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CHAPTER 4

Children of the City Invincible: Camden, New Jersey

Money," writes the *Wall Street Journal*, "doesn't buy better education. . . . The evidence can scarcely be clearer."

The paper notes that student achievement has been static in the nation while per-pupil spending has increased by $1,800 in five years, after adjusting for inflation. "The investment," says the *Journal*, "hasn't paid off."

What the *Journal* does not add is that per-pupil spending grew at the same rate in the suburbs as it did in urban districts, and quite frequently at faster rates, thereby preventing any catch-up by the urban schools. Then, too, the *Journal* does not tell its readers that the current average figure masks disparities between the schools that spend above $12,000 (Rye, New York, for instance) and the ones that spend less than $3,000. Many of the poorest schools today spend less than the average district spent ten years ago.

"Increasing teachers' salaries doesn't mean better schooling," continues the *Journal*. "More experienced teach-

ers don't mean better schooling. Hiring teachers with advanced degrees doesn't improve schooling. . . ."

The *Journal* returns to this idea at every opportunity. "Big budgets don't boost achievement," it announces in another article. "It's parental influence that counts." Money, in fact, the paper says, is "getting a bad name. . . . Indeed, our fixation on numbers—spending per pupil, teacher salaries, class size—may only be distracting us from more fundamental issues. . . . It is even possible to argue that schools themselves don't matter much, at least compared with parental influence. . . . Cash alone can't do the trick. . . . The U.S. has already tried that. . . . It has failed. . . ."

If this is so, one wants to ask, how do we explain those affluent districts where high spending coincides with high achievement? The *Journal*'s answer is that, in these cases, it is not money spent by parents, but the value system that *impels* them to spend money, which is the decisive cause of high achievement in their schools. The *Journal* does not explain how it distinguishes between a parent's values and the cash expenditures that they allegedly inspire. It does not tell its readers that poor districts, where impoverished parent values are supposedly to blame for poor performance, often tax themselves at higher rates than do surrounding suburbs. Nor does it tell us why the wealthy districts, where so many of its readers live, keep on investing so much money in their schools. Nor does it exhort them to do otherwise.

The *Journal* expands upon the theme that higher spending brings "diminishing returns." After a certain point, it says, it makes only a "slight" difference. This is an argument which, if valid, ought to be applied first to control the spending at the upper limits—in the schools that spend $12,000 on each child, for example. Instead, it is employed to caution against wasting further money in the schools where less than half that much is spent. So an argument which, if it is applicable at all, applies most naturally to wealthy schools is used instead to further limit options for poor children.

There is a parallel in this to arguments that we have heard in New York City in regard to health facilities that serve the rich and poor. There, too, we were told by doctors that the more exhaustive services provided to rich patients

may not represent superior health care but a form of "over-utilization"—again the theory of "diminishing returns." But here again it is not argued that the rich should therefore be denied this luxury, if that is what it is, but only that it shouldn't be extended to poor people. Affluent people, it has often been observed, seldom lack for arguments to deny to others the advantages that they enjoy. But it is going a step further for the *Wall Street Journal* to pretend that they are not advantages.

In disparaging the value of reducing class size in the cities, the newspaper makes this interesting detour: "If deep cuts can be made—reducing large classes by perhaps half—solid benefits may accrue, and research suggests that even smaller cuts can help the performance of young children in particular. But, as a universal principle, the idea that smaller classes automatically mean more learning doesn't hold water."

This pile-up of unassailables protects the *Journal* against logical rebuttal. The use of several qualifying terms—"as a universal principle" and "automatically"—creates a cushion of apparent reason for these statements, but, of course, we are not speaking about universal principles but about specific applications; nor need a change be automatic to be beneficial. What is most disarming, and seductive, in this argument is that it reasons from an insufficient premise: Small cuts won't help. Deep cuts will; but these the *Journal* has ruled out. What if the *Journal* turned it around and worded it like this: "Meager reductions in class size will not make much difference; but cutting the size of classes in Chicago to the class size of Winnetka would be fair and it would do some good. This is what we therefore recommend." The *Journal* doesn't say that. To speak this way would indicate that we might have one set of expectations for all children.

"The usual reduction in class size," says the *Journal*—from 30 to 24, for instance—"isn't enough to make a difference." If this were really true, and if the *Journal* wanted to help the poorest children of Chicago, the logical solution would appear to be to cut their class size even more—perhaps to 17, as in Winnetka. This is a change that even the *Journal*'s editors concede to be worthwhile. But this is a de-

gree of equity the *Journal* does not entertain. It contemplates a minor change and then concludes that it would make only a minor difference.

In actual fact, as every teacher of small children knows, the difference even from 30 kids to 24 would be a blessing in most cases, if some other needed changes came at the same time. But the *Journal* does not speak of several changes. The search is for the one change that will cost the least and bring the best return. "Changing parent values" is the ideal answer to this search because, if it were possible, it would cost nothing and, since it isn't really possible, it doesn't even need to be attempted. Isolating one thing and then telling us that this alone won't do much good and, for this reason, ought not to be tried, is a way of saying that the children of the poor will have to choose one out of seven things rich children take for granted—and then, as a kind of final curse upon their dreams, that any one of those seven things will not make a difference. Why not offer them all seven things?

Ironically, such research as exists is not entirely clear about the benefits of smaller class size to rich children, but very clear about its payoff to the poor. So what the *Journal*'s editors do again is to extrapolate a theme ("diminishing returns") that might be accurately applied to the well-financed schools attended by *their* children, then apply it only to the schools that serve the poor.

After several columns of such qualified and, at certain moments, seemingly well-balanced reasoning, the paper finally casts away its reservations to drive home its central point. "If money can't buy happiness," the final sentence of the editorial reads, "neither can it buy learning."

Thus it is that the progression moves from the unassailable to the self-serving. It will be noted that the *Journal* never says that money "does not matter." This would be implausible to those who read the *Wall Street Journal* to acquire knowledge about making money. What it says is that it matters "much less than we think," or that it is less important than "some other factors," or that it is "not the only factor," or that it is not the "fundamental" factor, or that it will not show instantaneous results, or that money used to lower class size

will not matter if this is the only change, or if class size isn't lowered very much. Out of this buildup of discouraging and cautionary words, a mood of cumulative futility is gradually formed. At length it is transformed into a crystal of amused denunciation of the value of equality itself.

Camden, New Jersey, is the fourth-poorest city of more than 50,000 people in America. In 1985, nearly a quarter of its families had less than $5,000 annual income. Nearly 60 percent of its residents receive public assistance. Its children have the highest rate of poverty in the United States.

Once a commercial and industrial center for the southern portion of New Jersey—a single corporation, New York Shipyards, gave employment to 35,000 people during World War II—Camden now has little industry. There are 35,000 jobs in the entire city now, and most of them don't go to Camden residents. The largest employer, RCA, which once gave work to 18,000 people, has about 3,000 jobs today, but only 65 are held by Camden residents. Camden's entire property wealth of $250 million is less than the value of just one casino in Atlantic City.

The city has 200 liquor stores and bars and 180 gambling establishments, no movie theater, one chain supermarket, no new-car dealership, few restaurants other than some fast-food places. City blocks are filled with burnt-out buildings. Of the city's 2,200 public housing units, 500 are boarded up, although there is a three-year waiting list of homeless families. As the city's aged sewers crumble and collapse, streets cave in, but there are no funds to make repairs.

What is life like for children in this city?

To find some answers, I spent several days in Camden in the early spring of 1990. Because the city has no hotel, teachers in Camden arranged for me to stay nearby in Cherry Hill, a beautiful suburban area of handsome stores and costly homes. The drive from Cherry Hill to Camden takes about five minutes. It is like a journey between different worlds.

On a stretch of land beside the Delaware River in the northern part of Camden, in a neighborhood of factories

and many abandoned homes, roughly equidistant from a paper plant, a gelatine factory and an illegal dumpsite, stands a school called Pyne Point Junior High.

In the evening, when I drive into the neighborhood to find the school, the air at Pyne Point bears the smell of burning trash. When I return the next day I am hit with a strong smell of ether, or some kind of glue, that seems to be emitted by the paper factory.

The school is a two-story building, yellow brick, its windows covered with metal grates, the flag on its flagpole motionless above a lawn that has no grass. Some 650 children, 98 percent of whom are black or Latino, are enrolled here.

The school nurse, who walks me through the building while the principal is on the phone, speaks of the emergencies and illnesses that she contends with. "Children come into school with rotting teeth," she says. "They sit in class, leaning on their elbows, in discomfort. Many kids have chronic and untreated illnesses. I had a child in here yesterday with diabetes. Her blood-sugar level was over 700. Close to coma level. . . ."

A number of teachers, says the nurse, who tells me that her children go to school in Cherry Hill, do not have books for half the students in their classes. "Black teachers in the building ask me whether I'd put up with this in Cherry Hill. I tell them I would not. But some of the parents here make no demands. They don't know how much we have in Cherry Hill, so they do not know what they're missing."

The typing teacher shows me the typewriters that her students use. "These Olympia machines," she says, "should have been thrown out ten years ago. Most of them were here when I had parents of these children in my class. Some of the children, poor as they are, have better machines at home." The typewriters in the room are battered-looking. It is not a modern typing lab but a historical museum of old typewriters. "What I need are new electrics," says the teacher. When I ask her, "Why not use computers as they do in other schools?" she says, "They'd love it! We don't have the money."

I ask her if the children take this class with a career in mind. Are there any offices in Camden where they use typewriters? "I tell them, 'We are in the age of the computer,' " she replies. " 'We cannot afford to give you a computer. If you learn on these typewriters, you will find it easier to move on to computers if you ever have one.' The keyboard, I explain to them, is virtually the same."

In a class in basic mathematics skills, an eighth grade student that I meet cannot add five and two. In a sixth grade classroom, brownish clumps of plaster dot the ceiling where there once were sound-absorbing tiles. An eighth grade science class is using workbooks in a laboratory without lab equipment.

In another science class, where half of the ceiling tiles are missing and where once again there are no laboratory stations, children are being taught about the way that waves are formed. The teacher instructs them to let a drop of water fall into a glass of water and observe the circles that are formed. Following a printed lesson plan, she tells them to drop the water from successive levels—first six inches, then 12 inches, then a higher level—and "observe the consequences." The answer in her lesson plan is this: "Water forms a circle that spreads out until it reaches the circumference of container." When they drop the water from a certain level they should see the ripples spread out to the edge of the container, then return back toward the center.

The children hold eyedroppers at the levels they are told and, when the teacher tells them, they release a water drop. "Describe the phenomena," the teacher says.

Several children write down in their notebooks, "Water splashes."

The teacher insists they try again until they get the answer in her lesson plan. I stand behind a row of children and observe them as they drop the water. The students are right: No ripples can be seen. There is a splash and nothing more.

The problem is that the children do not have the right equipment. In order to see ripples form, they need a saucer with a wide circumference. Instead, as a cost-saving measure, the school system has supplied them with cheap plastic cocktail glasses. There is so little water surface that there is no room for waves to form. The water surface shakes a bit when water drops descend from a low level. When the water-

droppers are held higher, there is a faint splash. Doggedly persisting with the lesson plan, the teacher tells the children: "Hold the dropper now at 18 inches. Release one drop. Describe the consequence." Students again write "Water splashes" or "The water surface shakes."

What the science lesson is intended to deliver to the children is an element of scientific process. "Controlling for variables" is the description of this lesson in a guide prepared by the New Jersey Board of Education. But, because the children do not have appropriate equipment, there are no variables to be observed. Children in water play in a prekindergarten class would learn as much of scientific process as these eighth grade kids are learning. As I leave, the children are being instructed by the teacher to "review the various phenomena we have observed."

Vernon Dover, principal of Pyne Point Junior High, who joins me as I'm heading up the stairs, tells me a student was shot twice in the chest the day before. He says the boy is in a trauma unit at a local hospital.

Two boys race past us as we're standing on the stairs. They leave the building and the principal pursues them out the door. "These are older kids who ought to be in high school," he explains when I catch up with him outside. The playing field next to the school is bleak and bare. There are no goalposts and there is no sports equipment. Beyond the field is an illegal dumpsite. Contractors from the suburbs drive here, sometimes late at night, the principal says, and dump their trash behind the school. A medical lab in Haddon, which is a white suburb, recently deposited a load of waste, including hypodermic needles, in the field. Children then set fire to the trash.

In the principal's office, a fire inspector is waiting to discuss a recent fire. On the desk, as an exhibit, is a blackened bottle with a torn Budweiser label. The bottle is stuffed with paper that was soaked in kerosene. The inspector says that it was found inside the school. The principal sighs. He says there have been several recent fires. The fire alarm is of no use, he says, because there is a steam leak in the boiler room that sets it off. "The fire alarm has been dysfunctional," he says, "for 20 years. . . .

"A boy named Joselito and his brother," says the principal, "set the science room on fire. Another boy set fire to the curtains in the auditorium. He had no history of arson. He was doing well in school. . . . It puzzles me. This school may be the safest place in life for many of these children. Why do they set fires? They do these things and, when I ask them, they do not know why."

He speaks of the difficulty of retaining teachers. "Salaries are far too low," he says. "Some of my teachers have to work two jobs to pay the rent." Space, he tells me, is a problem too. "When we have to hold remedial classes in a woodshop, that's a problem." Up to 20 percent of children in the school, he says, will not go on to high school. "If 650 enter in sixth grade, I will see at least 100 disappear before ninth grade."

I ask him if desegregation with adjacent Cherry Hill has ever been proposed. "Desegregation in New Jersey means combining black kids and Hispanics," he replies. "Kids in Cherry Hill would never be included. Do you think white people would permit their kids to be exposed to education of this nature? Desegregation? Not with Cherry Hill. It would be easy, a seven-minute ride, but it's not going to happen."

Camden High School, which I visit the next morning, can't afford facilities for lunch, so 2,000 children leave school daily to obtain lunch elsewhere. Many do not bother to return. Nonattendance and dropout rates, according to the principal, are very high.

In a twelfth grade English class the teacher is presenting a good overview of nineteenth-century history in England. On the blackboard are these words: "Idealism . . . Industrialization . . . Exploitation . . . Laissez-faire. . . ." The teacher seems competent, but, in this room as almost everywhere in Camden, lack of funds creates a shortage of materials. Half the children in the classroom have no texts.

"What impresses me," the teacher says after the class is over, "is that kids get up at all and come to school. They're old enough to know what they are coming into."

I ask, "Is segregation an accepted fact for children here?"

"You don't even dare to speak about desegregation now. It doesn't come up. Impossible. It's gone."

He's a likable man with horn-rimmed glasses, a mustache, very dark skin, sensitive eyes, a gentle smile. I ask him where he lives.

"I just moved my family out of Camden," he replies. "I grew up here and I pledged in college I'd return here, and I did. Then, a month ago, I was in school when I was told my house was broken into and cleaned out. I packed my bags.

"I'm not angry. What did I expect? Rats packed tight in a cage destroy each other. I got out. I do not plan to be destroyed."

"President Bush," says Ruthie Green-Brown, principal of Camden High, when we meet later in her office, "speaks of his 'goals' and these sound very fine. He mentions preschool education—early childhood. Where is the money? We have children coming to kindergarten or to first grade who are starting out three years delayed in their development. They have had no preschool. Only a minute number of our kids have had a chance at Head Start. This is the *most* significant thing that you can do to help an urban child if your goal is to include that urban child in America. Do we *want* that child to be included?

"These little children cry out to be cared for. Half the population of this city is 20 years old or less. Seven in ten grow up in poverty. . . .

"There is that notion out there," she goes on, "that the fate of all these children is determined from their birth. If they fail, it's something in themselves. That, I believe, is why Joe Clark got so much praise from the white media. 'If they're failing, kick 'em out!' My heart goes out to children in this city. I've worked in upper-middle-class suburban schools. I know the difference.

"I had a little girl stop in to see me yesterday. A little ninth grade girl. 'It's my lunch hour. I wanted to visit you,' she said. There is so much tenderness and shyness in some children. I told her I was glad she came to visit and I asked her to sit down. We had our sandwiches together. She looked

at my desk. 'I'd like to have an office like this someday.' I said to her, 'You can!' But I was looking at this little girl and thinking to myself, 'What are the odds?' "

She speaks of the insistence of the state on a curriculum designed around a battery of tests. The test-driven curriculum, she says, established at the prodding of the former governor, Tom Kean, "is, in a sense, a product of the back-to-basics pressures of the 1980s." The results, she says, are anything but reassuring.

"In the education catch-up game, we are entrapped by teaching to the tests. In keeping with the values of these recent years, the state requires test results. It 'mandates' higher scores. But it provides us no resources in the areas that count to make this possible. So it is a rather hollow 'mandate' after all, as if you could create these things by shouting at the wind.

"If they first had given Head Start to our children *and* pre-kindergarten, *and* materials *and* classes of 15 or 18 children in the elementary grades, *and* computers *and* attractive buildings *and* enough books and supplies *and* teacher salaries sufficient to compete with the suburban schools, and then come in a few years later with their tests and test-demands, it might have been fair play. Instead, they leave us as we are, separate and unequal, underfunded, with large classes, and with virtually no Head Start, and they think that they can test our children into a mechanical proficiency.

"What is the result? We are preparing a generation of robots. Kids are learning exclusively through rote. We have children who are given no conceptual framework. They do not learn to think, because their teachers are straitjacketed by tests that measure only isolated skills. As a result, they can be given no electives, nothing wonderful or fanciful or beautiful, nothing that touches the spirit or the soul. Is this what the country wants for its black children?

"In order to get these kids to pass the tests, they've got to be divided up according to their previous test results. This is what is now described as 'homogeneous grouping.' In an urban school, the term is a misnomer. What does it do to character? The children in the highest groups become elitist, selfish, and they separate themselves from other children.

We don't call it tracking, no. But tell me that the children in Math I or in Math VI don't know why they are there."

The children have to pass three tests: in reading, math and writing skills, according to a ninth grade English teacher. "They take preliminary tests before they leave eighth grade," the teacher says. "Eighty percent are failed, because of what has not been done for them in elementary school. So they enter high school labeled 'failures.' Their entire ninth grade year becomes test preparation. No illusions about education as a good thing in itself. They take the state proficiency exams in April of the ninth grade year. If they fail, they do it again in tenth grade. If they fail again, it's all remediation in eleventh grade. They must pass these tests to graduate.

"Already, in the ninth grade, kids are saying, 'If I have to do this all again, I'm leaving.' The highest dropout rate is in those first two years."

She shows me the curriculum for ninth grade writing skills: "Work-A-Text Study Program." There is no literature —in fact, there are no books. The longest passage in the "Work-A-Text" is one short paragraph immediately followed by test questions.

"The high school proficiency exam," another teacher says, "controls curriculum. It bores the children, but we have to do it or we get no money from the state."

From September to May, she says, instruction is exclusively test preparation. "Then, if we are lucky, we have two months left in May and June to teach some subject matter. Eight months for tests. Two months, maybe, to enjoy some poetry or fiction.

"The result of this regime is that the children who survive do slightly better on their tests, because that's all they study, while the failing kids give up and leave the school before they even make it to eleventh grade. The average scores look better, however, and the governor can point to this and tell the press that he is 'raising reading levels.' It isn't hard to do this if your children study nothing but the tests. What have they learned, however? They have learned that education is a brittle, abstract ritual to ready them for an examination. If they get to college they do not know how to

think. They know how to pass the tests and this may get them into college, but it cannot keep them there. We see students going off to Rutgers every year. By the end of the first semester they are back in Camden. So we teach them failure. When you think of what their peers in Cherry Hill have gotten in the same years, it seems terribly unfair. I call it failure by design."

I ask her if the students see it in the way that she does, as a case of failure by design.

"Our students are innocent of the treachery of the world," she says. "They do not yet understand what is in store for them."

"My first priority, if we had equal funding," says the principal when I return to see her at the end of school, "would be the salaries of teachers. People ask me, 'Can you make a mediocre teacher better with more money?' I am speaking of the money to *attract* the teachers. In some areas where I run into shortages of staff—math and science, in particular—I get provisional teachers who are not yet certified but sometimes highly talented, exciting people. As soon as he or she becomes proficient—squat!—where is she? Out to the suburbs to earn $7,000 more. . . . So this gives you a sense perhaps of the unfairness that we face.

"I am asked to speak sometimes in towns like Princeton. I tell them, 'If you don't believe that money makes a difference, let your children go to school in Camden. *Trade* with our children—not beginning in the high school. Start when they're little, in the first or second grade.' When I say this, people will not meet my eyes. They stare down at the floor. . . .

"I have a brochure here. It is from—" she names a well-known private school. "They want me to accept a nomination as headmistress. I'm skimming through this and I see—alumni gifts, the colleges that they attend, 99 percent of children graduating, a superb curriculum. . . . The endowment of this school is $50 million. . . . You are left with no choice but to think, 'My God! Am I preparing children to compete with this? And do they even have a *chance*?' "

* * *

At night two teachers from the high school meet me at a restaurant in Cherry Hill because, they say, there is no place in Camden to have dinner. At 8:00 P.M. we drive back into Camden.

As we drive, they speak about the students they are losing. "Six hundred children enter ninth grade," says one of the teachers, Linnell Wright, who has been at Camden High School for six years. "By eleventh grade we have about 300. I am the eleventh grade adviser so I see the difference. I look out into the auditorium when the freshman class comes in. The room is full. By the time they enter the eleventh grade, the same room is half empty. The room is haunted by the presence of the children who are gone. . . .

"This," she tells me as we pass an old stone church, "is supposed to be the church attended by Walt Whitman. I don't know if he cared much for churches, but he did reside in Camden in the last years of his life." A sign on the door indicates that it is now a homeless shelter.

A block from the church, we pass two ruined houses with their walls torn out. A few blocks more and we are at the waterfront, next to the Delaware.

"That darkened building is the Campbell's plant," the other teacher, Winnefred Bullard, says. "Campbell's just announced that they'll be closing down."

On the roof of the shuttered factory is an illuminated soup can: red and white, the Campbell's logo. Now the company is leaving town. General Electric, Mrs. Bullard tells me, may be leaving too. Its RCA division had a major operation here for many years, but Mrs. Bullard says that it is virtually shut down. As we pass the RCA plant on the silent waterfront, I see the lighted symbol of that corporation too: the faithful dog attending to his master's voice. The plants are closing and the jobs are disappearing, but the old familiar symbols are still there for now.

"The world is leaving us behind in Camden," Mrs. Bullard says.

Before us, over the darkened water of the Delaware, are the brightly lighted high-rise office buildings and the new hotels and condominiums of Philadelphia. The bridges that cross the river here in Camden bear the names of Whitman

and Ben Franklin. History surrounds the children growing up in Camden, but they do not learn a lot of it in school. Whitman is not read by students in the basic skills curriculum. Few children that I met at Camden High, indeed, had ever heard of him.

Before the announcement of the closing of the Campbell's plant, says Mrs. Bullard, there had been high hopes for a commercial rebirth on the waterfront of Camden. Plans for a riverfront hotel had been announced. Land had been cleared and several buildings were destroyed. Now it is an endless parking lot. Mrs. Bullard turns the car around so that the Delaware is just behind us. A turn to the left, and one to the right, and just ahead of us there is a huge, white, modern building. It's the first new structure I have seen in Camden. Brilliantly illuminated, it resembles a hotel.

"It may be the closest we will come to a hotel in Camden," Mrs. Bullard says. "This is the new Camden County Jail."

On the street beside the jail, several black women in white gloves are making gestures with their hands to men whose faces can be seen behind the windows. "They are making conversation with their men," says Mrs. Bullard. Directly across the street is the two-story wooden house in which Walt Whitman wrote the final manuscript of *Leaves of Grass* and in which he died, in 1892. One block away, the south face of the Camden City Hall bears Whitman's words: "In a dream I saw a city invincible."

The city, Mrs. Bullard tells me, has the highest tax rate in the area. "But," she says, "in order to get more businesses to settle here, we have to give them tax relief. The result is that we don't gain anything in taxes. But, even with that, we can't attract them."

The major industries, apart from RCA and Campbell's, are a trash incinerator and a sewage-treatment plant (neither of which pay taxes to the city), scrapyards (there are ten of them) and two new prisons. A third prison, intended for North Camden near the Pyne Point neighborhood, was halted by the pressures brought by local activists. According to Father Michael Doyle, pastor of Sacred Heart Church in North Camden, "55 million gallons of the county's sewage

come into Camden every day. It's processed at the treatment plant, a stone's throw from my church. Five blocks south, on the other side, they're finishing a new incinerator for the county." The incinerator tower, some 350 feet in height, rises above the church and soon will add its smoke to air already fouled by the smell of sewage.

"The stench is tremendous," says Lou Esola, an environmentalist who lives in neighboring Pennsauken. "Sacred Heart is in the midst of it. I went down to talk with Father Doyle. I stepped out of my car and saw the houses and the children and I wondered, 'How can people live here?' They would never dare to put these things in Cherry Hill. It simply would not happen."

"Anything that would reduce the property values of a town like Cherry Hill," says Father Doyle, "is sited here in Camden." In this way, he notes, the tax base for the schools of Cherry Hill remains protected while the tax base for the schools of Camden is diminished even more. Property values in the city are so low today that abandoned houses in North Camden can be purchased for as little as $1,000.

Camden, he says, once had more industry per capita than any city in the world. "The record industry had its start here. Enrico Caruso first recorded here in Camden. Now we have to settle for scrap metal, sewage treatment and incinerators. When you're on your knees, you take whatever happens to come by. . . ."

Everyone who could leave, he says, has now departed. "What is left are all the ones with broken wings. I can't tell you what it does to children to grow up amid this filth and ugliness. The toxic dangers aren't the worst. It is the aesthetic consequences that may be most damaging in the long run. What is the message that it gives to children to grow up surrounded by trash burners, dumpsites and enormous prisons? Kids I know have told me they're ashamed to say they come from Camden.

"Still, there is this longing, this persistent hunger. People look for beauty even in the midst of ugliness. 'It rains on my city,' said an eight-year-old I know, 'but I see rainbows in the puddles.' It moved me very much to hear that from a

child. But you have to ask yourself: How long will this child look for rainbows?"

I spend my final day in Camden at the city's other high school, Woodrow Wilson, which also has its difficulties in retaining students. The dropout rate at Woodrow Wilson High is 58 percent, a number that does not include the 10 to 20 percent of would-be Wilson students who drop out in junior high and therefore do not show up in official figures. Of the nearly 1,400 children who attend this school, more than 800 drop out in the course of four years. About 200 finally graduate each year. Only 60 of these kids, however, take the SATs—prerequisite for entrance to most four-year colleges.

The principal, Herbert Factor, an even-tempered white man in a soft tweed jacket who has been here for three years, takes me into a chemistry lab that has no lab equipment, just a fish tank and a single lab desk at the front, used by the teacher. The room is sweltering. "Something is wrong with the heating," says the principal. "We're right above the boiler room." He tugs at his shirt collar. "Would you want to study in this room? I'm surprised the fish don't die."

Fifty computers line the wall of a computer lab, but 30 to 40 can't be used, according to the teacher. "They were melted by the heat," she says.

"Hot as hell!" the principal remarks.

"We spend about $4,000 yearly on each student," he reports, as we are heading to the cafeteria for lunch. "The statewide average is about $5,000, but our children are competing also with the kids in places such as Cherry Hill, which spends over $6,000, Summit, which is up to $7,000, Princeton, which is past $8,000 now. . . .

"My students also have to work much longer hours than suburban children to earn money after school. Then there is the lack of health care and the ugly poverty on every side. Nonetheless, they have to take the same tests as the kids in Cherry Hill.

"The sophomore class contains about 550 students. This includes 350 entering ninth graders, who are reading on the

average at a sixth grade level, although many read much lower—some at only fourth grade level—and about 200 older kids who are held back each year because they failed the state exam. Of the 200 who make it to twelfth grade and graduate, maybe 80 to 100 go on to some further education. Of these, maybe 20 to 25 enroll in four-year colleges of any real distinction.

"How many graduate from higher education? Not even 40 percent of those who are admitted will complete a four-year program.

"For the brightest kids, the ones who have a chance at four-year college, we cannot provide an AP program. We don't have the funds or the facilities. We offer something called 'AT'—'academically talented' instruction—but it's not the same as AP classes in the suburbs. So, when they take the SATs, they're at that extra disadvantage. They've been given less but will be judged by the same tests."

In discussion of the problems that he faces, the principal of Woodrow Wilson High School differs in one interesting respect from several of the black administrators I have met. The latter, even when entirely open in the things they tell me, tend to speak with torn desires. On the one hand they want to be sure I understand how bitterly their children are denied resources given to the rich. On the other hand they want me to respect their efforts, and their teachers, and their children—they are frightened of the terribly demoralizing power of bad press reports—and also, partly out of racial pride and loyalty, they seem determined to convince me that their school is not a "dumpsite" or a "black hole" or "backwater," hoping perhaps that I will see it as a valiant effort to transcend the odds. So, on the one hand, they describe how bad things are, and, on the other hand, they paint an upbeat picture of the many hopeful programs they have instituted, typically describing them in jargon-ridden terms ("individually tailored units," "every child learning at her own pace"), often labeled with elaborate alphabetic acronyms, which differ from one city to another only in the set of letters they employ.

But it is so very human and so natural and understandable that black officials wouldn't want to see their school

subjected to the pity or contempt of a white visitor. One of the most poignant things about the visits I have made to urban schools is that the principals make such elaborate preparations for my visits. In suburban schools, with few exceptions, it is not like this at all. "Go wherever you like. No need to ask permission," I am told. "Take a bunch of kids up to the library and grill them if you want." In the urban schools it is quite different. Careful schedules are arranged well in advance. The principal escorts me or assigns a trusted aide to shepherd me to the right classrooms and to steer me from the empty labs, the ugly gyms, the overcrowded rooms in which embattled substitutes attempt in vain to keep a semblance of control. Then, too, the principals are rarely willing to allow me very much unsupervised discussion with the children.

More often than not, they also seem reluctant to describe their schools as being "segregated" or, indeed, even to speak of segregation. It is as if they have assimilated racial isolation as a matter so immutable, so absolute, that it no longer forms part of their thinking. They speak of their efforts "to make this school a quality institution." The other word—"equality"—is not, it seems, a realistic part of their ambition. I am reminded often, in these visits, of the times when I would visit very poorly funded all-black southern colleges, as long ago as 1966 and 1967, and would hear the teachers speaking, with the bravest front they could present, of "making do" and "dealing with the needs of our own children." The longing voiced today, as then, by good courageous black administrators and black teachers is for something that might be at best "a little less unequal," but with inequality a given and with racial segregation an unquestioned starting point.

Sometimes I have put the matter this way in talking with a black school principal and asked the question sharply: "Are we back to *Plessy*, then?" At this point, all pretense falls away: "What do you think? Just look around the school. Should I beat my head against the wall? This is reality."

Only once, and not in Camden, did I have the opportunity to press the matter further with a black school principal. I said that I felt black principals were sometimes feeding into the desires of the white society by praising the virtues of

"going it alone" as if this were a matter of their choice, not of necessity. The principal, who must go unnamed, said this: "I'm sad to hear you say that, and I'm also sad to say it, but the truth is that we are, to a degree, what you have made of us. The United States now has, in many black administrators of the public schools, precisely the defeated overseers it needs to justify this terrible immiseration. It is a tradition that goes back at least 300 years. A few of us are favored. They invite us to a White House ceremony and award us something—a 'certificate of excellence'—for our achievement. So we accept some things and we forget some other things and what we can't forget we learn how to shut out of mind and we adopt the rhetoric that is required of us and we speak of 'quality' or 'excellence'—not justice."

Questions of justice are not distant from the thoughts of Woodrow Wilson students, as I learn when six young men and women meet me for a conversation after lunch.

"I have a friend," says Jezebel, who is in the eleventh grade. "She goes to school in Cherry Hill. I go to her house and I compare the work she's doing with the work I'm doing. Each class at her school in Cherry Hill, they have the books they're s'posed to have for their grade level. Here, I'm in eleventh grade. I take American history. I have an eighth-grade book. So I have to ask, 'Well, are they three years smarter? Am I stupid?' But it's not like that at all. Because we're kids like they are. We're no different. And, you know, there are *smart* people here. But then, you know, they have that money goin' to their schools. They have a nice *clean* school to go to. They have carpets on the floors and air-conditioned rooms and brand-new books. Their old books, when they're done with them, they ship them here to us."

Books and carpets and cleanliness seem reasonable matters to complain about, but air conditioning strikes me as a luxury. I ask her if it really matters all that much.

"It gets steaming hot here in the summer. Lots of kids, on summer days, they look outside. They'd rather be outside there in the park. . . . But what I want to know is this: Why are the levels of our work so different? What we call a 'C' at our school is a 'D' in Cherry Hill. And I'm thinking, 'I can

get it. I can work at my grade level same as them. Maybe better. I can do as well as other people. . . .' "

An eleventh grader named Luis tells me that he went to private school before he came to Woodrow Wilson High. "If you ask me how it's different, I begin to think of books, or air conditioners, or computers. But it isn't one thing. It's a lot of things: the whole effect. The teachers at that school, they had a comfortable lounge. You go in there, with their permission, if you want to sit and get to know your teacher. The students also have a lounge. It isn't *concentrated.* It's relaxed. You drive up a slope. The school is on a hill. You go up the driveway and it's circular and like the entrance to a college campus or a nice hotel. The school is brick. A real nice-lookin' school. There is a lacrosse field. When you go to lunch you go together, not in shifts, and it's a pleasant place for lunch. My class had 15 students. And the teachers help you during class. They have the time, you know, to make sure that you understand. . . .

"In this school, they sometimes do not have the time. You know: They Xerox something. 'Here, do this.' Just hand it out. 'This is your work. Just do it. Get it in before the end of class. You'll get a grade.' And, you know, it does take time for kids to understand. And some kids, when they don't understand—they feel embarrassed. You don't want to be the only one to raise your hand and sayin' you don't understand. You sit there and say nothin'. If the teacher has the time to come around and talk to you, it's different. You're not scared to say to him, 'I didn't understand. I didn't get it.' And he helps you. And you're willing to come early on the next day and be helped some more. And, in this way, you're really *learnin'*."

I ask them: "If you had the things here that you want—new books, more computers, air conditioning, all of that—it would take a lot of money. Money has to come from taxes. Where would that money and those taxes come from?"

"If there's a surplus, say, in Cherry Hill," Luis replies, "well, you could divide that money."

"Let's say that you have $10,000," Jezebel says. "Split that sum in half: $5,000 for Cherry Hill, $5,000 for Camden."

Luis: "Make it equal. I don't mean that you should make it worse for them. They have the right to education. But we need our education too. Make it equal. Even if you have to take some funds from somewhere else. . . ."

I ask him this: "If they raise more money from their taxes out in Cherry Hill, don't they have the right to keep that money there and use it to buy things that they may want for their own school?"

"What could they possibly want," says Jezebel, "that they don't have?"

After a silence, she goes on. "Listen. They have those beautiful science labs. I've been there and I've seen them. You came to my science lab. You saw the difference. Look at this." She hands me a paperback volume with no cover and with pages falling out. "You see this book? We have to read Charles Dickens. That's the book they gave me. Pages are missing. *A Tale of Two Cities*. We don't even have enough for every student. There are just ten students in that class!" Her eyes are bright with anger. "Ten people! They had only seven books! Why are we treated like this?"

I ask her, "Did you like the book?"

"I loved it," she replies.

"I heard of a place once," says the girl beside her, "where white children and black children go to the same school. First and second graders go to one school. Third and fourth and fifth go to another. So it's mixed. Now that's been going on for years. So there are mixed families. People meet in school. When they're grown up, sometimes they marry."

I ask her, "If the governor announced that he was going to combine you with the kids from Cherry Hill—everybody goes to one school maybe for the ninth grade and the tenth grade, everybody to the other school for both their final years—what would you say?"

"As soon as it was announced, they'd start remodeling," Luis replies. "You'd see progress very fast. Parents of white children, with their money, they'd come in and say, 'We need this fixed. Our kids deserve it.' So they'd back us up, you see, and there'd be changes."

"I'd be glad," says Jezebel, "but they would never do it."

"What they'll say," says Luis, "is that it's a loss of education for their children. And that's so for now. They'd be afraid to come here. They would think the education would be less. It is. But it would be more natural to be together.

"Put it this way," he goes on. "Sooner or later, we have got to be around each other. You go to a hospital, or to a lawyer's office, and you'll see all kinds of different people. That's America. We have to live in the same world."

"I think," says Jezebel, "that it would take a war to bring us all together. Do you know how close we are to Cherry Hill? You go out from here five minutes down across the bridge. You're on the way to Cherry Hill."

"It seems the plan for now," I say, "is not to let you go to school in Cherry Hill but to try to make this a much better school. If this were done, and if the schools were equal, would that be enough?"

"I don't like that," she replies. "First, they wouldn't be equal. You know that as well as I. So long as there are no white children in our school, we're going to be cheated. That's America. That's how it is. But, even if they both were equal, you would still have students feeling, 'Well, if I'm not good enough for them, if we are going to be separate—well, I'm lower . . . somehow. . . .' You think: lower."

Luis speaks about the guidance system at the school. "This is what it's like," he says. "You go in to your counselor. He's under pressure so he acts impatient: 'What do you need?' You ask for help on college credits. They don't know. You end up choosing on your own. . . . We need people who can *tell* us what we do not know, or what we need to know. We don't know everything. But they don't have the time."

Chilly, which is the nickname of a young Cambodian girl, speaks up for the first time: "I'll give you an example. I went to my counselor. He said, 'What do you want?' I said, 'I want to be a lawyer. I don't know what courses I should take.' He told me, 'No, you cannot be a lawyer.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'Your English isn't good.' I'm seventeen. I've been here in America four years. I want to be a lawyer. He said, 'No. You cannot be a lawyer. Look for something else. Look for an easier job.' "

Luis: "Who said that?"

Chilly: "I don't want to say his name. . . . Well, anyway, I feel so disappointed. He tells me, 'Choose another job.' He gives me all these books that list these easy jobs. He says, 'Choose something else.' I tell him that I cannot choose because I do not *know*. 'Which one do you want?' he says. I say, 'How can I know?' I can't decide my life there in just 15 minutes. . . .

"This upset me very much because, when I came to America, they said, you know, 'This is the place of opportunity.' I'd been through the war. Through all of that. And now I'm here, and, even though my English may not be so good—"

The other students grow aroused.

"Don't let him shake your confidence," says Jezebel.

Chilly: "You know, I have problems with my self-esteem. I wasn't born here. Every day I think, 'Maybe he's right. Do something else.' But what I'm thinking is that 15 minutes isn't very long for somebody to counsel you about a choice that will determine your whole life. He throws this book at me: 'Choose something else!' "

The other students side with her so warmly, and so naturally; it is as if perhaps they feel their own dreams are at risk along with hers. "I want to say this also," she goes on. "Over there, where I was from, America is very famous. People think of it like heaven. Like, go to America—you go to heaven. Because life there is hell. Then you get here and, you know, it's not like that at all.

"When I came here I thought that America was mainly a white nation. Then I came here to this school and there are no white people. I see black and Spanish. I don't see white students. I think: 'Oh, my God! Where are the white Americans?' Well, I mean it did seem strange to me that all the black and Spanish and the Asian people go to the same school. Why were they putting us together? It surprised me. And I feel so disappointed. I was thinking: 'Oh, my God!' This school, you know, is named for Woodrow Wilson. . . ."

* * *

What does money buy for children in New Jersey? For high school students in East Orange, where the track team has no field and therefore has to do its running in the hallways of the school, it buys a minimum of exercise but a good deal of pent-up energy and anger. In mostly upper-middle-income Montclair, on the other hand, it buys two recreation fields, four gyms, a dance room, a wrestling room, a weight room with a universal gym, tennis courts, a track, and indoor areas for fencing. It also buys 13 full-time physical education teachers for its 1,900 high school students. East Orange High School, by comparison, has four physical education teachers for 2,000 students, 99.9 percent of whom are black.

A physical education expert, asked to visit a grade school in East Orange, is astonished to be told that jump ropes are in short supply and that the children therefore have to jump "in groups." Basketball courts, however, "are in abundance" in these schools, the visitor says, because the game involves little expense.

Defendants in a recent suit brought by the parents of schoolchildren in New Jersey's poorest districts claimed that differences like these, far from being offensive, should be honored as the consequence of "local choice"—the inference being that local choice in urban schools elects to let black children gravitate to basketball. But this "choice"—which feeds one of the most intransigent myths about black teenage boys—is determined by the lack of other choices. Children in East Orange cannot choose to play lacrosse or soccer, or to practice modern dance, on fields or in dance studios they do not have; nor can they keep their bodies clean in showers that their schools cannot afford. Little children in East Orange do not choose to wait for 15 minutes for a chance to hold a jump rope.

In suburban Millburn, where per-pupil spending is some $1,500 more than in East Orange although the tax rate in East Orange is three times as high, 14 different AP courses are available to high school students; the athletic program offers fencing, golf, ice hockey and lacrosse; and music instruction means ten music teachers and a music supervisor for six schools, music rooms in every elementary school, a

"music suite" in high school, and an "honors music program" that enables children to work one-on-one with music teachers. Meanwhile, in an elementary school in Jersey City, seventeenth-poorest city in America, where the schools are 85 percent nonwhite, only 30 of 680 children can participate in instrumental music. The school provides no instruments —the children have to rent them—and the classes take place not in "music suites" but in the lunchroom or the basement of the school. Art instruction is also meager in the Jersey City schools. The entire budget for art education comes to $2.62 per child for one year—less than the price of a pad of drawing paper at a K mart store. Computer classes take place in a storage closet. This may be compared to Princeton, where the high school students work in comfortable computer areas equipped with some 200 IBMs, as well as with a hookup to Dow Jones to study stock transactions. These kinds of things are unknown to kids in Jersey City.

Academic failure rates and dropout rates are very high in Jersey City's public schools, compared, for example, to the schools of Princeton. Moreover, as a judge has noted in New Jersey, the students listed as dropouts by most urban districts "tend to be only those . . . who *tell* the school that they are leaving." Statistics offered by the schools, therefore, "greatly understate the problem," says the judge. But, even with more accurate reporting, the percentile differences in failure rates would still obscure the full dimensions of the inequalities at stake. In Jersey City, 45 percent of third grade children fail their basic-skills exams, compared to only 10 percent in Princeton. But Jersey City's 45 percentage points translate to the failure of 800 children; in Princeton, where the student population is much smaller, ten percentage points translate to only 19 children. Again, the high school dropout rate of Jersey City, 52 percent, translates to failure for some 2,500 children every four years. The corresponding rate in Princeton, less than 6 percent, translates to only 40 children. Behind the good statistics of the richest districts lies the triumph of a few. Behind the saddening statistics of the poorest cities lies the misery of many.

Overcrowding in New Jersey, as in Harlem and the Bronx, is a constant feature of the schools that serve the

poorest children. In low-income Irvington, for instance, where 94 percent of students are nonwhite, 11 classes in one school don't even have the luxury of classrooms. They share an auditorium in which they occupy adjacent sections of the stage and backstage areas. "It's very difficult," says the music teacher, "to have concert rehearsals with the choir" while ten other classes try to study in the same space. "Obviously," she says, "there is a problem with sound. . . ."

"I'm housed in a coat room," says a reading teacher at another school in Irvington. "I teach," says a music teacher, "in a storage room." Two other classes, their teachers say, are in converted coal bins. A guidance counselor says she holds her parent meetings in a closet. "My problem," says a compensatory-reading teacher, "is that I work in a pantry. . . . It's very difficult to teach in these conditions."

At Irvington High School, where gym students have no showers, the gym is used by up to seven classes at a time. To shoot one basketball, according to the coach, a student waits for 20 minutes. There are no working lockers. Children lack opportunities to bathe. They fight over items left in lockers they can't lock. They fight for their eight minutes on the floor. Again, the scarcity of things that other children take for granted in America—showers, lockers, space and time to exercise—creates the overheated mood that also causes trouble in the streets. The students perspire. They grow dirty and impatient. They dislike who they are and what they have become.

The crowding of the school reflects the crowding of the streets. "It becomes striking," says a parent in another urban district, "how closely these schools reflect their communities, as if the duty of the school were to prepare a child for the life he's born to. . . . It hardly seems fair."

The crowding of children into insufficient, often squalid spaces seems an inexplicable anomaly in the United States. Images of spaciousness and majesty, of endless plains and soaring mountains, fill our folklore and our music and the anthems that our children sing. "This land is your land," they are told; and, in one of the patriotic songs that children truly love because it summons up so well the goodness and

the optimism of the nation at its best, they sing of "good" and "brotherhood" "from sea to shining sea." It is a betrayal of the best things that we value when poor children are obliged to sing these songs in storerooms and coat closets.

Among the overcrowded districts of New Jersey, one of the most crowded may be Paterson. The city is so short of space that four elementary schools now occupy abandoned factories. Children at one wood-frame elementary school, which has no cafeteria or indoor space for recreation, eat lunch in a section of the boiler room. A bathroom houses reading classes. Science labs in the high schools have no microscopes; sinks do not work; and class enrollment is too high for lab capacity. At Paterson's Kennedy High School, there is one physics section for 2,200 high school students. In affluent Summit, by comparison, where the labs are well equipped, there are six physics sections for 1,100 children.

Counseling facilities are particularly scarce in Paterson. One counselor serves 3,600 children in the elementary schools. Defendants in the recent period of litigation sought to undercut the relevance of counseling comparisons by asking if it is appropriate for schools to deal with "personal" problems that low-income children bring to class. But they did not ask this question in regard to affluent children. If it is an inappropriate concern for urban schools, observers asked, why did kids in wealthy districts need so high a ratio of conselors? Once again, it strains belief to say that Paterson's parents choose not to provide their children with sufficient counseling—just as it would not be credible to say that, when their kids are physically unwell, they choose to wait all day in crowded clinics rather than pay for the consoling care and kindliness available from private doctors. Local choice, where residence is not by choice, becomes a brutal euphemism for necessity.

How little choice poor children really have is seen at East Side High in Paterson. The school is in a stolid-looking building with no campus and no lawn. The regimen within the school is much like that which we have seen within the schools of Camden. Scarcity and squalor are again compounded by the consequences of a test-curriculum that strips

the child's school day down to meaningless small particles of unrelated rote instruction.

"The pressure for testing starts in elementary school," the principal reports, "and then intensifies in junior high. By the time they get to high school, preparation for the state exams controls curriculum."

According to a daily schedule given to me by Alfred Weiss, who chairs the Department of English at the school, 12 English teachers offer 60 classes in test-preparation to about 1,200 of the 2,200 students every day. I ask him what gets sacrificed in the test-preparation program.

"Literature gets lost," he says. "The driving notion here is that skills learned in isolation are more useful than skills learned in context. We need more money, but one of the dangers is that new state funds will be restricted to another stripped-down program of this nature. I mean, they'll give us funds if we will give them scores. The money will not be for education."

Paterson, he reminds me, was the home of the poet William Carlos Williams. But students at East Side High will get to know no more of William Carlos Williams than their peers at Woodrow Wilson High in Camden know about the writings of Walt Whitman.

In a basic-skills-improvement class, which, like all the English classes, takes place in the basement of the school, the textbook is the same compendium of short skill-paragraphs and brief examination questions that I saw in Camden. The classroom is dingy and gets little outside light. There are four different kinds of desks, some of them extremely old and too small for the students. The awkwardness of full-grown adolescents folding up their knees under these little desks stays in my mind afterward.

In another basic-skills class in the basement, a teacher tells me that the average reading level of the students in the school is just below sixth grade. The room, in which two classes take place simultaneously, is being used to teach the "Work-A-Text" on 12 computers. As elsewhere in the Paterson and Camden schools, computers are not used for reasoning or research—what the suburbs label "higher-order skills"—but as a toylike substitute for pen and paper.

Mr. Weiss, the English Department chairman who has led me through the school, stays very close to me and rarely smiles. An intelligent, weary-looking man with close-cropped hair, he does not realize possibly that I feel stifled by his presence. On the other hand, his presence is instructive, for his anguished manner and uncomfortable role, that of a top-rate scholar forced to shove aside all that he knows and values to atone for the results of history and poverty, embody much of the despair that filters through the classrooms and the hallways of the school. Forced by state requirements to teach an arid test-curriculum, he tells me that he feels a sense of longing for the literary work that led him into teaching. "I'm a New Yorker. I grew up in the South Bronx and I attended Morris High and City College. I insist that we do Shakespeare in non-basics classes. *Romeo and Juliet* in the tenth grade. *Julius Caesar* in eleventh. This woman," he says —and gestures toward a teacher—"will be doing *Caesar* next year with her students." Then, however: "I wonder what she thinks she will be doing. . . ." He throws out his hands, and winces, and then shrugs.

East Side High became well known some years ago when its former principal, a colorful and controversial figure named Joe Clark, was given special praise by U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett. Bennett called the school "a mecca of education" and paid tribute to Joe Clark for throwing out 300 students who were thought to be involved with violence or drugs.

"He was a perfect hero," says a school official who has dinner with me the next evening, "for an age in which the ethos was to cut down on the carrots and increase the sticks. The day that Bennett made his visit, Clark came out and walked the hallways with a bullhorn and a bat. If you didn't know he was a principal, you would have thought he was the warden of a jail. Bennett created Joe Clark as a hero for white people. He was on the cover of *Time* magazine. Parents and kids were held in thrall after the president endorsed him.

"In certain respects, this set a pattern for the national agenda. Find black principals who don't identify with civil rights concerns but are prepared to whip black children into

line. Throw out the kids who cause you trouble. It's an easy way to raise the average scores. Where do you put these kids once they're expelled? You build more prisons. Two thirds of the kids that Clark threw out are in Passaic County Jail.

"This is a very popular approach in the United States today. Don't provide the kids with a new building. Don't provide them with more teachers or more books or more computers. Don't even breathe a whisper of desegregation. Keep them in confinement so they can't subvert the education of the suburbs. Don't permit them 'frills' like art or poetry or theater. Carry a bat and tell them they're no good if they can't pass the state exam. Then, when they are ruined, throw them into prison. Will it surprise you to be told that Paterson destroyed a library because it needed space to build a jail?"

Clark has now left East Side High and taken to the lecture circuit. East Side High is virtually unchanged. The only difference, one that is regarded with much favor by some teachers, is that Clark's successor does not wield a bat. He is also less inclined to blame the students for the consequences of their poverty and racial isolation. He would like to see a new school building and would like to hire many more school counselors and outreach workers. Most of all, he says, "I'd like to put real money into preschool education and the elementary years. Children drop out in elementary school. They simply formalize that process here."

Outside his office, as I leave, I see a poster that announces an upcoming game. The basketball team is called the East Side Ghosts. On an adjoining wall there is a U.S. flag. Next to the flag, and written in the colors of the flag, there is this sign: "The American Dream Is Alive and Well at East Side High."

Reassurances like these are not required in the schools of Cherry Hill and Princeton. The American dream is not a slogan but a day-to-day reality in schools like these.

In Cherry Hill, for instance, according to a recent survey in *New Jersey Monthly* magazine, future scientists can choose from "14 offerings in the physical sciences department." There is "a greenhouse" for students interested in horticul-

ture. "Future doctors have 18 biology electives. . . ." In 1988, we read, "the school's wind ensemble traveled to the Soviet Union to perform."

In a section devoted to Princeton, we are told: "Future musicians have the use of seven well-appointed 'music suites'. . . . Carpeted hallways encourage students with free periods to curl up and study in a corner. . . . Computer-equipped subject-related study halls [are] open throughout the day [and] manned by faculty. . . ." The ratio of counselors to students is one to 150, not up to New Trier's level (one to 24) but better than New York City, where the ratio is one to 700, and better than that of the Camden high school in which Chilly and her classmates had to fight for 15 minutes yearly with a guidance counselor. Again, there is the added detail that supplies an extra touch of elegance to life at Princeton High: Three years ago, we are told, parents in Princeton raised $187,000—from outside sources—so that the choir and orchestra could travel to Vienna to perform in concert.

One thinks of the school in Jersey City where 650 of 680 children are denied the instrumental music class and where that program, such as it is, must take place in a basement. What would it do for the motivation of the children in this school to practice in a "music suite"—of all extraordinary things!—and with the dream of traveling someday to perform in Moscow or Vienna? How might carpeted hallways calm the tensions of the at-risk pupils of East Orange?

In summarizing differences in yearly spending that make possible these differences in educational provision, we have not considered certain other matters like the one-time costs of capital outlay (school construction, for example) and the size and value of school buildings. Matters like these—including floor-space measurements—were introduced by plaintiffs in the arguments that led to the Supreme Court finding in *Brown* v. *Board of Education*. A century ago, in *Plessy* v. *Ferguson*, the same kinds of comparisons were introduced.

If the court should ever be disposed to look at matters of this sort again, it might be persuaded to consider a comparison between an elementary school in Paterson and one in nearby Wayne. The school in Wayne, which is a white

community, is 33 years old and holds 323 children. The school in Paterson is 60 years old and holds 615 children. The first school has 395 square feet per child, the second 87 square feet. The first school has 40,000 square feet of playing area, the second 3,000 square feet. The kindergarten in the first school holds 15 to 18 children. A room the same size in the second school holds 60 children divided into two groups of 30 each and separated only by a row of file cabinets. The kindergarten in the first school has a climbing apparatus for the children, as a judge observed during the course of recent litigation, "and many things to be played with." The kindergarten in the second school has "no play equipment."

"Why," asks the judge, "should this type of disparity be permitted?"

It has recently become a matter of some interest to the press and to some academic experts to determine whether it is race or class that is the major factor in denial of these children. The question always strikes me as a scholar's luxury. To kindergarten children in the schools of Paterson or Camden, it can hardly matter very much to know if the denial they experience is caused by their skin color or their destitution, but now and then an answer of some vividness and clarity has been provided. Several of New Jersey's schools have literally run out of classrooms in some recent years and have gone with hat in hand to the suburban districts and "attempted to rent space" from them, according to court papers. They were thwarted in these efforts, says the court, even with the state's awareness that "the suburban districts' refusal was based on race." The state, says the court, "allowed suburban resistance" to these rentals "under circumstances which, if true, [are] particularly troubling."

For example, when Asbury Park—predominantly nonwhite—asked to rent facilities in a white district, the white district was willing to take only "a small number of students" and insisted that they "be kept separate." Similarly, the schools of Irvington, where 92 percent of children are nonwhite, tried to rent rooms for their children in three suburbs, all of which were white, when building shortages left chil-

dren without schools. "The schools sought by Irvington were vacant," the court notes. "The districts simply did not want [the] children."

In Paterson, the court observes, after a fire in which a wood-frame elementary school burned to the ground, leaving 1,100 children with no school, the city tried to rent a vacant school from nearby Wayne. The state refused to order Wayne to take the children. Suburban Fairlawn, an upper-middle-class community, finally agreed to let the children have a vacant building, but it did so with insulting stipulations—for example, that the children must be bused "at certain hours" and only "by certain routes."

This testimony, says the court, "was extremely upsetting."

The class-action suit that brought these issues to the notice of the public was filed in 1981 by parents of schoolchildren in East Orange, Camden, Irvington and Jersey City. The case succinctly crystallizes many of the issues we have seen in other cities; and the findings of the trial judge, which run for some 600 pages, are evocative and saddening.

In finding in favor of the plaintiffs, in a ruling handed down in August 1988, Judge Stephen L. Lefelt takes notice of the plaintiffs' claim that New Jersey operates two separate and unequal public education systems, then makes this observation: The state "did not dispute the existence of disparities" but argued that "different types of programs are the result of local choice and needs." According to the state, "each district . . . is free to address the educational needs of its children in any manner it sees fit. . . . To the extent that program choices exercised by local districts are deemed inappropriate . . . , defendants claim that they are caused by local mismanagement. . . ."

However, asks the court, "is it local control that permits suburban wealthy districts to have schools located on spacious campuses surrounded by grass, trees and playing fields" while "urban district schools [are] cramped by deserted buildings, litter-strewn vacant lots and blacktop parking lots?" It is local control, continues the court, that permits Paterson to offer its 5,000 nonwhite high school students no

other vocal music options than a gospel choir "while South Brunswick offers 990 students a concert choir, women's ensemble and a madrigal group?" Is it local control "that results in some urban districts conducting science instruction . . . in science rooms where water is not running" while suburban districts offer genuine science programs in elaborate laboratories?

The court concedes that certain programs—those for "the academically talented," for instance—may have more demand in wealthier districts, but it also notes that hundreds of academically talented students live in the poor districts too but are denied these programs. "It seems to me," writes the judge, "that students with similar abilities and needs should be treated substantially equally."

The court notes that the highest-spending districts have "twice as many art, music, and foreign-language teachers . . . , 75 percent more physical education teachers . . . , 50 percent more nurses, school librarians, guidance counselors and psychologists . . . and 60 percent more personnel in school administration than the low-spending districts."

Noting a statewide mandate for school libraries with at least 6,000 volumes in each school, the court points to the Washington Elementary School in Irvington, which has only 300 books. "Why should not all districts have similar library facilities?" asks the court.

Wealthy districts downgrade the importance of these inequalities, the court observes. But, when one of the wealthier suburbs asked the state's permission to back out of a cross-busing plan with a poor district, it cited the district's "old and dilapidated buildings, lack of adequate equipment and materials [and] lack of science programs."

Why, asks the court, "should the gifted urban science students be taught in a manner which has been recognized by science educators as inferior? Why should urban districts not have microscopes . . . ?" Why are classes "larger in urban elementary schools than in suburban schools? Why are there more teaching staff per pupil in [rich] districts?" If "local differences" are genuinely the issue, asks the court, why are there fewer early-intervention programs in the urban districts, where the need is most acute?

Again and again the court poses the question: "Why is this so?"

The court asks the superintendent of affluent South Brunswick to assess the impact on his district, were it to be funded at the level of low-income Trenton. The superintendent tells the court that such a cut would be an "absolute disaster." He says that he "would quit" before he would accept it. If such a cut were made, he says, class size would increase about 17 percent; nursing, custodial and other staff would have to be reduced; the district would stop purchasing computers and new software; it would be unable to paint the high school, would cut back sports, drop Latin and German, and reduce supplies to every school. "We would have a school district," he says, "that is as mediocre as some that exist, that don't have money enough to spend for some of the things I just eliminated. And our kids would . . . get shortchanged, as these kids in these cities are getting shortchanged. And I'm convinced that they're shortchanged."

The New Jersey constitution, says the court in its decision, requires that all students be provided with "an opportunity to compete fairly for a place in our society. . . . Pole vaulters using bamboo poles even with the greatest effort cannot compete with pole vaulters using aluminum poles."

In our contemporary society, the court goes on, "money purchases almost everything. . . . Children in high-wealth communities enjoy high levels of expenditures and other educational inputs, and children in low-wealth communities receive low levels of school expenditures and inputs. This pattern is not related to the educational characteristics of the children in these districts. In fact . . . , given the characteristics of student bodies in urban and suburban districts, one would expect expenditure rates to be exactly opposite to what they are."

The state's justification for these disparate conditions, says the court, "can be characterized as the need to protect against further diminishment of local control." But the court notes that local control is "already seriously undermined" in a number of ways—for example, by the state's assumption of the right to take control of local districts which it judges

to be poorly managed, an action that the state has taken several times, most recently in Paterson and Jersey City.

Defendants also argue, says the court, that, until the urban districts show that they can "wisely use the vast sums they now receive, no additional funds should be provided." No testimony, however, says the court, has been provided to affirm "that high-spending districts are spending [money] wisely." Under the defendants' argument, "wealthy districts can continue to spend as much money as they wish. Poor districts will go on pretty much as they have. . . . If money is inadequate to improve education, the residents of poor districts should at least have an equal opportunity to be disappointed by its failure."

Equal protection, in any case, the court observes, does not require efficiency but substantial comparability. "The record demonstrates that poor urban school districts are unable to achieve comparability because of defects in the funding system. . . ." Therefore, says the court, "I conclude that the defendants' local control, associational rights and efficiency justifications are outweighed by the educational rights of children residing in poor urban districts. There is sufficient proof in this record . . . to find that plaintiffs have also proved a violation of the equal protection clause of the New Jersey constitution."

In his final words, the judge asks how we may discern the benefits that might be gained from a more equitable system. "How do you evaluate [the benefit of] retaining a few students who would have dropped out? How do you weight the one student who becomes a successful artist and creates works that provide enjoyment for thousands of people? How do you cost-out the student who learns to enjoy reading and thereby adds excitement to what otherwise would be a rather ordinary existence? How important to society are flexible, imaginative and inventive citizens? I cannot even guess. Suffice it to say that I opt for providing equal opportunity to all our children, no matter where they may live."

Two years after these words were written, a high court in New Jersey affirmed the lower court's decision. In its rul-

ing, the Supreme Court of New Jersey noted the defendants' argument that "education currently offered in these poorer . . . districts is tailored to the students' present need" and that "these students simply cannot now benefit from the kind of vastly superior course offerings found in the richer districts." If, said the court, the argument here is that "these students simply cannot make it, the constitutional answer is, give them a chance. The constitution does not tell them that, since more money will not help, we will give them less; that, because their needs cannot be fully met, they will not be met at all. It does not tell them they will get the minimum, because that is all they can benefit from." There would, said the court, "be little short of a revolution in the suburban districts" if the course of study in those districts were as barren as the course of study found in these poor cities.

Noting that the equalizing formula for state assistance to the local districts had, in fact, been "counter-equalizing" and had widened the disparities between the rich and poor, the Supreme Court said, "The failure has gone on too long. . . . The remedy must be systemic."

The sweeping nature of the court's decision led the press to speculate that efforts might at last be undertaken to apportion educational resources in more equitable ways, and a newly elected Democratic governor, Jim Florio, appeared to favor a substantial transformation of the funding scheme. Opposition, however, surfaced rapidly and murmurs of a tax revolt have now been heard across the state. Newspapers have been flooded with the letters of suburban residents protesting the redistribution of resources. Taking state money from the towns that have high property values to prop up the urban schools, says one letter-writer, will "bring mediocrity to every classroom in the state." Putting more money into the poor districts, says another letter-writer, "won't change anything. . . . Money is not the answer. . . . It has to begin in the home." A letter-writer from affluent Fair Lawn compares the plan for fiscal equity to Eastern European communism. "Everything in a free society," says another man, who calls himself a former liberal, "is not supposed to be equal." An assemblyman from a suburban district doubts that giving Camden extra money will improve its schools. "How about providing values instead?" he asks.

The superintendent of affluent West Orange, faced with the threat of running his school district on the same lean budget as East Orange, Paterson and Camden, says, "I cannot comprehend that. . . . I can't believe that anybody will permit that to occur." The fulfillment of the dream of equity for the poor districts, says the *New York Times*, is seen by richer districts as a "nightmare."

The *Wall Street Journal* applauds the thousands of New Jersey residents who have jammed the streets of the state capital in protest of the threatened plan, and the *Journal* hopefully anticipates "a California-style tax revolt." Popular talk-show hosts take up the cause. Phone calls aired on several radio stations voice a raw contempt for the capacities of urban children ("money will not help these children") but predict the imminent demise of education in the richer districts if their funding is cut back. Money, the message seems to be, is crucial to rich districts but will be of little difference to the poor.

Whatever the next step that may be taken in New Jersey, no one believes that people in Princeton, Millburn, Cherry Hill and Summit are prepared to sacrifice the extra edge their children now enjoy. The notion that every child in New Jersey might someday be given what the kids in Princeton now enjoy is not even entertained as a legitimate scenario. In the recent litigation, the defendants went so far as to deride attempts to judge one district by the other's standards. Comparing what was offered in the poorest districts to the academic offerings in Princeton was unfair, they charged, because, they said, the programs offered in the schools of Princeton were "extraordinary."

The state's defense, in essence, was that Princeton was so far beyond the range of what poor children had the right to hope for that it ought to be left out of the discussion. Princeton's excellence, according to this reasoning, positions it in a unique location outside questions of injustice. The court dismissed this logic without comment; but the fact that such an argument could actually be made by educated people is profoundly troubling.

For children who were plaintiffs in the case, meanwhile, it is too late to hope for vindication. None of them are still in school and many have already paid a high price for the long delay in litigation.

"It took a judge seven years and 607 pages," notes the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "to explain why children in New Jersey's poor cities deserve the same basic education as kids in the state's affluent suburbs." But the Camden boy who was lead plaintiff in the case, the paper adds, "would have a hard time reading the decision." Raymond Abbott, whose name is affixed to the decision, is today a 19-year-old high school dropout with the reading skills of a child in the seventh grade. A learning-disabled student who spent eight years in the Camden public schools, his problems were never diagnosed and he was passed on each year from grade to grade. During the years in which he was in school, says the *Inquirer*, Camden "was unable to afford science, art, music or physical education teachers" for the children in its elementary schools and lacked the staff to deal with learning disabilities. On the day that the decision came down from the court, Abbott, now a cocaine addict, heard the news of his belated vindication from a small cell in the Camden County Jail.

The decision might have meant more to him, the *Inquirer* writes, "if it had come . . . when there was still a chance to teach him something." Except for "an occasional letter, written in a childish scrawl," his mother says that she no longer hears from him. "I was prepared for a long battle," she reports, "but not for seven or eight years."

What may be learned from the rebuttals made by the defendants in New Jersey and from the protests that were sparked by the decision of the court? Much of the resistance, it appears, derives from a conservative anxiety that equity equates to "leveling." The fear that comes across in many of the letters and the editorials in the New Jersey press is that democratizing opportunity will undermine diversity and even elegance in our society and that the best schools will be dragged down to a sullen norm, a mediocre middle ground of uniformity. References to Eastern European socialism keep appearing in these letters. Visions of Prague and Moscow come to mind: Equity means shortages of toilet tissue for all students, not just for the black kids in New Jersey or in Mississippi. An impoverished vision of America seems to prevail in these scenarios.

In this respect, the advocates of fiscal equity seem to be more confident about American potentials than their adversaries are. "America," they say, "is wealthy, wise, ingenious. We can give terrific schools to *all* our children. The nation is vast. There is sufficient air for all our kids to draw into their lungs. There is plenty of space. No child needs to use a closet for a classroom. There is enough money. No one needs to ration crayons, books or toilet paper." If they speak of leveling at all, they speak of "leveling up." Their adversaries call it "leveling down." They look at equity for all and see it spelling excellence for none.

This, then, is the dread that seems to lie beneath the fear of equalizing. Equity is seen as dispossession. Local autonomy is seen as liberty—even if the poverty of those in nearby cities robs them of all meaningful autonomy by narrowing their choices to the meanest and the shabbiest of options. In this way, defendants in these cases seem to polarize two of the principles that lie close to the origins of this republic. Liberty and equity are seen as antibodies to each other.

Again there is this stunted image of our nation as a land that can afford one of two dreams—liberty or equity—but cannot manage both. There is some irony in this as well. Conservatives are generally the ones who speak more passionately of patriotic values. They are often the first to rise up to protest an insult to the flag. But, in this instance, they reduce America to something rather tight and mean and sour, and they make the flag less beautiful than it should be. They soil the flag in telling us to fly it over ruined children's heads in ugly segregated schools. Flags in these schools hang motionless and gather dust, often in airless rooms, and they are frequently no cleaner than the schools themselves. Children in a dirty school are asked to pledge a dirtied flag. What they learn of patriotism is not clear.

One other contradiction may be noted here. Marilyn Morheuser, a 67-year-old former nun who was the lead at-

torney for the plaintiffs in New Jersey and prepared and tried the case as part of a nonprofit team, speaks of the vast sums of money the defendants spent to hire expensive expert witnesses to try to undermine the plaintiffs' suit. This, she says—like virtually every other action of the wealthy suburbs in this instance—demonstrates that those who question commonsense ideas about the worth of spending money to create a better education for poor children have no doubts about the usefulness of spending money for the things that they desire.

"Is it possible that the defendants in these cases do not sense the irony," she asks, "of spending so much money to obtain the services of experts to convince the court that money isn't the real issue? These contradictions do not seem to trouble them at all. But do they really ask us to believe that laws of economics, which control all other aspects of our lives in this society, somehow cease to function at the schoolhouse door? Do they think poor people will believe this?"