School

THE STORY OF

American Public Education

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INTRODUCTION BY DAVID TYACK

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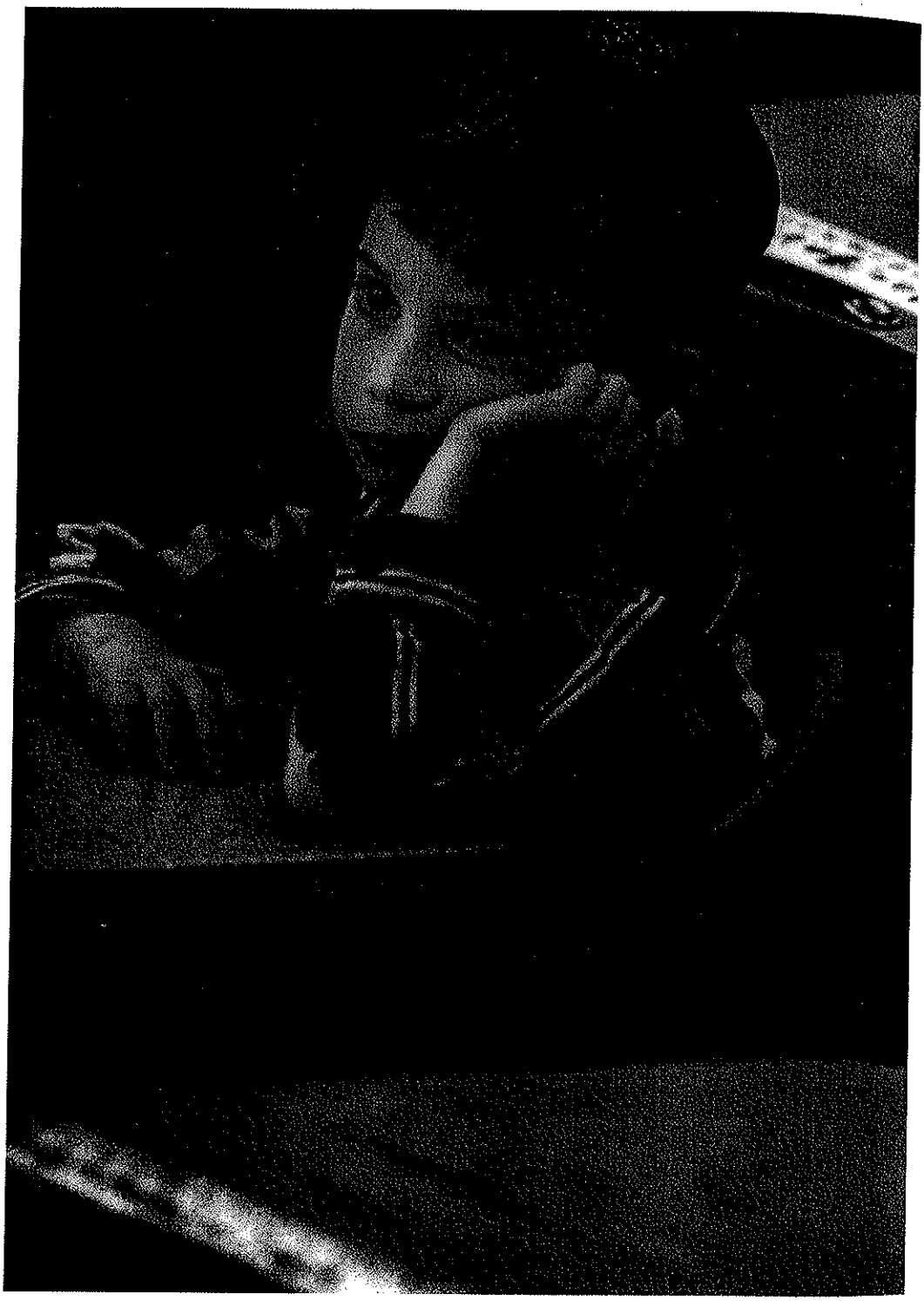
Part Four

1980-2000

THE BOTTOM LINE



Introduction

LARRY CUBAN

There is hardly any work we can do or any expenditures we can make that will yield so large a return to our industries as would come from the establishment of educational institutions which would give us skilled hands and trained minds for the conduct of our industries and our commerce.

THEODORE SEARCH
President of the National Association of Manufacturers, 1898[1]

Education isn't just a social concern, it's a major economic issue. If our students can't compete today, how will our companies compete tomorrow? In an age when a knowledgeable work force is a nation's most important resource, American students rank last internationally in calculus and next to last in algebra.

JOHN AKERS
Chairman of IBM, 1991[2]

1. Cited in Herbert Kliebard, *Schooled to Work: Vocationalism and the American Curriculum, 1876–1946.*

2. Ad appearing in the *New York Times Magazine,* April 28, 1991, p. 21.

At two separate points in our history, the ends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American schools have been vocationalized. Among the civic, academic, and moral goals that have historically guided tax-supported public schools, one became primary: preparing students for the ever-changing workplace. Twice in the past, business-led coalitions forged political alliances among public officials, union leaders, educators, and parents. Fearing foreign competition for their share of the global market, they turned to schools to develop an efficient workforce that would give American international trade an edge and ultimately fuel prosperity. In both cases, these reformers believed that schools should be modeled after the corporation and the marketplace. In these two periods of reform, business involvement in U.S. public schools was sustained and influential in changing school goals, governance, management, organization, and curriculum. But, surprisingly, business support has done little to alter dominant classroom practices.

For corporate leaders so committed to enhancing their firms' profits, the "bottom line," classroom teaching and learning has become their educational bottom line. But it is precisely here that the impact of business-led coalitions has had little influence. How can that be?

Business interest in schools has largely involved private individuals and groups drawn from a variety of large, middle-sized, and small businesses. No monolithic business community, "Big Business," has shaped and steered U.S. public schools. Of course, corporate elites have existed (and continue to exist) in the United States. And, yes, private businesses are highly organized and possess political resources that many other interest groups lack. But the diversity of business involvement (multinational Fortune 500 companies, regional and national business associations, and local chambers of commerce) in a wide range of school reform activities has been far more typical than any narrowly based group of individual corporate leaders who have sought single-mindedly to change U.S. schools in the past or now.

Since the founding of tax-supported public schools in the mid-nineteenth century, educators, public officials, and a broad band of business leaders (but by no means all) have worked together to improve schooling. These political alliances saw schools as economically important in producing a literate workforce that could help companies compete in the marketplace. They believed

that more and better schooling would not only build citizens but also bolster the economy.

Over the past century, businesses have started schools, helped educators manage, donated cash and equipment, persuaded children and teachers of the importance of a market economy, and subsidized programs aimed at enhancing teacher knowledge and skills. In the policy arena, business leaders formed coalitions of like-minded executives to lobby state and federal legislators to enact particular education bills.

In the 1880s and 1890s, top industrialists expressed strong fears that U.S. products were losing ground to those made in Britain and Germany. When American business leaders traveled to Germany to determine how the country had so quickly become a world trade rival to Great Britain, they often pointed to the fact that German technical schools were graduating highly skilled workers.

In the years prior to World War I, an alliance evolved among American business leaders, top public officials, unions, and progressive educators who were highly critical of traditional schooling. Teachers talked most of the time; children listened, read the textbooks, and recited answers to their teachers. By contrast, progressive educators wanted teachers to involve students in planning what to study and to have students learn by working on real-life projects. Other reformers sought to copy the successes of German technical education. By 1910, different reformers came together in the vocational education movement. Yet progressive classroom reforms became subordinate to the larger goal of preparing workers for an industrial economy that could secure a larger share of global markets.

Fears of foreign economic competition and the belief that vocationally driven American schools could strengthen the domestic economy led business leaders to privately fund vocational schools and then coax school boards to take over their funding and operation. In 1917, the vocational education coalition for the first time succeeded in securing federal subsidies for industrial courses in American schools. But this introduction of vocational education into U.S. schools was far from the only influence that this business-led alliance had on schooling.

Many political and educational reformers, even while condemning business-

men as robber barons, admired their insistence on scientific efficiency and professional management. A new breed of reform-minded educators, attracted to the higher social status that corporate leaders had attained, saw strong parallels between running a business and a school system.

These school reformers borrowed heavily from the values, language, organization, and governance of corporate leaders and applied them to schools. "Administrative progressives," as these reformers have been called, detested the large, politically appointed school boards of fifty to one hundred members who put friends and relatives into teaching and principal positions and took company bribes to buy their textbooks. They wanted nonpartisan elections and smaller, appointed school boards that prized efficiency and professionally trained managers. They sought nonpolitical boards of directors just like those running corporations. By 1930, this wing of progressive reformers had converted most school boards into smaller, businesslike operations with modern managerial practices divorced from partisan politics.

Thus, between 1880 and 1930 major domestic economic changes and U.S. expansion into world markets had much influence on public schooling. Corporate leaders and business associations viewed schools as crucial in producing a trained workforce that would strengthen American international competitiveness. They started private vocational schools and secured federal funding for vocational courses in secondary schools. By 1930, most urban secondary schools had vocational guidance counselors and a separate vocational track; many cities had separate vocational high schools. Instruction in these classes differed distinctly from that of academic courses. Teachers had students actively involved in designing, making, repairing, and completing real-life work projects that had apparent cash value outside of school.

Moreover, school reformers had adopted the corporate model of efficient school governance. They moved from large, politically appointed school boards and untrained administrators to small, elected boards filled with business and civic-minded laypersons who hired professionally trained experts to run their schools. This pattern continued into the late twentieth century when the second major instance of business involvement in schools occurred.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the decline of U.S. workplace productivity, rising unemployment, losses in market share to Japan and Germany, and swift

changes in technologies led corporate leaders and public officials to try to determine reasons for the poor performance of the American economy. Within a few years, a crescendo of criticism over high school graduates unprepared for the workplace, poor scores on national tests, violence in urban schools, and the flight of white middle-class families from cities to suburbs fixed blame on American public schools. Corporate and public officials organized political action groups called Business Roundtables to attack the problem of inefficient and ineffective schools.

By 1983, a presidential commission of corporate and public leaders and educators had reported their assessment of public schools in "A Nation At Risk." This report crystallized the growing sense of unease with public schooling in the business community by tightly coupling mediocre student performance on national and international tests to mediocre economic performance in the global marketplace.

Following publication of "A Nation At Risk," state after state increased high school graduation requirements, lengthened the school year, and added more tests. In 1989, in an unprecedented act President George Bush convened the fifty governors to discuss education. They called for six national goals (later expanded to eight), one of which asked American students to rank first on international tests in math and science by the year 2000. Throughout the 1990s, states mandated curricular and performance standards, new tests, and accountability of principals, teachers, and students for test scores. Instead of seeking high school graduates with industrial and craft skills that an earlier generation of business-led reformers wanted, the agenda now called for tougher academic courses and higher test scores on national and international tests for all students, not just those going on to college.

Three key assumptions drove this alliance of public officials, corporate leaders, and educators. The first held that in the same way the economy becomes more efficient and prosperous when businesses compete freely in the marketplace and consumers make choices among varied products, public schools would become more efficient and effective if they competed with one another and gave parents choices of where to send their children. The second maintained that in an information-based economy, students will perform better in the workplace if they have taken rigorous academic subjects, especially math

and science. The final assumption was that although schools, unlike businesses, show no profits and losses—no bottom line—at the end of the year, standardized test scores measure what has been learned and can roughly predict how future employees will perform in the workplace.

Given these assumptions, reformers designed solutions that essentially copied business practices. The corporate formula for success was crisp: set clear goals and high standards for employees. Restructure operations so that managers and employees who actually make the product decide how it is to be done efficiently and effectively. Then hold those managers and employees responsible for the quality of the product by rewarding those who meet or exceed their goals and punishing those who fail.

Top corporate leaders and Business Roundtables claimed that these strategies had worked for Ford Motor Company, IBM, Xerox, Hewlett-Packard, and scores of other firms. If schools pursued these changes, they could revolutionize public schooling.

How does this corporate model of success fit nearly fifteen thousand school boards where lay citizens—not experts—make policy in public sessions, tell professionals what they must do, and declare no dividend to stockholders at the end of the fiscal quarter? Despite the substantial differences between public school governance and businesses, a number of measures recommended by business alliances are now common in schools today: establish clear national goals and high academic standards; give parents choices among schools; let schools compete for students; test students often; tell parents and taxpayers exactly how their children and schools are doing on these tests by issuing periodic report cards; recognize and reward those staff members, students, and schools that meet goals; shame and punish those that fail to meet the standards; and reduce costs by contracting out certain tasks to private firms.

Borrowing heavily from the private sector, this formula for public school improvement crossed political party lines. Since the early 1980s, both Republican and Democratic presidents have endorsed this strategy and directed federal education officials to support it. State governors and legislatures have moved swiftly to establish curricular standards, measure performance through standardized tests, and hold teachers and administrators responsible for student

outcomes on these tests with such devices as cash payments and takeovers of failing schools and districts.

Parents' choices in selecting their children's schools have also expanded dramatically in recent years. Private companies now run public schools. More than two thousand independent charter schools exist. A few state-designed experiments give vouchers or checks to parents for use in private schools. In short, the corporate model of market competition, choice, and accountability has been largely copied by districts and states and has spread swiftly.

The wholesale application of a business model for success is only part of the private-sector influence on public schools. Other administrative influences are apparent as well. Managerial strategies derived from business include contracting school functions to private firms and importing "Total Quality Management" from the private sector. Schools now use technology for improved communication, resource management, and to aid teaching and learning. The rapid spread of computers in public schools in less than two decades has reduced the national number of students per computer from over 125 in the early 1980s to about 9 in 1998. Commercialization of curriculum and instruction has expanded. Channel One television, which is now in one-quarter of all high schools, displays ads in exchange for supplying free equipment; schools receive funds for signing exclusive contracts on selling soft drinks and for selling advertising space.

Missing from this inventory of business influences is teaching and learning. Have business approaches altered what routinely occurs in classrooms between teachers and students? Apart from the commercialization of some instructional materials, Channel One television, and other business influences, it is difficult to determine whether teachers now teach differently than they did before the early 1980s, when private-sector involvement in America's public schools began to build.

The few studies that have been done about teaching and learning in actual classrooms before the 1980s and since confirm that dominant patterns of teacher-centered instruction in both elementary and secondary schools have remained stable. If anything, the impact of standards-based performance and accountability for test score improvement has hardened these traditional

teaching practices. Once-flourishing progressive classroom approaches such as portfolios, project-based teaching, and performance-based testing that blossomed between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, for example, have since shriveled under the unrelenting pressure for higher test scores.

As a consequence of almost two decades of business involvement through philanthropy, partnerships, and imitation of corporate practices, public schools have become more businesslike in governance, management, and organization. As school districts have come to prize business savvy, big-city school boards have abandoned educators and chosen from the ranks of former CEOs, top military officers, and high government officials. More competition exists among public schools. Parents have far more choices among schools than they did a quarter-century ago.

Moreover, in the last twenty years, the political alliance of business leaders, public officials, and educators has succeeded in standardizing the academic curriculum and requiring it of all students. Vocational courses aimed at equipping students to move directly into the workplace have largely withered away, replaced by a trend toward vocationalizing all academic subjects—that is, every student must take so many years of English, social studies, math, and science to prepare for the workplace. The one exception to all of these changes is in classroom teaching itself; if anything, reformers have ended up strengthening traditional instructional practices while weakening progressive ones.

Kindergartens have become increasingly more academic to prepare children for the first grade; middle schools have become increasingly more like high schools; and vocational education courses have steadily declined as high schools have become increasingly college preparatory. Ensuring that American schools produce fully prepared graduates who can perform well in the workplace has led to an intense concentration on achieving high test scores in academic skills and subjects and a hardening of already dominant patterns of teacher-centered instruction. In effect, a single model of good teaching and good schools has emerged as a political orthodoxy from this concentration on harnessing public schools to the economy.

Finally, the ironies of corporate influence have become visible. A century ago, popular support for major reforms in school governance, organization, curriculum, and instruction made business leaders into administrative and

pedagogical progressives. In those decades, corporate leaders promoted more vocational courses and fewer academic courses, more hands-on learning than reading from books, and more real-life experiences rather than listening to teachers. That political coalition succeeded in adding vocational education to the curriculum. Although learning-by-doing classroom practices were limited, business leaders maintained that there was more than one version of good teaching and good schools.

Now, a century later, the coalition of business leaders, public officials, and educators say that more and tougher academic subjects equip graduates with essential knowledge and skills not only to perform well in an information-based workplace but also to secure America's global economic supremacy. Reformers called for and got a uniform academic curriculum that all students take at the price of eliminating vocational subjects. Reformers demanded and received more tests; now teachers, using traditional methods of teaching, spend more time with students preparing for tests, and students who fail these tests are left back for another year or don't graduate. Some teachers who were following progressive practices in their classrooms continue to use them, but many have forsaken their beliefs, and others have adopted practices they find distasteful.

What business-minded reformers sought in the school curriculum, tests, and accountability has largely been achieved in current state and local policies and programs at the cost of freezing the very teaching practices that an earlier generation of business-led reformers severely criticized.

So I return to where I began. Fear of foreign competition and fiercely held beliefs that education harnessed to the economy will strengthen the nation's global competitive position prompted sustained and influential political involvement by a variety of business leaders twice in the past century. Although business-led alliances have been limited in what they could achieve, particularly in shaping what occurs in classrooms, many documented changes in public schooling can be attributed to the involvement of corporate leaders, especially the hammering of alternative versions of good teaching and good schools into one mold for all students.

And what do these changes amount to? Given the sparse evidence, very little. No one can say for sure whether increased choice and competition have improved students' academic performance. The scanty evidence available on

whether standardized test scores are connected to job performance suggests that they are not linked. The idea that businesses need high school graduates who have taken more math and science to perform effectively in work has not been studied much, and what evidence exists raises serious doubts about this popular connection. Finally, where the bottom line matters in schooling—the classroom—no one knows for certain whether all the testing, all the required courses, and all the penalties and rewards get teachers to teach better and students to learn more.

Even more damning are questions omitted from current political agendas for school reform. In what ways does turning schooling into a consumer product, no different from candy bars and cars, undermine the common good that tax-supported public schools historically served? Do schools geared to preparing workers also build literate, active, and morally sensitive citizens who carry out their civic duties? How can schools develop independently thinking citizens who earn their living in corporate workplaces? What happens when the economy hiccups, unemployment increases, and graduates have little money to secure higher education or find a job matched to their skills? Will public schools, now an arm of the economy, get blamed—as they have in the past—for creating the mismatch? These basic questions, unasked by business-inspired reform coalitions over the past century, go unanswered today.

A Nation at Risk?

You can't teach a child how to think unless
you have something for him to think about.

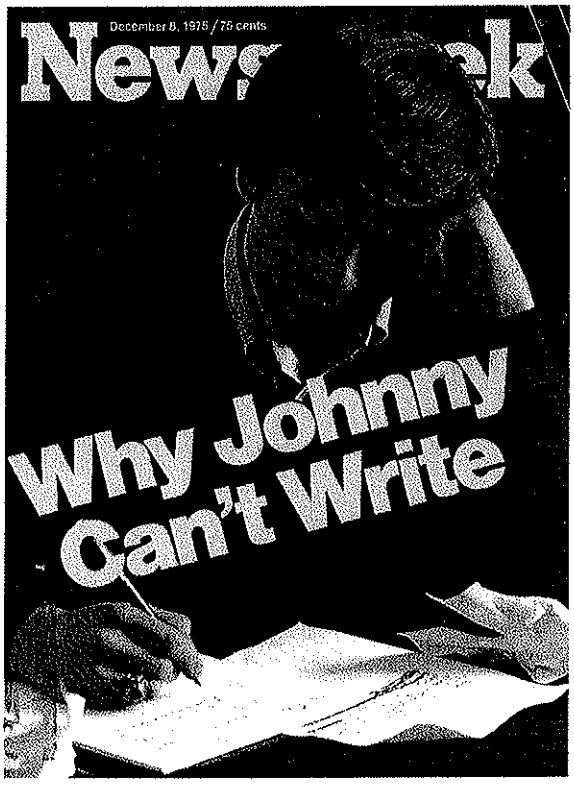
GEORGANN REAVES

Indiana student takes statewide assessment exam, 1988.

By the 1980s, education in the United States had reached unprecedented levels. Almost the entire school-age population was enrolled. More than 71 percent of seventeen-year-olds graduated from high school, and the majority continued on to college. But to some, including President Ronald Reagan, these numbers masked widespread problems. "Our educational system is in the grips of a crisis caused by low standards, lack of purpose, and a failure to strive for excellence," Reagan said in 1983, as he launched a campaign for reform. "Our agenda is to restore quality to education by increasing competition and by strengthening parental choice and local control."

A "learning crisis" is declared by politicians and the press in the mid-1970s and early 1980s.

Reports of a "learning crisis" by politicians and the press would forever change the way Americans perceived their schools. And they would open the door to free-market reforms that challenged basic ideals of public education, while introducing concepts such as consumer choice and economic competition. Traditionally, America's public schools had aimed to educate citizens to live in a democracy. They were the melting pot in which immigrants embraced the American dream. And they were at the forefront of the struggle for equality. In the 1980s and 1990s, schools were also asked to compete in a business-driven world where one thing mattered: the bottom line.

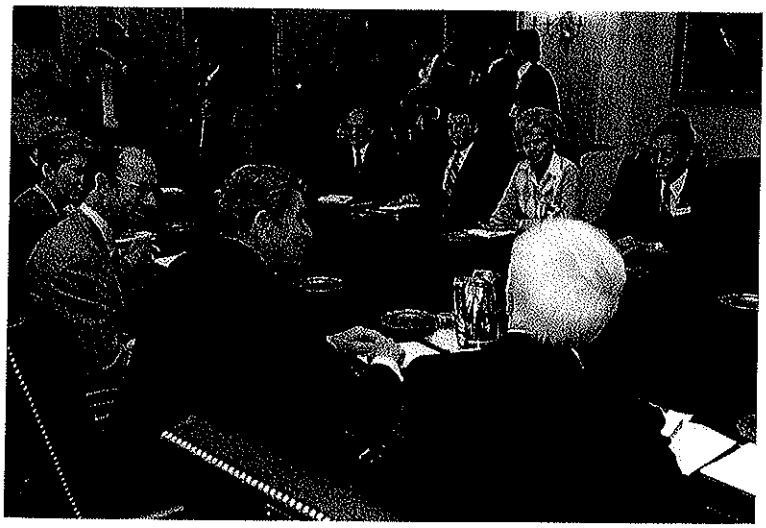


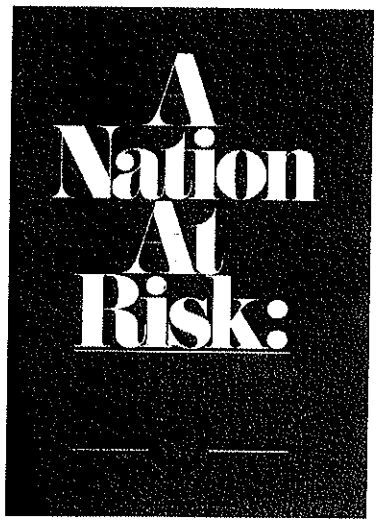
The twentieth century's final wave of school reform began with a 1983 report to President Reagan titled "A Nation At Risk." Commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, the report said that the poor quality of America's schools posed a threat to the welfare of the country. Historian David Tyack summarizes: "It said, 'Look, we are going to hell in a handbasket. If some foreign power had done to us educationally what we have done to ourselves'—said the report—'then we would consider it an act of war.' " The language "built up and up and up," Tyack adds. "And that fit the mood of the Reagan years.... It was a text for the times."

The statistics compiled for the report seemed to indicate a shocking drop in test scores and student achievement. More than 40 percent of students, "A Nation At Risk" said, were unprepared either for work or for college. Yet many educators cried foul, citing other evidence that showed more students doing better academi-

LEFT *President Ronald Reagan meets at the White House with the National Commission on Excellence in Education, authors of "A Nation At Risk," in 1984.*

RIGHT *"A Nation At Risk," the 1983 report that launched the twentieth century's final wave of school reform.*





A Nation at Risk?

cally than ever before. As author Nicholas Lemann notes, "The best source of data to counteract 'A Nation At Risk' is probably NAEP—the National Assessment of Education Progress—which goes back for at least a couple of decades before that and just doesn't show this dire picture of steady decline. It shows things, you know, slowly rising." Historian Carl Kaestle agrees. "Not only is it not true that there has been a great decline since that time," he says, "but it is also true that we are educating a much wider proportion of our population now than we were in the 1950s."

In addition, many educators disagreed with comments made by Reagan in 1983, in which he suggested that civil rights enforcement had hurt basic education over the previous two decades. "The schools were charged by the federal courts with leading in the correcting of long-standing injustices in our society," Reagan said. "Racial segregation. Sex discrimination. Lack of opportunity for the handicapped. Perhaps there was just too much to do in too little time." In fact, says historian James Anderson, "groups that had lagged way behind and had not had access to good public education were making significant strides during the same time period. And so in some ways, our schools were doing a better job in important areas than they had ever done historically, and yet all of that was lost because of our concern over the economy, which we blamed on the schools."

The U.S. economy faced new threats from global competitors. The auto industry, for example, had been losing ground to Japanese manufacturers since the 1970s. As had happened in the 1950s

after the Soviets beat the Americans into space, blame was placed on American schooling. The authors of "A Nation At Risk" claimed that economic security depended on education reform. They recommended higher standards for graduation, more courses in traditional subjects and in the new field of "computer science," a longer school day and school year, and more homework. At the same time, the federal government was scaling back its role in education and shifting the burden of these reforms to state and local authorities. They, in turn, cracked down on students. And to ensure that students were meeting these new standards, an era of high-stakes testing was born.

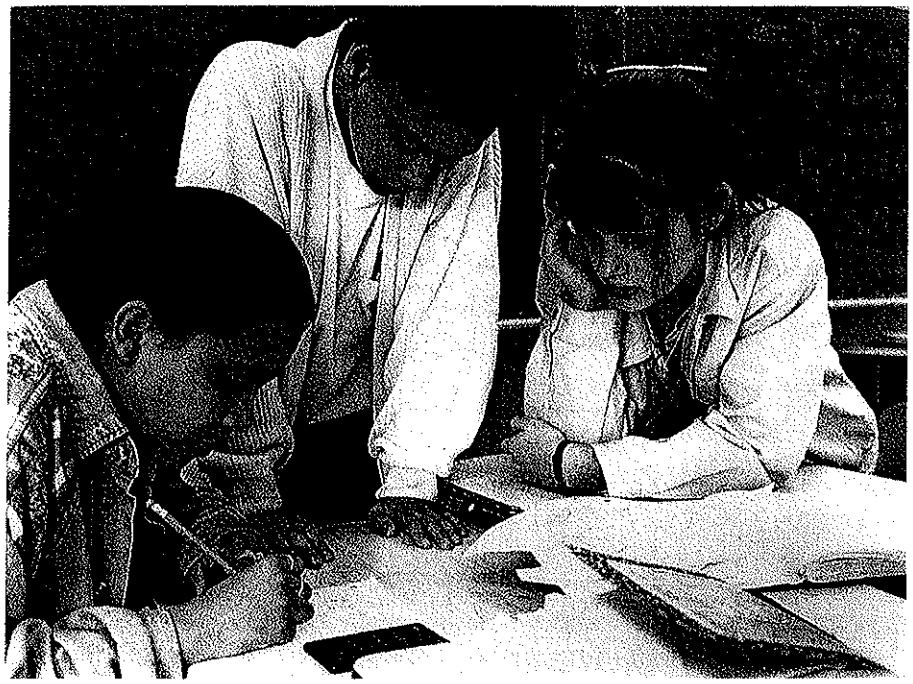
While many debated the dire conclusions of "A Nation At Risk," few argued that reform was needed in some schools. This was especially true in the nation's cities, where per-pupil spending might be as low as a third of what it was in nearby suburbs. But without additional funding, how could these schools improve? Some reformers believed that one solution was to apply business strategies, such as consumer choice and economic competition. "You want to improve public education?" says John Golle, founder and chairman of Education Alternatives, Inc., a for-profit company. "The way to do it is compete with them. Allow them the chance to compete with private enterprise, and vice versa. That's the way you're going to make public education better."

Injecting competition into America's urban school systems was the strategy behind an experiment already under way in East Harlem, a school district of 14,000 mostly low-income students in New

Deborah Meier, founder and former principal of Central Park East Schools in East Harlem, New York City, pioneered the idea of twenty students per class and twenty teachers per school.

York City. In the mid-1970s, East Harlem ranked last among New York's thirty-two school districts. "It was consistently thirty-second," notes Seymour Fliegel, a school administrator in East Harlem at the time. "It didn't move to thirty-one or thirty. So there was a tremendous advantage to being at the bottom. You can afford to be a risk taker."

In 1974, educators in East Harlem asked some of the district's best teachers to create small, alternative public schools, carving space as needed within existing buildings. "My first reaction was, 'You must be kidding,' " says Deborah Meier, founder and former principal of East Harlem's Central Park East Schools. "I had never heard of anybody offering to do that in the public system. And it was the beginning of a very bold and exciting experiment.



Students at Central Park East Secondary High School in East Harlem, New York.

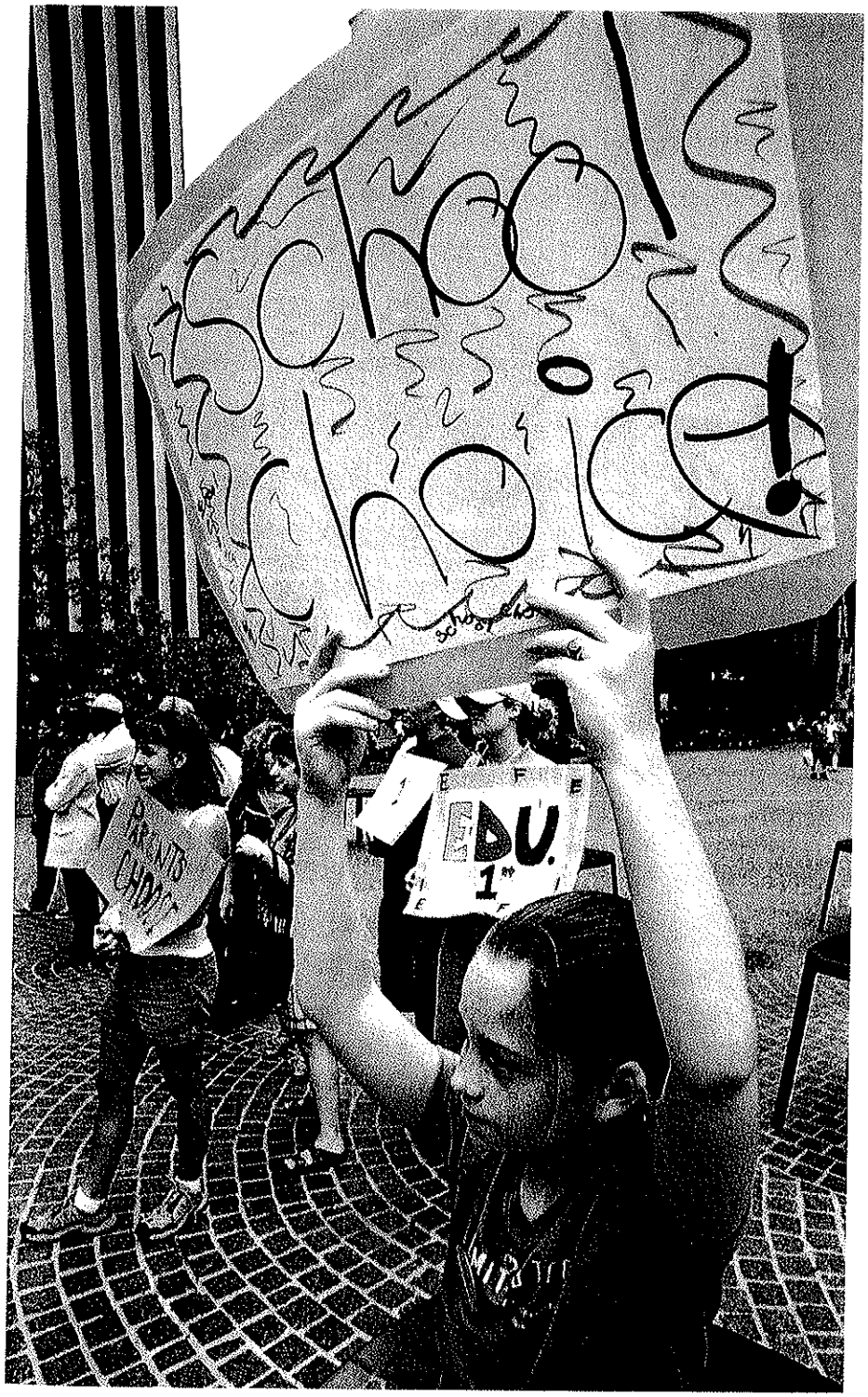
Within ten years, East Harlem went from having twenty schools to having fifty-two schools in the same buildings." Each school had its own focus and style, notes Fliegel. "So you had the open ed, progressive schools. We had some highly traditional schools; at the Frederick Douglass Academy they [wore] uniforms. We had three math and science schools. We had a maritime school, we had a sports school, we had a writing school, two performing-arts schools. Keep in mind, though, the goals were always the same: raising academic achievement. The themes were different ways to motivate the youngsters to get there."

By 1982, educators in East Harlem required that all junior high students choose a school, whether alternative or regular; no schools would be assigned. Any school that was failing would be

shut down and reorganized, much like a failing business. "Well, what do you think happened in the regular schools?" asks Seymour Fliegel. "Do you think they said, 'Look, isn't that nice, in the alternative schools their kids are doing well. They get into good schools. And we just sit here'? They started developing better schools. So in East Harlem, some of the regular schools were better than the alternative schools in their buildings. I was very happy about that."

By 1987, East Harlem was outperforming half of the city's school districts. Many attributed the turnaround to the smaller, more personalized schools. Most agreed that choice had also played a critical role. Deborah Meier states, "I think choice offers us the opportunity to rethink what we mean by a public institution and stop thinking of public institutions as dull, boring, mediocre buildings that house bureaucrats. Instead think of them as lively, coherent places that represent the very best and most excellent standards."

In 1992, New York began allowing students to seek enrollment in any public school in the city. Yet there were so few alternative schools, and so few students willing or able to leave their regular schools, that little competition resulted. Nationwide, a small but growing number of parents went to great lengths to get their children enrolled in a small number of specialized and alternative public schools. These included magnet schools, designed to combat segregation by attracting high-caliber students of diverse backgrounds. Magnet schools often received extra funding in



School choice rally in Cleveland, Ohio, June 20, 2000.

order to offer high-quality programs in the arts, science, and mathematics.

The interest in finding alternatives to local public schools, rather than working to improve those schools, has raised some concern. Historian Carl Kaestle comments, "I think that what is dominating the argument about choice is a very privatistic kind of mentality. Not that the schools will be private, but that the motives for going to school are more private. Getting your kid ahead . . . making your kid's scores come out higher." Jonathan Kozol, an advocate for children in low-income communities, adds, "There is a tendency in many cities nowadays to develop a kind of lifeboat mentality where the politicians and some of the educators sort of sigh and say, well, we are not going to save most of these kids, let's at least start a number of very attractive, spectacular little schools. The trouble is, these types of schools tell us nothing about what's happening to the majority of children in that city."

One of the most controversial forms of public school choice is a program known as vouchers, which allows students to use public school funds to pay for private schools. Voucher supporters believe that competition from private schools will force public schools to improve. "It's just like anything else—a supermarket, a car dealership," says Annette Polly Williams, State Assemblywoman from Wisconsin. "You keep selling lemons, then you're going to wonder why nobody's coming to buy your cars. What you have to do is get you some good cars and people will come and buy it. So public school around this nation is selling something that nobody wants."

At Williams's urging, and despite widespread opposition, Wisconsin passed the country's first voucher legislation. In 1990, the year it was implemented, a group of nearly four hundred low-income students in Milwaukee attended private, nonreligious schools at taxpayer expense. The private schools got $2,500 from the state for each student, money that would have otherwise gone to public school funding. Critics feared that an expansion of the voucher program might ultimately cripple the city's public schools. Voucher proponent Annette Polly Williams defended the program. "I am not in this battle on education to save any institution," she said. "I am in here to save the lives of children by any means necessary."

Nationwide, voucher advocates got a boost in 1992 from President George Bush. "For too long, we've shielded schools from competition, allowed our schools a damaging monopoly power over our children," Bush said. "It is time we began thinking of a system of public education in which many providers offer a marketplace of opportunities.... A revolution is under way in Milwaukee and across this country, a revolution to make American schools the best in the world." Chester Finn, an education advisor to Reagan, adds, "Well, the best argument for choice is to enable poor people to have the same rights and opportunities that rich people already have by virtue of being rich. I mean, rich people exercise school choice. They move to where they want to buy a house, because of the schools, or they send their kid to a private school. It is poor people who typically get trapped in bad schools and can't afford to

do anything about it." Jonathan Kozol counters, "They are proposing a voucher of a couple thousand dollars which at best would allow a handful of poor children or children of color to go to a pedagogically marginal private school. The day that the conservative voucher advocates in America tell me that they would like to give every inner-city black, Hispanic, or poor white kid a $25,000 voucher to go to Exeter, I will become a Republican."

By 1997, the Milwaukee voucher program served 1,500 students. Success stories included Urban Day, an elementary school offering small classes and a rigorous curriculum, whose students went on to graduate from high school at double the norm for the area. But many private schools did not accept vouchers, and the quality of those that did varied widely. "Anybody can start a choice school in Milwaukee," says Greg Doyle of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. "You don't have to have any money. You don't have to have any expertise in education. We had quite a number of people who wanted to start school without a building, without teachers, without textbooks. We believe that those are conditions that are not conducive to the education of children in the state." Critics also noted that the private schools, unlike public schools, could cater to special interests. The Bruce Guadeloupe School, for example, stressed Hispanic heritage and achievement. The Harambee School, visited by Vice President Dan Quayle in 1994, was Afrocentric.

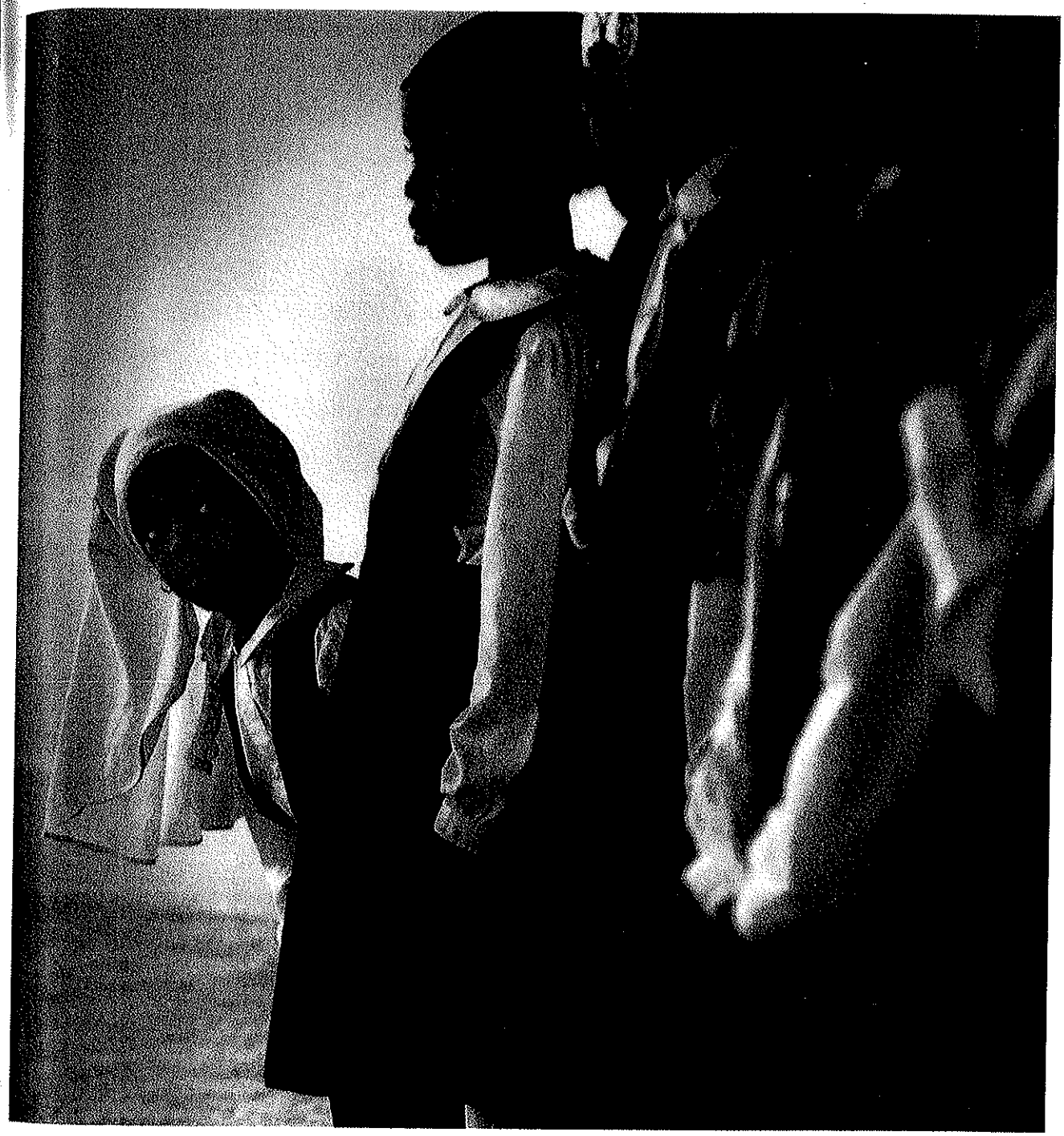
Of greater concern to voucher opponents, however, was the push to include private religious schools. In 1994, this expansion

Students praying at the start of the school day in San Antonio, Texas, in 1962.

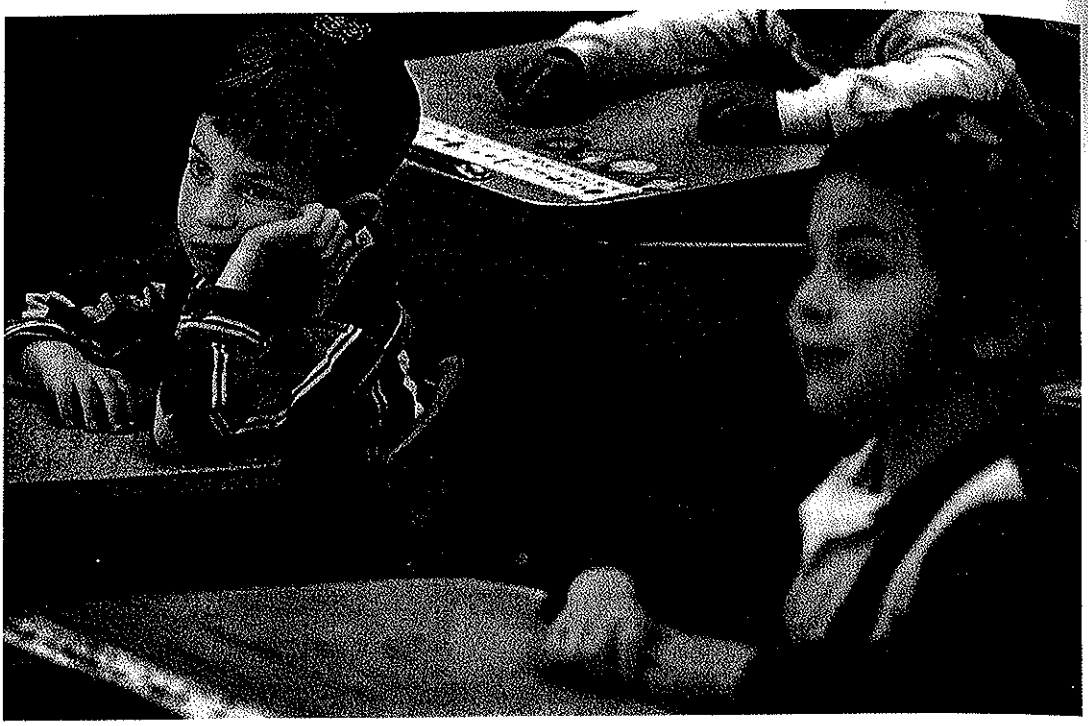
was debated in the Wisconsin legislature. Annette Polly Williams, a voucher proponent, told members, "I am not convinced that God or religion is going to hurt these little children in these schools." Opponents went to court, arguing that the use of publicly funded vouchers in religious schools violated the constitutional separation of church and state. "The question is, if it is okay for one church, why is it not okay for another church?" says Greg Doyle. "Would the taxpayer generally be willing to support a voucher that went to a school run by witches? Would they be willing to support a school that was run by skinheads? The gravest

concern has to be that this society made a decision in its very beginning that church and state would be separate. And so we believe that the democracy needs that separation." Chester Finn argues, "I don't get this distinction between why it is okay to assist people in church-affiliated hospitals and church-affiliated colleges and church-affiliated day care centers—but for some reason it is verboten to assist them in a church-affiliated elementary or secondary school." Jonathan Kozol says, "Think of cities that are just struggling to hold together . . . and then imagine what it would be like if you added a system whereby every little intellectual, ethnic, theological splinter group could indoctrinate children separately, and use public money to do it. It would rip apart the social fabric of this nation."

In 1996, low-income students in Cleveland, Ohio, became the first in the nation to use vouchers to attend religious schools. Two years later, in 1998, the Wisconsin Supreme Court allowed Milwaukee students to do the same. That fall, the number of voucher students jumped to nearly six thousand. Significantly, three out of four of these students had already been enrolled in private schools but now paid for them with public school money. This left the majority of Milwaukee's public schools with fewer resources than before. "One of our biggest concerns about the choice program is that we are not making the effort to improve the public schools," says Greg Doyle. "Rather than supporting the public schools we are supplanting them with something else. An expanded voucher system is going to require the taxpayer to support more than just



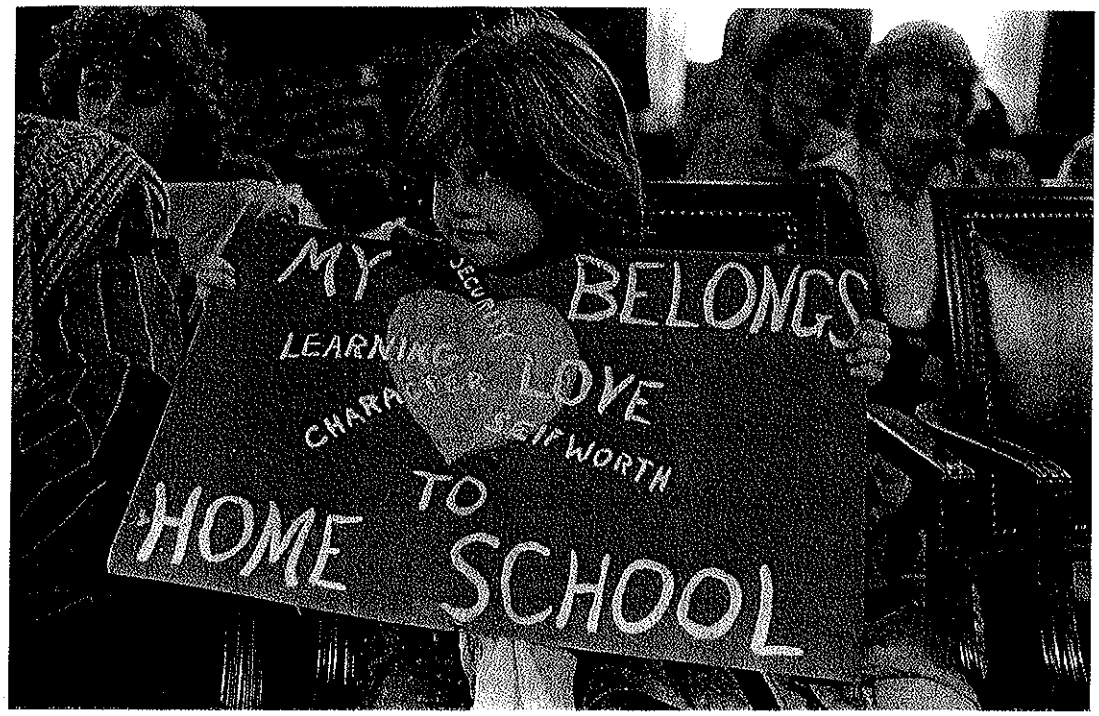
Milwaukee voucher students attending religious schools.



Milwaukee voucher students attending religious schools.

the public schools in America. It is going to require them to support an entire private school system. In Wisconsin, that will mean about six hundred and sixty million additional dollars for education in this state and we don't have the money for that."

To critics nationwide, voucher programs threaten public schools not only by siphoning off resources, but also by selectively sorting through students and excluding those who are difficult or harder to serve. Says James Anderson, "We could end up with vouchers that would allow systems to cater to people on the basis of class. People who are well-to-do [could] select students who are very similar in terms of class background and educate them in a



A child demonstrates in favor of home schooling at the State Capitol in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1985.

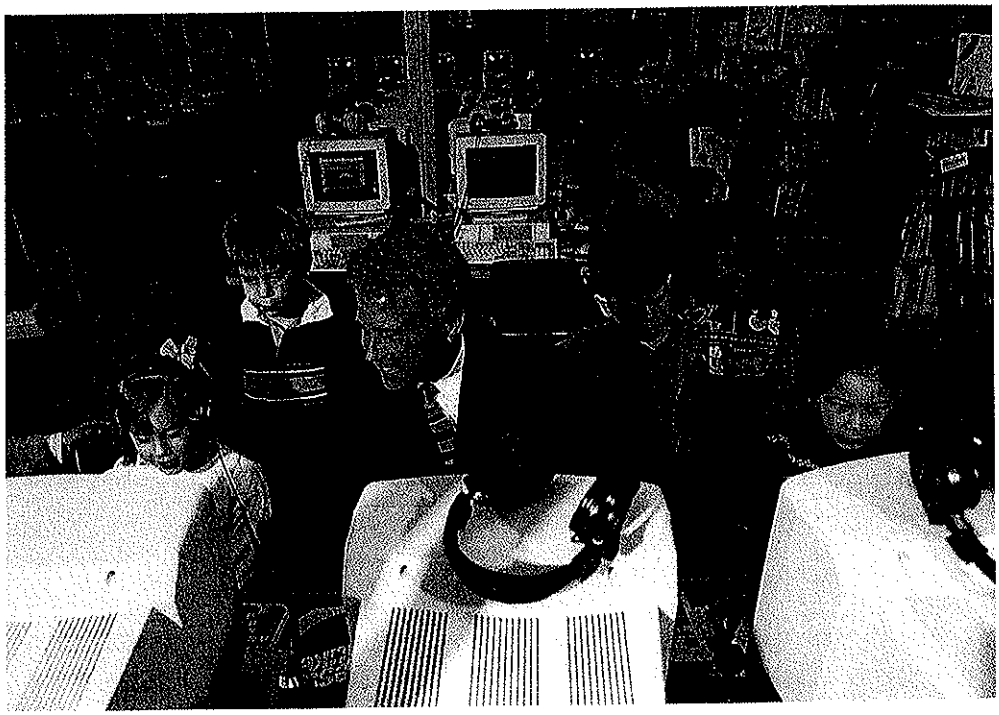
very different system. And we might end up, particularly in large metropolitan areas, with another class of schools that are public schools for the poor, the disenfranchised."

Still another movement for school choice gained momentum during this period: home schooling. By the late 1990s, the Christian right had led a successful campaign to make home schooling legal in all fifty states. While the percentage of students being home schooled remained small—less than 2.5 percent in 2000—exit strategies like vouchers and home schooling would continue to spark political battles in the years ahead.

Baltimore, Maryland, was the site of another experiment with

big implications: private management of public schools. Schools in Baltimore were in tough shape in 1992, when the experiment began. "We were overcrowded, underfunded," says Irene Dandridge, president of the Baltimore Teachers Union from 1980 to 1996. "Lots of teachers did not have supplies, such things as paper and duplicating fluid." Teachers had to buy their own books and buy workbooks for children, she says. "Having to duplicate materials over and over and then not having the paper to do it with. It was bad, it really was." Dr. Walter Amprey, Baltimore superintendent of schools from 1991 to 1997, adds, "We had tried many things in the past. I had a real clear list of what wasn't working. Not a real strong list of what would work. So I was looking for answers where they hadn't been found before."

John T. Golle, head of Education Alternatives, Inc., the first for-profit company to manage an American public school, talks with first- and second-graders at Tesseract School in Eagan, Minnesota, in 1995.



In 1992, the city of Baltimore hired a private company, Education Alternatives Inc., or EAI, to manage nine of its public schools. "[Public schools] are funded by the government. Their rules and regulations are dictated by the government," says John Golle, founder and chairman of EAI. "Where else can we look in our society and say that a government monopoly functions best for our society? I would suggest to you, no place."

For the same $5,400 per pupil that the city would have spent, EAI said that it could run the schools, boost test scores, and still make a profit. A Minnesota-based company, EAI was already running two private schools, as well as a public school near Miami, Florida—the first in the nation to be managed by a private business. Yet private-sector involvement in education is not new, says Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform. "We buy our desks, they are for profit, we buy our pencils, we buy our computers. We get our software, teachers are paid. I mean, there is money all around our schools. So to have a private company come in is not really a strange idea." In Baltimore, John Golle focused on the school buildings, which were in a state of disrepair. As a private company, EAI could bypass the bureaucracy, invest its own money, and hire outside contractors to rehab the buildings. He remembers, "When people came in and they saw one high-speed computer for every four kids, they said, how did you do this and earn a profit? We said it is easy. We had everyone compete. Compete for the delivery of the food services. Compete for the maintenance and the cleaning of the building, interior and exterior. And

by competing what we found was we were able to drive up the quality and drive down the costs."

Critics held a different view. EAI had replaced unionized teacher's aides with interns paid an hourly wage. They had cut special education services in half, and reduced art and music programs. The company was accused of taking profits back to Minnesota at the expense of Baltimore's schoolchildren. "These children need many, many, more services than children that you might find in the suburbs, for example, than most children," Irene Dandridge argues. "They need psychological services, the city has to provide health services. All kinds of services that children just cannot learn without. There is just not enough money in public school education, particularly in urban centers, to have a profit and good education, too."

Elsewhere, corporate involvement in schools was growing. By the mid-1990s, education in the United States was a $300-billion-a-year industry. Increasingly, for-profit tutoring firms were brought into classrooms to raise student test scores. School districts earned extra cash by allowing corporate logos to appear in public school buildings. Whittle Communications offered free media equipment to schools. In exchange, all students had to watch twelve minutes per day of Channel One, a broadcast of news features and commercials geared to a young audience. By the year 2000, one-quarter of the nation's secondary students were watching Channel One.

The controversial partnership between corporations and

schools brought national attention to the EAI experiment in Baltimore. Stockholders had seen the price of their shares rise from $4 to $49 in the first two years. But for students, the gains were less clear. An independent report said that EAI students performed no better on tests than their peers in other Baltimore schools. "There are other parts of our school system that did better for our school system than EAI," Kurt Schmoke, the mayor of Baltimore at that time, said. City leaders, caught in a fiscal crisis, pressured the board of education to end the experiment early. In 1995, with one swift vote, the school privatization experiment in Baltimore ended, just three years after it began. In news coverage of the cancellation, Bob Kur of NBC News said, "Had it gone better in Baltimore, this movement to privatize schools could have spread all over the country. This was a crucial test for one of the most controversial experiments in American public education."

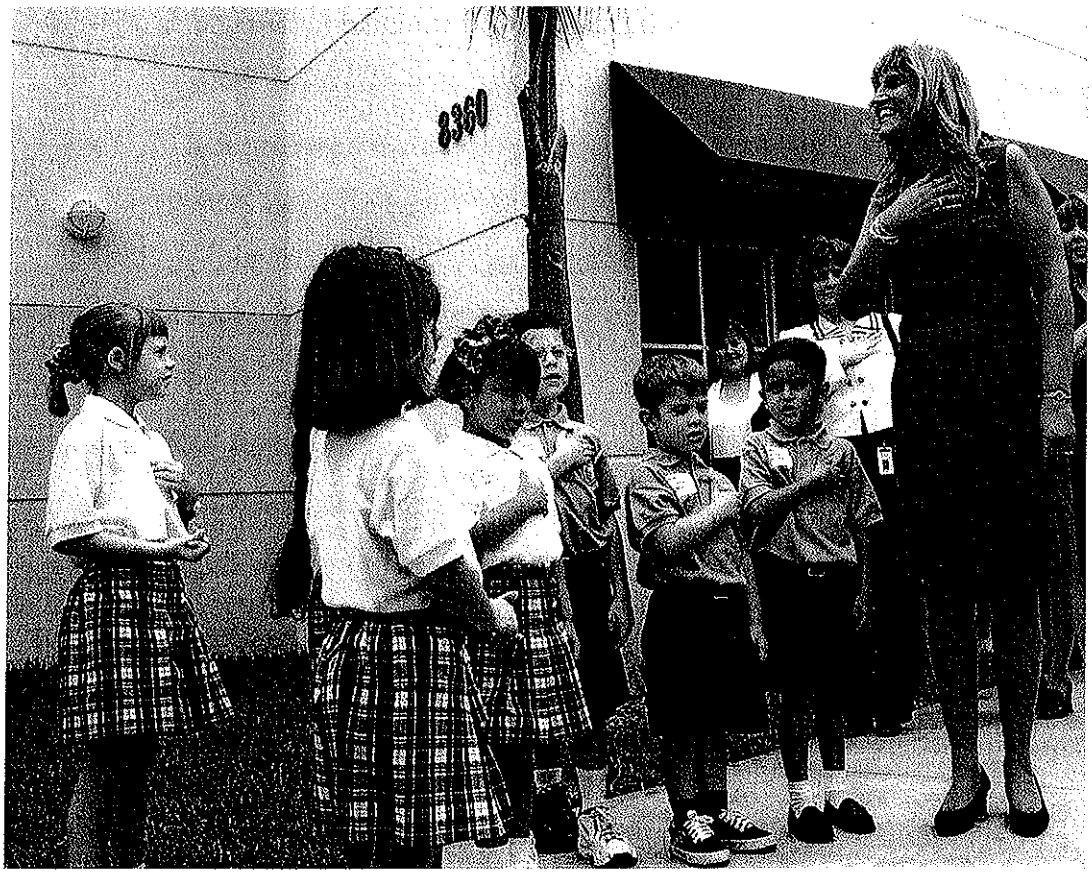
Those involved disagreed over what had been learned. Union leader Irene Dandridge: "Their primary job was supposed to be education. And the education part just didn't work. Cleaning the buildings worked. Bringing in supplies worked. Teachers were happy to get them, certainly. But they did not deliver the quality of education that they promised." Superintendent Walter Amprey: "It started the concept of schools making their own decisions about their dollars—and beginning to contract on their own. And we did put in place, through the EAI relationship, a way in which schools could begin to spend their own dollars as opposed to having those dollars spent for them by the central office." EAI

chairman John Golle: "This is going to be the example that people refer back to and say, 'Private enterprise can't work internally to make the system better; they are not welcome. Private enterprise will have to work externally to make competition prevail and make the whole system better.' In the last two years, there have been a dozen or more companies coming to the forefront, running charter schools all over the nation and proving that very point."

One way that EAI has found to work externally is through a special category of public schools known as charter schools. "Charter schools are a new form of public school," explains Jeanne Allen. "[They are] the same as traditional public schools in that they are open to everyone. They are not private, they don't have admissions criteria. They don't cost money. And oftentimes they are run by teachers, and parents are heavily involved." Charter schools can also be run by private companies; in 1997, EAI signed a contract with the state of Arizona to run a dozen small charter schools. Proponents argue that charter schools offer more flexibility than other public schools, in part because most are accountable directly to the state, rather than to city or school bureaucracies. Seymour Fliegel, who helped to pioneer school choice in East Harlem and is now a leading advocate of school choice, explains, "There is no central board, there is no district office, there is no superintendent, you make a contract that is usually five years, three to five years, you say this is where youngsters will be achievement-wise. If you reach those goals, you get renewed. If you don't, they can close you down."

As schools that must be chosen, rather than assigned, charters compete for students with targeted programs in subjects such as environmental science, learning and manners, and performing arts. Supporters hope that regular schools will be motivated by these schools—and by the potential loss of students—to reform. "Every state should give parents the power to choose the right public school for their children," said President Bill Clinton in his 1997 State of the Union address. "Their right to choose will foster competition and innovation that can make public schools better." That year, Congress approved $80 million to aid in the construction of new charter schools. Four years later, in 2001, there were 2,100 charter schools in the United States, including 173 charter schools run by for-profit companies. There were nearly 91,000 regular public schools.

Like other forms of school choice, charters have sparked significant debate. Chester Finn, a founding partner of Edison Schools, Inc., a private company, says, "Competition is having a salutary effect on schools and school systems as well. We are seeing examples, that are mostly anecdotal so far, of so-called regular schools responding to competition by changing their own offerings, by replenishing their faculty, by getting new textbooks, by getting a new principal or assistant principal. I think it is very important and I think it is probably going to work." Others, including historian Carl Kaestle, disagree. "I don't see any special reason, any convincing reason yet to think that competition is going to lead to better schools," Kaestle says. "Free market is not a perfect mech-

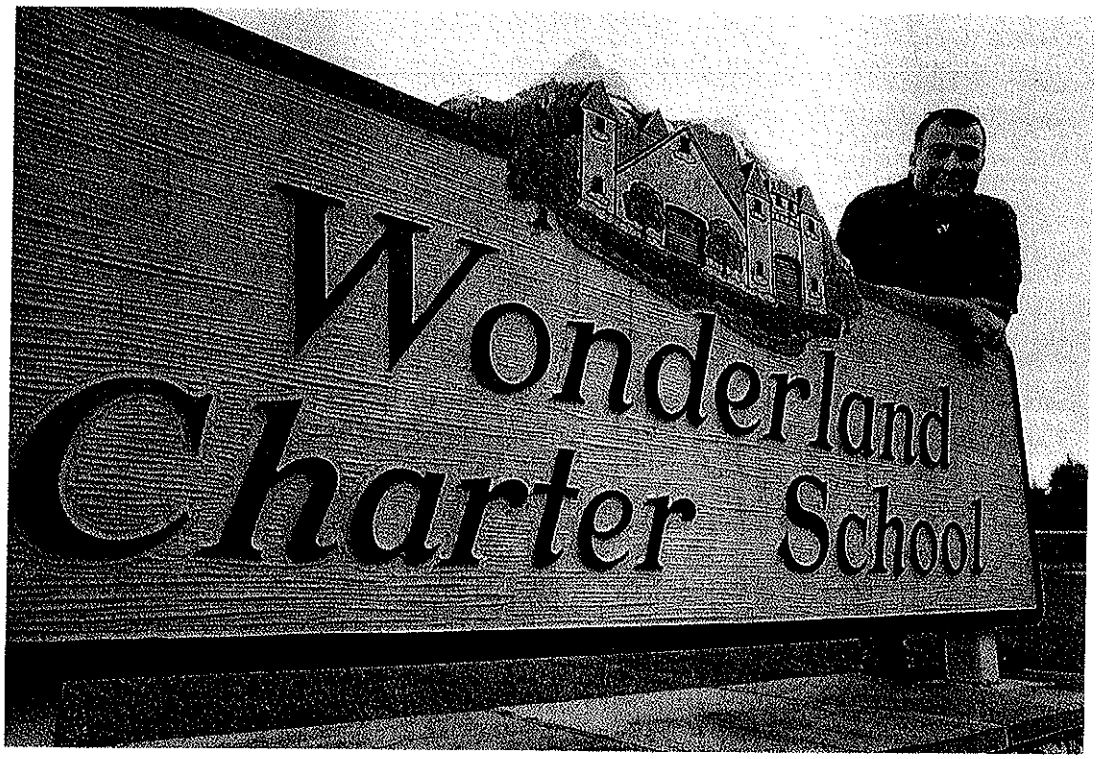


Principal leading students in the Pledge of Allegiance at the Ryder Elementary Charter School in Miami, Florida, 1999.

anism in the educational business. And I don't think the evidence so far suggests that it is." Historian James Anderson also has doubts. "Efforts at privatization and other kinds of efforts will incorporate a very small fraction of students," he says. "The vast majority of school-age students depend on a system of public education and at this point I don't see an alternative to that. And I don't even see an alternative that is of the same quality."

More than all the free-market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, the push for high academic standards, as measured by standardized testing, has arguably had the greatest impact on classrooms

nationwide. A legacy of the Reagan era, these standards and tests had bipartisan support by the end of the twentieth century. "Every state should adopt high national standards," declared President Clinton in 1997. "Every state should test every fourth-grader in reading and every eighth-grader in math to make sure these standards are met." This push for higher, measurable results has led some schools to adopt new curricula aimed at raising student achievement. Among these is the Core Knowledge curriculum, created by English professor E.D. Hirsch. It offers precisely the same academic content to students in over one thousand schools across the country, from Fort Myers, Florida, to the South Bronx, New York; from San Antonio, Texas, to Macon, Georgia. "There



The chief administrative officer poses in front of Wonderland Charter School in State College, Pennsylvania. The year 2000 marked the school's second year of operation.

"Core Knowledge" students in a Georgia elementary school celebrate Chinese New Year.

is no doubt that there is a core of knowledge and shared culture that the schools have an obligation to provide," Hirsch says, "for reasons not only of commonality and community but also of equity."

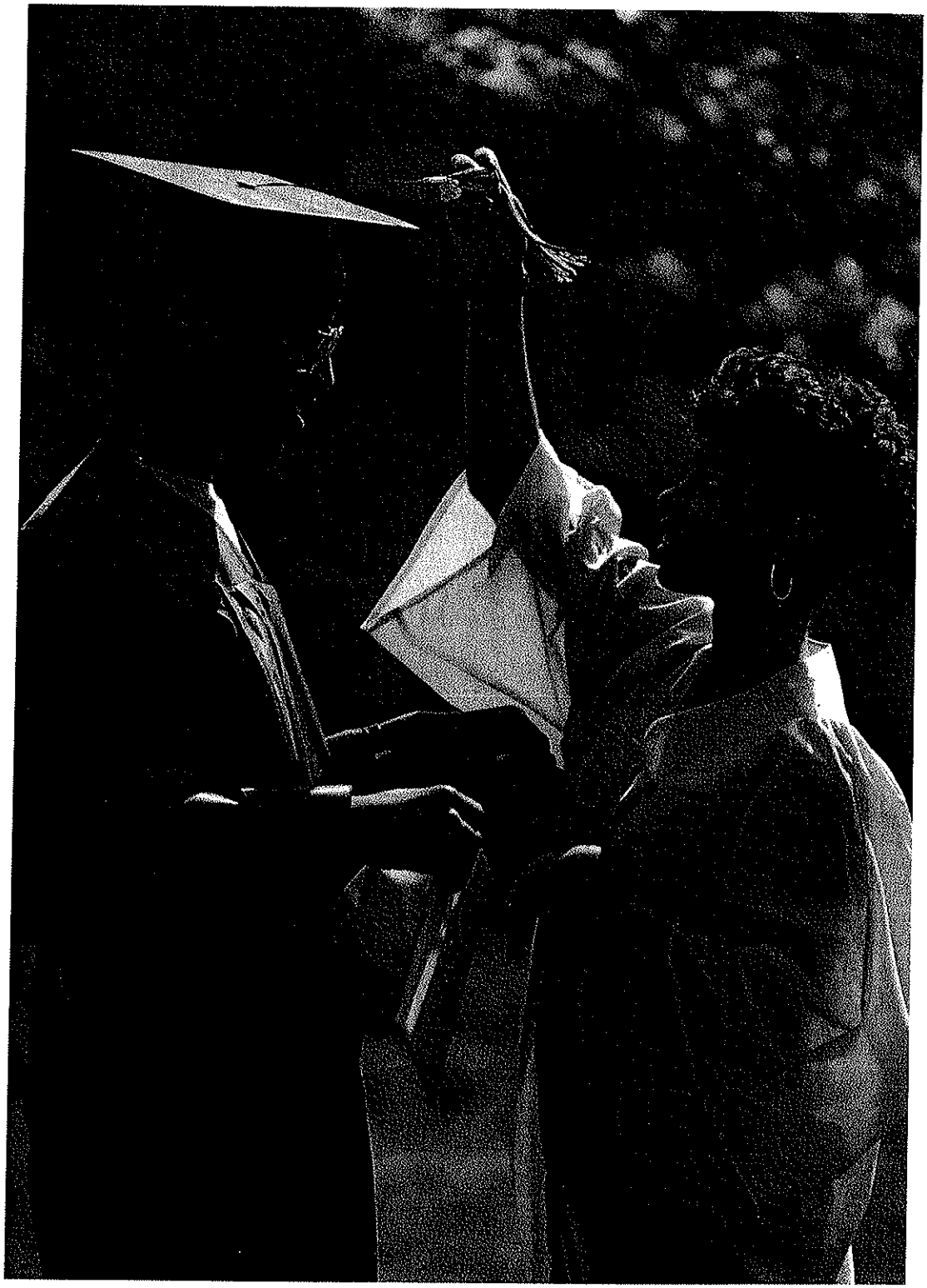
At Core Knowledge schools, all first-graders learn about the ancient Egyptians. All second-graders study Asian folktales and Greek myths. By the third grade, they are immersed in ancient Rome. The approach to learning is traditional and teacher-centered. All students are expected to master the same academic content at the same time. Says Georgann Reaves, "We believe that without the knowledge, without the facts, then there is no real education. You can't teach a child how to think unless you have something for him to think about."

Progressive schools, also found nationwide, offer a very different curriculum designed to enhance student achievement as well as critical thinking skills. Based on the ideas of early-twentieth-century educator John Dewey, the progressive model was put into practice in East Harlem, New York, where school choice was pioneered. In a world in which information is constantly changing, progressive schools teach children to master skills, as opposed to a set body of knowledge. "Differences of opinion are encouraged in the school, between children and grownups, between children, between children and adults," says educator Deborah Meier. "And then they are taught how you resolve differences, how to look up answers. How you find out what works and what doesn't work. So it is to create an actual little society of people who are grappling

with difficult ideas together." Debbie Smith, a teacher at Central Park East Secondary School, agrees. "We want to teach them how to be good thinkers. And in order to do that we have to give them the freedom to explore. My job basically is to guide them. I'm a coach, teacher as coach." Students in progressive schools learn by doing, whether writing a geometry textbook for younger students or designing and building a scale model of a house. "Projects drive our curriculum," says Smith. "Whatever the skills that we're teaching them, they always culminate in one large project so they can be proud, take ownership of something that they've done." Both progressive and Core Knowledge curricula have shown positive results in terms of student achievement and test scores.

In January 2001, President George W. Bush said, "Educational excellence for all is a national issue and at this moment is a presidential priority. Children must be tested every year. Every single year. Not just in the third grade or the eighth grade, but in the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh and eighth grades." Today, in all types of schools across the country, standardized tests and the preparation for them monopolize a growing part of the school year. Test results are posted in local newspapers, and readers know that school budgets and even property values hinge on the results. Yet even as the bar for achievement is being raised, the public education system faces tremendous challenges, from underfunding and overcrowding to school violence. More than two hundred shooting deaths occurred in American schools in the 1990s.

FACING *A young woman helps her friend with his mortarboard at their high school graduation.*



Still, in communities throughout the United States, the vast majority of parents continue to entrust their children to public schools. "I'm not excusing problems, I'm not saying please don't evaluate public education," says journalist Nicholas Lemann. "But I think the honest starting premise has to be that on the whole public education has been a big success in America. We have more people under the roofs of public schools learning than in any of the advanced industrial democracies." In 2001, nearly 90 percent of American children—47.8 million students—were enrolled in public schools. Serving them all, and serving them well, remains an important goal. "The real object that we should be striving for in this country," says Diane Ravitch, "is to have not only a balance between excellence and equity, but a sense of their being connected. That you can't have one without the other."

For more than two hundred years, public schools have helped to make us who we are as Americans. "The public school system has been a place where literally millions of children have been able to attend, to get an education, to be influenced by dedicated teachers, who otherwise would not have had that opportunity," says James Anderson. "And so I have been critical of the development of American common schools, I have been concerned about many of the faults, many of the problems, but when all is said and done I still think that it has been fundamental to American culture. It has been a positive contribution to the development of American culture." Adds David Tyack, "I do not see any way to achieve a good future for our children more effectively than debating to-

gether and working together on how we educate that next generation. Children may be about 20 percent of the population but they are 100 percent of the future." As Thomas Jefferson said, the future of a democracy depends on the education of its people. Today, public education is in urgent need of our support. Will we give all students what they need to succeed, or stand by and see their opportunities limited? That choice will determine the future of our children—and our nation.