

our business.” They tell visitors we’re “like a family.” At times I deny this—because we are after all here for a purpose. We’re not endlessly bound to love and forgive. But on the other hand: maybe it’s in that gray area between being a family and a school that we engender hopefulness.

We need this midwinter break.

#### JOURNAL

# 10

## On Failure, Persistence, and Public Education

I’ve been involved in starting three schools and intimately connected to the opening of a dozen more. Almost every one came close to extinction at least once in its first few years. Their troubles came from different sources: “too much” parental involvement or not enough, an overly controlling director or confusion over who’s running the ship, and (of course) personality clashes with or without political overtones. And if these are not inevitable, one can count on unexpected blows. On June 1 of CPESS’s first year, while waiting for the birth of my first grandchild, I got word by phone that a student had been run over on a school trip. I felt simultaneous fear for the boy’s life and fear for the school’s future. Fortunately, he survived with minimal damage (and was part of our first graduating class). If parenting is sometimes nerve-racking, in a community of hundreds one is always on the edge of disaster, a phone call away from tragedy.

Teaching, like parenting, sometimes feels more like a succession of near-misses, almosts, and downright failures. How honest are we as parents about our failings and doubts? To whom do we divulge our deepest worries? Threatened by exposure in the local newspaper, by regular postings of comparative parental success, would our willingness to open our doors and reflect on the truth increase or decrease? In the midst of our professional work at CPE, despite much praise, we see all the warts. And we open our doors nervously.

Kids change very slowly, and not always in quite the ways we were anticipating. On any particular day the possibilities of things going very awry are considerable. We find ourselves making the same dumb mistakes over and over. We try to remember not to lose our cool on Friday afternoon or it will bother us all weekend. And we hope no visitor hears us at our worst moments.

Two years ago I ambitiously decided to teach a senior course on New York history and politics, about which I thought I knew at least a bit. (And what I didn't know I thought my coteacher David Gartner, a young urban intern, knew as well as anyone.) Of the dozen students we started with, only half ended up getting course credit or using the work for their portfolios. There wasn't a teaching mistake we didn't make. We overplanned, as though by dint of spelling it all out we'd insure against the realities of twelve ornery adolescents. We underestimated the difficulty of our reading list. We were sure the kids would find things interesting on the basis of our enthusiasm alone. We expected they'd enjoy working together over weekends and holidays to explore neighborhoods that in fact they found intimidating. Fortunately, at the age of sixty I've learned to turn embarrassment into opportunity and we tried to use the experience to think aloud about our work. But it reminded me of how often I cried in my early years of teaching—and of being a director before I got a codirector. Tears of fear, frustration, anger, and sorrow.

There's never a time when one can say, Well, I've done all that can be done. There is always something else. A child you haven't done quite right for; a family that is in unnecessary distress because of school issues; a teacher you haven't been a help to; a book, a game, an idea that might turn the tide. It's a matter of endless lists, and none of the items are ever the kind you can cross off and put behind you. That conversation that you thought forever changed this child's distrust was after all just one step along the road toward a more trusting relationship. And then, in the midst of it all, comes an imperious call from someone "downtown" demanding compliance, asking, Who do you think you are? or, Where were you? or, How come?—and you feel outrage. Even when we get a better ar-

angement of power between school folks and school bureaucracies, we'll still have such irritations. (Private school headmasters have to deal with both state authorities and their boards of trustees.) What we can do is improve the odds that these phenomena don't drive out the best educators and undermine the natural drive to do one's best that lies at the heart of good parenting and good schooling. When we no longer believe such a natural drive exists, we've lost most of the battle. That's the "secret ingredient" that must be given an opportunity—plus a public nudge now and then—to take center stage in schooling.

It's thirty years since I began and twenty-one since Central Park East opened its doors. I feel almost as far from discovering how to make a difference as I did then. That sounds foolish, given our successes. But given what I wanted to do, it's a simple fact. The puzzle isn't, it turns out, one where you can finally put the last piece in and say "Done." It just gets more and more complicated. My first class had thirty-five kids and I had no helpers. My next class had twelve and I had a superb assistant. I was, in raw terms, "more successful" with the second class. But I was equally puzzled and equally "dissatisfied" by both. But my puzzlements and my dissatisfaction were of a different order.

There are, in the end, only two main ways human beings learn: by observing others (directly or vicariously) and by trying things out for themselves. Novices learn from experts and from experience. That's all there is to it. Everything else is in the details. Until we create schools in which the ratio of novices to experts is lower and the opportunities for novices to try out what they see and hear the experts doing are more plentiful, we'll be wasting much of our time. Until we, in whatever other roles we play in life, demonstrate our own dedication to the values we ask schools to demonstrate, the intellectual seriousness and thoughtfulness we want for our young will not be a commonplace school phenomenon. The experts needed include other students, books and movies, teachers and other adults—and not just in school. We also know that we don't learn from all experts (and Herb Kohl has written a great essay on this provocative topic, entitled "I Won't Learn from You"). Some we

tune out and we don't always know why, but the way schools are positioned in the larger culture and society has something to do with how youngsters see and hear "school people" and their brand of smarts. How to create the right conditions and provide the appropriate practice and feedback will require endless finagling and thus endless opportunities to make both small and big mistakes.

As a parent I used to say that as long as two out of three kids were doing okay on any one day that was great, and one out of three was okay. It was the days on which all three seemed in a bad way that I would lose heart. And of course most of the time I was ignorant about how things were going and just sailed along smoothly. The advantage of a school, even a small one, is that it's easier to persevere because there's bound to be something right most days; on the other hand, there's less chance that no one will let you know when things are amiss.

Keeping a sense of humor is another requirement of both parenting and schoolteaching. Some people say it's also a characteristic of a healthy democratic society—that it can laugh at itself. Mostly, of course, one needs a sense of humor about all the grand schemes that grand people devise. For example, the latest vast schemes to see to it that all kids become what we wish we had been made to be! Or that they know what our learned college professors don't want to bother to teach and therefore want someone else to take care of first. It's interesting to note that when an international study points out that more than two thirds of all college teachers everywhere find their students "unprepared," few realize that this is a joke on the insularity of academia—Why aren't they more like me?—not proof of the orneriness of students or the lack of rigor in their schools.

As I read the latest batch of state and national "curriculum frameworks" and diploma requirements—written in that odd jargonese of "all students will . . ."—only a sense of humor keeps me sane. Imagine otherwise intelligent people getting together and publishing the following proclamations (taken from a proposed statewide curriculum and assessment mandate) that "all students will" by the end of tenth grade "learn to understand and cope with death and dying" and "with the myriad of problems associated with

aging," "know how to establish, maintain, and end relationships," and "demonstrate an understanding of disease and disorders and take action to control, prevent, or limit and treat their development." The latter sounds like what an M.D. is expected (maybe) to "know and do." While curing the world's diseases our ninth-grader is also taking one semester of art, which will prepare him or her to "demonstrate ability in composing, arranging, and improving music," "play an ensemble instrument," know the major visual artists of his/her culture and others, and produce a one-act play. (By the time they graduate they will be able to choreograph a dance, improvise in various ethnic styles, and write and put on a "meaningful" three-act play.) Meanwhile, based on their ninth-grade global studies course, they will demonstrate "the connection between the pre-nation state, the development of nationalism and current geopolitical and economic issues" in Latin America, East, Central, and Southern Asia, the Mideast and Africa, along with literally a dozen other weighty theses. By the time they graduate high school they'll have mastered the "basics" that drive all of the academy, plus life itself, and have already earned mini-Ph.D.'s in a dozen fields of study.

My antidote is the new Meier Mandate: "No school shall have graduation requirements that cannot be met by every professional working in the school, and therefore these requirements shall be phased in only as fast as the school can bring its staff up to the standards it requires of its students." We're planning to test this one out at CPESS. School boards and legislatures might try it out on themselves, too.

But these too shall pass.

It would help, of course, if all our children had sound reasons to expect a decent and dignified job in the future, as well as neighborhoods and opportunities that offered them and their families a decent present. What would seem intolerable to any reader of this book should not have to be tolerated by any youngster in our great city or in the nation. In the end that's what still bothers me—it isn't fair. The unfairness cuts even deeper thirty years later, hurts more.

But there's also always hope—the fifty new small schools of

choice in New York City alone, all roughly consistent with the ideas laid out here, and another fifty that are on the drawing board for the future, and many others throughout the country. While policymakers and ideologues are busily inventing a new top-down fad every year or two—a uniform national curriculum, school prayer, or a system of private vouchers—there’s a slow awakening among school people, things are taking root out there that may not be easy to stop. People *are* “having wonderful ideas” in the sense that Eleanor Duckworth celebrated in her book by that name. It may be possible to have small idiosyncratic schools, lots of autonomy, public accountability, a fair amount of equity, *and* schools that work! But it will require us to abandon the stance of “outsiders” in relation to schooling. We can’t afford to attack others for getting involved just because we don’t like their ideas. We need to cultivate the adult habit of getting involved.

It won’t come as a surprise that I think the conditions that foster good teaching are the conditions I’ve described already: small schools, schools of choice, school autonomy over the critical dimensions of teaching and learning, lots of time for building relationships and reflecting on what’s happening, along with a culture of mutual respect for others and a set of habits of mind that fosters inquiry as well as responsibility.

What makes me hopeful, no matter what bad news tomorrow brings, is our infinite capacity for inventing the future, imagining things otherwise. It’s what allows me to remain optimistic even though there’s presently more racism and meanness in my home town, and the nation, than I ever recall witnessing before—and teenagers in our city bear the brunt of both. There are opportunities out there; things are stirring. *It’s up to parents and teachers to find their way into the current reform debate.* Change won’t happen the way I’ve been describing if it depends on policymakers, big-name task forces, well-intentioned governors or systems thinkers. Change will take people who remember what otherwise gets lost: that it’s not just about building a powerful America, beating out Japan, or even world-class job skills; it’s about creating a more powerful citizenry and a more caring one. Even then we’ll have lots to argue about. But

it’s about our kids and our shared future with them. Worth arguing about.

Luckily, in the meantime the work is interesting and tomorrow I just might figure out where this little piece over there goes . . . though I know that the puzzle is always changing shape. That’s what’s so marvelous about living things, they’re never entirely predictable. They can always confound the odds.