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The Power of Their Ideas

Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem

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My secretary interrupted our meeting three times today. A man from the Board insisted on knowing our "bell schedule." I told her to tell him (a) we had no bells and (b) there were three schools in the building and each had different schedules. He wouldn't be put off. So I told her to tell him they went off "every hour on the hour." He was satisfied. A report is now on file somewhere containing this data. Why? And why don't I remember to give the phony answers they want immediately? Probably if we tracked the history of each of these mindless requests we'd find it originated as a response to some ancient "scandal." In a system this large there's always one.

JOURNAL

January 29

Once again someone wants hard data on our success. As a purist about data I can't compress it into the needed two sentences. Compared to New York City data re attendance, graduation rates, test scores, college acceptances, it's so staggeringly high that I suppose precision isn't necessary.

Judy came in with her infant. She's one of four CPESSers who've had babies. How we agonize! We get anxious when the girls act so thrilled with a classmate's baby. On the other hand, motherhood is wonderful. If a youngster has chosen that route, however thoughtlessly, do we want to be her enemy? Is it contagious? Is that what I fear? So I hug her, too. And feel joy.

JOURNAL

December 3

Came back from Carmela's funeral. The school's steady attention to Carmela and her family as she lay dying for nearly a year can't happen in a school five times our size. Yet death surrounds our kids. If death doesn't count, does life?

Friends in other schools claim they see the despair; or is it the symptoms they see: violence, death, pregnancy, drugs. We see less of these—because we're smaller? more supportive?—and when we do, we think we can act, "do" something. Does that make our kids seem more "normal"—joyous, giggly, flirtatious, friendly? Have we created enough of an internal culture to sustain hopefulness at least between 9:00 and 3:00? Is it mostly being small and intimate enough to pay attention? It's not that we've figured out how to make all our subjects interesting or relevant or our assessment authentic. Although we try. But the place itself is interesting and authentic. I used to say that I learned most of what I knew as a kid in the company of people who were talking "over my head." I think that's how human beings naturally learn. Maybe the kids learn more here accidentally than on purpose. There are so many conversations going on.

JOURNAL

2 Central Park East: An Alternative Story

In the spring of 1991, Central Park East, located in New York's East Harlem, graduated its first high school students. Most of the graduates had spent at least six years with us, while some had been with us since they were four or five years old. Their achievement was heralded not only by the families of the graduates and their teachers, but by others from throughout the country who came to celebrate with us. Our school, once a lonely maverick, was now one among many schools in New York City able to demonstrate how all children could meet high standards of intellectual achievement within a public school setting, and part of a national movement to change the face of American education.

Defending public education is difficult, but the best defense is by example. City schools seem to many to be especially hopeless, and many who would probably love to support public education feel it's romantic to hold on to dreams such as ours. The story of how the Central Park East schools came to be and how they work generates possibilities that can change the way we think about all our schools, rich and poor, rural or urban. Here are some particulars.

Central Park East is in fact four public schools working in close collaboration with each other under all the constraints of the public

school system, but without all of the problems that plague many others.

The data on the Central Park East elementary and secondary schools is not in dispute. The CPE population is roughly equivalent to a cross sampling of New York City. The majority of students are African-American and Latino, most are low-income or poor, and they experience a full range of academic strengths and handicaps. Of the first seven graduating classes of CPE elementary school (1977–1984), 85 percent received regular diplomas and another 11 percent got GEDs. This compares to roughly 50 percent citywide. Furthermore, two thirds of those who graduated from high school prior to the opening of our own secondary school had gone on to college. And the statistics held across race and class lines. In 1991, the Central Park East Secondary School topped this impressive showing. While some students moved and a few transferred, fewer than 5 percent of those who started with us in ninth grade dropped out along the way. And not only did the rest graduate with regular diplomas, but 90 percent went directly on to college and stayed there. These figures for 1991 have held up for each subsequent graduating class. And the graduates of 1994 outstripped their predecessors in quality of work achieved and colleges attended. We've gotten better and so have they.

The Central Park East schools follow in the tradition of many of New York's independent private schools, a tradition few believed was appropriate for public education. They are places that successfully embody a conception of education that challenges most urban public schools' low and trivial expectations. Each of the four schools offers a rich and interesting curriculum full of powerful ideas and experiences aimed at inspiring its students with the desire to know more, a curriculum that sustains students' natural drive to make sense of the world and trusts in their capacity to have an impact upon it. The CPE schools are places where "teachers with the passion of the amateur and the competence of the professional" thrive, to quote David Ruenzel in an article on what African-American parents are seeking from private all-black schools.

Even now, twenty years later, as I see our work assuming new

forms and shapes as it spreads to schools throughout the city, I nervously worry, Are we a fluke?

For most of the staff and many of our parents, well-wishers, and friends, the success of Central Park East is a dream come true. A rather fragile dream, it has been tossed about by many of the ill winds of this city's tumultuous politics. Today, however, it would take an unusually strong storm to uproot us or break us—or even to bend us very much. Our parents and alumni/ae are, of course, our first line of defense. But today we are also surrounded by powerful outside friends and by dozens of sister schools struggling collaboratively to make a common dream come true not just for one small group of students in one of the city's thirty-two districts but throughout this system of a million students. We are filled with the heady vision that perhaps even in our lifetimes we can make schools like ours accessible to any student and family that wants this kind of education.

It wasn't always so. What has allowed this to happen is a combination of imaginative public policy initiated by a few brave, well-situated officials who made the experiment even possible; specific reproducible ways of organizing schools and of getting teachers, students, and families to work together; a small crew of teachers who were ready to take the risks and seize the opportunities; and a group of families either desperate enough or eager enough to give it a chance. Our singular success depended on complementary larger efforts: a districtwide effort throughout East Harlem to create a network of small elementary and junior high schools and a citywide effort to create a network of alternative high schools—public schools of choice for families and faculties. We are, in fact, just one of nearly forty options available to families in East Harlem's District 4, aside from the regular neighborhood or zoned elementary schools, and one of several dozen alternative high schools that have been nurtured by the special Alternative High School Division situated within the Central Board of Education since 1984.

Today, both District 4's example and the work of the alternative high schools are proliferating like wildfire; a whole series of subsequent developments have finally—after nearly twenty years of

quiet growth and gestation—caught on. For example, during 1993 and 1994 nearly forty small schools that involve high-school-age students opened under varied auspices, including a dozen designed to replace two unsuccessful large neighborhood comprehensive high schools. All involved some form of faculty and student choice and far greater autonomy and self-governance than the system had previously allowed. Many involved new partnerships with other community groups. None has fit in easily. They are still severely handicapped by a system that is struggling to reexamine what must change, root and branch, if these success stories are to become the norm. But many people are beginning to think that maybe they too can "found" their own schools. From top to bottom the system is readying itself for change. The genie is out of the bottle and it will be hard to put it back.

The founding of the first CPE school in 1974 came at a most inauspicious time, just as New York City's school system was forced to lay off more than fifteen thousand teachers and to close virtually all elementary school libraries and most music and art programs. This bloodletting simultaneously crushed both a thriving parent movement bent on decentralization and efforts by teachers to redesign curriculum and classroom life based on a new look at the nature of teaching and learning. These blows came on top of a divisive battle that pitted a mostly white teaching force against minority communities and one set of parents against another—the 1967 and 1968 teacher strikes and parent boycotts. Progressive educators in particular suffered during the aftermath of the strike and the devastating budget cuts; conventional wisdom said that "openness" was "through" (and discredited) and many of the young teachers and new programs that had carried the progressive message, already badly divided by the strike, were subsequently hardest hit by the layoffs.

In the spring of 1974, when Anthony Alvarado, the new superintendent in East Harlem's District 4, invited me to start a small elementary school in one wing of P.S. 171, it seemed a most unlikely

offer. School District 4, serving one of the city's poorest communities, was led by a politically divided and factionalized school board. Most students were Latino, but the community included a growing African-American population. It was educationally on the bottom, with test scores that placed it last out of the thirty-two city districts.

Naturally I accepted the offer. Who could refuse? After struggling for years to make my beliefs fit into a system that was organized on quite different (and hostile) principles, after spending considerable energy looking for cracks, operating on the margins, compromising at every turn, the prospect that the district bureaucracy would organize itself to support alternative ideas and practices was irresistible. Having been out of the classroom for three years, working in a City College–initiated program as an adviser to teachers who were interested in change, I was also eager to have a home again, to be back in the classroom. I was being offered a chance to focus not on bureaucratic red tape but on the intractable issues of education—the ones that really interested me and many of the teachers I knew well. The question for us was how the children at the bottom of America's social ladder could use their schools to develop rather than stunt their intellectual potential, how to provide at public expense for the least advantaged what the most advantaged bought privately for their own children.

But this was not a time in history—the mid-1970s—for having large visions. We would be satisfied if we could create an interesting place where important questions could be asked and explored. I met with Alvarado, collected a core group of experienced colleagues, and gradually began to believe that he meant what he said: that we could build a school just the way we wanted. The total allocation of funds (per-pupil costs) would have to be comparable to what was spent on any other school, and our staff would have to meet the usual requirements of the city, the state, and the union contract. (Years later, a diligent researcher proved we had actually received slightly less in public resources than other schools.) We would be exempt from no city or state regulations. Beyond that, however, the district would support us in doing things our way.

We were all a little wary. The staff included veterans of exper-

imental programs which had been destroyed by budgetary cuts and unsympathetic administrations, teachers who'd been caught working in schools whose philosophies they strongly opposed, former teachers who had left demoralized and exhausted but were willing to try again, supervisors who wanted to go back into the classroom, and a few colleagues fresh from student teaching. Most had experienced the fatigue that comes from cutting corners on the things that truly matter in order to meet the endlessly proliferating mandated programs and mandated accountability schemes.

We began small and carefully. We put all our resources into our classrooms. As teacher-director I had a regular full-time class of second- and third-graders. (We bought an answering machine to deal with the office.) We wanted no "we" versus "they" in our community. Creating a democratic community was both an operational and an inspirational goal. While we were in part the products of what was called "open education," our roots went back to early progressive traditions, with their focus on the building of a democratic community, on education for full citizenship and egalitarian ideals. We looked upon both John Dewey and Jean Piaget as our mentors. We were intrigued by the way individuals structured their thinking, as well as by the role of the community, the social setting, in the learning process. For us, a democratic community was the nonnegotiable purpose of good schooling.

Most of the original staff, six teachers and one paraprofessional (three of the teachers were white, two black, and one Latino), were students of Lillian Weber's at the City College Workshop Center. We came out of a tradition that was increasingly uneasy about the individualistic focus of much of what was being called "open" or "progressive." To us progressive education was not only child-centered but community-centered as well. We adopted Lillian's use of the word "personalized," and learned from her thoughtful reminders that diversity among people strengthens the larger community. We saw subject matter in broad terms, as the powerful "stuff" that makes up our common world. Lillian rooted the new for us within the old; she warned us to look for the strengths within traditions we

might otherwise reject out of hand. She taught us about looking for cracks in the system, always being advocates for the children, and above all she demanded intellectual toughness of teachers, not just of kids.

We were unhappy about the focus on breaking everything down into discrete skills rather than introducing strong subject matter, a focus that we saw in many of the "innovative" schools that labeled themselves open or progressive. One longed for a simple fact or a little memorization of poetry in some of these "modern" classrooms! My children's best and favorite teacher, I noticed, thought of herself as a traditionalist in response to many of the terms then current in educational debate. "Personalization" had been interpreted by too many to mean only that children could acquire skills at their own pace, and "individualism" and "active learning" as ways of placating restless or angry kids. (No wonder many African-American teachers and parents thought progressivism a cop-out, a way of avoiding, not confronting, the challenge. While many people have resisted progressive educational theories for many reasons, noted African-American educator Lisa Delpit points out that there has been something particularly frustrating to nonwhite teachers and parents in the seeming avoidance of "direct" instruction, as though if we waited long enough children would discover everything on their own; what they felt was that this represented either a patronizing attitude or a lack of sufficient care.)

In contrast, we saw children being driven into dumbness by a failure to challenge their curiosity, to build on their natural drive toward competence. We thought adults had important things to teach children, not just a mission to get out of their way. Our kind of classroom was not stocked with ditto fill-in sheets but literally full of stuff: books of every sort, paints as well as paintings, plants, animals, broken radios to repair—things. The curriculum we sought was both conceptual and *tangible*. We wanted children to fall in love as we had with stories of the past, including their own; we wanted schools that would evoke a sense of wonder. Building such schools, we thought, required strong and interesting adults who could ex-

ercise their own curiosity and judgment, who knew, as learning theorist Eleanor Duckworth put it, what "the having of wonderful ideas" was all about.

We also saw schools as examples of the possibilities of democratic community, and what we meant by this was continuously under debate and review. It wasn't simply a question of governance structures, and certainly not a matter of extending the vote to four-year-olds. Although classroom life could certainly include more participation by children in decisions than traditional schools allowed, we saw it as even more critical that the school life of adults be democratic. It seemed unlikely that we could foster values of community in our classrooms unless the adults in the school had significant rights over their own workplace. For us, democracy implied that people should have a voice not only in their own individual work, but in the work of others as well. Finally, we saw collaboration and mutual respect among staff, parents, students, and the larger community as a part of what we meant by calling our experiment democratic.

We knew that we were tackling many difficult issues at once. Time for planning and reflection was insufficient. We had a lean staff and no sister schools in 1974. But we saw no way to put any of these issues off until "later." Looking back, we were so euphoric that we had the energy of twice our number. Besides, we thought we knew exactly what we were after.

We started our school with fewer than a hundred students—kindergarten, first and second grades, and a few third-graders. At the superintendent's request, we recruited outside the usual channels, in part so that we wouldn't threaten other schools in the district and in part because one of Alvarado's goals was to increase the district's pupil population, thus guarding against being required to close more school buildings.

We had no academic entrance qualifications; we took all who said that this was what they wanted. We insisted that parents (or grandparents, aunts, older siblings) visit before signing up, and we considered it our job to enlist their collaboration. Families came to us then, as they do today, for many reasons. Many families came

because they had been told by Head Start teachers, social workers, or principals that their children needed something different, that they were too fidgety, noisy, withdrawn, or hard to manage. In short, many families came to us because experts claimed that their children would have trouble in a traditional school. Some came because their children were already having trouble in other schools or because older siblings had had trouble in the past. (We reminded uneasy parents that they had a right to stay in their neighborhood schools if they preferred, in order to avoid becoming known as the place other schools could "dump" their failures or troublemakers.)

Some families came because they heard us speak and just liked the way we sounded—caring (they told us later), open, friendly, committed. Some came because they had friends who knew us professionally and some because they were looking for a different kind of school for philosophical reasons. Yet even among those who chose us because of our presumed beliefs, there was often confusion about what those beliefs were. Some thought, for example, that this would be a parent-run school; some thought we didn't believe in any restrictions on children's freedom.

One of our primary reasons for starting the school—although we didn't often admit it—was our personal desire for greater autonomy as teachers. We spoke a lot about democracy, but we were also just plain sick and tired of having to waste so much time and energy negotiating with school officials over what seemed like commonsense requests, worrying about myriad rules and regulations, being forced to compromise on so many of our beliefs. We came together with our own visions of what teaching could be if only *we* had control. We saw parents as crucial, but viewed their input as advisory. Parental choice was in part a way we imagined we'd increase our autonomy.

While eschewing formal teacher/parent co-governance, we knew that good early childhood education requires authentic forms of collaboration between the school and the family. This is a matter not only of political principle but also of educational practicality, and it motivated us from the start to work hard to build a family-oriented school. We wanted a school in which children would feel

safe. Intellectual risk taking requires safety; children who are suspicious of a school's agenda cannot work up to their potential. For the school to be safe, children needed to know that their parents trusted us. It was that simple. Hard to create, perhaps, but essential.

Our experience suggested that a strong school culture requires that most decisions be struggled over and made by those directly responsible for implementing them, not by representative bodies handing down dictates for others to follow. We felt the same way whether the representative bodies were composed of kids, parents, or fellow teachers. Representative bodies are surely a legitimate form of democracy, just not very effective for the kind of school culture we were trying to create. In practice, creating a culture of this sort meant that only those few parents who were prepared to join the staff and school on a fairly regular basis got fully "represented" in the schoolwide decisions that counted, not a solution that always satisfied all parents or teachers at CPE. The CPE approach placed a heavier burden on public school choice as a form of parental empowerment, on the judicious use of advisory boards and parent councils for input, on openness and accessibility, and above all on the power and frequency of individual school/family relationships. It also called for rethinking the staffing of a school so that the gap between parents and school would be bridged in part by teachers who "think like parents," in particular like the parents whose children attend our schools. This meant always trying to recruit and maintain more staff, for example, who were African-American and Latino.

We stumbled a lot in those early years over such issues. We fought among ourselves. Personal autonomy and communal decision making didn't always go well together. We were teachers with strong personalities, used to going our own way and annoyed at having to convince others about pedagogical issues—colleagues or parents. In our former, less compatible traditional schools we had grown accustomed to closing our doors and secretly doing what we wanted. Sometimes we regretted we hadn't created a collection of one-room schoolhouses!

The struggle to preserve personal autonomy often over-

whelmed the needs of the community. We discovered that staff decision making was time consuming. It often seemed it would be easier if there were someone clearly "above" to blame in order to shortcut arguments. We weren't wholly comfortable with the idea that arguing was a healthy aspect of democratic life and certainly wished that we were better at doing it! It was hard, too, to engage in arguments among ourselves without frightening parents and raising doubts about our professionalism. We were often exhausted by the things that mattered least to us.

By the end of the second year, schisms within our own ranks, aided and abetted by a group of dissident parents, required rethinking and reorganization of the school. A largely personal power struggle with one key and charismatic colleague, combined with dissatisfaction on the part of some parents who sought a more directly parent-controlled school, shook us to our roots. Only the steady support of the district, the backing of the vast majority of parents, and the existence of alternative choices for the dissatisfied cut our losses and made this brief rebellion a blip in our history. (In subsequent years other schools like ours have all, we've discovered, experienced similar moments. Crises are part of the life of such institutions and are too often covered up rather than learned from.)

The experience led me to make some crucial decisions regarding the future organization of Central Park East, decisions necessary if I were to remain even its titular leader (the title being "teacher-director"). The central change involved my becoming somewhat more of a traditional leader, with time to "lead." The staff also voted for less sharing of administrative tasks, so we got rid of our phone-answering machine and hired someone for the office. Two teachers left (one of whom subsequently returned and later became the leader of a CPE school), along with about a dozen parents out of around a hundred and fifty.

We remained a "staff-run" school, but not a principal-less collective, as we had originally envisioned. Although formally I was still "just" a teacher, I was no longer full-time in a classroom of kids. The bottom line remained: the staff (and the parents who chose to join us) continued to be central to all decisions, big and small, the final

plenary body directing the life of the school. Nothing was or has ever been "undiscussable," although we have learned not to discuss everything—at least not all the time. This has actually meant more time for discussing those issues that concern us most: how children learn, how our classes really work, what changes we ought to be making and on what basis. We have also become better observers of our own practice, better collectors of information, documenters of practice as well as users of expertise. We thus have more to bring to the collective table. Yet the complexities of school governance—by whom and how decisions are made, questions of "we" and "they"—still crop up from time to time to bedevil us. How teachers can take collective responsibility for supervising each other, for determining school rules, disciplinary consequences, and school schedules, as well as for the trickier issue of standards and evaluation, while also maintaining sufficient classroom autonomy and focus has not been resolved. We console ourselves with Winston Churchill's paean to democracy as "the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

As we have grown in our understanding and in practical skills, we have also been obliged to reexamine the relationships between school and family. Today we understand better the many, often subtle ways in which schools can undermine family support systems, can undercut children's faith in their parents as educators and in their community as a worthy place. Given our good intentions this has not always been easy for us to notice. Our assumption of expertise and our concern lest parents and grandparents "misteach" children this or that school skill can widen the very gap we are so busy trying to close. We complain later when they wearily pull back, if not altogether out, but what has our role been in this withdrawal? We were determined to keep exploring new ways to make connections. Although we have not changed our beliefs about the value of "literature-based" and "whole-language" approaches to teaching reading in contrast to basal readers or formal phonics, for instance, we have become more supportive of parents whose home instruction differs from ours. In math, learning how to subtract in the old ways as well as in the new ways may even be an advantage, we

now argue. Is it so terrible to fall back on such "anachronisms" as borrowing from the tens column? Kids can adapt to a variety of methods. As psycholinguist Frank Smith wisely notes, "In the two-thousand-year recorded history of reading instruction, as far as I have been able to discover, no one has devised a method of teaching reading that has not proved a success with some children."

In short, we give less advice, are less prescriptive. We try not to suggest obvious "solutions," like having a quiet homework area or buying an alarm clock. We listen with a more critical ear to what we say to parents, wondering how we would hear it as parents ourselves and about how children may interpret the relationship as well. We invite students, four-year-olds and eighteen-year-olds, to join teacher/parent conferences, viewing such conferences as joint school/family problem-solving sessions in which all parties share information. Since relationships take time to build, we keep kids and teachers together for two years when we can.

As we became more secure with our way of working, District 4 was expanding its network of choices. In the fall of 1974 we were one of only two alternatives. Within a half-dozen years there were more than fifteen "alternative concept" schools, mostly on the junior high level, where schooling had most glaringly broken down. Today fifty-two schools occupying twenty District 4 buildings, with a total population of about thirteen thousand students mostly under the age of fourteen, comprise a group of alternative schools that is bigger than the vast majority of school districts throughout the nation.

This represents a sweeping change that required ignoring the assumption that a building equals a school. Every building in the district soon housed several schools, each with its own leadership, budget, parent body, curricular focus, organization, and philosophy. Our original site held three schools—the neighborhood school, our own elementary school, and a small alternative junior high. (Most of the new junior highs were located in elementary school buildings, and former junior high buildings were gradually turned to multiple use as well.) As a result, the schools were small and their staffs and parents were associated with them largely by choice. Generally the building contained only one "official" principal, which

sometimes caused quarrels and tensions. To this day, unlike the alternative high schools, none of District 4's small schools are acknowledged as "real"; only the original twenty school buildings show up on centrally controlled forms, budget allocations, or organizational charts. The schools mostly suffer from this undercover existence, although there are occasional benefits to not being noticed "downtown."

The Central Park East's schools have always had a predominantly African-American (nearly half) and Latino (about a third) student population. They are also among the few district schools that have maintained a steady white population, as large as about 25 percent in the elementary schools and closer to 10 percent in the high school. (The population of District 4 is about 60 percent Latino, 35 percent African-American, and less than 5 percent white and "other.") Well over half of our students have always qualified for free lunches, and some 20 percent meet the state requirements for being labeled "handicapped," thus qualifying for special state funds. Researchers investigating our population generally conclude our students are at least as "at risk" as New York City's general population, although more heterogeneous than the average East Harlem school.

In the beginning, these ratios came about largely by chance, but the 20 to 25 percent white population in the elementary schools has been maintained by choice—by both the local school board and CPE. As mentioned before, one of the district's motivations for starting new alternative schools was to offset its declining student population, and so "outsiders" were more than welcome. Federal funds for integration were part of the lure for the district as they encouraged us to maintain our white population. Already the belief in the possibility of school integration was losing its power and CPE's integrated enrollment met with a mixed reception in East Harlem, some resenting the white children who traveled to our schools and took seats that might otherwise have gone to Latino or African-American children. In general, the CPE schools have sought to maintain heterogeneity without having too many fixed rules or complex machinery. In the mid-1980s we adopted a lottery

system that favors neighborhood students and ensures fairness; it also avoids handling large masses of visitors and applicants. The one exception to the lottery is that the CPE schools accept all siblings, to preserve our family orientation.

Central Park East grew from one school to four mostly because we were inundated with applications. Turning anyone down was painful, lottery or no. In 1980 an annex opened in P.S. 109, a few blocks south of the original. It soon assumed its own separate status. Several years later a third, River East, opened on 115th and the East River. Thus by 1984 Central Park East had become three schools, each with 250 students, each with its own style and character, yet united in basic ways. Then, in 1984 at our tenth anniversary celebration, Theodore Sizer, a former dean of the Harvard School of Education and then (as now) at Brown University, congratulated the school for its impressive history and asked, "Why not a Central Park East secondary school? Why stop at sixth grade?"

We agreed. In fact Sizer's presence at our celebration was not an accident. We had read excerpts from his just-published *Horace's Compromise*, part of a larger study of American high schools. It resonated. Here was a highly respected educational guru who spoke our language. We knew that starting a secondary school was a good idea, but until the early 1980s we had shied away from it. It seemed too dangerous, and we were early childhood experts, anyway. Some of our critics had said that a nurturing elementary school wouldn't prepare students to cope with the "real world"—wouldn't nurturing be even less legitimate in a high school? In fact, a commissioned study of our graduates had proven our critics wrong about elementary school, and our good sense suggested it would prove them wrong about a high school. Regardless of race or social class, the graduating sixth-graders of the CPE schools had handled the real world remarkably well. They had coped. The statistics amazed even us.

But our graduates had unhappy stories to tell about the high school experiences they'd had after CPE, stories not about being ed-

ucated but about survival. These stories confirmed the bleak picture Sizer had painted in *Horace's Compromise*. Sizer found that even wealthier, more middle-class, "successful" high schools were large, anonymous factories (even if also often physically attractive and cheerful) focused on everything but learning to use one's mind well. Teachers, he noted sympathetically, faced with 150 or more students daily, had compromised their standards not out of malice but out of necessity. In fact, the stories our graduates told us were generally far worse, with no "shopping-mall campuses" to distract them from the intellectual barrenness. It was hard to avoid the good reasons for trying to create an alternative, at least for our *own* students.

We began negotiations with the district and with the Central Board of Education. We committed ourselves openly and loudly to being different, to keeping alive the ideas and spirit of good early childhood education, and to graduating our students, as Sizer and the newly formed Coalition of Essential Schools recommended, on the basis of publicly accessible "exhibitions." The last idea, now popularly known as performance or portfolio-based graduation, requires our students to prepare tangible demonstrations of their knowledge and competence rather than accumulating "seat-time" (credits) or grades on multiple choice tests. Sizer reminded us that such exhibits had a long and honorable tradition, including bar mitzvahs, Boy Scout rituals, Red Cross tests, and doctoral committees. While experimental colleges had tried something on this order (e.g., the University of Chicago in the 1940s, Hampshire College in the 1970s), we knew of only one other public high school that had done so—Walden II in Wisconsin. We traveled out to see their work and borrowed many of our ideas from them.

In the fall of 1985 we opened with 80 seventh-graders, and thus began Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS). Today it serves 450 seventh- through twelfth-graders, only half of whom ever went to one of our elementary schools. Then it was one of five new schools supported by Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools nationwide; today it's one of more than seven hundred secondary schools (including several dozen in New York) affiliated with the Coalition. In 1985 it seemed we were back where we began in 1974,

launching a new way of thinking about public high schools as we had earlier done in the field of elementary education. But unlike 1974, the 1980s were an auspicious moment for thinking big. As we celebrate the tenth anniversary of CPESS we are part of a major city- and statewide challenge to reshape public education along the lines we've pioneered.

The launching of the high school, however, produced special challenges we had not dealt with before. We began with far less self-confidence. The Central Park East elementary schools benefited from their low profiles. No one demanded proof of our success except us; we weren't seen as a threat, except perhaps to the principals closest to us; we had no visitors or media to contend with, and the privacy, therefore, to make mistakes without fear of exposure. Even though the elementary schools began with skimpy tax-levy budgets and no outside financial support, our limited visibility freed us to take educational risks that most school bureaucrats could never have allowed.

The secondary school, in contrast, has had a high profile from Day One, as have all the Coalition's efforts. We wanted it that way; we thought it worth the risks, which are plenty. In addition, as an official new high school rather than a wildcat District 4 invention, we were entitled to the usual start-up tax-levy support provided to new schools, and we have had some private foundation support for staff development, retreats, consultants, and technology that we neither asked for nor received for our elementary schools. But the obstacles that block the path of reforming a high school are harder to budge than those that face elementary schools. Bureaucratic and financial impediments are only parts of the picture, and not the most difficult ones. The biases and prejudices of the larger society have more obvious effects as youngsters come closer to the "real thing"—being adults. The external demands for proof and evidence are far greater in high school, the rituals more fixed (curriculum, credit hours, course sequences, daily schedules), and the "next" institution—college or workplace—even less under our influence. But even these factors were not the most important.

The big, mindless high school, no matter how dysfunctional,

has many fans, including kids. When we talk with school officials and local politicians about restructuring large high schools, the first thing they worry about is what will happen to the basketball or baseball teams, the after-school program, and other sideshows; that the heart of the school, its capacity to educate, is missing, seems almost beside the point. Furthermore, we've glorified a teen culture that's out of control and adultless. Kids are accustomed to their "freedom." At CPESS, new students often find so many caring adults a nuisance—"in my face," as they say. And anxieties about whether the new schemes we are trying will prepare students properly for the "real world" press upon high-schoolers as well as their parents and teachers.

We knew we had to challenge the assumptions behind these high-stakes anxieties especially. Do you change supervisors every forty minutes in the real world? we asked. Not to mention job tasks or team members? In what real-world job is the sequence of tasks (classes) so unconnected to the larger product? What college student attends eight lecture courses a day running back-to-back with only one short breather? We introduced two-hour interdisciplinary class periods and demanded exhibitions—projects—rather than short-answer written tests. We provided time during those two hours for presentations, seminars, group work, and independent study. We built in time for tutorials and coaching. We insisted that this was more like the real world, not less. But mostly we had to say "Wait and see."

Traditional course requirements, assumptions about college admission policies and SATs, and the usual panic about dealing with adolescents and their hormones combined in those first years to make everyone nervous. We had, in addition, to decide how to respond to the New York State Regents' "Action Plan" of 1984, with its increased number of required courses and standardized examinations, and its greater specificity about both the sequencing and content of courses. We promised to meet the "spirit" of the new plan, and more, but publicly ignored the mandated route.

But over and over the most serious barrier facing us was the dearth of experience with progressive education at the secondary

school level anywhere in the country, even in private or suburban schools that had a tradition of progressive schooling on the elementary level. Our elementary schools had had a plethora of models, experts, and literature. Teacher education programs were available in all the best colleges, staffed by proponents of progressive, child-centered elementary education. This was not the case in secondary education teacher training programs. The better so-called progressive high schools were mostly distinguished by having smaller class sizes, more course choices, more student input, and more intellectually stimulating discourse—goals they achieved mostly by having more money and wealthier students and by accepting only the already self-motivated and successful. A student- and learner-centered curriculum and pedagogy and the commitment to educate all children which are characteristic of progressive elementary education had gotten lost in the translation to high school. We had to invent the translation.

We had to go back to "ancient history" for our lessons, to the bold 1930s experiment known in the field as the Eight-Year Study. Led by school theorist Ralph Tyler, the project was cut short by World War II—although not before "proving" that radical change worked. This fifty-year-old story offered a sobering message: the project had left almost no traces! Resistance to change was deep-rooted, not specific to one community, one set of individuals, particular forms of bad luck. Entrenched practice had a way of creeping back; old habits die hard.

We had a lot going for us, however. We had our three sister elementary schools to lean on and draw support from. We were part of a flexible and inventive alternative high school bureaucracy; we had the support of the fledgling Coalition of Essential Schools, with considerable national status and glamour, and a growing national interest. Not least of all, we were physically located in the one local district that despite political upheavals still supported the idea of "schools of choice." Anthony Alvarado's brief one-year tenure as citywide chancellor was critical, too, as it was Alvarado who initiated the Alternative High School Division, which began the tradition of small secondary schools, albeit at first for those students no one else

wanted—the throwaways, dropouts, so-called misfits. It was Alvarado who also gave the green light for Central Park East Secondary School (which was later supported by the Alternative Division). His replacements in District 4, starting with Carlos Medina, mostly maintained the tradition of support for innovation. Medina and his deputy, Sy Fliegel, worked out, for example, the conundrums necessary to clear the road for CPESS to move into a thoroughly discredited and nearly empty junior high. Their creativity enabled us to avoid having to hire a small cadre of burned-out teachers with something known as "building tenure." Instead we were able to hire volunteers who were willing to try something totally untested.

The oddest, or perhaps merely saddest, thing is that the incredible experience of District 4 has taken so long to have any impact on the rest of New York City. It drew attention, but most of the energy of the Central Board of Education (and some quite prolific reporters and school reform networks) went into proving that District 4's elementary school successes were exaggerated (probably true) or that its finances and administrative practices were questionable or at least unorthodox. The bureaucratic resistance was expected; resistance from so many reformers was worrisome. Here and there another district experimented with District 4's innovative practices. But few schools were willing to break decisively with the traditional mold. Officials would proclaim the existence of alternative programs or mini-schools, but made sure they had little real power as separate institutions with their own leadership, space, and budgets. Sometimes the alternatives were only for the "gifted" (often wealthier and whiter) or only for those having trouble with school (darker and poorer). Such mini-schools tended to come and go at the political whim of the district or school supervisor.

Our hope that "next year" our ideas would finally catch on has endured for twenty years. (Of course the ideas themselves are far older.) Perhaps what is surprising is that our approach has now become fashionable, rather than the object of resistance that it was for so long. And perhaps the fact that next year kept moving one year further away suggests that parents and teachers, not just bureaucrats, were for a long time more satisfied with the status quo than

reformers understood. Maybe it took the threat of privatization to loosen the hold of old ways.

Our high school experiment, for its part, caught the public's attention and fancy almost immediately. In fact, CPESS was proclaimed a success even before it had any data to show for itself, while CPE's elementary schools were subject to skepticism long after they had demonstrated success. High schools are of course more clearly in a state of crisis. Adolescent students who are in trouble *cause* trouble, unlike their younger counterparts. High school violence scares citizens who might otherwise not care. The high dropout rate (nearly 50 percent in New York City) along with the fate of many of those who do not drop out officially has proven embarrassing and visible. Perhaps these glaring and tangible realities make Dewey's ideas of progressive education seem once again worth looking at after a hiatus of over forty years.

But while there is a rhetorical acceptance, it's an uneasy one, and by no means yet secure. At the heart of the idea of progressive education is a still unaccepted notion: that giving both adolescents and their teachers greater responsibility for the development of their schools can't be by-passed. Without a radical departure from a more authoritarian model, one strips the key parties of the respect which lies at the heart of democratic practice and good schooling. As long as we see "these kids" as dangers to our civil peace and their teachers as time-servers or crazy martyrs, we are not likely to offer either group the respect they need to make schools work. Schools for thoughtfulness can't be built on top of thoughtlessness.

Unfortunately, most of today's urban high schools express *dis*respect for teachers and students in myriad ways—in the physical decay of the buildings, in the structure of the school day, in the anonymity of both students and staff and their lack of control over decisions affecting them. Size alone—say 3,000 students and 200 adults per school—makes staff and student participation in decision making a matter of lip service at best. In many public high schools the average faculty member sees 150 students a day, and every semester the rosters change.

Central Park East Secondary School, like the dozen sister

schools that soon followed suit, broke with this traditional design, following the tradition of the CPE elementary schools in opting to be small so that we could know our colleagues and students well; teachers are rarely responsible for more than 40 students a day and stick with the same students for two years. (If we had it to do over again we'd have been even smaller—with no more than 300 students—so that the entire faculty could more easily meet together to talk things out.) We have clear beliefs about teaching and learning, and control over many of the variables that go into schooling. Only in matters of physical plant are we largely still helpless, although we are able at least to work together to make the best of it.

Since students view the schools as theirs, vandalism is rare and artwork abounds on otherwise cracked walls. Bathrooms are functional; toilet stalls have doors. Physical violence is almost unknown. Like the CPE elementary schools, the secondary school has proven that tailor-made schools, designed by users, *work*. When interviewed later, our high school graduates have had this or that complaint about the way we've prepared them, but the results speak louder even than their words. We don't know what most accounts for their success—actual academic skill, work habits, attitudes, or perhaps just the capacity to relate to adults, to negotiate complexity and independence. We continue to monitor CPESS graduates year by year, as we did our elementary school graduates, and we listen closely to their feedback, both to help us refine what we're doing at the school and to help prepare them for the adjustments they must learn to make.

CPE and CPESS are not meant to be copied piece by piece. The current reform mood offers us an opening, but only if we can resist the desire for a new "one best way," for new cookie-cutter solutions that can be easily "replicated." We will not achieve the reforms we need by fiat. There are top-down mandates that might help, but they are few. One of them—giving more power to those who are closest to the classroom—is not the kind that appeals to busy legislators, politicians, and central board officials. Even teachers' unions

(who, like other advocacy and defense organizations, have built top-down structures that mimic "the enemy") have often looked askance at giving teachers more direct influence. In our case, our insistence on placing teachers in the forefront of our reforms, plus the particulars of the local union's leadership, helped pave the way for unprecedented, if often only tacit, support. (The union's secondary leadership remains suspicious as the union begins to openly explore more flexible responses to school-based democracy.)

Not only are our colleagues in other schools wary, our fellow citizens are suspicious, too. Small, democratically run schools are both quintessentially American and hard for Americans to swallow. They appeal to our spirit of independence, but not to our impatient desire for guaranteed fixes and standardized products. In the face of vast school failure, such reforms argue for fewer rules, not more of them. They smack of a kind of trustfulness that a heterogeneous and complex society finds reason to be wary of. Not only are good schools hard to replicate, but they aren't even easily compared to one another! To institutionalize this kind of change process requires not blind faith but a nurturing watchfulness, continuous documenting and recording, and plenty of public exposure.

Do we have the collective will to take such risks? Will enough good examples make a difference? (And how many is enough?) It's hard to convince people that what we do at CPE or CPESS *is* reproducible by others—*in their own way*. People often have a whole string of "well, buts" for why our situation is different from theirs. Principals visit the school and say, Ah, but you have only four hundred students; I could do it too if I had only four hundred. I say, Terrific, you can divide your building into a bunch of smaller schools, as we have. So then they say, Well, you have so much more freedom than I do. I remind them that no one actually gave it to me or to us. We have what we took. They say, You have an unusual staff. I agree, but it's not because they went to more elite colleges, taught longer, or have exceptional gifts. What's unusual is that they are practicing what they believe in and working in settings they design. We've proven that these kinds of schools work over and over again with different directors, with different staffs, and without extra

funds. It isn't even a uniquely urban story, as visits to schools throughout the nation remind me. The nearly all-white rural kids at Thayer High School in New Hampshire would fit right in at CPESS. The secret ingredient is wanting it badly enough.

If what we've done is to have wider applicability we need to look upon our story as an example, not a model, and then make it easier—not harder—for others to do similar things in their own way. We need to insist that there cannot be just one right, perfectly crafted, expertly designed solution. Good schools, like good societies and good families, celebrate and cherish diversity. Since we don't know the ending ahead of time, life's unpredictability is a given. After accepting some guiding principles and a firm direction, we must say "hurrah," not "alas," to the fact that there is no single way toward a better future. It's the kind of work that must be done by people who don't all like the same movies, vote for the same politicians, or raise their own kids the same way. It's worth arguing about, leaving room for lots of answers and not being afraid to tell each other the truth.

Dear parents, students and staff

What were you doing in the winter of 1985? Some of us spent that winter "inventing" CPESS. Of course, it's changed a lot since we first invented it, based on ideas from parents, students and new teachers. But also because the best-laid plans never look quite the same when put into practice. But our "habits of mind" probably have held up best of all. (Although we're all inclined to want to add our favorite 6th now and then.)

When we were "inventing" them we settled first on "viewpoint." It's interesting six years later to see how much more difficult the idea is than we anticipated.

In listening to our students defend their work, I realized that many interpreted viewpoint to mean "opinion." They knew that we liked people to have strong opinions and, of course, we hope our school doesn't injure this quality of mind. But it wasn't what we were thinking about.

We probably hit upon "viewpoint" first because in our conversations that winter our different past experiences gave each of us a different way of viewing what we wanted to see happen at CPESS. Planning CPESS required us to articulate our own separate points of view in ways that our colleagues could understand, and then to hear and understand theirs. In the course of this sharing of views I think we built a stronger school.

Recognizing that one's own point of view is just one of many possibilities—that's the first goal I think we had in mind. No two photographers, for example, are ever likely to snap exactly the same picture, if only because no two people are likely to be standing at exactly the same place (at the same time). Photographers have fun with this: creating a whole art of odd but accurate per-

ceptions of reality. No two family members ever see their own family in exactly the same way either.

Where we're coming from as well as what we're up to affects the way we see things. My older brother and I see our family differently because he sees the family from the first-born's perspective. But the two of us may also have different interests that shape what we see and say. It helps to know something about the speaker, writer or artist before judging the meaning of their work. Who is he and what's he up to? Sometimes I can find the evidence right there in the text (or photograph). But sometimes I have to dig a bit to hear the "hidden" voice.

Finally, the hardest task for many may be stepping into the other guy's shoes for a while, long enough to see the world as someone else sees it. Living vicariously through the characters in a novel is something I love. For me, reading novels is an escape from my daily troubles. But sometimes it's tougher, and I resist even a very good book. I think I sometimes resist when it means living inside the mind of someone I'd hate if I met him in real life! Suppose the "hero" is a racist, a sexist, a murderer, a German soldier in World War II? The greater the novel or movie the harder it is to resist, and when I give in I often find I've learned a lot from stepping into some pretty unpleasant shoes! It's good practice for thinking about political issues too.

The more I sit here and write about this, the more complicated it gets! I don't really think we had all this in mind when we started. But a good idea has a natural habit of growing.

CPESS Newsletter

Who Cares & So What

CPESS focuses on five major "intellectual habits"—habits that should be internalized by every student, and used no matter what they are studying about, both in school and especially out of it! These five "habits" include concern for evidence (how do you know that?), viewpoint (who said it and why?), cause and effect (what led to it, what else happened), and hypothesizing (what if, supposing that).

But most important of all is the 5th "habit": who cares? Knowing and learning take on importance only when we are convinced it matters, it makes a difference. Having a good mind and being well-educated don't always seem important at 15 years of age.

It matters because it will help us get ahead, get into a good college, hold a well-paying job.

But that's not the whole story!

It will also help save the world!

That sounds kind of corny. But it's also true.

The song of the Civil Rights movement was called "we shall overcome." For too many Americans these days the song has been rewritten into "I shall overcome." period.

It's important to be able to stand alone, to take personal responsibility. But it's also important to learn to work together with others—to collaborate. That means not forgetting our family, our friends and our community as we gain success in life.

However, it also means not letting anyone tell us that we have to fail in school in order to keep our friends.

Teenagers are in a lot of conflict between their ambitions, their compassion for others and their loyalties to family and

friends. That's where they need you—their parents. There is no better source of wisdom on these issues.

CPESS Newsletter

January 17

It's the day before our Saturday retreat devoted to graduation standards. I'm nervously checking to be sure our external reviewers (college faculty, teachers from other high schools, and so on) have the material they need. Every student must complete the requirements of fourteen different "portfolio" areas: literature, history, ethics, science, math, media, and so on, and present seven of them to a Graduation Committee for questioning and defense. (The other seven are presented for a more cursory review.) The Graduation Committee has at least two assigned faculty, another adult of the student's choice, and a student. The whole thing is like a series of doctoral orals! It takes at least a year from the time the first set of work is presented until the last is approved. The kids take it very seriously. But ensuring that we have a set of shared and publicly defensible standards takes continual reexamination. We select a sample of items—including videos of Graduation Committee meetings—for staffwide review and then, ultimately, for external review. The "outsiders" review the material ahead of time. They start off by discussing their ratings and reasonings. The ratings are then compared with ours, and then we join together to argue over our rationales! It's a form of assessment that builds standards, examines teaching practice, and raises issues of curriculum—all at one and the same time.

The essence of our notion of standards is this publicness. It's like the old one-room schoolhouse evening performance, where kids got up before the whole community and recited poems, were quizzed on history, and so on. It's like a well-done Bar Mitzvah. There's both showmanship and authenticity to it. It's why we're so hostile to the idea of imposed "standards" via tests. They wouldn't be so dangerous if they were low-stakes exams that were used mostly on a sampled basis or as a way to get a second opinion. But they're being proposed as high-stakes assessments intended to be used to make decisions simultaneously about grade placement, job entry, school accountability, and teacher pay. Snake oil.

And such testing leads to cheating—directly and indirectly. No testing system can ever entirely avoid it. People cheat on eye tests if they need to. I like [our system because] the conversation about the test is part of the test, we're always revising, and the stakes are never too high. They can always try again.

Journal

February 3

Terrific staff meeting on racism. I started off irritated by the session's leader, who had us engage in a bunch of exercises I found silly and embarrassing. I put up with it in what I hope was good grace. Dom and Howie (both white) then role-played a white parent luring a white teacher into a discussion about "those" kids in a clearly racist way. The tension among the white and black teachers was very sharp. Lois (white) felt sure it was a "straw man"; no white parent in our school would be so openly racist. I agreed.

Dom said it had actually happened in just this way, and he had responded in just the way he play-acted! I was aghast at both facts. It helped when someone "played" the white teacher and interrupted the attempted complicitous conversation by insisting that "those" kids were hers. There was an almost audible explosion of relief. We spent an hour or more trying it out other ways, while everyone commented and criticized different approaches. A lot of interesting issues surfaced. Would it be any more acceptable in our school if an African-American or Latino teacher did the same thing with a fellow African-American or Latino parent? I tried it out with Sandra (African-American). I played the African-American parent sharing "our" shared perception of whites in the school. I hammed it up but the African-American teachers laughed in recognition. It looked less simple to me when reversed. But lots of staff had trouble with it both ways. I think everyone left feeling intrigued and pleased. I know Sandra gets mad at me for saying that these race/class/gender discussions will only work if they're "fun." All this talk about its being "painful but necessary" is a mistake, I argue. Granted, the African-American staff feel the pain all the time, so why shouldn't we? But pain is not the best educator. Not for kids or adults. The kind of thing we learn best from pain is avoidance and bitterness. (A little "discomfort" is probably okay.) Maybe whites are morally bound to suffer the pain. But so what? Pain works when it's strictly voluntary—when you're in control of the level of pain! But the staff meetings are something else.

I felt vindicated today. We've come a long way. It's getting easier to talk this way together. I came away feeling I'd caught on to something that had seemed elusive before. Is it translating into how we dare talk with kids? Because they desperately need opportunities to sort out racism—to deal with it in a "safe" way. They're as touchy as the staff. Self-doubt and a sense of hopelessness are things you can chip away at. But we're all naturally nervous about exposing ourselves to the underlying rage.

JOURNAL

3 The School at Work

We started Central Park East Secondary School with an important conviction, that expertise in early childhood development is a good foundation for starting a school for adolescents. In fact, we believe such expertise stands us in good stead in educating ourselves as adults, too.

We all have more in common with five-year-olds than we imagine; adults remain, in Piaget's terms, "concrete thinkers," and little kids, lo and behold, are capable of some very fancy abstractions. Think about how deeply we've accepted the notion that young students lack "attention spans" because they're "immature," when in fact it's small children who have the longest and most tenacious attention spans. (Watch an infant struggling for half an hour to work out some new theory of how an object moves from one place to another.) It's boredom and anxiety that drive concentration away; fidgetiness appears in first grade and grows worse over time.

Just as our elementary school was based on the idea of keeping the traditions of kindergarten going through the sixth grade, so for our secondary school we largely imagined our task as keeping the spirit of kindergarten going for a few more years. I do not mean this to sound condescending or belittling. I see the spirit I'm referring to as fundamental to all good education; wouldn't it be wonderful, after all, if high school students were as deeply absorbed in their "work" as five-year-olds are in their "play"?

I entered teaching accidentally and became a kindergarten teacher because it was convenient; the work was available part-time and across the street from my house. I didn't have any intention of becoming a teacher, much less a teacher of little children. And there I was doing both. This fortuitous opportunity to work with young children gave me a particular viewpoint and perspective that has, as much as anything else, shaped all my subsequent efforts. I have carried a kindergarten teacher's perspective with me, first into elementary school and now into high school.

Kindergarten is the one place—maybe the last place—where teachers are expected to know children well, even if they don't hand in their homework, finish their Friday tests, or pay attention. Kindergarten teachers know children by listening and looking. They know that learning must be personalized because kids are incorrigibly idiosyncratic. (I speak here of an old-fashioned kindergarten, one that doesn't look like a first grade.) Kindergarten teachers know that helping children learn to become more self-reliant is part of their task—starting with tying shoes and going to the bathroom. Catering to children's growing independence is a natural part of a kindergarten teacher's classroom life. This is, alas, the last time children are given independence, encouraged to make choices, and allowed to move about on their own steam. The older they get the less we take into account the importance of children's own interests, and the less we cherish their capacity for engaging in imaginative play. (In fact, we worry in kindergarten if children lack such capacity, while later on we worry if they show it too much.) In kindergarten we design our rooms for real work, not just passive listening. We put things in the room that will appeal to children, grab their interests, and engage their minds and hearts. Teachers in kindergarten are editors, critics, cheerleaders, and caretakers, not just lecturers or deliverers of instruction. What Ted Sizer calls "coaching" is second nature in the kindergarten classroom.

A good school for anyone is a little like kindergarten and a little like a good post-graduate program—the two ends of the educational spectrum, at which we understand that we cannot treat any two human beings identically, but must take into account their special interests and styles even as we hold all to high and rigorous standards. A good Oxford education is more like my kindergarten classroom than it is like the typical American high school or public college. We don't need research on this astounding proposition. The main difference between the advantaged and the disadvantaged is that the latter need such flexible schools even more. When people think "those kids" need something special, the reply we offer at CPESS is, Just give them what you have always offered those who have the money to buy the best, which is mostly a matter of respect.

I think we've created a framework at CPESS for creating such a respectful setting, day by day. We don't create all the conditions that affect our students' lives; we can't stop the world our students live in while we do our work, a world that places crushing burdens on far too many of our young people. We have no guarantees to offer our kids, their families, or the wider public beyond trying our best to make CPESS a place that at least temporarily makes life seem more interesting and more worth the effort.

For this to happen, teachers first need a framework that enables them to know their students as learners well. This takes time and trust. Trust can't be mandated, but because students and families come to us by choice, at least some modest basis for mutual trust is built in—at least choice buys us time. Teachers also need to know—or decide—what they can expect of each other. They need to agree not only on what to teach, but also on how their teaching and their kids' learning will be assessed. We refuse to let our work be judged on the basis of a students' capacity to collect trivia. We want it to be judged instead on the intellectual habits of mind it engenders. And we also value certain habits of work: the acceptance of increasing levels of responsibility, the increasing capacity to communicate appropriately to others, a willingness to take a stand as well as a willingness to change one's mind, and being someone who can be counted on to meet deadlines as well as keep one's word.

We threw together the "CPESS Habits of Mind" in a hurry as we realized the need to create a unity across disciplines and a focus on the essential that hadn't seemed so critical in the younger grades. It was all very well to refer to "habits of mind," but the phrase

seemed too abstract. We didn't want an endless laundry list either, so we wrote down five, based on many years of watching kids and observing our own habits, and now they are posted in most classrooms and appear regularly in our weekly newsletter. They are at the heart of each curriculum as well as being the basis for judging student performance. We have, on occasion, played around with adding a sixth or replacing one with something different, if only to remind ourselves and the world that they weren't handed to us from Above. We never quite write them out the exact same way, and over the years we've realized they are constantly evolving in their meaning. They are: the question of evidence, or "How do we know what we know?"; the question of viewpoint in all its multiplicity, or "Who's speaking?"; the search for connections and patterns, or "What causes what?"; supposition, or "How might things have been different?"; and finally, why any of it matters, or "Who cares?"

Lawyers tell us these "habits" are very lawyerly, but journalists and scientists tell us they are basic to what they do as well. As a historian I recognize them as being at the heart of my field. As a principal I find them useful when "naughty" kids are sent to my office. I ask them to put their version of the story on one side and that of whoever sent them to me on the other, then we consider evidence that corroborates either version, discuss whether what's happened is part of a pattern, how else it might have been dealt with, and, finally, why it matters.

In order to make such "habits" habitual, they need in-depth practice. Young people need to be immersed in their use. We want to demand evidence in the form of performance at real, worthwhile tasks. To do this we devote ourselves to covering less material, not more, and to developing standards that are no less tough and no less rigorous than those associated with traditional displays of academic excellence but sometimes different. It's very hard to use these habits in the typical survey course, no matter how provocatively taught. As we rush through a hundred years of history in less than a week, or cover complex new scientific ideas one after another, there's no time to study conflicting evidence, read multiple viewpoints, detect the difference between false analogies and real ones,

not to mention imagine how else it might have happened. The first time I really did these things as a student was in graduate school in a course on the French Revolution. It was the first time I understood what history meant; that the history of the world was at least as complicated as my own family's story (and certainly my brother and I have a hard time agreeing on a single version of that).

As teachers, we see the habit of asking these kinds of questions as critical to our students' education not because our kids have special disadvantages, but because it's what we want for all children. But building standards based on these habits of mind takes time, takes translating back and forth between theory and practice, between our ideas and samples of real student work. Can a student do a distinguished piece of work at CPESS without demonstrating breadth of knowledge about the larger context? Is it okay if Francis knows a lot about Japan's involvement in World War II and uses diverse sources with considerable discrimination but seems to know very little about the same war in Europe? Is it okay to be comfortable with ideas and experimental evidence in the field of genetics but superficially ignorant about a presumably simpler phenomenon like photosynthesis? Teaching this way requires forms of rigor few of us have ever before demanded of ourselves. It doesn't mean dispensing with all shallower "survey" requirements, but it shifts the balance dramatically. And it creates anxiety as we ask, But what will other people say if our kids don't know *x* or *y*? Of course, in reality their peers who take the traditional courses don't remember *x* or *y* anyway. But while that's reassuring, it's a cop-out. So it's an endless tension, a see-sawing back and forth between "coverage" and making sense of things.

The resolution of such weighty issues won't matter in the end if we don't simultaneously deal with the relationship of the school to our students' communities and families. Respect among children's families, their community, and the school is an end in itself, as well as an essential means to the education we have in mind. It isn't merely a question of good and frequent contact between school and family. That's hard enough, but it takes more. The gap between the social, ethnic, and class histories of the school's staff and the school's

families is often substantial. Even with the best of intentions, none of our schools have a majority of African-American and Latino teachers on their faculties, and few of our teachers grew up in East Harlem or neighborhoods like it. It's a gap we cannot bridge by good intentions alone. There's a price to be paid. At minimum, parents need to know that we will do our best not to undermine their authority, their values, or their standards, although we will encourage our students to raise questions about them. We don't demand that Seventh-Day Adventists accept our scientific version of the world's origins, but we require that they explore this view with us. We acknowledge the existence of different ways of handling conflict, but we insist that they use our way in school. We can't do away with the likelihood that some of our students' families see white teachers as inherently suspect, but white teachers can listen, we can reconsider our own reactions, offer alternative possibilities, and challenge some implicit assumptions.

We know that the school's pedagogy doesn't always rest easily with parents, some of whom wonder if we're not creating difficulties for children already handicapped by racism or poverty. We're not always going to be convincing, but we need to provide evidence that where we disagree we do so respectfully, that we're not out to frustrate the aspirations parents have for their kids, or to blame them for what goes wrong. Children must take increasing responsibility for who they are and what they accomplish, which includes sorting out the unresolved tensions between school and family. At their best, family and school are allies, however cautiously, but the kid is the performer. Adolescence is a time of experimentation, and we want our students to take on new challenges, to look at the world and their own life histories in novel ways. These two ideas—a commitment to avoid fostering an alienation between students and their families and a commitment to opening new doors and pathways for them—don't always rest easily together. In the end however, CPE and CPESS are more often faulted by kids for being too close, not too distant, from their families and community. It's amazing how much can be done to bridge the gaps if we eliminate some of the obvious barriers.

When school people complain that parents "these days" don't show up at parent/teacher conferences, especially in high schools, I remember my own experiences as a parent attending school conferences. At best, the teachers restated what I already knew: my child was doing fine or he or she wasn't. Bad news at the conference was more than useless. I left such meetings feeling more inadequate, more guilty, and more helpless. I learned to stop going. It was an act of intelligence and survival, not a lack of concern, that led me to stay away. Such avoidance can produce distrust and wariness, and our children sometimes pay a paralyzing price. Children can get stuck between the two suspicious, warring parties to their education even if no confrontation ever takes place.

One obvious way of maintaining a climate that favors trust is by running a small rather than a large school. In many public schools across the country anything under 2,000 is thought of as tiny, hardly a school at all. We feel our high school enrollment of 450 is actually too big. It requires more subdivisions than is ideal. Incidentally, all 450 kids can fit into our auditorium, which is one criterion for maximum size. The other useful criterion is whether or not the entire staff can meet face to face, preferably in a single circle.

Experts at team building claim a group works best at somewhere between 15 and 20 people. By this standard, both class size and staff size should top at around 20. Having miscalculated a little on size, we divided the school into three major divisions, each with about 150 kids and 8 or 9 primary adults covering nearly all subjects taught, along with a "resource" teacher with a specialty in learning disabilities. The divisions are further subdivided each into two houses of 75 to 80 students, each with its own core faculty of 4. Most teachers are responsible for more than a single discipline, so we can combine courses such as math and science. This reduces the number of students a teacher deals with by half. We've also cut administrators, supervisors, and some specialists.

Thus, with the same budget as the typical city school we've cut the number of children a teacher sees each day from 160 to only 40. More like an elementary school. The 40 includes a group of about 15 students that each teacher sees daily for an extended advi-

sory period—a combination tutorial, seminar, and study hall—and whose families the adviser keeps informed about how things are going. (All professional staff—principal, social worker, librarian, special ed staff—run advisory groups as well.) This means that on parent/teacher evenings each staff member has only 15 families to meet with. Quite a different task than the one that faced my son's high school teachers. Parents have the opportunity to talk with someone who actually knows their son or daughter! The talk lasts at least half an hour, and both the student and the student's work are there as well. It takes time: several evenings, one afternoon, and some early mornings to reach everyone. A simple idea, but one that the average urban high school can't pretend to hold itself to.

Students spend two years in each division at CPESS, and with the same adviser. Division I is the equivalent of grades 7 and 8, and Division II consists of grades 9 and 10. Students remain in the last division, called the Senior Institute, as long as they need to get a diploma and be prepared for the next step in their lives. Within each division no distinctions are made by grade level; everyone studies the same broad subject matter together, and it's easy for us to forget who is in what grade. But the kids seem to know. Since we avoid holdovers in the earlier grades, there are a number of students who need more time at the end. Students who spend a third year in the Senior Institute work with their advisers more independently, often taking off-campus courses, maybe working part-time, doing more independent study, and progressing as fast as they can toward completion of the required portfolios. Kids still feel strongly about graduating with "their class"; despite our efforts to fudge over these categories, spending that extra time is hard. For a few it doesn't work, but most proudly show up at graduation the following June to receive their diplomas, and one or two have come back for their diplomas a year or more later! The kids think a CPESS diploma is special.

"Keep the schedule simple, so you can focus on the complexity of the kids and the complexity of the ideas they are dealing with," Sizer recommended when we began. So we did. We kept it as close to our elementary school schedule as we dared. We decided on the

simplest of schedules: two hours each day in Humanities (art, history, literature, social studies), two hours daily of Math and Science, and one hour of Advisory. That's the routine, day after day, with almost no change for the first four years, from grades 7 through 10. Some kids attend Humanities first, while the others have Math/Science; then it reverses. Within each two-hour block, the staff makes decisions about time and grouping. They can decide to do one thing on Monday and change their minds on Tuesday. They can even quickly decide to spend one whole day on Science! When the kids and teachers complained once that no one seemed really prepared to study hard after lunch, we all grumbled about it until the kids suggested a simple solution: no after lunch. So we run four hours straight three days a week, eat lunch late, and put Advisory at the end of the day. Everyone prefers it, at least for now. This was a decision we were able to make on Monday and put into effect within the same week. In most New York high schools, it would take a task force months to study an idea like this and more months or years to put it into effect. We just sat in our circle, listened to the kids' proposal and said, Let's try it.

One morning per week each student in grades 7 through 10 spends in community service, which allows for teacher planning time. Also, between 8:00 and 9:00 each morning we offer foreign language—with a mostly auxiliary staff of language teachers. The kids think 8:00 A.M. is outrageously early and they are still giving us a hard time about promptness. But being on time is a necessity for our kind of schedule, so we aren't budging. Our policy at present is based on theater time: if you arrive late you have to wait for a scheduled intermission. (It's somewhat different once you get into the Senior Institute, where students take some courses off campus, are involved in an extended internship at some point, and have a wider selection of mostly one-hour classes.)

We also have an hour for lunch, longer than is typical. This gives the staff time together, and it gives the students time to eat, choose options such as sports or computers, or use the library for independent study or reading or the wide range of modern technology and media facilities located there. Finally, from 3:00 to 5:00 P.M. and on

Saturday mornings the building is open for interscholastic sports programs, study, homework, or tutoring in the well-staffed library, and for a few student or staff-initiated clubs. Between 4:00 and 5:00 P.M. kids and staff are still hanging around, in and out of classes and offices, often together. This kind of schedule is not only simple, it also provides time—six scheduled school hours a week—for faculty to meet and talk to each other, to do collegially what people who work together need to do.

To create a staff-run school with high standards, the staff must know each other well, too, be familiar with each other's work, and know how the school operates. Each team of teachers that works with the same students and the same curriculum also teaches at the same time and are "off" together. The school's structure, from the placement of rooms to the scheduling of the day, is organized to enable teachers to visit each other's classes, to reflect on their own and their colleagues' practice, and give each other feedback and support. Curricular teams who teach the same division of students the same agreed-upon topics, for example, have a full morning each week outside the classroom to critique student work and each other's plans, and occasional full days to work on standards and long-range expectations. For the same reason, those who teach the same eighty kids—the faculty of each house—have an hour-and-a-half extended lunch together every week. The entire staff meets from 3:00 to 5:00 P.M. every Monday and from 1:30 to 3:00 P.M. on Fridays to make collective schoolwide decisions, discuss ideas, and work out both curricular and graduation standards, issues that overlap all ages and divisions. The staff is responsible for hiring their own members, assessing their own colleagues, and when dissatisfied for confronting colleagues with their concerns. They are responsible for developing and assessing both the curriculum and their students' success with it. Above all, the teachers are responsible for defining, and defending, the criteria for receiving a CPESS diploma. All faculty sit on senior graduation committees. Each potential graduate's name comes before the full faculty, who must vote to give them a diploma based on work presented and publicly accessible.

This structure took time to develop and there are plenty of still unresolved issues in the way our school works. How do we know if we've developed sufficiently high standards for graduation? We have created a system of regular external reviews by panels of experts consisting of college faculty, high school colleagues, parents, community leaders, discipline experts, and educational policymakers and officials. It's effective but probably too cumbersome as presently constituted, especially if many schools were to adopt it. Can technology solve any of this for us? What does it mean to tell kids the content of their final exam at the beginning of a course as the Coalition of Essential Schools' "planning backward" strategies suggest? Can one really design final "essential questions" so craftily that answering them requires a student to deal with the curriculum in a serious and systematic way? So far it seems easier said than done, particularly in math and science. How much should each teacher's curriculum and pedagogy be the result of team decision making rather than individual inclination? Unlike our CPE elementary schools, where teachers select topics with extraordinary freedom based on personal inclination and professional judgments, teams (and ultimately the whole faculty) make such decisions in the secondary school. While both the elementary and high school faculties accept responsibility for all students, there is more built-in joint decision making on the secondary level. If this is a good idea, should we do more of it on the elementary level?

Unresolved also is our effort to deal with racism. No school in America can avoid the issue, but it's self-evident in a place like CPE. This means that dealing with such questions among ourselves as staff—honestly and yet carefully—has to happen alongside of our work with kids. How can we ensure that we don't tear the school apart as we pick our way through such thorny underbrush? There's no pretending that we don't need to do this, or that once we clear it all up we can get on to other things. We must deal with this issue over and over if we are to help kids who desperately need to be able to talk with adults about such difficult matters, and must do so long before

we have "solved" them. We need to take chances even though making mistakes can be dangerous. We've called in outside experts on racism as well as experts on group relations to work with us on both a regular basis and in times of crisis, when these issues seemed likely to split us apart. A bitter charge by some parents that a white teacher was not only a racist but out to injure children of color, and the overtones of anti-Semitism that went with it, didn't produce the same instinctive response in all of us. We didn't reach a consensus, except on how to get through it safely. Acknowledging the depth of harm that racism has caused and yet not allowing it to be an excuse for expecting less of our kids or the school, always plagues us, our students, and their families. Every family conference or student conflict with a peer or a teacher can potentially raise issues of race. These can be excuses or they can be fundamental roadblocks. It's not easy to know when to open up the topic and when to leave it closed. The very mention of race can be misinterpreted. But it's not the only super-charged issue. Gender issues for a school full of adolescents are also powerful. And class is even more taboo. The kids are super-sensitive to any hint of a put-down, like being called "disadvantaged," even by reporters who mean to praise them or the school.

And there is never enough time to work any of these issues through! So we look, usually unsuccessfully, for shortcuts. In a school with a faculty of thirty rather than twelve, face-to-face democratic school governance often seems impossible. What role can a smaller cabinet play? What is the role of inexperienced novices compared to that of the more experienced staff? What are the limits on a faculty's legitimate right to make decisions versus the necessary controls exercised by a community, school board, principal, or parent organization? In what capacity and by what means should students play a role in governing their own schools?

These are just a few of our unresolved issues. Most will never be finally resolved. But as we struggle with them we've seen dramatic changes. Because our adult debates are not hidden from our students, there is no sharp dividing line between "staff development" activities and student educational activities. The deep immer-

sion in a value system that places mutual respect first and encourages a climate of diversity and disagreement becomes enormously powerful over time, and not just for the staff. The kids know we're serious. It rubs off. Sometimes we fear that they are just parroting our ideas, but mostly we can't help but be impressed. They are less engaged in battling with us over every imposed limit on their freedom than they once were, and more engaged with us in the battle to become well educated. They get down to business faster and are more cheerful about more things. They read and write a lot. They talk a lot about their own learning and schooling. They are more self-consciously reflective about how they go about it. Yes, it's partly glibness, but even that glibness is a triumph.

We're happy but not surprised when alumna Lindsay reports from Cornell that our "habits of mind" language really impresses the college faculty, and we glow to hear Erran, Division I terror and self-proclaimed tough guy, talking about evidence and viewpoint and alternative possibilities as he heads off to an Ivy League college.

It's hardly surprising that our rate of retention is very high, that only about 5 percent of our students move or transfer annually. CPESS is a nice place to spend the day and kids willingly travel across the city to stay at CPESS. Attendance is also extraordinarily high; kids and parents show up at family conferences to complain about things to our faces and risk the necessary confrontations. Violence is rare and incidents we consider serious are probably barely noticed in many large urban high schools. The children are willing to let us catch them acting like nice young people who want to be smart. By tenth grade they say "I'm bored" a bit less and admit to being interested in the idea of becoming truly well-rounded citizens a bit more. (And their boredom, after all, isn't all feigned; it sometimes requires us to reconsider what we're doing.)

When they enter the last phase—our Senior Institute—students take on the task of completing fourteen portfolios full of work, including seven major presentations in such areas as math, science, literature, history, the arts, community service and apprenticeship, and autobiography. These "presentations," made to a graduation committee consisting of at least two faculty members, an

adult of the student's choice, and another student, are carried out with enormous seriousness and zeal. They are the primary record—transcript—of a student's success at CPESS, and the basis for receiving the diploma. The Saturday morning school was the outgrowth of Senior Institute students' insistence on more time to prepare. They prep each other before, and debrief each other after, each presentation. Committee meetings, originally designed to last about thirty minutes per portfolio, rarely get finished in less than an hour. Starting in seventh grade, kids know what awaits them at the end and have the opportunity to practice this final process each semester as they move through the school and sit through a half-dozen or more meetings as student members of graduation committees. This process, which has its trade-offs in terms of the time required for faculty participation, creates a series of tasks that require a wide range of performance skills, habits of work as well as mind: the sheer ability to put the material together for their committee to review, to arrange and schedule meetings, to make oral presentations and answer unexpected questions with poise and aplomb!

It also means that early on they must tackle the most important question of all—what's this all for? What comes next? Each student's post-graduation plan is the first of the fourteen portfolios, the centerpiece of the Senior Institute and the graduation process, the tool that promises to become the most powerful focuser as we learn to use it better. Creating this plan—a joint activity of student, family and adviser—enables us to put together a package of courses (both on and off campus), internships or apprenticeships, independent study, and other external experiences that will lead a student from the protective cocoon of CPESS's Division II to his or her next and more independent task as a graduate. The entire process of the Senior Institute, from the creation of the first post-graduation plan to the completion of the fourteenth portfolio, brings together our commitment to a personalized education and our commitment to high standards for all—standards we take full public responsibility for stating and defending in ways that all can understand.

The facts that reinforce my confidence that we're on the right

track go beyond the statistics. Recently I dropped in on the ninth- and tenth-graders as they were presenting their scenes from *Macbeth* in the school auditorium. They had spent many months working over their ideas about the play, and now they were presenting these ideas to each other. The keen sense of ownership they displayed over the material was astounding to me. It was the product of the kind of leisurely pacing only a school like ours can afford, and they were able to show it off to each other without fear of being ridiculed. They knew that the laughter from the audience was the laughter of colleagues working with not against them. It was a wonderful few hours.

Another confirmation came under less happy circumstances. The infamous so-called wilding assault on a Central Park jogger occurred just a few blocks from our building. That event had a particularly powerful impact on the sensitivities of East Harlem residents. As I came to school after the four-day holiday during which the assault occurred, I knew one thing: we needed time to work out how to deal with the youngsters' reactions. The staff met at lunch to talk about what the kids were saying and how we might respond.

We knew we had to address not only the children's reactions, but also our own fears and angers. We had to face our different responses and learn from them. We also had to help the kids deal with a hungry press, and prevent their unwitting exploitation as cameras, microphones, and reporters with pencils and pads pushed into their lives in order to get firsthand "reactions." The events unfolded in such a way that adolescents in East Harlem were perceived as a threat to decent white middle-class joggers. It was easy for kids to fall into the trap set up by reporters and the general climate and respond as though they were defending the alleged attackers and distancing themselves from the victim. Reorganizing to deal with these issues would not have been possible in a typical New York City high school. Our size, our simple and flexible schedule, the advisory system, and our collegial organization made it feasible to address the crisis together and immediately. The kids as a result felt less exploited, had time to sort out their own feelings and develop their own language for describing them. They also learned that they need

not answer reporters at all. It helped them avoid feeling like helpless objects of the prurient interest of the reporters, to be more "in control of the script."

They have such opportunities often as crises hit their world, from the death of a fellow student to the events surrounding the Rodney King trial. On the Friday morning following the Los Angeles riots, we were scheduled for a visit from an all-white Michigan high school chorus, who were coming to sing for us. We on the school's staff were nervous about rumors that some of the week's tension and anger might be directed against these frightened out-of-towners—some students, the rumors claimed, wanted a symbolic protest, a walkout to show their distress. After a few introductory greetings before the packed auditorium, just as we could feel a crisis coming, sixteen-year-old Mark walked resolutely onto the stage. "There are no enemies of ours in this room," he announced, and to resounding applause brought us all together.

Above all a school structure such as ours works for the small crises—rumors of a fight or drug use, family crises and homelessness, runaways and attempted suicides, pregnancies and births. We can take the time (the endless hours, it often seems) to attend. Some years ago one of the most beloved members of our larger school community, Josie Hernandez, died. Her children were among our first elementary school graduates, fifteen years before, and one has since returned as a teacher. Ms. Hernandez had become secretary at one of our elementary schools. In short, she mattered to us all in many different ways. Her death could not go by unnoted. We stopped to take stock of her life and its meaning personally and individually. We had to be sure that those students who had known her could attend her memorial service. We had to pay attention to details, not just good intentions.

We can do such things not because we are more caring than other teachers or other schools. Not at all. It's because we have a structure and style that enables us to show our care effectively. What could a high school principal with four thousand students possibly do in the face of such a situation? In such schools a death a day is commonplace, and to take cognizance of individual tragedies would

be to lapse into a state of perpetual grief and mourning. The distancing and numbing required in most schools is a fact of life, a necessary coping strategy.

If we want children to be caring and compassionate, then we must provide a place for growing up in which effective care is feasible. Creating such intimate schools is possible even in an existing system of large buildings if we create smaller communities within them. That's what I think the visitors who come to our schools recognize and acknowledge. That is what is visibly obvious.

Caring and compassion are not soft, mushy goals. They are part of the hard core of subjects we are responsible for teaching. Informed and skillful care is learned. Caring is as much cognitive as affective. The capacity to see the world as others might is central to unsentimental compassion and at the root of both intellectual skepticism and empathy. "Any human being sufficiently motivated can fully possess another culture, no matter how 'alien' it may appear to be," argues noted African-American author and literary critic Henry Louis Gates. "But there is no tolerance without respect—and no respect without knowledge." Such empathetic qualities are precisely the habits of mind that require deliberate cultivation—that is, schooling. If such habits are central to democratic life, our schools must become places that cultivate, consciously and rigorously, these moral and intellectual fundamentals.

Moving on to high school has helped us at Central Park East to see where the qualities of a good kindergarten classroom need reinforcement. The imaginative play that we so early abandon, the attention to children's nascent friendships, these are after all merely the precursors of what Piaget called intellectual "decentering," that is, the ability to imagine the world without oneself at its center. As we stint on one we injure the other. As we eliminate from our schools and from children's after-school lives the time and space for exercising their creative imagination and building personal ties, we've cheated our children and our society in a far more critical way than we're inclined to understand.