

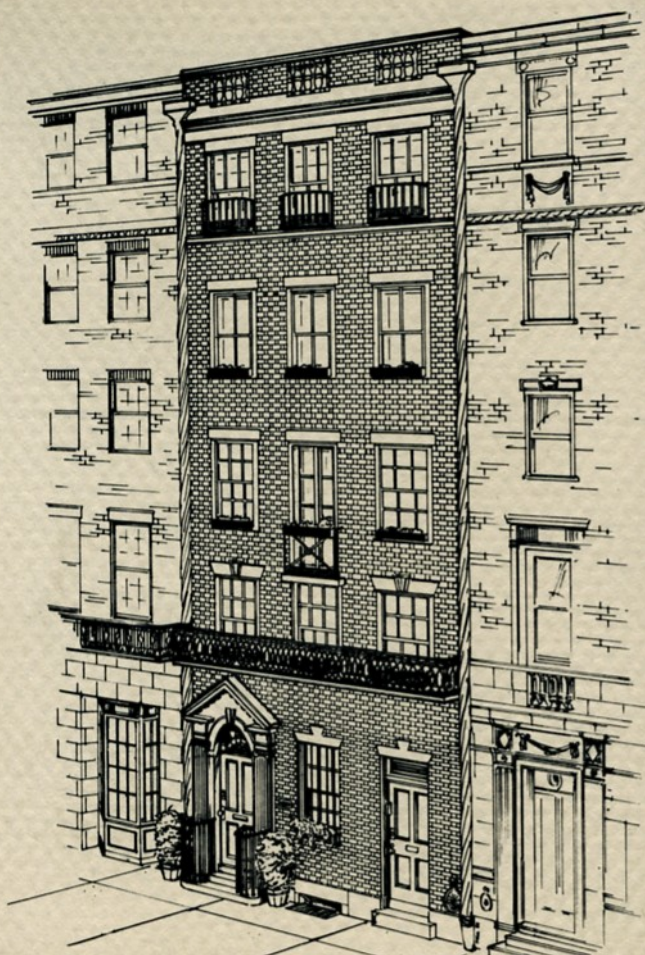
Making Schools Better

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Center for Educational Innovation



Americans have good reason for dissatisfaction with the recent record of public education.

SAT scores are down, the dropout rate is high, and our technical training is internationally uncompetitive.

A mediocre system nationwide, however, masks the disastrous situation which prevails in most—if not all—of our inner cities. Any parent confronted with the prospect of sending a child to public school in cities like New York, Chicago, Atlanta or Los Angeles knows there is a crisis. And the crisis exists in spite of dramatic increases in expenditures per pupil (already up 40% in the last five years) that are unlikely to continue at the same high level. Obviously, the answer lies beyond a fiscal cure for the problem.

Evidence has been mounting that in education, as in business, effective management is the key to success. Important new research carried out by Dr. John Chubb and his colleagues at the Brookings Institution presents these findings and clearly illustrates why some schools work while others fail.

Chubb's findings are reinforced by the experience of Community School District Four in New York's massive public school system. In 1979 the leaders in this district put into practice a management system based on choice and competition. A key member of that leadership team, Mr. Seymour Fliegel, joined Dr. Chubb to discuss the intersection between the theory and practice of choice. Roundtable Chairman Nathan Glazer of Harvard University introduced the proceedings, which are reprinted here.

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A
*Center for Educational Innovation
Roundtable*

Nathan Glazer
John Chubb
Seymour Fliegel

*The Roundtable Series on
Innovation in Education
is funded by a grant from the
William H. Donner Foundation*

Participants

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Making Schools Better

Nathan Glazer—I am going to briefly introduce a theme that will be taken up in different ways by both John Chubb and Sy Fliegel. This theme is freeing up the management of public schools so that they can pursue their main academic goals, and opening up the choices of students and parents so that they can use the schools to the best advantage.

In New York such freedom has become quite difficult to come by. Lately I have been spending a considerable amount of time reading some of the numerous official and unofficial reports that come out of efforts to reform the workings of the city school system. These reports cover many subjects: recruiting teachers, getting supplies to the schools, renovating schools. And yet they all have the same message: "No matter what you are trying to do, it is too hard to do it in the New York City school system."

Invariably these reports list the 16 offices you must go through, or the 22 steps in any procedure. You read through these things and it becomes perfectly clear why it takes at best four-and-a-half years to prepare a plan to renovate a school; or why the supplies don't get to the schools; or why teachers from good colleges very often will give up in disgust and go off to a private school or to a suburban school district that is smaller and runs more easily.

These reports, by the way, are not brand new. If you go back five years, ten years, twenty years you'll be reading more or less the same reports. Every office has a history and every step has a reason. In 1912 something horrible happened and an office was created. In 1918 something else happened and we got a rule. In 1921 there was a general reform—which needed an office. In 1933 we needed a coordinating office. All terribly necessary. Yet, the fact is private schools, and not just prestigious private schools but parochial schools, manage to get their supplies, hire teachers, organize their curricula and fulfill state requirements, without the 4,000 or 6,000 people at central headquarters.

Would freeing up the organizational structure or finding a way around it make for better education? Under the aegis of the Brookings Institution, John Chubb has done an extensive study which addresses that question directly.

John Chubb—I'd like to start by providing a broad overview on what we think is wrong with American schools and what we think would make a difference.

Most of you are familiar with the state of American education. Just to give you some basic statistics, for roughly 20 years from the mid-1960s until the mid-1980s, the SAT scores of American students dropped sharply. Although scores have been going up for the last few years, they've recently stalled. Our students still are well behind where they were in 1965.

In addition, the dropout rate in the United States is about 25 percent. That is to say, 25 percent of our students are not finishing high school on time. In many of our large cities only half of the students finish high school on time.

Comparing the United States to countries around the world is even more depressing. In math and science, U.S. students rank dead last in any comparison with students from the nations that are our leading competitors. The top 5 percent of students in the United States achieve at the same level as the middle student in the Japanese system.

There is a bit of good news. For the last five years, Americans, mostly at the state level, have been trying very hard to turn things around. The amount that has been done is remarkable. Five years ago, when reports began to come out suggesting various ways to improve our nation's school systems, a lot of skeptics said we could never find that much money. But in those five years or so we have spent far more money than any of

the skeptics thought possible.

Between 1981 and 1986 expenditures per pupil for elementary and secondary education went up 40 percent. In real terms we now spend four times as much per child as we did in 1950. In the first half of the 1980s, teachers enjoyed larger salary increases than any other occupational group in the country. Their salaries are still arguably too low, \$29,000 per year, but they have gone up very quickly. We've also spent a good deal of money to reduce the size of classes.

There has been a crackdown on teacher incompetence. Teachers are being asked to take more tests, to demonstrate that they are able. There has been a crackdown on student underachievement. Graduation and promotion requirements are being boosted around the country.

This is very heartening because it is unusual for our political system to act so forthrightly. Clearly, Americans are taking the problem seriously. Unfortunately, the prospects that these reforms will make much of a difference are not very good. That is doubly discouraging because we may be wasting a rare political opportunity to really do something.

Why am I willing to say that what has been taking place is not likely to make much of a difference? The reasons are reflected in the study I did that was mentioned by Nathan Glazer. Entitled "What Price Democracy?", it is an analysis of the largest, most comprehensive data set ever assembled on American high schools and their students. I would like very briefly to summarize the study, its basic conclusions, and the implications for reform.

This study included 500 randomly selected high schools nationwide, public and private. Within these high schools it included the principals, 12,000 teachers, and 12,000 students. We've never before had, in this country, a data set that puts together such detailed information on both students and the schools that they've attended. Large studies usually concentrate on either schools or students. We've combined the two.

The other thing that is virtually unique about this data set is that the students were examined not once, but twice. They were examined when they began high school as sophomores, and again when they graduated. Thus we were able to study not simply changes in the levels of student achievement over time, but how a particular group of students progressed.

We focused on one major issue, academic achievement. Some will argue that schools are trying to accom-

plish a lot of other things as well. But the thing that we care about and we think most people should care about is academic achievement. We used five tests: math, science, reading, writing, and vocabulary, and combined the results into a comprehensive measure of student achievement between sophomore year and graduation.

After determining which students were achieving and which were failing, we sought to uncover the sources of success or failure. First came a bit of bad news: The most important determinant of how students achieve is their aptitude. Bright kids learn more in high school than kids that aren't so bright. There is a certain amount of student achievement that is beyond the reach of school reformers.

But the good news is that the second most important determinant of how well students do is the school they attend. The skeptics of the 1960s and '70s, who doubted that schools could make a difference, were wrong. Schools make a big difference. They are marginally more important than the influence of parents. They are far more important than the influence of peer groups.

The next question naturally is, "What makes the difference between successful and unsuccessful schools?" Let me begin by telling you what doesn't make a difference. Neither expenditures, teacher salaries, class size, graduation requirements, the amount of homework assigned, or any other individual school policy that we looked at matters. There was no correlation between student achievement and any of the variables on which school reformers have been concentrating so much time, effort, and money. That is why there is very little reason to believe that school reform, as it is proceeding, is going to work.

What will work? For any of you who are involved in management, the answer may seem pretty obvious. The thing about schools that really seems to matter is how they're organized. To begin with, good and bad schools have different goals. The schools that are succeeding, whether with poor students or the best students, consciously focus on academic achievement. If you ask personnel in these schools what their goal is, they will say, "academic achievement," or "academic excellence." People in schools that aren't doing so well say things like "the basics," "occupational training," or "citizenship." These goals may well be important. But if you want achievement the school has to focus on achievement.

I should also say that clarity and consensus about

goals are as important as what you call the goal. The thing that distinguishes successful schools is that there is a real consensus within those organizations about what they are trying to achieve, whether they say, "the basics," or "academic excellence." We asked a random sample of 30 teachers in each school what were the priorities of the school. In the good schools, they agreed on the priorities. In the unsuccessful schools, there was a great deal of disagreement. Other school researchers have said that successful schools have a mission. That appears to be true. The schools in our survey that were succeeding consciously focused on one purpose.

Another important aspect of organization was leadership. The principals of successful and unsuccessful schools were as different as night and day. Successful schools were led by principals whom the teachers said had a vision, knew where they wanted the school to go, and knew how to take the school in that direction. These are standard qualities of strong leadership. Also, the principals in the good schools were educationally oriented and thought of themselves as educational leaders, not administrators.

When we asked principals of unsuccessful schools why they became principals, they would say things like: "I prefer administration to teaching." When asked what their long-term goals were, unsuccessful principals were much more likely to say, "I want to get out of the school, move up into the central office and rise in the administrative hierarchy."

In the successful schools, the principals wanted to stay in the schools. When you asked them why they became principals, they were more likely to say, "Because I wanted to take control of the school. I wanted to control personnel, I wanted to control policy." They wanted to lead, not merely manage.

The other profound organizational difference was that in successful schools the sense of professionalism, independence, and responsibility for one's work was enormously higher. Teachers and principals in the successful schools were true professionals. Those in unsuccessful schools weren't professionals at all. The teachers in successful schools had more independence, they participated more extensively in school decisions, and they had more influence over those decisions.

Within their classrooms they were free to tailor their practices to the needs of the students. Any educator will tell you that this is important because education is not a science but an art. It requires discretion, not prescription. In the successful schools teachers had discretion.

To us, the concept that best summarized the difference between the successful and unsuccessful school organizations was that of a team. In successful schools the organization was held together by consensus and cooperation, not primarily by rules and regulations. The unsuccessful school looked like a classic bureaucracy, held together primarily by rules and regulations—a hierarchy, not a team at all.

If strong leadership, clear goals, professionalism and team spirit are what is important, how do you instill these somewhat elusive qualities in a school? Can it be done at all?

Many state legislatures believe that it can be done by sending teachers and principals to classes. There may be some management consultants in this room who believe that it can be done that way. But if you look around the country at successful school organizations, it doesn't appear that formal management training accounts for much.

We took a careful look at what accounts for effective organization. The key determinant, more important than anything else, turns out to be autonomy. Successful schools were relatively independent of external influence by administrators: superintendents, central office bureaucrats, and union officials. A school that was free to chart its own course was much more likely to develop effective organization and thereby breed academic achievement.

Principals who had greater influence over curriculum, instruction, discipline, and especially hiring and firing, put together effective organizations. It doesn't take much insight to figure out why. If you're a principal and you get to determine who teaches in that school and what the school's resources are, you are much more likely to trust the members of the organization, which, after all, you assembled. You are more likely to treat them as members of the team and grant them the autonomy they need to do their jobs. If you don't have control over personnel, you're less likely to treat people as if they're team members. You distrust them. You believe there is going to be conflict and you regulate. Soon you have an organization that is held together not by a common vision but by rules and regulations, that is, a bureaucracy.

If autonomy from external control appears to be the key factor, the final question is where do you find autonomy? How do you get it?

You don't often get it in the public sector. In the public sector, autonomy arises only under exceptional

circumstances: usually in schools outside of an urban area, where the students are already performing well and the parents are affluent and involved. In other words, in the public sector you get autonomy and good organization in those places where right now you don't need it because they are doing well.

In the cities, in schools that are failing, autonomy is decreasing. These schools are victims of a vicious cycle in which poor performance leads to demands that politicians do something, and politicians demand that administrators crack down. The politicians and administrators have only a limited number of levers to pull. They begin regulating. That regulatory bureaucratic attitude seeps into the schools, further undermining performance, leading to more complaints and more regulation. The process is very much the one Nat Glazer described in which succeeding crises lead to endless layers of regulations and broods of bureaucrats to see that they are carried out. The public sector does not provide autonomy for bad or mediocre schools, and therefore bad public school systems typically get worse.

If you don't find autonomy in public schools except under unusual circumstances, you almost always find it in private schools, including religious schools. Private schools are more autonomous and, all things being equal, have more effective organizations and perform better than public schools.

Why are private schools so autonomous and why do they develop these effective school organizations without anyone teaching them how to do it? The reason is really very simple. Private schools have to attract clients. They have to get parents and students to come to school. One way that you do that, and keep parents and students happy, is to ensure that decisions are made at the level of the individual school, which is where the parents and students confront the system. You are forced in the private sector to delegate and to decentralize because that is the surest way to give parents and students access, keeping them happy and helping the schools meet their needs.

In the public sector, the people who run the schools must please not only parents and students who are, at least to some extent, trapped in the system, but also various interest groups: the unions, politicians and so forth. Were the people who run public school systems to delegate and decentralize, and provide real autonomy, they might not be able to satisfy these other groups. So in the public sector they centralize. But the private schools have no captive clients. The competi-

tion for clients leads the schools to concentrate on pleasing students and parents, and therefore to decentralize and make decisions at the level of individual schools. That decentralization provides autonomy, which encourages effective school organization.

I want to close with an anecdote that really brings this home. It illustrates the difference between organization in the public and private sectors in New York City.

Several months ago I was called by a reporter who wanted to know about our research. In the course of explaining about autonomy, I told him that in New York City they have an enormous central office bureaucracy, staffed by 5,000 people, which is tremendously overbearing and leaves the principals with very little influence over their schools. I contrasted this with the Catholic school system in New York City, which despite the church's reputation for hierarchy has only 50 people in its central office, though the system has almost a quarter of the students the public schools have. He took those numbers down and a month later they sent me the galleys of the article so I could check the quotes. I saw all these numbers and I thought, "Five thousand versus fifty! I better double check," because those figures had come from other sources.

I called the personnel office of the city school system and said, "I have a simple question: how many people work in the central office of the New York City School System?" The first person I reached had no idea, nor did the second or third, but they all promised to transfer me to someone who did.

Thirty-five minutes and many transfers later, I got to a person who said, "Yes, I do know the number, but if you want to know, you'll have to put your request in writing, send it through proper channels and we'll get the information back to you in a month."

Well, I pleaded and explained the circumstances and finally I was put in touch with someone who had the authority and the number. And he told me it wasn't 5,000, it was 6,000.

Now I needed to find out the number for the Catholic school system. I got someone in that central office and said, "I need some basic facts. I need to know the number of students in your school system." She told me. "I need to know the number of teachers in the school system." She told me. "I need to know the number of schools in the system." She told me. So I said, "The last thing I need to know is how many people work in the central bureaucracy of the Catholic school system in New York City."

And she said, "I'm sorry, we don't keep that kind of data."

"Well," I said, "would you have any idea? Is there any way you could get the number for me?"

And she said: "Just a minute—I'll count them." And she counted. There are 25. Twenty-five people running a school system that's a fifth to a quarter of the size of the public school system.

Public and private education are organized in an enormously different fashion. Those differences in organization account for all of the differences between the performance of public schools and private schools and most of the differences between good public schools and bad public schools.

The message for reformers is very simple. If you want schools to be organized more effectively and to teach more successfully, you must give them autonomy. But, as any public school administrator will tell you, you can't just turn over a school to principals and teachers without holding them accountable in some way. You've got to provide autonomy without losing accountability. And once public school administrators begin thinking about accountability, they think about tests and rules and regulations and before you know it the autonomy is gone.

The only way to provide autonomy without losing accountability is to go to a different system of accountability. A top-down system will not work. You must build a system of accountability to parents and students rather than to politicians and administrators.

It works in the private sector. Private schools are held accountable to their constituency through the process of competition and choice. Similarly, the surest way to get autonomy and accountability into the public school system is not through regulation or spending, but through a mechanism of choice. There are many ways in which choice systems can be set up. Vouchers, open enrollments, magnet schools, and others. And one of the best ways to see it in operation is to observe the good works of Sy Fliegel and his associates in District Four of the New York City School system. They made it work despite the 6,000 bureaucrats, the 16 offices and the 22 steps. And if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere.

Seymour Fliegel—Before I get into the details of District Four I'd like to lay down some principles and some goals, most of which I believe lead directly to choice.

First, let's take the question of autonomy and the

6,000 bureaucrats. Wherever you have 6,000 bureaucrats you've got freedom that you can't imagine, but only if you take the opportunity. I think it would have been much harder to build District Four if there were only ten people downtown.

John says do away with bureaucracy. The alternative is to ignore the bureaucracy. The paralysis of the New York City school system offers you the freedom, the choice, to do what you think is right. But you have to accept that it is your choice. You can take autonomy. But if you wait for someone to give it to you, you'll wait a very long time because no one gives up power.

Let me establish that while I believe in choice, I also believe in public education. I believe in private education too, but they already have choice, so that's not my job. I also think what is good for the children of the wealthy generally speaking would do very nicely for the children of East Harlem, and that includes choice.

John spoke about a vision. Of course there is little point to vision if you have no choice. But there is also very little point to choice if you lack vision. As the Cheshire Cat tells Alice, if you don't know where you want to get to, it doesn't matter which way you go. That's the situation in most schools in the United States. Without a vision, you're not going anywhere. And as John said, the focus of that vision has to be on instruction and learning.

Another principle comes from George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion", in which it is explained that the difference between the lady and the flower girl "is not the way she behaves, but how she is treated." Your expectations of youngsters largely determine how they behave. They will never let you down. Treat them with high expectations, treat them with respect, and they will perform. Show them you expect them to be thugs and they will never disappoint you.

Finally, and now we are getting very close to choice, I believe that smaller schools are better than larger schools. Look at one of these huge comprehensive high schools that offers every course or choice you can imagine. Ninety-five percent of the kids take the same courses, as if they were on an assembly line. In the smaller school kids don't get lost. In the smaller school the vision stays clear because it is being shared among a small group of teachers and students who are working together.

I want you to understand that in District Four we run the gamut in the vision department. We have some very progressive open education schools and we have one

that's almost a military academy. They both work. They work because in both institutions everyone knows where they are trying to get to.

Choice is tied up with all of these, as cause, effect, or both. So let me just stop for a moment and explain something about the mechanics of choice in District Four.

First, I ought to make clear that complete choice comes on the junior high level. The elementary level does not offer complete choice, although there are five schools that anyone can select to attend. But most people stay in the school they're assigned to on the elementary level.

It is in junior high that you must make a choice. At that level we have 16 choices. Now to complicate it more, although we have 20 buildings, we have 52 schools in the district. For us a school is not a building. Our schools are too small for that and our buildings are too big. It's just like in business: when you go into an office building, it's not all one business. We can have a lot of different businesses in one school. There is a lot of preparation that goes into making these choices. We give out a booklet that describes all the schools in the district, and they are very diverse. In addition, this booklet has any of the press clips written about the system or about any individual school. Over time, we have collected quite a few of them, including one in Japanese which we cannot read. We send out these booklets with explanations.

Then there is an extensive orientation process that starts in the sixth grade. We train teachers how to train sixth graders to make some decisions. Then we have occasional recruitment meetings with presentations and slides or whatever. It's a business, after all. The principals have to go out and get clients. So you see principals running around with their little Kodak carousels and telling the kids about all the wonderful things in their schools.

The kids select three schools in order of preference. By and large, 90 percent get one of the three they requested. That leaves a small number of kids who have to be placed. So we talk to the schools and we come up with something, and the schools consent to take these hard-to-place kids.

Sometimes almost nobody chooses a particular school. If no one shows up, we close the school. Later we reorganize it and we reopen it. We did that in two situations and both of those schools are very successful now. Generally speaking in American education, once

you open a school it stays open forever, which means not only that old schools never close but that new schools rarely open. We changed that. It's pretty easy to start a school in our district, because a school isn't a building, it isn't large, and it isn't eternal. We also defy the very powerful myth that says you can't have elementary school kids, junior high school kids and high school kids together in the building. We had to defy it because we had goals that seemed more important which we could only achieve by using the buildings very flexibly. It worked.

We have been talking about choice. But let me tell you what we really have in this system. We've extended ownership of these schools to the kids, to their parents and to the teachers. That is the most important lesson. It's by extending ownership that you make for successful schools.

When you extend ownership to youngsters, to teachers, to parents, they begin to identify with that institution. It's theirs. You're not going to see the graffiti, you're not going to see the destruction. And you are going to see respect and team spirit, as John said, and performance.

But how do you extend ownership truly? You can't just say, "I'm giving you the school," because they know you're lying. The school belongs to somebody downtown. You extend ownership by extending choice. The school they choose, the school they want for their own, has to attract them.

There must be quality and diversity if choice is to be meaningful. It will do no good to simply declare a traditional district a choice district overnight. Big deal. Now you can select any one of six lousy schools, only now you will have to travel to get there. It doesn't work that way.

What we did is gear our schools to children's interests, but in such a way that they would get a complete education. We have the open education school and the military academy, as I mentioned, a performing arts school, a maritime school, a sports school, a science and math school, and quite a few others. That's a way of telling youngsters you care about their interests. And that is reinforced because the schools are small, so students and teachers know each other.

These schools are vehicles for capturing student interest in academic performance. In our performing arts schools we are not looking to make actors. Only eight percent of actors earn a living. What we want them to learn are the skills that an actor needs. An actor

certainly has to know how to read. He also has to know how to communicate. He has to have confidence in himself and be able to express that confidence. It is the same in our sports school. If you listen to sports you'll hear the announcer say, "Look at the concentration of this athlete." Now just think about that. If we could get kids to concentrate the way an athlete does, if we could get them to practice reading the way they practice throwing balls in a hoop, then we could build skills. The concentration and intensity of an athlete are transferable skills.

By the way, we make the same appeal to teachers. They choose too. And they help design the choices. In every school, the teachers want to be there, the kids want to be there, the parents want to be there. That's how you begin to extend ownership.

I happen to believe that there is nothing sacred about a neighborhood school. But if any of our teachers or parents feel strongly about going to the neighborhood school, they haven't lost because they can select the neighborhood school. But they have to choose it. So there isn't a parent or kid in any of our schools who can say, "I never wanted to come to this lousy school." They selected it. They're owners too.

Does it work? I hesitate to spout claims because self-praise is almost as good as no praise. But this morning Mary Ann Raywid was kind enough to send me a chapter from her new book. Mary Ann Raywid is at Hofstra University, and as I think John Chubb would agree, she knows more about alternative education and choice than any researcher in the country. This is what she had to say:

"Manhattan's District Four is probably the nation's most celebrated choice system and rightly so. If a renaissance in public education can occur in East Harlem, it can happen in any city in America.... The district," she concludes, "has romanced the children of Harlem into the pleasures of the life of the mind." And then she goes on to discuss what the achievements are. Just to give you some data:

In 1973 the district ranked 32 out of 32 school districts in reading and math. It had all the problems endemic to an inner-city school district. Only 15.4 percent of the youngsters were reading at grade level and the math scores were even lower. Since 1981-82, the district has ranked sixteenth or seventeenth in the city. The latest scores had 64 percent of the students at or above grade level in reading, and 53 percent at or above grade level in math.

In 1973, from the whole district, only 10 youngsters went on to the city's prestigious specialized high schools. (New York, you should know, has five of the best high schools in the country—such as Stuyvesant or Bronx Science—and too many of the worst.) In 1973, only 10 youngsters from District Four went to these specialized schools. In each of the last three years, between 250 and 300 have been accepted.

Benjamin Franklin High School was an old high school located inside our district. It was a failing high school. At the time we took it over, only seven percent of the students were graduating. Attendance in the morning was 44 percent. No one had the courage to take a count in the afternoon.

In 1981, District Four presented a plan to the central board to re-open the high school as the Manhattan Center for Science and Math. Four years later every youngster graduated and every single one went on to college. Last year the figure was 96 percent.

I think those are legitimate ways to evaluate a school system. But there is another way, perhaps better, and that is by watching people vote with their feet. We are in East Harlem, a very economically poor and disadvantaged community. We have at the present time between 1,500 to 2,000 youngsters (we don't keep an actual count) coming quite voluntarily from all over the City of New York to go to school in East Harlem. I could take you to a school on 100th Street where 49 percent of the youngsters are white middle-class kids in a building that's eighty years old with the plaster coming down.

I don't know how many of you live on the West Side, but if you know anything about West Siders, they're the most boring people to go to a party with. All they talk about are schools, usually private schools. If you talk to a pregnant woman on the West Side, more than likely she'll tell you where she plans to send the kid to school. We now have a good number of youngsters coming from the West Side into East Harlem. If you offer quality in public schools, you will get the people to come to those schools because no one likes spending \$7,000 per year for private schools. As I once pointed out to a group of parents, if they just took that money from kindergarten on and invested it, and sent their kids to our schools, by the time their kids graduated not only would they be smart, but they'd be rich too. That seemed very attractive to them. Thank you very much.

Question—It's interesting that when you run down the list of what you think makes a good school, you list the

same things that John Chubb calls for. But John calls autonomy a prerequisite, implying that it can't be done in the current New York City school system. You think it can be done. If you're right, why is yours the only one out of 32 New York City districts in which this is happening?

Seymour Fliegel—As I said in the beginning, I think you can take autonomy. But you have to give up certain things. You can't be too ambitious to move up the administrative ladder, because if you are then the system has something on you. But that is the only hold the system can have. Otherwise nothing ever happens to anyone in the New York City school system. Nobody ever gets fired. So what is there to be afraid of? You've got to be willing to take a bit of a hard time occasionally, that's all.

Fortunately, most people on central boards are not courageous folks. They do not seek confrontations with people who have some support, whether from the media, parents, kids, or teachers. So if you are doing something that has some support, you can take risks, especially if you are in a school district that has no place to go but up. Don't worry about the 16 offices and the 22 steps—they're not worth worrying about.

The real problem in a bureaucracy is not insurmountable barriers but minor excuses for inaction. When I was a teacher, I did pretty much what I wanted to do. I would break some rule and some of my fellow teachers would say, "You can't do that." I would say, "Why not?" And they'd say, "the Board of Ed won't allow you to do it." So I said to them, "I bet you can't name the seven members of the Board of Education. I bet you never saw one of them." So who are they stopping?

The Board of Education was just an excuse. Maybe the Board would have liked what I was doing. Same thing with the unions. Teachers and administrators alike love to be able to say the union won't let us do that. You can do a lot of things as long as you don't spend your time looking for reasons you can't do them, in which case you can't do anything.

Question—One of the objections to choice strategies which we frequently hear from its critics is that the majority of inner-city students come from families that don't have enough intelligence to make a good choice, so only the intelligent parents will get their kids into good schools.

Seymour Fliegel—Go into any school, anywhere, ask the youngsters who are the best teachers in this school. They'll tell you, and their answers will be very consistent and generally right. Ask the parents in the community what's the best school around here, they will be able to tell you. That's no surprise. School is a very big topic of concern and of conversation. Parents talk to their neighbors. They talk to their children, including the older children who have been through it. Now it's true, no one's like the West Siders. They can find a school in Timbuktu. But most parents can make an intelligent choice within a school district.

In our district, where everyone has to make choices, we know from experience that people make good choices. It is not meant to be an infallible system. If you make a mistake, there is flexibility. People do come and say, "This is the wrong school for my kid." We find out from the school what happened, and we find the kid another place.

Question—I have two questions about your teachers. Who hires them and can they be fired?

Seymour Fliegel—Within the district, for all practical purposes we hire them. The central board doesn't realize that, but we do hire them. Most people in the system accept that the central board sends you teachers. We never accepted it. You don't have to accept it if you have the initiative to go out and find the people you want and fill your slots before the central office does. We have always interviewed teachers, and when we find people we like we transfer them in.

Firing teachers is another matter. It is very, very difficult to fire a teacher. What we tend to do is negotiate them out, talk them into some other place. But firing a teacher from the system is a tough procedure. Few teachers are fired, and virtually none are fired just for teaching badly.

Question—You say if you can do it in East Harlem you can do it anywhere. But there are even worse places than East Harlem. There is, for instance, the South Bronx, where the physical destruction of the environment is much worse and the quality of life is even more desperate. Are you saying that those things don't matter?

Seymour Fliegel—I don't like to say it doesn't matter because poverty is tough. But that is something over which schools have very little control. I can't change all

of society. I can, however, create an institution that works for those kids. But not tomorrow. You have to make a lot of changes. You have to change the leadership, create visions and so on. None of this is easy. It took us ten years at least to really get it going in District Four. We were not an overnight success.

Question—You tell an exciting story and it raises so many hopes and possibilities. My straight-line kind of thinking says all we have to do is just gradually increase the size of your district and finally we've got it all done.

Seymour Fliegel—It doesn't work that way. You can't simply say, "Let's take over that district now and have a revolution." You have to get the people there to see it. If I came into another district and started carrying on, they'd say, "Get rid of this guy, he's crazy."

It's at the site of the school that change takes place. Remember autonomy? Part of autonomy is that no matter how much people complain about teachers, you still need them. If you don't have the teachers actively involved and actively on your side, and you don't have the principals, you have nothing.

Question—What caused it to happen in District Four? Was it one individual or was it a collection of forces?

Seymour Fliegel—Failure is a major catalyst. When you are really at the bottom you are willing to take risks. The superintendent at the time, Mr. Alvarado, had some ideas he wanted to try. So did other people. Ideas were being generated by the desperateness of the situation, and we could not afford to be closed-minded. We created an environment that encouraged people to come forward with their visions. People came forward, and instead of trying one, we tried a lot of them. And a lot of them worked.

Success depends on getting a lot more out of people than the bureaucracy gets out of them. That means having motivated people and you can't impose motivation.

Question—On the topic of motivation, those involved in the privatization movement in the U.K. have said that one of the things you must do is buy off the people who oppose change. Is that possible here? What incentive could you give those 6,000 bureaucrats to cooperate in freeing up the system in ways that would probably make many of them obsolete?

Seymour Fliegel—I think you could do a lot with those 6,000 people if you kept reminding yourself they weren't born bureaucrats. You have to assume they were decent, capable people when they moved up to the central office. After all, the central office doesn't say, "Send me your bureaucrats." It usually takes people who were good at what they were doing.

What you would do is put them back into schools and draw on their very real skills and their ideas and motivate them the same way you motivate the people who never left. You take someone who has been, say, director of communications, and you put his considerable expertise at his specialty to work in a school. Put his 16 helpers back into the school, too. They would come back to life. They're still getting paid. The only difference is that you have moved them back to where the action is, where we need them, and where they can make a real contribution. And after awhile they would be happy we did it. □

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