeling, 'I am a writer,'" says Nina Parish, Canton's language arts department head. She conceived the basis for the strategy in 1994 after attending a professional development session where the state-required writing test had been dissected and discussed. With modifications from our staff over the years, the process has become the core of our writing instruction and has given countless numbers of our middle school students one less thing to feel awkward about. "Once you change the mindset of the students so they feel more comfortable about writing," Parish says, "you can teach them to be better writers."

But before you can make them better writers, you have to get them to write. The students seem to fear what appears to be the permanence of writing: ink etched on paper in what they believe should be the perfect sentence, paragraph, or essay. So ideas ebb without ever really flowing, and partial sentences on crumpled paper represent what the student sees as the essence of his writing ability. That's the image we sought to change by giving our students the tools and the practice to bring their ideas to life on the page.

This strategy doesn't have a catchy name, but the kids catch on to "doing prompts," which is what they call this process which stems from analyzing prompts, or writing assignments that outline the topic for a piece of writ-











ing. Based on the premise that students learn best by seeing *and* doing, our strategy begins as a full-class activity where students complete a piece of writing following specified steps:

- Analyze a prompt, to determine the genre, or form, it is calling for; the intended reader, or audience; the topic; and the purpose—what the writer will be trying to accomplish: FAT P in our shorthand. (See Figure 1, page 20, for an example of a prompt.)
- Complete a “graphic organizer,” a graphic version of the old-fashioned outline, especially designed to fit the particular type of writing. (See Figure 2, page 20, for an example of a graphic organizer.)
- Compose and edit a rough draft.
- Write a final draft.

At Canton, the language arts teachers introduce the narrative and explanatory forms of writing during the fall. In midwinter, we start teaching the persuasive form.

In the introductory lesson, the teacher, using a transparency of the assignment or notes on the chalkboard, leads the class through an analysis of a prompt. The students determine the various things they would need to consider in doing a piece of writing based on the prompt—we call these the “Think Aouts.” After this, the teacher shows the class an example of a finished text based on this prompt, paying close attention to how the ideas in each Think About are developed into paragraphs.

Then the students are ready, as a class, to carry out a writing assignment. They begin by brainstorming and

*Traci Johnson Mathbena is a former reporter for the Baltimore Sun, who is starting her sixth year as an English teacher at Canton Middle School in Baltimore. She is also working on a book about motivating teenagers to write.*

laying out ideas on a graphic organizer. Each Think About from the prompt becomes the heading on one section of the organizer, with the notes that pertain to it entered below. When the organizer is completed, the students, working with the teacher, turn the organizer notes into paragraphs. They also compose opening and closing sentences and they connect the ideas with time, or transitional, words. They even learn a foolproof topic sentence formula—the PAT topic sentence: *I am going to [insert Purpose] you [insert Audience] about [insert Topic].* (Not fancy, but much better than a blank page.)

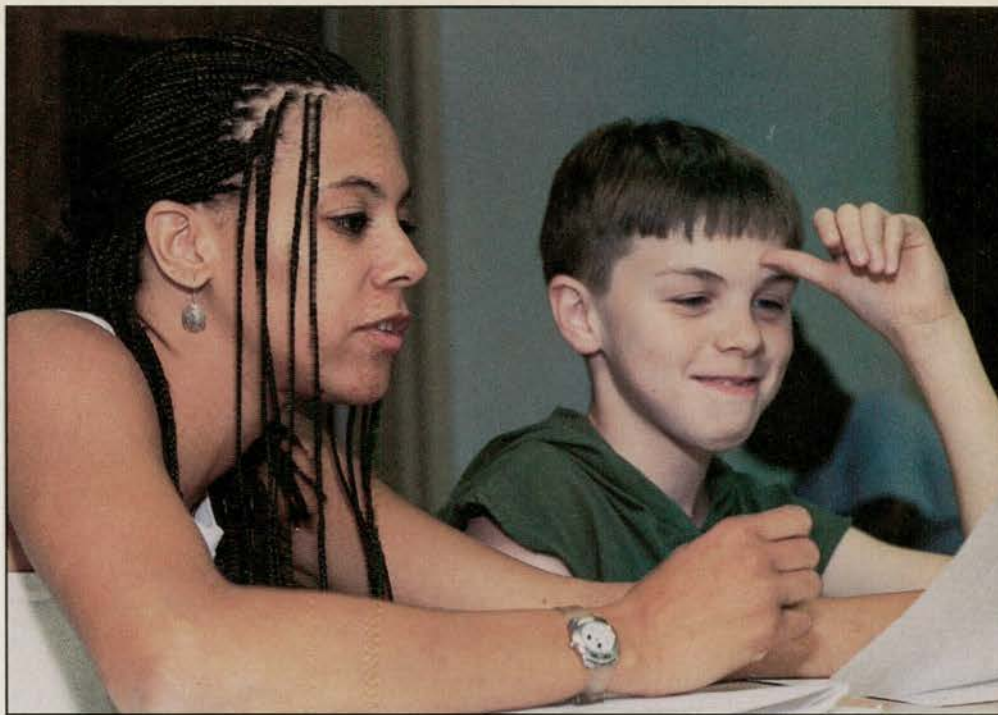
The students copy the group-created organizer and essay from the overhead transparency where the teacher has been leading and working the entire time. Punctuation, spelling, grammar, and capitalization take a back seat (for now) to the *content* of the essay, since our state test does not grade these things. A full-class editing process follows the creation of the rough draft, and the teacher is able to model that strategy as well.

“The strength of the process is that you can get any kid to write,” says Camille Basoco, a former Canton language arts teacher who now teaches high school English. “It is a great springboard for the kid who’s scared to write, or who doesn’t think he knows how.”

“It gives them something to attack, something to hold on to. They know where to start, and I think that is pretty much the key,” says Daryl Walsh, a language arts teacher at Canton for five years. “When it [the writing process] is broken down like that, students see it as a complete task; and they perceive it as within their reach.”

Once the full-class simulation has been completed, students are given an assignment with a slightly different topic. They now carry out the process themselves, with teacher guidance only as needed. Students analyze the assignment, brainstorm, and use graphic organizers, many of which have been developed by our staff for explanatory and persuasive writing, as well as





(Above) Traci Mathena and eighth-grader Joshua Merica working through a writing problem. (On page 17) Eighth-grader Jewel Richardson writing an in-class essay.

for the narrative writing with which students begin. (Later on, when they gain confidence, students develop and use their own organizers.) Once the student has transformed the notes on the organizer into the sentences of the rough draft, he has a basic, yet detailed and organized, piece of writing. Peer editing—where the students exchange papers and are taught to respond to others' work with useful feedback—and final draft writing complete the process.

"I find that students in general have so little idea of how to organize their writing or even how to approach the task that this is an essential first step," Daryl Walsh says. "It can—and maybe should — be reinforced ad nauseum. The more practice the better."

And practice is exactly what they get. After the language arts teacher introduces the first narrative essay and follows up with a second, the social studies teacher issues a narrative assignment based on that content. One social studies assignment had students writing a story about what it was like to be part of the expansion westward. Science and math teachers do the same when we introduce the explanatory essay. Science teachers assigned a prompt that asked students to explain the process one would use to test whether a water resource needed a "riparian forest buffer." Students become familiar and comfortable with the process in all areas, writing as many as three formal pieces using this process each month.

### The Formula Comes First

"I think it is a really good way to teach kids to write," says Ian Armitage, a former Canton student who will begin high school in September. He says he feels confi-

dent that he can write about anything now. "It tells you everything you need to do."

The kids seem to agree with Ian. Although I have had to endure the sighs, sucking teeth, and rolling eyes of countless students after announcing that we were going to work on a writing prompt, the students say that the process gives them what they need—a place to start.

Jeremy Armitage (Ian's brother) started his first year in my class writing essays that sometimes scooted off on a tangent. "What really helped me was the organizer," says Jeremy, who will enter the seventh grade in the fall. "Sometimes when I would start writing about something, I would look at it and say, 'Whoa, hold on a second. This isn't what I was supposed to be talking about.' The ideas in the organizer are in order, and that helped me stay on topic."

Katie Dobry also had a lot to say, but she didn't know how to structure her writing. "I had the biggest trouble paragraphing because I could never remember when to switch to another subject," says Katie, an eighth-grader. "Learning to number the Think Abouts really helped a lot. Having to analyze the prompt before you went into it definitely helped, too. You knew exactly what you had to write."

An artistic and creative means of expression this is not. But if you have students who struggle to find that "right" way to begin, or who cross out, scribble into oblivion, or simply destroy what they have written for fear of not writing what they are supposed to, then this is a great place to start.

"You have to do the formulaic writing before you move on to the creative," says Nina Parish. "If they can't do this, they cannot move on to more creative things."

*True, but the creative things are the fun and interesting things, I remember thinking to myself when I was introduced to this idea five years ago. As a former journalist and aspiring fiction writer and poet, this cut-*



and-dried approach to writing was more frustrating than writer's block. But like my colleagues, I soon found that what it lacked in excitement it more than made up for in efficiency and effectiveness.

"It is a great way for a beginning teacher to learn to teach writing," says Camille Basoco, "especially when

Figure 1. A sample prompt

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative One**

Some gifts carry a big price tag, while others - like the one in the story "Aaron's Gift" - are priceless. Write a story telling about a time you gave OR received a wonderful gift.

Before you begin to write, think about how the incident began. Then, think about what happened next and how it continued. Finally, think about how the incident ended. Remember: Every story has a beginning, middle, and an ending.

Now, write a story telling about a time you gave OR received a wonderful gift.

1. Identify:

Topic \_\_\_\_\_

Audience \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose \_\_\_\_\_

Form \_\_\_\_\_

1. Underline the "think abouts."  
How many "think abouts" are there? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Write a possible topic sentence.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Figure 2. A graphic organizer

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

CLASS: \_\_\_\_\_  
Language Arts  
Writing Prompt Organizer

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

Form: \_\_\_\_\_

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Audience: \_\_\_\_\_

Topic Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_

Think about	Think about T W	Think about T W	Think about T W
-------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

Concluding Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_

they aren't sure how to get the kids started."

Harry Tomlin, who has taught language arts at Canton for two years, says that he finds the process useful because students can use this formula for everything from college research papers to the types of reports and memos he wrote during his 25 years with the federal government.

"You can take the mystery out of writing by showing it as process," says Tomlin. "We're not teaching everyone to be John Irving—not that being creative isn't important. But creative writing is an art, and not everyone is an artist."

Everyone may not be an artist; however most students know what tools they'd use if they wanted to create a painting. But what about writing? How do students like Katie and Jeremy, who have used this process for several years, or Ian, who is going to high school and will be facing more rigorous demands on his writing, begin moving beyond the process?

"One limitation I can see is that if a teacher can only teach the formula, students will never learn to move beyond it," Parish says. "And they should."

"The trouble comes in when our writing process is presented as *the* goal," says Daryl Walsh. "It is a low expectation, but kids have to reach it before they can move beyond it. When they have a schema, a skeleton for writing, then you can start dealing with how to move beyond it. You just don't want to bring all the kids to this level and then stop."

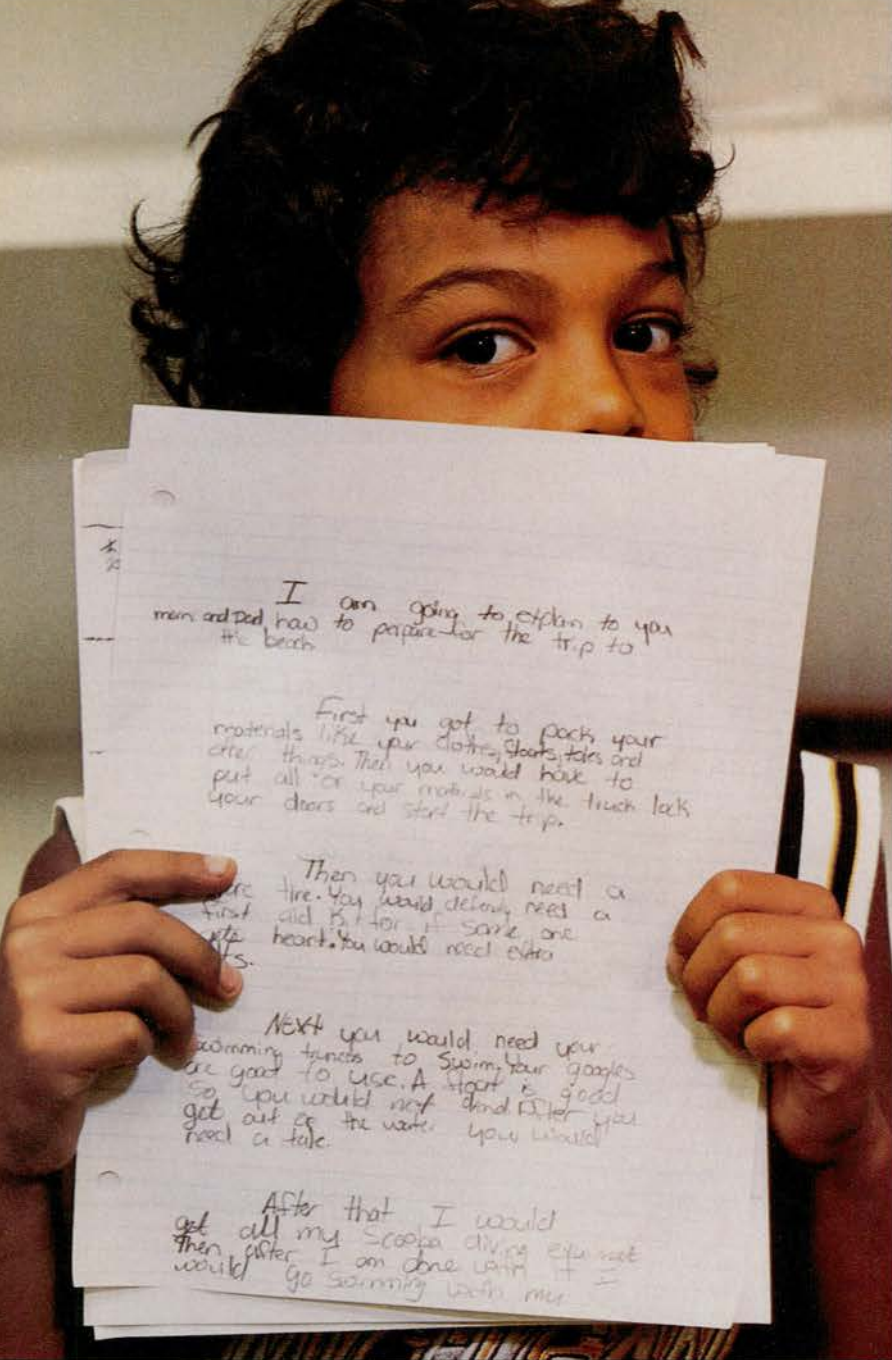
Camille Basoco feels that some children become dependent on the structure and are reluctant to give up their security blanket. "It's not good when they learn one strategy and then are afraid *not* to use it. There has to be a transition between that fundamental step to something more sophisticated."

## Breaking Away

In order to move forward, the students must make a break from the structure that has supported them and take some risks. The teacher's job is to provide them with the tools—more creative and daring writing skills—that will make their writing come alive. I start by taking that static, formulaic piece we created and teaching them to manipulate it. We vary the sentence structure, use punctuation to give the piece rhythm, diversify word choice—anything that will show them that once something is on the page, they, the writer, control the piece. My guarantee to them: *Once you get something on the paper, I can teach you to make it do what you want it to do. It will dance to the beat of your music.* It is then that my language arts classroom evolves into a writing community. Figurative language, sensory imagery, and literary allusions are some of the tools that fill the bag of tricks into which my students tentatively dig.

I find that teaching them to use their senses to invigorate their writing motivates and captivates them. My students had finished Martha Brooks' "What I Want





*Success: Jeffrey Yates, a student in Traci Mathena's summer school class, showing off the expository essay he has just completed.*

To Be When I Grow Up," a short story about a boy who prepares for his future as a journalist by honing his observation skills during bus rides from his orthodontist appointments. In the story, the boy uses language to paint verbal pictures of people (the pork-chop man, pristine girl, and the suit person, for starters) and recount conversations and events that go on around him. From a writing standpoint, that's exactly where I wanted my students to go. So I took them there.

Armed with spiral notebooks and pens, we went out to the streets around our school to notice things—ordinary people doing ordinary things. In our spiral notebooks we had listed the five senses: sight, taste, touch, sound, and smell. We categorized what and who we observed, and we jotted down the immediate

description that came to mind. Back in the classroom and under teacher guidance, the observations became the basis for simple sentences, and the descriptions were transformed into similes and metaphors. Put together, they became humorous and telling stories that my kids scrambled over one another to share. After other "Observation Outings," as we call them, students turned their notes into image-filled poetry, or even short stories and plays.

Students practice various writing skills—using detail, handling sequence, and revising—with Passabout stories. After they all copy the same story opening into their spiral notebooks, each classmate adds to the page to continue the piece. Sometimes, this is done by passing the books. But most often, we do a kind of musical chairs in which students move by each desk while the music plays and add to the book at the place they end up when the music stops.

I found that both of these activities inspired my writing class this past summer—seventh- and eighth-grade students already indoctrinated into the Canton writing process. Although friends, back in their neighborhoods, were enjoying not being in school, these kids were serious and focused on their writing. Each student shaped his or her piece with care and precision, and they willingly offered and accepted criticism. Indeed, pride vibrated in each voice that asked, "Who's the next writer to share today?"

"Everyone wants to feel good about what they do," says Nina Parish. "And all a kid has to do is write a metaphor about which someone else in the class says 'Yeah—that's a good one!' and the student wants to do it again."

In moving beyond the basic process of doing prompts, my students and I have found that where once we listed, noted, and webbed, we now imagine, try to pick just the right word, and capture the energy of the experience in our writing. It's also where we edit for the things we missed before—the mechanics and grammar—in order to move beyond the final draft to publication—which means the presentation of the product to its intended audience.

The process we developed at my school is the first step to creating students who can write a simple but decent piece of prose. The next step shows them something about the art of writing and the tools they need to practice that art. But in the end, what really matters is getting the students past the anxiety presented by the blank page. If they can confidently put together a basic piece of writing, and later acquire the skills to develop it, they will grow into effective communicators and thinkers.

And think of the trees we will save. □



# HOW TO ESTABLISH WRITING AS A WAY OF LIFE

*Shelley Harwayne is currently acting superintendent of Community School District Two in New York City, but for eight years she led the Manhattan New School, also in District Two, of which she was founding principal. The following article, which recalls her experiences as principal, shows how writing can become an important part of a school community and a tool that even the youngest children want to use and use well.*

—EDITOR

BY SHELLEY HARWAYNE

WRITING IS a way of life in our school, an almost automatic response to practically every occasion. Students are encouraged to write, throughout the school day, for the same various reasons you and I write. When children tell their teacher they have changed their afternoon travel plans, the teacher is most likely to say, "Have you sent a note down to the office?" When a child is worried she will forget to bring a snack when her turn rolls around, the teacher is likely to suggest the first-grader write a reminder note. When a student complains about a broken hook in the classroom clothes closet, it's no surprise that she is asked to put her request in writing and leave it in the custodian's mailbox. Our students quickly learn that writing is a tool that helps you get things done.

It comes as no surprise then that children begin to

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*Shelley Harwayne is the author of several books, including Lifetime Guarantees: Toward Ambitious Literacy Teaching (Heinemann, 2000), from which this article is excerpted, and the forthcoming Writing Through Childhood, which will be published by Heinemann and from which the article on writing conferences on page 27 is drawn. Both articles are reprinted with permission of the publisher.*

write on their own without teacher prompting. When kindergartners are sent to borrow snacks from another class and the 5-year-olds find a box of cheese crackers in an empty room, they know to leave a note. When second-grader Mark is frustrated with how his soccer career is going, he sends a "retirement" announcement to our physical education instructor. When fourth-grader Lindsay wants her class to view "All My Children," a soap opera in which she is appearing, she leaves a letter of request on my desk. When second-grader Sam doesn't know which restroom the boys on the fourth floor are to use, he automatically sends me a note, complete with check-off boxes for my response. (See Figure 1, page 24.)

There is an extra bonus to all this real-world writing. When children use their writing for real purposes, they understand why they need to edit their work. They become serious about checking their spelling, punctuation, and grammar and even using their best handwriting.

Over the last seven years, I have kept all the children's letters in scrapbooks. They make for some wonderfully entertaining and nostalgic reading. Someday I should probably categorize their contents. I could imagine creating separate sections for requests, complaints, "love letters," birthday and holiday greetings, tributes, reminders, and one entitled "Writing Our Wrongs," filled with all the letters containing explanations, apologies, and promises to never repeat wrongful acts.

The latter is the kind of writing we ask children to do when they have forgotten about gracious living and the need to resolve conflicts in a just and peaceful way. Classroom misbehavior is relatively rare, but bus rides and lunchroom and playground times seem to bring out the feistiness, daring, and mischief we could easily live without. There have been times when I wished I could dramatically whip out a cellular phone,



writing

ed up e



g.



just for the effect, and announce to the rascal in front of me, "I'm calling your mother!" More times than not, my first response is to ask children to cool off by writing an explanation of what went wrong.

Although this kind of explanatory writing is valuable, I much prefer looking back over the writing that suggests more positive school moments. For example, I'm always delighted when graduating seniors decide to write tributes to the school. (It might be a very lovely graduation ritual to require each senior to write a tribute to the school. These could be placed in a separate three-ring binder and added to each year. It would make for some fine nostalgic reading.)

### Confer About Purpose and Audience

Conferring can help children understand what writing is for. When teachers continually ask, "Where in the real world does this piece of writing belong?" students appreciate that their words can make a difference to the people, places, and causes they care about. Students revise their writing keeping in mind the destination they envision for their work. If I suggest to a child that her writing has potential to become an article for the school newspaper, a text to teach reading in the first grade, or an appropriate gift poem for a teacher who is about to have a baby, she approaches revision more purposefully. If children understand the constraints of the chosen genre and audience, they can establish clear ways to make their work the best it can be. (See also the accompanying article beginning on page 27 for conference guidelines.)

### Elevate the Genres Particular to Schools

The following is a list of many other kinds of writing I encounter because I am working in a school:

- welcome notes
- school brochures
- phone messages
- bus schedules
- floor plans
- journals on plant and animal growth
- birthday greetings
- get-well messages
- good-bye messages
- congratulatory notes
- procedural writing
- minutes of meetings
- yearbook pages
- interviews
- curriculum guides
- permission slips
- class lists
- reading recommendations
- invitations and programs for school events
- resumé for school jobs
- application letters
- speeches for school causes
- plant and animal care suggestions
- procedural writing for use of school equipment
- inventory of supplies
- fire drill procedures
- labeled map of the school
- good news announcements
- school calendars

- cafeteria schedules
- discipline codes
- assessment forms
- schedules for use of the auditorium and cafeteria
- custodial requests
- thank-you notes
- late passes
- school newspaper articles
- letters to families
- toasts for school events

Figure 1.  
A query to the principal

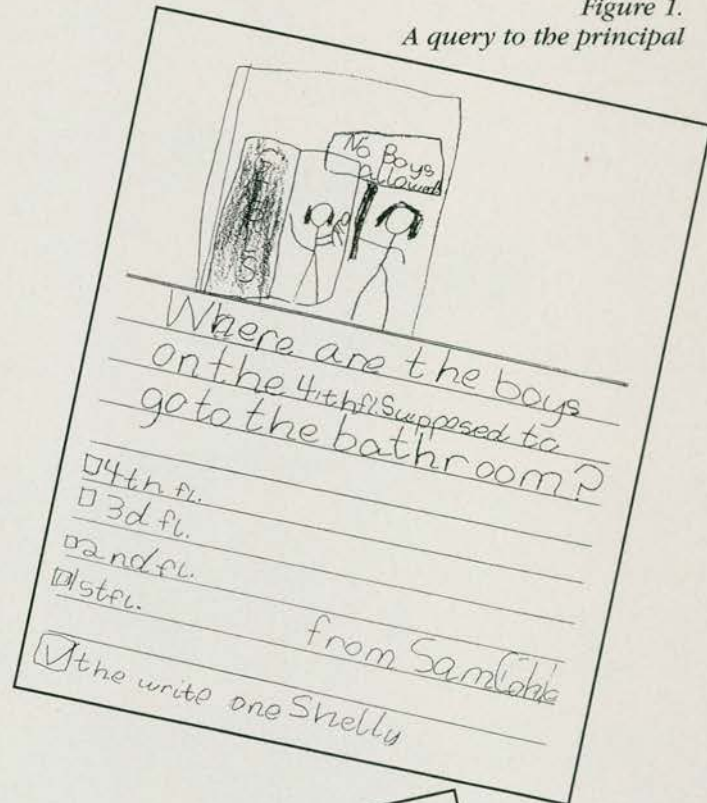
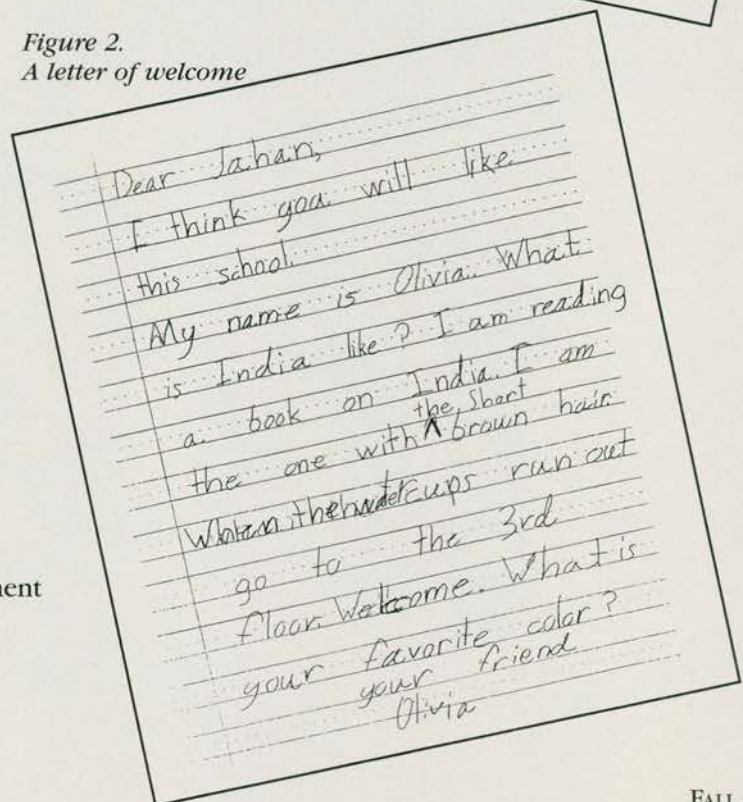


Figure 2.  
A letter of welcome





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## Fourth-graders could create posters reminding people to clean up after themselves in the school cafeteria.

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- banners and congratulatory notes
- bulletin board announcements
- surveys about school issues
- classroom signs
- narrative reports
- visitors' guides
- instructions for substitutes
- homework assignments
- daily agendas
- pen-pal letters

How many of these genres can be introduced to students? All, I would imagine, in one form or another. Some have already been learned by children in their home settings.

For example, thank-you notes are perhaps one of the first genres parents ask their children to write. Some forms of writing are more unexpected. One afternoon a prospective family arrived at school with child in hand. I'm very used to the parents bringing a list of must-ask questions, but this time the child carried his own list. His questions included: Who are the second-grade teachers? Where and what time do we get the bus? What are the specialists? Do you have to bring your lunch? What Manhattan New School kids live around 96th and Columbus and/or 106th and Broadway? What time do you start and let out? Needless to say he was my kind of kid. We must never underestimate what children can do. Children can learn to write significant interview questions, as they can learn many of the genres listed above. Some would require very little instruction; others might deserve brief, whole-class genre studies.

Years ago, I attended a reading conference in Perth, Australia. Each participant received a letter of welcome, tucked into the registration material, from a local school child. It was a delightful way to learn about the city, the schools, and the life of a child. I could easily imagine asking students in our school to prepare welcome letters to be handed out to new parents, students, student teachers, and all visitors.

### Design Community-Service Assignments

According to the African concept of *ogbo*, people of different ages are assigned certain village responsibilities. I suggested a similar set of responsibilities for schoolchildren at different grade levels. It would also work very well to assign specific grade levels to the following writing tasks, all carried out for the good of the whole community.

- Third-graders could be asked to write commentaries for the monthly menu posted in the cafeteria. Other students would refer to this explanation and critique when deciding whether or not to order school lunch.
- Fourth-graders could be asked to craft written instructions for physical education activities and exercises and games. These would be given to new students and to students who need additional support.
- Third-graders could be asked to prepare a written

summary of all the events listed in the school calendar. Their notes could be given to all new families.

- Fifth-graders could be asked to serve as a get-well crew, responsible for sending cheerful notes to anyone who is absent for an extended period of time.
- Fifth-graders could be asked to serve as roving reporters, regularly crafting columns for the school newsletter.
- Fourth-graders could be asked to write for specific areas of the school. For example, Sharon Hill's fourth-grade class took it upon themselves to solve the school problem of children being disrespectful and sloppy in the restrooms. Their collaboratively written poem appears below.

#### Think Twice

Don't be in a rush  
Always flush.  
No spit balls  
They mar the walls.  
Don't flood the floor  
Or you're out the door.  
Writing on the wall?  
You're not on the ball.  
Wash your hands,  
But no headstands.  
Leaving a mess?  
We're in distress.  
Think Twice.  
It's just not nice.

I added a few more verses to their beginning efforts—

No trash in the bowl,  
Or you'll stuff up the hole.  
Use the soap,  
Sparingly we hope.  
If you can't be neat,  
Wipe the seat.  
Peeking in the stall?  
It's rude, that's all.

- Fourth-graders could also hang signs reminding people to use soft voices in the halls. They could create posters reminding students to clean up after themselves in the school cafeteria. They could hang warnings about the dangers of play fighting turning into real fighting.

### Expect That Artwork Will Be Accompanied by Text

There is very little white space on the walls of our school. Every inch seems decorated with student work. Just as museum pieces are accompanied by titles, placards with background information, and brochures describing the work and the artist, so too children's work in a school deserves to be treated in the same elegant fashion. (I can even imagine asking older students to periodically prepare a walking tour of the school on tape to be given to visitors who want to tour the hallways on their own.) Perhaps less ambi-



tious, but nonetheless valuable, would be to require that every piece of art in the hallway have a title (or at least an "untitled" notation), a description of the medium used, and background on the student/artist. Other writing possibilities would be procedural notes so that other students can learn the techniques used, reflections by the artist on his work, and blank paper to encourage written response by viewers.

### Weave Writing into Student Government

Our school's student council (one representative from every class) meets with me every two weeks. Our mission is to acknowledge the people and events worthy of celebration and to attend to the problems that need to be solved. Following the half-hour gathering, representatives share their notes with their individual classes. Not only does this structure allow for quick sharing of information with the entire student body, it also enables students to take on leadership roles in the school. In addition, this structure leads to all kinds of writing tasks. In the upper-grade classes in which students vote for their class representative, some children even prepare promotional materials encouraging their friends to vote for them.

Most of the writing, however, takes place at our meetings or in response to our meetings. First, all students take notes on the discussions. Even the kindergarten children find a way to record key points. Then too, children's conversations about the good things happening in the school and the problems yet to be solved inevitably lead to some real-world writing. They write thank-you notes, congratulatory banners, and good news announcements. They've also written many letters to the custodian requesting repairs, reminder signs for hallway decorum, and posters for a neighborhood "curb your dog," campaign. Likewise, our students use their literacies to improve the quality of life at school. Dominique and Jhordan sent the note in Figure 3 to our custodian James. Note their "c.c." to me. The younger children at the student council were fascinated by this device and in fact began adding a "c.c." to their writing and sending carbon copies to their parents and teachers.

### Create Classroom Newsletters

When children know that there is a predictable, formal vehicle for publishing their writing, they often write

toward that publication. In several classes, parents assume the responsibility of putting together a biweekly or monthly class newsletter. They include all the information parents need to know, including updates on curriculum, a calendar and description of upcoming trips, book recommendations, and supplies needed. In addition, most leave ample space for student writing and artwork. Parents are eager to tuck in students' poems and short stories, but the newsletter format invites children to try their hand at more newsy genres. Children in fact can take over for the parents. Youngsters can be asked to write their own accounts of what is happening in their class and school as well as their own lists of supplies needed, calendar dates, and curriculum happenings.

### Encourage Keeping in Touch with Friends

I always encourage students to keep in touch with friends who have moved. The possibilities of using electronic mail have made keeping in touch even more popular. Children write to former classmates as well as to children they have never met. One teacher's students write pen-pal letters to children from her former teaching assignment in Brooklyn, and the teachers arrange for the children to meet. Another teacher requires all his fourth-graders to select someone in their lives that they can write to on a regular basis.

Monthly letter writing is built into their writing workshop schedule. (See Figure 4.)

No doubt, if teachers have abundant time to meet and reflect on their teaching, they will devise many more ways for students to engage in real-world writing. But it will be much more likely that teachers will be able to turn their ideas into practice if they are thoroughly supported by a principal who deeply understands how to establish writing as a way of life in the whole school community. □

Figure 3.  
A request to the custodian

Dear James  
We need higher stalls because people climb and look at people using the bathroom. They also stand on the toilets and look over.  
Your Friends Jhordan and Dominique  
P.S. People also go under and lock the doors. We also need stalls as high as the tiles.  
C.C. Shelby  
3/27/98

Figure 4. A pen-pal letter

Dear Penpal Friend,  
My name is Cineca Anthony and New York is always busy and noisy. I don't like New York because of pollution and noise. I really love North Carolina with the nice clean breeze, the butterflies, and the beautiful green grass. You can smell the food cooking on the stove. Is Maine like North Carolina?  
Yours penpal  
Cineca



# When You Sit Down with Young Writers

**D**URING MY eight years as principal at the Manhattan New School, I conferred with hundreds of children about their writing as I stopped in to visit their classrooms, conduct demonstration lessons, or cover classes for absent or unusually busy teachers. I'm convinced more than ever that responding to student writing is an art not a science. Even though I know our students fairly well, and I'm aware of any courses of study taking place, I tread lightly, knowing there may be information about that young writer and the context of his current work that I am unaware of.

I have found it incredibly helpful, therefore, to carry a simple framework in my head whenever I approach young writers. I have a few conference guidelines in mind, no matter what the age of the students.

- First, I want to find out how the students feel about being asked to write.
- Second, I want to know if students take risks as writers.
- Third, I want to find out if students understand what writing is for.
- Fourth and finally, and the one I only think about when the first three conditions are in place, I want to find out if students have strategies for improving the work at hand.

An explanation of each guideline follows.

## Finding Out How Young Writers Feel About Being Asked To Write

I want to know if students feel confident about being asked to write. If they are reluctant, I want to know why. If they use the pages from their writer's notebook to do math homework or make paper airplanes, I want to know why. If their writer's notebooks are ragged, empty, or constantly misplaced, I want to know why. If writing is the only school subject they aren't interested in, I want to know why. That's always where my conference with a new student

begins. I can get at the above kinds of information by asking such questions as the ones below. All of them are based on the children's having notebooks entirely devoted to their writing.

- Why do you think your teacher has asked you to keep a writer's notebook?
- Do you find it easier to write in your notebook at home or at school? Why?
- What is the best thing about keeping a writer's notebook? What is the most difficult thing?
- Do you ever have trouble writing? If so, what do you do to get going?
- Do you ever think you will write during the summer vacation? When you graduate? When you are an adult?
- How would you feel about school if writing were not on the daily agenda?

## Finding Out if Students Take Risks as Writers

Of course there are all kinds of ways to take risks. With very young children, we frequently need to encourage them to take risks as spellers. Older students take risks with choice of topics, experimentation with new genres, and with their willingness to share their work with wider audiences. I can figure out if children are taking risks by asking such questions as the following:

- Have you done something in this piece of writing that you have never done before?
- If I looked through your writing folder would I find fairly similar writing (in topic, genre, writing techniques)?
- Have you been thinking about trying something new or different in your writing, but are not ready to go ahead just yet?
- Have you ever heard or read some topic or technique in another student's writing or in some professionally written material that you think would be too difficult to try?
- If a teacher says that a student "plays it safe" in writing, what do

you think the teacher means?

- What happens if you misspell many words in your writing? How does that make you feel?
- What happens if your classmates don't understand your writing? How does that make you feel?
- How does it take courage to be a writer?
- Where do you think it is easier to take risks—on the playground, in the cafeteria, in the writing workshop? Can you explain your thinking?

In addition, I can find out if students take risks by skimming through their portfolios or notebooks with the writers at my side. For example, if I discover that a writer only does one kind of writing, I'd want to know if the student is afraid to try something new or lacks the background to try a new genre. It's my hope that students attempt many forms of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. There need to be lots of ways to shine as a writer in any school year, in any writing workshop. The student who struggles with nonfiction may be a fine poet. The student who can't write personally may be a fine journalist. (Of course, a student may be sticking to one kind of writing because he or she has found an area of expertise or an area of interest. Poets improve their craft when they write many poems, not when they produce one or two poems a year.)

Within each of these broad genre areas, we put our trust in brevity: short people, short genres. We privilege short forms of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction.

We've also discovered that there is life beyond the personal narrative. Of course, our students still do narrative writing, but when they do write about personal things, we don't cross the line. Taking risks as writers does not mean students have to write about risky things. In the eight years our school has been in existence, we have never had to hide a piece of writing on open school night. We don't ever play therapist. We never ask children who have only been

*(Continued on page 44)*



# A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD?

## *What We Can Learn from the New Zealand School Reform*

BY EDWARD B. FISKE AND HELEN F. LADD

IT'S FASHIONABLE among some school reformers today to see simple governance changes as the key to improving urban schools. Proponents of charter schools and vouchers share a belief that if local schools are freed from the heavy hand of public school bureaucracies and forced to compete for students in an education marketplace, they will have both the means and the incentives to provide quality education to students.

These are intriguing—and, for some people, highly appealing—notions. The problem is that they are largely untested. Charter schools and voucher schemes in the United States are either too recent or too small in scale to constitute legitimate tests of the theory. What is needed is evidence from a sustained large-scale experiment with self-governing schools in a competitive environment.

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*Edward B. Fiske and Helen F. Ladd spent five months in New Zealand in 1998. Their book, *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale*, was recently published by the Brookings Institution Press. Fiske, former education editor of the New York Times, is an education writer and consultant. Ladd is professor of public policy and economics at Duke University.*

Fortunately, there is such an experiment—and it suggests that U.S. policymakers should think twice before counting on governance changes alone to solve the problems of troubled urban schools.

The experiment has been going on for the last decade in New Zealand, a country that is the size of a typical American state and where the national Ministry of Education is the functional equivalent of a state education system in the United States. New Zealand has similar social, cultural, and political traditions to the U.S. as well as a significant minority population. Maori and Pacific Islanders, many of whom live in urban areas, make up 20 percent of the population.

In 1989, New Zealand abolished its heavy-handed central education bureaucracy and turned the running of each primary and secondary school over to a locally elected board of trustees dominated by parents. Two years later, a new government added to the reform mix by giving parents the right to choose which school their child would attend. Schools no longer enjoyed ensured enrollments and were forced to compete for students in an education marketplace.

One way of characterizing these governance changes,









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Many low-income families were deterred from exercising choice because they could not afford the added transportation costs or student fees associated with more upscale schools.

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known collectively as the Tomorrow's Schools reforms, is to say that New Zealand is running a whole system of conversion charter schools—with the important qualification that schools took on this status whether they wanted to or not.

Since New Zealand has no national testing system, it is impossible to determine whether the reform package improved student achievement. Nevertheless, it is possible to describe other results—both positive and negative—that are relevant to policy debates in the United States.

### **The Impact of Self-Governance**

Schools in New Zealand clearly enjoy their new operational autonomy. In the course of our travels and research we encountered virtually no one who wanted to restore the highly regulated system of the past. "There is no doubt that the increased autonomy at the school level has been attractive to many principals and trustees," said Cathy Wylie, who has closely monitored the changes at the primary level for the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER). "It has allowed faster decisions, and has allowed—where their budgets permit—the direction of funds in areas which are relevant to those at the school. Schools have been able to purchase computers, develop programs, strengthen a bilingual Maori unit, hire a consultant for schoolwide staff development, or hire a part-time teacher or teachers' aide."

Principals welcomed their new authority to hire teachers suited to the particular needs of their school rather than having to accept whoever was sent by the local board of education. Principals and teachers report that parents, who elect members of boards of trustees and constitute a majority of members, have become more assertive in articulating their children's needs and even in questioning school policies. "[Parents] question teachers a lot more," said Angela Stone, the principal of Waitangirua Intermediate School in Wellington. "Many of our parents had bad experiences during their own schooldays, and to them schools have been very alienating places. Slowly, slowly, these parents are becoming more comfortable about coming into the building, and they are now beginning to ask questions about what we are doing."

Self-governance, however, has also brought new problems, starting with workload. In giving schools the responsibility of governing themselves, the Tomorrow's Schools reforms handed over to them the burden of carrying out many of the administrative tasks that had been handled by the Ministry of Education through its regional boards. For the first time primary school principals had to deal with matters such as bud-

geting, hiring, and dealing with boards of trustees, while teachers found themselves with new responsibilities such as the increased record keeping associated with new accountability mechanisms. In addition, self-governance imposed whole new areas of activity on schools, brought on by the enhanced needs to raise local funds, to market themselves, and to maintain better contact with parents.

"Self-governance works because of the high workloads taken on by principals, the increase in teachers' workloads, the voluntary time given by trustees, and the additional money which schools have raised," observed Cathy Wylie in a report for NZCER. Wylie found that primary teachers' working hours rose steadily from an average workweek of 45.8 hours in 1989 to 48.3 hours in 1996. A major reason, she said, is that "teachers have not cut back on their extra-classroom responsibilities to accommodate the new administrative demands."

Another negative consequence has been that some schools, primarily those located in low-income areas, have found it difficult to assemble boards of trustees with the financial, legal, and governing skills necessary to run an institution as complicated as a local school. The sort of cultural capital that middle-income schools take for granted is largely missing in such areas since, until recently, one out of every two students emerged from school without credentials. "Half the population were academic failures and came to loathe schools," said Philip Capper of the Center for Research on Work, Education, and Business. "Now we're telling these same people to go manage them."

In such areas, boards typically lack the technical expertise to advise on legal or financial issues and also often lack the sophistication that would allow them to challenge decisions by the principals. They often do not know enough to ask the hard questions or sometimes even the simple questions that would allow them to make good decisions on budgetary or other matters. One principal of such a school praised the intelligence and dedication of his board but added "There is no way I will get a robust appraisal of how I am doing."

### **Parental Choice and Market Competition**

The 1991 decision to abolish geographic enrollment zones for local schools and to institute parental choice also had both positive and negative effects.

Parents were quick to take advantage of their new right to exercise a voice in which school their child would attend. A climate was created in which choice came to be seen not only as a right but as a moral obligation. To be a "good" parent one had to make a con-



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## Popular schools tended to turn down students who were difficult to teach because of the effects of poverty, learning or behavior problems, or lack of English proficiency.

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scious decision about which was the best school for one's child.

The impact of the new system on school enrollments was rapid and profound. Parents began voting with their feet and sorting themselves among schools in demonstrably different ways than under the regime of zoning. Middle and upper middle-class European families were the most aggressive in taking advantage of the choice option, but many upwardly mobile Maori and Pacific Island families also opted for choice as a means of improving their children's educational prospects.

While parental choice brought clear benefits to families who were in a position to exercise it, the new student assignment policies had negative consequences as well. Many low-income families were deterred from exercising choice because they could not afford the added transportation costs or student fees associated with more upscale schools. Still others were restricted by the rules governing situations in which a school had more applicants than available places. In such cases, schools had wide latitude in determining which students they would accept. Not surprisingly, popular schools tended to turn down students who were difficult to teach because of the effects of poverty, learning or behavior problems, or lack of English proficiency. One major consequence of New Zealand's new educational marketplace was thus a significant polarization of enrollment patterns by ethnicity.

For funding purposes, the Ministry of Education classifies schools by "decile rankings" from 1 to 10 that reflect the socioeconomic and ethnic makeup of their students. Low-decile schools serve high proportions of minority and disadvantaged students while high-decile schools serve relatively affluent and European students. Under a funding system that the U.S. might do well to emulate, the government provides more funds to low-decile schools serving students who are most costly to educate than to their higher-decile counterparts.

The additional public funding for low-decile schools, however, was not sufficient to make them attractive to parents. Enrollment data for the years following the introduction of parental choice show that the number of students attending low-decile schools declined while the number attending high-decile schools rose. Moreover, although minority families as well as European (white) families opted out of low-decile schools, the white flight was greater than the minority flight. The result was a greater concentration of minorities in the low-decile schools.

Between 1991 and 1996, for example, the share of minorities in decile 1 primary and intermediate schools in the capital city of Wellington rose from 76 percent to 82 percent—a shift that cannot be ex-

plained by changes in ethnic residential patterns as measured by census data. At the secondary level even greater changes occurred, although the patterns were a bit more complex as some minorities moved from decile 1 to decile 2 schools while Europeans fled from both. Piecemeal evidence from a ministry-financed study indicates that school enrollments have also become more segregated in terms of socioeconomic status.

One reason that the introduction of parental choice fostered polarization is that New Zealand parents appear to judge the quality of schools largely by the ethnic and socioeconomic mix of their students. Schools with a preponderance of European students are seen as superior to those with large numbers of Maori and Pacific Islanders. As Margaret Ngatai, principal of Rowley Primary School in Christchurch, put it, "People see little brown faces coming in our gate and immediately think that it's not a very good school." Another less racially tinged interpretation of this behavior is that parents have some valid reasons to judge a school's quality by the relative socioeconomic or ethnic mix of its students. These reasons include the possibility of positive peer effects on student learning, the fact the higher-decile schools are able to attract the more-qualified teachers, and the reality that higher-income parents can provide more resources to the school.

### **The Impact on Individual Schools**

New Zealand's new system of self-governing schools competing for students in an educational marketplace had varying impact on particular schools. Some, such as Gladstone Primary School in Auckland, thrived. Colin Dale, the principal, became intrigued with the concept of multiple intelligences developed by Harvard University psychologist Howard Gardner. In 1990, just as the Tomorrow's Schools reforms were kicking in, Dale decided to create a learning environment that, in keeping with Gardner's ideas, would systematically promote the full range of pupils' intelligences. "Schools typically focus on a narrow band of logical and linguistic skills," he explained. "We teach these, but we also address other important intelligences, like spatial, kinesthetic, and interpersonal ones."

Dale's efforts resonated with teachers, parents, and students alike. Enrollment at Gladstone soared from 415 students in 1990 to 744 in 1998, making it the largest primary school in the country. It now encompasses a school of performing arts and four other mini-schools, and it has rich academic offerings that include instruction in seven languages. It also runs an extensive after-school program and pays for students who have self-esteem problems to take part in a 10-week program at the University of Auckland. Dale attributes



Gladstone's success to the managerial freedoms accorded by the Tomorrow's Schools reforms. "No one is restricting us," he said. "The potential is now there to do whatever you want. It's all about meeting needs and performing. If you get it right, people will flock to you."

Other schools, however, found it difficult to compete in the new education marketplace. As popular schools took advantage of the opportunity to fill their rolls with students from family backgrounds conducive to academic success, undersubscribed schools, many of them located in low-income urban areas, found

themselves coping with greater concentrations of difficult-to-teach students.

As upwardly mobile European, Maori, and Pacific Islanders left, these schools lost staff positions and other academic resources, which in turn made it even more difficult for them to serve the students left behind, much less attract additional students. Such schools face great difficulty in recruiting good teachers and are often reluctant to fire teachers who are clearly not competent for fear that any new replacement teacher might be even worse. New Zealanders have come to speak of downwardly "spiraling" schools that have

# New Zealand: About the People and the

## Kiwis

New Zealanders may be the only people in the world who describe themselves colloquially by their national symbol. They are known as Kiwis, after one of the numerous bird species unique to these islands. The kiwi is small, flightless, and very vulnerable—characteristics with which New Zealanders readily identify—and it is nocturnal. Few persons ever see them except in zoos.

New Zealanders form three main groups. Residents of European descent are known as Pakeha (Pak'ee-ha) and make up 80 percent of the population, while Maori account for 14 percent. The term *Maori* means non-European. It was coined by the original New Zealanders in the 19th century to distinguish themselves from the arriving Europeans; about 1850 it became a collective noun to describe the various tribes that had settled the islands long before the arrival of the English but that hitherto had no need for a particular collective identity. The third major group is Pacific Islanders, who began arriving during the manufacturing boom of the 1950s from Samoa, the Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji, and other islands and constitute 6 percent of the population. Another 4 percent are Chinese, Indian, and others. (The total is more than 100 percent because persons of mixed ancestry are sometimes counted more than once.)

The relationship between Pakehas and Maori is complex and unusual. Unlike other British colonies,

New Zealand was not conquered by military force. Instead, new immigrants purchased land from Maori, who for the most part saw Europeans as useful neighbors and a source of goods such as muskets, tobacco, iron tools, and clothing. Relations between the two were formalized in 1840 in the Treaty of Waitangi, which was signed by 45 Maori chiefs and the representative of the queen of England. Under the treaty, the Maori ceded their sovereignty of New Zealand to the queen, who in turn guaranteed them protection and granted them the same rights, privileges, and duties of citizenship enjoyed by the citizens of England. The treaty gave Maori continued possession of their land but stipulated that, if they chose to sell it, they must do so to the Crown. Although there has always been a considerable degree of intermarriage between Maori and Europeans, subsequent relations between the two groups were rocky. Disputes over land and British prerogatives led to a series of wars in the 1860s, variously known as the Land Wars, the Maori Wars, and the New Zealand Wars. Confiscation of large territories from Maori who had taken up arms against the government created resentments that continue to this day.

Maori generally accepted Christianity, and missionaries took the lead in extending education to them. Both Maori and

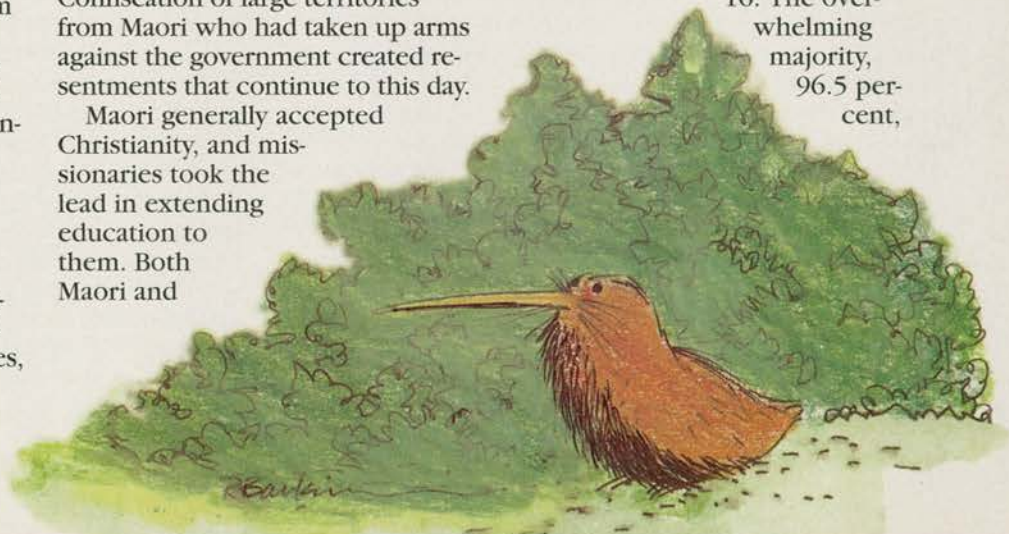
Pacific Islanders, however, share the plight of racial and ethnic minorities in other developed nations. They lag far behind the Pakeha majority in income, educational attainment, and measures of well-being such as health.

The 1970s and 1980s brought a resurgence of Maori culture, and political activists began pushing for redress of long-standing grievances. In 1975 the Parliament passed legislation establishing a Waitangi Tribunal to investigate Maori claims against the Crown, and 10 years later the act was amended to apply to all claims dating back to 1840. Substantial financial reparations have been made to Maori tribes whose lands were found to have been unjustly confiscated, and other claims are pending.

## Education in New Zealand

New Zealand pupils begin their first year of school, as new entrants, on their fifth birthday, and they pursue 12 more years of schooling through year 13. Attendance is compulsory through age

16. The overwhelming majority, 96.5 percent,





gone into a downward trajectory over which they have little control and from which it is difficult to escape.

In October 1995, national attention was focused on the plight of spiraling schools when one of New Zealand's major television networks broadcast a prime-time program entitled "The Forgotten Schools" that documented the shattering effect of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms on several secondary schools in South Auckland, an impoverished area of the country's largest metropolitan area. By highlighting the downside of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms, this program

proved to be a turning point in public attitudes toward government education policies.

Faced with political pressure to come to the rescue of troubled urban schools, the Ministry of Education initiated a series of programs to assist them. Policymakers still held to the belief that schools would succeed in the education marketplace if they were properly managed, so at first these programs were limited to managerial assistance. If schools were run well using managerial principles, the reasoning went, then everything else would fall into place.

*(Continued on page 45)*

## Education System

of New Zealand young people attend state schools; the rest are in private schools, which receive state subsidies ranging from 25 to 40 percent of the average state cost per pupil, depending on the age of the student. Nearly 10 percent of students in state schools attend what are known as state integrated schools. These schools, three-quarters of them Roman Catholic, have a "special character" and are run by boards that are accountable both to the Ministry of Education and to the sponsoring body. Although they own their own physical plants, integrated schools follow the national curriculum and are fully funded by the state for operating and new capital expenses.

One notable characteristic of the New Zealand education system is the large number of single-sex state schools. New Zealand is an inherently conservative country, and, its fundamental egalitarianism notwithstanding, the English tradition of prestigious grammar schools lives on in the minds and hearts of many Kiwis. Prestigious all-boys schools such as Auckland Grammar and Wellington College turned out most of the country's political and other leaders in the past, and most of the highly sought after secondary schools today are single sex.

Another important feature of state education in New Zealand is the growing network of Maori schools. In response to the resurgence of interest in Maori culture in general and its language in particular, the Ministry of Education has supported the development of

a range of educational institutions run by and for Maori. Preschool children learn Maori in language "nests," or *kobanga reo*, and regular primary and intermediate schools operate as immersion classrooms, known as *ruma rumaki*, that offer the chance for students to pursue part of their education in a Maori environment. In recent years the government has been encouraging the creation of schools known as *kura kaupapa* where students can receive a Maori-oriented education through secondary school. There are also eight Maori boarding schools serving about 1,000 students.

New Zealand's state education system is held together by a national curriculum that, while created centrally and designed to provide overall coherence to teaching, is not as highly prescriptive as those in, say, England or France. It is perhaps best described as a set of curriculum statements, and teachers are given great latitude in how they cover the material.

In keeping with British practice, it has been traditional for New Zealand students to take a school-leaving examination at the end of their compulsory education, and over the years, as students stayed in school longer, new tests were added at higher grade levels. School attendance is now compulsory to the age of 16, and most students sit for a school certificate examination at the end of three years of secondary education in year 11, or at about the age of 15. Twelve certificates are awarded on a subject-by-subject basis, and a higher school certificate is

awarded to students who have satisfactorily completed five years of full-time secondary schooling, or through year 13. Graduates going on to further study at the university take university entrance and bursary examinations to qualify for admission and to compete for scholarships.

A notable characteristic of New Zealand schools has been the absence of any comprehensive system of national tests of student performance for students under age 15. New Zealand teachers are wary about the use of tests for reasons other than to organize classes or to diagnose the needs of particular students, and there is little tradition of aggregating test data or keeping them on a school-wide, much less a national, basis. Instead of following the English model of national tests, the Ministry of Education in 1993 initiated the National Education Monitoring project, which assesses the achievement of a light sample of primary pupils in years 4 and 8 in selected schools primarily as a source of information to teachers. The assessments cover about one-quarter of the curriculum areas each year. The first four-year cycle was completed in 1998. Other than the results of these tests, the ministry collects no data that can be used to track student performance in core academic areas over time.

*Excerpted from When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale by Edward B. Fiske and Helen F. Ladd (Brookings Institution, 2000).*



# A BLACKBOARD'S REFLECTION

## *The Making of the Albert Shanker Memorial*

*On May 17, 2000, AFT dedicated a memorial to Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers from 1974 until his death in 1997.*

*It was created by his daughter Jennie, a sculptor, and it uses photographic images and artifacts to portray Shanker as a union leader and a teacher. The article that follows is an expansion of the talk Jennie Shanker gave at the dedication. In it, she invites us to follow the process by which the germ of an idea grew, changed, and finally took shape as a memorial that honors Al Shanker's life and leadership with simple eloquence and power.*

—EDITOR

BY JENNIE SHANKER

**N**EARLY A YEAR after my father died, I got a call from the AFT saying that the union planned to commission a Shanker memorial piece for the national headquarters, and asking me if I'd be willing to accept the commission. Doing a memorial piece is a huge responsibility for any artist; being asked to do one for a parent is in a category of its own, and is very rare.

One of my first reactions to the request was that I had already begun making work about my father. During the years of his illness, and in the year since he'd died, I'd done a number of pieces, modifications of blackboards, in which he was a felt presence. Although



this presence would not have been evident to anyone else, having done these "blackboard" pieces gave me some confidence that I could handle AFT's offer.

Nevertheless, a memorial demands

certain things of its maker. And this commission was not like any work I had previously done. There were many questions to consider, above and beyond what I as an artist needed and wanted to do: What did the AFT as an organization need this piece to be? What would people who had worked with my father, and who felt a real loss, want to encounter every day? How could I make something that would have meaning for people in the future—people who would never have known him? What was important to remember about him—both personally and professionally? Did I understand him well enough—and as his daughter, could I distance myself enough—to portray him? What kind of memorial would *he* have liked for himself? There was a lot to think about.

Finding a balance that seemed right took many months. The following is an account of the process of creating the AFT memorial for my father.

*(Above) Jennie Shanker's studio showing the finished memorial. (Opposite) The memorial's principal image, created from two photographs, with Al Shanker in the center foreground.*





TEACHERS AND PARENTS DEMAND FAIRNESS

TEACHERS make the DIFFERENCE

AF - FREE THE SOUTH FROM TRADE UNIONISTS

AFT supports FARAH STRIKERS

SICK PAY for SUBSTITUTES

UAW supports Newark Teachers

OPPOSED TO TAYLOR LAW

SOLIDARITY FOREVER

DO NOT TAKE ONE MILLION SCHOOL CHILDREN!

Support Nurses they care for you

CONTRACTS MUST BE HONORED

PUBLIC EMPLOYEE: Bringing out the best in America

DIGNITY Memphis Sanitation Strike

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING NOT COLLECTIVE BIDDING

TEACHERS OF BABYSITTERS

QUALITY EDUCATION

Justice for Socialist Janity

Full Employment = More schools

Solidarity

FAIR SHARE FOR SCHOOLS

TEACHERS FOR LABOR LAW REFORM

Paraprofessionals in Education Education in Democracy

Equal Opportunities YES! Quotas NO!

VIVA LA HUELGA

ON STRIKE for HIGHER WAGES

No Podemos Ensuciar sin Dignidad

HANDS OFF SOVIETISM and SARKISISM

WE DEMAND EQUITY WE WANT COST OF LIVING

Civil Rights plus Full Employment equals FREEDOM

REGISTER TO VOTE the future depends on it

TAX BREAKS FOR THE RICH MEAN NO BREAKS FOR OUR CHILDREN

TEACHERS WANT THE CHANGE TO TEACH!

PUBLIC EDUCATION: America's First Line of Defense

ORGANIZE YOUR CAMPUS Your Professional Work Depends on it

WE WANT BETTER SCHOOLS FOR ALL CHILDREN

The TRUTH Shall make you FREE not FIRED!

PARENTS ACT NOW! Overloaded Classes Harm your Children

40 in a class. No Way

THE RIGHT EAT DUTY FREE LUNCH

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING FOR TEACHERS

ZERO TOLERANCE OF VIOLENCE

RIGHT FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS FIGHT AGAINST VOUCHERS

More Effective Schools through Collective Bargaining

EDUCATION REFORM

Her Future Is At Stake

FREE AL SHANKER

Teach with Dignity Learn with Dignity

Breaking Teachers is not Break for Kids

DUE PROCESS for TEACHERS

TEACHERS WANT WHAT CHILDREN NEED

THEY WENT TO JAIL FOR US. WE WILL STAY OUT OF SCHOOL FOR THEM!

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

We are PREPARED to NEGOTIATE on the basis of EQUALITY and JUSTICE

HOTEL WORKERS SAY: FREE SHANKER REPEAL TAYLOR LAW!

HIGH STANDARDS for STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

TEACHERS NEED ELIMINATION OF NON PROFESSIONAL CHILDREN'S TEACHERS WANT TO TEACH

Bad morale that should

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## The 'Blackboard' Pieces

In 1994, at the beginning of my father's struggle with cancer, I produced a series of pieces that looked, at first glance, like ordinary blackboards. These "blackboards" were actually made by coating mirrors with a slate paint and scratching thin, horizontal lines into the surface once it was dry. Doing this exposed tiny slivers of mirror and created a shadowy reflection of anyone standing in front of it.

I thought of the blackboard as a universal symbol of a place where we all go to learn. Although blackboards are blank, mute surfaces, they can carry a remarkable amount of information. The mirror, I felt, is similar to the blackboard in its ability to carry information. Its surface reflects color, depth, and movement in time. But, although a mirror conveys more physical information, it is limited in its ability to carry meaning. So the two materials—the blackboard and the mirror—complemented each other.

As is true with any artwork, the "blackboard" pieces could be understood in several different ways. As mentioned earlier, I found them to be a kind of stand-in or symbol for my father. At the time, I believe I was in the process of thinking about the effect he had had on me and others.

Indeed, I found his influence (or reflection) in everything. When anyone in my family engaged in a discussion or argument, its structure would be influenced by his type of thorough, logical thinking. Almost everyone whom my father knew well owed a hobby or interest to one of his enthusiasms. I would hear his words (his *exact* words) coming out of the mouths of strangers on radio talk shows within a week or two of a convention where he had presented new ideas. These people would speak with passionate conviction, as if, for that moment, my father had become a part of their identity. The threat his illness posed made me want, all the more, to understand who he was, and at the same time, it made me nervous about my own identity. Who would I be without him?

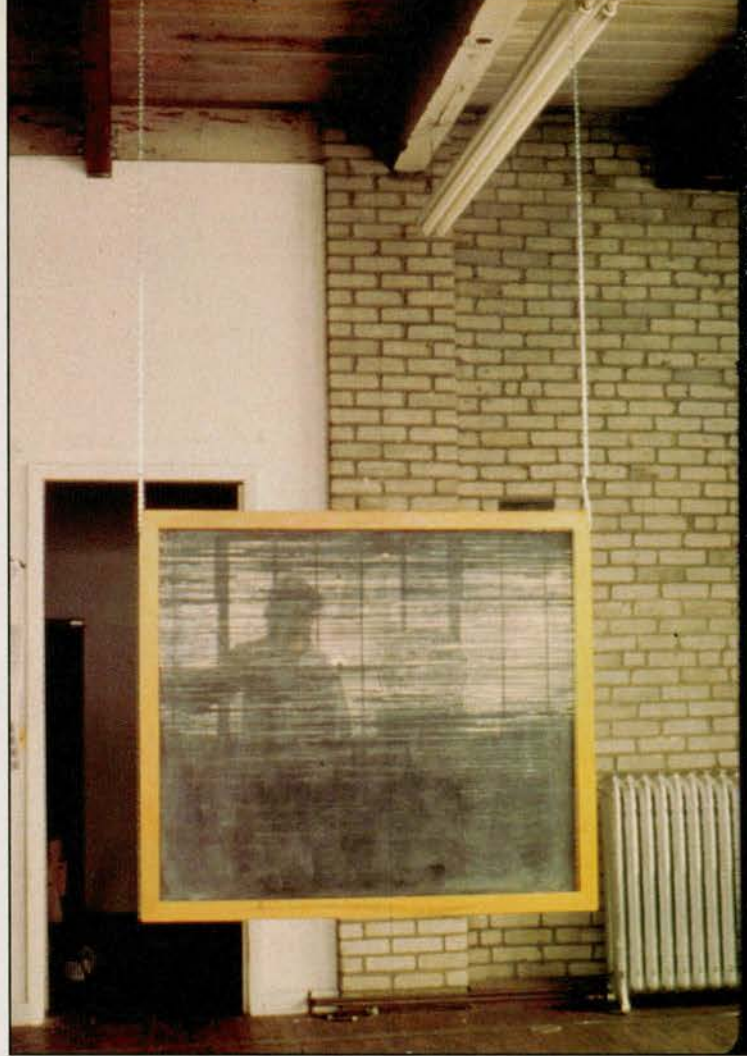
Now, someone else might stumble on the blackboard and its effect and think none of this. When forced to explain my reason for using the blackboard, I would talk about how it had to do with seeing through a filter, the filter being the blackboard (the filter, for me, was also my father).

So from the moment I received the call from AFT, I felt that some version of the "blackboard" pieces would be a part of the memorial. At the same time though, it was clear that my father's presence would need to be more explicit in the "blackboards." I decided that the memorial needed a recognizable portrayal of him. It would have both a literal image and a symbolic component.

When we think of a portrayal of a person in a memorial sculpture, the first idea that comes to mind is a life-sized bronze or marble statue. The figure is usually idealized, and an accompanying plaque offers a few lines of text as a tribute. I knew that my father

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*Jennie Shanker is a sculptor and teacher who lives in Philadelphia. Archival photographs courtesy of the United Federation of Teachers archives; photographs of artwork by Jennie Shanker.*



*(Above) One of the "blackboard" pieces, showing the reflection of the viewer; that Jennie Shanker made before her father's death. (Top right) The first version of the Shanker memorial incorporating a photo silkscreen image of the strikers on the left, and a "blackboard" image of Al Shanker, on the right. (Right) A collage of photographic images assembled by Shanker as she worked through various ideas for the memorial. (Below) Al Shanker leading marchers across the Brooklyn Bridge in 1975, the photograph that appears, much modified, in the foreground of the memorial's central image.*







would have absolutely hated being idealized, and a few lines of text would be insufficient to speak of him. I did spend some time considering ways of working in collaboration with a figurative artist but ultimately decided it was the wrong way to go. Instead, I would work from photographs.

I went to the archives of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City, where my father was president from 1964 to 1986, and sorted through hundreds of images. There were photos of my father there that spanned more than 35 years of his life: professional portraits and photographs of him at meetings, speaking, shaking hands, marching, striking, getting out of jail, and working in his office. I selected certain ones from a gut instinct. I felt his presence most strongly in shots that showed him in his element, speaking from a podium or into a microphone at some

event. There were also a number of images where he was leading or part of a crowd of marchers or strikers. I made photocopies of the best of these images, then took them back to the studio.

I photocopied each of them multiple times and at different scales, and began “sketching” by cutting them out and juxtaposing them in different ways. After putting together a number of possibilities, I chose two. Both showed him with a crowd. In one, he was in the foreground with strikers carrying signs in the background. In the other, he was part of the group of marchers.

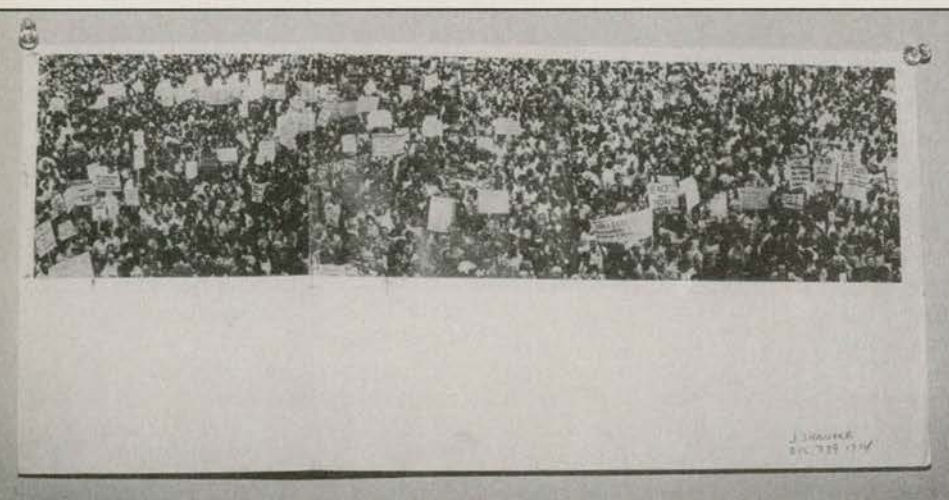
It was clear that I would need to find some way of incorporating text into the piece. There were so many things that he had struggled for and accomplished, it would be impossible for an image to convey them all. The signboards in the photo provided a perfect medium for the text.

At this point, I felt I was close to a decision about the imagery—and I had already decided on the materials—so I began looking for a framework in which to place the images. I came up with a few ideas that had potential and began building models.

The most obvious answer was to contain all the elements within a blackboard. While experimenting with this, I got the idea of making the blackboard into a type of book by folding it in half. I built two different models using variations on this theme. In the better one, the opening page of the book (to the left side of the viewer) contained a photo silkscreen image of the marchers with picket signs. It was printed in relief using the blackboard paint, which made it appear as if it were etched into slate. The back page (to the right side of the viewer) contained a screen-printed re-



*(Below) A strike scene that, along with the Brooklyn Bridge photo, served as raw material for the central image of the memorial.*





lief image of my father. It was also done using blackboard paint printed on a mirror. The background area had lines scratched into it that exposed glimpses of mirror. A piece of glass, set like the inner page of a book, between the front and back covers, reflected the image of the marchers. The book would be situated in such a way that to view the image of my father, you would have to look through the reflected image of the marchers with their signs.

This model seemed, in many ways, like a good solution. But I felt that separating my father from his fellow activists—and the content in the signs they carried—was a problem. The two basic elements belonged together, not on separate pages.

### A Composite Reality

I went back to the photocopies that included my father in the marching crowd. There was a great photograph of him, Sandy Feldman, and other UFTers in the frontline of a march over the Brooklyn Bridge in 1975. (See photo, page 36.) I decided to take this line of people and put them in front of the image of the striking crowd. To create a new image from the originals, I scanned both into the computer and used a program designed to manipulate photographs to meld them together. Since there were too few people in the frontline of the bridge photo to fit with the striking crowd, I extended the frontline by copying and pasting the original image several times to extend it. This meant that some of the frontliners appeared three or four times, which looked terrible, so I altered their clothes and replaced their faces with others from miscellaneous photographs.

After the frontline was blended in with the background crowd, I erased the content from the original picket signs and filled them in with selected slogans that came from photos of old strike boards, and the recollections of union members. Each item represented something that had occurred during my father's terms as president of the UFT and AFT. Each, in its own way, represented a chapter in his story.



*(Above) An early stage in the creation of the central image, using a computer. The horizontal photograph of the marchers (previous page) is in the process of being made into a vertical image by repeating groups of people and reducing the size of the figures as they recede in space. Some of the repeated figures in the frontline have not yet been reworked to differentiate them. (A mirror image of the man holding a white coat over his arm, at center left, and the man beside him appears at center right.) Many have been slightly altered. (The policeman in the left center is repeated at right without his hat, badge, tie clip, and walkie-talkie; the three men in the frontline holding signboards are actually the same figure, slightly modified.) The words on most signboards have been deleted, preparatory to putting in new text.*

Many of the signs had to be constructed from scratch, and it was tricky to make them look as though they belonged in the original picture. For example, the slogans had to be in an appropriate typestyle and the perspective adjusted so the words sat properly on signboards that were turned at all kinds of angles. The light and shadow on the signboards had to be convincing, and the signboards had to give the impression of receding in space. At the same time, if the letters be-





(Above) Objects Shanker created as she was building the memorial, including the "book" with Al Shanker's photo (at right) that appears in the completed memorial.

came much smaller than they were on the front-row signs, they would not be readable. Adjusting the text and the image took more than six weeks.

Once the image was believable—and the text was readable—I had to decide about the material on which to print the image. If I used a blackboard, the image would be too dark to see. Remaining with a classroom theme, I began working with slide projection screens. I printed the image on a few yards of silverscreen material and attached it to a retractable window-shade rod. The idea was that the slide projection screen, with the image printed on it, would hang over and in front of the blackboard, replicating a standard classroom arrangement.

I then realized that by turning the blackboard vertically, and putting it into a frame that had some depth, the blackboard became a kind of window, and the slide projection screen became a type of window shade. This framework maintained part of the idea behind the blackboard: A person sees the world (sees out the window) through this filter (education), which also allows a person to see him or herself. The shade is half drawn to show the image, but it is also as if it is being shut over the window, a reference to my father's passing. In addition, there is a hint that, as time goes on, the crowd will continue to move forward, and the shade will continue to be pulled down as the marchers advance.

At this point, I felt that I had represented my father as a union leader. But the piece seemed only to be about him as an activist. It had his intensity, but it made him seem too harsh; it didn't reflect the passionate, pragmatic, and visionary person he was.

I began looking for something more personal and individual, and I started making objects that reminded me of him. I made copies of his eyeglasses in black plexiglass and cast some books and a wine bottle in tinted epoxy resin. I played with placing some of the photocopied images behind the books, which created an interesting, intimate effect. One photo in particular, in which he is looking up and smiling (as if he had just surprised himself by saying something unexpected and particularly telling), evoked him in a way that filled the gap in the piece. The book was set on the "windowsill," (or "chalk tray") along with a piece of chalk,

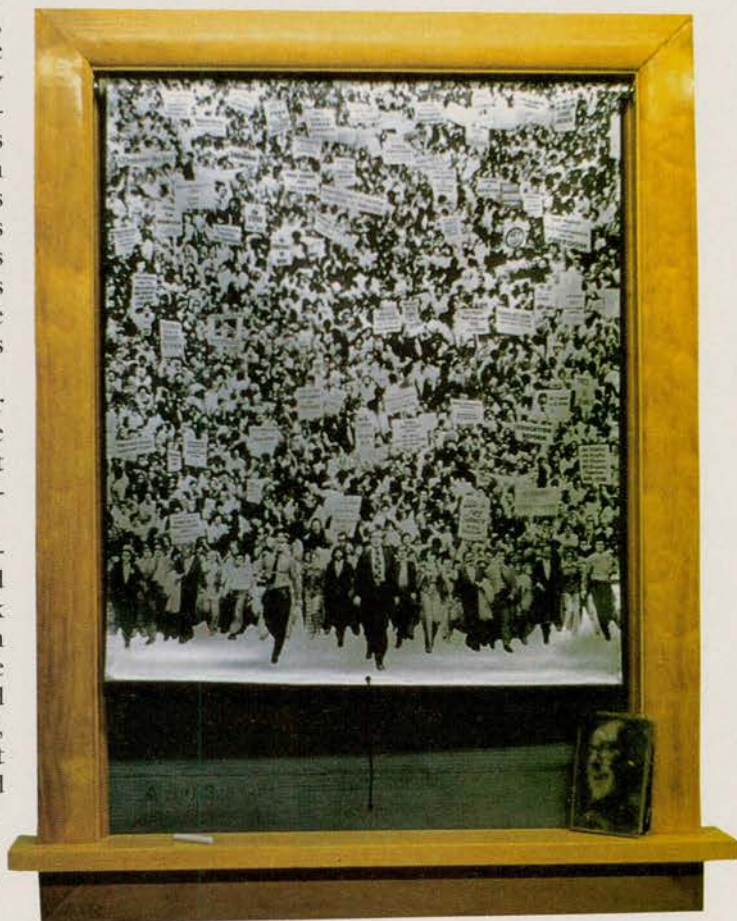
(At right) The completed memorial.

and the piece was complete.

Although no memorial could ever fully capture my father, I hope it shows him in a way that he would have appreciated. It emphasizes his work and accomplishments without separating him from the people who really made it possible for his vision to be fulfilled. The story it tries to tell is not just about an individual, but about a period of time in the history of a great organization. It contains a metaphor that identifies education as the key element in the development of an individual within society. My father's presence is understated but very real.

A memorial work is a gesture that is made to help people commemorate a person or event. In its greatest form, a memorial is referred to as a monument, a thing of massive and enduring value and significance. I believe that the best memorial to Albert Shanker, and a true monument, is the AFT and the work of its members. My father's legacy and vision are clearly alive and well within it. □

**Author's Note:** Thanks to Philadelphia printmaker Lois Johnson, chair of the Fine Arts Department at the University of the Arts, for helping me overcome technical difficulties related to printing in relief. Thanks also to Virgil Marti of Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop and Museum for helping me with the difficult task of producing a good print on the silverscreen material for the shade, as well as a limited edition of prints made from the image.





# AL SHANKER REMEMBERS

*In September and October 1996, when Al Shanker was dying of cancer, he gave a series of taped interviews to Jack Schierenbeck, a staff writer at the New York Teacher/City Edition. In the interviews, Al talked about the ideas and experiences that had shaped his life, ranging widely over subjects like education, politics, and trade unionism, the Cold War, and the Boy Scouts. The excerpts from the interviews that follow will give people who never knew Al a taste of his characteristic turn of mind—and those who did a chance to hear his voice once again. They also give us reason to look forward to the oral history that Schierenbeck is now preparing. The history will make extensive use of interviews and speeches, as well as recollections from people who knew Al. (See box, page 42.)*

—EDITOR

## **His assessment of himself as a student**

I didn't work very hard in school because my sister, who's a year and a half younger, was the perfect student in a rapid-advanced class, and I didn't want to compete with her. I was afraid of losing the competition. So I protected myself by not competing. Basically, I liked school but there were a lot of things in school I was bored with and if I was bored with something I didn't do it and would get into trouble, like grammar. So I went from the 1-class to the 3-class in the tracking system they had. That teacher kept me in school every day until I became a crackerjack at grammar. I loved history, social studies, and geography. I found mathematics very easy and I enjoyed it. I had some very good teachers who were into various mathematical recreations such as puzzles.

Later in high school, I took Spanish but didn't do very well. It was a lot of memorization, and I don't like sitting down and memorizing. With history it's different because it tells a story of how things fit into place—but not memorizing verbs. It was foolish because it turned out I have a natural bent for languages. If I'm in another country, I can pick up things rather quickly. If I'd just have put in a little effort....

## **On competition and learning**

I passed the exams to both Stuyvesant and Brooklyn Tech. I went to Stuyvesant and it was a very competitive, intensely competitive, school. By this time I took to [the competition] pretty well. A lot of people can't take it, and it's not good for everybody. I think a certain amount of competition is good but if carried to an extreme it can make a lot of people crazy. You do, though, have to have a certain amount of stress. I think that what we've done in American education is to largely get rid of the stress at a cost of losing a lot of the energy that goes with trying to succeed.

## **A different kind of merit badge**

I had these dreams of becoming a Boy Scout. So when I was 12, I went to the local church [in Long Island City, Queens] but they said the troop was only open to Catholics. About a year later, a troop started in this low-income housing project. The scoutmaster was a local fireman. Besides helping us pass the various tests for advancement, he has us marching and doing drill. So I went down to Boy Scout headquarters and got a copy of the scoutmaster's handbook. It said you really weren't supposed to do military drill but more outdoor stuff. So I drew up a petition to the scoutmaster saying we ought to have less drill and march and more camping and hiking. I got a number of my friends to sign and we sent it to the scoutmaster. I was really scared that something was going to happen to me. But he called us together and said he agreed. But since he was a fireman he didn't really have time to do all of this and that if we wanted to take responsibility for doing some of these things, such as hikes, we could. So that was sort of my first successful politically rebellious experience.

Not long after, just after Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, the scoutmaster was drafted. So he asked me to be the acting scoutmaster. Here I was at 14 or so passing kids on their tests. It also gave me my first organizing experience because the troop grew from 17 kids to about 85 plus a Cub Scout pack by the time I was





finished. Later, I engaged in a big political struggle on the scout committee when the men discharged from the army—maybe because they had been forced to do a lot of marching and drilling, they now wanted to be the guys who forced others to do the same. So I developed a newsletter, and so forth. So actually I got my first caucus-like political fighting in the Boy Scouts.

### **The seductiveness of socialism**

It's true I named my oldest son after [Karl] Marx—not with a "K." By the way, his middle name is Eugene after [Socialist Party radical] Eugene Debs. I was a socialist and very militant anti-Stalinist since high school. I joined the Socialist Party when I was an 18-year-old freshman at the University of Illinois, where I later became head of the campus socialist studies club. I read a lot of Marx.

The guy I really admired for a long time—and I guess you could say he was an anarchist—was Dwight MacDonald and his *Politics* magazine. Then there was Jerzy Glicksman, a Polish socialist, who wrote the first book on the Soviet Gulag where he'd been a prisoner. I still have an autographed copy. I liked George Orwell, was an early reader of Arthur Koestler, and the most powerful, Ignazio Silone, an Italian communist and brilliant novelist. These were very powerful influences on me, and basically they all involve a type of moral thinking.

Reading these people and others made me realize that you had to take seriously the warnings of the Founding Fathers about government. That if government had such powers you couldn't restrict it to just things that were good. You had to have a system of real checks and balances on state power. As for capitalism: I embraced it slowly—I didn't embrace it on one day in 1949— but grew to accept the idea as necessary for political freedom as well as economic prosperity. Still the idea of socialism is very seductive. As a kid growing up, I had spent lots of time thinking about injustice. And socialism basically provides a theory that explains why all this is happening. It's a good catch-all. That's why it had such appeal to so many people be-



cause, gee whiz, you put on that set of glasses and all sorts of things fall into place. But it's all wrong.

### Winning the Cold War?

Do I feel exonerated that what I said all those years about the communist threat has proven true? Well, yes. But even now with all the stuff being translated out of the KGB archives and the Venona files [Soviet messages concerning Cold War espionage against the U.S.]... Look, we have the stuff on Alger Hiss [State Department official in the Truman administration] now that proves he was a Soviet agent. There's no question about it. But among the liberals, 97 out of 100 will still say that he was innocent.

### Multinational corporations and the nation state

As a result of the development of world corporate power, there will be some good things happening. It may make more high-quality things available at cheaper prices, whatever. But there are things about it which are very bad, namely the undermining of the nation state. Whether we're in control of our own destiny. The whole question of whether the nation state means very much anymore. When you start tracing these companies, you ultimately don't know who the hell owns them or if they have any loyalty to any nation. These things have to be dealt with by means of fresh ideas, which nobody has come up with.

### Tough kids

When it came to classroom management, I couldn't take the really tough kids. I wasn't teaching those kids anything. I'm not talking about your average kids; I did fine with them. Even kids who were slow but were very well-meaning and who wanted to learn. But when it came to violent kids or the kids who were emotionally disturbed, I just had no way of getting through to them. There are some teachers who could—I never figured out how they were able to do it, and they learned it on their own because nobody ever taught that in any ed course. Or it may have been personality traits of a certain sort which are not transferable—certain ways

of demonstrating strength of will to these kids that you're not going to get away with this. I tried to find the right balance, but I was not successful.

### John Dewey and his followers

I had taken three education courses in school that weren't particularly helpful. They had nothing to do with how to teach kids. I still find fault with much of what's taught in education schools. I think it suffers from what it has always suffered from. It has a certain ideological conception of what good teaching is and what learning is—which is a distortion of John Dewey. Dewey had reacted against the old-time education which thought that you just take a kid and just stuff his brain. He understood that the only way you learn is if you're interested and that the learner couldn't just be a recipient but had to be active. On the other hand, he believed that what the youngster had to learn was not to be determined by whatever that youngster happened to be interested in. That there was a world of disciplines out there and that these disciplines were powerful ways of organizing knowledge.

And that you're not going to be part of the world or effective if you weren't educated in the disciplines. Now what a lot of Dewey's followers did was that they just took the child-centered approach and said that whatever the child is interested is what he's going to learn and whenever he is ready. That it doesn't make any difference what he learns. It's all of equal value. Dewey himself was shocked when he went into some of these progressive schools and saw what was going on in his name. But essentially, we have that now. That has won the day. Basically it is the orthodoxy. It's the politically correct. What you have in education schools is very little emphasis on the disciplines and subject matter. So essentially what you end up with is an anti-intellectual philosophy. It's pretty awful.

### At the negotiating table

As a negotiator, you have to know what are the interests of the other side: what are the absolute no-no's, the things they're not going to do to create impossible situations for themselves. This was a trait I had even as a kid. I'd started role-playing, trying to see things from the other guy's point of view. What is it that they're able to do or not able to do. If you haven't thought of that in advance you're really playing Russian roulette.

### Ideas are 'not a game'

Most people in the union who wanted to go places felt, like everybody else, I was looking for a yes-person. There were a number of yes-people. But Sandy Feldman was certainly no yes-person, and she ended up president of the organization [United Federation of Teachers]. Look, I like a good argument or a debate. Anything worth having a debate or an argument about I'm intense about it. But I've always been approachable in all areas. I do listen to what other people say. I do change my views. I recognize the validity of others. I can dump mine. But I'm not going to treat it as a game. It's not a game. It's often very important, sometimes life or death. And I treat it that way and I expect people to treat their own ideas that way. □

## Contribute to an Oral History of Al Shanker

Jack Schierenbeck is interested in talking to anyone who knew Al Shanker during his childhood days in Long Island City; his years as a student at Stuyvesant High School, the University of Illinois, and the Columbia University graduate school; his career in the classroom; and as a unionist, a life-long anticommunist, and education reformer; or as a cook, photographer, collector, etc.

You can contact Schierenbeck by writing him care of the *New York Teacher/City Edition*, 48 East 21st Street, New York, NY 10010, or e-mailing him at [jackschierenbeck@aol.com](mailto:jackschierenbeck@aol.com).



## SWORDS AND PENS

(Continued from page 10)

thinking skills by working with graphics technologies such as lists, matrices, flow charts, and illustrations, which are widely found in textbooks and workplace materials.

It is still true that becoming highly and broadly literate when one starts from a low baseline of both knowledge (vocabulary, concepts) and word recognition takes a long time. However, the functional content approach is a speedy and effective way to get adults from basic literacy to the point where they can get better jobs or achieve other goals like more-informed parenting. Then, if they care to, they can embark on a program of life-long learning, including continuous, well-rounded reading, that will make them literate enough to qualify for higher education or advanced job training or simply to enjoy the many personal, social, and cultural benefits that require a high level of literacy.

### The K-12 Education System

Within the public schools, the military research supports the use of "contextualized" teaching and learning that was recommended by the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). Unlike small children—who tend to do things to please their parents or teachers—teenagers usually want to understand *why* they should invest time and mental energy in learning something. In this respect they are like adults. Functional Context Education can adapt the same principles first used to teach young military recruits to teach today's high school students who are in danger of being left behind because they have inadequate reading or math skills.

Much work in this area remains to be done. However, Dale Parnell, former head of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, has already shown how Functional Context Education principles can be successfully applied to secondary school and community college education. His colleagues at the Center for Occupational Research and Development, Inc., have developed "contextualized" curricula for teaching mathematics and science, and they have worked with other groups to develop secondary and college level courses of study based on FCE principles. For instance, a visit to the Internet site at [www.cord.org](http://www.cord.org) provides access to summaries of work with the Appalachian Contextual Teaching and Learning Network, funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission. This work shows how teachers can use multimedia technology to teach the more abstract, academic content of mathematics and science in the functional contexts of familiar community and workplace settings. So students both know the reason for learning the material in question and are able to use their prior knowledge of familiar contexts to relate to the more abstract content of mathe-

First Aid

Text Representation of Lifesaver Step 1

In combat or on the field, doctors and medics can not be every place to treat injuries as they happen. You may have to give fast emergency care to yourself or to someone else. Such emergency medical care before a doctor or medic can see the patient is called first aid. The most immediate first aid steps are the four basic lifesaver steps. Follow these steps in order: (1) clear the airway and restore breathing and heartbeat. ... (2), etc.

The first step must be done immediately. The injured person's life may depend on it. He can not breathe if something blocks his mouth or throat. Take out anything from the mouth that does not belong there. If the person still can not breathe, give him artificial respiration. The best method to use if you can is the mouth-to-mouth method ...

Picture Representation of Lifesaver Step 1: 7th grade level reading student

Flow Chart Representation of Lifesaver Step 1: same student

Figure. Examples of reading-to-learn tasks in which students read a text, then draw a picture of what they have read, then reread and make a flow chart.

tics and science.

It's clear that Functional Context Education can help meet our nation's needs for more effective youth and adult education. We already have extensive experience using its principles to help semi-literate adults, and it should also be possible to develop new applications designed specifically to raise the skill levels of high school students who are struggling to meet new and higher standards. As we embark on this mission, it is satisfying to remember that we are continuing a tradition established by General George Washington and drawing on more than 200 years of the military's success in using pens, as well as swords, to preserve our nation's freedom. □

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## WRITING CONFERENCES

(Continued from page 27)

on the planet fewer than 10 years to spill their guts onto the writing tablet, or share their innermost thoughts, fears, or nightmares. That's not to say that in our safe, supportive classrooms children never bring up heartfelt issues and traumatic moments. Of course they do, and teachers handle these issues professionally, privately, and confidentially. But it is to say that we never ask young children to add details, think about their lead, and make sure their dialogue is authentic when their piece really demands seeking parental or professional intervention.

There are many topics that will move an audience. We delight in pieces that sound like real children wrote them. We're not interested in pushing children to write in such sophisticated or precocious ways that readers can't believe children did the writing. Yes, we want our children to write in powerful ways, but at the elementary level that does not require complicated genres, layered meanings, surprising symbolism, or heart-wrenching topics. Childhood is short enough.

Enjoy 7-year-old Haden's narrative entitled, "The Dress Up Disaster." (See below.) We consider it a

powerful piece of personal narrative writing.

### Finding Out if Students Understand How To Put Their Writing to Good Use

I worry when students have never put their writing to real-world uses. I often ask students the following types of questions, all variations on the same theme:

- Who might you give this to?
- Where might you send this?
- Who would benefit from reading this?
- How can you go public with this?
- How can this piece improve the quality of our lives at school or your life at home?
- Where in the real world does this piece of writing belong?

### Finding Out if Students Know How To Improve Their Writing

My fourth and final guideline, and the one I only think about when the first three conditions are in place, involves finding out if students have strategies for improving the work at hand. In other words, if students don't feel good about being asked to write, if they don't take risks, or put their writing to real-world uses, it's highly unlikely that I'll fret whether they know how to lift the quality of their work. When the first three conditions are in place, I feel fine about talking to young children about issues of crafting, revising, and editing their work.

I can imagine, however, an occasion

when helping an older student write a memorable piece might be the only way to make him feel better about being asked to write. There are older students who, like many adults, appear unhappy when asked to write because they have set very high standards for themselves. Their work is never quite good enough. For the most part, however, my belief in making students feel good about being asked to write has more to do with helping young students discover that writing is important, self-satisfying work. I want our students to believe that it is worth carving out time, in school and at home, to take their writing seriously. I hope many will eventually write with gusto and joy. When children seem bored with writing, or annoyed at having been asked, I don't try to improve the quality of work they do not care about. First, I would help them discover how to make writing count in their lives.

When I do feel comfortable helping a child revise a piece of writing they care about, there are many teaching paths I might take. Any of the following questions might direct my conference:

- What questions might your classmates have if they hear this piece?
- What do you want your readers to think about (feel, realize) when they hear your writing?
- What kind of additional material might you need to do the best job possible?
- How can you describe the shape of your writing (the architecture of the piece)? Does it feel well-balanced and complete?
- What lessons are you learning from the literature you are reading? Are there specific techniques that your favorite writers use that you might consider trying on this piece?
- How can I help you make this the best piece ever?

It should be noted that these frameworks not only inform the conferences I have with children but they can also serve as guidelines when I launch writing classes, design mini-lessons, or carve out courses of study. □

#### The Dress Up Disaster by Haden

My sister and I were playing dress up. Colby wore a pink tutu and beautiful cape with lots of different designs and beautiful colors like red, green, pink, purple, and blue. They were the kind of designs that were very much like the windows in a church. The cape was tied around her neck. I was wearing a long veil that was like a skirt. The shift I wore showed my belly button when I picked my belly. Colby and I got the clothes from the cabinet next to my bed. I pretended to go to work so I grabbed a purse, slipped it over my head, and onto my shoulders. As I was fixing my hair, Colby shut the door with a BANG and my hand got stuck in it.

I screamed and burst into tears. Finally, Colby pulled open the door. She ran to get Daddy while the tears came out of my eyes like shooting stars. When I saw Daddy, I felt safer and knew that my hand would get better soon.

THE END





## NEW ZEALAND

(Continued from page 33)

Corollaries to the view that problems were at root managerial were that intervention from the center would be short term and that it would involve tight accountability provisions. As a result, new funds were allocated for short periods, typically six months, and release of additional promised funds was made contingent on the school meeting certain performance milestones. But these tight restrictions were not well conceived and made it difficult for the schools to hire good people for projects designed to last two or three years. "Six-month deadlines are not milestones," said Terry Bates, the principal of one of the low-performing schools. "They're 100-meter dashes."

Such managerial fixes suffered from another more fundamental flaw: They did not address the real challenges facing the downward spiraling schools, many of which were outside the control of principals and teachers. They did nothing, for example, to address the difficulty such schools faced in attracting high-quality teachers.

Over time, however, central authorities were forced to adopt a more proactive approach and to provide funding for programs ranging from professional development of teachers to the creation of mini-schools. Policymakers took such direct action reluctantly, however, since they were in effect conceding that giving schools autonomy, incentives to attract students, and competent management was not a sure-fire formula for success. The spiraling schools had all of these elements, but still they could not overcome the obstacles they faced.

Eventually senior administrators came to concede that, however well it may have worked in middle and upper-middle-class communities, the education marketplace was not suitable for troubled urban schools. "Some schools will never work under this system, and for them we will have to have a different system," conceded Brian Donnelly, a former associate minister of Education. "Some will have to be under direct control of ministry, and South Auckland will get a design for schooling that will be unique."

### A Balancing of Interests

The Tomorrow's Schools reforms raise some broad questions about the applicability of market concepts to the delivery of public education, including the question of how to balance the interests of various stakeholders.

Any state education system has a multitude of stakeholders with different interests. These range from the central government, which funds public education for important public purposes, to students, parents, teachers, administrators, employers, and others. The legitimate interests of these parties are sometimes in conflict, however, and it is important to have institutional means to deal with these conflicts.

New Zealand policymakers found themselves confronting such a conflict almost before the ink was dry on the Tomorrow's Schools legislation in 1989 when the board of Seatoun Primary School in Wellington,

the equivalent of a K-6 school in the U.S., announced that it would add two more grades to its program so that its students would no longer have to travel to a nearby intermediate school. This decision had major consequences for competing primary schools as well as for the intermediate school, which faced an immediate falloff in enrollment. Although the resulting controversy was vigorous, the minister of Education declined to enjoin. In keeping with the principle of self-governance, he asserted that the wishes of current parents in a school must prevail over all others.

As already noted, the balancing-of-interests issue also arose regarding policy on how to determine which students would be admitted to popular schools that had more applicants than openings. Placing admissions decisions largely in the hands of local schools was another way of affirming that their interests took precedence over those of other stakeholders.

By the end of the 1990s the government came to realize that structures were necessary to restore some balance between the interests of autonomous schools and other stakeholders. Limitations were placed on the right of schools to make unilateral decisions about which grades they would teach, and popular schools lost the right to frame their enrollment policies without consultation with other schools and central authorities.

### Winners and Losers

Another broad issue has to do with the creating of "winner" and "loser" schools. This is what competition does—create winners and losers. But the question arises whether it is defensible, morally or practically, to organize a public school system in such a way that, when it is running as designed, it will inevitably exacerbate the problems of some schools and have a negative impact on many students and families.

Such a situation might be justified if the competitive environment led to improvement in all schools—a rising tide that lifts all boats even though some might be going faster. Similarly, such an approach might be justified if, knowing in advance that some schools would become losers, central authorities were ready to intervene when schools started to spiral downward. However, neither of these conditions held in New Zealand.

Proponents of charter schools and vouchers in the United States and other developed countries would be well advised to recognize that while market-based reform may work in middle-class areas where schools compete for students on a level playing field, they will never—in and of themselves—solve the problems of troubled urban schools. In a compulsory education system, setting up some schools for inevitable failure is an unacceptable price to pay for other schools to succeed.

New Zealand's spiraling schools had the freedom, the incentives, and in many cases the managerial ability to compete effectively in the education marketplace, yet they were still unable to do so. Some direct intervention from the center will always be necessary for such schools, and provision for such assistance should be anticipated from the outset. □



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## LETTERS

(Continued from page 2)

inexperienced new teachers in our district and surrounding districts trying to satisfy the current "education gurus" with daily group activities and lengthy projects to teach concepts that could be covered in one class period. Their results on the June tests were less than impressive. What a shame that so many "veteran" teachers are now exploring ways to retire early to avoid being forced to adopt methods they are uncomfortable with.

—REBECCA RURY

JORDAN-ELBRIDGE HIGH SCHOOL  
JORDAN, NEW YORK

As someone just getting acquainted with *American Educator* (NEA members in Minnesota have recently begun to receive your publication as a result of the state-level merger of the Minnesota Federation of Teachers and the Minnesota Education Association), I want to commend your organization for providing the most absorbing, relevant, and substantive discussion of educational issues I've seen of late. Gilbert T. Sewall's "Lost in Action" and Vincent Ryan Ruggiero's "Bad Attitude" in the Summer 2000 issue especially gave me food for thought and will provide plenty of discussion between me and my peers.

Contrary to public opinion and sometimes to my own observations, this publication gives me hope, that indeed, teachers are engaged in professional conversation. More often than not, our educational institutions—whether union or school—seek to promote self-image and preservation rather than engage in self-study and honest appraisal. I can hardly stand one more photocopied "celebrating" how great we are, what remarkable things we are doing! This is not to say that there isn't much to celebrate, yet "feel-good press" does little for my practice in the classroom. My triumphs are more diffuse and delayed than what I commonly see portrayed. Such press rarely captures the difficulties, complexities, and absurdities of our profession.

*American Educator*, in this most recent issue, however, dared to respect my intelligence and my desire to reflect upon cultural and educa-

tional trends. Thank you for the thoughtful discussion and debate. You address my everyday reality while reminding me of why I want to teach.

—KIRSTEN VAAGE

NINTH-GRADE LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER  
CHASKA, MINNESOTA

Gilbert T. Sewall expresses his belief that the more traditional classroom is being supplanted by an activities-based curriculum. Sewall believes this trend has caused both traditional curriculum and activities in reading, writing, and critical thinking to suffer. In Sewall's opinion, today's teachers no longer recognize, value, or have the expertise to present a more traditional lesson that is not only informative but stimulating for the teacher as well as the students.

As an educator, I can appreciate Sewall's concern if it is true that facts and knowledge are being replaced by games and activities in schools throughout America. However, Sewall appears to be making sweeping generalizations about today's classrooms without having the statistical proof to support those claims. He cites a 1996 study that queried only a limited sample of 65 teachers. Also, Sewall did not address how the survey questions were posed and what the actual responses were, or how lessons proceeded *after* initial interest was established.

Sewall's article does cite projects and activities that appear to be trivial and meaningless, but examples could be given of ineffective traditional classroom instruction as well. I disagree with his premise that because so much bias exists today against a teacher-centered classroom there is a major trend taking place from the traditional to more "activities-based learning," with the increasing belief that reading and writing are boring and should be replaced.

Instead, I see more educators and officials recognizing that reading and writing standards need to be raised, and acting on that belief. However, some of those same individuals also know that many of today's students, for a host of reasons, are not only living in a different world than that of their parents, but that their needs are different,



too. Many need to be externally motivated, to see the relevance of what they are expected to learn, and are more likely to learn if they are actively engaged in the learning process. Also, transfer of learning to real-life situations is not automatic for many students. Meaningful activities can help make those connections. While Sewall argues for more lecturing and note-taking in the classroom, research has shown that the auditory mode is *not* the predominant learning style of individuals. Rather, the combined use of visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic approaches possible in hands-on tasks will enhance learning for all students.

No responsible person would argue with Sewall that a balance is needed when determining the role that "hands-on learning" should play in today's schools. Much thought needs to be given to the purpose, planning, and expected outcomes of an "activities-based" lesson. I agree that the activity or game, no matter how entertaining, should never be the lesson, but rather a way to teach that lesson more effectively. Also, much critical thinking, reading, writing, and sharing of ideas must take place.

In making the decisions for what and how instruction takes place in the classroom, the role of the teacher is pivotal. Teachers have the responsibility of determining not only if and when to use a certain activity, but what activity best fits the purpose. I don't believe that most educators would accept activity that is meaningless and content that is irrelevant. To ensure that doesn't happen, all tasks, projects, and activities should first be based on a solid foundation of knowledge, regardless of the content area.

—EVELYN KOMANECKY  
CAMILLUS, NEW YORK

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#### BAD ATTITUDE

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I just finished reading the article, "Bad Attitude," (Summer 2000, *American Educator*) and all I have to say to Mr. Ruggiero is this: Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you for being someone who finally, at last, says what I've been thinking for years and years.

I'm a good teacher. Moreover, I

love teaching. Unlike many people who go into education as a default career choice, teaching was always a first choice, never a fallback position for me in case my "real" career as an athlete/model/rock star happened to fail. However, each year I become more and more depressed at the absolutely poisonous attitudes I encounter on a daily basis, five hours a day, five days a week from my students. "This sucks," I've heard. "This class is boring." "Get your ass out of my face," I've heard. "I'm outta here," I've heard. Mr. Ruggiero, if I thought I were the only one who was hearing these and similar sentiments, I would quit. I would quit tomorrow, because it would be obvious to me who was at fault...but I'm not the only one. In fact, I believe I receive fewer negative comments from students than do many of the teachers who are my colleagues and friends.

I've thought for some time that students essentially think of me and other teachers—and maybe other people—as essentially false constructions, like puppets or mannequins, immune to criticism, to rudeness, to harshness. As teachers, we're supposed to sit there and take it, be told our classes suck, we suck, the books we love and chose because we thought they were interesting suck, and never say the slightest negative comment back because it might injure their self-esteem. We're not supposed to tell students that they themselves are responsible for their learning, but rather, are supposed to assume all responsibility for ourselves. We're not supposed to tell them that they're factually wrong about factual phenomena. After all, that might also damage their self-esteem—something they never worry about when dealing with others, like the mannequins in front of the chalkboard. We're supposed to do the job of entertainers, but be paid like educators and treated like whipping boys.

In my opinion, the focus on self-esteem (as opposed to self-discipline) has acted like a pernicious rot on the educational system, but as you point out, it doesn't stop there. It's infected the culture. I've noticed that certain words like "duty" aren't used much any more; nor are concepts such as "restraint"



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or "etiquette" currently in vogue, because all of them demand a degree of self-control deemed largely unnecessary in today's society. I thank you for being the first—and the only—person I've yet read to connect these ideas, to show the linkages between them. Reading your article, I felt like an exile in a foreign country who, suddenly and without warning, hears his own native tongue spoken in familiar accents by a perfect stranger. I would say "forgive the hyperbole," except that it isn't hyperbole at all. I thank you for your insights. I will buy your book at once.

—RACHEL BURKE  
LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

I've just finished reading the article "Bad Attitude," and I'm stunned at its timeliness. Recently, after 12 years in the Texas public school system, I quit my job. Although pay was an issue, the main reason I left was that I felt overwhelmed and unsupported in my efforts to combat the very problems described in the article. In my last three months, I sometimes felt like I was in the Twilight Zone. I was under relentless pressure to meet student needs, yet often I could not even get my students to be quiet long enough to teach, nor could I get administrators to acknowledge, much less act on, my requests that they discipline the kids after time-outs, detentions, and phone calls home proved futile. Mr. Ruggiero is right: The principal reason for today's academic deficiency is that our culture undermines young people's desire to learn and their respect for parents and teachers. Unfortunately, most administrators either don't know or don't care that the problem exists. I quit because I was tired of asking principals to discipline Johnny—in effect, asking them simply to do their jobs—and being told that the problem was I'm not teaching to his style of learning, I don't have "student-centered" instruction, I've given up on Johnny too soon, etc. Any teacher worth her salt knows the difference between a student who's trying to learn and needs more help, and one who's just not trying.

—ROBIN McMILLION  
AUSTIN, TEXAS



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