WHOLE SCHOOL REFORM

Ready, Read!

Nicholas Lemann

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A new solution to the problem of failing public schools is emerging: takeover by outside authorities, who prescribe a standardized field-tested curriculum. This runs counter to our long-standing tradition of autonomy for local schools and teachers, but it works.

Most discussion of public education in the United States begins with the premise that big, government-run school systems no longer work. The way to provide a good education to all children, especially poor children, is to turn over control of public schools to smaller, more local, and possibly private operators—to decentralize authority. At the center of the debate is a contest between two ideas: vouchers and charter schools. Vouchers are checks from the government that are issued to parents and earmarked for education; they are redeemable at both private and public schools. Charter schools are new public schools operated by independent groups. "We must . . . bring more choice and competition into public education," President Bill Clinton said last year, in calling for the establishment of 3,000 charter schools. Both ideas address the problems in public education by walking away from them.

The rhetoric of failure is simply wrong. There are 87,000 public schools in this country, with 45 million students—a sixth of the U.S. population. Enrollment is increasing rapidly. The best measure of public schools' performance, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, has shown modest but steady overall gains since it was first administered, in 1970. One has to belong to the small but disproportionately influential subculture that interacts only with private education to believe that public education—rather than specific public schools—has failed. The total enrollment in private, nonsectarian schools where the annual tuition is more than $5,000 is about 400,000—less than one percent of public school enrollment. Catholic-school enrollment is 2.5 million. Public education is by far the largest and most important function performed by government in this country. In no way is it in systemic crisis.

In the public schools that can fairly be described as having failed, most of which are in poor urban neighborhoods, what is actually taking place is a great and largely unremarked centralization of authority. The trend is diffuse, and its precise dimensions are difficult to limn. In at least a thousand American public schools, it is safe to say, outside control has replaced local autonomy during the 1990s. This has affected many more schools and students than has the devolution of authority through voucher programs or charter schools.

During the 1980s many states began imposing measurements of performance on their public schools, usually in the form of obligatory standardized tests in reading and math. (Bill Clinton first gained national attention by doing this in Arkansas.) In this decade, when individual schools or entire districts have persistently turned in poor scores on these tests, outside authorities have often moved in. The school systems of Chicago, Hartford, Cleveland, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and three cities in New Jersey, among other places, are no longer under the control of the municipal school superintendent. The Pennsylvania legislature is threatening to take over Philadelphia's system. In other cities, such as San Francisco and San Antonio, the school superintendent has imposed "reconstitution" on the worst-performing schools, meaning that the entire staff has been required to reapply for employment and the school has been "redesigned."

In many of these cases, after the change in authority the schools have adopted one of about a dozen national school designs that cover such areas as governance, relations with parents and the neighborhood, teaching techniques, and, especially, curriculum. Many schools that

have not been taken over or reconstituted (for example, dozens of schools in Memphis and Miami) are also using these "whole school" designs. Of the three most popular—Success for All, Accelerated Schools, and the School Development Program, all designed by university professors—the first two have each been adopted by more than a thousand schools across the country, and the third by 700.

The outline emerges of a future in which schools that aren't doing their job will lose their independence and will have to adopt a standard mode of operation that has demonstrated good results. This is not what most people think of as the direction in which public education is moving. Even Clinton's constant calls for national education standards mean the setting of goals for what all students should know, not dictating the day-to-day operations of schools. If failure in the public schools is resulting not in decentralization but in the imposition of a template, then we should know it—and think about whether this is a good idea.

American public schools have never been as local as politicians claim to want them to be. In a country as big as ours it would be impractical to leave education entirely in the hands of 14,800 school boards that operate independently. So we have a strange hybrid: a system rhetorically committed to decentralization but in fact centralized in a patchwork, undeliberate way. We have national standardized tests, national teachers' unions, national textbook publishers, and national laws, regulations, and funding programs for schools. No school is free of their influence. But they influence most schools in a haphazard fashion.

The great majority of public schools muddle along fairly successfully. It is students at bad public schools who are the main losers in the patchwork system, and a consistent national standard for how to operate bad schools ought to be considered with their interests in mind.

Recentralizing Authority

At the end of the nineteenth century, New York City, cobbled together out of smaller cities and towns, created the country's biggest centralized public school system. In 1969, following a long, famous, resonant battle, New York dropped centralization in favor of a policy of "community control" and created thirty-two local school boards. This was not an unqualified success, and the move back toward centralization began. In 1989 the New York State commissioner of education created a new status, called "registration review," for persistently low-performing

schools, most of which were in poor sections of New York City. The schools were under a threat of having their state registration revoked and being shut down. In 1996 the state legislature essentially rescinded community control, by giving the chancellor of New York City's schools the power to fire principals and school-board superintendents. (Chicago's school system went through much the same cycle, but faster: dramatically decentralized in 1988, recentralized in 1995.) The state commissioner kept up the saber-rattling, and in 1996 New York City's new chancellor, Rudy Crew, took direct control of nine of the worst registration-review schools—six elementary and three middle schools—in the hope of turning them around.

Fifteen percent of the registration-review schools in New York State were in a single school district—Community School District Nine, in the Bronx, the most consistently problematic school district in New York City. Its test scores have always been low, its board has twice been disbanded after the discovery of job-selling and kickback schemes, and in the most notorious incident a school principal was arrested for possession of crack cocaine.

If you drive around District Nine, which is in the collection of neighborhoods known to the outside world as the South Bronx (although it is actually in the West Bronx), you can see how the school system could have become so bad. The neighborhoods are, of course, largely poor and nonwhite, and remote from the mainstream of city life. What is really striking about them, though, is that the schools in them are the biggest buildings. Three- and four-story factory-style brick palaces, built before the Second World War, they tower over the landscape like cathedrals in medieval villages. In its heyday District Nine was a white ethnic working-class residential area; in the late 1960s and 1970s it was a burned-out, abandoned, desperately poor, all-minority area. Today it has been substantially rebuilt and repopulated with black and Hispanic immigrants. Public schools are still where the money and jobs are: The driving force of this school district has long been political patronage, not education.

The nine schools Crew took over are collectively referred to as "the Chancellor's District"; they have been operating separately for two full school years. At the beginning of the first year Crew replaced the principals of all nine schools. At the end of that year three of the schools had actually gotten worse on the crucial measure of reading scores, and only three had improved substantially. Crew replaced four of the nine

new principals, and he adopted the Success for All reading program. This time the reading scores at all nine schools (and at three other schools that had been added to the district) rose significantly.

Measured by test scores, one of the worst schools in the Chancellor's District is Public School 63, in the Bronx. We'll stop there for a moment before moving on to the dramatically improved Public School 114, a short distance away. It is helpful to have a sense of what a failed school is really like.

One Fad on Top of Another

Two images of bad inner-city schools prevail in the wider culture: the out-of-control violent school, where weapon-toting gang members rule and teachers cower; and the underfunded school with overcrowded classrooms, peeling paint, leaking pipes, and broken heating. P.S. 63 is neither of these. To be sure, it has a lot of disciplinary problems, but it is only an elementary school. It is not overcrowded, because the surrounding neighborhood, Morrisania, hasn't been part of the revival of the Bronx and is still depopulated. Every day 240 students are bused in from other parts of the Bronx, and the average class size is twenty-three. Chancellor's District schools get extra money, so at the moment an insufficient budget is not P.S. 63's No. 1 problem. Overall, P.S. 63 seems more like a child-care facility than a school—a relatively benign and happy place, where an overall program of instruction was somehow never put in place. When I visited, the school was being run by a young woman named Gillian Williams; she was the fourth principal at P.S. 63 in six years. The New York City teachers' union has proposed to take over the school's management, and if it does, there will probably be a fifth principal, because the head of the union has all but promised publicly to fire Williams. Teacher turnover has also been high. Williams brought in eighteen new teachers, out of sixty-eight, for the 1997–1998 school year.

Control over curriculum in New York City schools has traditionally been diffuse: The state and the city set various standards and benchmarks that schools are expected to meet, although it is not clear what happens if they don't. Otherwise, the schools establish their own instructional methods. Sometimes the superintendent selects the textbooks, readers, and worksheets; sometimes the principals do. During P.S. 63's first year in the Chancellor's District it was redesigned and given the name Author's Academy, to demonstrate its commitment to

making students literate. The principal bought a new reading curriculum, which teachers were supposed to use to guide their students to basic literacy. The problem, Williams told me, was that the publisher didn't make good on its shipping date. All year long, the curriculum materials arrived in bits and pieces, and the reading program had no structure at all. The school's reading scores dropped drastically.

The following year Williams came in as principal. On orders from the Chancellor's District she adopted the Success for All reading program, which is extremely demanding. The school also adopted a new math curriculum that year and, because Williams considered Success for All to be insufficient, two other new reading programs. As a result, most of the students were taking three separate and quite different reading classes every day. In third grade, for example, a student would learn one technique in the Success for All class for charting the structure of a story, based on Venn diagrams; another technique in the second reading class, based on "story maps"; and another technique in the third reading class, based on "character maps." The rest of the school day consisted of one math class and one period in the afternoon into which everything else was wedged. And this was just for the students in the main instructional program. A fifth of the school population was in special-education classes, and a fourth in "limited-English-proficient" classes. The school was a library of education vogues and special noncurricular functions.

A School That Works

I spent a good deal of time recently in one of the Chancellor's District schools at the opposite (that is, better) end of the spectrum—enough time to move beyond the Potemkin-village phase of marveling at an inner-city school that works. A description of what happens there should convey what this particular way of fixing a broken school means, what the disadvantages are, and what kinds of opposition must be overcome if these schools are to succeed.

Public School 114 is in a neighborhood called Highbridge, which runs along the Hudson River behind Yankee Stadium. In its glory days, the 1920s, it was a lower-middle-class paradise populated mostly by Jews and Irish-Americans. Even Yankees could and did live proudly in the grand Art Deco apartment buildings along Jerome Avenue and the Grand Concourse; the humbler buildings on the cross streets were for

cabbies and shopkeepers. P.S. 114, which was built in 1940, was considered a first-class school that put its students firmly on an upward sociological trajectory.

The neighborhood changed in the mid-1960s, when the Freedomland amusement park on the other side of the Bronx was torn down and the enormous Co-Op City apartment complex was built in its place. Whites left Highbridge for Co-Op City, and blacks moved in from Harlem, and then Puerto Ricans; the student population of P.S. 114 changed, first from all white to mostly black, and then to mostly Puerto Rican. The school's official name, which nobody uses, is Luis Llorens Torres Children's Academy, after the national poet of Puerto Rico. Today P.S. 114 is mostly Dominican. The surrounding neighborhood is populated by a polyglot ethnic working poor. It feels crowded and scruffy, but safe; there aren't many empty buildings. Stores are filled with a wide variety of specialty items from the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America. The elevated train on River Avenue rumbles by every few minutes.

P.S. 114, a large three-story building, has more than a thousand students, which is a third more than its official capacity. When the state's registration-review list was created, P.S. 114 was placed on it. The school's particular problem was that it had turned into a bilingual-education patronage machine. Students with Hispanic last names—which is to say most students—were assigned to "bilingual" classes taught in Spanish, often by non–English-speaking teachers. The school generally didn't test students or seek their parents' consent before putting them on the bilingual track, and it rarely moved anybody out of bilingual education, because that would have meant losing job slots for bilingual teachers. All of this was and is in violation of the state and city regulations governing bilingual education, but administrative supervision of P.S. 114 was so lax that the regulations weren't enforced. From 1989 to the creation of the Chancellor's District, in 1996, the school suffered no negative consequences for its extremely low reading scores—in fact, the consequences were arguably positive, because the low scores qualified it for special funding. The school adopted a popular and well-regarded reading program, Reading Recovery. But the program was only nominally implemented and didn't have much effect.

Eileen Mautschke, the current principal of P.S. 114 and a thirty-year veteran teacher and administrator in District Nine, describes the condition of the district years ago this way: "The district controlled things. There was so much corruption! Money went into the school board's

pockets. Decentralization gave people control over a tremendous amount of money, and very little got down to the schools. District Nine was one of the worst offenders in that respect. There were warehouses elsewhere in the city full of supplies that didn't get to the kids."

In the first year of the Chancellor's District all the elementary schools devoted a ninety-minute period every morning—9:00 to 10:30, the meatiest part of the school day for young children—to reading instruction. Rudy Crew had made an arrangement with the teachers' union under which every school in the district would be allowed to replace half the teachers by transferring them to other schools. (The union was cooperative because it feared that if the Chancellor's District didn't work, the state would hire a private company to run the schools—one that didn't use union teachers.) The schools were told to redesign themselves.

Mautschke took over at P.S. 114 in the middle of the 1995–1996 school year, just before the creation of the Chancellor's District. After off-loading a third of the teachers and hiring new ones, most of them very young, she led the staff through a lengthy series of discussions. At the end of these, P.S. 114 was divided into three mini-schools, called the Author's School, the School of Environmental Studies, and the School of World Discoverers. She began cleaning up the bilingual mess. At the end of her first full year, P.S. 114's third-grade reading score—the number that had gotten it into trouble—had risen moderately.

During the first year, Rudy Crew realized that the Chancellor's District, though an experiment in centralizing authority, was not centralized enough. He brought in a new superintendent, Barbara Byrd-Bennett (who, ironically, had begun her career thirty years earlier as a Harlem teacher fighting for community control) and replaced more principals. Most important, at the heavy prodding of the teachers' union, Crew adopted the Success for All reading curriculum.

The Parris Island Approach

The inventor of Success for All is Robert E. Slavin, an education researcher at Johns Hopkins University who gives off the sweet-and-sour, casual-intense air of a perpetual graduate student. Slavin has been studying education in elementary schools for twenty-five years. In 1986, the Baltimore public school system asked him to try to figure out a way to prevent inner-city schoolchildren from falling permanently behind during their first few years in school. Slavin set up a program of tightly

controlled reading instruction, which began at one school in Baltimore in the fall of 1987. The idea was to devise a system that could be transported from school to school. Although during the past decade Success for All has lost its contract with the Baltimore school system, it has grown rapidly elsewhere. By the end of this school year, the Success for All organization will have a budget of $30 million and will operate in more than 1,100 schools all over the country. Among its customers are the Edison Project, which is private; the state of New Jersey; and the cities of Houston, Memphis, and Miami.

There are two reasons for Success for All's quick spread. Of all the school curricula, it comes closest to guaranteeing the result that state education commissioners want: higher reading scores. Although it is quite expensive—about $70,000 per school in the first year and $25,000 a year thereafter—the program is usually paid for by Title I, the federal compensatory-education program, so there is no direct cost to school districts. Because Title I targets schools with high percentages of children from poor families, Slavin says, "high-poverty schools can afford us, low-poverty can't." Success for All is used almost exclusively in poor schools. Most school designs offer testimonials and anecdotes to sell prospective customers on their effectiveness.

Slavin has statistical comparisons of reading scores from schools that use Success for All and similar schools that don't. "There's nothing on most of these programs," he told me. "No data! Organized research with control groups and reports every year, no matter what the data show—that just doesn't happen." The prevailing criticism of Success for All is that it is designed to produce higher scores on a couple of tests chosen by Slavin, for which the control-group schools don't train their students; the gains it produces, according to critics, are substantially limited to the first year of the program. Whether or not this is true, Slavin is right when he says that the other leading national programs for elementary schools can furnish almost no data at all on the results they produce.

It's not difficult to see why Success for All is so much quicker than the other programs to generate quantifiable benefits. The next two most popular programs for elementary schools—Accelerated Schools, devised by Henry Levin of Stanford University, and the School Development Program, devised by James Comer of Yale Medical School—are essentially planning and organization tools that give individual schools great latitude in choosing instructional methods. Success for All tells schools precisely what to teach and how to teach it—to the

point of scripting, nearly minute by minute, every teacher's activity in every classroom every day of the year.

When a school adopts Success for All, its top administrators go for a week of intensive training at Slavin's headquarters. Then Success for All personnel come to the school to provide all the teachers with three days of training. The school must designate a full-time Success for All "facilitator" and a full-time parent "coordinator." Success for All representatives visit the school three times a year. Each student takes a Success for All reading test every eight weeks. Teachers must use a series of catch phrases and hand signals developed by Success for All. In kindergarten and first grade every piece of classroom material (readers, posters, tapes, videos, lesson plans, books—everything) is provided by the program. Afterward, Success for All's grip on what goes on in the classroom isn't quite as complete, because other companies' textbooks are incorporated. But it's still tight: At every level Slavin's programs greatly reduce teacher autonomy, through control of the curriculum. Slavin has developed curricula in math, science, and social studies. People usually describe Success for All with terms like "prescriptive," "highly structured," and "teacher-proof"; Slavin likes to use the word "relentless." One education researcher I spoke with called it "Taylorism in the classroom," after Frederick Winslow Taylor, the early twentieth-century efficiency expert who routinized every detail of factory work.

The theoretical foundation of Success for All is supposedly cooperative learning, meaning that students are put into small groups or partnerships and help one another. This is true as far as it goes, but it fails to convey the full flavor of a Success for All classroom. The students do work in teams, but they don't work independently. Cooperative-learning sessions are frequent but strictly time-limited and task-defined. One purpose the sessions clearly serve is to keep students from drifting off during the times when the teacher is leading the whole class. A bit less obvious in the Success for All literature is that it teaches reading primarily through phonics (learning a word by decoding it, rather than deducing its meaning from context), which is not as popular as cooperative learning in the liberal education world. Students are tested, put into groups based on their skill levels, drilled in reading skills, tested again, regrouped, and drilled some more. The ones who are furthest behind receive individual tutoring. But everybody is supposed to learn to read.

A few minutes in a Success for All classroom conveys the Parris Island feeling of the program better than any general description could. It is

first grade—the pivotal year. The students sit at their desks holding copies of a story called *Woo Zen*. The teacher stands at the blackboard and says, "Okay, let's get ready for our shared story. Ready, read!" The students read the first page of the story loudly, in unison. The teacher says, "Okay, next page. Finger in place, ready, read!" After a few minutes of this the students have finished the story. Not missing a beat, the teacher says, "Close your books, please. Let's get ready for vocabulary." She moves to a posted handwritten sheet of words and points to herself. "My turn. Maze, haze, hazy, lazy. Your turn." She points to the class. The students shout out the words in unison: "Maze! Haze! Hazy! Lazy!"

Then the teacher announces that the students are going to do "red words"—Success for All lingo for words that students can't decode from their phonemic components. "Okay, do your first word," she says. The students call out together, "Only! *O* [clap] *N* [clap] *L* [clap] *Y* [clap]. Only!" After they've done the red words, the teacher says, "Now let's go to our meaningful sentences." The students read from a sheet, loudly and in unison, the definitions of three words, and then three sentences, each of which uses one of the words. The teacher sends the students into their cooperative-learning groups to write three sentences of their own, using each of the words. "If you work right, you'll earn work points for your work team! You clear?" Twenty voices call out, "Yes!"

Rigor and Routine

Success for All can't work unless a school's principal and teachers cooperate. Partly for that reason, and partly to avoid having the program appear to be imposed from without (though in truth it usually is), Slavin will not sign on with a school unless 80 percent of its teachers have voted by secret ballot in favor of his program. At P.S. 114 in the spring of last year, teachers twice voted it down, even though a third of the teachers were brand-new and the Chancellor's District, the union, and Eileen Mautschke were all pushing hard for Success for All. Then the principal arranged for the teachers to go on a field trip to an elementary school in Brooklyn that used Success for All. On the third and final vote the program passed.

The teachers' reluctance is understandable. Success for All takes over a school and substantially limits teachers' freedom. At P.S. 114, the Author's School, the School of Environmental Studies, and the School of World Discoverers are gone—not to mention the previous, teacher-

chosen reading curriculum, which involved more student creativity and less drilling. All over the school are exhortatory posters. A veteran teacher who felt that she had accumulated wisdom over the decades about how to reach children would find that Success for All, in its insistently nice way, was now telling her that everything she thought she knew should be jettisoned in favor of lesson plans from Baltimore.

The atmosphere of the school, though, is cheerful and purposeful, not grumpy. Every morning, as the children stream in, Eileen Mautschke stands in the main hallway presiding over a scene that is impressive for not being completely chaotic: More than a thousand children, at least a third of whom don't speak English and every one of whom is poor enough to qualify for the federal free-lunch program, briefly assemble in a foyer that is far too small to hold them. Last year, when I was there, the school was phasing in uniforms; this year all the students have been asked to wear them. Mautschke, a middle-aged woman with an air of genial, slightly weary unflappability, does not have the strutting disciplinarian aspect of effective inner-city principals in the movies. If you told her that a tidal wave was about to hit P.S. 114, she would smile resignedly, say "Okay," and figure out what to do about it. But she plainly has the school under control. As she cruises the hallways during the day, she greets most of the children she passes by name.

After everyone has arrived and settled down, the hour and a half of Success for All begins. All the teachers in the school, even gym and music teachers, have been pressed into service as reading instructors, to bring down the size of the classes—not to the ideal fifteen but at least to twenty-four. Because there are forty-six reading groups and only thirty-two classrooms, groups meet in every nook and cranny: on the stage of the auditorium, in the library and the gym, in an oversized supply closet, even on the floor at the ends of hallways. It's not a scene of squalor, but it's not a scene you would encounter in a school for the children of the prosperous. P.S. 114 has been spruced up a bit since its worst days. It has the utilitarian look of a big, indestructible public facility—clayey coats of paint, clean linoleum, smudged grated windows, fluorescent lights.

P.S. 114 goes only through the fourth grade. For children that young, and for their teachers, an intensive ninety-minute morning class is so consuming that it uses up most of the school's daily energy supply, not to mention its money. P.S. 114 doesn't do anything else nearly so elaborately as it does reading instruction. Administrators and

parents (a parent representative helps in the school full-time, without pay) must supervise the overcrowded lunchroom: Teachers are exempted by their contract from that duty, to compensate for the length of the Success for All classes. Subjects such as science and social studies are relegated to shorter, later time slots. Not even math gets nearly so much time. Low reading scores got P.S. 114 into trouble with the state; thus reading instruction gets extra funds, staff, training, and time.

In addition to the hour and a half of Success for All, P.S. 114 devotes half an hour of every school day to preparation for state-required standardized reading exams. These classes are a junior version of a Stanley Kaplan or a Princeton Review course, in which students take old tests for practice, drill on vocabulary words, and learn little tricks—for example, that guessing on a question is better than giving up. The test that originally landed P.S. 114 on the state registration-review list and then in the Chancellor's District is called the DRP, for Degrees of Reading Power; it was until recently given to third-graders annually in May. The DRP is exactly the kind of test that education reformers most dislike. Children read a series of passages in which every seventh word is left blank, and pick from a multiple-choice menu a word to fill in each blank. They are being quizzed more on vocabulary than on understanding. For that reason New York State has since dropped the DRP in favor of another test. But during the time I spent at P.S. 114 enormous energy went into preparing students for the test—a test that teachers felt should not even be used, and that would in fact no longer be used in New York public schools after the end of that school year.

The fate of the entire Chancellor's District was heavily dependent on what these third-grade reading scores, which had not risen sufficiently in the district's first year, would be. The message had been forcefully communicated to the principals. As the date of the DRP approached, Mautschke and her teachers bore down with remarkable concentration. Every week the school's administrators met in a supply depository off the gym. These meetings were substantially devoted to test-prep matters. All the third-graders were given a pre-test in March. The worst performers were parceled out to the administrators, including Mautschke herself, to be given half an hour a day of one-on-one tutoring in addition to the regular test-prep class.

A leitmotif of the administrative meetings was the complaints of the school's consultant on teaching techniques, Deborah Fuhrer, about the overwhelming focus on test prep; Mautschke, without rancor, but firmly,

would overrule her. At the final staff meeting before the day of the test Mautschke outlined a program of concentrated memory drills on certain vocabulary words thought likely to appear on the test. Fuhrer said that this was a bad idea: It was imparting a trick, not a skill. One of the words the students would be taught was "anxiety." "This will increase their anxiety, that's all!" Fuhrer said. "What would you suggest?" Mautschke asked her evenly. "What would I suggest? Prayer. Prayer works well."

The third-graders did their vocabulary drills. When the test results came back, in June, 80.5 percent of the third-graders at P.S. 114 had scored at or above the state minimum level on the DRP. The school's scores are now above the average for all New York City public schools.

Of course, the score increase is a product of test prep, but not only that. P.S. 114's scores on the Success for All reading tests and the third-grade reading test that the state will use next year instead of the DRP (which has been given purely for diagnostic purposes for several years) also went up impressively. Last May, the school was taken off the state registration-review list. On the day parents were to register their children to enter kindergarten, people started lining up outside P.S. 114 at 3:30 A.M. Later registrants had to be assigned to another school, because P.S. 114 could not accommodate anywhere near the number of students whose parents wanted them to go there. The Chancellor's District as a whole registered by far the largest rise in scores on the new reading test of any district in the city. At P.S. 114 most of the students are now learning to read. Only a few years ago that was not the case.

Control Where It's Necessary

Drawing lessons from inner-city education successes (and, for that matter, from failures) can be perilous. An improved school has a Rashomon aspect: The moral of the story depends on who's telling it. Whatever supposedly causes a school to turn around is bottled and exported to other schools, where it may or may not work. The successful school may sink back into desuetude in a year or two. Schools are often accumulations of shiny new reform ideas that have been jammed into the same small space and don't fit together particularly well.

Nonetheless, it seems clear that although several factors were at work in the improvement of P.S. 114, including a good new principal, a higher budget, a turnover in the teaching staff, a cooperative union, better staff training, physical improvements to the building, more parental

involvement, and smaller class sizes, the key was the imposition of a tightly defined, proven reading curriculum. The most important thing in education is what the teacher does with students in the classroom. To direct that requires control of the curriculum. Structural changes, supposedly the essence of education reform, can have amazingly little effect if they do not alter what teachers actually teach. The importance of Success for All is less the particulars of how the program works than the general idea that if one method can be proved to work better than any other, nonperforming schools should be required to use it exclusively. Given the paramount importance of reading in a student's education and later life as a citizen and worker, shouldn't we try to identify the best method of reading instruction, demonstrate its superiority, and then require it for children who aren't learning to read? This would inescapably require some centralization of authority over public education.

Airline safety offers a good analogy for what I'm suggesting. You can't fly on an airplane that has no radar or oxygen masks, because the federal government won't allow it. But you can get an unacceptable education in your local school, because so far the federal government has been reluctant to challenge local control. Vouchers and charter schools offer students a way out of bad public schools, but neither option assures decent education for all. Children with unmotivated or unsophisticated parents are left behind, in unacceptable conditions. Control of the curriculum from without—not for every public school, only for failed ones—is the way for the country to ensure a good education for every child.

Centralization is actually occurring fairly rapidly, but rhetorically it is still quite unpopular. We are generally in an anti-bureaucratic phase, and within education there is no organized, powerful force for centralization. Most politicians don't want to do the work of persuading voters that they should be taxed more in order to educate other people's children. Local school boards don't want to give up their power. Christian conservatives are afraid that centralization in the public schools will lead to liberal indoctrination. Economic conservatives want to privatize education as much as possible. Unions resist the teacher-evaluation systems that come with centralization.

From a philosophical standpoint the main force working against centralization is a progressive, humanist, anti-utilitarian view of the purpose of education. Most popular books about the education of young children—*Summerhill*, *Thirty-Six Children*, *Death at an Early Age*—take this view. Children are inherently creative, curious, and democratic: Inspirational

teachers and supportive schools can awaken and nurture these qualities; grim, factory-like traditional schools can extinguish them. Although progressive education rarely involves the kind of crude ideological brainwashing of which it is often accused, it does operate on an implied social critique: Education should counterbalance the commercial, regimented nature of adult working life. A school should be an arena for open discourse about values, not a job-skills training center. Schoolteachers—smart, hardworking people who aren't paid much and are rarely celebrated—are naturally drawn to the progressive view. It gives them creative latitude in the classroom and gives value to what they do.

What I encountered at P.S. 114 would deeply affront the progressive sensibility in education. Success for All turns teachers into drill instructors. The atmosphere is palpably one of preparing children to become workers. When I was there, Mautschke instituted a system of "scholar dollars," given to students for good behavior and redeemable for trinkets at the school store. The connection between what goes on in school and the economic world could hardly be clearer. And then there is the preoccupation with using children to generate test-score statistics that will propitiate state bureaucrats and keep the money flowing.

Probably the most celebrated progressive educator in the country is Deborah Meier. In 1974, Meier started a public school in East Harlem called Central Park East, which for the two decades she ran it was a remarkable success. Meier must be the only public-school principal to hold honorary degrees from Harvard and Yale and to have received a "genius grant" from the MacArthur Foundation. She recently left New York to start a public school in Boston, partly because she didn't like the direction in which the New York City schools were moving. Meier had helped to raise foundation money in order to "create a different kind of Chancellor's District," one that operated a string of schools on a progressive model of teacher and principal autonomy. But it was clear to her that Rudy Crew wasn't interested in that kind of thing.

I went to see Meier and ask what she thought of the district's adoption of Success for All. Of course she was extremely skeptical. She said it was natural that reading scores in the district were going up—the children were being taught how to do better on tests. "If kids are surrounded by grown-ups who don't have authority, who follow orders, how could they learn to question, to discuss ideas?" And, a little later in the conversation: "It's shameful that we've come to the point of test scores as the end of education. It's critical to do more for the intellectual side

of the lives of disadvantaged kids, to introduce them to ideas. School's the only place they'll get that."

The hard nub of disagreement is over what the first task of schools should be—to impart intellectual curiosity or to impart a body of skills and knowledge. What would doubtless strike Meier as the worst excesses of the Chancellor's District and P.S. 114 are not, however, by-products of emphasizing skills over curiosity. They are by-products of decentralization.

True, Success for All and programs like it are the enemies of teacher autonomy. But almost every school that uses Success for All previously had a greater degree of teacher autonomy and was failing to teach its students well. Autonomy is hard to defend where it is demonstrably not working. It is also true that Success for All tilts a school toward reading instruction to the exclusion of other subjects—but if there has to be a tilt, it should be toward reading.

The real solution would be to develop a comprehensive curriculum covering all subjects and the entire school day—in other words, more centralization, not less. This is the aim of the whole-school reform movement, the chief promoter of which, a private organization called New American Schools, now has more than a thousand member schools that choose among eight designs, one of them developed by Robert Slavin. New American Schools persuades public school districts to abandon the usual impulsive way of reforming schools and adopt an all-encompassing design that has worked elsewhere. Even without committing themselves to New American Schools, however, many school districts have moved toward whole-school reform on their own.

Testing excesses are another consequence of decentralization. Every school gives tests. The problem lies in tests that are made enormously consequential even though they have nothing to do with what should go on in the classroom and can be prepared for with trick-pony exercises. If there were a nationally agreed-upon curriculum, regular classroom instruction would be the only test prep students would need.

I'm not suggesting that we impose a required curriculum on the great bulk of American public schools, which are functioning just fine on their own. I am suggesting, though, that nonperforming schools be put into the hands of higher authorities—up to and including the federal government—until they start performing. By far the best and most reliable means for turning these schools around would be to institute a prescribed curriculum that has been carefully researched and field-tested and has been proved to work.

Liberals have long dreamed of using the federal government to fix bad schools. The chief means has been the Title I program, passed in 1965, which gives more than $7 billion a year to schools in low-income areas. The money must be spent on instruction, but not on any particular kind of instruction. We are moving toward a better and more directed use of Title I funding, which now pays for nearly every operating Success for All program. Last year Congress passed a bill that sets aside $120 million of Title I funds for a variety of whole-school designs, with the idea of tilting the entire Title I program toward them if the results are promising. Many of the cities and states that have taken over bad schools have put together money from Title I and other federal education programs to pay for new curricula that are both intensive and imposed.

Changes of this kind are punitive to local school boards, principals, and teachers—but they had it coming. Students in taken-over schools aren't being punished; they're getting a genuine education, and hence a chance in life, that they would otherwise be denied. No reform that lets students abandon the public school system, or lets individual public schools redesign themselves in the absence of guidance, can possibly ensure a minimum standard of education for every American child. Only central control of the curriculum can. A decent education should be a guarantee, not an option.