

and the dependence of almost all educational institutions on public funding. To avoid unwise and dangerous politicization, government agencies should strive to distinguish between their proper role as protectors of fundamental constitutional rights and inappropriate intrusion into complex issues of curriculum and pedagogy.

This kind of institutional restraint would be strongly abetted if judges and policymakers exercised caution and skepticism in their use of social science testimony. Before making social research the basis for constitutional edicts, judges and policymakers should understand that social science findings are usually divergent, limited, tentative, and partial.

We need the courts as vigilant guardians of our rights; we need federal agencies that respond promptly to any violations of those rights. But we also need educational institutions that are free to exercise their responsibilities without fear of pressure groups and political lobbies. Decisions about which textbooks to use, which theories to teach, which books to place in the school library, how to teach, and what to teach are educational issues. They should be made by appropriate lay and professional authorities on educational grounds. In a democratic society, all of us share the responsibility to protect schools, colleges, and universities against unwarranted political intrusion into educational affairs.

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## *A Good School*

(1984)

IN the not distant past, when attitudes toward public education were strongly positive, it rarely occurred to anyone to seek out examples of "effective" schools. The evident assumption was that most schools were good, and that the ineffectual school was an aberration. The first annual Gallup Poll about public schools in 1969 showed a strikingly high regard for schools and the teaching profession; three out of four persons responded that they would like to see their children take up teaching as a career. The level of public esteem for the schools at that time was even more remarkable in light of the overwhelmingly negative tone of the popular literature on schools in the mid-1960s.

After a decade of strident attacks on the schools, a decade in which public confidence waned, a small number of educational writers and researchers started looking for examples of good schools. There had long been a tradition of writing about a particular school as a way of trumpeting certain values that the school embodied, but the climate of the times tended to define the "good school." In the

Progressive era, certain schools were singled out because of their antitraditional features, such as their combination of work and play or their engagement in the social life of the surrounding community. In the 1960s, certain schools were lauded for their political activism or their success in “liberating” children from bourgeois values.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, an “effective school” came to be identified with the characteristics set out in the writings of the late Ron Edmonds of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Perhaps because Edmonds was black, he was able to assert values that would have sounded disturbingly traditional to the educational establishment if voiced by a white. Edmonds identified schools where academic achievement seemed to be independent of pupils’ social class, and he concluded that such schools had an outstanding principal, high expectations for all children, an orderly atmosphere, a regular testing program, and an emphasis on academic learning.

Edmonds’ conclusions may have seemed like a series of commonplace observations to most people, but they were received as stunning insights in the arcane world of educational policy. (Outsiders are repeatedly astonished by what passes for revelation in the education field; for instance, one of the great discoveries of recent years—though still not universally accepted—is that student achievement may be positively related to something called “time-on-task.” In other words, what one learns is determined in part by the time spent learning it.) In fact, Edmonds was not alone in his interest in learning as the major measurement of school quality. Other studies reinforced his view that student achievement could be raised by sound educational practices. To appreciate the importance of this change in orientation, one must recall the many years in which academic achievement was treated with disdain in comparison to nonacademic goals.

Writing about a single school is also a good way for a writer to test out his own educational ideals and to display them for public inspection. Now, in the interest of candor, I confess that I instinctually hew to John Dewey’s admonition: “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely. . . .” The best and wisest parents, I expect, want their child to read and write fluently; to speak articulately; to listen carefully; to learn to participate in the give-and-take of group discussion; to learn self-discipline and to develop the capacity for deferred gratification; to read and appreciate good literature; to have a strong knowledge of history, both of our own nation and of others; to appreciate the values of a free, democratic society; to understand science, mathematics, technology, and the natural world; to become engaged in the arts, both as a participant and as one capable of appreciating aesthetic excellence. I expect such parents would also want a good program of physical education and perhaps even competence in a foreign language. Presumably, these mythical best and wisest parents want their child to have some sense of possible occupation or profession, but it seems doubtful that they would want their child to use school time for vocational training, at least in the precollegiate years.

That our public schools have long operated on contrary assumptions should be obvious. The program I have described is usually called the “academic track,” and not more than 35 to 38 percent of American secondary students were receiving this kind of well-balanced preparation in the early 1980s. Acting not *in loco parentis* but on behalf of the state, educators have sorted children into vocational or general tracks, the former to prepare for a specific job, the latter being neither academic nor vocational. For reasons that are rooted largely in misplaced compassion—not in

meanness or ignorance—our educational philosophy has dictated that academic learning is not for everyone; that it is too demanding for the average student; that its apparent inutility limits its value to the average student; that too much of it will cause students to drop out of high school in droves; and that such students should take courses that provide job skills, life skills, practical know-how, and immediate relevance to their own lives.

In public schools, curricular tracking has become a common practice. By tracking, I refer to the academic/vocational/general trichotomy, not to ability grouping. Ability grouping permits students to take different amounts of time to reach roughly similar goals; tracking offers students vastly different kinds of educational programs. The practice of tracking raises all sorts of questions: Who decides which students go into the academic track? At what age does the tracking begin? To what extent is the decision to funnel a student into a nonacademic track a response to his parents' occupations and social class? Should the public school—supported by taxes from all citizens—have the right to determine that some students will get an education of high quality while others will get a denatured version?

To such questions, which go to the core of our democratic ideology, the defender of the present system might well respond: "Such naiveté! Dreams of perfection! In a perfect world, where all children had the same genetic and cultural inheritance, such a scheme of high-quality education for all might make sense. But in reality, children differ dramatically. Some come to school already knowing how to read; others can barely decipher words after six years of trying. Some are brilliant; others struggle to master the rudiments of learning. The smart ones are clearly college bound and should have an academic curriculum. The others should have courses where the level of challenge

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is not too high, where they can get a feeling of success. And more than subject matter, what the majority needs most is vocational training to get them ready for the workplace. That is what they want, and they should get it. Let us not forget that the great achievement of modern educational research has been the recognition that the curriculum must be adjusted to meet the differing needs of children."

For years, such views have represented the conventional wisdom in public education. The school that I have selected as an example of an effective school—the Edward R. Murrow High School of Brooklyn, New York—explicitly rejects these views. Its principal, Saul Bruckner, is a product of the public schools as well as a twenty-seven-year veteran of the New York City public school system. I learned a great deal by spending time in his school; I changed some of the ideas I brought with me. I am not sure that I agree with every practice and program in the school, but I deeply admire its tone and its high academic aspirations for all pupils. I think what Bruckner is doing deserves attention, not because it is the only way or even the best way, but because it is one successful way of wedding traditional goals with nontraditional means.

Murrow was opened in 1974 and officially designated an experimental school by the New York City Board of Education. Its 3,000 students are drawn from the borough of Brooklyn. Half are white, and half are members of minority groups. One of the many unusual features of the school is that it treats all of its pupils as college bound. No one is tracked into a vocational or "general" program. Yet the school is purposely composed of children with a broad range of abilities. By board of education mandate, at least 25 percent of Murrow's entering students read below grade level; no more than 25 percent read above grade level; and the remaining 50 percent read at about grade

level. There is no entrance examination, but competition for admission is vigorous; in 1983, there were some 9,500 applicants for 800 places in the entering class. Critics complain that special schools like Murrow “cream away” the best students from other public high schools, but about one-fourth of Murrow’s enrollment consists of students from parochial and independent schools whose parents had previously rejected the public schools. Student morale is undoubtedly lifted by awareness of the difficulty of gaining entry into Murrow. The very process of applying makes every student a committed participant in his own education and eliminates the handful of unwilling students who otherwise make school life an ordeal for teachers and other students. Since Murrow has the luxury of not admitting those who have a well-established record of truancy, disruptive behavior, or criminal activity, it occasionally gets pilloried by detractors as “atypical,” but it may instead demonstrate that mixing those who want to learn with those who don’t want to learn is no favor to either group.

Even though the students at Murrow represent a wide ability range, all are expected and required to take a strong academic program in order to graduate, that is, a minimum of five academic courses throughout the school year. The academically gifted take more than five, and there are advanced placement courses in every subject area. The New York City school system requires one year of foreign language, but most students at Murrow take three or four (the school offers Spanish, French, Latin, Hebrew, and Italian). Similarly, most students take more than the required two years of science and mathematics. Advanced science students may enroll in a sequence that includes six years of science; weak science students may take astronomy or horticulture instead of the rigorous course in physics. All must take at least four years of English, including a year of writing instruction, and three and a half years of

social studies. This level of academic engagement stands in stark contrast to the figures reported by national surveys. For example, only about 15 percent of American secondary students study *any* foreign language; only 6 percent of the nation’s students finish a third year of foreign language study, but at Murrow at least 65 percent do. When compared to national enrollment rates in subjects like algebra, geometry, and the natural sciences, Murrow looks like a private school instead of a public school made up of a broad cross section of pupils.

The students who read two or more years below grade level receive intensive remedial instruction in reading and writing while enrolled in regular courses. The school does not exclude average or below-average students from any of its upper-level courses, as many schools do. Consequently, even advanced placement courses in English, social studies, mathematics, and science contain a diverse spectrum, and occasionally teachers complain about students in their advanced placement classes or the calculus class “who don’t belong there.” But the school’s philosophy is that no student should be discouraged from taking on an academic challenge. Unlike teachers at many other public schools, most teachers at Murrow do not practice grade inflation (20 percent of all its grades last year were “no credit,” the equivalent of not passing the course) or social promotion (no one graduates until all of the academic requirements are met, and some students take longer than four years to finish).

The results of the Murrow program have been impressive. The annual dropout rate is only 4 percent, compared to a citywide rate of 11 percent. Daily attendance averages 88 percent, far above that of other urban high schools. Disciplinary problems are negligible. Nearly 90 percent of its graduates continue to either a four-year or a two-year college program. The school urges even those who intend

to be secretaries to take a degree at a community college in order to promote their occupational mobility later. The chairman of the social studies department, Mary Butz, explained to me on my first visit to the school, "The climate of the school is middle-class Jewish. These kids all believe that education will help them get ahead, move up into college and good jobs. They have bought the whole package. They believe in themselves, and they believe in us."

How can Murrow get away with its ambitious program? Well, for one thing, its students have been persuaded that Murrow is a very special school and that they are very special students. The school year and the day are organized somewhat differently from what is usually found in a typical school. Instead of two semesters, there are four cycles of ten weeks each. The principal believes that the advantage of four ten-week courses is that students are encouraged to take risks, knowing that they won't be stuck for an entire year (or semester) with a bad choice. Instead of every subject meeting daily, the time is divided into four weekly meetings; this gives the students some blocks of optional time which they can use as they wish, either to study, to do homework, or to socialize with friends. Unlike most other schools, Murrow permits the students to cluster in the halls during their optional time, and affinity groups have claimed different territories (none based on race). "Over there are my theater groupies," says Bruckner. "And those kids are the science groupies." As we walk through the hall, he sees a Hispanic girl curled up on the tile floor, deeply engrossed in a paperback book. "What's that you're reading?" She holds up the book, and he reads: "*Richard II*." In the English "resource center" (like a study hall), a group of youngsters work together on a project. In an otherwise empty classroom, half a dozen boys are setting up a videotape camera, part of a

project for their literature course, "Detective Story." In the computer center, two or three students share a single machine, figuring out problems together, teaching each other.

Murrow represents an ingenious answer to the question: How do you enlist students' interest in their education without giving them control of the curriculum? Murrow does it by setting high requirements for graduation, but permits students to meet those requirements by choosing among a carefully designed mix of required and elective courses. The required sophomore course in American literature, for example, focuses on textual analysis of major poems, novels, and plays. Whether required or elective, all academic courses assign homework and writing exercises. The many ten-week elective courses have jazzy titles but fairly traditional readings; for example, students in "Youth and Identity" read Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Carson McCullers' *A Member of the Wedding*, Paul Zindel's *The Pigman*, and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Students in "Novel into Film" read *The Great Gatsby* and *Great Expectations*. Many electives are unabashedly classical, like the Shakespeare class that reads *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II*, and *Othello*, or the advanced placement course that reads Milton, John Donne, Ben Jonson, Jane Austen, and other great writers of English literature.

In reviewing the literary offerings available to Murrow students, I could not help but contrast them to my own public school education in Texas. Although it is customary to lament the decline of public education, I believe that Murrow is a far better school than my alma mater in Houston. The literature curriculum of San Jacinto High School was uniform and limited. I recall a year of British fiction that never moved beyond *Silas Marner* and *Julius Caesar*. I have no idea why this selection was inviolate for so long, because I believe that such books as *Pride and*

*Prejudice* or *Emma* or *Great Expectations* are wonderfully appealing to adolescents, while few adolescents have the maturity to appreciate George Eliot's complex prose.

Wisely administered, electives enable a school to provide what I would call the illusion of choice. Students do, in fact, make choices, but "wisely administered" means that they should not be permitted to make bad choices, like junk courses without academic merit ("bachelor living" or "personal grooming"). The illusion of choice can be readily adapted to the English sequence because the traditional English I through English VIII (which I took in my four years of public education) can easily be rearranged and attractively packaged. Thus, a course called "The Woman Writer" appeals to the modern sensibility, but is a fine setting in which to teach the works of Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Charlotte Brontë, and "The Literature of Social Protest" turns out to be a good marketing tool for the works of writers like Orwell and Dickens.

While repackaging can work neatly for the English curriculum, it has proved to be nearly a disaster in the undisciplined realm of the "social studies." The field—once dominated by history—is now rootless and very nearly formless. Among social studies educators, the phrase "chronological history" is frequently used as a term of derision. Even courses entitled "American History" are likely to eschew the traditional narrative of events, leaders, ideas, and institutions in favor of themes, topics, and trends. A significant portion of the Murrow social studies curriculum reflects the political and social fragmentation of the past generation, as well as the disorganization of the social studies as a field. There is a required course in American government, focusing on political institutions, and a required course in American diplomatic history, relating the history of America's foreign policy, but most other courses are either specialized excursions into some

thematic "experience" (the word "history" is usually avoided) or overly broad, like "the global experience." While history is in retreat, psychology, economics, and law studies are thriving: A student, for example, may choose among eight different psychology courses (e.g., "Social Psychology," "Abnormal Psychology," "Developmental Psychology," "The Psychology of Aging," etc.).

Despite my reservations, the social studies program at Murrow is far stronger than at most schools. For one thing, there are no contentless courses in "values clarification," "process skills," or "decision making"; second, while the catalogue contains the feminist "Herstory" and "The Black Experience," there is otherwise no further ethnic or group fragmentation of the curriculum. Perhaps most important, the department includes some gifted teachers, who have before them at all times the example of their principal, Saul Bruckner, himself a master teacher of American history. He is frequently in classrooms, observing, prodding, and instructing other members of the staff to enliven their presentations and their teaching style. Under his critical gaze, the course in "Origins of Western Civilization" really is a treatment of Western civilization from ancient Rome to the Renaissance, and the "Isms" course turns out to be a history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe.

I have to explain how I happened to learn about this school. I was involved in sponsoring a conference in Minneapolis in the spring of 1984, on behalf of the National Endowment for the Humanities, on improving the teaching of the humanities in the high schools. The opening speaker was a distinguished social historian, who discussed the problem of integrating ethnic diversity into the common culture. It has been my experience that public discussions of ethnicity, especially among educators, invariably are pervaded by a sanctimonious tone. Everyone

speaks reverentially of the nobility and struggles of oppressed minority groups (who cumulatively add up to a large majority of the population), and the air gets heavy with guilt and piety.

During the coffee break, a young teacher grabbed me by the arm to tell me, in an unmistakably Brooklyn accent, that an American Indian woman—known in current bureaucratic jargon as a Native American person—had just assailed her in scatological language. “What?” I said. “What? How can this be?” “Well,” she said, “this Indian woman asked me if she could use the bathroom, and I told her that the bathroom was reserved for conference participants. So, she used the bathroom anyway. When she came out a few moments later, she jabbed her finger in my chest, called me by an odious term, and warned, ‘White woman, don’t mess with me anymore!’”

Her name card said, “Mary Butz, Edward R. Murrow High School, Brooklyn, New York.” Charmed by her indifference to the demands of ethnic piety, I asked her to tell me about her school. She said, with what I later learned was characteristic candor, that it was the best school in New York City, because it had the best principal and “the greatest kids.” I was startled, because over the years, I have met so many embittered teachers in the New York City school system, who recall or have heard of the school system’s reputation in another era, an era when the New York City public schools were widely recognized as pioneers and when their students were pressing hard for future greatness as literati or scientists.

Naturally, I wanted to see the best school in New York City, the best principal, and the greatest kids, particularly because I had been in so many high schools that seemed like armed camps and in so many subway cars at the end of the school day when high school students used their raw energy to intimidate everyone else. So, not many days

later, I trekked out to the Midwood section of Brooklyn to find an undistinguished, nearly windowless modern brick building, set in the midst of an ethnically diverse middle-class neighborhood. In an example of incredibly stupid planning, the Murrow building abuts the subway tracks (the noise of passing trains regularly disrupts classes in progress) and has no surrounding campus, although the students are able to use another school’s athletic field across the street.

As it happened, I arrived on the day that Bruckner teaches an advanced placement section of American history. There were about thirty youngsters in the class, and the question for the day was: “Was it moral for the United States to drop the atomic bomb on Japan?” Something inside me warned that I was in for a session of moralistic Truman bashing, but I was wrong. The students (some of whom were Oriental) had read the textbook description of the war. When I entered, the class was discussing the incidence of cancer in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Then Bruckner used an overhead projector to display contemporary news stories from the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune*. One headline told the human cost of capturing Okinawa: 45,000 American casualties, 90,000 Japanese casualties. How many lives might be lost in an invasion of the mainland? A mimeographed handout discussed Japanese kamikaze raids and brutality towards American prisoners, which gave the students a flavor of Japanese and American wartime attitudes. A fair conclusion, which did not involve prejudice towards our Japanese adversaries, was that they would fight ferociously to the end. Lest anyone jump to the easy conclusion that the decision to drop the bomb was moral, the principal-teacher also displayed comments by generals and revisionist historians that dropping the bomb was not necessary to end the war.

The lesson was taught in a Socratic manner. Bruckner did not lecture. He asked questions and kept up a rapid-fire dialogue among the students. "Why?" "How do you know?" "What does this mean?" "Do you really think so?" Sometimes he called on students who were desperately waving their arms; other times he solicited the views of those who were sitting quietly. By the time the class was finished, the students had covered a great deal of material about American foreign and domestic policies during World War II; they had argued heatedly; most of them had tried out different points of view, seeing the problem from different angles. It was a good lesson: It was well planned, utilizing a variety of materials and media; and the students were alert and responsive.

Bruckner's lesson was at odds with the usual characterization of American teaching. In the past year or two, most critics of the schools have complained about the quality of teaching. Educators like John Goodlad of UCLA and TheodoreSizer, former headmaster of Phillips Andover Academy, believe that there is too much "teacher telling," too much student passivity, and little if any thought-provoking activity in the typical classroom. A major study prepared for the National Institute of Education a few years ago contended that teaching in American schools has remained unchanged—that is, boring and teacher dominated—throughout the century. Well, I thought to myself, I have seen one great teacher; what happens in the other classrooms?

I visited many classrooms and observed teachers in every subject area. I saw some outstanding teaching, some passably good classes, and a few that failed, but in no instance did I see a teacher droning on to a class of bored students. The teaching style in the building was remarkably consistent, and every teacher used materials and experiences that were outside the textbook. In the best classes, the focus of the

lesson was on the dialogue, the intellectual exchange sparked by the teacher and kept alive by student participation. In one literature class, the students debated O. Henry's use of language to establish the tone of a story; in a chemistry class, thirty-five students jointly figured out how a battery operates.

I later learned that Bruckner expects all his teachers to use what is called the "developmental lesson" or the "socialized recitation." If they do not know how to teach this way when they are assigned to Murrow, they are taught the method by the department chairman. At its best, it works magnificently: Students listen, speak out, think, disagree with each other, change their minds, make judgments. For this method to work, two things are necessary: One, the teacher has to be well prepared, having planned out the lesson in advance with an "aim" or problem to be solved, with pivotal questions to provoke student discussion, and with materials (a political cartoon, a newspaper headline, a quotation from a participant or critic, or an excerpt from a book) to stimulate new lines of inquiry; two, the students must bring something to the lesson in the way of reading or homework, so that they can respond to the teacher's questions with ideas and insights of their own. If the teacher does not prepare well and if the students are uninformed, the developmental lesson can dwindle into a vapid exchange of uninformed opinion, of less value than a traditional didactic lecture.

Bruckner's biggest problem is building a good teaching staff. Within the context of the public school bureaucracy, this requires consummate skill. When Bruckner opened Murrow in 1974, he was officially permitted to select only 35 percent of his staff. Because he was a veteran of "the system," he was able to play the teacher selection game like a Stradivarius, and he ended up with a staff in which about 70 percent of the teachers were of his choosing. He

might encourage a skilled teacher to apply to join his staff, who would then not be counted as one of his "picks." Since the school opened in the midst of the city's fiscal crisis, Bruckner was able to hire many talented young teachers who had been laid off by other schools. Among the 30 percent or so that he did not choose were, inevitably, some lemons. It is possible, but not easy, to fire a probationary teacher (who has taught for less than three years); it is nearly impossible to oust a tenured teacher. "A principal can't fire a teacher simply because he is boring or incompetent or even when you know that he treats the kids like dirt," Bruckner says. "He must be grossly negligent, persistently late for class, drunk in class, something like that."

What a principal can do, however, is to lay off staff, but only in order of seniority. One principal, Bruckner says, wiped out most of his English department to get rid of a teacher with fifteen years of seniority; seven able young teachers were exceded in order to drop a bad senior teacher. Bruckner closed down his guidance department in order to remove the person assigned to Murrow. Eventually, the Brooklyn superintendent for high schools ordered him to hire guidance counselors, and he continued to hire and lay off until he got the people he wanted. Usually it is easier to lay off personnel than to go through the procedure of ousting them. Not only is it time-consuming, but if the principal wins, the teacher is stripped of his license. It is akin to having a lawyer disbarred, with this exception: The teacher can get a license in another area. For example, Bruckner had the licenses revoked from two probationary teachers: One was a teacher of the handicapped (special education); the other taught social studies. Before long, both were reinstated: The ex-special education teacher had become an elementary teacher, and the ex-social studies teacher had moved into special education. "Well," he says

with resignation, "I didn't get them out of the system, but I got them out of this school."

Bruckner speaks with passion about how the structure of public education contributes to the "infantilization" of teachers. "Teachers," he complains, "have little responsibility for the conditions of their working lives. We call teaching a profession, but if so, it is the only profession in which there is no opportunity for growth while remaining in the profession." Teachers have lost a great deal of authority to make decisions, not only to supervisors but also to their own organizations and to federal, state, and local mandates. "For most of the important things in their day," Bruckner says, "teachers depend on someone else. Someone else assigns them a room, someone else gives them a daily schedule, someone else writes their lesson plan." Yet in the classroom they have total control, and no matter what the official course of study says, the teacher defines the curriculum every day. Outside the classroom, however, the teachers "are like students. They have very limited say over their life and that creates bitterness and hostility." To break through this "infantilization," Bruckner encourages teachers to design their own courses and to take more responsibility for school affairs. Perhaps the most promising innovation has sprung from the science department, where teachers visit one another's classrooms and discuss content and methodology; their professional critiques of one another take the place of an official observation by a supervisor. Bruckner hopes that other departments will follow suit: "Doctors observe each other practice and learn from one another; so do lawyers. Why shouldn't teachers?"

Like other big-city high schools in the 1980s, Murrow is constantly threatened by financial pressures. Average class size is now up to thirty-four in the city's high schools, the largest in many years. The library is funded

at only one dollar per year per student; half of the library budget pays for the *New York Times* on microfilm and its index, leaving only \$1,500 for books and magazine subscriptions. At today's prices, \$1,500 does not buy much of either. In order to continue using a diversity of materials and media in the classroom, which is integral to the lively approach that Bruckner advocates, the school has heavy expenses for equipment, supplies, and repairs. Occasionally, he has traded in a teaching position (valued at \$33,000) in order to maintain the school's duplicating machines, mimeograph machines, computers, overhead projectors, and audiovisual equipment.

The school has a climate that is relaxed and tension free. Teachers and students alike know that they are in a good school, and this sense of being special contributes to high morale. Yet the tenuousness of the authority structure of a big school was revealed to me one morning when the principal was away. Word spread through the building that the police bomb squad had closed off part of the second and third floors, and it was true. Students milled in the corridors, elaborating on the rumor. An assistant principal announced on the public address system, "Everyone return to your classroom. There is no danger at the present moment." Since the police had sealed off a major portion of the building, most students had no classroom to return to. In the absence of sensible adult instructions, nearly half of the students went home. The surprising thing, Mary Butz observed, was not that so many left, but that so many stayed, because the bomb scare had effectively ended the school day.

Schools cannot function as they once did. Teachers cannot presume to have the respect of the students. They have to win it in the classroom. Many New York City school teachers have found it difficult to adjust to the loss of authority over the past generation and the change in

the pupil demography from predominantly white to predominantly black and Hispanic. Some professionals in the New York City public schools labor with a sense of nostalgia for a lost golden age, a time when student motivation could be taken for granted and when teachers were respected figures in the community. This image of a lost golden age is a mixture of truth, misty memories, and historical accident. The Great Depression was a time when many overeducated teachers entered the school system because there were no jobs in higher education or the professions; when there was an unusual number of second- and third-generation Jewish students who were eager to use their education to get ahead; and when the less motivated students dropped out to work as elevator operators or messengers or in some other low-skill job.

Life was hard for most people during the depression, but in many ways it was not as complicated for school people as it is today. Many of the children at Murrow, who come from a broad mix of racial, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, bear the scars of social dissolution. While trying to educate them, the school cannot ignore the family crises, the broken homes, the child abuse, the parental negligence that cut across all socioeconomic lines. In other urban schools, the wounds that families inflict on their children are far worse. Sometimes the best that a school can do is to provide a sympathetic adult who will listen.

Bruckner knows that the school competes for children's attention with the pathology outside its doors, with the lure of television, drugs, sex, and the adolescent culture. He has not created a social service program; the school is not a social work agency. What he has tried to do is to make it a place where adolescents feel at home, a place that they might want to come to even if they didn't have to. He has done this, not by turning the school into a

playing field with low hurdles, but by harnessing nontraditional means to traditional academic goals. The smart kids have no ceiling on their ambitions; they can go as far and as fast as their brains will take them. Not many public schools in the nation can match Murrow's advanced courses in science and mathematics. But this richness for the bright students is not achieved by pushing the average ones into nursing and automobile mechanics. All of them have available a strong basic curriculum and a diversity of learning opportunities that enable them to learn at their own pace, and all are accorded equal respect as students.

There are many different kinds of effective schools. Some of them, like Murrow's neighbor in Brooklyn, Midwood High School, are highly structured and traditional. Visiting Midwood is like stepping into a school in the early 1950s; it is quiet and orderly, and the students seem serious and purposeful. What effective schools have in common should be available to all American students: a strong academic curriculum, a principal with a vision and the courage to work for it, dedicated teachers, a commitment to learning, a mix of students from different backgrounds, and high expectations for all children.

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## *On Thinking About the Future*

(1983)

IT is obvious that anyone who tries to predict what the future holds is foolhardy, brave, or both. Yet it is also true that those who devise policy and direct social institutions must try to plan ahead, both to anticipate what might happen and to affect what does happen. In trying to think about what American schools might look like in the year 2000, I found myself reflecting on earlier attempts to conjure up the school of the future.

I hold no brief for the idea that the future is to be discovered by searching the past, but it struck me that it would be instructive to see what could be learned from the past about the limitations of social forecasting and about what might be the enduring qualities of the schools. Anyone who has studied the past knows that history has a limited predictive value. Knowledge of the past is vital