

Why Is You Always Got To Be Trippin’ School Reform And The Racial Divide

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Notice

ALTHOUGH THE EVENTS DESCRIBED IN THIS BOOK ARE REAL, ALL NAMES, INCLUDING ANY OF THOSE USED FOR PEOPLE, PLACES AND PROGRAMS, HAVE BEEN CHANGED. ANY CONNECTION TO EXISTING PEOPLE, PLACES OR PROGRAMS IS PURELY COINCIDENTAL. ALSO, IN AN EFFORT TO MAKE THIS WORK MORE READABLE, OCCASIONALLY EXISTING EVENTS HAVE BEEN CONDENSED.

IN RECOGNITION OF THE FACT THAT THE EDUCATION OF DIVERSE POPULATIONS IS AN ESSENTIALLY COMPLEX AND LOCALLY ORGANIC PROCESS, IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT THE STORIES PARTICULAR TO THIS BOOK REPRESENT ONE TEACHER’S EXPERIENCES AND SHOULD NOT BE CONSTRUED AS A REPRESENTATION FOR ALL TEACHERS AND ALL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS.

Dedication

*This book is dedicated to my son who, after listening to my
frustrations, said:
“Write a book.”
And believed it possible.*

Teachers Like Me

I never knew I wanted to be a teacher until, very unexpectedly, the idea hit me; it fell heavy as a meteor, targeting me immutably from out of the blue. I was thirty-one years of age, and it was *not* on my agenda to change professional careers so unexpectedly. Nevertheless, I spent the next three years of my life working toward a Bachelor's Degree in English Education and testing my way to an instructional license. I was excited to finally land my first teaching position inside the halls of an expansive, multi-cultural high school located on the outer edge of a large inner-city district.

An integration-based busing plan allowed the school hiring me to serve students from various areas of the city; disparate cultural and socio-economic groups mixed freely inside our imposing, multi-leveled building. Having personally grown up inside, and attended the small schools of, a tightly-knit rural community, I had minimal experience inside the walls of a big-city high school able to accommodate more than two thousand students.

Privately?

I was petrified.

Absolutely convinced that I would soon be making countless unforgivable new teacher mistakes.

Painfully aware that I would now be expected to stand in front of huge classes filled with unfamiliar teenagers, I was determined to hide my weak-kneed uncertainty. Adopting an air of casual assurance to cover what I felt must be my unmistakably obvious small-town girl's lack of sophistication – making the effort to get my head around various unfamiliar names as I made my way down the main hallway on the first day of classes, I scanned a recently printed roster: Elisso, Jhante, Shartone, Guilleramne, Tarnet, Yasnin. Crowds of students mingled, divided, and flowed around me as I inched my way down the corridor whispering the intriguing names to myself.

An initiation into contemporary high school culture came without warning, arriving, as it did, in a sort of high-pitched squeal behind me. It was a shrill, insistent petition able to bring me sharply out of my reverie.

“Shut the fuck *uuuuup*.”

The sounds of a scuffle ensued.

“Oh my god, you goddamned *pussy*. I’ll kick your motherfucking ass down this goddamned *hall*, and yank that tiny little dick of yours down to your motherfucking *ankles*.”

Panicked, I turned – expecting?

Well, I didn’t know.

Surely imminent pandemonium.

At the very least?

Impending mayhem.

What I found, however, was an astonishingly small blonde-headed girl in a blue and white cheerleader’s skirt shoving her hip flirtatiously into a tall, dark-eyed boy twice her size. No one in the halls reacted. Teachers, students and administrators – everyone went about their business, as these two apparent love-birds passed me by.

Dumbfounded, I stood in an open-mouthed wonder. Feebly turncoat at best, my stiffly imposed veneer of urbanity had quickly evaporated. I had grown up, as I said, in a *very* small town. When a boy in my history class had pulled a ribbon out of my hair (a ribbon I had spent the better part of an hour putting *into* my hair) I had turned on him. Mustering up all of the outrage available to my thirteen-year-old soul, I had sputtered the very worst thing I could imagine: “You...*bastard!*”

The teacher had stopped teaching.

The students had stopped talking.

In a shocked silence, *everyone* had looked my way. Within minutes I had found myself seated in the principal’s office.

And he was calling my mother.

Ah, well; clearly, as they say?

Times have changed. Twenty years later, I, too, can rattle off a scathing invective, much like the proverbial sailor. Or, to state it more accurately, much like a twenty-first-century inner-city teenager. Contrary to middle-class America’s romanticized fantasy around educator role models, I am no Miss Landers: that pretty-as-a-picture, sweetly virginal icon made popular in an era of the *Leave It To Beaver* TV series.

However; having slowly and painstakingly built my instructional craft for more than twenty years, I am, on the other hand, a very good teacher. This means that I am experienced, well-educated, disciplined and tolerant. I know my subject; I de-

fulfill my purpose. I protect children; I am dedicated, vigilant, self-assured and opinionated. And, in modern years; in years “compassionately” committed to the implementation of a no-excuses, high-stakes testing accountability?

It is exactly these traits which also make me a very *bad* teacher.

Yes, I know. This likely feels confusing.

But, all of those problematic teachers you’ve heard so much about lately; all of those so many *bad* teachers about whom you’ve been endlessly told to worry? Well, despite the relentlessly advertised anxiety, in reality those teachers are simply reliable, hardworking, everyday people.

Hardworking, everyday people – *like me*.

Herding Instincts

Maybe it’s important to mention that the me I am introducing, here, is one of those irrational left-wing “libruls;” one of those crazy people who chooses to work with culturally-complex, low-income, inner-city students on purpose.

Recently, as I was sitting over coffee with an ex-student, I found myself speaking about my latest concern: I worry, these days, about the diminishing number of culturally protective and fully inclusive neighborhood schools in our district. As our conversation moved on, and began to include previous students and favorite classes, my youthful companion reached across the table to stop me.

“Why do you do that?” she asked, touching my hand.

I raised my eyebrows. “Do what?”

“Why do you move your hands around like that when you talk about kids – in a kind of a circle. It’s as if you’re trying to pull something together.”

Looking down, I noticed that my fingertips were indeed touching, each finger attracted to an opposite as if by magnetic force. Perhaps you’ve read stories about herding dogs: dogs specifically bred to keep livestock from straying, becoming lost or hurt. If no livestock presents itself, the instinct to herd doesn’t disappear; frustrated, the dogs continue working, trying to round up people, rabbits, ducks, hamsters – whatever might be available.

Protective by instinct, these dogs never stop worrying about the precarious balance of safe living.

I get that; I *do* that.

I brought that very same instinct to teaching.

One day when noise from unsupervised students caught my attention, I stepped into the hallway to find a group of boys throwing friendly punches outside a neighboring classroom.

“Gentlemen!” I stated reactively, clearing my throat.

Happy to ignore extraneous interference, the boys continued their game.

“*Gentlemen!*” I said again, this time a little more loudly.

Straightening, the boys stopped to look my way. “Okay, *let’s go,*” I directed. “Aren’t you supposed to be in class?”

“Aw, Miss,” two or three grumbled as the small group broke up and began to move away. Pulling at chronically sagging pants while smoothing intricately braided hair, a tall, thin young man hung back. As a student who had attended one of my afternoon classes for more than six months, he knew me well. Watching his friends now amble unhurriedly down the hall, he turned to look at me in plaintive wonder.

“Aw, Miss,” he protested. “Why is you always got to be trippn’?”

It was a good question.

Why *is* I always got to be trippin’?

The query itself, however, contains the answer. There is an instinct inside of me, something innate that knows a deeply important fact about kids, especially big-city, low-incomed teenaged kids. They need, almost more than they need any other thing in life, herding. As they labor so single-mindedly, burning up such amazing reserves of energy to gamble dispassionately with life’s smorgasbord of choices, these children profoundly depend upon, and openly thrive when offered, an unvarying intervention.

If you don’t take pains to hold them together?

If you don’t step in, over and over (and then over again) to pull them circuitously inward towards success – sometimes with no other help than the full power of your will?

They struggle, they flounder; they deflate and fall apart. Desperately they count upon the people in their lives who make the effort to “trip.” The people who worry; the people who inter-

ferre; the people who draw them in, despite their endlessly manufactured resistance. The people who gather; the people who pull and guide; the people willing to forgive countless mistakes in their effort to patiently move them yet again, one more time, in the direction of success.

The people in their lives ready to step in and help them believe that no matter who they are? No matter what the media, testing data, privileged-class politicians, and big-wig educational reformers have been saying about them and their schools?

That they are being protectively watched – and tirelessly herded toward safety.

Just a Suppository

Most low-income schools are, for all intents and purposes, small, self-protective communities forced to fight daily battles against frightening odds. Too often furniture, materials, technology and environments are ancient and nonfunctional, temperatures excruciatingly hot or frigidly cold, necessary preventive programs minimal to nonexistent, and art, band, choir and gym the first courses to fall by the wayside.

Despite these less-than-perfect realities, however, there is, each year, and inside each school, a stubborn thread of self-promoting identity; a delicate strand of hopeful purpose which runs dynamically throughout the student body. It is this optimistic filament of hope which best describes the soul of a true community.

For outsiders; for “interventionists” entering low-income buildings lacking any belief in the possibility of finding positive foundations – well, it always appears a much more efficient task to detachedly identify and isolate easiest perceived deficits; a much less complicated mission to uncover, and then draw public focus to, a full-fledged, overwhelming despair. For loyal insiders, however, local neighborhood schools are not an abstract problem to be solved; they are simply a straightforward, everyday reality. Places where, despite what fund-seeking reformers point to as evidence to the contrary?

Each and every child brings hope, pride, curiosity – and guardedly private dreams.

Nevertheless, deficit and despair remain the most popular, the most advertised, and the most dramatically underscored media themes.

“*How can you work there?*” I have been asked by more than one concerned middle-class, dominant-culture friend who, safely cocooned inside his/her non-integrated, non-poor neighborhood, receives his/her understanding of low-income social issues from useful television shows like *COPS*. “Aren’t you *afraid?*”

Gangs, violence, attacks, drugs, junkies.

Sure, you’d think, by listening to (and sadly knowing only about) what mainstream journalists – privileged-world commentators who have elected to operate from deep within the pockets of ratings-dependent media corporations – select to publish:

That, absolutely awash in deficit?

Culturally-diverse, low-income, inner-city schools function only and consistently in crisis mode. However, despite the aggressively published media theme where difference inevitably equals violence: Police officers aside?

I have never seen a gun.

I have, on the other hand?

Oh my yes, quite often *heard* about them.

One memorable year, a painfully inexperienced, reform obligated principal (a woman abruptly hired to lead our largely Latino school because she spoke fluent Spanish and bragged openly of being a Chicana Who Could Still Beat You Down In A Dark Alley) spent her first year with us warning everyone that, oh my yes, undoubtedly: *gang wars were imminent*. Laboring alongside a carefully selected company of “fixer” assistants ready to share her high-voltage dedication to the theory of impending doom, hours of time and similarly lavish sums of money were spent in the tracking down of the most ominously dangerous – and most unmistakably recognized – suspects.

“Tell us again, Miss,” Latino students begged me, years later. “Tell us again how those principals kept chasing down all of the *cheros*.”

Extracted from the longer Spanish word *rancheros*, although not always used respectfully, *cheros* was generally a benign epithet. In local slang it referenced those students who originally hailed from geographic areas particular to northern Mexico

and the southwestern United States; kids who tended toward a ranching attire which included tight-fitting jeans, sharply-toed boots and Western-style shirts. *Cheros* often stood out dramatically when juxtaposed against our school's typical high school student who, in those years, sported pants so baggy, and worn so low, that he or she appeared to be trying, inadequately, to climb out of a small tent.

Although visibly dissimilar?

As a whole, *cheros* were known by insiders to be atypically reserved. Often shy, modest and respectful, most of these children were reliably hardworking students. Although notably dissimilar, they were not, by even a good stretch of the imagination, likely to be leaders of a haphazard gunslinging violence. Their confusing willingness to stand out, however; their stubborn loyalty to a visible cultural disparity – inspired agonizing fear in the hearts of our reform-intending administrators.

To my students?

It was all a big joke.

Tell us again, Miss; tell us how those principals were afraid of the cheros. Tell how they kept chasing them down. As the culturally-different poor, my students knew, had, in fact, always known, what it was like to be tracked down and harassed for no other reason than difference; what it was like to be targeted simply because they stuck out.

In the small community of a school, these children understood more quickly than most the damaging effects of a harmful administrative miscalculation and its detachedly attendant bullying. They knew how blindly misguided the never-ending flow of short-sighted supervisors were, coming as they did, in modern days so “benevolently” bent to a high-stakes accountability, from outside the building, outside the neighborhood, and even outside the district. Quick-fix no-excuses reformers carrying ideas and solutions created in legislative sessions and board rooms by people living distant, privileged lives.

They knew, as well, better than anyone?

That they were under attack; that they and their schools were facing an assertive outsider targeting for stereotypical deficits that they didn't understand, believe in, or even see. “But, they'll never stop, Miss, they'll never leave us alone,” one of my more philosophical tenth graders explained to me stoically, per-

haps more tellingly than she knew. “They’ll just keep on telling everyone that our school can’t do anything: that all we are is a suppository for the dumb kids.”

Target Practice

Okay; yes.

I can hear you saying that I’m being naïve; that there were, there are, guns in schools.

Sadly, I do know that.

Depending on the year, the city and the school, there might actually be, at any given time, an intimidating arsenal hidden inside backpacks, lockers, clothing and cars. And, yes, in those communities hardest hit by a nationally burgeoning social inequity; in poorest neighborhoods most painfully destabilized through the blind invasion of forced school turnarounds and the subsequent crossing of long-embedded gang/culture/crew lines – each day more insidiously? The harsh reality of easily acquired weapons not only threatens, but controls, street life.

But. Despite the many deficit-of-violence theories set up to target minority and poor students (theories lucratively adopted by fund-seeking reformers and sound-bite-seeking journalists alike), in over twenty years of working inside culturally diverse low-income schools, I have never known violence and guns to come even close to defining a school’s true culture.

Although.

Well, yes, there was that afternoon when one of our more experimental children?

Shot himself in the leg.

Following district policy, upon notice of the shooting our school was very dramatically pushed into a suddenly unexpected lock down. Time crawled, and the minutes ticked off, one by one, ever so slowly, until authorities had managed to ascertain that the gun wound now famous to our “event” had been both accidental and self-inflicted. Important people flocked in, anxious to delve into this child’s misguided psyche. What clearly sinister violence had he intended?

Having known the perpetrator, a creative young man named Leon, as a student in literacy classes two years in a row – I had my own opinion. Although generally a capable student, Leon

had always been a bit unhelpfully prone to daydreaming. When finally I got the chance, I had to ask:

“Leon, what on *earth* were you thinking?”

“It *wasn't* my gun, Miss, honest. But you know how in the movies they sort of hold the gun sideways, and then, when the cops come, they kind of flip it and shove it down super-fast into the side of their pants?”

He paused before adding: “Well, that’s not really a good idea.”

Leon graduated the next year; so far as I knew he had stopped trying to juggle firearms. His short-lived fame, however, allowed our school to experience – if only momentarily – the highly anticipated and widely predicted low-income student’s penchant for a weapon-induced violence.

It was a violence that, as the years dedicated to implementing an increasingly ruthless test-score accountability commenced, and an apparently endless flow of culture-and-poverty-detached reformers found themselves assertively moved into low-income buildings, was recurrently brought to our attention through insistently repeated warnings. As a nationally targeted, unmistakably pending predilection, a low-income student violence was, in fact, so likely to occur?*

That we were all cautioned to stay on our guard.

To keep alert; to watch for it coming.

To see it always looming, there – just over the horizon.

*Statistically, both gun violence and an illicit prescription drug use in schools has changed dramatically since the 1980s. In modern days it now makes much more sense to worry about the relative safety of a friend employed inside a 95% dominant-culture school located in one of our state’s most conservative districts.

Panic Policies

When you work inside environments where outsider theory demands that abruptly hired reformers stay not only vigilantly on the lookout for aggressive, gun-happy children, but additionally argues that these same innovators keep a similarly wary eye upon the very people and neighborhoods which surround modern-

day test-score-deficit-labeled schools – well, you learn to anticipate a certain amount of high drama.

And a consequently attached confusion.

Our worst year, compounding a new-to-building management angst about how, exactly, to track down a highly anticipated in-school violence – a violence which our administrators could not, with any great specificity, actually identify – suddenly thrilling sightings of menacing neighborhood delinquents (mysterious villains who, quite possibly, oh my, yes, very likely, were flaunting guns) flustered those in charge into calling for the phenomenally disruptive, but district mandated, lock-down status over and over.

And then over again.

Apprehensive, on-the-very-edge-of-panic directives sent out over the intercom system were complicated by lower-level administrators who walked the halls, anxious to deliver personal interpretations of actual policy:

“Teachers! Teachers! We are on full lock-down. *Lock your doors!*”

“*Why* did you lock your doors? Haven’t we told you to *never* lock your doors?”

“Teachers! Teachers! Keep children away from the windows! *Pull your shades!*”

“*Why* did you pull your shades? Didn’t we tell you to keep away from the windows? You are *never* to pull your shades!”

Trying to keep track of when to panic and when not to panic; this was a puzzle made ever more complicated as district, school and in-house policies repeatedly went head to head. At our school, high anxiety was kept tinglingly alive by an exceptionally large woman who had been only recently, and very unexpectedly, placed in charge of discipline. Her nickname, Buck, was fitting; with Buck, spectacular size came with spectacular bullying. Already infamous inside our building, stories, including mention of full leather and a Harley, abounded.

Calling upon a favored tactic, Buck paced the halls in the hope of catching insubordinate teachers – those teachers who, in an outright defiance, might be erasing boards or talking to students between classes. Attentively, then, she would sneak up and

yell across the room loudly and unpredictably, always making my heart stop and my urinary tract muscles contract:

“*Ms. Aech! You will be at your door during passing periods!*”

After one particularly long morning spent in trying to keep up with the various stages of panicked policy which had entered our school hand-in-hand with yet another alleged neighborhood gun sighting, our wobbly-voiced principal announced that while our school had now been authorized to move out of a full lock-down status, we were to continue our day in a partial lock-down mode: Absolutely *no* student was to be given permission to exit the building.

Immediately, a glowering Buck stood in front of me, ready to bellow her own version of this decree: “It is district policy, Ms. Aech, that no student may leave the building, but it is school policy that you must check every ID. *No student may leave the building and every student must show you an ID.*”

Left to carry the weight of Buck’s unambiguous commands, I quickly reacted when two boys talking animatedly to one another avoided hearing my escalating requests that they show an ID and not exit the building. Positioning myself between them and our building’s front doors, loudly, and I thought quite logically, I asserted:

“*Stop!*”

Being the very model of a modern-day school reformer – a vocally concerned administrator privately attached to the painstaking avoidance of any and all of the messy community politics which inevitably ensued should she back policies of any kind, even those which she had, herself, announced publicly only a short time before – our latest fixer principal stomped angrily out of the office.

“*Ms. Aech! Ms. Aech!*” Her clearly offended voice rose precipitously.

“*What are you doing? Stop this immediately! You may not raise your voice in this school. Leave those students alone!*”

But they don’t have IDs, I explained. *And they are leaving the building.*

“*Do not take that tone of voice with me!*” she huffed and turned her back to walk away. As she marched decisively back into the front office, her smartly polished one-and-a-half inch

heels clicked loudly, giving an unmistakable emphasis to her words. Confused, I turned to watch as the two ID-less boys now strolled leisurely out of our building. Crossing the driveway and entering the parking lot, there they met up with a large gray-haired man. After getting into his car, they all drove off together.

Probably?

Well, at least it seems likely.

None of them had a gun.

No Longer In Kansas

Mandates, directives, orders and policies.

Protocols, procedures, guidelines and strategies.

Oh, yes; in years ever more inflexibly bent to the “compassion” of a modern-day educational liability; in years ever more immovably bound to the no-excuses theory of a “munificent” instructional accountability?

The world of low-income education had been changing rapidly. However, learning which policies to follow?

As our nation’s loyalty to both a retaliatory testing and its consequently generated high-stakes punishments progressed, the true-life selection of mandates had, over time, begun to devolve into a game played something along the lines of Russian Roulette. If people were asking *you* to follow along, blithely and blindly, as an incessantly realigning stream of “non-negotiable” directives forced you dispassionately over the cliff’s edge and into the yawning abyss – did you make a peep, did you moan, did you swoon; did you have the common sense to take a dizzying leap *off* the razzle-dazzle-bedecked reform-or-die bandwagon?

And, then:

An additional conundrum.

Whom did you decide to follow when those who *had* been leading – administrators you had learned to trust; supervisors who had not only protected, but respected, your voice – were suddenly and inexplicably no longer around?

A solidly long-term, career-committed leadership had always been critical to the survival and maintenance of low-income schools. Now, however, in days overflowing with the high benevolence of a statistical innovation, the definition of good

school leadership was experiencing a perplexingly surreal transformation.

Twenty years earlier when I had first started my teaching career, I had been hired by a woman who, at that time, had been fulfilling the terms of a long-standing principal's assignment in (as everyone in our building knew to call it) *her school*. Her expectations of me had been founded upon a triangle of historically protected traditions: I was to produce academic solutions through a collaborative interaction with my teaching department, prepare lessons for democratically assigned classes – and work hard.

So that's what I did.

And, oh, I loved teaching,

As a new hire, the old-school presumptions for an administrative stability, a long-term employment, and an involved neighborhood-protective community had all served as essential supports for my happiness; each of these factors played a key role in my ability to discover, and then build, an each year more effective teaching craft. Counting upon predictable interactions with experienced peers, and the use of a specific, yet creatively flexible, curriculum guide, in my earliest years of teaching I had taught myself in how to be a reliable cog in the complicated machinery of a large inner-city district.

And – all across this same district?

School after school depended upon, and was allowed to trust and hold on to, loyally-supportive, career-committed, long-term administrators.

Certainly some principals were better than others.

Some, just as in any other profession?

Were fractious and difficult.

Good or bad, however, as old-school traditional leaders, old-days' administrators made serious career commitments. They were expected, as their administrative years passed, to show a proven instructional vision; to fight for the clear and specific success of *their* schools; to show support and loyalty for *their* teachers; to listen intentionally to the parents who sent students to *their* buildings. If, and when, mistakes were made, as a result of the integrity tied to long-term commitments, they knew that they would have no choice but to stick around and take responsibility for the mess.

To admit, even?

To their part in the problem, and help clean it up.

Old-school career-committed administrators understood: Due to the nature of long-standing commitments, they would pay an overall price for poor decisions, abusive relationships and weak leadership. They also knew that they would be allowed to learn from their mistakes, and that they could, even, gain a management value each and every time they went through the process.

But, today?

Ah well, *today*.

Today, mixed up inside the shimmering glitz of an endlessly advertised testing accountability; inside this shiny, new, razzle-dazzle system of a statistically engendered liability – a liability which then pushes districts to impose countless reforms, redesigns, innovations, closures, academies, vouchers, charters and choices...

Well, let's just say that in modern days?

Leadership expectations have changed.

Today, in fact, numerous low-income schools, no matter neighborhood, magnet, charter or choice, have been converted into buildings where the concept of *long-term career-committed administrators* is, somehow, no longer a part of anyone's vocabulary. Exchanged for the high glitter and flash generated by an endless run of ever shifting invasions, the very concept of a *years-long stably-committed management* – has now become outdated.

Understood, if at all?

Only as an old-fashioned, and irrelevantly unlikely, oxymoron.

At a faculty meeting where our staff had just been introduced to the *fourth* reform principal in an especially disorganized year, my friend Sendra leaned across the table to offer a wry observation. "You know," she whispered, "how in that movie *The Wizard Of Oz*, there really isn't anybody in charge – there's only that little bald guy hiding behind a screen, and, in the end it turns out that all anyone sees is a flashy façade because even *he* doesn't know what's going on?"

"Well," she suggested, waving her hand lightly in the direction of our latest administrator: "I have a feeling that we're no longer even anywhere *near* Kansas any more."

The Peter Principal

Browsing the isles of a benefits' fair, I ran into, and greeted, a teaching peer; aware that a few years earlier she had been abruptly assigned into one of our district's most infamously low-scoring buildings, I asked her about her work. Together we smiled as she replied with a privately understood joke.

“Oh, *you* know,” she stated sardonically. “Another year? “Another Peter Principal.”

The Principle of Peter Principals. For teachers working inside aggressively reformed, score-invaded, low-income buildings, the principle of Peter Principals was a concept each year more intimately understood. In the flashy glare of a modern-day accountability, those school districts choosing to most aggressively back the relentlessly implemented cycle of fund-garnering reforms no longer maintained a loyal interest in, nor offered up any protective safeguards for, a long-term-committed, true-life-education-experienced leadership.

More efficiently; more effective to their purpose?

They hired, and then almost immediately promoted, exchanged, shuffled, reassigned, relabeled, retitled and occasionally canonized a relatively small group of change oriented top-down personnel.

In a strategic replication of the little man working behind the screens in *The Wizard of Oz* – that in-over-his-head official who had taught himself in how to manipulate public perception through the use of a divertingly intimidating show – the distracting sparkle attached to the precipitous reassignment of “reform” personnel simply served as a cover for a critical lack in the larger confusingly deregulated, and far from cohesive, national plan.

Adopted from corporate practices of hierarchy, the standard behind Peter Principals (an old-days patriarchy willing, in contemporary days, to include party-line devotees of either gender) assured unwavering allegiance to company-faithful, salary-motivated managers; those administrators who most efficiently, and most consistently, always said *yes*. Repeatedly and impetuously reassigned, those most faithful could expect glossily re-titled postings made widely impressive through the glimmer and glitz of a media-controlled razzle-dazzle. Ever-shifting and pub-

licly aggrandized appointments vigorously and enthusiastically acclaimed...

Until.

Well, until the school, program or innovative reform which the highly lauded – if minimally experienced – administrative recruit had been assigned to manage?

Was exposed as being test-score problematic.

And then, while the school, program or innovative reform could be mercilessly blamed; while, in the name of a compassionate invasion, students, teachers, parents and staff could be forced through yet another destabilizing closure, reorganization or redesign – despite having bungled yet another assignment? With an expanded glitter and show, the loyally protected Peter Principal could once again be divertingly promoted into his or her next greatly praised (if only recently created) assignment.

One with a higher salary.

And an even more imposing title.

If.

Well, *if*, with a purposeful, focused intention, deliberately you shaded your eyes.

If, with a protected, concentrated effort, intentionally you narrowed your focus.

If, with a deliberated calculation, guardedly you avoided looking directly at the distracting shimmer produced by an endlessly instigated reassigning and retitling – well, you could, then, locate a truth that, save for the distracting sparkle attached to an ever thickening profusion of smoke screens, was becoming each year more devastatingly clear. Heavily protected by the whirling disorder of an increasingly deregulated personnel movement, short-term assigning, management shifting, reallocating and retitling:

No company-loyal administrator and, even more significantly, no particularly invasive reform, *was ever going to be long-term implemented nor long-term isolated*. In harshly punishing days committed to the true “benevolence” of a mercilessly initiated accountability; in days willing to brag ceaselessly about forcing a no-excuses answerability...

No program, no policy, nor any publicly-touted innovative leader, would ever be allowed to stay restrictively and stably in any one place long enough to, consequently?

Ever be held accountable.

On The Ball

Of course there were those who noted the disorder.

Of course there were those who spoke up and argued.

Of course there were those who said that – exactly opposite to this ostentatious game of a flashy, deregulated turnover now disruptively invading low-income schools; exactly contrary to the chaotic managerial shuffling now swaggering into buildings attached to shimmering promises and an unprecedented funding?

Well, there were those who claimed that a truly good leadership for today's struggling test-score-targeted schools alternately, and entirely, depended upon the hiring, supporting and empowering of long-term-dedicated, true-life-experienced educational leaders.

Long-term veteran administrators willing to see their job in a school *not* as a short-term, quick-fix assignment, but as a years-long relationship-building, organically-evolving commitment. Staunchly faithful career principals *unwilling* to see their schools, or the students who attended them, as the irreparable victims of an endlessly denigrated underachievement. Highly experienced educational leaders willing to hold minimal to zero interest in supporting the idea that schools and teachers must, in order to bring about a miraculously instantaneous improvement, be invasively and endlessly rearranged.

For some, in fact?

The discrepancy between old-fashioned career-dedicated principals and this latest rash of modern-day business hires was crystal clear. Doing my best to follow along at a back-to-school night, with a particularly focused care I listened as a Spanish-speaking parent declared a patent, and even transparently simple, distinction. As she saw it?

The contrast between good school leadership and bad school leadership was unambiguously clear. It was, simply, the difference between a principal *with* balls...

As opposed to one *without*.

My grasp of Spanish being generally formal, although I missed many nuances embedded in the language, I yet managed to grasp the fact that this parent felt strongly – and was anxious to

make sure that I understood it as well – that the recently-hired reform administrator who had been very abruptly placed in charge at our building; this decisively selected minority leader who had come into her community with big bilingual promises?

Oh, she made no bones about it:

Heavily and disappointingly?

This man had fallen unmistakably into the category of the *latter*. What our school required, and what we more honestly needed?

Was a leader much more generously and obviously endowed: a principal who, as this woman now labored to explain it, would more clearly fit into the category of the *former*. A courageously trustworthy advocate willing to fight for the idea that a school, no matter where it was located, no matter which students it served, had value. A leader willing to argue that our school was not a *bad* school, despite what the recent glut of reform promoters kept serving up as their own version of a pessimistic neighborhood-and-culture-denigrating truth.

What we *didn't* need?

And here she was adamant.

What we *didn't* need, and what we had been paying a huge price for keeping?

Was our currently assigned, and disappointingly spineless, administrator. This cowardly, testicular-challenged man who, after selling out a parental trust?

Had shamelessly abdicated his role as a true neighborhood-and-culture-protective advocate.

This man who, despite his many supportive promises, slippery as an eel had transformed himself into simply yet another in the growing spate of top-down, outsider-led school managers – simply yet another in the endless lineup of inexperienced, money-hungry employees who, as this frustrated parent now struggled to explain it, were taking over our district. Self-interested recruits so gorged on avarice, in fact, that each was willing to agree (well, so long as the salary banked for an unquestioned agreement remained high): Low-income schools, especially those generating their lowest scores?

Were institutions literally wallowing in a socially unacceptable deficit.

Flogging Will Continue Until Morale Improves

It was, each year, more visibly true.

In fact, the latest inundation of business-trained, minimally-education-experienced, quick-fix administrators so brazenly willing to vault in great leaps of hubris over the heads of currently existing student-and-neighborhood-protective old-school personnel – oh, it was this apparently unlimited flow of self-promoting recruits most eager to dive into the deepest end of the highly-paid managerial pool who could be most immediately, and most disinterestedly, persuaded.

Persuaded, and made entirely sure:

The schools where *they* were soon to be deployed?

The schools where *they* were soon to be placed into leadership?

Must be fixed.

Absolutely satisfied, even before walking through their assigned school's doors, that the buildings which they now entered were unquestionably broken. Fully and entirely positive, before meeting any of them, that the teachers inside their test-score-broken schools (oh, but wasn't this pure and simple logic) were undoubtedly broken as well. Broken, and, oh my, there were just so *many* of them:

Lazy. Resistant. Incompetent. Selfish. Insubordinate. Incontrovertibly and unmistakably?

Bad.

Taking on a low-income leadership assignment in order to enjoy and support a school's community; in order to celebrate neighborhood and cultural values; in order to build morale and elevate a teacher esteem; in order to protect institutional reputation and believe wholeheartedly in a student ability. Oh, for modern-day business-model zero-tolerance recruits – none of this tree-hugging people-centered *silliness* was programmed into the agenda.

Flogging, however, along with an unlimited, morale-killing blame?

Was unquestionably there.

Even assertively positioned at the very top of the list.

*"I have been warned about you."**

Defensively thrown out at the teachers seated inside our auditorium, these words had been purposefully selected by an impressively-titled, double-salaried administrator – a suddenly appointed reformer who, very unexpectedly and unambiguously, had been assigned to “fix” the test scores now seeping out of our low-income and over ninety-eight percent minority school. Three years had passed since earliest mandates of a no-excuses NCLB had invaded our building to prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that – well, due to the annually predictable production of indefensibly lowest scores? At our school, teachers bumbled along in a veritable cesspool of broken cultural, personal and academic deficits.

Looking first to each other, we turned, then, to stare wonderingly back at our newly assigned leader. To whom, exactly, was she speaking? Behind protective hands; over furtively-held handouts – surreptitiously we glanced around the room. Surely this imposingly-titled and exceptionally well-paid woman must have some particularly inflammatory information.

About *somebody*.

Oh yes, probably; oh yes, very likely.

That teacher.

The one sitting right there, in the next seat.

*In her first year with us, this particularly unhappy principal made this defensive statement not just once, but on three separate occasions.

Teachers Like You

When, in days of a modern educational accountability, you choose to work with continuously tested low-income kids – poor and often culturally-different children who wind up swamped under the ever growing and oft-published label of an untenable underachievement – well, you’ll be warned habitually, and by many, that you and your school are, straight up?

Bad.

And, undoubtedly; I mean, hello?

Nothing good will come of this.

You, as a teacher, are (and you are told this so often that it certainly must be true) the obvious reason why these schools – schools which must now be placed under the penance of a pes-

simistically short-term leadership – well, *you* are the reason why these schools were labeled as failing in the first place. Shoot, even the President has explained to everyone that it's a good idea to fire *you*. You have been told repeatedly so, really, it's time to start believing it:

You.

Are.

Bad.

Bad teachers. This has become such a popular if, confusingly, very broadly interpreted phrase. The words bring to mind that unhappy little puppy; that sad, guilt-ridden little guy forced to sit way over there in the corner. That one, with his head down and his tail between his legs. He's clearly repentant. Oh, he knows darned well that *he* caused all of the ruckus.

Bad, *bad* dog!

It's funny, though; I can remember when, not so long ago?

I was told quite often that I was actually a very *good* teacher.

A few years after starting my instructional career, I had transferred from the outer edge of our extensive citywide district into a ninety-eight percent minority, high poverty and truly inner-city school. At that time – in pre-NCLB days; in days long before the advent of a high-stakes accountability – the imposingly tall, four-story building I entered had been under the supervision of a well-known and long-term-committed administrator: a man who had, very clearly, enjoyed his work. Enthusiastically and often, he had told anyone who cared to listen that *his* school, Central High?

Was the best.

I got used to hearing that not only was our school a great place?

But that the students who attended, and the teachers who worked there, were also great. According to this neighborhood-and-culture-protective long-term-committed leader, we were all, just like his school, *the best*.

His optimism had been contagious. Counting upon the shelter provided by a protectively uplifting leadership, I had begun to work – hard. As an integral part of a large academic department, I had met frequently with a group of highly experienced educators; collaboratively we had addressed issues of schedule,

class size, and curriculum. Each year our department had spent long hours in the shaping of a teaching calendar for the following year: a teaching calendar which, while offering our students a carefully rounded course selection, might simultaneously boost an instructional success by allowing educators the opportunity to instruct those classes closest to the heart.

Arguments ensued; concessions were made; compromises were negotiated.

All, however, was done in the name of building an instructional calendar which would ultimately be best for us, our students, and our school; as publicly recognized professionals, we had been intimately and adamantly involved. Educators received overt credit for putting in the long hours necessary for preparing each year's instructional schedule; we knew, however, that all of our hard work would pay off when our school, and our students, got the best that we could offer.

As *good* teachers?

We had been fully engaged, publicly appreciated, and, following the leadership of our long-term career-committed principal, enthusiastically and invigoratingly optimistic. No matter the demanding work, no matter the complications (and, yes, there were many) associated to employment inside a low-income, inner-city school, both teacher loyalty and a professional educator opinion had held high value. Educator experience, along with a professional self-respect and an outspoken confidence, had remained solidly protected attributes.

But.

Oh, well; that was *then*.

Today, although I work in the same schools, and with the same kids?

Due to the never stopping and always whirling circle of innovations forced into low-income schools by highly funded reformers, I am, as so many people now feel compelled to tell me over and over (and then over again):

Bad.

Today while I attend many, *many* meetings, my teaching experience, my years of a hard-won education, and my student-protective voice hold little merit. As the means to control old-school opinions, micro-managed assemblies forced onto school-score-identified educators (regardless of age; regardless of sub-

ject; regardless of background) are carefully monitored. Veteran conclusions are no longer requested, and an educator collaboration – except where minutely orchestrated by a thin-skinned reform personnel – is no longer tolerated.

Today, in the name of a “compassionate” innovation, my instructional assignments and teaching schedules are handed to me by fixer “experts” and an increasingly disinterested Department of Human Resources. As a direct result, year after year both instructional appointments and student schedules are so poorly constructed, and so unprofessionally implemented, that, at a high cost to the school, the district, and ultimately to the students themselves, the earliest months of each academic semester must be interrupted with the repeated redress of one invasive mistake after the next.

Teachers who speak up; teachers who believe it useful to stand up; teachers who suggest that there might be a more logical and more collaborative way to help schools avoid this relentless flow of academic disruptions:

Are warily kept at bay.

Because, well; we aren’t smart, you know.

Just problematic.

And – *bad*.

You’d think I could learn to accept this; you’d think I could stop all of this nonsense of trying to get anyone, anyone at all, to see it any other way. “*Teachers like you,*” I hear instead from an apparently unlimited supply of flashily titled, but minimally experienced, administrators-of-the-moment.

Teachers like *you*.

No Child Left In The Neighborhood

Before all of this nonstop testing.

Way back in old-school-traditional, neighborhood-protective days; way back in days prior to all of the inflexibly instigated “compassion” of a governmentally legislated testing reform – my instructional craft and my deep love of teaching had expanded rapidly.

I had experienced, in my earliest days of an educator employment, a demanding but rewardingly collaborative work with a broad array of knowledgeable peers. And I had discovered, along

the way, that educators willing to initiate actual, true-to-life teaching ideas; teachers willing to go out on a limb and experiment, believing that they could make an honestly effective difference? Could find support. Counting upon the safeguards extended through a professional collaboration and an optimistic leadership, I had ascertained that it was not only imperative, but safe, to reach out to my students. Safe to step out into the unknown, and take interpersonal academic risks.

But, then?

Well, hoo boy.

Wham, bam, *shazam!*

High drama presented itself, suddenly, loudly and unexpectedly, arriving in the form of a Presidentially-initiated educational legislation centered upon a no-excuses answerability. Abruptly, and without building discussion or teacher input, educators employed inside the public arena were summarily introduced to a punitive package wrapped around a retaliatory, test-happy program – a program very decisively entitled NCLB:

No Child Left Behind.

Years later, after the test-fanatic platform of NCLB had had its way with public education for more than a decade – well, there were more than a few voices contending that facets of this test answerability program had strategically shut down and destabilized schools inside poorest and most often culturally-different neighborhoods.

There were those who took pains to point out that this national call for a no-excuses educational reform had conveniently paved the way for the massive re-gentrification and multi-million-dollar land speculation which had then forced out long-embedded low-income, culturally-protective communities.

There were those who protested; there were those who agonized; there were those who worried: that the struggling and often culturally different citizens now unable to afford the newly expensive re-gentrified lifestyles? Had been given no choice but to pack up and vacate previously culturally diverse neighborhoods.

There were those who thought it important to mention (and, well, wasn't this perhaps just a touch ironic) that, paradoxically, as over the years so many of these low-income neighborhoods had been methodically and heartlessly routed, the original

understanding of NCLB had been premised upon the idea that, well, gee – in the end?

No low-income, culturally-different child *should*, actually...

Ever be left behind.

Okay, okay.

So, yes, perhaps a small part of the initial equation had somehow been ignored in all of the exciting national fervor for a test-based reform. But now, really, wasn't it such a very small, and surely unimportant, part? Apparently, shoot, it was a part no longer even considered to be all that relevant. Because; although the original intentions behind the structures of NCLB had recommended that no child should, ever, be left behind – *in poverty*.

Well. I mean, really; you could *see*, right?

That despite earliest-projected, advertised-as-compassionate governmental intentions, rather than genuinely attacking the social, racial and political underpinnings of *poverty*, the consequently created testing configurations of a no-excuses accountability had, well, gosh darn it, so swiftly and compliantly, and with such a slick agility, converted themselves into a conservative capitalist's dream. A dream that a few unusually prescient critics now referred to not as NCLB, but, more particularly, as NCLUT. Evidently, as public school teachers had been quick to discover with the assertive implementation of an immovable NCLB, our nation had entered into a truly modern, statistically dependent world where – in a deepest countrywide empathy?

No child *would*, ever again, be left:

Un-tested.

Proposing a logical delineation for the basic, and, as she understood it, transparently simple purposes of NCLUT, a teaching peer outlined her straightforward equation.

“First,” she detailed, “manufacture an always increasing supply of privileged-class-created, dominant-culture-biased tests.*†

“Then,” she continued, “endlessly and repeatedly administer these tests. *Prove*, through the results garnered from your incessant testing, that the non-standardized, non-assimilated poor and minority children who perform unacceptably on your tests live in an untenable vacuum of deficit. In the name of a benevo-

lent reform, blame their teachers, close their schools, and kick them decisively out of the neighborhood.

“Build a massive Home Depot; sell those cute little just-emptied bungalows to privileged-class, dominant-culture yuppies for a *phenomenal* profit.

“Really, “ she concluded, “it’s all so *simple*.”

*The practice of winnowing out those who are unwanted through an affluent-culture-biased testing – that type of testing able to promote and include only those citizens willing to idealize the history and culture of those traditionally in power – has been criticized as being not only a racist, but sexist and elitist “meritocracy.” (And, by savvy critics of test-fanatic days, as our nation’s latest class-dividing devotion to a “testocracy.”)

†While the heavily publicized fact that recent SAT/ACT scores are at a historical “low” has led to an additional public school bashing – reformers expediently ignore the fact that as, over the past decade, an ever increasing number of low-income, culturally-diverse students have been pushed into taking these tests (tests now paid for by more than a few states and mandated for a no-excuses administration on-site to *all* age-appropriate students during the school year at lowest-income schools), these famously expensive and traditionally self-selective, dominant-culture-biased tests are being exposed as being just that: culturally biased.

Visibly Hidden

As a child, my son received a generous amount of attention from his grandfather. Enjoying time spent with his first grandson, Grandpa appeared to have an unlimited supply of energy. One evening, however?

It was clear that Grandpa was losing just a little bit of steam.

In the course of an already long-running game of Hide and Seek, little footsteps pattering gleefully in slippery pajamaed feet, my two-year-old scurried excitedly into the kitchen. Stifling a giggle, conspicuously he “hid” himself under the kitchen table. Taking advantage of the moment, Grandpa stretched out his turn as finder by wandering leisurely about the house, pondering loudly: “Oh, my, where *could* he be?”

Next to the kitchen table was a door which led to the basement. Upon finally entering the kitchen, Grandpa stopped

beside the table and opened the basement door. As he stood looking down into the shadows of the stairwell, he cleared his throat and began to speculate: “Oh, my; I wonder if he went down *there?*”

Leaning up against the wall, he allowed a few more seconds to pass before he added: “Oh, it’s awfully dark down there. I wonder if he *did* go down?”

“Well!” was the frustrated assertion of a little voice from underneath the kitchen table: “You *could* turn on the light!”

Ah. Shedding light on an obvious conundrum.

Such a logical, if often purposefully and even dexterously avoided action. Not so long ago in the political realm, a presidential hopeful got himself into a little mess when he pointed to meticulously written conservative proposals and labeled them exactly what they were: A clear attempt, he stated, at “social engineering.” Although this type of a political manipulation – an intentional maneuvering where lawmakers seated at *any* point along the ideological spectrum do what they can to influence legislation bent in the direction of personal (and too often outsider-lobbied) beliefs – was far from a historically unseen or hidden activity, the publicly blatant use of these words threw glaring light onto an age-old and less than savory truth.

In theory elected to serve others?

Much too often politicians act to protect narrowly personal agendas.

“Today,” commented a journalist, taking note of not only this candidate’s undisguised statement, but the immediacy of a piercingly negative reaction generated by his peers: “Well, today the worst political gaffe is a direct articulation of glaringly visible truth.”

And as, year after year, a painstakingly “unseen” social engineering now attached itself assertively to our nation’s attempt at a hard-hitting, no-excuses, test-score-based educational accountability? Glaring, can’t-miss-it truth – no matter how visible, no matter how hard to miss:

Was ever more skillfully evaded.

No Teachers Allowed

Once everyone had been fully convinced.

Once everyone had been poignantly persuaded.

Once everyone had been plaintively induced to get up on board; to jump up on board, and enthusiastically embrace the idea that – well, in an imperative effort at meeting the needs of low-income students? Our newly benevolent country must now instigate a particularly modern age committed to the invasive transformations behind a test-based accountability: an age wherein *all* students could, now, so very generously count upon receiving the kindhearted care of a nonstop statistical attention.

Once everyone had been assertively swayed; once everyone had been movingly influenced; once everyone had been heartrendingly pushed into offering up an immovable support for the world of NCLB assessments, and an attached, test-engineered social reform. Once everyone had passively acknowledged, in the process, our new millennium's unprecedented power over a national public education; once everyone had watched as a public school administration began to slip inexorably into the realm of big-government controls and capitalist profits...

Well, not surprisingly?

A rising number of educators had begun to stand up in response.

At first politely, and then more aggressively, frustrated teachers had repeatedly done what they could. They had tried, again and again, to reach out and turn on the light. They had stood up; they had taken direct hits. They had argued; they had pointed candidly. They had labored, continually and anxiously, to illuminate the shocking connection between our nation's growing focus upon a no-excuses testing liability, and a poor, culturally-different neighborhood abuse.

Anxiously they had worked to expose the connection:

Between test labeling and a community destabilization.

Between inflexible transformations and a neighborhood regentrification.

Between socially-biased exam practices and a blatantly elitist separation.

Forthright, outspoken educators – each year more troubled; each year more outraged – had demanded a democratic forum where the traditional processes around an intentional collaboration might guarantee recognition of increasingly panicked concerns.

But.

Oh, well, now see?

It was *these teachers...*

Who kept creating *all of the problems.*

Loudly excited NCLB politicians, suddenly empowered Department of Education executives, nationally lauded, self-proclaimed instructional experts, district leaders, fixer administrators, test designers, exam evaluators, assessment producers, expensively contracted school consultants, building transformation personnel, innovation architects, curriculum peddlers, charter managers, on-line proponents, technology analysts, employee trainers, teacher locators and program instigators – *all* of whom had grown parasitically dependent upon not only the annual extension of an endlessly repeated testing, but, much, *much* more importantly, upon the reform-allocated funding umbilically attached to its underbelly: Well, as these dedicated reformers were quick to recognize?

Non-collaborative, voice-blocking strategies would now be required.

For so many years, national public education had presented its intentions as being contingent upon the inclusive, multi-voiced involvement of administrators, teachers, students, support staff, parents, community leaders and, in more than a few cases, business owners operating in geographically attendant neighborhoods. But, nowadays; nowadays in a truly magical era looking to the lucrative invasions of a test-based accountability?

Oh, let's just say that democracy – you know, that tedious process where multiple parties got together in the effort to generate optimal solutions for local, honest needs; where culture-protective parties stubbornly refused to hop up and board the remunerative reform wagon, rejecting any need to be labeled as deficit-prone and therefore fully incompetent; where citizens connected with a day-to-day low-income, culturally-different reality demanded the opportunity to speak up and shed light *by pointing directly at glaringly problematic truth.*

Well, *that* kind of a multi-party, everybody-has-a-voice democracy?

Really slowed things down; really gummed up the works.

After all, in a deeply compassionate nation now heroically willing to take on the heavy obligation of making *all* truly impor-

tant decisions about what was good for schools (and, even more importantly, capitalist profits):

My; *who really needed teachers.*

Or anyone, for that matter, with any long-standing educational experience at all.

Changing The Status Of The Status

And so, arguing the undoubted need to engineer a brand-new public school reality; maintaining the obligation to *step up*, to *stand for*, and in the name of a modern-day social responsibility, *put students first* – well, in the deeply concerned name of children?

Governmentally manufactured NCLB test-score reformations were insistently, aggressively and continually mandated. Across the nation, in state after state, city after city, district after district: one by one, the inflexibly detached innovations assaulted, ransacked and destabilized unsuspecting low-income neighborhoods: blowing up the weakest schools; closing, restructuring and redesigning. Removing experienced teachers; eliminating long-term principals; re-assigning students; separating, segregating and dividing.

Creating, as year after year of reform passed?

A mercilessly ongoing havoc.

In a belated shell-shocked rejoinder, apprehensive citizens began to react. Voices rose as constituents labored to describe the ruinous fallout tied to an overwhelming, and even blatantly discriminatory, agenda. At first uneasily, and then more frantically, frightened participants demanded what they believed to be their right: an old-fashioned, old-school-traditional, neighborhood-protective, opinion-inclusive democratic forum.

Refusing responsibility for implementing an old-school-style, multi-voiced inclusion, however, in strategic response the gurus of reform turned away. Electing to extend a more promising tactic, they began to make publicly negative references to *pre-testing*, *pre-NCLB* traditions – those old-school collaborative traditions where a building management had depended upon intentionally inclusive practices – as the now outdated “broken system’s” *old-days status quo*.

And, from there?

Ah, well, from there it was simply a funky little razzle-dazzle two-step.

Those vocally frustrated detractors; that growing mass of dissatisfied anti-reform critics; those so many loudly opinionated, but clearly misguided parents, students, and community members; those uncooperative, outspoken teachers and, in fact, anyone at all who continued to demand any of those old-days' expectations for an *intentionally democratic collaboration*?

Well, in the fast pace of truly modern days, critics like these (and, oh; surely this was obvious) were nothing more than self-interested disbelievers who, due to their impossible-to-understand loyalty for the tediously slow practices tied to an indefensible old-school status quo – well scandalously, people like these?

Clearly did not hold a high value for children.

That old-fashioned expectation for an interactively democratic inclusion – oh, make no bones about it, this message was repeatedly and assertively insinuated: Tolerance for any of those sluggishly outdated voice-inclusive, tediously-collaborative practices *would force the nation backwards*. Backwards into that shameful, no longer palatable pre-testing world where poor and/or culturally-different communities had been left to muddle along on their own.

Citing the intentions of an original NCLB, modern-day arguments calling for the uninterrupted production of a relentlessly collected testing data immovably maintained that – well, due to the statistically proven deficit of a data-supported underachievement?

Poor and often culturally-different children simply could not, as had been the case in days of an unpardonably slow, multi-voiced, old-school-inclusive status quo, *be left to themselves*.

Oh my, no.

Blowing up their schools.

Silencing their teachers.

Removing their career-committed principals.

All of this?

Was unmistakably and unquestionably necessary.

Because, as everyone (well, everyone who mattered in truly contemporary days) knew, and subsequently never questioned:

Test scores?

Never lied.

Progressing Progressively

And?

Well, honestly.

You only had to stop a minute; stop and let yourself *think* about it. If poor and often culturally-different students *didn't* look like, act like, imitate and aspire, always and undoubtedly, to being and acting exactly like culturally...uh...*normal* students; well, it simply *must* have been our nation's job, mustn't it?

To stop their inconvenient dreams of being *left alone*.

Of being *just who they were*.

Oh, my, no; you had only to stop and *think* about it.

Think, for example, about our nation's modern-day, test-score-transparent, nationally-recognized academic ideal of a rigidly standardized *achievement*.

As a nation, didn't we, all of us, all together, fully agree with our government's theory that a statistically-tested, one-size-fits-all and increasingly standardized academic achievement would, in the end, be true illustration of an indisputable national *progress*? And gee whiz, *progress*, as a growing number of the progressive thinkers calling out each year more loudly for a mounting reliance upon a data proven (and thus unmistakably visible) tested achievement knew: well, surely *progress* could only arrive through the no-excuses reshaping of untenable reality.

"We've *got* to do something about students at Central High."

Proffered up by an unmistakably concerned and oft-professed-liberal activist, this emphatic assertion was accorded an immediate defense through an even yet more logical rationale:

"I wouldn't send my children there."

Progressive declarations like this one, coming as they did from privileged-class and generally non-minority but avowed open-minded citizens, oh, they just made so much sense – to other privileged-class and generally non-minority but compassionately troubled advocates. Holding test scores high, *progressive* thinkers waved what they argued to be incontrovertible truth. What *had* to be done? What was *undoubtedly* required?

Was the immediate "non-negotiable" reformation of our nation's lowest-income, lowest-scoring schools.

Wasn't it, after all; well, wasn't it our country's overall objective?

Although – well, yes; despite a visibly growing national diversity, despite proudly disparate communities, despite painstakingly celebrated multi-cultural traditions, despite earnestly cultivated neighborhood-specific loyalties – well, still: *Wasn't it* our modern-day instructional goal to aggressively convert each and every public school into a building where privileged, middle-class-to-wealthy and largely non-minority students would not only be comfortable, but heck, *could even be the very students to set all educational standards for each and every academic expectation, curriculum focus, and cultural celebration?**

Wouldn't this, unmistakably, be *progress*?

Wasn't it our nation's ultimate intention, as, with an increasing fervor we manufactured (and then fanatically maintained) our testing laws bent upon forcing an ever more tightly pinpointed proof of a data-based student “progress” – well, *wasn't it* our benevolent goal that, in the end, every student and every consequently created citizen *be exactly alike*?

Because.

Okay, now I'll warn you, this is a seriously frightening thought.

If they weren't?

Wasn't it our country's absolute and unquestioned obligation, through the ongoing implementation of our increasingly homogenized test-score practices, to push each and every student directly and uncompromisingly toward an unopposed, and endlessly tested, compliance?

I mean, gee whilikers.

Just stop and think of the uncontrolled *consequences*.

A poor kid. A culturally-different kid. A kid we hadn't taken the time to overwhelm with our mercilessly never-ending testing; one we hadn't managed, early on, to carefully, repeatedly and humiliatingly label (gosh, as early as was practicable: kindergarten, pre-school – in the womb if possible) as an unmistakably *test-score-proven* failure. Gee, a kid like that?

Might slip through the cracks; might lose his or her sense of place; *might even lose the fear of being different*. Shoot, one of them; maybe some upstart culturally-different female?

Might grow up – oh, now, but isn't this a laugh – to be President! Or, even more preposterous; even more impossible?

A Supreme Court Justice.

Competitive, punitively implemented school accountability laws were undoubtedly, and even irrefutably, necessary.

Just *look* at those test scores.

But – *progressive social engineering?*

Oh, now; don't call it *that*.

*Surely one day in May is enough time to spend on learning *everything one might need to know* about our nation's Latino heritage (i.e. that Latinos are a simple people who love to dance and wear bright colors).

The Interests of Children

As each year's additional supply of suddenly deregulated NCLB reforms bullied their way into low-income schools, engendering a flood of endlessly denigrated test scores – well, not surprisingly?

Due to a years-long history of being an over ninety-percent non-White, low-income institution, Central High quickly drew a long line of miracle-working “fixer” attention.

After all, as the so many compassionate “experts” of modern days thought it helpful to publish in local newspapers and on insistently advertised school-performance websites: Central High, despite the every year amazing efforts made by children living with a severe and relentless poverty; some homeless, some transient; many learning to speak, read and write in a brand new language:

Well, Central High?

Was clearly and irrefutably an *F* school.

A school miserably and unacceptably *failing*.*

Just in case anybody out there – *hadn't heard*.

To jumpstart the social “progress” now demanded by a suddenly instigated NCLB, the optimistic, career-minded principal who, for so many long years, had been in charge at Central High, was abruptly transferred out of our building. Discussions around securing new leadership began. For reform loyalists, considering parental requests to recruit locally smacked of those now outdated old-school traditions and that dreaded backward fall into

the democratic practices associated to a pre-NCLB *status quo*. It wasn't long, then, before Mr. Elton – a burly, hired-on-purpose-Black-male-from-back-East-where-people-are-unquestionably-smarter; an imposing, never-smiling man who looked the very part of a no-nonsense reformer – took over.

“I feel that I must warn you,” Mr. Elton informed our staff at his initial faculty meeting; holding an expression of serious concentration, he stared solemn-faced out at his audience. “*White women moving into this neighborhood have made appointments to see me. And these women,*” he continued in a threatening tone, “*have made it very clear: They want this school to be...*” and here he paused for affect:

“*Better.*”

Peering out into the heavy air of our auditorium, his unwavering frown dared anyone to question these unassailable intentions. “So, I am here to tell you? That *that* is what we are going to be:

“*Better!*”

Ah, we whispered, one to the other: so *that* was it.

The local community, made up historically of minority families – of non-White mothers who had lived in surrounding neighborhoods for decades – must never have been motivated enough, perhaps simply not wise enough, to consider coming into the building and making such an essential request.

Only one year later, Mr. Elton, who, through a conspicuous lack in both educational and management experience had made countless appalling and even scandalous errors, was forced to resign his powerful position. Exchanged for yet another highly-paid (although this time publicly-acclaimed Latina) “fixer” administrator, we learned that our latest leader’s vision apparently mimicked Mr. Elton’s push to please the dominant culture. Under our new principal’s direction, the excitingly transformed and unquestionably *better* Central High?

Was going to look like, act like, and, for all intents and purposes be an exact replica of Franklin Hills High School. That award-winning, high-test-scoring and surely superior suburban high school – on the other side of town.

Nevermind that Franklin Hills’ students were, and had traditionally always been, over ninety-five percent White.

Nevermind that the average annual income of the households located in, and around, Franklin Hills' neighborhoods came in at well over \$80K each year.

And a very ironic nevermind, that – *in a protective recognition of research-based stability as a proven precursor for a long-term, deeply-embedded student achievement* – the career-minded, career-committed principal at Franklin Hills High School had been in charge at her building for seventeen consecutive years and was still, very guardedly and very proactively, calling the shots.

In the name of a “compassionately” instigated statistical reform, once a nationally mandated NCLB had made the inflexible invasion of poor and often culturally-different schools not only obligatory, but abruptly imperative, huge amounts of time, energy and money had been spent in seeking to prove that it was not only possible, but munificently helpful, to force non-White, non-wealthy kids into their very best imitation of:

Wealthy White Kids.

Teaching those who were poor to be poor (because, well, honestly, we really weren't planning to do anything about *that*) *but to not look or act poor.*

To be culturally different:

But to not look or act culturally different.

Surely this, as the so many big-name school reformers of modern days could now make abundantly clear, was in the very best interests of children.

*When, in the name of a “benevolent” intervention, you assertively malign, label, invade and destabilize those schools where, due to the wide array of issues attached to poverty and cultural disconnect, only around 40 percent of students graduate and move on to find success at a college – ultimately what you are doing in the name of your unprecedented “compassion?” Is making sure that *even this small but steady percent of minority students cannot progress and successfully integrate into society.*

My Boss Is Not Harry

Considered, in modern days, to be an essential element of the top-down school-control paradigm now deemed necessary for

not only protecting, but promoting, the very best interests of children – finger pointing, shaming, blaming and the exposing of personal grievances mushroomed quickly into a nationally modeled (and district assumed) practice.

Bad teacher blame, followed by an immediate, alarm-generating, publicly-humiliating censure: As an administrative tool useful to those now laboring to force invasive transformations inside lowest-scoring schools, a shame-based educator manipulation soon began to intertwine complicity with the invasive penalties of a no-excuses NCLB. Traditional old-school collaborative energies – old-school, voice-inclusive energies now so negatively associated to that argued-as-ineffectual old-days *status quo* – were scrupulously redirected into an immobilizing, retributive blame. Quickly replacing a no longer tolerated interdependent trust?

Privately independent fear burgeoned.

Area superintendents, quadrant supervisors, principals, assistant principals, advisers, deans, counselors, massively hired reform personnel, and, increasingly, teachers assigned into the role of department chair were all warned of an impending danger. Pushed into the office of witness, all were encouraged to keep a vigilant eye out for a clear, if nonspecific, *bad* teacher behavior.

Almost immediately?

A surge of unscheduled classroom observations escalated.

“Miss, I didn’t get to finish this.”

Scrawled onto the bottom of a fifth-hour essay, this quickly scribbled note was followed by a brief but defensive clarification: “That harry lady who comes in here all the time kept asking me too many questions.”

Smiling, I presumed a reference to the voluminously-dyed tresses sported by a recently installed vice principal – a loudly flamboyant woman who had managed to make it more than clear that *her* best efforts required not only the continual disruption of classes?

But an unapologetic interaction with students.

Especially those who appeared to be most busy.

Slowly and unbendingly, as the years of statistical reformations evolved, low-income schools experienced the painful loss of democratically interactive rights. In ultra-modern days committed to a rigid liability, unimportant school personnel (oh, you know, like those lowest-level and thus inconsequentially *bad*

teachers) were expected to come to terms with the fact that – as school-score-identified *bad* employees? Their opinions no longer held value. Somewhere along the way, a newer, more contemporary theory of a low-income school organization had been emphatically adopted and was now fully in thrall to a brand-new, one-sided, vigorously-fault-finding model of an employee management.

And, in this model?

Well, in this model, in place of sitting down to *talk* to a teacher; in place of honestly supporting her or collaboratively listening carefully to her true-life concerns? Alternately and meticulously you distanced yourself by unexpectedly entering her classroom, interrupting her lessons, and sitting or standing ominously to the side.

Taking, as you hovered there:

Conspicuously copious notes.

Sometimes you were the principal.

Sometimes you brought the principal with you.

Sometimes, rolling deep in days of a swaggering importance, you arrived in the company of an impressive gaggle of district administrators, area supervisors, newly-hired evaluators or sundry management personnel.

You had no qualms about invasively disrupting lessons.

In fact?

After entering a classroom unannounced, you would often – although, yes; this was particularly distracting – stroll around. Frequently, ignoring the fact that the teacher was, at that very moment, delivering an explicit instruction, you would lean down to speak to a student. Evidently? You believed that this wasn't rude. It was patently obvious that you, as the expert, felt actual instruction to be of only a fleetingly limited importance. As a barely consequential part of a student's day – surely direct instruction was an extraneous element which could be repeatedly and nonchalantly ignored.

Disregarding any actual instruction, abruptly you would lean down to ask nervously unsuspecting students multiple imperative questions:

What are today's objectives?

What is the purpose of today's agenda?

What are this unit's specific academic goals?

How do these goals relate to the expectations found inside our state standards? Exactly which standards are being covered in today's lesson? Why are you studying this particular page in your workbook? *Don't you feel that you would understand everything better if you were working in groups?*

With any luck; oh, with any luck at all you might quickly elicit the student reaction which, secretly, you always knew that you could find; the one you were always privately seeking: "Huh?"

Ha.

You would, then, have done your job; you would have located a direct proof that *this* class was suffering from the debilitating influences of yet another *bad* teacher. And, should one or more district bigwigs happen to be standing there, alongside you that day?

Well, gosh, what a happy way to ameliorate the boredom of *actually* observing an inconsequentially lowest-level teacher, by making loudly whispered comments to high-level peers; giggling or snorting, whenever necessary, as those oh-so-funny big-shot reformers you were hanging with these days made loudly private insider jokes.*

*Maybe this won't be a surprise, but in truly modern days not only do many of those who "observe" allow their cell phones to ring out unexpectedly, but openly take calls and begin to talk or whisper loudly and disruptively – as if, somehow, the reform-day status of "expert" makes them not only invisible but inaudible.

No U in Data Teams

Mirroring the punitive management model where suddenly unexpected observations led, more often than not, to both negative evaluations and a humiliating censure, the testing mandates of NCLB exercised an identical practice by offering either monetary rewards, or degrading punishments, to schools where literacy or math scores had shown a notable gain or – much more reliably – an insupportable loss.

In a logical response, hoping to both garner compensation and avoid penalties through the decisive elevation of literacy and/or math scores, each year larger and larger segments of a low-in-

come school's budget were funneled directly into the programs and personnel connected to these two now immovably state-tested subjects. Soon enough, the funding required to engage both math and literacy consultants – self-promoting “experts” who then turned around to command the supplemental hiring of facilitators, supervisors, managers, specialists, coaches, testing personnel, data analysts and evaluators – boggled the mind.

There were even, we learned as the years of a no-excuses testing passed?

Highly-paid consultants whose sole task was to initiate a financing for the repeatedly mandated acquisition of *more consultants*.

“Hey; have you noticed?” a teaching peer whispered as we found ourselves assembled inside yet another reform-mandatory, out-of-building, *bad* teacher retraining. “I just counted. This is a training for educators, right? There are twenty-four teachers here. But, look: there are *thirty-seven* people here who are *not* teachers.

“My god,” she mused. “How much does all of this *cost*?”

Intrigued by her comment, I thought back to a day when, after arriving late to yet another data team meeting inside our heavily reformed school, I had been informed, as I sat down, that most of the other teachers on our team had been diverted to an alternate assembly. The only other educator in attendance, a shyly inexperienced young woman named Teresa, sat beside me as, confusingly, seven non-teachers, including an assistant-principal-in-training, two Language Arts coaches, a curriculum specialist, a testing-data technician, a subject facilitator and, well, I forget who the other guy was – perhaps a helpful custodian – all sat together for the full hour arguing the merits of a recently accumulated assessment data.

Although our presence was kindly tolerated?

Neither Teresa nor I was asked to more than peripherally contribute our personal views. *Teacher* thinking – well, by now everyone was starting to grasp this. Teacher thinking was always so damned *protective*.

Resistantly guarded; frustratingly cautious – experienced educator opinions?

Simply got in the way.

Besides, as lowest-level, school-score-proven *bad* teachers; as the educators expected to stand in front of, and do our best

to effectively instruct, enormous, hormone-imbued classes filled to overflowing with resistantly-wriggly, multi-ability kids – well, we weren't really considered competent to be part of this statistically specific, and somehow vitally imperative, process.

It did make me wonder, however.

In hard-hitting days; in days now so unbendingly dedicated to an über-modern, no-excuses, test-based reform – were hugely expensive innovation-financed teacher development meetings being held out there where no teachers actually showed up...

And no one noticed?

The British Very Possibly Are Not Coming

So – although overwhelmingly expensive?

Touted as the *absolute and only* solution for countering a now nationally recognized (and relentlessly NCLB test-score-proven) school-wide deficit in literacy and math, an escalating number of reform personnel were steadily and insistently hired.

Argued to be the singular solution for forcing low-income schools to confront their shamefully “unacceptable” test scores, the often very large salaries necessitated to pay for an escalating deluge of reform hires began to systematically drain building and district coffers. With so much of a school's budget channeled directly into support for the suddenly ordered innovations now immovably aimed at math and literacy, an increasing lack in overall operational funding required the continual reassessment of traditional curricular offerings.

As literacy and math departments yielded to mandates for spending double, and even triple, hours in a direct contact with low-scoring students, schools had no choice but to re-think their overall academic scope. Casualty to both the increasingly narrowed course constraints and consequently overstretched budgets – alternate subject departments?

Did not fare well.

Art, music and dance were the first to feel severe, painful cuts. Gym, foreign languages and special education were next in line. And then:

Geography? Civics? Government? History?

Oh, well, gosh. Now, really; who actually needed *those*?

Certainly not low-income children.

Or, as it turned out?

Your average American citizen.

When, in the spring of 2011, the United States elected to spend massive financing upon military interventions inside the nation of Libya, pointing to a map, journalists on the street asked passersby to identify where, exactly, one might find that particular country. Few respondents were up to the task.

“Huh,” commented a teenager who found himself standing next to an imposingly attired businessman unsuccessfully perusing the map. “Maybe we ought to stop spending so much of our money on the military, and start spending more of it in the teaching of geography.”

Out of the mouths of babes.

Adding fuel to the school criticism fire, on the heels of more than a decade committed to the heavily-tested subjects of literacy and math, a somewhat broader look at national test scores suggested that, well, huh. Wasn't this surprising? As it turned out, a general student knowledge of *history* was – oh, now, how to state this gently: *pretty darned weak*. Making this same point a bit more directly, a famous maybe-I-will-maybe-I-won't politician drew additional attention as she volunteered her personal interpretation of Paul Revere's heart-stoppingly late night ride. To warn the British that they were coming.

Or. Shoot. Was it that they *weren't*?

Possibly they didn't know.

“Why,” queried a blogger in response to this famous politician's unique interpretation of historical events. “Well, why don't we quit worrying so much about a candidate's birth certificate, and start demanding more proof of an education?”

Personally?

I would love to see this idea take root.

In fact, after having been forced through more than a decade bent to the arbitrary abuses of a never-ending testing, I would simply be happy to ask, that – *from now on?* All currently elected officials, presidential candidates, senators, representatives, mayors, councilmen/women, school board hopefuls, superintendents, fixer-principals, self-proclaimed reformers, talking-head journalists, and the recent glut of I-know-everything educational innovators be forced to sit down with our state's tenth-grade NCLB exam.

And then?

Oh, my, let's not be shy; surely we could have *all results with names overtly attached* very publicly published. Shoot; we *are*, after all, talking about self-promoting educational experts and gloriously opinionated look-at-me politicians.

We could, probably?

Just make it the third grade test.

Narrow The Curriculum, Narrow The Voice

In modern days overwhelmed by the heavy “compassion” of a no-excuses educational reform, it soon became difficult to get around to the other side of a suddenly initiated run of studies; studies which endlessly promoted a test-score-based subject-specific reform. However; depending upon whose research you intentionally tracked, with only a little added effort you could locate alternative views. Views which included plenty of years-old evidence to indicate that children of *all* backgrounds?

Thrived when offered broadly kinetic and physically demanding lives.

Over and over, in fact, studies connected both a mental function and an academic retention to complexly kinesthetic, physically challenging activities.

One evening, a teacher who had made this connection intuitively was on the news. She had been concerned, she told an encouraging news associate, because in her elementary school classroom the girls had been far outscoring the boys. “I bet myself,” she explained, “that if I made sure to add in plenty of physical activities, oh, like letting the kids jump, or climb, or do their work while kneeling on the floor, that the boys’ scores would rise.

“And,” here she paused to emphasize her results with an excited smile: “They *did*.”

To help illustrate this teacher’s impressive success, the news anchor cheerfully drew everyone’s attention to a brightly charted graph where pre-experiment and post-experiment scores had been neatly diagramed. The evidence was visibly convincing. (Although; well; wasn’t it interesting, I remember thinking at the time, that no one felt it necessary to comment upon the fact that – not only had the boys’ scores jumped? But, you could see it; it

was *right there*. The girls had also made great gains, staying, on average, seven to eight points ahead of the boys.)

The relationship between physical activities and academic progress, as this teacher had so importantly and correctly guessed, was possibly not only useful, but crucial.*†

Additional studies supported her presumption.

Students whose day, while allowing for an intentional academic focus, strategically intermixed physically involved courses – kinetically creative courses such as dance, gymnastics, band, choir, drumline, step, art, jewelry, woodworking, home economics, sports, cheerleading, set design or student council – illustrated, through the elevation of test scores, that a high academic performance had more to do with the category and sequence of subjects and activities offered, than did any intentionally narrowed emphasis upon one or two rigidly-selected academic categories.

Categories such as?

Literacy and math.

Paradoxically, then; all of those low-income, low-scoring students?

All of those children who, for so many long years, now, had been immovably targeted by a nationally engendered test score evidence – evidence that a mushrooming supply of self-proclaimed “experts” loudly promoted as being an indisputable proof of intellectual deficit? Those so many students who had, then, been subsequently forced into modern-day schedules requiring double math, double literacy, and, for many, additional intervention reading and/or mathematics classes combined with a reform-financed *no-after-school-activities-for-you* late afternoon tutoring.

Well, due to the compounding hours spent inside ever tightening schedules able to offer little to no integration of physical activities – were these students actually children *who had retained less information?*

Was it possible?

That, after all was said and done; that, despite the breathtaking sums of money argued as being an indispensable support for the never-ending parade of math and literacy programs attached to expensively altering personnel – well, was it possible that, in the end, narrowly test-score-focused students *might actu-*

ally know less than peers of the same ability who had experienced broader and more physically demanding lives?

Was it possible?

That, in the loudly advertised name of an “expert”-initiated accountability, the relentless statistical targeting which then forced students into an increasingly narrowed concentration upon non-kinetic studies, in reality had, year upon year, for over a decade now, produced the exact opposite effect by undermining an academic success and stealing voice from those who could least afford to be silenced?

*Or, as my niece would say: Why do you think the band kids usually get the highest grades? (Learning how to read, interpret and apply the language of music has, in fact, been statistically compared to the effort required to comprehend and employ the functions of calculus.)

†And, as teachers willing to go out on strike would tell you: Recess should never be considered as a part of a student’s day which might be easily eliminated, but as an essentially protected component of the overall curriculum.

Welcome To Nirvana

As the Western calendar turned over, hitting the year 2000 with great fanfare, intrepidly our nation had entered into the earliest decade of a brand-new twenty-first century. Simultaneously, a recently elected President had set the new millennium’s educational tone by claiming a vehement personal ownership (and parallel protection rights) for any and all students attending his nation’s public schools.

“Rarely is the question asked,” this benevolent leader of our country’s latest educational paradigm had been given credit for bringing to the table:

“Is our children learning?”

Pushing a sudden (and purportedly unprecedented) awareness of the twenty percent or so public school students who lived in national poverty, this exceptionally concerned President had taken responsibility into his own hands by brashly making the threat that – absolutely, all schools, from now on?

Well, hoo baby; let’s just say that they had better start to worry, worry, worry.

About an unmistakable and utterly serious educational *accountability*.

Previous to the outrage coming so visibly from our brand-new millennium's modern-day President, decades of public school research had regularly and predictably confirmed two facts. *Fact number one*: A lowest national academic performance had been historically produced by lowest-income neighborhoods. *Fact number two*: Way too many of our country's lowest-income neighborhoods had traditionally served as a home to the largest number of our nation's culturally-different minority children.

As a response to these two repeatedly documented facts, in fact, forty years earlier a protective Civil Rights' legislation had been adopted; legal dictates had been written and signed to demand that the federal government set aside financing slated for use *only* as an aid to our nation's lowest-income schools. How better, now proclaimed our nascent millennium's newest educational President, to use this legally mandated Civil-Rights-initiated poverty assistance:

Than to hold low-income schools accountable.

And, oh my; here was a truly innovative and decidedly compassionate possibility: How better to expend hugely unparalleled sums of this low-income-designated money – funding so carefully and resolutely earmarked as a support for those children struggling with the debilitating realities of poverty and cultural disconnect – *than to test the bleeding bejeebies out of them!*

Hence the theoretically benevolent, if minimally dissected, arrival of a brand-new century's first decade of a "high-stakes" testing. Legislation compassionately entitled No Child Left Behind passed easily through lawmaking hands; caring openly about poor students (well, caring enough to hold educators rather than politicians accountable for them) made so much sense. It also made for good press. It sounded so, well, you know, involved, responsible – *so hands-on* – to the voting public.

Before the year 2000, before the legal mandates of a massive educational answerability had invaded schools to commandeer a traditional building management, students in most states had experienced only one (once yearly) one-to-two-day test; scores from these widely-used and thus widely-normed tests had served as an indicator for an overall school standing, comparing, as they did, students in one state or school to students in another.

But, *now*?

Ah, well: *now*.

Now a brand-new century anxious to initiate the groundbreaking benevolence of a no-excuses liability suddenly opened the door to a little, oh, how about we label it *creative* competition. Swiftly and conveniently, test makers, test evaluators, test coaches, test consultants, test monitors, test facilitators, test theorists, test technologists, test trainers, test analysts, test writers, test re-writers, test briefers and test de-briefers – all popped up, seemingly out of nowhere. All nervously champed at the bit; all impatiently awaited a chance to get into the game; all were more than ready to vie for a personal slice of that compassionately mandated accountability pie.

State tests, district tests, quadrant tests, in-school tests.

Writing tests, reading tests.

Intelligence tests, intervention tests, entrance tests, exit tests, placement tests. Language tests, comprehension tests, math tests, technology tests.

Tests to test the reliability of the suddenly initiated run in excitingly ordered tests.

Each now circled scintillatingly around the next inside our nation's shiny new era of a modern-day, data-dependent public school answerability.

Having pulled wide the gates?

Compliantly the public had followed along as a widely applauded President called everyone over the threshold. Obediently everyone had marched intrepidly past the millennium marker, and entered into a freshly shining new century. Giddily high-stepping across, when finally everyone had paused; when finally everyone had stopped long enough to take a deliberate look around?

We had found ourselves standing smack-dab in the middle of a brightly shimmering new kingdom. That magically miraculous and enticingly gleaming realm of:

Testing Nirvana.*

*After forcing the nationally mandated creation and administration of *state-specific, state-created* tests which, then, across the country turned out to be dramatically dissimilar in both make-up and scoring, the country was bombarded with contradictory evidence produced by nationally-created, nationally-

instigated tests even as newscasters began to anxiously present statistical information engendered by differently implemented international tests. Belatedly the question arose: Exactly *how* was it useful for our nation to be forevermore juggling the results of so many non-connected and disparately created tests?

If You Cannot Read Warning Do Not Use Product

Enthusiasm for NCLB's suddenly munificent hold-everybody-accountable testing policies leapt as a raging wildfire across the nation.

Well, gosh.

The words all just sounded so good:

Poor kids. Responsibility. No excuses.

Reform.

There was, however, one teeny little problem; a problem which had been seeping into many of the governmental programs produced inside truly modern days. While our newly-written national legislation unconditionally *demand*ed a test-score-based accountability? Evidently, little thought had been given to the actual implementation and regulation of the same. In fact, an escalating *deregulation*, surrounded by an ensuing impenetrable chaos – well, this more descriptively fit the modern-day test-score accountability bill.

As a direct result of a sudden slew in testing proclamations, vast numbers of hard-hitting exams were instantaneously requested. Not surprisingly, then? Year after year, a repeatedly mandated deluge of annually altered tests were busily being written, even as educators, knowing little of what might actually be tested, taught classes. “Building airplanes in the air,” we soon thought to entitle this process, as an abruptly instigated inundation of mandates forced the implementation of confusing, student-and-teacher-unfriendly, reality-detached innovations.

However, as one airplane crashed?

Endlessly and relentlessly, another was always being uncompromisingly built.

“How are your students this year?”

Posed by an ex-administrator – a man who had been both abruptly and unexpectedly reassigned out of our building and into a breathtakingly-salaried position inside the no-excuses world of a high-stakes testing – this seemingly innocuous question reminded

me that when I had worked for this man? He had always shown an optimistic appreciation for my efforts. I was taken aback, then, at his less than enthusiastic reaction when I responded that this year I had been pleased to find my ninth graders showing an unusual aptitude for locating, labeling, and understanding parts of speech.

“*Parts of speech?*” this recently promoted reformer caught me off guard by blustering heatedly. “*Parts of speech are not part of our state test, Ms. Aech. Why are you wasting your time teaching parts of speech?*”

His normally calm face flushed, turning a bright red. I had never seen him so agitated.

Only one year later, in an attempt to mitigate the very low scores produced by the notable number of poor and often minority students attending schools in our district, innovators mandated the additional use of locally constructed exams in lowest-scoring buildings. Disruptively administered not once, but four times, each academic school year, ostensibly these tests would serve as a proof of an incrementally rising achievement. Impetuously ordered, these unexpected assessments were most often constructed by young district test makers mere weeks, or even days, before they became available for a true-life implementation.

Actual educators – those teachers who, in due course, would be forced to not only administer each suddenly imposed measurement, but who, subsequently, would be held liable for each consequently produced student response?

Were kept, well...somewhere out on the edges.

Surely, this made sense.

In fast-paced, immediate-fix days of a *true* accountability, well, when it came to building school reform practices, teachers – oh, *teachers*, I think we’ve covered this? Were just so gosh-darned *reactive*. So damned likely to *slow things down*; so irritatingly anxious to make sure that the next haphazardly constructed airplane would actually *fly*.

Really, it was for the best; best for everyone involved, when educators could be quietly and conveniently left out of the loop. Kept far away from reform construction tables and, each year to a greater and greater extent, aggressively compelled to use, rely upon, and ultimately enforce products which they had been given no opportunity to preview, create, nor understand.*

So it was, that, in the sixth month of an endlessly reformed school year I found myself standing in front of my classroom glancing through the pages of a recently delivered district exam: a test I had only just received, and never before seen. Collected together in front of me, my students were already busily addressing the test booklets I had just placed upon their desks – reading, responding and filling in the bubbles on a three-page answer sheet.

As I flipped methodically through the pages of the suddenly delivered and unfamiliar assessment, my attention came to an abrupt halt when I stumbled across a multiple-choice literacy section, where...

Well, *huh*.

Nine of the thirteen questions?

Asked my students to not only recognize, but unambiguously identify and label:

Parts of speech.

*In many states, the absolute secrecy behind our nation's recently developed Common Core assessment is fast becoming legendary as teachers are warned against any scrutinization, *purposeful or accidental*, of these massively administered tests – the results of which will then be held against them. (And how ironic as, year after year, educators are forced into *bad* teacher trainings to be told that a truly effective educator's "best practices" depend upon her intentional creation and full understanding of all assessments *before* the instigation of any actual instruction.)

Testing, Testing

With mounting tenacity, with deregulated enthusiasm, with unbounded aggression: A decade of damn-the-torpedoes hold-everybody-accountable high-stakes testing gained momentum. And, repeatedly measured by an apparently interminable supply of exams? Inner-city poor and often minority students continued, despite literal years of a hard-hitting and unprecedentedly expensive reform, to produce the nation's lowest statistical achievement.

This was not, actually, terribly surprising.

In point of fact?

Lowest-income student testing performances followed long recognized historical trends. Few new-millennium school reformers had, in year after test-score-invasive year, actually undertaken the task of digging deeply enough into school performance issues to intentionally effect a long-term, true-to-life difference. Almost no one had managed (or even proposed) the goal of genuinely addressing the many outside-of-school social disadvantages which came so debilitatingly attached to a cultural and racial inequity.

Luckily, however?

An alternate line of attack was near to hand.

Leaning upon a modern-day logic to *goddamnit, force higher test scores* – rather than contemplate the troubling message sent by more than a decade of a flatlining, achievement separating testing performance, the repeated and each year more predictable production of an “unacceptable” testing data simply led to (and oh, now, here surely was the undoubtedly more benevolent solution): *More testing*.

In the NCLB spirit of a thoughtful (and well, yes, enticingly lucrative) concern – as the days of a high-stakes testing advanced, ignoring the ominous results generated year after year by an aggressively implemented assessment, big-name reformers conversely elected to legislate the ever more urgent obligation for forcing unsuccessful schools to *Shape The Hell Up*. Belligerently they began to call out *not* for the instigation of a contemplative review, but for an each year more assertive inundation of increasingly abrasive, increasingly debilitating, and increasingly humiliating punishments.

However.

Well, gosh darn it?

Overwhelmingly and frustratingly – oh, you just couldn’t get away from it.

Year after year those uncooperative lowest-income and most often culturally-different students continued to produce their largest number of embarrassingly problematic scores.

Grasping at straws; arguing the possibility of finding relief through the production of a supplemental achievement: multiple district tests, in-school tests, literacy tests, math tests, computer tests, and a suddenly written influx of intervention tests were added to the already state-legislated exams.

Because?

Well, if, somehow, you miraculously administered *just the right test*? Surely you could *make* those inconsiderate children prove an accepted level of ability.*

Soon enough, in many buildings the act of testing began to rule with impunity. With ever more ruthless, ever more high-stakes punishments dictating tighter and tighter controls around the physical act of testing, the actual practices of assessment soon landed directly under the national microscope. It wasn't long before, in an ever more painfully minute detail, annually appended regulations stipulated exactly what teachers, students and facilitators could, and could not, do during any test administration.

Testing “experts” were hired.

And “testing days” were born.†

Testing days.

Days when – *education be damned?*

Testing was the only activity expected, or allowed, inside a school. Testing days overwhelmingly filled with minutely organized, non-human-friendly, micro-managed schedules; testing days where, depending upon the constraints entailed by any particular exam, precise schedules followed down-to-the-minute timetables. Timetables which not only expected, but exacted, a rigidly enforced compliance.

Testing days, when?

Painfully aware of the district pressure at their backs, anxiously posturing “fixer” principals and an ever shifting array of reform hires affixed additional threats to each day's regulations, complicating already impossible expectations.

Testing days, where, as examination schedules unfolded?

The very hours of a day stretched out interminably.

*One of my favorite comments on this subject comes from a writer who suggests that adding tests for “failing” students compares to expecting a weight loss simply through the repeated purchase of new bathroom scales.

†Even as across the nation the Opt Out Of Testing movement has been gaining momentum, not all proponents have considered the fact that, along with the legal act of “opting out” there must also be a contingent demand for in-school academic activities if students are not to sit passively, day after day after day. (In some districts frustrated by the burgeoning number of students/parents

choosing to “opt out,” as a punishment students have been commanded to sit quietly at their desks for hours, doing nothing.)

Don't Do Me That

Calling up an instinctual protection for intellectual survival, students struggled to distance themselves from the mind-numbing effects of a testing-day wear and tear. However, as year after year of a nationally instigated testing fervor gained momentum: For many?

Worn and torn remained the unhappy reality.

Certainly it was the case for Gerardo.

As a culturally-different child from a very poor, non-English-speaking family – well, due to the benevolent intentions behind an über-compassionate answerability? Being a student lucky enough to be receiving an aggressively repeated but surely munificent statistical attention, over the years Gerardo had been forced through innumerable tests. And, as these incessantly administered tests had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt:

What this boy unquestionably needed?

Was more tests.

One day as we were inching our way through an exceptionally long morning filled with yet more assessments, being a student likely to employ a rip-the-bandage-off approach to academics, Gerardo finished a section of his exam at light speed. A generous amount of time still sat, however, heavy and immovable, upon the clock. Closing his test booklet and pushing it to the side, Gerardo reached down to take a Language Arts' novel from his backpack. Sitting back, he made ready to read.

As I walked by his desk, gently I pulled the book from his hands. This year's fixer principal had made it very clear: *No reading.*

Heaving a sigh, Gerardo turned his head and began to gaze aimlessly up at the wall. Motivated toward finding a solution, suddenly he sat up, leaned over, and once again rummaged through his backpack. Pulling paper from a notebook, he picked up the pencil handed out for the test and began to draw. On the next round past his desk, silently I appropriated the paper.

Sorry; an additional rule this year?

No drawing.

Staring longingly up at the clock, Gerardo began to tap his pencil, at first unconsciously, and then methodically, on the top of his desk. An imaginative, tiny drumbeat soon filled the room. Catching his attention, I shook my head; soundlessly pointing to the other students still testing, I reached out yet again.

This time I took his pencil.

Defeated, Gerardo's head flopped down to land resignedly upon his desk. Arms outstretched, his hands still held and manipulated the inch-and-a-half-long pink testing eraser. Only a few minutes had passed before he had inadvertently torn off a small corner of the rubbery substance. Intrigued, he sat up. Carefully balancing the fragment of eraser between his thumb and forefinger, he positioned a digit from his opposite hand and shot the tiny missile in a high arc across the room. *Thwack*. The scrap of eraser smacked delightfully into the very center of the vindictively offensive clock. His face lit up in a happy grin.

Reluctantly, I passed his desk and confiscated what remained of the eraser.

"*Aw, Miss!*" His expression collapsed in a beleaguered resignation. "*Aw, Miss,*" he remonstrated plaintively: "*Don't do me that!*"

Funny – but those were my sentiments exactly.

Why *did* we do that?

Why did we force test upon test, hour upon hour, day upon day? In reform-invaded buildings proposing a modern-day interest in forging a true education, why did we now impose day after day of:

No reading.

No writing.

No drawing.

No classwork.

No homework.

No computers.

No phones.

No talking.

No noise.

No wriggling.

No tapping.

No moving.

And – for teachers?

No grading; no planning; no organizing; no filing; no reading; no writing; no researching; no emails.

And, some years, in some schools, although testing might run for hours?

No sitting.

No kidding.

As, over the years, testing-day schedules evolved into increasingly orchestrated affairs where unhappy reformers jumped up to dictate any and all pre-test activities, exam logistics, post-test protocols and, on a good day, restroom break allowances – it began to appear that a supplemental *No* would soon be added to the mix of testing-day expectations:

Absolutely?

*No thinking.**

*What irony when, as China begins to recognize that generations of test-focused citizens seldom think outside the box, and that the notably largest percent of economy-enriching entrepreneurial patents have been traditionally developed and registered inside the United States – in an effort to prove a globally “exceptional” standing? The United States now moves toward a standardizingly statistical, think-only-inside-the-box testing.

I Gotta Go To The Bathroom

In the middle of yet another long day of testing, a student scuttled up to my lectern, handed over a hastily folded note, and, before I could blink – was out the door. I opened the note to find written in an obviously hurried hand:

“I gotta go to the bathroom.”

It felt appropriate.

Lately, in fact?

It was more and more apparent that – oh my, yes; very likely? We were *all* headed, everyone all together, no detours planned nor allowed, directly into the bathroom.

With an always increasing number of assessments required to meet the whim of the annually shifting accountability proclamations, time for not only writing, but proofreading, these suddenly created tests dwindled. Although, over the years, politi-

cal leaders had loudly and vigorously led the nation to the belief that these tests must be unquestionably administered? Few lawmakers had taken it upon themselves to contemplate, or write a regulatory legislation around, the fact that hurriedly manufactured tests administered without a painstaking review would inevitably end up as measures both culturally slanted and response ambiguous.

The fact that *either* of these serious aberrations would invalidate an honestly useful test-collected data?

Well, damn it all.

That was the kind of tedious, collaborative thinking brought to the table by those old-school building-score-identified *bad* teachers; that kind of an unacceptable, *old status quo* thinking which, being meticulous and slow, did not protect the immediately urgent interests of low-income children. In fast-paced quick-fix days bent to an exceptional answerability, educator complaints – even about the reliability of the high-stakes testing which would then be held against them – well, quite simply, school-score-identified *bad* teacher concerns?

Were no longer recognized.

Nor addressed.

Selecting to bypass an old-school teacher resistance, a progressive surge of supplementary testing was feverishly constructed in-house by district hires: test writers laboring to meet the many unpredictable and often altering deadlines. Required immediately, minimally-proofed tests were pushed into schools despite a critical lack in professional oversight; few guarantees offered protections for a response reliability.

And then, oh my; *out of the blue*.

An additional conundrum presented itself.

(Really, now; *who* could've seen this coming?)

In order to statistically access, and subsequently utilize, this additional mountain of an abruptly mandated data?

Tests not only had to be written:

But accordingly, and at great inconvenience – *they had to be graded*.

Coming to terms with the fact that financing had not, with any particular intention, been set aside to pay for the long hours now required for the focused assessment of a hastily authorized data, the suddenly acknowledged test grading dilemma grew.

Desperate to meet the challenge, in possibly the most invalidating assessment solution ever witnessed by evaluative history, not only teachers, but supervisors, coaches, specialists, facilitators, analysts, administrators, librarians, psychologists, social workers, para-professionals and, occasionally, clerical staff were rounded up.

And all, unceremoniously?

Were pressed into a test-grading service.

There were few among us who didn't react with a wide-eyed, visibly stunned surprise.

To earn my teaching license, I had been enrolled into a course very simply entitled *Statistics*. Trained, in that course, to safeguard a statistical legitimacy when working with surveys, bell curves and a numbers' analysis, I had been well-taught that nothing held more importance than the protections for a procedure integrity which must first be established whenever I, or anyone else, accumulated and/or evaluated quantitative data.

Not surprisingly then, as the employees inside our school found themselves randomly dispersed; as our erratically organized staff came face to face with the jumbled stacks of student test booklets – unable to process administrative intentions, voices rose in protest. Seeking to expose a concrete assessment invalidation, teachers pointed to the yawning lack in judgment which expected any and all building employees to evaluate the hundreds of student responses tied to multiple disparate subjects.*

Anticipating administrative support for his long years of a student-popular, community-award-winning teaching, a soft-spoken and eminently distinguished Advanced Placement science teacher named Mr. Paul now stood up. Ready to exercise his role as well-known and highly respected school leader; willing to place his personal trust in our building's long-established, old-school traditions – clearing his throat, Mr. Paul stated that he could not be part of such an offending practice. And, after picking up his things:

He left the room.

Infuriated reform leaders reacted immediately. Refusing any validation for what they perceived only to be an insubordinate *bad* teacher resistance, belligerently they forced his hand. Pushed into a corner, Mr. Paul submitted an ultimatum:

Either the blatantly unreliable grading practices would go?

Or he would.

A few months later, he and his family sold their house.

They live near his wife's parents, now – in Connecticut, I think?

*And oh, my; how about recent radio ads where an announcer solicits “test graders:” test graders who, after experiencing a brief training, will receive eleven dollars an hour to *grade local tests* – all while sitting back to enjoy life in their “casual attire.” Is this *really* how we are now planning to rate our children?

Dancing With Them What Brung Ya

Years of a test-score-based school accountability progressed.

And *good* teachers?

Learned.

Protests, no matter how rational; no matter how glaringly connected to tangibly visible problems – inevitably led only to blind party-line declarations from a money-controlled, business-trained management. In short order, what *good* educators were expected to understand? Was that in truly modern days *it was the act of testing*, and not the validity of any examination practices (nor any safeguards established around a consequently produced data) which was most unquestionably protected.

“*I don't know what's wrong,*” a visibly irritated Human Resources' officer bristled. Having been informed about numerous abuses occurring inside our building, with great resolve this high-ranking official elected to stay his course. “And please don't keep telling me what you *think* is wrong.” Dramatically he drew everyone's attention to a brightly coded chart where manifest evidence illustrated an inadequate progress.

“Look; do you see? These scores remain low. *That* is the problem. And because we *care about children?*” Unequivocally, he now concluded our conversation by brusquely clearing up the dilemma: “*It is these scores which are unacceptable.*”

Replicating the now highly-visible, brightly-diagrammed (and therefore unquestionably offensive) test scores, in days of a truly compassionate liability, clearly *bad* teachers – those educators who most insistently and repeatedly drew attention to them-

selves by harping on issues of a statistical validity; those most visibly problematic teachers who forevermore forced questions around a testing integrity to resurface – well, notably unhappy teachers like these?

Were equally, and just as plainly, distasteful. Imperative in modern days benevolently committed to the instantaneous miracles behind a no-excuses reform, *bad* teachers like these needed to learn: *how to be good*.

And, *good* teachers?

Well, c'mon. Isn't it just a fact of life?

In the end, as they say, ya gotta dance with them what brung ya.

In the end?

You had little choice but to support the people who controlled the purse strings.

In truly modern days, in lieu of indignantly pointing directly to invalidating discrepancies, *good* teachers?

Stopped resisting.

With great determination, *good* educators closed their eyes. Industriously, *good* teachers taught themselves in an imitation of financially motivated “fixer” administrators; with great tenacity, *good* teachers refused a direct look at the deregulated chaos now dancing with impunity around an ever realigning array of testing and penalty practices. Hearing, and subsequently spouting, only a cautious reflection of the shallow district, state and federal dogma, *good* teachers offered up only a passively guarded support for the belligerent doctrine of accountability – a progressively more retaliatory doctrine which, year after year, continued to hold to the incontrovertible fact that:

All of those unacceptable test scores?

Were forevermore, always and only, the product of *bad* teachers.*

Fortunately for the district, the punitive blame-based management which had begun to burrow intractably into lowest-performing schools soon generated a more acceptable alternative to an initial spate in *bad* teacher protests. In the guise of *good* teacher peer-to-peer advice, passively murmured excuses began to slink furtively into low-income buildings. Skulking surreptitiously in dark corners, privately extended whispers slipped stealthily

into back hallways and sought clandestine expression behind closed doors:

“*Don’t fight back.* Do what they say; don’t make waves.”

“Don’t speak up; *always* say yes. Better yet? Just smile and never say anything.”

“Whatever you do? *Don’t bring attention to yourself.*

And, for god’s sake, don’t ask me to support you. I’ve got a mortgage; kids in college. We just adopted a *dog* for chrissake.”

Under the inflexible top-down management of a modern-day accountability, as voice-friendly faculty and department meetings experienced a methodic elimination, non-collaborative data days sprouted to fill the vacuum; countless added testing days began to intertwine complicitly with an increasing supply of the non-student-contact days now set aside for grading. As an emerging array of non-traditional days accumulated – testing days, grading days, development days, training days, retraining days, assessment days, preparation days: so many inflexibly mandated days added to the already inflexibly mandated days ordered up for the preview and analysis of an exam administration and grading practice – well, it was only old-school *bad* teachers?

Who were foolish enough to not only take notice of, but publicly argue about, the alarmingly shrinking number of actual *teaching* days.

For ignoring the privately whispered counsel for a hushed nonresistance?

For disregarding the increasingly anxious call for a conscientious silence?

For publicly and purposefully taking on that now old-school outdated collaborative *bad* teacher stance, and inexcusably (shocking, in modern days) drawing attention to self through the visible act of standing up *and speaking out*?

Sympathy had died.

Parting ways with an old-fashioned expectation for a publicly outspoken opinion, in a decisive trade for articulated outrage, the *good* teachers of reform shied warily away from openly stated criticisms. Alternately donning the modern-day uniform of a docile compliance, *good* teachers assumed the only truly innovation-sanctioned role of voicelessly unemotional bystanders – as mutely watching?

Became the only fully tolerated reform-day expectation.

Days, however?

That kept growing harder and harder to watch.

*When we contemplate all of the money which has been aggressively spent over the past decade – massive, gigantic, overwhelming amounts – in the blaming, retraining, identifying, evaluating and dismissing of “bad” teachers, what exactly does that say about a society which, at the same time, in comparison spends so little upon issues of truancy, nutrition, wellness, social mobility, parental neglect, domestic abuse, transience, cultural disconnect, learning disabilities, teen pregnancy and a gang or inmate rehabilitation?

Drowning In The River Of Denial

In a semester grown swollen with the whirling chaos of reform, a suddenly unexpected directive demanded building-wide involvement in yet another long day of a no-students-allowed testing assessment. Well-schooled in days of a retaliatory accountability to exhibit only the *good* teacher response of non-confrontation, submissively our literacy team followed directives. No longer considered competent to make our own departmental decisions, we now looked to the orders handed down by a highly lauded Language Arts’ facilitator – an exceptionally attractive young woman whose meticulously applied make-up and perfectly tailored apparel fostered the fixed impression of Expert In Charge.

Gathered together at her request, we filed into an empty classroom. Test booklets brought in before us had been neatly stacked into pre-ordered piles. Due to the fact that sections of this test had required written responses (responses which might vary in length from one or two sentences up to small multi-paragraphed essays), evaluating this type of assessment was especially difficult and markedly time consuming. To expedite the process, disparate building employees had been rounded up. Proposing little regard for teaching years or subject experience:

Everyone had been commanded into participation.

Locating work stations, quickly we took our seats. An assessment key written to delineate the rules around response evaluations was passed from table to table; briefly the process for assigning points to student answers by deciding an assessment range of zero, least value, to four, highest value, was discussed. And then, with little further ado:

Our official day of grading began.

Two hours, three hours, and then four crawled by.

Handed out at random, test booklets received a systematic review. When completed, exams might be stacked interchangeably at the opposite end of the test-booklet table. Little by little the mound of evaluated tests grew until, finally, only a few still-to-be-graded test booklets remained. As we approached the tail end of a long fifth hour, finding herself summoned, our impeccably attired facilitator moved to answer a question posed by two program specialists – two men who, at the last minute, had been assigned to assist with our team’s day of grading.

Everyone in the room heard her sudden, sharp intake of breath.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “*Oh my.*”

Misunderstanding directions, both of these last-minute test graders had apparently been methodically reversing the recommended point value allowed for responses. In the test booklets which *they* had graded? Zeroes had become fours, fours had become zeroes, and (oh, it was anyone’s guess) who knew what had happened to those responses allotted a point value of one, two or three. Her lovely face blanched a pale, delicate white, our faultlessly dressed facilitator turned to stare in confusion at the tidily assembled piles of graded exams. Test booklets amassed there, randomly evaluated by various participants, including these two unhappily misinformed men, were now mixed irrevocably together – one test indistinguishable from the next.

Horried, our director’s beautifully lined eyes widened as she stood, paralyzed with shock.

“What do I *do*?” she whispered, letting her glance run anxiously around the room. Resolutely, we lowered our gaze. Avoiding eye contact, we looked away. No one spoke; no one attempted to offer her any advice.

Oh, yes, we had all seen egregious mistakes like this happen, in fact, *many* times before. But *talking about it*? Admitting it? Critically pointing to the lunatic nature of invalidating testing or grading practices? Oh, in modern days callously dedicated to an immovably punitive accountability – oh my yes, *good* teachers had learned:

That would mean we were cynical.

Cynical, insubordinate, selfishly resistant and unacceptably *negative*. And – most revealingly? Most overtly advertised?

Bad.

Best to just let it go. Best to pretend ignorance, and *simply deny any existence of error*. After all, as modern-day *good* teachers, we understood that in the fast pace of truly magical years pushing for instantaneous transformations?

It was not, actually, the validity of test scores which held a highest importance.

Oh, my, no.

It was the massive funding garnered for the blindly guarded act of testing itself.

Flying Blind

Frantically written upon demand by an evidently unbounded wellspring of young hires, a torrent of suddenly created district exams gushed up in a manner which soon began to feel truly magical. And, as was becoming rapidly apparent, actually understanding many of these precipitately manufactured tests?

Called for just a touch of magic as well.

Pushed repeatedly into the role of test graders, it wasn't long before a diversely collected school personnel began to comment upon, and even argue about, not only the point value attached to student responses but, more and more frequently, to the tangible intentions behind the intricately worded test questions themselves.

“Help!” I whispered to a grading partner one afternoon. “Do you have any idea what this means?”

Sliding a test booklet across the table, I pointed to an essay prompt so convoluted that I could make little sense of it: *In what way does this story's diction create foreshadowing while working sympathetically inside the author's choice of syntax?*

My students – well, if we were being very optimistic, at least a couple of them – possibly knew what *diction*, *foreshadowing*, and *syntax* meant. But even I didn't know how to combine these three uniquely discrete elements in a logical response for this tortuous prompt. I struggled with my conscience, tempted to give full credit to the student who had written simply, and I thought most reasonably:

I don't know what the fuck this is talking about.

Another student, less inclined to waste words?

Had printed more succinctly: IDK.

I Don't Know.

Well damn, kid, me neither.

Holding little patience for those old-school processes so monotonously tied to a methodically careful (and oh-so-tedious) analysis, as the years bent to the magic of no-waiting transformations systematically edged out an educator resistance, it was rapidly determined that a test question ambiguity (up to and including plainly misleading typos) did not, actually, invalidate tests. Nor, subsequently, nullify an endlessly collected testing data. Specifically hired to address issues of examination, testing experts were ready to advise; expressly versed in party line, assuredly and absolutely they always knew the answer. *Every single time.*

Oh, it *was* magical.

They could simply walk over and show you. "See?" Here they could point with an absolute confidence to the official answer sheet. "It's right here," they could tell you. "The answer is: *D.*"

Or: *Two.*

Or: *No change.*

In years now gloriously imbued with the high brilliance of an instantaneous reformation, all you ever really had to do? Was close your eyes. And, then, clicking your heels together: *Believe. Believe*, as you took your first frightening step over an unknowable cliff; *believe*, as anxiously you began to flap your arms; *believe*, as apprehensively you started to fly alongside in a blind obedience:

Believe, absolutely and without reservation?

In the answer sheet.

In modern years fully dedicated to the groundbreaking charity of a no-excuses liability, it was, in fact, this exact strain of miraculous faith which now functioned as both a support and validation for the dizzying array of marvels promised through the wonders of magical innovations.

Everyone? Ready? All together?

Close your eyes; jump on in.

Bravely, now, flap your arms. Fly blindly along with our mushrooming procession of governmentally-created, minimally-

regulated, big-money mandates; soar unquestioningly alongside our growing club of culture-and-poverty-disconnected politicians and that ever increasing number of self-proclaimed (and shockingly salaried) reformers. Because in life, as we all *should* know by now: There is, only, ever *one* answer to any question.*

So, go ahead, no kidding; leave your worries over there by the door. In ultra-compassionate years benevolently bent to a students-first reform?

Really important people – *with answer sheets* – have now been placed fully and irrefutably in charge.†

*Tutoring for college entrance exams, I came across this example: Which item is not a match: a lamp; a toaster; a refrigerator; a table. While my student argued that everything but the lamp was typically found in a kitchen, according to test makers the answer was incontrovertibly the table because it did not use electricity. Following the one-answer-and-one-answer-only theory of standardization, this student was not only wrong, but assuredly not college material. When later I posed this same question to a girl who had not only attended college, but was working full-time after earning her graduate degree, she chose the table. As she saw it? This was the one item most likely to be made out of wood. (Heaven only knows how any college had been fooled into accepting such a non-standardized thinker like her.)

†While money-making college entrance exam test-makers are loath to admit it, evidence suggests that a student's attendance, grades, and social skills are the better predictor of a subsequent college success.

Coloring Outside the Lines

Even as the locally constructed tests of quick-fix years were prone to structural errors (a result unavoidable when little to no time had been set aside for a methodical editing) – both district and state test writers frequently manufactured exams which were culturally, racially and socially biased.

Nevertheless; bonded, as we had become in days of an instantaneous answerability, to the official one-answer-and-one-answer-only assessment sheet mentality (a bare bones logic able to wondrously simplify our increasingly diverse nation's call for a massively implemented standardization) – as the cords around a widely instigated testing were pulled in ever more tightly?

Educators quickly learned: less and less room was going to be made available for a creative or unexpected response. Coming as it did with very strict penalties, coloring *anywhere* but inside rigidly dictated lines was increasingly projected as being not only irrational, but, more and more inflexibly, more and more intolerably:

Just plain wrong.

Serving to demonstrate the fixed nature of a modern-day assessment, in the final hours of a morning already overwhelmed with a teachers-only testing review, a sample literacy question was distributed to small groups. Directed to make inferences, participants were asked to read through a short article which had intentionally included the capitalized word *Rover*. Bound conclusively by the never-wrong answer sheet, assumptions maintained that respondents would be able to make a dominant-culture specific (*and therefore surely most logical*) connection between this particular proper noun – and *dogs*.

Not, for goodness' sake, the scandalously incorrect, if more universally recognized, *Land Rovers*.

So; when my well-educated but non-upper-European partner stood up to present a funny, cleverly written and grammatically correct paragraph about a *car*? Well, what *could* our better informed and highly-paid testing expert do, but stand in front of our room full of diversely experienced educators and splutter.

And then, very publicly and particularly?

Chastise.

This man's answer, she explained to the room absolutely:

Was incorrect. Oh, my, yes. Unjustifiably, it was *just plain wrong*. (I never understood why she felt such a need to rush in, as if she were being watched; as if she were expected to humiliate this teacher. But, then, well, he wasn't like her. Clearly, he had dark skin, and looked exotically foreign. I suppose really, after all: *What did he know?*)

Only a few years later, this exact point was made once again. This time a school-created test expected our classes of over ninety-percent non-dominant-culture ninth graders to make the same literary connection. In this instance, a poem selected for use had been notably entitled: "Rover." Yet. Well, goshdarnit, so many of these non-upper-European kids had no idea why a poem

about a *car* – see, *it was right there in the title* – had anything at all to do with *dogs*.

“But that’s just plain silly,” our dominant-culture data team leader declared when we brought this invalidating discrepancy to her attention. “For Pete’s sake, *everyone* knows it’s about a dog. That’s simply not an excuse.” Rubbing a hand dismissively across her face, she brushed our concerns – and, consequently, all care for cultural disconnect – to the side. Moving it comfortably out of her way.

Ah.

How nice, how safe – to be so sure.

So *positive*, always, of exactly where the coloring lines *were*. To know, so conclusively and irrefutably?

Every single answer.

Okay, I thought as I continued my evaluation of student responses. *What about this one?*

“All I am think about is this today lunch,” had been neatly printed onto the lined space below the poem. Knowing that the respondent, a young lady whose impoverished family had only recently immigrated into the United States from a historically British-invaded country – well, knowing that this exceptionally shy student had been showing a great reluctance for trying out her developing literacy skills, I was happy to see that she had written anything at all.

“Today,” her response continued, “they are to be making the pizza. I am to be getting the more if I am to be early. Not at this time I am to be thinking on these dog.”

So; well, *was* the necessary logic in place?

See, right there: clearly she got the *dog* connection.

(I hope she also got that extra slice of pizza.)

Bombs For Peace

In an effort to promote self-discipline and an individual motivation, one year the students at our much-beleaguered school had been drawn into the auditorium one class level at a time. Staff members and administrators had bravely joined together in an effort to support a program which asked volunteers to relate personal stories; typically, the selected stories centered upon the theme of overcoming obstacles. Many narratives were com-

pellingly heartfelt, and, if the sound system happened to be working that day, there was a good chance that they might even serve their intended purpose.

I had a lot of respect for both the stories and the storytellers. It was never easy to gamble that an easily distracted collection of over-excited teenagers in an almost always too-hot or too-cold auditorium would sit still. It was even more of a gamble that they might actually listen.

A few months into the program, one of our school's counselors courageously volunteered to speak. Having hit upon what he presumed would be good copy – his years in the military – as he spoke to the students, and one hair-raising adventure followed another, it was clear that this man had missed his true calling as a blockbuster movie screenwriter. When, finally, he approached his summation, with an absolutely straight face he explained to the kids that war is a terrible thing; a thing so terrible, in fact? That it must be painstakingly avoided.

“And so,” he stated with conviction, missing any of the irony inherent to his conclusion, “because we wanted to bring them to the peace table, *we decided to bomb them heavily.*”

A teacher seated in the row behind, leaned forward. “*Ah!*” she whispered, holding a hand lightly over her mouth. “I bet *he's* the guy that they've decided to put in charge of all this testing.”

Testing. Testing. Testing.

Followed by?

More testing.

And then, in order to address the problems created by an incessantly commanded and subsequently color-coded (and thus so visibly unacceptable) testing?

The aggressive addition of a yet more inflexible testing.

Because.

Oh, well, now; we've already discussed this.

If we just tested these exasperating children often enough, somehow, magically, one day? *Surely we could get the results* – well, the kind of results that, if we just added enough testing, we would undoubtedly be able to force out of *all* students. And thus prove to everybody that we were, really, see our test scores?

A good district.

With good schools.

Goddamnit.

Test Wars

Reform-mandated, low-income, test-based accountability.

Testing days, grading days, training days, assessment days, technology days; statistical analysis, data teams, repeated observations; compulsory in-school conferences, requisite out-of-school assemblies; annual evaluations, forced placements, personnel shuffling, administrative shifting, curriculum overhauls; incessantly commanded school status briefings, consequentially ordered test score status de-briefings.

Day upon day of a non-differentiated educator development.

Piling up, the measures of a “benevolent” accountability entered low-income schools so quickly, and so invasively, that they felt physically to be a true military bombardment. Taking on the role of unofficial generals in this national war for a no-excuses statistical reform, semi-administrative personnel were added to the escalating ranks of a well-paid non-teaching staff.

At our school?

Ms. Dovinjlender – more conveniently known to us as Ms. D – was hired and indisputably placed in charge of assessment.

Although the mandates of testing now seriously impeded an actual classroom instruction, tests and only tests held importance for Ms. D.* An extremely organized woman, Ms. D made sure that nothing, *and that was an absolute nothing*, ever stood in her way. Dispersing a volley of staccato commands, Ms. D’s well-armored tunnel vision allowed her to organize the unqualified hell out of state-ordered testing days.

What she hadn’t counted on, however.

What this systematic woman hadn’t foreseen?

Was that, as a response to the ever more aggressive penalties demanded by an increasingly intolerant accountability, the growing frenzy behind each year’s ever more deregulated reform would, sharply and bafflingly, warp original intentions around a once-a-year state testing. That, taking a hard right turn? Minimally regulated money-garnering measures would first invade, and then transform, her meticulously organized building into a chaotically spinning three-ring circus: A frenzied extravaganza which had become unexpectedly lodged under the don’t-talk-back

management of a never stable and ever shifting parade of beligerently inexperienced ringleaders.

All of whom?

Felt it obligatory to throw out suddenly imperative directives. Unexpectedly, four-time-a-year district tests were added to Ms. D's already busy schedule. And, then?

Reading tests traditionally administered only as-needed by literacy personnel were made requisite for any student who had shown weaknesses on state testing. Additionally, in an effort to build a more direct access to reform funding, supplemental subject testing would now be essential for the heavily mandated (if sporadically created and precipitately re-created) courses of intervention.

Oh, and Ms. D?

High school juniors and seniors who had traditionally taken their college entrance exams at controlled sites on weekends – well, surely these students (along with each and every one of their now immovably obligated peers)† would be best able to complete these complicated tests inside their own buildings. Administered *not* by a narrowly selected outside personnel, but by in-house employees who would have to be trained, these nationally recognized tests could (oh, undoubtedly, this *was* logical) take place disruptively in-building during the course of a normal academic week.

And, then?

Well, here was an additionally inspired idea: Why not pull this increasingly unruly assessment circus together under the big-top of computer testing. Although, well, yes; due to painful budget cuts it was true that you never could count upon reliably functioning computer labs. (Oh, now, for Pete's sake, Ms. D – *surely* you could't expect low-income, reform-invaded buildings spending so much of their money on innovation to keep full-time computer technicians *on staff?*)

Also.

Well, yes, it was true.

Due to the continued dependence upon written responses, these tests could not, actually, be graded, as had been enthusiastically promised, by computers. Employees would have to be rounded up and trained – again.

And?

Oh well, now, see; the thing was.

A multiple-year district contract with previously hired test writers had not, in fact, been honored. But, since we *still* have the contract – well, why not (my, here, surely, was the most sensible solution) simply administer both tests.

You understand, Ms. D?

In days of a no-excuses statistical intervention, there simply was no such thing as aggressively amassing an excessively unnecessary data; no such thing as inflexibly collecting a gratuitous number of those never-endingly mandated scores.

*National education unions have begun to argue their case to the press: When so many teachers are now expected to spend upwards of 30% of their time in testing, *could* this ever be pared back to an old-days traditional expectation of only 5%? (And as, here and there, a few politicians have been seen to publicly sign legislation for “cutting back on testing,” what is not seen is the fact that an already massively appended testing is now being cut back only to the point where additional time will yet be required for a mandated testing. “It’s as if,” suggested a peer, “they keep taking us three steps forward, and then publicly cut only one step back.”)

†A fact conveniently ignored by nay-saying statisticians: When an abruptly appended number of students in an increasingly diverse society are suddenly forced to participate in an immovably mandated testing, traditional result levels *will inevitably fall*. (As in: “More students are taking the SAT; SAT test scores are at an all-time low.”)

The Massive Accrual Of Insufficient Data

Storing one test here and another one there, in her effort to accrue the mountain of data now deemed necessary in days of an extra-benevolent accountability (a statistical evidence required as validation for the continual mandating and subsequent carrying out of yet more financially lucrative innovations) – Ms. D ran herself ragged.

Sending out massive emails in the effort to describe upcoming tests, exam schedules and administrative expectations, Ms. D appended complicated lists of student names. Taking over the public address system, Ms. D loudly interrupted classes to monotonously read out name upon name upon name. Unconditionally? Students were expected (oh, now, do *not* question this)

to take tests *when scheduled*. There was simply no room, nor tolerance, for an exception.

If, over the years?

Well, if a student attending junior or senior classes had managed to earn only enough credits to be listed as a ninth or tenth grader – well, dammitall, *that* student must now be pulled out of her or his upper-level classes and repeatedly forced through a battery of testing until she or he had the common courtesy to illustrate an accepted level of achievement.

And if, upon registration, a student's parents had checked a box to suggest that their child's first language had not been English? Well, despite an acceptable (heck, despite even an irreproachable) academic performance; oh, undoubtedly this student must be methodically taken from his or her classes and aggressively tested in order to accumulate the unbending proof that this parent-identified *different* child?

Was still, clearly and problematically, *different*.

For any student who had been precipitately shifted into the suddenly added classes for intervention: oh, very logically this child must now be systematically released from these classes in order to undergo a repeatedly obligatory testing. How else to accrue the statistical data necessary to prove that this test-score-deficit-labeled student continued to require the classes from which he or she must now be continually removed?

And if, unexpectedly; well if, one day, out of the blue, a student with a previously exhibited poor attendance wandered into a classroom and sat down: immediately sending this child back *out* of the classroom – compelling him or her to exit the academic environment in order to undergo a mandatory make-up testing – well, in data-dependent days?

Nothing held more relevance than the hunting down and testing of non-attending students. Making physical trips to homes, condominiums, apartments, homeless shelters and, if necessary, parked cars, in the effort to bring truant students *back to school*. Oh no, not to sit, irrelevantly, inside rigorously protected instructional classrooms, but, much, *much* more imperatively?

To complete an increasingly ordered series of exams.*†°

After all: producing, collecting, orchestrating, filing, ordering and binding.

Color coding, graph creating, visibly diagraming and chart filling. *This*, surely?

Was the stuff of a modern-day liability.

Bad teachers – who noticed?

Outspoken educators who yet held the audacity of calling attention to themselves; *bad* teachers who (shocking, in modern days) yet felt it logical to stand up and make an effort to turn on the light; unhelpfully selfish employees who yet thought it necessary to publicly mention the counter-productive lack of respect for both a student class time and a protectively uninterrupted (and essentially contiguous) academic instruction? Oh, with great determination resistant educators like these were pointedly, and very decisively, ignored.

Even, if necessary?

Mercilessly plowed under.

Because, as both Ms. D and the burgeoning club of self-promoting school reformers who now hovered cloyingly around her knew – in days of an über-modern student-centered, test-score-based reform?

The practice of an invasively repeated testing (followed by a necessarily mandated re-testing) was much, *much* more important than any explicitly hard-won and carefully protected education. Wasn't it, after all, our proclaimed-as-expert government now so loudly and aggressively professing this to be true?

*What reform supporters never discussed: When original state testing regulations harshly penalized schools by issuing a debilitating score of zero for each “un-tested” (absent) student, abruptly hired test consultants quickly caught on and thus allowed for notable “gains” simply by assertively finding, and then inflexibly testing, *every single child*. Even a low score is better than zero. As test score results inevitably rose, schools were publicly lauded for having miraculously produced a “better achievement.”

†As the years of a no-excuses testing passed, this method for strategically garnering a suddenly recognized “achievement” continued as reform gurus taught themselves in how to: (1) laboriously erase all extraneous markings which had previously invalidated tests; (2) aggressively control testing environments to eliminate penalties for a student use of ink, crayon or marker; (3) preemptively identify and eliminate non-attending or imprisoned students from school rosters *before* testing dates; (4) assertively process the necessary paperwork for moving special-needs and ELL students to alternate programs – across town.

°In the initial years of testing, as test specialists were hired and a tactical use of penalty-avoiding strategies was put into play, test scores notably rose. Clinging to the theory that invasively administered reforms *and not the intentional elimination of penalties* had created this early years' success, those who most promoted test-invasive reforms gained national prominence even as, over time, test scores began to flatline and fall.

The Politics of Change

For anyone who intentionally took a step backwards; for anyone who adjusted his or her personal viewpoint in the effort to gain a broader perspective; for anyone who thought it necessary to dig just a little deeper before offering up a wholehearted support for the testing initiatives now battering their way into low-income buildings – oh, it was immediately evident that schools and neighborhoods deprived of long-term collaborative traditions, experienced, student-protective educators, and the stable, optimistic guardianship of old-school, career-committed principals:

Were in big trouble.

Fortunately, however?

Few people who held power over public education ever deliberately stepped in any direction which might force an honest look at a pedagogical (and socially unappealing) truth. Conversely, those schools which continued to turn out an annually noted production of their brightly charted – and thus so visibly “unacceptable” – test scores, were ever more diligently held up to the spotlight. Seductively, these schools called out to a growing supply of entrepreneurial thinkers. And – as the nationally-touted ultimatum for a no-excuses quick-fix school innovation opened the door?

An abruptly available tide of self-professed consultants flooded in. Self-promoting, self-aggrandizing experts; enterprising, self-acclaimed reformers; self-motivated innovators vociferously demanding the deregulated agenda of a modern-day educational imperative:

Change.

Making the discovery that under the pretext of a hard-hitting accountability an unbounded reform could now be swiftly connected to state, federal and a growing supply of philanthropic

monies, district budget wonks saw their chance. Vigorously they began to push a nonstop and ever shifting innovation as the *only* remedy for “fixing” lowest-scoring and most politically defenseless schools.

(Shoot, so long as you were offering the money?

They would jump right on in.

Invasively and unbendingly; oh they’d fix...well, pretty much *any* school.

And then?

Fix it again.

Heck, so long as the money held out?

They’d even do it even one more time – *again.*)

To promote the modern-day fervor for this lucrative flood of transformations, funding kicked in to buttress obligatory team-building events. Ordered into attendance, teachers working inside our building were directed to a recently constructed events center. Everyone received nametags; new staff members were introduced. Discharging lighthearted jokes, an animated activities’ director led our roomful of educators through one team building event after the next.

It wan’t long, however?

Before an overarching theme came to light.

Filtered in by way of a cleverly hidden, but heavily repeated, motif, a message soon began to seep through the fast pace of the day’s games. *Change*, the insistent motif suggested, *is unquestionably good*. People who oppose change? *Are unacceptably bad*. Employees who resist change? *Cause problems*. Selfishly resistant employees? *Are frustrating obstacles*. Problematically hesitant team members?

Must be silenced.

Or, at the very least:

Studiously ignored.

“Stand facing a partner,” our excessively happy activities’ director instructed. We followed his request. “Turning your backs, change five things about your outward appearance.” Heeding his directive, we reversed and began to take off glasses, re-button shirts, and pull down socks.

“Turn around, now, and look at your partner. Point out any changes you see.”

This we did as well; it felt silly, but it was easy, and few thought to complain.

And then the director told us – to do it again.

With a little grumbling, for the second time we turned our backs – this time having to work a little harder at rearranging the way we looked. We took off earrings, rolled up pant legs, and removed shoes. When told to reverse, we laughed at each other even as we expressed our relief at being done with this strangely uncomfortable game.

But, then, much to our surprise? We heard a repeated directive: Turn around.

And do it again.

Complaints, outbursts, and sighs of frustration accompanied a much-less-than-enthusiastic compliance with this recurring edict. Although scattered participants followed the request, few put much effort into changing their appearance for a third time. Told to turn and pinpoint additional changes, those who had made alterations complied listlessly. Not many, in fact, had followed directions, and only a small number of employees were listening as the games' facilitator stood at the front of the room crowing happily that the human capacity for change is amazing. Truly vast and immeasurable.

Trumpeting the wonders of change even as he assiduously avoided hearing any of the louder and louder complaints now coming from a growing number of annoyed, and even angry, faces – the cheerfully determined director bounced over to our small group.

“What did *you* notice?”

Timidly, a new teacher raised his hand.

Looking around nervously, he ventured an opinion.

“What I noticed? Was that the longer the game went on, the more everyone seemed to become really frustrated. Some people were even getting pretty upset. More and more, with each turn, people began to actively resist making changes, and after each round they were trying harder and harder to tell you how they felt.”

Shyly, he glanced around at us, his new peers, before adding: “And also, near the end? The changes were getting to be seriously absurd.”

Plainly at a loss in how to respond to such a directly unexpected statement, caught up high on his tippy-toes, our activities'

director stopped bouncing. Deflating slowly, gradually he sank to the floor where he stood perfectly still, an energetic smile frozen tightly onto his face. And then, suddenly?

Something terribly important on the other side of the room caught his attention. Instantaneously re-inflating, off he went...

Excitedly willing to help.

Finding Gold Inside Silver Bullets

The thing about poor populations. The thing, very often, about those who are culturally different.

It is an almost guaranteed reality that, as communities?

They will only ever wield minimal political power in the larger society.

So. When big money gets thrown around under the socially responsible guise of helping less powerful and politically disenfranchised citizens – benevolently offering that helpful leg up, so to speak; well, it's a funny but historical trend that quite often this particular kind of money?

Somehow, sort of, gets redirected.

If you spend a little time to chase it down – oh, you may find that, ultimately?

Much of this purportedly compassionate funding has actually landed in the pockets and bank accounts of many who are non-poor, and, more often than not, culturally similar. In fact? Frequently, in due course this especially vulnerable, fleetingly protected financing simply gets divvied up between middle-class-to-wealthy dominant-culture (and occasionally non-dominant-culture but clearly assimilated) people. People who are happy, they will tell you as they sit back to enjoy their more than comfortable benevolent-money-funded salaries, *to help*.

And sometimes? Well, sometimes, due to a lucky shortage in a protective oversight and a happy lack in guardedly enforced financial regulations, the money actually wriggles around so darned much that, well, huh, isn't this astounding – sometimes it simply becomes an additional drop in the bucket of the truly massive fortunes belonging to the already amazingly wealthy.

That is, after all, how they got to be so amazingly wealthy.

Consequently, for anyone who had been paying close attention; for anyone who had kept an attentive eye out for personal

opportunity – oh, it was clear that, in the name of a loudly professed governmental concern, our newly progressive educational age now so benevolently bent to the no-excuses punishments behind a harshly penalizing liability was going to attract two things: gigantic, exciting sums of money, and, even more enticingly? Wonderfully underregulated funding disbursements. Abruptly and opportunely, self-declared educational gurus made headlines as they assertively marketed themselves into the accountability picture.

Educational change, they bragged?

Was their bailiwick.

Magical, immediate-fix, silver-bullet solutions?

Oh, now wasn't this amazing: *their exact area of expertise.*

Tactically, they saw fit not to mention: It was also their bread and butter. Change, even if only for the sake of change – well, here was a special little secret. It was actually the *unfettered* part in all of this ongoing demand for unfettered educational transformations which most effectively kept these high-energy, self-aggrandizing experts gainfully employed.

Eager to advertise the shimmering display of promises now emanating so invitingly from a growing array of miracle-offering “experts,” political leaders began to combine a gigantic governmental funding with capital offered up by big-name philanthropists. Promising a wholehearted support for the dramatic invasions of *change*, they began to brag loudly of an unprecedented educational financing. And – in an immediately miraculous response?

An enthusiastic deluge of abruptly available school reform consultants stepped up to claim the limelight.

If *you* were a consultant?

My, it was a truly thrilling moment.

The very fact that every single district in every single state very likely housed at least one (and often *so* many more) school/schools where poor and/or culturally-different students wrestled with testing, and the even more breathtaking fact that: well, apparently in über-modern days enthusiastically dedicated to the no-waiting promise of an instantaneous transformation? *No one cared* that you, as an untried but assertively self-promoting “expert,” had never actually earned any long-term educational expe-

rience; no one, evidently, was even prepared to take note of your shocking naïveté about, and lack of interest in, decades of a rigorously assembled educational research.

In truly miraculous days looking to the wonders of an immediate accountability (days impatiently looking to, and so quickly embracing, a growing supply of silver-bullet solutions) – well if, after publicly professing your claimed-as-expert intentions, you simply stopped for a minute; stopped and contemplated *all* of those innumerable, test-score-identified struggling schools?

Oh, you could see just how exactly you had hit the jackpot. How, in fact?

You had stumbled upon an out-and-out low-income-school *gold mine*.

Consultants In Heaven

Pulling the magical reform-day safety net of an energetically proclaimed (if blithely untested) expertise tightly about themselves, suddenly empowered reform consultants stepped impatiently up to the plate. Winding up; readying themselves to found their latest string of invasions upon the modern-day NCLB science of a ruthlessly administered one-answer-and-one-answer-only testing – assertively they began to throw out minimally researched, but conveniently uncontested, claims.

Keeping one eye trained warily to the modern-day production of ruthlessly accumulating test scores – test scores which, in days of a no-excuses accountability, now loudly trumpeted the identity of a growing number of “unacceptable” change-mandated, funding-available schools – self-motivated experts grew ever more skilled at the game. Studiously seeking out the governmentally ordered testing labels, methodically they scoured punitive evaluation scales which, ostensibly published as a warning for concerned citizens?

Were each year made more and more blatantly available.

And there, overtly and expediently listed?

The so many irrefutably branded *failing* schools.

Talk about a self-promoting consultant’s shiny little corner of heaven.

Stipulating an invasive, year-specific, funding-contingent, short-lived change, consultant upon consultant moved through

low-income schools so often, and at such a high rate of turnover, that the teachers in our Language Arts department – as a department most unbendingly tested, and therefore most aggressively hit with a never-ending string of ever shifting reforms – simply stopped trying to remember names. We spoke, instead, in a privately understood, if temporary, code.

“We need to identify pre-test expectations.”

“Who says?”

“That new lady.”

“The tall one?”

“Well, she’s *kind* of tall. “

“That lady who talks a lot?”

“The one with the squeaky voice?”

“No, Squeaky Voice moved over to Bell Elementary.”

“That other one then, the one with short hair?”

“Really blonde? Or sort of blonde?”

“Sort of blonde.”

“The one who always wears boots?”

“No, that one got pregnant.”

“That really thin woman then, the one who worked with her?”

“With the funny name?”

“And the accent?”

“No, the younger one; the one with a tattoo.”

“That ring of tiny flowers?”

“No, those two stars, way down on her ankle.”

“Oh, *that* one.”

“Yes – *that* one. Well, *she* says that we need to work on the pre-test.”

We would see on the news that another reform grant or possible innovation fund had been petitioned and was now being pursued by our district; we would hear lawmakers speak of going to the public to demand new taxes, new bond measures, new school reform investments. We would hear about ongoing efforts to raise an imperatively required money – money needed, or so it was persuasively and unendingly argued, in order *to step up. To get smart. To stand for children. To put them first.*

Money that was, then?

So immediately and frustratingly dispersed into the ever more insistent hands of the always-hovering and always-waiting

consultants. Welcome, we noted behind closed doors, to the *real* NCLB. Welcome to the newer and more modern world where:
No Consultant will ever be Left Behind.

Beancounter Logic

With every added reform came attached personnel: consultants, supervisors, quadrant superintendents, area chiefs, administrators, managers, advisors, coaches, facilitators, organizers, evaluators and specialists. Employees whose often very large paychecks depended, quite simply, upon amassing proof that whatever new reform had been currently (if only temporarily and experimentally) implemented?

Was working.

If the innovative change *wasn't* working – which, not surprisingly, turned out to be a repeated case when so many unexpected ideas were forced into buildings without an educator input – there had to be, as these highly-paid evidence collectors knew, a direct proof. *Not*, as you might think, proof that the reform was failing. Oh, my, no. Proof that the reform was not working due, undoubtedly and incontestably, to a subversive resistance from, or poor execution by, unquestionably *bad* teachers.

Beancounters, we soon thought to entitle these district loyal but minimally experienced and heavily blindered managers.

Unquestioned logic according to a beancounter?

Was that, when one had been hired to *prove* a suddenly invasive reform to be both necessary and practical? Well, no matter what one might actually encounter inside a classroom, as a trained specialist a true evaluator only ever saw, discussed, appraised and maintained interest in the specific instructional elements directly connected to the reform idea which one represented.

Groupwork, for example. My, oh my, but didn't we hear about the magical – oh, the truly amazing – powers of *groupwork*.

Never mind that more often than not the very *last* thing that increasingly social, hormone-driven and over-stimulated kids in huge middle and high school classes needed was an added invitation to a frivolously non-academic behavior. Never mind that no matter the lofty intentions behind proposed-as-magical interactive “projects,” rather than aiding comprehension, much too often

group or partner assignments simply allowed game-savvy students to play the system by putting off an individual responsibility.

As long-term experienced low-income-school teachers had early come to recognize, asking large classes of ability-diverse, attendance-sporadic and often limited-skilled students to work under conditions which encouraged an interaction with peers depended heavily upon a minutely pre-planned organization. The endlessly advertised promise that an indiscriminately assigned group or partner work would, somehow, foster a miraculous comprehension – actually held truth only if, and when, strictly outlined expectations had not only been painstakingly deliberated?

But, with a high visibility, cemented solidly into place.

In other words.

If you honestly expected junior-level students to *not* spend their full hour arguing about who it was, exactly, who had thrown up all over Stewart’s car at Josefina’s party?

You had to be sure. Sure that each student knew precisely what he or she was expected to do; doubly sure that a highly visible plan for an individual accountability had been posted notably into place. By placing an undue pressure on “A” students – those students who predictably stepped up to complete all expectations – a suddenly implemented interactive assignment offered unearned scholastic credits to less motivated students: those students most willing to spend a weakly monitored group or partner time in throwing the chalkboard erasers across the room.

Beancounters, however?

Coming into schools as “experts” trained only to know that in the name of a magical accountability our district had become blindly loyal to the miracles of group study; had, in fact, adopted an immovable loyalty to *seeing kids working with others* – well, despite the problematic, and much too often less-than-stellar, results, beancounters turned *all* expectations back to the only subject which mattered:

Groupwork.

“Today I noticed that your objectives were clearly written and lesson appropriate; I noticed that students were locating quotes in support of upper-level thesis statements; I noticed a high level of student engagement and interest; I noticed a wide application of semi-colons and a repeated access of the vocabulary wall;

I noticed your use of language cognates helping students connect with content; I noticed the return and discussion of graded homework; I noticed your students organizing their assignments into personal notebooks.”

Positive evaluative information might be distractingly listed by a district-loyal beancounter. But then, no matter how well the lesson had progressed? No matter how much academic information had, evidently, been explicitly offered and individually absorbed? With a high visibility, a serious concern would be boldly appended beneath the accusatory heading: NEEDS IMPROVEMENT.

“I was sorry to see, Ms. Aech, that once again your students were not working in groups. As you have been repeatedly warned, your avoidance of this district expectation has become a serious problem. You must address this unsatisfactory weakness immediately.

“Also.”

Here, perhaps? A yet more shameful concern might be unhappily appended:

“I noticed that today you stopped your lesson with *two minutes left on the clock.*”

Oh what brazen, what possibly even seditious, behavior.

Although, typical in years bent to the wonders of a no-waiting reform, no one had ever taken the time or shaped the opportunity for me to point out that, like so many other school-provided amenities nonchalantly ignored under the never stable and always shifting management of accountability?

That large school clock in my room had not, actually, functioned all year. And that small portable clock; the one I had purchased and mounted myself?

Well, no matter how often I reset it, it always tended to run...oh, about two minutes slow.

Strategy Du Jour

Beancounters were an inspiration to watch. The energy it took to not only *know*, unconditionally, that the teachers they had been hired to keep an eye on were *bad*, but to innovatively construct brand new ways of proving it?

Well, that was something to see.

Especially when the particular reforms which an evaluator endorsed had been founded upon constantly varying and persistently re-ordered policies, protocols and interventions; this made the very act of keeping up with the expectations associated to a *Strategy Du Jour* an astonishing feat in and of itself.

As the years of a statistical accountability advanced, an aggressively garnered test score evidence gave hard-hitting reformers powerful ammunition. Pointing to test scores as the only evidence required for the instigation of additionally invasive change, a sudden barrage of reforms repeatedly and uncompromisingly hit politically weakest buildings.

Almost none, however?

Was long-term, big-picture successful.

Anxious to draw attention away from the disappointing results produced by a weakly regulated – yet doggedly insistent – innovation, district hires were quick to grasp their place in the game. Rapidly they taught themselves in how to shift the blame away from reform, and allow it to slide, alternately and slickly, onto the backs of teachers. Anticipating a reception of ancillary funding, district financiers turned a blind eye to the increasing probability that their ruthlessly mandated programs were at fault. Conversely, whenever the phenomenally expensive (if poorly managed and minimally planned) innovations foundered, hinting broadly at a soon to come out-and-out failure:

Well, quite logically?

Additional beancounters were hired.

And sent out to locate, isolate, and aggressively evaluate.

Oh, no, not the problematic, and even egregiously failing, innovative programs; no, no, the *clearly bad teachers*. Those educators who, so suddenly and belligerently, had been mandated to put the arbitrarily instigated innovations into practice.

Duh.

Awkwardly; well, as it turned out?

The intentional accrual of that particular type of evidence required to most assertively identify modern-day- untenable teaching practices was a slow and frustratingly complicated process. Fortunately, innovative experts quickly ascertained that this complex and essentially interactive procedure could, in the fast pace of modern days, be greatly simplified through the concrete construction of – and ensuing devotion to – an immovable checklist

of visually friendly Classroom Expectations. Efficiently streamlined for use in days of instantaneous, no-waiting solutions, a professional teacher evaluation soon operated smoothly and economically. Like this:

You walked into a room.

You looked around.

Ignoring any actual instructional practices, methodically you consulted your carefully developed *good* teacher checklist. Either the thing you were looking for was there, and clearly visible?

Or it wasn't.

Check, check, check.

Really, evaluating educators was so darned simple!

No need, in days committed to the immediate magic of silver bullets, to complicate a multifaceted, experienced-based understanding of pedagogy by actually watching, and subsequently analyzing, any genuinely effective instructional practices; no need to notice, feel an interest in (or acceptance for) alternate methodologies. That checklist you had been handed? That list of absolutely essential classroom effects which you now carried; those reform-friendly expectations created, of course, by *experts*? Oh, surely this official checklist supplied any information which a person might need in order to have a true test-score-inspired perception of what really mattered.

And – what made this particular checklist *really* cool?

Was the fact that you could hand it out to, well, *anyone*.

Principals, area administrators, quadrant supervisors, coaches, facilitators, specialists, curriculum writers, visiting big-wigs – shoot, even that lady who wandered in, one day, looking for her grandson. Anyone at all, by carrying around and faithfully referring to this district-endorsed (and thus unquestionably legitimate) checklist could see *with an immediate clarity* the genuine value of any classroom.

And, even more tellingly?

Any educator.

Check It Out

It was so...*innovative*.

In modern, quick-fix years bursting at the seams with a nonstop inundation of assertively implemented school transformations – well, now *anyone* could evaluate a teacher.

Shoot, even *you*.

(Go ahead, now; don't be shy.)

You only had to look.

See?

Because everything was already right there; everything you needed to know in your effort to implement a hard-hitting *good* teacher evaluation had already been efficiently and compellingly categorized. Everything you needed to rely upon was already there, thoroughly boxed, charted and cataloged for you, right there on your official *good* teacher checklist. Certainly your list included, and in fact particularly referenced, that miracle-inducing ideal of achievement: *groupwork*. After all, group or partner work was such a wonderfully visible activity. You might not actually know one little thing about education, but, well, you certainly wouldn't miss *that*:

Kids were either working together?

Or they weren't.

Also engagingly listed for you, right there on your meticulously categorized register (depending on the year, the administration and the school):

Content objectives; language objectives; reading objectives; writing objectives; word walls; leveled readings; mandated texts; pre-scripted workbooks; supplemental libraries; student work samples; strategy posters; behavioral expectations; dress code regulations; seven-step teaching plans; homework models; paragraph rubrics; exam specifications; student notebooks; lesson agendas; expectation examples; bulleted standards; bell activities; key vocabulary; warm up instructions; unit goals; semester overviews; learning calendars; assessment documents; data team projections; closure protocols; and – oh my yes, absolutely; considered, now, to be each year more essential:

Exit slips.

As an “expert” holding tightly to your carefully-ordered checklist, surely you could place an unqualified trust in this highly officious form. Certainly – and it didn't take much as each year this sight-dependent list continued to grow – well, surely you could always find *something* missing. Quite possibly, in fact? If

the undoubtedly *bad* teacher whom you had been sent to observe subversively spent her time in actually teaching, and not, more productively, in complying with the eternal parade of reform-mandated, expert-created checklist expectations...

Oh, you might even hit the jackpot.

Missing. *Check.*

Missing. *Check.*

Missing, missing, missing.

Check, check, check.

Ah, my.

Here you would have located one *seriously inept* and decisively problematic teacher.

Although; well yes, it was true.

As, more often than not, a minimally experienced dominant-culture, privileged-class spectator – oh, it was true that *you*, personally? Understood very little about genuinely effective long-term teaching practices. It might even be glaringly obvious that you grasped almost nothing about the instructional applications which might most effectively serve low-income, often culturally-different students. Still, you conceded no reason to seek out, take notice of, nor honestly appraise any alternate methodology. Loyal only to the limitations ordered up through a modern-day *good* teacher evaluation – well, despite a clearly visible success from, or teacher and student enthusiasm for, supplemental academic activities?

Defensively you clung to your immovable beancounter logic: Locate and document either a clear loyalty to, or a subversive evasion of, current checklist expectations. And, in über-compassionate years dedicated to the rigid efficiency of a highly visible standardization?

Absolutely no exceptions.

Camel Flags

One year, through an unquestioned faith in the spell-check feature of her computer's writing program, a student in my second-period class mistakenly converted her desired word *camouflage* into the much friendlier spellings of two machine-offered options:

Camel flags.

These delightfully unexpected words became stuck in my head. As the long years bent to an ever more invasive educational reform showed no signs of stopping, or even slowing, low-income school teachers who wished to survive – those educators who hoped to find just a touch of peace amidst all of the insidious blame – learned to first identify, and then do what they could to strategically present, what I began to think of privately as an endlessly commanded progression of *camel flags*.

In other words?

You tried to give the always increasing number of checklist-carrying beancounters what they wanted.

Even with best intentions, it was never easy to second guess which upcoming and often entirely unexpected evaluator-endorsed *camel flag* might be abruptly required. The year that, as a result of yet another innovation-ordered reshuffling of employees, I landed in a fatally low-scoring middle school was eye opening.

Thinking back, I should have guessed.

I should have been aware that a school historically known to house the poorest children in our city – a building already made infamous for its recurrent production of strikingly lowest scores – had served as a lighthouse calling out seductively to consultants. As I grappled to find bearings inside unfamiliar territory, it was hard to miss the fact that district mandates forced into this painfully low-scoring building had created a confusing adherence to what felt to be monthly-, weekly-, and even daily-altering strategies. What was promoted as being an acceptable instructional practice one day?

Was, if you blinked and missed a late directive, punitively offensive the next.

Pushed detachedly into this unstable environment, yet offered no building-specific directives from administration or, for that matter, anyone else, I took upon myself the task of seeking out the complicated mix of reform-ordered texts, workbooks, libraries and curriculum guides. When, in my search, I happened upon a set of short-article, thought-generating textbooks, fully aware that a student motivation is always tied directly to the true-life relevance in text, optimistically I stacked the appealing set onto my cart.

And, along with the other innovation-mandated materials:
Hauled everything back to my room.

My.

Oh my.

In a deeply subversive move, or so I was soon loudly and antagonistically informed, I had dangerously and insubordinately elected to introduce nothing short of a ready-to-detonate dynamite into that unsuspecting environment.

“THOSE BOOKS!”

Having only recently survived her own top-down visit from a visibly unhappy quadrant supervisor, my principal flew at me. Coming unexpectedly, it was painfully obvious that she was trying to communicate from the very center of a magnificently unchecked rage. “What,” she fumed, “are *THOSE BOOKS* doing in this classroom?”

“*Ms. Tyler,*” she spluttered in a reference to her immediate supervisor. “*Ms. Tyler* asked why I *allowed* this; why I *allowed* you to have *those books* here, in this room. Oh, I am warning you, *Ms. Aech*; I know that you are new this year, but I simply *cannot have this.*” Confused, I followed her gaze to the neatly stacked but evidently scandalously offensive textbooks: that full set of thought-provoking texts I had been so pleased to find.

Although; well, actually?

Although I had been having great success with those books; although, as I had suspected, my students had been responding to them enthusiastically; although they had been the source for some of the best work I had managed to extract from my very large and very wriggly classes: Oh, I knew by this time only too well the particular sounds of a *bad* teacher blame. Making visual eradication my priority, I took immediate pains to remove the offending texts. Loading them hurriedly onto a cart, I lugged them back upstairs and stacked them cautiously out of sight in the dark recesses of our bookroom.

Gosh.

Surely there must have been some shockingly treacherous – and even powerfully anti-reform – *trickery* in those books.

I was never informed, however, as to why they’d caused such an uproar. But that year; that continuously, never-endingly, checklist-evaluated year. As it crept ever so slowly forward?

I began to comprehend that, as a new-to-the-building re-

form-displaced teacher, I had now been strategically positioned to become one of this aggressively test-score-labeled “failing” school’s most conveniently condemned scapegoats. Blamed over and over, suddenly and unexpectedly, for things I couldn’t predict or control: as I clung in a growing desperation to support from an unusually perceptive therapist and the amaranthine patience of sisters and friends – with a Herculean effort?

I taught myself to turn away.

To turn away, and swallow deeply felt responses.

To turn away, and bend, screaming inside, to the interminable invasions demanded by a never-ending flood of all-encompassing commands. Commands which, despite exhaustive efforts expended in the hope of meeting an unpredictably dispensed *camel flag* logic?

Were still relentlessly followed by the brashly promoted quick-fix mantra of a modern-day educational reform:

Bad teacher.

Check Opinions At The Door

Eternally, unremittingly and endlessly: we heard from interchangeable, reform-bought, minimally experienced educational consultants. So many had been hired, in fact, that as the years of accountability evolved, few agreed upon the incessantly imposed (and often bafflingly contradictory) dictates. Adding confusion to chaos, blindly protective of the practices they had been hired to represent, evaluative personnel felt no compunction about arguing heatedly with administrators, or amongst themselves, in front of the very teachers expected to not only embrace but implement their inflexibly presented commands.

Wishing to wrap my head around what felt to be the fully illogical fact that, despite repeatedly feeble results, an endlessly mandated, forever shifting school reform not only mattered, but somewhere along the line had become a district imperative – I decided to place a growing faith in the power of camouflage. Painstakingly I began to create, and then affix, an ever-growing armory of highly visible “camel flags.”

The more they flashed; the more they danced?

The more they glittered and glowed?

Well, evidently it was the eye-catching sparkle behind

camel flags which most reliably conjured up the educational magic promised by a modern-day liability.

Making a concerted effort, on a personally-purchased whiteboard I printed out multiple highly visible content, reading, writing and language objectives. Taking care to integrate the ostentatious jargon of reform, on an additionally-purchased whiteboard I constructed a plainly leveled seven-step lesson plan agenda.

Alongside?

Attentively I posted a heavily detailed warm-up activity.

Two bulletin boards now became official, smartly-colored Word Walls. Over my desk, resolutely I tacked down our most recently adopted writing strategy posters: posters compellingly printed onto luminously bright-pink and bright-yellow paper.

Distractingly decorated with stars and arrows, boldly lettered state standards now paraded along the top of my chalkboard. Unmistakably evident, right out there next to the classroom doors, judiciously I taped up various neatly written student work samples. Out in full view? A four-inch-thick multi-divided curriculum guide – open, if not exactly to any particular page, yet still unquestionably in use. And, there, conspicuously visible, placed under the desks, onto the bookshelves, and stacked up onto various tables for anyone to see, the intentionally selected reform-approved texts, workbooks and unmistakably labeled student-leveled readings.

Theoretically, as a *good* modern-day teacher?

Oh, I was fully prepared.

But, keeping up; finding occasion to not only interchange sight-friendly work and words to meet checklist-dependent evaluator demands even as I labored to effectively instruct five to six large classes per day. Keeping up: reading and responding to an onslaught of modern-day emails even as planning period after planning period lost ground to whimsically added intervention, evaluation and data team meetings; fulfilling mandatory duty assignments even as I jumped to the belligerent orders for always and forevermore standing in the hallway between classes. Well, like *all* teachers in our building?

Due to the fact that we were (so very annoying in days of an instantaneous magic) only human, I often fell behind.

When, one day, the administrator-in-training who led our countless data team meetings walked into my classroom unannounced, an official district-endorsed *good* teacher checklist unmistakably in hand...

I experienced a little panic.

Seating himself at the back of my room, his gaze immediately began to wander. Head popping up, and then down, I watched as systematically he availed himself to the absolute authority of his evaluation checklist. Knowing that I hadn't had time to change the wording of multiple objectives; aware that I had been too busy to update the agenda or flip my curriculum guide; uncomfortably conscious that the only groupwork in evidence for this day's lesson would be a student here and there who, due to issues of language or special needs, worked with a partner – steadfastly I faced my class.

Forcing my worries aside, I did what I actually know how to do very well, flamboyantly-worded, flashily-distracting objectives, agendas, work samples, standards, unit goals and heavily detailed curriculum guides be damned.

I taught my class.

In my school mailbox the next day, I discovered a meticulously completed evaluation. Everything had been neatly, and positively, checked off:

Check, check, check, check.

Perfect score.

At the bottom I found an unexpectedly appreciative note: "Great job."

Much too busy consulting his modern-day *good* teacher checklist; his attention captured and fascinated by the glitter and glow emanating from myriad *camel flags* – this soon-to-be-fixer-administrator had not actually taken time to note the multiple discrepancies between his official checklist camouflage and the genuine content of that day's lesson.

That actual, student-centered lesson which, apparently? Had been very unnecessarily in progress.*

*It was this same man who, during the course of one chart-obsessed data team meeting, loudly and embarrassingly chastised me in front of my peers for having taught students who, on one obscure test or another, had produced a statistical achievement of only 29%. Knowing this to be unlikely, I had questioned

his information. Taking a moment to review his source data, he'd then offered a little smile before admitting to having transposed the numbers. The actual result? Suggested a 92% success rate. Oops. *Ha ha ha*.

The Silent Apostrophe

Learning to play the game.

Learning to rely upon a cleverly distracting camouflage.

Learning to swallow opinions.

Learning to keep my mouth shut.

Oh, it wasn't easy. It was, in fact, very, very *hard*.

One year as I started off a new semester, and was meeting my students for the first time, I read names from an alphabetized roster. When, about halfway down the list, I came to the printed name D'Angelo, having learned the importance of exercising great care when enunciating a student's particular sense of identify, I asked the boy who responded if, in future, I should pronounce his name "Dee" Angelo or, alternately, "Duh" Angelo.

"Jeez, Miss," he had replied, staring back at me as if I were a bit off my rocker. Shaking his head at coming into contact with a person of clearly lesser intellect, he had taken a moment to enlighten me. "It's *Dee* Angelo, Miss.

"The *apostrophe*?" he'd then explained in a helpful disgust: "Is *silent*."

Ah.

The *silent* apostrophe.

How silly of me to imagine that it might have been any other kind. Problematically, over the years, I have learned that I can be silly like that.

I've learned that I might even be thinking truly ridiculous and even outright impossible things. Oh, like the now fully outdated and surely laughable idea that, *good* teachers – well, that *unlike* apostrophes?

Good teachers are not meant to be silent.

Shortly after starting my teaching career (way back in old-school days; days so far back, in fact, that the now branded-as-unacceptable *status quo* had relied heavily upon a tediously democratic and fully collaborative involvement) I had been pleased to discover that one of the expectations for an old-school *good* teacher had been the repeated contribution of ideas in voice-

friendly meetings. Never expected to sit in silence, I had been happy to ascertain that teacher opinions were packaged as part of the deal; skilled educator viewpoints were not only solicited, but actively anticipated.

With the addition of each year's instructional experience, I had begun to feel increasingly empowered to speak; I had felt proud of, and respected for, my developing professional acumen. And I had discovered, in old-fashioned, old-school days, that *good* teachers?

Were, if anything, *not* silent.

Not shy.

Not self-conscious.

Not afraid.

Good teachers, I had quickly come to recognize, were strong. Strong enough and sure enough to take on heat by stating, and then assertively standing their ground to protect, deeply held professional convictions. As a rule, *good* educators were not, in days before the advent of an inflexible NCLB, employees who could be meekly and repeatedly cowed into a fearful submission.

As respected educators?

Not workers who could be belligerently forced to swallow personal opinions. As honored professionals?

Not easily intimidated minions who could be forcefully pushed into the castigating silence of a dark, voiceless closet. As recognized authorities?

Not timidly frightened underlings who, once coerced into that ever-more-crowded, ever-more-claustrophobic space?

Could be made, through tactics of a harshly punitive blame-based management, to stand in a docile compliance and watch as the door to that mutely impotent closet was precisely and rigidly latched – locking no longer welcome educator opinions into the retaliatory confines of a minutely pre-scripted obedience:

And cleanly out of the game.

Please Pick Up Your Prescription

“*Teach a child to read,*” the enthusiastic originator of our nation's modern-day educational paradigm had commanded in earliest years of a benevolent school reform, attracting a lot of national attention; irrepressibly filled with concern, this solicitous

leader had then taken a little time to elaborate upon his original idea: “You teach a child to read, and he *or her* will be able to pass a literacy test.”

My.

Such a wonderful (and unquestionably vital) reason to learn how to read.

Presumed imperative in modern days if we were ever going to get students up to the high academic bar set by our leaders in Washington D.C., it wasn’t long before minutely pre-scripted literacy programs – overpowering structures aggressively ordered up for use by educators of any educational background or ability – became a full-fledged, if breathtakingly expensive, rage.

Maintaining that; oh, well, clearly?

Modern-day school-score-identified *bad* teachers no longer held the capacity for managing a conventional curriculum, reform advocates began to present an urgently new and indisputably crucial need: budget-breaking, minutely-pre-scripted academic reforms. As enormous educational innovations, these impressively wrapped programs could arrive in the super-pricey packages of page-by page, move-by-move, thought-by-thought, *groundbreakingly pre-scripted* constructs.

Massively costly and massively composed:

Programs which, through the appendage of a copyright symbol at the bottom of each overdetailed and overwritten page?

Could not, under penalty of law, be duplicated.

Gigantically expensive and gigantically written:

Innovations which, due to the mercurial nature of an unpredictably shifting competitive financing?

Required an endless modification, and thus necessitated not only an annual re-purchase but an ongoing and zealously expensive educator re-training – even as box upon box of last year’s lavishly overstocked materials sat moldering inside the confines of overburdened bookrooms.

Argued as the most logical response to a suddenly ordered NCLB testing; declared as being not only vital, but immediately essential; claimed as being the most rational reaction to the vigorously color-coded (and thus so plainly unacceptable) test scores now being produced by our largely low-income and over ninety-percent culturally-different students: An exhaustively pre-scripted day-by-day literacy program was unexpectedly purchased, and

abruptly forced onto the Language Arts department at Central High.

However; in days already teeming with the heavy benevolence of a no-waiting reform, this suddenly acquired program swept imperiously into our building at the exact same moment when an especially invasive district directive additionally required *all* ninth and tenth graders to be unbendingly registered into double-length math and literacy courses. When, somewhat accidentally, administrators stumbled onto the fact that getting these two magical innovations to work together would, in point of fact, cost roughly the price of a small oil-imbued kingdom?

They sat down to re-think an *actual* implementation.

Luckily for the silver-bullet leaders of modern days, a sincerely protected loyalty to both a pre-scripted fidelity *and* a true-life program execution – oh, well, it turned out that these two often exasperatingly oppositional elements of a modern-day accountability were not, most days, on very good terms.

Shoot, more often than not?

These two habitually conflicting components of an immovable transformation:

Weren't even speaking to each other at all.

A Few Little Changes

To ensure that the school-score-identified *bad* teachers employed inside our now deficit-labeled school could not subversively implement any of their untenable old-school practices, an excessively detailed, minutely pre-scripted literacy package had been procured – despite the shocking number printed on an attendant price tag. Promoted as being a page-by-page pre-written, and thus precisely calculated, academic structure, this costly program had been particularly assembled to most accurately and effectively work with small mixed-ability classes.

But.

Should this suddenly purchased and heavily pre-scripted structure actually be put into place as written; should program specifications be honestly and exactly honored? Well, an unbroken loyalty to program fidelity would, administrators now unhappily discovered, entail an unimagined sum of financing capital.

To keep expenses down, it was clear that we would all have to make...oh, just a few little changes.

I mean really.

Small classes judiciously capped at twenty students?

How impractical.

Big class sizes – even huge class sizes – really, *what was the difference?**

And, well, okay; maybe the text studies, work routines and academic practices written so carefully into this phenomenally expensive program *were* geared intentionally toward upper-level achievers. Maybe the program's fundamental design *did* recognize (and even absolutely depend upon) the fact that struggling students learn best from high-ability role models *who must be made available to them.*†

Surely it was no problem when disengaged financial gurus – seeing no reason to tolerate the extra expense of first implementing, and then supporting, mixed-ability classes, essential to the program or not – argued that in truly modern days; in days when we could, now, so easily access a test-score data and identify student abilities? We should simply locate our lowest-scoring students and attentively separate children by skill level. So what if, rather than following an explicit program design, we more efficiently created a few extra-huge double-length classes and filled them *only* with our lowest ability, least literate children.

This, as everyone in our teaching department was now emphatically told, was an implementation solution which could best serve *our* students.

And, even more essentially?

It could also best serve district expenditures.

But; well; here's the thing.

These suggested structural changes didn't just *not* work.

They really, really, really (oh, *really*) did not work.

Educators, even those who held the most limited allegiance to an academic effort, began to point out glaringly debilitating program issues and inconsistencies. In a very short time, teacher concerns skyrocketed; anxious voices loudly stipulated that the forced implementation of this inflexibly pre-scripted program was seriously hurting, rather than helping, a student achievement.

Oh my.

Bad teachers.

Bad, *bad* teachers. *Voicing opinions.*

Well, we've covered this; you know we simply could not have *that*. Rather than heeding the mounting educator objections, efforts to persuade unhappy employees that their resistance was both wrongheaded and selfish escalated, ultimately pushing our entire department into an obligatory meeting with one of the authors of our recently purchased program: a genuinely important woman being flown in, or so we now were assertively told, at great expense; a thrillingly imposing curriculum-writing expert who would soon set us straight.

To give her credit?

She did tell us, immediately and unreservedly, that her program *worked*. And then?

We told *her* about the true-life program execution occurring in our district.

Painstakingly we explained that her program's predetermined twenty students had become our uncompromising thirty-five. Glancing around the table; letting her gaze bounce briefly over each teacher, one at a time – delicately she cleared her throat. With a lightly defensive catch in her voice, she stated that *her* program was only written to be successful with *small* classes.

Tentatively, we began to detail the fact that rather than implementing her program with mixed-ability students? Our now very large, double-length classes had been formed through homogenized groupings based only upon lowest scores.

Staring back at us, an increasingly blank look settled upon her face. Demonstrating just a touch of panic, she blustered that her program really *couldn't* work if it was implemented...*that way*. Encouraged, we saw our chance. Rapidly we began to tell her about having no voice; we spoke about the detached, highly punitive execution of inflexible activities; in detail, we described our escalating concerns that our students were not learning. And, outright?

We asked her, as author of the program, to step up; to join forces with us and help.

Closing her eyes, she bowed her head. Then, sighing heavily, she raised her head and let her gaze sweep once again over each teacher at the table. She and her partner, she explained

to us, had sold their excessively written and minutely pre-scripted program directly to our district as a total package.

Technically?

They had no control over how it might be placed into our schools. And, on that note, the meeting ended.

Off she went, back to Texas – where she and her partner continued to compose page after judiciously-copyrighted page of their overwhelmingly pre-scripted program. Earnestly they sent each newly created, shockingly pricey section on to our happily posturing district.

And, perhaps not surprisingly?

We never saw her again.

*Although endlessly argued, class size debates bypass an essential point. I have had classes set at 35 which went off without a hitch and classes set at 15 which never stopped being overwhelmingly difficult (and vice versa). Effective instruction isn't so much about a "standardized" class size as it is about the make-up of students: their ages, their needs, their abilities, their attendance – and, even more importantly? *The predictably concrete and regularly dispensed disciplinary actions offered to educators through a reliably stable, long-term experienced administration.*

†Few reformers recognize social research which points to the fact that human children learn best, and even essentially, through a role modeling *which must be made available to them.* Or that, as our nation's "choice school" divisions continue to escalate, and those students most able are methodically separated from those students least able – a crucially interactive role modeling is now being nonchalantly eliminated for those children who need it the most.

Wishful Thinking

Each year when I started off upper-level classes, especially honors courses, kids new to my pull-everyone-in, sheepdog-herding style of management tended to get a bit glassy-eyed. Some felt, at times, singled out and overwhelmed.

A few weeks into the semester, however, after figuring things out, usually my students began to relax. When a little time had passed, most caught on to the fact that my constant and often noisy demand that *all students stay with me*, stay awake, and stay on task, was, in the end, the safer road. An innate conviction made me believe that if I could just manage to keep the group to-

gether; if, obstinately and stubbornly, I never stopped pulling, prodding and pushing?

Ultimately I could herd as many students as possible all the way along the road to our final destination. Not only was there the hope that, somewhere along this path my students might gain an academic comprehension, but – and here was the yet more powerful bit of educational mysticism – as many children as possible would have been forced through unceasing interventionist efforts to earn their true, if often belligerently hidden, goal:

A passing grade.

So many careworn, never-endingly labeled students had learned. It was so much safer, really, to project a face-saving defiance as you sat through year after year of a media and textbook marginalization; as, passively, you were forced through class after class projecting a dispassionate social denigration, up to and including an outright cultural exclusion; as you survived the blatant, building-enforced actions behind a social elitism, poverty stereotyping, homogenous “dumb-kid” grouping, and, now, in the theoretically compassionate age of a statistical liability?

Over a decade of an *unacceptable failure* test-score branding.*

So much easier to pretend, that?

Oh well, you had never really wanted that grade anyway.

Following intuition, I believed that the key was relatively simple: Ignore labels.

Refuse to see, accept or promote the modern-day theory of a publicly humiliating deficit. Reject analyses arguing a cultural or individual failure; sidestep the humiliating, degrading classifications; avoid looking for, and accommodating, that modern-day “statistically proven” inability – and simply trust wholeheartedly to the fact that there never was a student (even that one who managed to keep it a deeply hidden secret) who didn’t wish, always and forever, for the safety and social respect promised through an overtly recognized success.

If, as the teacher; if, as the person in charge?

Well if, counter to a patent and even confrontational resistance, you rejected the modern-day argument behind test-score-labeling deficits, and instead refused to dumb down assignments; if, methodically and repeatedly, you forced truth onto students simply by obstinately showing them, over and over, and then one

more time, over again, that each and every child owned the faculty to not just work, *but work hard*, and, in working hard? In living up to your relentless demands for a better attendance, for handing in assignments, for sitting up and paying attention, for taking notes, for conscientiously participating and responding – all of this done so that, in the end, despite their best efforts to fail they had alternately and accidentally earned, and now owned, a good grade.

A grade that an autonomous labor had so very plainly and undeniably produced.

Suddenly, hardened don't-call-me-a-schoolboy, no-way-I'm-a-schoolgirl students had no choice but to come to terms with their exclusively produced and no longer secret *ability*. This was the mystical answer. This was the educational talisman. Once you gave a student that; once you had not only pushed her or him toward, but made her or him honestly warrant and then overtly carry around an openly acknowledged reputation for a publicly lauded *success* – oh, it just wasn't as easy as any of them thought to give that up.

To turn their backs and, ignoring a documented talent, walk away.

I heard, occasionally: “Aw, Miss, you don't *let* me fail.”
Probably?

Well, it seems likely.

Chances are that that is what Carlos meant when, after handing in his final paper, he thanked me before adding: “You made me sit still and listen; you didn't *stupidify* me.”

It was never easy being a student; all you could do each year, and with each class?

Was go in wishing and hoping that the person in charge wouldn't stupefy – *or stupidify* – you.

And as, ever more assertively, minutely pre-scripted academic programs began to invade low-income buildings; and as, in an increasing number, inflexibly ordered mandates began to call out for yet more obligatory professional developments; and as, ever more aggressively, low-income school employees found themselves coerced into the impotent role of voiceless trainees...

Frustrated school-score identified *bad* teachers?

Began, fervently, to wish for it as well.

*I have often wondered how we, as a nation, have gotten to that place where we now allow our government to tell us that the methodical, accusatory label of “failure” will somehow motivate a student and/or teacher ability. Wouldn’t almost any social scientist, minister, therapist, psychologist or psychiatrist explain that it is this very action which will, in fact, likely garner the exactly opposite result? (And how important is it to note that, for more than ten years now, across the nation the overwhelming preponderance of those students we have thought it necessary to repeatedly and denigratingly label as failures *are not White?*)

The Process Of Stupidification

Ordered up as a nationally advertised method for controlling *bad* teachers (those educators who, in a singular *bad* teacher fashion, continued to produce each and every one of those modern-day “unacceptable” test scores), as hugely expensive page-by-page, pre-scripted programs were insistently pushed into low-scoring buildings, high-salaried consultants snapped to attention. Loudly and insistently, they began to demand yet another round of all-encompassing, *everybody-must-attend* assemblies.

Suddenly, unbendingly and belligerently, school-score-identified educators employed inside our nation’s lowest-income, publicly deficit-labeled buildings discovered that they would now be pulled away from their traditional role in front of the desks, and, as statistically-targeted, failing-school-recognized *bad* teachers?

Be compelled to sit impotently and mutely behind them.

Not just once.

Oh no.

Over and over.

And then?

Over again.

It was, after all, the process of repetition which was fundamental.

Ignoring a previous teaching experience; extending minimal regard for a years-long individually protected craft – under the umbrella designation of a suddenly essential *bad* teacher development, low-income school educators were indiscriminately, and at great expense, forced to stop teaching and submissively assume the negligible status of students. Those teachers most

shockingly associated to the incessantly tested (and therefore most seriously offending) department of literacy, soon discovered that a ruthlessly documented attendance at a never-ending run of assemblies was now not only going to be mandated, but unavoidably, and even militaristically, managed.

Meetings, meetings, meetings.

Followed by?

More meetings.

Meeting, seminars, assemblies; briefings and debriefings.

Conferences, conventions, classes; trainings and retrainings. *All compulsory, and each assertively presenting that modern-day reorganization of public school authority: That brand-new, no-excuses, reform-designated, non-traditional, non-democratic, non-collaborative top-down world where a never-ending run of expert” outsiders felt it necessary to argue that, in hard-hitting days so compassionately bent to the true benevolence of a statistical accountability?*

Good teachers:

No longer resisted.

No longer spoke up.

No longer looked for, nor expected, an individualized voice. *However.*

Well if, with a great care, you protected your eyes; if, with a cautious intention, you worked to stay alert: Oh, very likely you could catch a glimpse. You might even see it – just over there, out of the corner of your eye. Because with each insistently mandated and excessively expensive assembly?

There it was.

Glancing about surreptitiously; intentionally narrowing your eyes – oh, you could always find it *because it was always there*. Cleverly concealed behind the pretext of an extravagantly expensive professional development; strategically hidden behind the stridently ordered top-down assemblies promoted to the public as being unquestionably necessary teacher retrainings...

Oh, my yes.

See it?

Look: *just over there.*

The harshly punitive, doubly stupefying processes of an educator stupidification.

Robbing The Hood

Year upon year of historically engendered educational studies. Book upon book filled with a carefully collected public school research. Everything always came back to the same repeatedly documented reality:

Low-income and often culturally-different students?
Struggled academically.

And had always struggled academically.

No magical public school intervention in national history, most especially those interventions claiming no intention whatsoever of very directly and particularly addressing the debilitating underpinnings of a social, racial and cultural inequity (no matter *how* expensive the intervention; no matter *how* ruthlessly and invasively it might be applied) had ever changed this fact.

However; in an effort to magically transcend this heavily chronicled truth, and yet, somehow, live up to the inflexible obligations now coming so adamantly out of Washington D.C. (compassionately written obligations now immovably requiring *all schools to irrefutably produce higher test scores*) – well, after contemplating the far-from-impressive outcomes of a true-life student testing performance; after combining these repeatedly weak results with the findings of past research?

Oh, it turned out to be a good idea to take heed of a documented certainty, bow to the impossible, and find a better solution.

Simply stop working with the students.

That, obviously, had never worked.

In modern years unprecedentedly dedicated to a much smarter, and much, *much* more compassionate, educational answerability?

It was time to move on to more essential things.

Oh, *forget* about the children.

More logically?

Fix those damned teachers!

Projecting a munificently interventionist concern, the low scores engendered by low-income and often culturally-different students were enthusiastically accumulated. With great fanfare, these vigorously charted and impressively color-coded scores were poignantly presented to the nation. Here, citizens, was iron-

clad *proof*. Proof that poor and minority schools – oh, undoubtedly, my, *just look at those test scores*; these schools were surely, wall to wall?

Filled with bad teachers.

Sidestepping, with a nimble agility, the much, much more complicated, and much, much harder to fund issues of a student transience, economic instability, crippling poverty, limited attendance, inadequate home environment, out-and-out homelessness, language acquisition, cultural disconnect, substandard nutrition, domestic and neighborhood violence, gang domination, rampant incarceration, teen pregnancy, early parenthood, and special needs (needs which, in truly modern days, now included that highly prognosticated rise in a diagnosed autism, ADD and ADHD)* – well, brandishing an assertively collected mass of compellingly diagrammed, and thus so inarguably offensive, test scores, highly-paid, quick-fix consultants began to demand the overwhelming expense of yet more *bad* employee retrainings.

Consequently, as the “benevolent” years of a no-excuses NCLB reform passed?

Teachers sat.

In meeting after meeting after meeting.

Occasionally?

Well, occasionally we would pause, and add up the hours. Now and then we would sit back to calculate the amount of time that, in the more than a decade dedicated to the inflexible implementation of a statistical innovation, as school-score-identified *bad* teachers we had been forced to sit in an enveloping glut of obligatory trainings: data meetings, test briefings, score debriefings, statistical analyses, grading seminars, curriculum previews, pre-scripted curriculum overviews, instructional trainings, multi-school conferences, evaluative summaries, day after excruciating day of a no-students-allowed exam assessment, and a compulsory, everybody-will-attend professional development.

And, repeatedly?

I’d wonder.

I’d wonder if anyone out there, anyone at all who, for so many long years now, had thought it useful to offer up a mindless voter support for so much of this eternally petitioned Students First reform – would be surprised. Maybe shocked, possibly even outraged, to grasp that those so many, many, *many* hours demand-

ed of me in the name of reform; those so many monotonous hours obligated for telling me repetitively and endlessly that *I* was the problem; those innumerable, incessant hours mandated for making me hear that, as an unquestionably school-score-identified *bad* teacher, *I* had to be fixed...

Well, I'd wonder if anyone out there might be incensed to finally understand that these very same hours; *these exact same tediously forced hours?*

Had been detachedly and irreparably stolen.

Robbed unequivocally; stripped mercilessly; seized, and shamelessly appropriated through the disconnected arrogance of a politically "munificent" action – from low-income, culturally-different children.

Children who showed up for classes, only to be repeatedly presented with long, poorly organized days under the management of minimally prepared, and much too often minimally experienced, substitute teachers. (And much, *much* too often? Long hours in the gymnasium or auditorium *with no academic focus at all.*)

Children who, counting upon the predictability of regular academic routines, were alternately forced through long testing-day after long testing-day; children compelled to sit submissively, and watch as the nonchalantly mandated minutes stolen from their lives ticked mercilessly, and inevitably, away.

Children who, optimistically, started off a new school year only to be told, with an increasing frequency, that – while their red-flagged underperforming *bad* school was being imperatively reformed; while their school-score-labeled *bad* teachers would be receiving necessarily additional trainings; while a small segment of their peers would be using the building for yet more obligatory testing:

In the compassionate name of putting them *first?*

They should simply forego attendance – and stay home.

Again.†

*When scientific evidence increasingly recognizes that children who experience the extreme stresses of poverty may not be able to produce the chemicals necessary to help their brains with an academic focus and retention, how useful is it for these very same students to be repeatedly confronted with the upheaval

demanded by a chain of relentlessly ordered school-score-based transformations?

†While some “progressive” leaders now believe it politic to demand longer school years and longer school days, apparently there is little interest in calling out – alternately and proactively – for the assertively guarded protection of the school days and school years already in progress.

We Don’t Need No Education

One year, a few days into my Thanksgiving Break, I met up with a friend – a teaching peer who, for the past twenty years, had been employed inside a high-scoring, long-term-stably-administrated secondary school located in the suburbs of a neighboring district. When our conversation predictably turned to issues of education, it immediately became clear that, in the modern age of a low-income school accountability, what we, as public school educators, had each experienced?

Diverged dramatically.

It felt, in fact, a little like discussing educational practices as they existed here on Earth... and somewhere way out in the far reaches of the universe.

On Jupiter, maybe.

At one point, we paused to count up the non-teaching/non-student-contact days we had each had so far that fall.

She counted two.

I counted *seventeen*.

It was, truly, miraculous. That, in the name of a benevolently invasive low-income school transformation, it could be promoted as logical that, in order to *help* students struggling with academics earn their necessarily higher test scores? What they most rationally needed was not only a regular separation from long-term experienced educators, but, now, more and more frequently:

A full severance from the school building itself.

Illustrating exactly how much they cared about the true-life needs of frustratingly non-standardized children, well-paid, self-promoting reformers helped districts decide. In exchange for those old-fashioned guardedly protected, daily administered and *essentially contiguous* academic routines; in lieu of a rigorously

uninterrupted student-centered instruction – oh, surely low-scoring students could be more effectively aided by alternately substituting an unprecedented number of testing days, grading days, training days, briefing days, debriefing days, and professional development days for those so many boring (and, oh well, now; let’s all step up and admit it; in modern years pushing everyone toward microwave sensibilities, days that were, now, way, way, way out of fashion): old-school-style, every-single-day, tediously-repetitive *classroom* days.*†

Slowly, painstakingly and “boringly” educating *actual* students?

In years dedicated to the magic of silver-bullet solutions:
Well, hadn’t that become sort of...irrelevant?

After all, as had recently become the national mantra, it was unquestionably *not* the students but, so very unmistakably, their school-score-proven *bad* teachers – those so many old-fashioned intransigently slothful, union-protected employees who, so scandalously and stubbornly, continued their efforts inside low-score-producing schools – who had actually *failed*. And if (oh, but wasn’t this *transparent*; wasn’t this *obvious*) the most compassionate action expected under the modern-day aegis of a statistical accountability would entail the immediately inflexible retraining of school-score-identified *bad* teachers?

Well, it was just too bad, but a direct, daily, teacher-to-student instruction would simply have to give way.°

With the ever louder promotion of a no-excuses liability; with the widely generated promise of *stepping up and getting smarter*; with the loudly proclaimed intention of *standing for children and putting them first* (apparently by unconcernedly leaving them almost completely out of the equation) – the school-score labeled *bad* teachers of modern days received such an impressive amount of innovative attention that, in fact? More and more frequently, with a previously scheduled planning day here, and an added national holiday there, *entire weeks might pass with no explicit student-centered instruction at all*.

As the always growing number of self-proclaimed, hugely-expensive educational experts evidently understood: To get *past* the problem of a low-income, culturally-different achievement deficit?

You simply eliminated the act of education itself.

My; talk about a true reform *genius*.

*Forced into interactions with group upon group of reformers, I have often tried to point out that, for each of us in the room; for each and every well-educated, middle-class-to-wealthy person seated together in this effort to “progressively” discuss methods for “fixing” our “broken” system – well, for each person in the room, the old-school traditional approach based upon an all-student-inclusive, every-single-day *boringly* uninterrupted and rigorously contiguous lesson-and-lecture-based pedagogy had so obviously done its job. Why, then, were we always so quick to suggest that in order to “fix” low-income buildings, we must aggressively deny politically disenfranchised children this very same, *and clearly advantageous*, formula?

†What if, conjecture holds, the old-days public school system has never in fact *been broken*? What if, as a long-term statistical evidence actually illustrates, the *pre-NCLB* traditional public school system had been steadily producing an every-year-improving performance? What if it is not, actually, the public school system which has been broken, but the social system: A modern-day us/them social system now ever more able to produce an increasingly segregated *and ever more educationally debilitating* poverty?

°If we believe that there is any truth behind the axiom that “a body in motion tends to stay in motion while a body at rest tends to stay at rest,” then how have we gotten to that place where we now allow our low-income schools to endlessly interrupt a rigorously protected and contiguously daily instruction? How is it that we now expect an academic superiority from students who are whimsically called away from a regular instruction (in modern days simply by means of an impersonal don’t-talk-back email) for make-up testing, alternate subject tutoring, class meetings, early sports release, college visits, field trips, auditorium presentations, disciplinary actions, infirmary appointments, program interventions, restitution meetings, class photographs...ah, well; in a nation where education apparently happens by magic, and “boring” is considered to be a perfectly good reason for minimizing academic efforts – the list goes on.

Please Release Me

District enthusiasm soon begun to swirl, over, under, and then entirely around the suddenly convenient idea of “fixing” low-income school teachers. As a punitive accountability solution – well, it certainly beat out trying to transform the behavior and attitudes of those much less responsive, and much less easily coerced, deficiency-identified students.

Almost overnight, an impassioned aura of teacher-retraining fervor slipped into the heart of an endlessly ordered innovation. Deemed instantly necessary, a sudden run of rapidly built reforms began to call out for an ever increasing number of non-student-friendly, out-of-classroom assemblies. No, no, not for one teacher here; nor, even, for two or three there. Oh my no, think *bigger*. Think like inspired school reformers going for the *serious money*.

Think big.

Think huge.

Think *impressive*.

Think of colossal super-trainings created at phenomenal expense; think of seminars spectacularly projected to serve multiple assemblies; contemplate huge groups comprised, oh, not of a couple inexperienced, struggling educators, but of full departments, numerous grade levels, and multiple schools. Imagine everyone brought together *en masse*; everyone seated together in an anxious anticipation of that necessarily imperative retraining.

Bowing, with an initial delicacy, to the old-school interest in minimizing an educator resistance, early-day reform jargon belied invasive intentions. In earliest, introductory years so much closer to that old-fashioned expectation for an interactively democratic management, surely there was no reason to scare anyone off by describing unbendingly mandated trainings through a use of intimidating, give-away words.

Frightening, punishing words:

Like *mandatory*.

Or *training*.

Conversely, in earliest years of a suddenly legislated NCLB, teachers began to hear about a thoughtful reward; a gift, really; a truly generous endowment which each educator would soon be receiving. Supervisors, administrators, coaches, consultants, specialists and evaluators – all were just so tickled to tell everyone about it: *Release Time*.

“Have you noticed?” a peer commented as we found ourselves assembled once again inside yet another in a long line of benevolently “gifted” (although absolutely compulsory) trainings, and had been hearing, yet one more time, about the wonders associated to a repeatedly mandated *release*.

“It’s as if they think we need to be paroled.”

As the national demand for an instantaneous educational liability progressed, this, in fact? Turned out to be a popular theme: equating teaching in inner-city, culturally-diverse, low-income schools to incarceration. To drudgery. To an undoubtedly distasteful and clearly unhappy chore. As the days of reform advanced, you could, in fact, begin to count upon it. Public school innovators – the bigger the big-wig, the more expert the expert, the more powerfully disconnected the politician or commentator – well, apparently? Few outsiders believed that that actual old-school style of *teaching* (that old-fashioned, every-single-day-in-front-of-the-kids theory of *teaching*) was any fun at all. “Releasing” low-income school educators?

Oh, surely this was nothing less than a benevolent reward. Getting teachers *out* of the classroom...

And away from those damned kids.

Away from those complicated, non-standardized, non-aculturated kids about whom, in days of an ever more lucrative accountability, everyone claimed so much to care. Offered up as a much-needed escape from a forced daily interaction with problematic students, draped in pretty words, “release time” was presented as a thoughtful solution intended to show just how much self-proclaimed experts understood the thorny (and, oh my; so undoubtedly distasteful) world of low-income school employees.

However.

Well, now: here’s a little secret.

I suppose this *could* be confidential.

I apologize if I’m letting the cat out of the bag.

But: More inner-city, low-income-school teachers actually, *with a full intention*, chose to walk into those complicated buildings; chose to work, day after day, inside those low-income, culturally-complex schools; chose to spend year upon year standing right there in front of those so many assertively labeled “difficult” children *because they wanted to* – than you might think.

Oh, man.

Crazy, huh?

Choosing Siberia

According to a popular, dominant-culture media, low-income, inner-city schools (oh, you know, those typically very old

buildings which the average middle-class-to-wealthy citizen never visited, nor even drove past): Well, those schools were understood to be...

Out there.

Sort of like Siberia was understood to be...

Out there.

Barren, unforgiving wastelands meant to serve only as a punishment for those regrettably disorganized teachers; those particularly clueless educators who simply couldn't pull their lives together *and get a real job.*

The kind of teacher?

Who didn't fit in anywhere else.

Actually, this was sort of true. A lot of us?

Didn't really fit in anywhere else.

For reasons apparently unfathomable to the mushrooming supply of loudly proclaimed "expert" governmental officials, deficit-promoting reformers, and your average, everyday, privileged-class citizen – some of us? Oh, my; sit down, now, prepare yourself. Some of us not only purposefully chose to work inside low-income, culturally-different schools?

But honestly liked it.

(We'll take a minute; go ahead, get your breath back.)

Contrary to the each year more energetically proposed theory that modern-day *good* teachers – that brand-new, Presidentially-lauded brand of miracle-working youngster who could, somehow, magically and immediately, *get those scores up* – well, contrary to the theory that modern-day *good* teachers like these would only ever spend their days imprisoned inside low-income, deficit-housing schools *if* offered the promise of garnering huge sums of money – well, the truth was that more than a few of the old-school, highly-experienced teachers "stuck" (as media would have it) inside low-income and often complexly diverse schools?

Were not actually there by default.

But by choice. And (oh, my, this is such a huge secret I'm almost afraid to say it):

Some of these evidently crazy, long-term loyal, community-protective, low-income school employees would even do it – would even go willingly into those low-scoring buildings daily, monthly, and yearly, over and over, and then over again, in order to interact determinedly and repeatedly with those inimitably di-

verse, complicatedly needy, sometimes defiant, and occasionally belligerent students:

*If you paid them less.**

(Oh, my. You need another minute?

We can wait.)

The craziest teachers? Those most eccentric?

Those who believed that they could best serve students *not* by embracing the “gift” of liberation, *but by staying defiantly in their classrooms to teach?* Well, bizarrely unhelpful educators like these actively resisted the highly promoted gift of being “released.” Resisting release, however, was not an action which the top-down authorities of modern days could equate in any way with an educator intelligence. Consultants, coaches, facilitators, supervisors, specialists, evaluators and fixer administrators – *all* of them knew better.

Refusing release time? Asking, demanding, and even begging to remain in school *with the students?*

My, such an unacceptably self-serving behavior clearly illustrated little appreciation for, nor any necessary recognition of, the every day more crucial reform-mandated retraining of school-score-identified *bad* teachers. Actively fighting against the generous gift of release, and demanding to stay inside the school?

Surely this could not be equated with *intelligence*.

It could, however:

Be swiftly and punitively equated with an unacceptably self-centered insubordination.

*I am not suggesting that, due to the fact that more than a few teachers teach from the heart and not for the paycheck, this argues any logical reason to pay them less. In fact, in a country dependent upon *more than three million economy-stabilizing public school teachers*, offering them anything less than a carefully protected, longevity-loyal, middle-to-upper-class salary is simply yet another way of shooting our nation in the foot. (And is, undoubtedly, one of the reasons why our country has, over the past thirteen years, become ever more crippled.)

Substitute School

Almost every reform, from data analysis to pre-scripted curriculum takeover, created an additional reason to push large

groups of teachers together at yet more massively orchestrated meetings. For the district, thoughtfully offering educators this obligatory “gift” of release from the unhappy labor of teaching was the easy part. What reformers tended to forget – ah, now, who could blame them in all of the excitement swirling so dizzily around each impetuously deregulated innovation – was that, while it was not really all that complicated to force paycheck-dependent employees out of a building?

The students (problematic little things) kept showing up for classes.

You had to give these deep-thinking reformers credit. They *did* catch on; it took only a few spectacularly chaotic days when a targeted subset of teachers ordered into yet another abruptly mandated training didn’t show up for work. Peers and administrators left in the building scrambled to cover suddenly instructorless classes.

With any luck?

Students wouldn’t be left entirely on their own, unsupervised, for more than *one* class. Maybe two.

When, very surprisingly, it came to light that teachers actually, gosh, *every single day*, interacted directly with students, deductive reasoning helped excitement-blinded reformers parse out the fact that – oh, well, apparently? Substitute teachers would be necessitated. It was just too bad that the these now obligated teachers-hired-to-replace-teachers would expect to be paid.

Initiating yet another phenomenally heavy expense.

The careful retention of a limited corps of backup personnel (a protected supply of dependable substitute teachers) was, for any responsible educational system, indispensable. Although this essential reserve of veteran substitutes existed, in days of an ever more ruthlessly forced accountability it was becoming increasingly difficult to not only locate, but additionally retain, the escalating number of qualified stand-ins now required to cover a sudden surge in obligatory *bad* teacher retrainings.

Fortunately, however, years before?

An innovation-friendly substitute policy had taken root in our financially strapped inner-city district: a cost-effective policy which suggested that pretty much any person – well, any person who happened to be breathing – could surely jump on in and take over public school classrooms. To show support for this budget-

favorable conjecture, the district, in fact, had been working hard to ensure that each year a substitute teacher pay continued to shrink. Therefore, when, in response to the aggressive call for an increasing innovation, the demand for substitute educators leapt substantially higher:

Locating *qualified personnel*?

Quickly and conveniently converted into simply finding *personnel*.

Anxious to cover classrooms increasingly left unsupervised by the ever larger and ever more frequent teacher retrainings, administrators began to circulate flyers via the students, begging parents to step up. To come on in; to volunteer. To take over a classroom. *Please*. A living, breathing body – well, that would do it. Evidently, that was all that low-income, inner-city students required. In extra-benevolent years now inflexibly dedicated to a no-excuses liability, well *surely* this made more sense than allowing these unsuspecting students a direct, daily contact with their regular long-term-licensed and highly experienced – *but, oh my now so disgracefully school-score-identified – bad teachers.**

On a day when, due to yet another mandatory retraining, over a third of the teachers in our building had been consigned elsewhere, I set out to locate a missing sixth-period student. Stopping a girl in the hallway outside the gymnasium, I asked:

“Have you seen Gennine?”

“I think she’s in there,” the young lady pointed me to the door of the dance room.

As I drew near, through the thinly constructed partitions I began to hear the dull driving beat of a rhythmic bass; when I opened the door, however, the sheer intensity of top-volume music caught me off guard. Involuntarily, I took a step backwards. Overrun, the room utterly swarmed with girls. Girls were everywhere, dancing, jumping, running, scrambling over one another, falling over chairs, climbing, impossibly, up the walls.

Compressed into a corner, a tiny, white-haired lady sat almost invisibly on a folding chair; defensively she huddled over her official class roster: the student roll sheet which had been handed out along with her substitute teacher folder. Oblivious to not only me but to the room in general, protectively she kept her head down.

Hesitating; feeling unsure in how to respond – I paused.
Shake that ass, girl the music advised me deafeningly as I stood irresolute in the doorway. *Shake that ass.*

*When latest statistics suggest that after more than a decade bent to a denigrating, teacher-blaming, no-excuses testing, each year fewer and fewer citizens are willing to sign-up for a career in education (the numbers in both teacher-training colleges and teacher-production factories falling off dramatically), it may well be that one day soon it will *only* be desperation-located volunteers running out public schools.

Elf Control

Although now and then he went head-to-head with complexities found inside the English language, one of the hardest working substitute teachers in our building – and by far everyone’s favorite – was a lively and always-smiling man named Mr. Nantu. I didn’t know much about Mr. Nantu’s cultural or personal history; what I did know, however, was that he was friendly, extremely reliable, and – most wonderfully? He always managed to get a surprising amount of work out of the kids.

One afternoon I came upon Mr. Nantu as he stood staring up at a wall.

To help students find classrooms, the hallways in our building had been color-coded; to inspire motivation, each hallway had additionally been labeled with a corresponding value word. The list of words encouraged positive personality traits:

Generosity. Courage. Kindness.

Perseverance. Responsibility.

Staring intently, Mr. Nantu stood just where a particular value word had been inscribed as the heading for our purple hallway. With great care, an enterprising student had managed to remove the letter *S*, so that what had started out to be *Self-control*?

Now stated, more bluntly: *elf-control*.

Perplexed, Mr. Nantu stood gazing up at the paired words. A question had registered upon his face when he turned to me, and asked: “What is the meaning?”

Pointing up to the altered word, I explained about the missing letter “S.” After grasping the joke, Mr. Nantu smiled broadly, and together we laughed, shaking our heads at the inventive imagination of children.

The entertaining assumption of *elf-control*, however, held my attention; in days of an ever more aggressive and apparently never-ending reform, it seemed, in fact, an exceptionally fitting description. As year upon year of the abruptly implemented quick-fix solutions progressed, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the complicit magic of helpful little elves would evidently be a necessary component for the so many out-of-the-blue, no-job-too-big, fix-everybody educational expectations now flying in unchecked and unregulated on the wings of a whimsically conceived and ever changing innovation.

Seated alongside other largely dominant-culture children, as a child I had heard the story of *The Shoemaker*: a poor, aging man who had labored alone. Finding himself unable to complete what felt to be a mountain of work, sad, worn out and defeated, one evening the cobbler had taken himself to bed. Magically, then, at the mystical hour of midnight, an accommodating troop of industriously happy little elves had snuck cheerfully into his workshop. Tap, tap tap, they had started to work; tap, tap, tap, their little hammers had rung out in a happy camaraderie. Toiling to take on the old man’s labor, staying true to their task they had finished their work and left, just before dawn – just as the shoemaker woke up to find row upon row of beautifully assembled shoes.

Ah, the wonder of magically happy little elves.

Willing to do all of the work.

After midnight.

As a never-ending string of reforms bullied their way into low-income schools, teachers expected to implement the ongoing parade of innovation struggled to take on an abruptly appended labor. Learning, too often the hard way, that there was to be no alternative save integration of invasive change into already complicated days, educators quickly discovered that those who initially created, and then imperiously promoted, this unfettered cycle of “transformative” change? Apparently spent little time contemplating the additional toil which their magical reforms (each pro-

posed as being yet another silver bullet capable of generating truly miraculous results) would actually entail.

Lack of forethought on the part of loudly professed educational “experts” wasn’t, really, all that surprising; as self-proclaimed, poverty-and-culture-detached authorities, *they*, certainly, wouldn’t be doing any of the work. Oh my, no; much more imperatively, as the arms-length instigators of our truly modern nation’s no-excuses educational transformation...

Well, quite plainly?

Their task was simply to think up and throw out brusquely immovable orders.

“Of course I support school reform!”

A full decade after the origination of a high-stakes testing, yet another presidential hopeful made it emphatically clear that – well, should he be elected? Oh, as an education-minded candidate, certainly *he* would be man enough, *he* would be strong enough, *he* would be forceful enough, to take on and continue the mantle of a modern-day accountability hero. As the leader of an ultra-conservative state, he was, or so he now told the nation, more than ready to mandate yet more of that no-excuses test-based reform. More than ready to step up and commandingly throw out an additional fusillade of uncompromising school reform directives.

Taking care, however; cautious in days of an impetuous change to make clear the exact boundaries around his particular stance on education, judiciously he then thought to add: *“I just don’t get caught up in the minutiae.”*

Really, now.

Well, you *couldn’t* expect a politically powerful, aggressively pro-reform “expert” *to worry about the minutiae*. Those irritatingly trivial details of an *actual implementation*.

Oh my, no.

Leave *that* to those so many irrelevantly unimportant, lowest-level employees.

Like, well – all those *teachers*.

And if, in response, those selfishly resistant educators – as the employees most assertively mandated to not only magically comprehend, but then cheerfully implement, the endless backlog of minutiae which kept flying in on the tails of reform after reform after reform – well, if unappreciative educators like these

argued that they couldn't, actually, keep up? And, oh-so-ridiculously, *never stopped fussing?*

Well: *Fire every single one of them.*

And, then?

Call in those magically marvelous elves.

Those complicity happy, über-industrious little elves who never complained; who never resisted; and who, as the modern-day prototype for a *good* employee?

Completed their work quietly and submissively – after midnight.

Jive Talking

Forcing teachers out of their classroom for an obligatory attendance at an incessantly ordered lineup of retrainings. Well, inconveniently?

This brought various educator arguments to the surface.

As more than a few employees contended?

All of these suddenly mandated retrainings ignored their students' right to receiving daily lessons from long-term-licensed and highly experienced classroom teachers. Additionally?

An invasively ordered attendance at a never-ending succession of compulsory meetings undermined a teacher's opportunity to offer an effectively contiguous instruction; all of the so many inflexibly ordered out-of-classroom assemblies sharply interfered with an educator's ability to help students earn those necessarily higher scores – the paradoxically higher scores required for keeping teachers from this forced attendance at a relentless run of out-of-classroom retrainings.

Also, it was argued, coercing large numbers of teachers away from their buildings and, in the process, creating a heavy dependence upon substitute personnel, pushed undue pressure onto the shoulders of the remaining staff when, frustrated to find so many of their regular teachers gone – students acted out.

Moreover, it was asserted?

Expecting often the exact same teachers to repeatedly prepare substitute plans for a five-to-six-class day, including advisement, team meetings, lunch duty, bus duty, hall duty, or other obligations, was a tremendous, and tremendously unfair, burden.

(Oh. Well, just in case you've been wondering?
Those industrious little elves never actually showed up.
Lazy little buggers, as it turned out.)

No argument, however, no matter how logical, no matter how carefully presented, made headway. Offering only an immovable loyalty to district party line, reform leaders held firm: School-score-decided *bad* teachers would, or so we all soon learned, no matter our reasoning, no matter how glaring our dispute – certainly *not* stay in school. We would attend all mandated trainings. *Our* thoughts on the matter?

Well, if we knew what was good for us, *our* thoughts would quickly start to jive a lot more closely with *theirs*.

Taking advantage of a substitute policy which paid little, and required little, school reformers pushed their growing demand for massively envisioned out-of-classroom assemblies. The nonsense message behind this sudden surge in irrevocably forced retrainings assured everyone that – well, in our truly compassionate district; in our deeply concerned district so benevolently intent upon implementing a hard-hitting, student-protective liability?

An emerging array of minimally experienced substitutes could, surely, with only a negligible effort, *do* what low-income school teachers *did*.

Whatever *that* was.

But then. Abruptly, unexpectedly and confusingly – in a sudden about face?

The heavily argued out-of-classroom retraining message shifted one-hundred-and-eighty degrees. Raining down hard and fast, a flurry of lectures commenced in the effort to address a suddenly recognized problem: Teachers, these lectures asserted, were swallowing up personal and sick days *in order to stay home*. A growing number of employees (oh, how scandalous; how shockingly unprofessional) were calling in sick on *testing days, grading days, training days, retraining days, data days, debriefing days, preparation days, and that endlessly mandated succession of days now being set aside for a professional development*.

Refusing an acknowledgment of the bitterly ongoing in-house complaint against a ruthlessly forced out-of-building “release” – an action which both necessitated, and then paid for, the callous procession of minimally-prepared, reform-mandated sub-

stitute teachers – the point of one particularly heated anti-absenteeism lecture held that:

Truly dedicated *professional* teachers?

Understood how important, *how indispensable*, they were.

Good professional teachers, our faculty was pointedly told, *didn't* stay home; *didn't* avoid work. After all, the scolding continued, no one wanted to get on board an airplane, only to find out that the pilot had called in sick *and a substitute was in charge!*

Staying In School

Wondering if I might lean upon the unexpected inundation of anti-absenteeism lectures as a rationale for making my personal stay-in-school case with our latest fixer principal, naïvely I placed my trust in the old-school theory that – as two grown professionals? A teacher and a principal might have an interactively philosophical conversation. (And thus missed the point entirely that as a modern-day, school-score-identified *bad* teacher?

I was no longer *anyone's* equal.)

Tentatively I approached this infamously defensive man.

Had he ever considered, I carefully began, that as a licensed educator; as a person who had taken great pains to earn my instructional credentials; as an educator who had backed this achievement with a hard-won master's degree; as a professional who had interacted with culturally diverse students for more than twenty years; as a dedicated employee willing to commit long years to the development and application of a personalized teaching craft: well, had he ever thought that it might be painful for a teacher like me to be told that: Due to the immovably ordered mandates of an NCLB testing, administration had now decided that I must be repeatedly separated from my students?

Had he ever thought that it might be additionally demoralizing to recognize that, while I must now be repeatedly forced out of my classroom, a never-ending procession of minimally prepared substitutes could – or so the theories behind a modern-day *bad* teacher retraining held – simply drop by my room *and do my job?*

“How might it feel,” I cautiously put forward, “if, after all you've done to become a principal; if, after all of your efforts at running our school; well, how might it feel if a minimally experi-

enced chain of substitute principals was ordered to come in, take over your office, and manage our school every time that you were told to attend a meeting?”

Mystifyingly, his response ignored my point.

“I attend *many* meetings, Ms. Aech,” he blustered defensively. “And in the future?” he continued, allowing his words to take on an unmistakable menace as he turned his back and walked away:

“Do not take that tone of voice with me.”

Simply Elementary

A spectacularly invasive out-of-building teacher retraining program introduced under the name of Elemental Scholars arrived, one day, without warning – coming unforeseen and unexpected, as so many of the huge, and hugely expensive, innovative programs of a modern accountability often did. Heavy and breathtaking, it landed directly on top of any and all literacy teachers who continued their work inside our district’s lowest-scoring and most politically irrelevant schools.

Having somehow overlooked the possibility that, during a school year, teachers might be – well, just a wee bit busy? Advocates of the Elemental Scholars’ program proposed that an unrestricted number of literacy personnel, necessarily accompanied by highly-paid administrators, evaluators, supervisors, coaches, specialists and facilitators, should, no excuses tolerated nor allowed, participate in an immovable lineup of out-of-classroom retrainings.

All at once; all together.

Reckoning, as big-name, highly-proclaimed “experts” often did, that poor, inner-city and often culturally-different children produced their lowest scores for reasons which had nothing whatsoever to do with social inequity, debilitating poverty, transience, limited attendance, special needs, language acquisition, shockingly poor nutrition, homelessness, or cultural disconnect, the Elemental Scholars’ program maintained that test scores continued to be low simply due to a much less complicated and much more easily addressed oversight:

Teachers, this program contended?

Especially those long-term-experienced, state-licensed educators who, while holding various university degrees, had been interacting with children for years?*

Well, these teachers had simply never been introduced to a basic, elementary-level pedagogy.

My; *imagine that*.

As a hugely expensive, but theoretically indispensable, program, Elemental Scholars projected immediate results through the direct confrontation of an underlying low-income-school problem: *Bad teachers*, it was proposed?

Clearly lacked the elemental basics of a *good* instruction.

Therefore, irrevocably ordered and massively engendered teacher retrainings must now occur.

Caught up in the exciting orchestration of events; distracted by the logistics of finding, and then reserving, conference halls, ordering multi-colored binders, constructing pamphlets, accumulating texts, creating power-points, collating lecture notes, arranging breakfasts, snacks, drinks and lunches, hiring out-of-state (and thus indisputably more knowledgeable) speakers – speakers who must be flown in and provided with lavish accommodations – well, caught up, as the animated leaders of a massive retraining were, in the exhilarating arrangement so many exciting details...

Well, really now; you couldn't expect them to think of *everything*.

When, in the end, organizers had managed to bring together a very large and complex mix of low-school-scoring middle and high school teachers, certainly it was forgivable if, in all of the thrilling disarray attached to the making of so many important preparations, they had failed to understand a vital (and, perhaps a bit confusingly, *very elemental*) academic premise:

High school students?

Were *not*, pedagogically, middle school students.

And, an even bigger surprise?

Neither high school students *nor* middle school students:

Functioned at the same scholastic level as elementary school students.†

Having no choice but to somewhat belatedly face the alarmingly upward spiral of expenses now associated to the organization of so many massively commanded retrainings, in an imaginative cost-effective moment, the enthusiastic architects of

Elemental Scholars proposed that – well, in place of trainings judiciously aimed at taking into account the expensive complication of ability-differentiated assemblies? *Students were students*. And thus, in a logical juxtaposition, *teachers* – despite varying school and student assignments, classes taught, work histories, personal interests or levels of education – *were teachers*. Under the finance-friendly logic of such an *elemental* calculation, surely it followed that *all* school-score proven *bad* teachers?

Required an exactly identical retraining.

And so.

Even though, as a well-educated and comprehensively experienced high school teacher; as a teacher who, for more than twenty years, had interacted repeatedly with upper-level students; as an educator who had discovered, along the way, that it was only through the intentional *avoidance* of flashily dumbed-down short cuts that I might be truly effective; as a teacher who had come to recognize that it was only through an unvarying expectation for a repeatedly hard, serious work – work steadfastly focused upon the ongoing integration of higher-level thinking skills – that my students could make it: could get all the way through to graduation and find success at post-secondary institutions.

Oh, I remember.

Acutely.

The frustrated anger boiling within when, at yet another massively forced out-of-classroom retraining, given no choice I found myself seated at a table with markers in hand, coloring in the outlines of little cartoon animals proposed as being cutely useful end-of-lesson exit slips.

And, just as plainly?

I can still hear the sarcasm which had dripped from a remark made by a similarly humiliated teacher ordered into attendance along with her peers from a sister school. “*This*,” she had said to our table at large, holding up a short, cylindrical tube, “is chalk.

“Have you *heard* of it?”

*At yet another reform-ordered meeting, our staff skimmed through a twenty-page article extolling the wonders produced at a handful of predominantly non-White schools where test scores had increased; it wasn’t until the very last page that a brief proviso, one which was neither brought to our attention nor dis-

cussed, made mention of the fact that *all presented data had been premised upon an 80% attendance*. Well, *duh*. If you ask teachers in low-income secondary buildings what they believe to be a most likely cause for the continued production of lowest scores, you will hear this answer over and over: “*Attendance.*”

†A debilitating consequence of reform’s willingness to promote and exchange an unlimited churn of personnel has been the assignment of defensively thin-skinned, do-what-I-say supervisors into buildings where they have had no previous experience. For example, the endlessly unhappy literacy “specialist” moved into our traditional high school after having spent twenty years as an elementary school band teacher.

A Matter Of Semantics

Late one afternoon, in the waning hours of a school day, I was approached by a shyly deferential young woman. As a student registered into my first period Language Arts class, I knew this young lady to be exceptionally – and even painstakingly – polite. Having immigrated into the United States in her primary school years, being a hard-working student, this girl was well on her way to becoming an English language scholar. The intricacies of a nuanced innuendo, however?

Kept her on her toes.

On this particular afternoon, she stood in front of my desk rocking a little bit, back and forth. It was clear that she was hoping to propose an importantly private question. Catching her eye, I smiled encouragingly.

“Miss?” She started, after glancing cautiously around my empty room.

Leaning in a little more closely, she lowered her voice. “Miss? What is...” Here she paused again, to let her voice drop even lower. “What is the difference, Miss, between *horseshit* and *bullshit*?”

Thinking back, I can’t remember exactly what I told her. But, had she asked this same question only a few years later?

I could have told her that the *exact* distinction between *horseshit* and *bullshit* was simply the difference between year one and year two of Elemental Scholars.

As our team of disparately collected educators neared the end of our first long year of an immovably ordered Elemental

Scholars' retraining, program organizers had taken the time to explain that their latest evaluative feedback suggested that teachers felt future retrainings would greatly benefit from an intentional student-and-teacher-based differentiation. In fact, organizers explained? Educator opinion had made it more than clear that (no matter *how* much money had already been spent; no matter *how* much instructional time had already been interrupted), the concept of requiring *all* teachers – regardless of individual experiences and class level responsibilities – to utilize practices best suited to elementary-level students, had not, in point of fact, been helpful.

Offering belated apologies for having forced a very long and invasive year unconditionally filled with weakly ineffectual retrainings, program coordinators made repeated promises to address this serious issue; they would, and here they gave their personal guarantee, immediately take educator requests for ability diversified retrainings under consideration.

However. Participant requests, organizer apologies, ensuing big promises...

All, as it turned out?

Moot.

Previous contractual commitments with organizers, venues, printers, booksellers, and speakers kept first year practices firmly, and immutably, in place. If, in fact, organizer promises for an intentional differentiation were to be honored, well, this would cost *an amazing amount of money*. And, now, c'mon; surely you couldn't expect the district to just throw money around, spending it unwisely. *Could you?*

And so it was that Elemental Scholars, Year Two, commenced – with few, if any, notable variations. More overwhelmingly sugar-laden breakfasts led off long, mind-numbingly unimaginative days: days filled to overflowing with a supplemental run of elementary-level strategies.

But.

Oh well, now. *On the other hand.*

Seriously dumbing down academic practices for *all* upper-level students? Unexpectedly, in a moment of wondrous serendipity this was turning out to be a fortuitously unanticipated solution for yet another suddenly legalized shiny-penny educational mandate. Seeking glory and gold in days of an ever realigning, cyclically funded school reform, an additional glut of self-identified

educational “experts” – more than a few of them poverty-and-culture-disconnected, keep-an-eye-on-me-I’m-going-places politicians – now vigorously contended that school-score identified *bad* teachers should not *only* be assertively and massively retrained.

Oh my, no.

They must now also be individually and unconditionally isolated; and then?

Aggressively, repeatedly and uncompromisingly appraised.

Grinding gears to once again throw the innovation bus into a painful reverse, the focus of low-income school reform pulled up short. Selecting to yet again bypass any of those pesky issues attached to a cumbersomely deepening national poverty – an increasingly ominous, Presidentially-recognized “us-them” kind of poverty ever more capable of producing not only a burgeoning social inequity, but a visibly attached cultural segregation:

Well, regrouping at first subtly, and then more overtly?

With mounting precision, an unprecedented educational financing was reined in, redirected, and aimed ever more particularly at the actions now associated to the suddenly legislated and much *truer* answer to our modern-day low-income-school innovation conundrum:

A massive and, well yes, massively expensive, *teacher evaluation*.

Woman Troubles

Due to the fact that a tax-money-funded public education proposes to serve the children of a large number of voting citizens, schools and the issues surrounding them often become primary components of a political hopeful’s soapbox. Many a declaration directed at schools, teachers, and education in general, gets made during the heat of a fiery political campaign.

Hoping to garner media attention while attracting votes from the ultra-conservative, perhaps made brave by the thrill of speech-making, recently a political candidate proclaimed that, well – in his view? A critical element for improving our nation’s public education would be the calculated removal of all single and/or gay women from the classroom. Presumably, this could

help protect our nation's students from the dangerous influences of an uncontrolled (and morally unbounded) *feminine behavior*.

(Oh. *You* know how women get. Especially when not receiving the attentions of *a good man*.)

"So," was the response of an unusually discerning television commentator. "There goes two-thirds of America's teaching force."

Should anyone take a moment to stop, and, in stopping, contemplate who, in our country, is most likely to make the career decision to teach – well, that person would likely come to the conclusion that, by and large? America's public school teaching force is female. Annually published census studies bear this out: In more than a few states, around eighty percent of our country's public school educators are, and, for the larger part of a full century, now, have traditionally been, women.

Quite a few?

Are single.

Some, undoubtedly, are gay.

Perhaps more importantly, it is not typically your shy, inverted, subservient or quiet portion of our nation's female population who, with an intrepid self-possession, head directly into life as an educator. Taking a little more time; stopping yet another minute; continuing to think: Common sense might suggest that quite often the women who choose public school teaching as a career tend more toward the outspoken, self-confident type of female. In fact, teachers in general, male or female, gay or straight, married or unmarried – well, *most* have a tendency to be self-confidently forthright.

Not only forthright, but creative, extroverted and outgoing. Resourceful, passionate, inventive and unique.

Absolutely, and incontrovertibly:

Individuals.

Massively and irrefutably evaluating forthright, creative, extroverted, outgoing, resourceful, passionate and inventively unique *individuals*?

Well, now.

That could be a real problem.

Losing The Baby

If, as once again the direction of school accountability began to regroup; if, as the money began to move inexorably away from functions of a mammoth retraining, to functions of a mass evaluation. Well, if *you* were the person expected to face this monumental task; if *you* were the person suddenly charged with taking on this adamantly ordered (and, oh my, so heavily expensive) directive commanding an annually overwhelming educator assessment...

Well if, quite logically?

You decided that your most productive goal would be in the fashioning of an assessment system able to generate information around an instructional ability even as it allowed plenty of room for those uniquely non-standardized, creatively risk-taking personalities who went above and beyond (oh, you know, those especially idealized educators about whom everyone, once led down memory lane, always remembered; that particularly effective teacher who ended up in a *Readers' Digest* Great Teacher story; that exceptionally inspired instructor gloriously transformed into the hero of an Exceptional Educator movie):

Oh, you were going to have to be patient.

Patient, and very, very careful.

If, as you began the design of *your* immovably mandated evaluative structure, you not only believed, but intended to protect, the fact that educators can make the biggest impact when given room to be visionaries; if you honestly understood that teachers are able to more effectively reach students when allowed to be individually and creatively resourceful – oh, you were going to have to take your time. You were going to have to move very slowly. You were going to have to do your very best to *not*, through the sloppily built and poorly executed structures of a mass assessment:

Thwart, shackle, silence or, even yet more debilitatingly?

Out and out lose your most loyal, most experienced, and most long-term-effective educators.

You were going to have to take pains to very slowly and conscientiously create your teacher appraisal system – *because?* You would not, as they say, want to cause irrevocable damage to the overall system by haphazardly, and irresponsibly, *throwing out the baby*. Losing your strongest, most devoted, most inspirational

teachers right there in the gutter: carelessly tossed out right there alongside your unwanted bathwater.

For the good of your schools *and* the test score achievement each year more ruthlessly mandated, you would necessarily need to be guarded; you would necessarily need to work very slowly; you would necessarily need to progress with great caution, making scrupulous effort at avoiding the mindless disposal of those so many modern-day scapegoated *bad* teachers – and, in the process?

Unforgivably and devastatingly *discarding the baby*.*

However.

If, as you found yourself standing there, ordered to confront this dauntingly legislated task; if, as you stopped; if as paused and looked around – you found yourself blinded by the shimmering display of expectations mandated by this magically imagined silver-bullet legislation. And if, as you cautiously glanced about?

You saw that:

Well, *huh*.

Slow, thoughtful and contemplative?

Was really no longer how things worked.

If, abruptly, you understood that as a response to the bell-the-cat urgency of yet another highly publicized accountability “emergency” (an “emergency” impatiently demanding the ongoing *every-single-year* test-score-based evaluation of all teachers) – well, if, as you contemplated the phenomenal expense tied to such a massively ordered assessment; and if, as simultaneously you grasped the fact that a Big Money reform funding was right now, *at this very moment*, being specifically allocated for an educator evaluation; and if, as ultimately you understood that for pioneering efforts in days of a magical reform? A precipitately budgeted capital had started to flow – funding that at this particular moment was insistently being made available for the heavily legislated act of a teacher assessment innovation.

Money that, well, you couldn’t help but see, was being offered up, *right now*.

Oh, you had to step up; you had to reach out.

You had to put out your hand – *and take it*. In modern days calling out impatiently for the no-waiting wonders of a magical reformation, it was, always:

The money.

As the impetuous taskmaster behind all miracles promised by a quick-fix, silver-bullet accountability: *Money called the shots*. Detachedly and impatiently, money demanded an aggressive, no-waiting action. Unbendingly and belligerently, money mandated, and then unconditionally required, immediately visible *we-will-not-wait* results. And gee; well, *you* know how it is.

When you can take the money, or *not* take the money?

You take the money.

Duh.

So what if, in all of your clumsy efforts at leaping up into the flashily hectic and heavily financed teacher evaluation chaos, ultimately you fashioned an assessment structure capable of devastatingly weakening the overall system by repeatedly and shockingly *losing the baby*.

Heck, once you had acquired a personal slice of that brand-new teacher assessment pie?

You could simply *buy* a new one.

Right?

*As, along with a growing supply of über-wealthy educational “experts,” our leaders in Washington D.C. repeatedly push the shortsighted theory that our public educational system will flourish if we simply rid ourselves of a forever mushrooming number of “bad” teachers, I am put in mind of the story that when Chairman Mao held power in China? Arguing that he could garner more grain for export, he blithely ordered up the death of all sparrows. What he got, however – *and not at all surprisingly?* Was hordes of locusts, and many long years of a citizen-killing famine.

Disenfranchising The Messengers

So: You took the money.

And then?

In thrall to huge financing, immediately you hired a surplus of those modern-day obligated, if shockingly inexperienced, teacher evaluators. Unsure of the *actual* long-term goals behind an ever realigning accountability,* quickly you coerced your mushrooming flock of evaluators into attendance at an interminable procession of retrainings to sit side by side with multiple school-score-identified *bad* educators. And there, inside this

punitively ordered procession of assemblies bent to the methodic dumbing down of educational expectations, you induced everybody, new and old, experienced and inexperienced, *to get on board*.

And, then – very unexpectedly?

The answer came.

Mammoth non-differentiated teacher retrainings, retrainings where elementary level strategies could be pushed indiscriminately onto employees of every background, conveniently revealed an important mass-evaluation principle. While *all* educators, even brand-new never-taught-before greenhorns, were able to grasp simple, uncomplicated strategies such as, say, a mandated use of cutely-colorful end-of-lesson exit slips – at the same time? Brand-new, never-taught-before, don't-in-fact-know-what-I'm-doing evaluators could be trained to physically see:

If these same cutely-colorful end-of-lesson exit slips?

Were being used.

Ah *ha*.

The dilemma of how to massively evaluate an ever increasing number of irrepressibly unique educators had begun to unravel. Uncomplicated, elementary-level practices adopted by the district as being inflexible protocols necessary for all low-income-school educators could force teachers to teach in ways that a growing number of inexperienced, what-to-do evaluators *could mass evaluate*.

If, in fact, reform-ordered assessment personnel could be trained, right there alongside those so many school-score-identified *bad* teachers? Then brand-new, naïvely inexperienced evaluators would, ultimately, never have any need to contemplate (nor even own personal scruples pertaining to) whether or not the compulsory strategies being forced onto teachers as modern-day mandatory routines had any true-life academic value.

In point of fact?

The less that abruptly hired evaluators knew about honestly effective educational practices, the better this all-encompassing system of mass evaluation might work. When, in response to humiliatingly simplified expectations, teachers voiced opposition or showed any resistance for working with what they believed to be frustratingly ineffectual and harmfully dumbed-down academic expectations – well, unhappy teachers like these?

Could now so easily, and so efficiently, be disenfranchised.

In Big Money days callously bent to the suddenly legislated requirements of a mass evaluation, you simply need send out a vigorous succession of structurally trained, if minimally experienced, evaluators; taking the form of facilitators, coaches, specialists, testing minions, data analysts, curriculum regulators, administrative fixers, area supervisors, assessment managers or sundry reform personnel, *all* could be efficiently trained to believe that any hesitancy against a use of belligerently ordered strategies – strategies now promoted as being both research-based and compulsory – well any sign of resistance, as this each year escalating supply of accountability personnel might be taught to believe, was not only problematic, but insubordinately *unacceptable*.

Teachers who stood in opposition?

Teachers who altered or ignored commands?

Teachers who avoided a dictated use of weakly ineffectual strategies?

Well, gosh darn it, these teachers were *bad*.

All of that flashily promised assessment money; all of that money you had enthusiastically acquired and now so faithfully bowed down to – continued its clarion call. Continued its relentless demand for an ever more invasive, ever more uncompromising evaluative action. And, in *modern* days?

Well, in the fast pace of modern days, it was a simple economic truth: Money?

Was never wrong.

As the “compassionate” funding impatiently attached to an increasingly retaliatory accountability might now make crystal clear, the time had come to draw attention to, and subsequently eliminate (oh, and wasn’t it frightening to contemplate just how *many* were out there) that always increasing number of intractably *bad* teachers.

Teachers who resisted.

Teachers who demanded respect for an individualized experience.

Teachers who insisted upon expressing personal, forthright opinions. Teachers who fought to be creative, non-standardized, and outspoken. Teachers who, so self-interestedly and obstinately?

Elected to remain passionately and irrepressibly *unique*.

*If, opening our eyes, we allow ourselves to recognize that earliest efforts at closing/reopening schools under the invasive theory of a test-score-based reform have not, years later, produced their promised results; if we let ourselves understand that, in point of fact, *the majority of schools first forcefully closed down and invasively “transformed” have been additionally, and sometimes repeatedly, closed down and revamped due (as the argument goes) to the continued production of unacceptable test scores*; well, then, what is the actual goal of a modern-day accountability? Is it an *actual* accountability, or simply the lucrative perpetuation of the *cycle* of accountability?

Superfluous Redundancy

A particularly debilitating aspect of a modern-day educational accountability was its ability to not just once, but repeatedly, produce a prolonged and extraordinary confusion. The suddenly intense, NCLB-ordered under-the-magnifying-glass focus upon low-income, low-scoring schools had, in fact, actively encouraged districts to cooperate intimately with vacuum-cleaner-like consulting firms.

Organizations which, once hired?

Instigated innovation after innovation, even as they inhaled truly enormous sums of a reform-triggered money. Little attention was given to the *actual* state of affairs inside deficit-labeled schools when a massive funding – money offered insistently to anyone willing to order up a cyclically chaotic change inside lowest-income, politically weakest buildings – controlled the floor.

If, suddenly, one reformer decided that children learn best when daily presented with content, language, reading and writing objectives?

Almost immediately an additional innovator argued that *good* teachers must additionally post, review and discuss each day’s visibly available lesson plan agenda.

Although the analysis of multiple objectives *and* a daily lesson agenda was time consuming, and, since one mirrored the other, redundant – watching precious instructional minutes pass, educators complied, only to discover that yet another reformer was demanding that, each day, teachers allot time for a discussion

of their lesson expectations as they related to prominently posted state standards. Unaware, presumably?

That the *point* of creating objectives for each lesson had been to reiterate the particulars found inside standards' expectations.

What had already become redundant...

Now became superfluously redundant.

Dog-piling onto the innovation heap, an additional reformer suddenly stipulated that, upon entering a classroom, students must have visual access to daily lesson expectations in the form of objective-based warm-ups. And, another innovator decisively contended, each day's key vocabulary must not only be made predominantly available, but painstakingly reviewed at the onset of each lesson. Not to be left out, yet another expert jumped up to command an academic closure; each and every day? Teachers must make time to review their most important lesson points (remembering, absolutely and always, to hand out and collect those now ubiquitously ordered exit slips at the end of an ever-shrinking fifty-minute hour).*

So, well.

How about just for kicks?

How about we follow along with this particular set of silver-bullet solutions driven into schools by self-promoting "experts" – mandates most easily pushed onto those lowest-of-school-score-identified-lowest *bad* teachers: Those never-endingly tested, and thus especially offensive, instructors of literacy. How about we tag along and observe how a *good* Language Arts lesson might go.

Entering a classroom and taking a seat, you look to the board. Reading through daily-posted warm-up directives, you start and complete expectations. When you have finished, you sit quietly and wait until everyone appears to have completed their work. And then, when everyone appears ready for instruction?

You, your teacher, and your peers can move along and look to, read aloud and reflect upon the multiple lesson objectives made available to you for the intentional delineation of the exact purposes connected to each carefully differentiated academic feature planned in today's lesson.

After you have taken enough time; once everyone in the room appears to have carefully dissected and fully understood

each of these various goals: together you, your teacher, and your peers can move on to now review and analyze each distinct element found inside today's objectives as it relates to the step-by-step, plainly-posted lesson plan agenda. Everyone might now determine this day's academic goals by taking the time to recognize how, during the course of this day's lesson, each of these goals will be specifically and intentionally addressed.

When the examination into the day's agenda concludes; once everyone appears to be fully on board, illustrating an understanding of both the day's objectives and the logical connections located inside your visibly-posted lesson plan itinerary?

Stepping right along, you, your teacher, and your classmates might now progress to a thorough discussion of the analytical expectations found inside your classroom's openly displayed state standards; with great care, you, your teacher and your classmates can carefully deliberate the numerous associations which will link today's lesson to the particulars found inside your state standards' requirements.

Then, finally; as your detailed standards' review concludes; once everyone has shown a basic comprehension of how the multiple objectives, lesson plan agenda, and posted standards' expectations connect to this day's academic purposes?

Together everyone might now move along to an intentional review of your prominently listed key vocabulary. With necessary care, words particular to this day's lesson might now be fully and purposefully deliberated.

Whew.

At this point?

Well, at this point, with any luck your teacher will look at the clock, and see that, due to the fact that there are so few minutes left in the hour? It is now time to begin the expert-mandated processes connected to an intentional lesson closure.

Everybody, all together:

Let's review what we've learned today.

*In recent years confused parents have begun to argue that with each year of reform their children seem to be learning less and less; this is not actually hard to explain. Between a growing number of days mandated not only for testing, but for a non-student-contact teacher retraining and development, and the multiple, time-consuming protocols now being forced onto teachers by innovation

after innovation – well, thirteen years after the initial instigation of NCLB, many teachers are only able to introduce two-thirds to one-half of what they used to be allowed to cover.

That Oldest Profession

As years bent to a high-stakes testing progressed, those who felt it necessary to fight their way past the razzle-dazzle generated by a never-ending parade of innovations began to recognize a relatively simple truth. The *real* school reform conundrum; the truest accountability dilemma?

Was how to say no to the powerful lure of Big Money.

A few brave dissenters, a couple governors here, an out-of-the-way county there, an occasional rebel district with its own strongly held beliefs around protecting local sovereignty – well, as dissenters willing to speak out, each showed impressive gumption as they voiced a public opposition to modern-day educational funding competitions.

Competitive races where the “winner?”

Inevitably found that severely limiting (and invasively tunnel-visioned) expectations came absolutely and irrevocably attached.

Prepared to articulate exact reasoning for opposition, a few morally besieged dissenters extended the opinion that governmentally and/or philanthropically funded school reformations – innovations where financing came based upon a standardizing, test-score-funded rivalry? Forced states and districts to give up a locally protected academic integrity and, in the process, lose old-school-collaborative community controls.

Not every state, however, and oh, certainly, not every district, struggled with the ethical issues inherent to the wooing, and promiscuous embracing, of any and all reform-designated monies. Not that many, in fact? Appeared to have much trouble in opening wide to swallow down the belligerently written constraints which commanded recipients to follow through with any and all conjoined expectations – up to, and including, a severely abusive, community-debilitating building invasion, and the crushingly unhappy mistreatment of a low-income school personnel.

In fact, as years dedicated to the implementation of a test-based accountability advanced? An increasing number of self-

aggrandizing educational “leaders” apparently felt little need to scuffle with the annoying moral issues which might logically attend the indiscriminate pursuit of a reform-aggressive, change-mandating money.

Hello?

It was money.

Always searching, in days of a punitive statistical liability, for answers to a growing number of the now legally imposed funding predicaments, governors, mayors, superintendents, administrators, testing personnel, and an increasing supply of school board members began to contemplate the benefit of approaching monetary competitions with *not* a wary, nor limited, involvement, but, alternately?

With a full and unquestioned cooperation.

If, as the person in charge...oh, how about we call you the parent.

Well if, as the parent, you could *maybe* win that lottery?

If, as the guardian, you could *possibly* step up and take in a sizable chunk of that Really Big Money? Although your hope of winning required you to resolutely burn up huge chunks of your limited income in *trying* to win, even while the kids in your charge were left without food, shoes or hell, even heat – surely this was still an excellent economic logic. Wasn't it?

Yes, yes.

Of course.

Rather than miss a chance at pocketing a personal slice of that *really* big money, and studiously ignoring the fact that the very act of making states, districts and schools perform like trained circus animals in their effort to garner a governmental and/or philanthropic funding was an action which allowed a frighteningly disproportionate disbursement system (a system which could, and did, selectively offer money to *some* schools, while withholding it carefully and debilitatingly from others; a system which was, if anyone took time for a deeper analysis, shockingly similar in both manner and deed to not only child abuse, but a ruinous neglect) – well, acting alone or with state partners, multiple districts willingly stood up, and began, precariously and expensively, to prance about on hind legs.

Agreeing, as they danced.

Willing, as they performed.

Compliant, as they postured.

To accept the underlying demand that, should they “win?”

Not only would they take on – but then unbendingly execute – any and all of the obligations imposed by an increasingly powerful faction of educational “experts.” That suddenly mushrooming supply of modern-day educational “experts” who had now been irrefutably placed in charge of the minimally regulated “discretionary” disbursement of that lucrative monetary prize. *

*In case the concept of a “discretionary” educational funding has not been made clear, it is a modern-day configuration based upon the idea that, *if you do not close or invade yet more low-income, high-minority schools, fire an additional supply of union-protected teachers, endlessly re-assign and interchange your lowest-scoring-school principals, adopt our very expensive pre-scripted (oops-apparently-we-completely-left-out-Civil-Disobedience-and-Jim-Crow) curricula, and use our massively implemented computer-based you-will-now-need-to-buy-thousands-of-computers testing*, we will simply withhold your financing *until you do*.

When Big Money Speaks

Even in the face of the each year more competitive – and each year more inequitable – distribution of a Civil-Rights-initiated/low-income-mandated aide to public schools, there was a notable lack in participant criticism.

When *Big Money* spoke?

Oh, it spoke very, very loudly.

Blinded by the possibility of obtaining tantalizing monetary prizes, educational competitors steadfastly avoided pointing to the outright, and even technically illegal, misuse of governmental funds. Choosing, instead, to contend energetically for cash (always hoping, in the process, to appropriate an exciting hunk of that money *just for themselves*), participants elected to follow each and every command – including those which asked competitors to jump through particularly undignified and financially devastating hoops.

Leaping repeatedly; executing countless handstands; offering up impossible backflips; effecting underwear-revealing cartwheels; preparing, always, to deliver yet more of the relentlessly required tricks and turns at the constantly shifting whim of an

“expert” demand – districts pranced deferentially around the most recently fashioned school-funding circus.

Although.

Well, yes; it was true.

Most contestants ended up *not* with the money:

But with a repeated, humiliating demand for *more*.

More hoops.

More jumps.

More flips.

More tricks.

More dancing.

More prancing.

And?

More fees exacted as the means to effect a continual entering of yet more of those highly expensive, but endlessly and unbendingly required, financial competitions.

Once rejected, choosing to see only that they had missed out on what was now thought of as essential funding, and doggedly dismissing any need to re-think tactics of an overall educational financing, desperate competitors stubbornly refused to stand up to the devastating competitive programs and demand a return to more democratically equitable practices. Continuing to anxiously consume local operational budgets in their effort to cover the spiraling costs of preparing for and entering big-money race after big-money race, too often contestants learned late, that:

Ah, well; due to a lack in pre-ordained competitive regulations; due to arbitrary and abruptly decided race requirements?

Well gee, a final distribution of that capriciously unpredictable money was going to be as chaotically supervised as the incessantly mandated test-score-based school reforms themselves.

Jumping.

Flipping.

Dancing.

Prancing.

The show-me-the-money I’ll-do-anything acrobatics never actually stopped. Following a modern-day logic, they simply attached themselves to the next huge, prize-garnering financial race – that next really-big-money reform circus. That newer, bigger and even more lucrative big-money circus which, coming just after the last big-money circus, followed immediately upon the

heels of the big-money circus put into place only a few years before. Each big money circus so flashily and spectacularly pressing in; each extravaganza making so many shimmeringly razzle-dazzle demands?

That each effectively replaced any true-life effort at an organically particular, location specific and *stability dependent* pedagogic reason.

Whack-A-Mole Management

All too rapidly, the unbounded enthusiasm for winning educational monies turned into unchecked chaos. So many evaluators, coaches, facilitators, specialists and fixer administrators were hired, in fact, that few within the district, and certainly even fewer within the incessantly invaded schools themselves, could predict the year's, the month's or even the following day's school assessment focus. As reformers continued to grasp after the slippery undulations of an ever realigning competitive funding, strategies which had, at great expense, been abruptly forced onto educators at one massively obligated meeting?

Were abruptly outdated almost as suddenly as they had once been instigated.

Baffled teachers who stayed true to a protocol or policy introduced at one or another compulsory assembly, soon found themselves unforgivably behind the times when yet another newly assigned evaluator began to agitate that *her* miraculous innovation (a much flashier tactic which had evidently been carried in on the shoulders of those industrious little elves at midnight) was being ignored. Unhappy evaluators?

Argued with facilitators.

Facilitators dictated to specialists.

Specialists complained loudly to coaches.

Coaches fussed at fixer administrators.

And fixer administrators?

Came down hard and fast on the school's lowest-level and thus unquestionably incompetent staff. Whether reform-loyal administrators chose, in the act of addressing school-score-labeled *bad* faculties, to try out the ploy of crying, speaking dejectedly, publicly humiliating, punitively chastising, or just plain old red-faced yelling?

It all came down to one thing: *Statistics didn't lie.*

We.

Were.

Bad.

And, thus, irrefutably?

Our school was bad.

Turning sideways in seats; glaring antagonistically over shoulders – an ever changing corps of evaluative personnel made sure that everyone in the building knew: In exceptionally compassionate days committed to the no-excuses magic of an instantaneous transformation?

They were watching.

Endlessly patrolling; continually on the lookout – a perpetually dissatisfied cadre of evaluative hires made sure that everyone was fully aware: Not only did they expect to locate, but to then very publicly castigate an unacceptable behavior. Following along behind their staff, shaking fingers and chastising openly, standing, even, outside restroom doors ready to walk suspect personnel back to the latest round of non-optional meetings, modern-day evaluators labored to identify the most openly resistant rebels and force them into a visible compliance.

Referring with the relentless echo of a broken record to the frightening array of consequences now being tied, each year, to a progressively meaner lineup of penalties, administrative threats held employees liable for the merciless flow of reform directives being driven into low-income buildings at a faster and faster rate. Imprisoned within the always shifting and minimally regulated money-hungry district's game of *bad* educator Whack-A-Mole, teachers paid dearly for any misstep, purposeful or accidental.

You didn't put up your objectives! Whack.

You didn't go over your objectives! Whack.

You didn't change your objectives! Whack.

You don't have an agenda! Whack.

You didn't update your agenda! Whack.

Your agenda was not complete! Whack.

You don't have a bell activity! Whack.

Your bell activity took too long! Whack.

You haven't posted the state standards! Whack.

You haven't posted the *current* state standards! Whack.

Your kids weren't working with partners! Whack.
Your kids weren't working in groups! Whack.
Your kids were using the wrong books! Whack.
Your kids were studying the wrong page! Whack.
You didn't stop for lesson closure! Whack.
Your lesson closure didn't include exit slips! Whack.
You used *last* year's writing strategy, and not the one introduced this week! Whack.
You opened your mouth and criticized – anything?
Whack, whack, whack, whack, *whack*.

See Me At Your Own Incontinence

After what felt to be the thousandth classroom observation inside a frighteningly destabilized building where old-school foundations had lost steady ground to the whirling vortex of reform – always susceptible to yet another bludgeoning from the Whack-A-Mole mallet, I received an evaluative email from Ms. Hart.

Ah, Ms. Hart.

That very small, very defensive...

And very, *very* unappealing woman.

That woman who, absolutely and indisputably?

Was our school's Whack-A-Mole champion.

Creating the illusion of a collaborative interest, Ms. Hart's assessments typically began with a short list of compliments. All too soon, however, compliment turned to complaint; complaint which then followed complaint which followed complaint.

For Ms. Hart?

An unhappy criticism was pretty much a done deal.

Having entered our school as a buddy hire, Ms. Hart worked intimately with our building's most recently installed fixer principal – a man well trained in the theory that *all* teachers employed inside low-scoring buildings were undoubtedly and inexcusably *bad*. His latest powerfully-paid position had, in fact, been offered to him with explicit instructions: Isolate, negatively evaluate, and dramatically rid both the school and our district of unwanted teachers.

(Oh, you know, that modern-day store of *bad* teachers:
Teachers who spoke up.

Teachers who showed resistance.

Teachers who, oh my, *openly voiced opinions*.)

To realize this mandate, our newest “fixer” principal had quickly separated himself and our years-old institution from any of those sticky complications attached to a traditionally collaborative old-school management. Acting to then assertively fill his newly-vacated administrative seats, he had brought in his own supply of shockingly young assistants – administrative adjuncts so greenly untested that they never thought to question his defensive string of belligerently delivered, if endlessly shifting, commands.*

Being, thus, an administratively deployed bent-on-*bad*-teacher-elimination hire?

Ms. Hart could not, actually, be pleased.

(Oh, come now. You simply couldn’t purge a school of resistantly opinionated, student-protective teachers *by being pleased*.) In her latest email, Ms. Hart took pains to point out that, once again, I had taken it upon myself *to directly instruct my students*. Students, she lamented at length? Who had not been convened into the more modern-day magical formation of groups: that miracle-inducing configuration where, presumably, they could instruct themselves.

I just didn’t get it.

How Ms. Hart and the literally dozens of reformers she represented could so repeatedly and adamantly promote the idea that low-income, too-often-transient, too-often-sporadically-attending children came to school somehow imbued with all prerequisite academic information and could, therefore – oh, but *wasn’t* this a popular theory – simply forego an explicit teacher-based instruction. That old-school *boring*, contiguously daily instruction which so obviously got in the way of more visibly impressive innovator dreams.

Feeling trapped inside the web of Ms. Hart’s bewildering demands; stymied by the whine of what felt to be her fully illogical complaint – my eyes were drawn to a handful of words which had been attached to the bottom of the email:

“Please see me,” an appended comment read, *“at your own incontinence.”*

Coming as it did from this endlessly dissatisfied woman – this unhappy adjunct who, hiding a yawning lack of experience

along with her glaring inability to connect with others behind what was erroneously labeled as an “evaluation” in modern days, thought it necessary to invasively and unendingly micro-manage:

Well, actually?

It felt a rational directive. Watch out, the insider joke held. It won’t be long before, not only orchestrating every move in the classroom? Ms. Hart will be telling employees exactly where and when to urinate, up to and including the immovable assignment of exactly specified restroom stalls.

*One of the more debilitating elements attached to a Big Money reform has been its ability to demand “specialists” “coaches” and “evaluators” where a long-term-experienced and truly capable personnel do not exist, thus allowing the district to fill reform-mandated/fully-financed position after reform-mandated/fully-financed position with an endless flow of minimally prepared greenhorns. “It just doesn’t make any sense,” observed a peer. “Why do they think it is logical to always be putting the conscripts in charge of the war?”

Weapons of Mass Instruction

Micro-management.

Oh, now *here* was a truly exciting mass-evaluation solution.

Microscopically controlling employees in the name of addressing low-income school deficits. As a rising tide of well-paid evaluators, specialists, coaches, supervisors, administrators, testing adjuncts and managerial fixers were drawn into the accountability melee, the practice of placing ever tightening controls around more and more of the actions, methods and routines employed by low-income school educators quickly gained popularity.

Once procured, Big Money disbursements attached to the suddenly legalized mandate for an additional round of teacher evaluations commanded the immediate hiring of a supplemental assessment personnel – thereby both creating and sustaining the illusion that minimally experienced and unpredictably hired evaluators could, in fact, take on the intimidating task of recognizing, calculating and mass-assessing an old-school, long-term-experienced educator ability. Many tenderfoot recruits, while happy

enough to be employed through the immediacy of reform funding...well, if truth be told?

More than a few were familiar with little, if anything, having to do with education. To complicate the matter, being predominantly born and bred members of the dominant-culture, middle-to-wealthy classes, many new hires had minimal to zero experience working with inner-city poor and/or culturally-diverse children. So, well.

Yes, it was a tad embarrassing. Effectively assessing low-income school teacher needs *or* ability?

Well, as it turned out – this was a job that many culturally disconnected and minimally experienced educational evaluators could *not*, in fact, do.

Fortunately, however?

It didn't matter.

Due to the abruptly escalating dependence upon a micro-managed rigidity (a rigidity now able to demand the many practices associated to statistically fanatic data teams, minutely orchestrated professional developments, exactly bound testing expectations, profusely detailed lesson-plan templates, and the budget-breaking purchase of thought-by-thought pre-scripted curriculum guides) – well, it was soon discovered that timidly inexperienced evaluators?

Had limited reason to employ, or even rely upon, independent thought. What greenly inexperienced evaluators didn't know about teaching; what privileged-culture hires didn't know about working with poor and often diversely-complex students; what unskilled management hires didn't know about low-income school requirements?

All, as it turned out in days of a no-excuses liability:

Irrelevant.

As an ever more punitive accountability began to demand the growing practice of an everybody-on-the-same-page conformity, teacher instruction (and, consequently, the evaluation of an educator ability) quickly began to intertwine complicitly with the exhaustively bound and microscopically pre-scripted processes connected to a *non*-creative, *non*-individualized, *non*-risk-taking: Mass instruction.

Having little idea about what a novice teacher might need to do. Having even less idea about what a skilled educator already knew how to do.

Abruptly deployed evaluative hires felt minimal pressure to actually sit down, learn about instructional strategies, and work collaboratively with teacher suggestions or requests. Empowered only to execute those regulations put into practice with a micro-managed and massively produced innovation – in what was surely a groundbreaking educational move?

The *good* teacher evaluators of a modern-day reform:
Were no longer required to think.

Once the practices around an increasingly rigid mass instruction came to require the exhaustive production of five-to-seven-step lesson plans, a minutely-detailed semester mapping, and an absolute, page-by-page adherence to pre-scripted curriculum guides – well, suddenly?

Any person willing to buy into the theory that struggling schools *could*, actually, be “fixed” simply by forcing an inflexible adherence to a non-creative mass instruction, was invited to join the mushrooming ranks of evaluative personnel:

And take charge of any indisputably recognized *bad* teacher’s day.

At any time.

The Perfect Image

To promote the theory that our modern-day dependence upon massively executed teacher evaluations existed – a theory increasingly affixed, as the years of accountability passed, to practices of an ever more punitive micro-management – well, fully aware that district adoption would come at the phenomenal price of embracing the multiple heavily-prescribed structures of a mass instruction, vast sums of money (oh my now, really, who out there *is still surprised*):

Were spent.

Again.

Now swaying alluringly on center stage?

The latest pre-scripted frenzy: Thickly-flashy, day-by-day, minutely-calculated, heavily-expensive, one-per-student-per-year workbooks.

Ignorance, clearly, was bliss.

Schools barely scraping by yet elected to overlook the fact that in more than a few cases classroom shelves already bulged heavy with recently purchased textbooks. Conversely, at phenomenal expense innovation-mandated, year-specific workbooks were assertively acquired. Densely-written, page-by-page manuals; manuals which, due to a never-endingly ordered alteration?

Obligated a never-endingly ordered repurchase.*

Leaning upon the now nationally adopted logic that – well, regardless of instructional background; regardless of years spent accruing a hands-on experience; regardless of classes taught or university degrees earned? School-score-identified *bad* teachers could surely never access page-by-page, self-explanatory manuals or be classroom competent unless forced to meet, year after year, with extravagantly flown-in workbook representatives, one-to-two-week-long teacher trainings were instigated at a mind-boggling cost. As the rationale behind modern-day accountability held?

It was only through this directly forced contact with the enlightened minds of pre-scripted writers (and oh, my, but wasn't this repeatedly made clear) that a true educational magic might occur. It was, after all, the mushrooming supply of exceptional thinkers who wrote, or simply peripherally represented, these phenomenally costly and fully pre-scripted programs who absolutely and undoubtedly were the true educational geniuses. The gloriously pioneering masterminds: the true academic saviors for whom, all of these many long years?

Low-income schools had been anxiously awaiting.

Although.

Well now; *was it possible?*

Was it possible that these well-educated and assuredly well-meaning (if hugely expensive) pre-scripted writers and sales representatives had, somehow, along the way managed to miss a tiny, but, oh gosh, probably important point? *Was it possible* that they had missed the fact that the children who attended low-scoring, inner-city schools might not actually be (slow down now; big surprise ahead) the economically stable, fluent English-speaking, reliably attending offspring of Harvard professors who had read not only the entire Protestant Bible, but the complete works of long-dead British poets and playwrights to their children in utero?

No matter how often educators spoke up; no matter how many times teachers voiced their concerns that an inflexible, pre-scripted curriculum written and promoted by privileged-class thinkers did not actually match low-income, culturally-diverse instructional needs;† no matter how avidly educators argued that an immovable prescription generated academic havoc as it detachedly ignored the realities of everyday low-income lives – the more the district refused any admission of a harmful miscalculation.

Preening under the now nationally generated title of No-excuses Reformers, proponents of a day-by-day-pre-scripted micro-management moved to escalate an everybody-on-the-same-page instruction. Loudly promoting the long-term “growth” projected through a purchase of minutely-pre-scripted programs, in a tactically executed razzle-dazzle back flip?

Once again district leaders managed to bypass not only any recognition of, but any responsibility for, the growing number of debilitating social, cultural and environmental issues which much more profoundly affected a true-life student achievement. In our modern age now so blindly dedicated to the Big Money theory of instantaneous innovations?

Surely a district *image* was much, much more important than any of those true-life student results. Shockingly expensive, mass produced and overwhelmingly pre-scripted workbooks may not have matched the real-life needs of poor and often diversely unique students, but – written, published and promoted, as they were, by Very Important People?

Well, the use of these programs made the district *look* damned good.

And in modern days pushing to implement the über-benevolent magic of silver bullet solutions:

That mattered.°

*What is perhaps just as frightening is to see, at the end of a school year, how so many building dumpsters (many of them not even set up for recycling) are now filled to overflowing with an excess of these used, slightly used, or never-used-but-now-outdated pre-scripted manuals.

†Here I would point out that the term “privileged-class thinker” cannot be tied solely to the dominant culture, but applies just as well to any non-dominant-

culture citizen who has been educated exclusively inside dominant-culture perimeters (i.e. the university educated Hispanic administrator who explained to me emphatically that the Hispanic experience was fully represented in our American Literature textbooks simply through the inclusion of Columbus – a man who, while he may have forced the *inception* of the Hispanic culture? Was technically never himself Hispanic.)

°Take a little time to uncover the names and faces behind the many heavily written and massively prescribed school “reform” programs. Ultimately you will find not only unprecedented corporate profits, but big-name I-think-I’ll-run-for-President investors.

The Weiner Question

Not so long ago, a perhaps overly confident politician blessed with the last name of Weiner created (and then, only a short year or so later, recreated) a big media splash when he elected to send pictures suggestive of his most private parts via the world of a digital – and thus globally shared – information. Journalists and comedians alike had an entertainment heyday as they repeatedly referred to the now infamously-posted Mr. Weiner’s *wiener*.

Or, was that his *weener*?

As the story broke, in my head I heard my students asking: “Miss? *How* do you spell it?”

Within days of the first exposure, a drama-inducing newspaper printed bold headlines to proclaim: *Weiner admits...Yeah, I’m a Schmuck*, thereby engendering a fascinating study in derogatory epithets. Allowing that certain citizens in our country carry the appellation of Schmuck, a follow-up inquiry now presented itself: If a politician named *Schmuck* got himself into trouble, would he then be obliged to publicly denounce himself as a *Weiner*?

Talk about your average Schmuck calling a weenie a Weiner.

It was a wordplay convolution likely to spark contemplation of that age-old literary question: What *is* in a name? *Is* a rose still simply a rose if, in the effort to distract through a massively produced and endlessly scintillating razzle-dazzle, you enthusiastically and repeatedly referred to it not as a rose, but as an *exceptionally advanced multi-faceted specimen of floral eminence*?

Tangentially, if the impoverished students attending your district's lowest-income, largely culturally-different schools persistently embarrassed their administrators – illustrating, through a repeated production of their unacceptable test scores, that they struggled academically – well, *could* you magically elevate a student ability simply by compelling placement, after bragging loudly and publicly of a dramatically increased enrollment, in *Advanced, Accelerated* and *Honors* courses?

Did the suddenly decided act of adding impressive academic titles to various classes and then force-filling these now imposing courses to the brim and beyond *make* your school better? *Were* the kids you had enrolled, often abruptly and without input, into these classes – students who had experienced few privileged-class, dominant-culture social advantages – really, somehow, magically *more academically able*?*†

Did closing a decades-old, all-student-inclusive neighborhood school and then, under the guise of a hard-hitting reform, expensively reopening it as multiple exclusive “academies” with exciting, exceptional names – long, striking names such as *The Presidential Scholars' Early Elite University* – well, *did* this ostentatious act of re-naming institutions somehow enable these buildings to supersede local life issues, and thus a deeply entrenched historical performance?

Did the assertively forced use of page-by-page, shockingly pricey and fully pre-scripted programs written, promoted and published by prestigious big-name educational companies (companies which, as a result of such an unprecedented national compassion, *were growing fatter and fatter with each benevolently munificent year*) – well, *did* a use of these exclusively published manuals somehow magically guarantee not only a student comprehension, but a subsequent academic success?

Driving home late one afternoon, with relief I pulled into the passing lane and moved my car from behind a dingy white truck which had been leaking dark clouds of a visibly gray exhaust; the liberally emitted smoke had been making me feel both light-headed and queasy. As I pulled over to pass, however, I couldn't help but notice a boldly-lettered sign which had been carefully affixed to the back driver-side fender.

LEV, the sizable sticker asserted absolutely:
This is a Low Emissions Vehicle.

Projecting the necessary magic behind a no-waiting logic, this unambiguously posted proclamation – as opposed to any literal truth – surely served to solve the highly visible problem of emissions. This was, after all, how the miracles of a silver-bullet innovation *worked*.

Wasn't it?

*At the onset of one school year an administrator pushed statistical information onto our staff; as we were initially led to the fact that a previous year's AP teacher had enrolled an unprecedented number of students into his courses, we followed expectations to clap, whistle and cheer. Minutes later, however, a larger-than-life statistical data projected at the front of the room illustrated that very few of his students had managed to procure even a lowest-recognized AP score, and way too many hadn't even gotten that far. Suddenly the room went silent as, unexpectedly, this man was now loudly and publicly chastised.

To Spin The Doctor Or Doctor The Spin

Schools “reformed” through the impressive magic of a highly polished image.

Well, as it turned out?

They weren't always what they were cracked up to be. Sometimes?

Oh, sometimes there was quite a bit of spin behind the liberally polished façade.

In the spring of 2011, much to the embarrassment of big-name educational authorities, after huge bonus monies (and we're talking hundreds of thousands here) had been presented with loud acclaim to a southern state superintendent – a no-excuses powerhouse who, reformers were proud to point out, had not only radically raised test scores, but, along the way, proven the Presidentially-lauded theory of *absolute need for a competitive, punitive-measure, test-score-dependent accountability* – well, it turned out that this assertively honored administrator:

Had been, maybe?

A little less than honest.

In fact, investigators now argued, not only had an extensive test score manipulation been practiced in her district...

It had been aggressively, if very privately, endorsed.

Almost a full decade after the policies of a high-stakes testing had been legislated by our nation's suddenly “compassion-

ate” government, big-name journalists (sound-bite-seeking commentators who, for so many years, had enthusiastically protected their advantaged position as educational reform’s loudest cheerleaders – had, in fact, been happily established on seats way up high at the very top of the pro-reform bandwagon), now professed a sudden astonishment to find that not just one particular school, not just one or two misguided and miscellaneous *bad* teachers, but suddenly a scandalous percent of a large, award-winning district was being exposed as having pulled the testing wool over public eyes.

It was so, well, *shocking*.

Who could’ve foreseen it?

Who could’ve guessed?

Who, along the way, could’ve envisioned that those astounding high test scores – test scores which had jumped so miraculously, leaping *as if by magic* up the increasingly demanding, increasingly punitive, and increasingly inflexible test-score barometer – might turn out to be *not* what they proposed?

Who could’ve predicted that, as the harshly invasive, job-threatening measures behind a high-stakes accountability assertively commandeered district management: Well, *who* could’ve foretold that the extreme pressure for boosting low scores might start *right at the top*? *Who* could’ve projected that the no-excuses demand for a production of that magical (and oh-so-lucratively rewarded) “image” of success, might come down directly onto low-income school employees from the very heavy hands of a bonus-and-power-hungry *superintendent*? An overwhelmingly powerful leader who, employees now claimed, had made it more than clear through her penalty-menacing, paycheck-threatening demands, that buildings in *her* district:

Would, by hook or by crook, dramatically elevate test scores. So that, not surprisingly?

They did.

District employees: teachers, facilitators, coaches, evaluators, data analysts, curriculum specialists, testing minions, and that always realigning circle of fixer administrators – all whose middle-to-upper-middle-class livelihoods depended upon a continued employment – were not, as it turned out, actually stupid. Practices of a test-score manipulation, or so it had been quickly

discovered, could immediately proffer (and then so very favorably sustain) those rapidly climbing scores.

And then?

Well then, so suddenly and with such a brilliantly glittering fanfare, those schools most miraculously producing their rapidly climbing and wonderfully impossible scores were accepting not only a massive reform financing, but unprecedented bonus monies – everything happening so quickly and so excitingly, even as the now nationally lauded and widely glorified superintendent was bragging openly about *her* district’s extraordinary academic success.

And, well; all along the way?

No one, apparently, had blinked.

No one had thought it necessary to look – oh, just a tad bit closer. No one had believed it logical (or even necessary) to question, before embracing, the incredible, *magical* production of those stupendous, governmentally acclaimed *and monetarily rewarded* scores; those scores which, cleverly packaged inside their fraudulent disguise? Had, for so many long years, now, helped fabricate the nationally applauded, big-money supported – if problematically counterfeit – reality of a modern-day educational accountability.*

*As “grade change” scandals hit the news and those in charge feign a shocked incredulity, I would encourage journalists to seek out the so many, many teachers no longer employed and learn from them how, in those districts most reform aggressive, orders for a grade change manipulation run long and deep – more often than not coming down right from the top.

A Funny Thing

In the end.

Well, gosh darn it, in the end it turned out, that – as a direct result of the never-endingly antagonistic threats? Years of manipulating, forging and falsely reporting test scores in the effort to elevate a district or school image and thereby garner both public praise *and the even bigger wonder of bonus monies* (a practice, as it turned out, much more prevalent across the nation than anyone wished to admit) – well, as it happened, the inexplicably high test scores produced through data manipulation didn’t, actually?

Make frustrated kids any more able to pass their incessantly mandated exams.

But, oh my.

It surely brought in *the money*.

And, although seldom recognized, a funny thing kept happening, over and over, all along the way. A funny thing that a few extra thoughtful, public-education-protective citizens thought it useful to recognize.

Although false, the outstanding scores (combined as they inevitably were with image elevating accolades published inside a widely disseminated reform-promoting press) made local communities, and the parents of every cultural and socio-economic background residing within them, believe that the schools where they now sent their children – schools which had only recently been so loudly denounced as *bad*?

Were, now, not only *good* schools, but, somehow, magically?

Great schools.

Upon being told that their local neighborhood schools were not only doing well, but doing very, *very* well, a hidden, till-now-dormant attitude of enthusiastic support took root and grew. Community members, expecting to hear, as they had heard each and every year since an initial instigation of NCLB, that their low-income schools were (always and forevermore) *bad* – schools where, as the ruthless publication of an amalgamated test score data informed everyone, *all* students functioned in deficit; schools where, due to this detached practice of indifferently fusing building scores, year after year *all* children had been statistically labeled as underachievers; schools where not only the students, but the neighborhoods which surrounded them, had been annually branded as insupportable failures – well, upon hearing, conversely, that these very same neighborhoods *now possessed good schools*?

Things started to change.

Parents stepped up.

Schools and students were spiffed up.

Teachers, no longer harassed for the annually predictable production of unacceptable test scores; no longer blamed for an aggregated, school-wide deficiency; no longer intimidated by the oft-parroted threat of yet more high-stakes punishments; no

longer shackled by inflexible, creativity-stifling reforms – alternately felt lauded, respected, rewarded, enthusiastic.

And energized.

And, although the now exposed-as-spurious scores had been telling the nation a story of an astonishing academic ability; although, in the end, these scores had been revealed to be largely mirage – the perception of local success had motivated, and given a foundation to, not only neighborhood pride, but to an unparalleled community and employee buy-in.*

“It just doesn’t make any sense,” a confused parent commented to a carefully scandalized journalist as yet another test score swindle, in yet another city, yet another state, hit the news. “We’ve all been so pleased with our school.”

Serving to visually corroborate this story of an inexcusable deceit, a television camera now swept repeatedly, back and forth, back and forth, in a shameful presentation of the transgression inherent to the many long, invitingly clean school hallways, the multiple trophy cases filled with engaging samples of student work, and the replicated parade of cheerfully decorated classrooms. Classrooms which had, now?

Been exposed as being nothing more than additional examples in our nation’s untenable profusion of *test-score-proven* failing schools.

*”Do you think it’s possible,” suggested a peer, “that any of those teachers in trouble for changing test scores might have done it simply because they are fed up? Because they are sick and tired of seeing their students labeled as failures and told that they are stupid and will never be good enough – *year after year after year?*”

When Perception Becomes Reality

Perception, it would seem, does not always mix comfortably with reality.

As a nationally mandated educational accountability pushed itself aggressively forward, magical innovations forced onto low-scoring schools frequently fell short of a publicly hyped proclamation. In more than a few cases, the nonstop instigation of poorly implemented modifications simply put additional stress onto already struggling systems. Increasingly, the public state-

ment of building policies – and an actual execution of the same – turned out to be two very separate, and often fully disconnected, entities.

Big-salaried reform personnel: advisors, deans, counselors, coaches, facilitators, specialists, evaluators, supervisors, and an ever-realigning supply of “fixer” administrators – all had been hired, or so schools were told, to help out with a student supervision. Walking into reform-invaded buildings; taking a look around? Oh, very likely you’d arrive at the *perception* that, well gosh, in modern days there were just so many (doubtless, more than enough) adults in place. Seeing so many assertively hired school monitors, surely, you would presume?

Discipline and supervision *couldn't* be an issue.

Reality, however.

Trusting to the after-midnight logic of a modern-day elfin magic, the suddenly legislated conjecture behind accountability simply held that each incessantly-added hire – each assertively installed and highly-paid adjunct – could necessarily cover the always growing supply of endlessly added mandates through the simple expediency of taking on endlessly added alternate roles.

Struggling to take on the labor appended to each year’s additional supply of abruptly decided mandates (mandates now allowed to fly into buildings with an increasing whimsy and at a higher and higher rate of speed) – well, scrambling to implement the unexpected orders for an additional testing organization, assessment administration, assembly management, educator development, new teacher instruction, curriculum facilitation, test score analysis, technology training, pre-scripted regulation, intervention implementation, data team preparation, and, lately, the hugely legalized obligation for an excessive employee observation, management hires neither had the time to instigate, nor assume, a personal responsibility for that much less exciting, and much, much less impressive, old-school administrative tradition:

An actual hands-on student supervision.

Being seriously busy; being unquestionably over-booked; being *important* – highly-paid reform hires rarely had time for, nor proffered up an individual interest in, fulfilling the most tedious of their way-too-many-assigned obligations.

Most especially?

That tryingly monotonous *lunch duty*.

Sending large numbers of ten-to-thirteen-year-olds outside for a thirty-minute lunch recess required, as had been carefully written into the disciplinary policies at our school, a consistent, vigilant supervision. To support this expectation, the boys – given a half hour of outdoor freedom while the girls remained indoors for lunch – were under the careful supervision of three adult males. When our school’s first lunch ended and second lunch began, managed by three adult females, the girls were escorted out of the cafeteria by way of an isolated back exit. As the girls headed outdoors to their own thirty-minute recess, the boys were ushered into the cafeteria by way of an intentionally separated front entrance.

For all intents and purposes?

This was a logically written and student protective plan.

However, inside our heavily test-score-penalized year, all three of the men assigned to supervise the boys’ lunch – one a recently promoted advisor, another a rookie mathematics’ coach, and the third an administrator-in-training – well, it turned out that all three of these men (and oh, but wasn’t this made repeatedly and adamantly clear) *were very, very busy*. Frequently, all three men were much too preoccupied to be held responsible for the low-level expectations attached to an actual hands-on student supervision. More than occasionally?

One or two simply didn’t have the time...

So didn’t show up.

When two of these three extra-busy reformers didn’t arrive, being much too involved with one momentous mandate of reform or another to locate a supervisory substitute, the boys quickly figured things out, and things tended to get a bit out of hand. When all three supervisors were unexpectedly absent?

Well, go ahead; use your imagination.

First Do No Harm

So here’s how the story goes:

Fulfilling an assigned duty for supervising the girls’ lunch, after taking a cue from two additional female teachers, I began to walk the girls through a short hallway and up a flight of stairs to the back exit. Suddenly, without warning, a swarm of flailing excited boys banged into the set of double doors above. Aware

that school policy expected these boys to enter our lunchroom only through a separated front lobby, I made my way up past the girls and warily opened one of the doors – anticipating an immediate assistance from any one of three adult male supervisors.

None, however, was in sight.

“You guys know that you can’t come through this door,” I stated reactively as three of the boys forced their way into the stairwell entrance.

Offering not the slightest hesitation, enthusiastically the aggressive trio pushed on by, happily continuing their raucous journey down the stairwell. In a desperate, unthinking hurry to keep up with bigger buddies, as the smallest boy – a markedly thin child of perhaps ten or eleven – bounded gracelessly into the small space, inadvertently he knocked one of the girls into the wall.

“Hey!” I called out loudly.

Without losing pace, looking over his shoulder the boy shot me a cursory glance. “*Suck my dick, bitch,*” he suggested generously.

And zipped on down the stairs.

Well.

Okay; yes, it did take a few minutes to regroup; it did take a moment to get past the initial shock of this young man’s astonishing response. Once I had recovered, however; once I managed to find my breath – I almost smiled. Consider, if you will, the exceptional hubris involved when such an intimate edict comes out of the mouth of a four-foot-tall, pre-pubescent, barely-endowed-yet-unmistakably-proud little miscreant.

To make a point, however?

How about we suspend our story; how about we simply stay right here.

Let’s stay right here, and pretend, temporarily, that *you* are the principal. As the administrator in charge, what is *your* take on this unquestionably inappropriate state of affairs; how, exactly, would *you* handle this outrageous – and surely insupportable – situation?

(By the way: yes, this is a trick question.)

Do you find yourself distracted from all other issues by a personally held indignation at the scandalous language coming out of this insolent child? Disturbed by his disrespectful words,

appalled by what he has said, are you absolutely sure that this child must now face immediate consequences? Are you additionally upset that the other two young men (unruly, riotous children forcing their way down that stairwell to run heedlessly into others) refused, in their wild aggression, to show a necessary respect for school rules? Shouldn't *boys like these* learn that they can't get away with such a flagrant disregard for the conventions of social order?

Or.

Well; *did you notice?*

Did you, by any chance (sadly, you'd find yourself standing there, almost completely alone, if you did) get past the noisy pandemonium; did you move beyond the immediate *perception* of an unacceptable *bad* student behavior to see, instead, a much more serious, much more cleverly hidden, *and much, much more devastatingly harmful* reality?

Sure, you could, as reform-controlled building after reform-controlled building was electing to do in extra-busy days bent to the true compassion of a no-excuses accountability, inflexibly scapegoat these thoughtless little boys. Boys of a certain, well, *culturally-different background*; boys who had been *so clearly out of line*; boys *so unmistakably and belligerently* disobedient.

In this case?

That's exactly what happened.

After all, these boys had so undeniably been – even to those who most loudly professed to be standing up and caring for them – simply three more problematically low-income, culturally-different troublemakers; troublemakers doing, in their notable act of aggression, what kids of, well, let's call it *their background*, were theoretically known to do: making trouble. Complaining phone calls went out to homes; long hours of an after-school detention obligated the unmistakable addition of negative commentary to each student's individualized school records.

And the littlest guy; the one with the truly grandiose interpersonal ideas?

Was unceremoniously suspended.

Nothing, however?

Was done about the blatant lack of a hands-on adult supervision. That tediously dull, old-school, student-interactive adult involvement.

That physically burdensome hands-on supervision which:
Had it actually been in place?

Would not only have prevented the behavior, but, in extra-modern years when state after state was finding it convenient to adopt zero-tolerance disciplinary policies – policies which not only encouraged an ongoing negative-record building, *but also a direct police-ticketing, even to the point of pulling shockingly young students out of their buildings in handcuffs* – would have eliminated the need for accruing those harmfully negative, long-term-debilitating, *bad-student-case-building* student records.*†

Surely it wasn't surprising when, as our especially reform-imbued, test-score-compassionate year progressed?

All three of these notably important men continued to miss day upon day of a lunch supervision. After all, as they labored to implement the endless procession of protocols now attached to our nation's extra-charitable liability – well, being modern-day accountability personnel? *They couldn't themselves be held accountable* for the appalling behavior coming from so many of those offensively difficult students.

All three of these undeniably important men had, you understand, *been busy.* Innovatively *fixing our school.*

Gosh.

Didn't I say that?

*Are you aware that in more than a few high schools the counselors and advisors must check a "pupil has disciplinary record" box whenever their students apply to a college?

†As, increasingly, non-traditional schools are given permission to review student records *before a pupil selection* and as, simultaneously, technology billionaires push to have student and teaching records slotted for perpetuity into administratively accessible databases, it might be a good time to think this through. Think, for example, about the very little boy recently suspended for kissing a very little girl. His parents had to get involved *to have written labels of sexual harassment removed from his permanent school records.* (And, in days when we hear nonstop about the dangers of a governmentally collected data, why do we worry so much about the NSA, even as we so passively ignore the fact that our educational systems are now being empowered to not only

gather, but subsequently publish *and even sell*, their one-sided/in-school records – *starting as early as pre-school?*)

Heart Of Darkness

In the world of Big Money competitions which had come to characterize the “discretionary” financing of a modern-day public education, an honest dedication for *fixing* frustrated schools – an action which would have necessitated not only a real-world understanding of, but a subsequent reaction to, the growing inventory of economic, racial and cultural inequities which much more directly affected student lives – turned out to be a far from easily achieved goal.

In fact, along the way?

A sneaky little truth, one which had become irritatingly lodged beneath the shimmering glitz of a nationally implemented accountability; an annoying little truth which had become cleverly veiled behind the razzle-dazzle of an innovatively generated publicity; a nagging, clinging little truth? Had started to suggest that low-income school reform mandates as they existed under the structures of NCLB and an additionally mandated Race To The Top simply never could address, and therefore honestly fix, the various multi-pronged social realities which much more grievously affected a low-income student existence (and, consequently, all of those assertively generated test scores).

If?

Well, *if*, once this little truth had been unveiled, school reformers had been forced to dig a little deeper: deeply enough to ascertain the true-life solutions required for tackling the many oppressive social issues which much more grievously confounded an academic achievement inside poor, inner-city, culturally-different schools?

Well, these very same “compassionately” led reformers would no longer have had reason to keep up their incessant string of short-term and invasively superficial – but, oh my, *so-well-funded* – reforms.

Fortunately, early on?

Well, early on, in years bent to the initial execution of a no-excuses liability, it had become immediately obvious that – well, huh: It was the reforms themselves, *and not the actual fix-*

ing, which got the money. Confoundingly, however, you really had to stay on the ball and ahead of the game if you wanted to keep a portion of that ever-shifting Big Money funding flowing your way. Massive reforms which had garnered a top billing one year?

Were often, suddenly and unexpectedly, insupportably out of fashion the next.

In point of fact, reform practices typically lost steam *and* an enticingly deregulated financial support at exactly the same time. Popular protocols argued as being able to produce magical results – well, once identified as being likely to attract less Big Money support? Were inevitably pushed aside and forced to take a second, third, fourth or even fifth place behind suddenly novel, and drivingly urgent, *bigger* big-money-supported initiatives.

Producing, and then calculatedly guarding, the public perception that this never-ending need for the perpetual realignment of reformations inside a “broken” system existed, and then – even yet more imperatively?

*Building an I-take-mine-off-the-top access to the fleetingly available funding which had begun to swirl around your latest innovative proposal.**

Well: *That was it.*

There you had it.

The true beating heart of a high-stakes test-score-dependent accountability.

Once you had grasped this as fact; once you had accepted this as truth – your conundrum was, simply, where to go. *Which* schools, *which* students, *which* buildings, *which* neighborhoods...

To compassionately, aggressively, and oh-so-lucratively, *reform.*

*Called into a meeting, I was introduced to a specialist who (as everyone in the room was now told) could inject sizable grant money into our school by working directly with “mainstreamed” special needs students. However, as one Integrated Needs teacher and I were summarily informed, this unexpected money would now necessitate the collapsing of already existing classes: thirteen of her special needs children into my nineteen-student regular ninth grade class. This older, highly experienced and very well-educated (making 20K more a year) Integrated Needs teacher would now sit passively in my classroom as an “aide.” Completely without educator input, this decision had been made *not* because it would add an instructional comprehension (it would, in fact, intro-

duce a debilitating disruption into an already existing stability) but *simply because the money existed*. When, in outrage, the Integrated Needs teacher went directly to administration threatening an immediate departure, to my great relief the plan sort of...faded away.

Guinea Pig Kids

Whenever you decided to pursue political money.

Well, if you were prudent?

You first created the public perception that the latest innovation for which you would happily instigate an interest; the most recently groundbreaking action for which you would actively pursue a funding – was not only a compassionately thoughtful activity, but, as a nationally imperative response?

It was both abruptly and instantaneously necessary.

Taking into account the fact that the voting public on whose monetary support you depended tended heavily toward middle-class to wealthy citizens, assertively you advertised your initial concerns: On whom best to try out your newly benevolent transformations than the poor? After all, wasn't the core of our government's educational accountability tied umbilically to that original Civil Rights' aid for the less fortunate; weren't reformers encouraged to focus their efforts upon our nation's lowest-income schools?

And, oh my. *All those complexly-diverse, low-income, inner-city children.*

Especially those who were economically unstable.

Particularly those who were culturally different.

Specifically those whose parents held only minimal to nonexistent political clout.

Here was such a ready supply of needily helpless children; politically weak, socially stereotyped students – students who could be made to endure an endless manipulation inside the flashily-hyped world of a Big Money accountability. Students who could be both cyclically and assertively transformed into the academic guinea pigs now so particularly required by our nation's "compassionate" focus upon a punitive, test-score-based reform. Traditional, old-school, inner-city buildings; buildings historically known to provide seats for the largest number of lowest-income, typically minority kids; facilities set up to serve the poorest com-

munities; schools located inside neighborhoods which traditionally exercised the lightest political footprint:

Ah, my – such handily useful targets.

And, well gosh, wasn't it *fortunate*; wasn't it *convenient*?

That the children who acted out inside these ruthlessly invaded schools were oh so easy, easy, *easy* to label. As *everyone* already knew; as a dominant-culture media complained to the privileged world so predictably and so often:

Bad inner-city, culturally-different children?

Did bad things.

And being, thus, already *bad*?

Surely these children were in need of a never-endingly invasive reform.

And.

Well, although tactically it was never mentioned.

A supplemental, and perhaps even more essential element behind so much of this modern-day interest in a hard-hitting statistical innovation – particularly that type of innovation which might force the locus of Big Money directly onto lowest-income schools – well, filled as they were with seriously poor and often culturally-different students?

No matter how anxiously they fought back; no matter how often culturally-different voices were raised against a ruinous invasion: The socially debilitating factors of both poverty and cultural disconnect turned out to be precisely why these detachedly raided and repeatedly destabilized schools never held enough political clout *to stop the devastating flow of a neighborhood-and-culture-disruptive (but oh my, so financially lucrative) experimentation.**

*Side effect to economic upheaval, as family after family lost employment; as a rising tide of culturally-different citizens found themselves victim to the prey-on-the-vulnerable, approve-the-home-and-then-foreclose housing scandal; as these same families were pushed assertively back into the smaller homes and crowded apartments of the inner-city and as, simultaneously, a surge of their low-income, culturally-different students flowed back into inner-city schools and created, in the process, an additional supply of low-income, culturally-different, *minimally-political guinea pig kids* – well, looking to garner a supplemental funding? District leaders began to brag of a suddenly increasing enrollment. With shocking insensitivity, repeatedly they made the claim that these same families (families having so devastatingly lost jobs, homes and the

upward mobility connected to suburban neighborhoods) *had purposefully selected to move back into the inner city* simply because they wanted to take advantage of our district's endlessly – but oh-so-lucratively – destabilized “good” schools.

Does Anybody Know A Good Shell Game?

In the name of educational accountability, the national government – made up in an age-old aristocratic fashion almost exclusively of privileged-class politicians minimally connected in any way to either a devastating poverty or issues of cultural oppression – had swiftly lined up behind the theoretically liberal testing laws of NCLB.

After all, punitive answerability mandates?

Were such politically expedient laws.

As politician-detached regulations, they took issues of social inequity (issues which otherwise would have so annoyingly fallen directly under the governmental umbrella) conveniently out of legislative hands. In lieu of assuming a direct responsibility for socio-economic reforms, politicians on both sides of the isle repeatedly voted to extend the invasive mandates of a no-excuses NCLB, and thus pushed culpability for social inequity away from the political realm, and let it fall, alternately and heavily, upon those so many already struggling (and politically weakest) lowest-income schools.

It didn't take long. Financially stressed low-income buildings were quick to discover that when laws made by distant, culturally-detached legislators decisively said that schools would – *in the name of children, goddamnit* – change? Well, the surest path to acquiring the monies now needed for implementing this inflexibly legislated change was, simply, to open doors wide to any and all innovative comers.

Early-years traditional, career-committed principals were at first receptive. Why not step up; why not accept a theoretically groundbreaking help for frustrated students?

It wasn't long, however, before schools originally willing to embrace the abruptly mandated innovations demanded by money-pursuing leaders – leaders increasingly anxious to acquire yet another disbursement of that minimally regulated governmental and/or philanthropic funding – began to suffer both an em-

ployee and community resistance. Acting upon old-school expectations for an interactive collaboration, principals originally ready to stand behind educator and/or parent groups began to voice concerns about an aggressive, teacher-and-student disconnected, test-score-mandated reform. And, *like magic?*

In the exact same manner as the so many recently identified *bad* teachers the public had only just begun to hear about, resistant administrators?

Began to disappear.

Trained to be theoretically *smarter*, the sudden inundation of administrative replacements now necessitated for filling the burgeoning supply of management vacancies (those enthusiastically lauded “fixer” administrators of truly modern days) knew, or at least carefully pretended to know, that that old-fashioned status quo which had so tediously tolerated the collaborative involvement of a teacher, student and parental voice:

Was *bad*.

The newly instated top-down, non-collaborative, corporate-style type of management, however?

Was *good*.

So long as reform-loyal hires held tightly to the dogma behind an endlessly shifting change, when things inside their buildings got sticky (as, predictably, they always did) – well, as opposed to old-school days when a poor administrative performance might have led to a separation from both the school *and* the district?

The devoted “yes” men and women of modern days could count upon an inherently secreted promise:

No matter how big the mess? No matter how obvious their involvement in *making* the mess?

They would almost never, ever, be fired.

Conversely, they would be very distractingly reappointed.

Reappointed; retitled; reordered; reassigned; reallocated.

And *moved*.*

It was this, the non-stop, eye-catching *movement*, in fact, which was crucial to the protracted maintenance of Big Money invasions. Chaotic movement; constant, incessant change; the flashy razzle-dazzle of new titles, new schools, new tests, new initiatives, new protocols, new teachers, new leaders, new hires, new evaluators, new laws, new standards, new assessments, new

practices – nothing stable, nothing sacred; no one allowed to stand still; *no one permitted to stay in any one place long enough to become an obvious target.*

No one held long-term responsible.

No one compelled to admit to a problematic incompetence. No one expected to stick around and clean up the mess.

The invitingly deregulated, now-you-see-it-now-you-don't shell game behind Big Money's educational transformations served an ingenious purpose. Producing, as it did, a distractingly disordered chaos, the game kept onlookers too dazzled, too reactive, and too confused to ever point a finger directly at an underlying – and fully debilitating – reality.

*Go ahead; do a little research. See how many administrators the lowest-income schools in your district have had in the past thirteen years.

Bring Your Own Facts

Forced into attendance at yet another *bad* teacher retraining, when a woman at our table proposed that, despite the enthusiastic predictions for our current interventions' ability to alter a school performance; despite the aggressive assurances that these latest reforms would produce miraculous results: well in truth, she suggested? These reality detached innovations wouldn't even begin to address the many debilitating social issues rampant at her school – a literacy peer spoke up in agreement.

"It reminds me of that story," she commented, "where that little boy tries to prevent a flood by sticking his little finger into the hole that he finds in the wall of an enormous, crumbling dike."

My, but her assertion took me back.

Two years earlier, as I had presented lessons to my barely pubescent but socially precocious ninth graders, together our class had studied a poem where paltry governmental efforts at enforcing social equity in Civil Rights' years had been compared to the feeble effect of putting one's finger into the proverbial dike. I remember thinking, at the time, that the poem had been both well-written and thought provoking.

I simply hadn't realized *how* thought provoking.

Discharging an assigned lunch duty later in the day, I overheard a few of my students talking about the dirty poem they

had all read in class. You know, that poem *with all the sexy stuff*.
That poem about *fingering dykes*.

Oh, undoubtedly?

It was an interesting time to be teaching.

A time when, due to the complex mix of perspectives brought to public education by our nation's broadly expanding cultural and social diversity, the overlooked and never-actually-addressed schematic details written into an aging, dominant-culture-heavy curriculum more and more often led to a cavernous disconnect between the students and the lessons presented. A time when? Due to an ever-more-inclusive, push-the-envelope media, I had totally missed the fact that the only dikes my students had ever heard of, or read about, were the assertively female kind; the kind of dyke who might, actually, retain water.

If for very different reasons.

Strategically replicating this modern-day phenomenon of disconnect – a phenomenon likely to arise when classes might be filled with non-dominant-culture-indoctrinated, and therefore naively vulnerable, students – well, it turned out that building the public perception that this never-ending run of Big-Money-funded school reformations was not only desperately needed, *but absolutely and instantaneously imperative?*

Depended heavily upon bringing necessarily additional facts to the table.

With a slight difference.

As you built your case; as you called out for yet *more* big-money-funded school transformations – the particular facts which *you* might carefully locate and then judiciously present to a largely schematically-removed audience; the specifically selected research which you might expressly identify as being imperative support for the particular aspect of a student or teacher behavior which you had now selected to reform? Depended, wholly and entirely, upon what money was *also* there.

Already on the table.

And, very significantly?

Immediately available.

The Logic Behind Advertised Logic

By this time?

The low-test-score achievement conundrum had been ingeniously sold to the public. Insistently pushed onto schematically deprived audiences and endlessly argued to be the most compassionate approach for “fixing” a “broken” system – oh, surely the now loudly maligned test-score quandary could only be solved through the immovable appendage of additional, and ever more deregulated, reforms. Once public sponsorship for the implementation of a high-stakes accountability had taken hold (allowing, in the process, an unprecedented tax-financing to be relegated toward not only the act of testing, but to test making, test management, test evaluation, test analysis and that increasingly lucrative realm of test revision) – the next step?

Was the particular selection of a test-generated data: that category of a statistical detail which could most assertively prove that the essential need for instigating yet additional deregulated transformations?

Continued.

Putting first things first, initially you looked to the convincing of your audience. Repeatedly, your call for the unbounded addition of imperative reformations was advertised visibly, aggressively, and relentlessly to a schematically disconnected public:

Billboards. Television ads. Radio spots. Talkshows.

Buses. Benches. Magazines. Websites.

Sizable sections of local and national newspapers.

Even poignantly heartrending, full-length, reform-desperate movies.

Aware that (as was true for any advertising campaign) engendering a continuing national support required the buttress of public outrage; understanding that first establishing, and then resolutely maintaining, an ongoing public zeal depended upon the always preemptive, ahead-of-the-game fabrication of yet another newly discovered educational imperative – well, to build credibility for your advertising blitz? Visibly you displayed a specifically collected test-score research: prudently selected “facts” which you now assertively held up to the public and promoted as being substantiation for your highly published call to unbendingly transform an unmistakably “broken” system.

These were, as you so painstakingly and repeatedly argued: *Facts*.

Although; well, yes, there *was*, always?

That slight possibility.

That small chance; that limited likelihood.

That remote probability that somebody out there – somebody who felt more than a little anxious when taking note of the short-term “growth-dependent” nature of your research?

Well, after clearing a path through the densely emitted smoke, *somebody* might find it necessary to directly contest your evidence. Somebody, in fact, might perceive that this modern-day bring-your-own-facts method of research – a manipulative approach increasingly popular, in silver-bullet days, as the foundation for mandating yet additional invasive reformations (a truly modern method of research where, after realigning test-score claims, innovators labored to attract a supplemental and suddenly available financing)* – oh, there was always the risk that your research methodology might, with only a little effort, be deconstructed.

Might, in fact, be unveiled.

Might, for example?

Be uncovered in your sudden push to identify those institutions which you had now loudly and aggressively decided to label; those clearly underperforming, culturally-diverse schools which – pointing to a recently amassed if shallowly representative research – you now held up and overtly branded as being (oh, my, it was almost too shocking to mention):

Drop-out factories.

*A statistically manipulative approach that in days of a high-stakes accountability has been frequently referenced as “juking the stats.”

Ya Tú Sabes Vato

Teaching eighth graders.

Let’s see; yes, you could call it a challenge.

Teaching largely bilingual, Spanish-speaking eighth graders?

Well, honestly, it didn’t make much difference; they were, still, *eighth graders*. Definitely?

Always a challenge.

For a short time one spring, having fallen victim to a mania which had snuck in and taken over the minds of our school's hormone-imbued, barely-arrived-at-puberty teenagers, every few minutes one or another of the more entertainment minded students in my class would pipe up, or respond to a question, with the Spanish phrase: *Ya, tú sabes, vato*. Holding various connotations, roughly the phrase could be translated as:

Yeah, you know it, homey. Duh, you get me, dude.

And then?

They'd *all* giggle.

Giggle, giggle, giggle, giggle, *giggle*.

Unquestionably, it was the funniest phrase in the whole of the Spanish language.

And so, everyone, all together?

We laughed at it every few minutes for the next three to four weeks.

By law, children in our country – English speaking, Spanish speaking, students conversing in the languages of Pluto – *all* children between the ages of approximately first grade and late teenager are legally mandated to attend school. These legislated expectations pertain to *all children*: those with documented immigration papers, and those without. Newly-arrived immigrant; sixth-generation voluntary or forced immigrant; immigrants who have laid claim to both land and social status so long that they no longer recognize the fact of *being* immigrants. Heck, even primary occupant first-nation Native Americans.

All children.

Here's a fact. For a surprising number of people, even after five decades given to a legally enforced integration, it is not information considered comfortable; if *you* have delicate sensibilities? You may well be shocked. Maybe, if you take a deep breath; if you prepare yourself – oh, heck, you can probably handle it. This country, the United States of America, has always, ever since it was first founded, been dependent upon, and in fact *would not exist without* (are you ready? Hold your breath):

Immigrants.

Immigrants who currently speak, and have always traditionally spoken, *multiple, complicatedly diverse languages*.

Gosh.

So, no matter how much money we spend.

No matter how much fear we generate.

We will never simply wake up, one day, to find that the troublesome issues of immigration – issues which for some guardedly fearful citizens represent an intolerable dilemma, while for other more optimistic thinkers are embraced as the evolutionary heart of a truly progressive nation – will ever be magically gone.

Like it or not, once we accept this as fact?

Well, we might then move on to a relative truth about our nation's attempt at an *all-student-mandatory, every-child-will-attend* public education.

Throughout every single year of the past almost four centuries (five, if you choose to recognize an earliest colonization in the deep South and Southwest), children of multiple cultural backgrounds – children who have voluntarily enrolled into, or been forced to participate in, our developing nation's schools – have always struggled academically when bundled into buildings and assertively told that they must function by reading, writing and speaking a brand-new language.

If, by any chance; if, at some point in your life: *You* have endeavored to acquire a second language? Perhaps you know that it is far from an easy process, and not, by any stretch of the imagination, a quick one. However deep the desire to learn, any language learner soon finds that patience, along with a heavy reliance upon a long-term dedicated support, would seem the most logical, and even absolute, requirement.

A requirement on the part of the student, the teacher, the educational system:

And the larger society itself.

Fabricating Fabrication Factories

Before mandates of an invasive NCLB; before a punitive, sorry-no-financing-for-you competitive R2T; before the morale-killing inflexibility of a vicious, test-based standardization – way back in pre-testing days; days so far back, in fact, that they had not been threatened by our modern-day profusion of test score penalties:

Across the country those educational systems expected to serve the largest number of recently immigrated students (chil-

dren laboring to acquire both a new language *and* that hard-won high school diploma) had opened their schools, and their minds, to the long-term/multiple-year needs of uniquely individual, non-standardized students.

If, in old-school days, due to an ongoing struggle with language acquisition (or any other of the debilitating issues that came burdensomely attached to poverty) you were a student who required more time – say an extra year, or even two – to finish your classes and get that diploma?

You had the school's, the district's, the community's, and, even, very generously, the nation's support.

In many schools, educators expected to instruct English Language Learner populations were encouraged, and even in some cases inflexibly mandated, to add to their previously earned teaching degrees by completing classes focused upon the instructional strategies deemed most helpful when working with students struggling to learn a new language. Repeatedly introduced in these classes, heavily documented research made a powerful point: Educational systems wishing to best support English Language Learners must, with a particular intention, offer a scaffolding for true-life success by not only permitting, *but actively encouraging*, students to stretch out their high school education into a fifth or sixth year.

Prior to an abruptly legislated NCLB, schools across the nation had supported this logical four-to-six-year diploma option. Districts were fine with it; teachers were fine with it; America, presumably, was fine with it. Plenty of research promoted it. Citizens, in general, were sympathetic. With great patience they understood, and thus championed, the long-term needs of language-learning (and too often precariously poor) immigrant students.

Until.

Well, until one day, *quite scandalously?*

Coming face-to-face with the need to pursue a supplemental funding, a big-name innovator began to publicly redefine our nation's educational intentions. Aggressively, and with great concern, this "compassionate" reformer pointed to the untenable fact that many low-income, low-scoring schools (and oh, my, but didn't a prudently collected statistical data now shamefully expose this to be true) did not graduate their students:

"On time."

Suddenly, although the particular timing for a student's high school graduation as defined both historically and traditionally had nothing whatsoever to do with the initial goals of a statistically engendered accountability, according to data-collected imperatives pushed assertively onto the public by money-pursuing "experts" – well, now? Absolutely *four years and four years only* was argued to be the definitive (and immovably *punishable*) time frame allowed for any and all students seeking to complete their diploma requirements.

Abruptly, high schools where, as a result of the complicated issues attached to language disconnect, debilitating poverty, domestic instability, pregnancy, childcare, finances, homelessness, health care, special needs or transience – students had been generously offered additional years to earn their requisite credits? Pointing assertively to a selectively collected statistical evidence, these buildings were now punitively isolated, and denigratingly presented to the public as being shockingly unacceptable "failing" institutions.

And – oh well; deplorably offensive schools like these?

Schools which so indefensibly and outrageously *never managed to produce graduation rates comparable to the advantaged, privileged-class, economically-stable "good" school's four-year norm?*

Oh, surely it was *bad* schools like these which now deserved a newer, more statistically proven classification: *Drop-out factories*. Drop-out factories which, as citizens across the nation might now recognize through the simple act of turning on the television, picking up a newspaper, or flipping through a magazine? *†°

Were bad.

And, oh my; *bad* schools like these?

Well, this should be eminently clear by now. In modern years dedicated to the punitive invasions behind a no-excuses liability – *bad* schools? Must always, absolutely, unquestionably and at great expense, *be invasively blown up, redesigned, re-ordered, restarted, reorganized, revamped, revised and (incessantly, continuously and endlessly) reformed.*

Certainly never, ever left alone.

And; oh well, yes.

By the way.

Each and every one of these suddenly identified acts of reform? Each and every one of these compassionately ordered calls for innovation?

Conclusively warranted the reception of yet another sizable hunk of that slated-for-low-income, Civil-Rights-initiated, government-and-philanthropist-controlled money.

Ya, tu sabes, vato.

*I can't help but wonder as I watch carefully selected non-White celebrities push our nation's worries about graduation rates and our growing problem with those so many students who do not graduate "on time" – well, *do* these famous spokespeople really know what they are endorsing? (I also wonder if any of those who now aggressively promote our punitive "on time" funding solution personally relied upon having more than four years to get that high school diploma.)

†Critics argue that due to the penalties now being forced onto schools for not graduating their students "on time," the growing practice of enrolling students into poorly supervised on-line classes where an "accelerated" credit might be earned quickly and with little care for an actual edification has skyrocketed.

°Lately we have begun to hear about the wonders of a "free" community college funding; a funding which might then be devastatingly withheld from those institutions most willing to serve our nation's lowest-income students when, *exactly like our nation's poorest public high schools*, they turn out to be too lazy and/or too incompetent to graduate their students "on time."

You've Been Schooled

Why was it, the question kept rising up over the years.

Well, why was it that those schools most quickly and aggressively labeled as "drop-out factories" – schools slated for closure or an endless chain of reforms, schools forced through the fatal destabilization of restructure and redesign, schools branded publicly as being underused failures, schools negatively marked with the highly publicized letter grade of an *F* – well, why was it that such a large percent of these schools (shoot, pretty much *all of them*) had traditionally served as a home to *non*-dominant-culture, *non*-privileged-class, minority students?

Hey! Was it a possibility – this proposition came directly from students attending a few of the now infamously labeled

“drop-out factories” – that the closure of, and constant incursion into, low-scoring, low-income schools had little to do with a true-life educational support, but was alternately connected to (and spurred on by) the larger society’s easily manipulated fear of *immigrants*?

Civil Rights’ activists, leaders initially willing to proffer up a carefully blindered support for the national argument that an uncompromisingly engendered testing data would allow a benevolent focus upon poorest students, found that their attention kept snagging on the confusing flow of deregulated reforms which, accountability year after accountability year, were now being beligerently forced into lowest-income neighborhoods.

Tentatively, concerned leaders began to band together; gradually, they started to organize. Having repeatedly heard frightening stories from those most affected by the unfettered initiatives of reform, after years of effort, the most adamant leaders managed to wangle the ultimate coup – a face-to-face meeting with the man currently responsible for the biggest test-score-punitive funding race of all time:

The President of the United States.

People not invited to the meeting?

Collectively held their breath.

Activists, community members, parents, students, relatives and neighbors. Teachers, advisors, counselors, support staff and old-school principals.

Together and individually?

Anxiously everyone waited.

And, as they waited – apprehensively they recalled:

Watching helplessly as, year after year, test-score abuses took long-known administrators and educators out of neighborhood schools; speaking out at school board meetings, public forums, and specially instigated round-table discussions to tell those who showed up to listen how hard they’d been hit by reform dictates; carefully voicing concerns, clearly, emotionally and eruditely, only to see – despite their anxiously stated protests – schools drastically changed, chaotically invaded, and impersonally closed; witnessing as school closures not only destabilized, but methodically destroyed traditionally protective neighborhoods.

Students forced out of local communities through mandates of redesign and closure remembered: Detailing the burden-

some expectation for traveling across town to dominant-culture-heavy, publicly-labeled “good” schools; describing the hardship of getting up in the wee hours of the morning to spend time transferring, often in cold winter weather, from bus to bus; explaining about the sting of riding these same buses home even as students of privilege (students whose lives unfolded next door to so many of these test-score proclaimed “good” schools) participated in after-school programs.

Music; sports; debate; student council.

Art clubs; honor societies.

Computer classes; science programs.

Agitated community members remembered: Fearfully speaking out about the harrowing confrontation created when students forced away from culturally protective neighborhoods were ordered to cross unseen but agonizingly recognized gang and culture lines; talking, even, of death; of children who had died *and who, in days still endlessly bent to a student-detached, test-score-based reform, continued to die* even as the cyclically implemented mandates of closure and redesign – mandates so egregiously disconnected from low-income realities that, with a blind detachment, they instigated an escalating social collision – commanded children to transcend years of profoundly held, and violently enforced, borders.

Students, teachers and school employees remembered: Voicing concerns about the frightening number of children who, after the initial instigation of reform? Could no longer be found; students who had been lost in the many innovative shuffles. Students who were, now, gone, no longer attending any school at all.*

Demoralized educators recalled: Speaking up year after year, looking for help and seeking support; articulating the pain of being compelled to leave schools close to the heart, of being assigned to work in buildings far from home, of being expected to forego even a minimal respect for past experience, of watching years of ability and talent be humiliatingly ignored; explaining in detail how evaluation and testing procedures were often devastatingly and unfairly administered; arguing, repeatedly and publicly, that testing mandates?

Grievously ignored the actual, true-life needs of students.

Hearing the anxiety; heeding the ever-louder call for action – Civil Rights’ leaders now led the way. Off they went to Washington D.C., in keen anticipation of their long-awaited meeting with the President.

Together, they sat down. They talked. They listened.

Who knows; maybe they even had tea.

And, then?

They left their hard-won summit enlightened.

They were smarter, now.

They had, so very expertly, been schooled.

The nation’s public education system (gosh, they had heard this directly from the President) *needed reform*. Schools depended upon a *punitive-measure testing accountability*. Low-income students *couldn’t be left to themselves*. Teachers *had to be assertively evaluated*. Testing *must continue*. The President had said so. And, my; he was such a nice, soft-spoken, *articulate* man.

And *Black*.

Well, half Black.

Certainly, *he* would never steer non-privileged, culturally-different people wrong.

Would he?

*Even as the nation has begun to hear that modern-day graduation percentages are rising, little mention is made of the statistical probability that this lauded elevation (much like that of our nation’s employment rate which inevitably rises when an increasing number of citizens no longer look for work) ignores that population of students who are no longer attending any school at all (too many, in fact, sitting passively – *sometimes waiting years without even a conviction* – inside a growing array of our reformatories, detention centers, jail cells and prisons).

The Audacity of Political Disconnect

Ah, the pain caused by theoretically well-meaning politicians. And by those whose intentions may not be so kind.

In a perfect world?

Well, in a perfect world, men would never be given the power to mandate legislation centered upon women; dominant cultures would never be allowed to formulate the rules for controlling minority communities; and the privileged, wealthy classes

would never be permitted to impose their theoretically well-meaning (but too often destructively invasive) understanding of the world onto those who are poor.

However, very clearly we find ourselves living in *this* world. And in this world?

A predictable chain of events occurs frequently in political halls, be they national, state, city or county. It is an audacious, assertive process; a process perhaps best understood when compared to that age-old culturally particular fable – that long-standing allegory which has given our language the expression *Belling the Cat*. (For you purists out there? Yes, I will be taking great liberties.)

Opening our scene, we move in upon a small group of administratively enterprising mice; a group of mice who have had it up to here with the never-ending litany of mouse citizen complaints about a Big Bad Cat: an omnipresent feline willing to wreak ongoing havoc upon poor, defenseless mice. Mouse-world constituents have made it more than clear: They will no longer tolerate such an unremitting harassment. Hence, the intentional meeting of mousey governmental minds.

“If only we knew when the cat was coming,” sighs one contemplative legislator.

“A bell,” offers another: “What if a bell was placed around the neck of the cat?”

“Yes, yes, a bell!” A multitude of voices now loudly and animatedly agrees. Ah, the cheers; oh the excitement; and then, my, oh my, the adamantly mandated and heavily earmarked rodent legislation. *A bell it shall be. An imperatively necessary warning bell to be placed preemptively around the neck of the cat.*

What a small, helpless rodent’s dream come true!

Oh – but then.

Even with so many well-meaning and supportively exuberant legislators behind this exceptional plan; despite the brashly exacting orders which have been written into massively inflexible laws – well, gosh, as it turns out? Once these proudly enthusiastic little mice have calmed down; once each mouse has taken the time to get a direct look at reality – well, each legislator realizes that not one politician has thought of, nor painstakingly offered up, a true-life proposal for getting that excitingly legislated bell onto the neck of the cat.

Meant as a wise warning against the very human (and probably not, actually, very mouselike) tendency to act impulsively before thinking, here the little fable typically ends. If heeded, this perceptive allegory allows those who mark it to recognize the embarrassing, and so often financially devastating, likelihood of being taken in (and subsequently screwed over) by faulty planning and flashy, but empty, promises.

However.

Had this little tale been composed today?

It would not likely have ended so neatly.

Under the deregulated “growth-projecting” wonders of a modern-day political reasoning – oh, in modern days, sadly these little mice would not have recognized, at the end of their story, that their initial lack in a reality-based logic was soon to lead to the undoubted failure and hugely wasteful expense of pursuing an enthusiastically legislated – but devastatingly faulty – plan.

Like other twenty-first-century politicians unable to see, or admit, truth due to the unimaginable size of a modern-day media-orchestrated pride, these little mice would, instead, have continued an adamant support for the originally stated idea – even to the setting aside, and offering up, of gigantically unheard-of sums of money for anyone out there willing to stick it out. And then, enthusiastically disbursing vast quantities of a nominally regulated funding?

They would begin to lose track.

Hundreds lost here; thousands over there; hundreds of thousands and even millions of dollars lost and misplaced, all while everyone continued to work hand-in-hand with media moguls to calculatedly and insistently produce, throughout the entire rodent kingdom:

Anxiety.

Concern.

Apprehension.

Worry.

Incessantly advertising, and thus expediently building, an ongoing mousey-world belief in, and blind dependence upon, the now referred to as not only possible *but crucially and irrefutably necessary* Belling Of The Cat.

It would, after all...be hard.

If you were the mouse commander seated way up high, there, at the top? If you were the topmost rodent-world leader?

Well, it would be hard to admit that, in your blindly invasive efforts at enforcing massive, community-destabilizing, cat-belling laws, you had become completely disconnected from the actual underlying problem. Hard to admit that you had made your initial mistake years ago when you had been taken in by the heavily publicized cat-belling bandwagon in the first place. A wagon that, as it was turning out?

Had been supporting national progress in a frighteningly divisive – and shockingly discordant – alternate direction.

Because; well; when you and your bigwig, power-hungry, bell-the-cat buddy mice were *all* up there; everyone all together; everyone cheering so loudly on that oh-so-public cat-belling bandwagon?

Well, wouldn't you look an utter fool (even if, privately, you lost sleep over not only the deplorable amounts of money blatantly wasted, but the lives and livelihoods of the so many helpless, politically weakest and non-privileged constituent mice so recklessly jeopardized in your ruthless bell-the-cat schemes) – oh, but wouldn't you be seen the fool if you up and admitted to everybody that you, *and all of your bell-invasive plans*, your subjective, privilege-rewarding, non-collaborative, non-democratic, class-separating, community-dividing competitions and harshly punitive cat-belling accountability invasions...*were wrong?*

Or, huh.

Maybe.

Well, gosh, this might be just a little too bizarre:

*Maybe you'd simply be seen as a real mouse hero.**

*How sad to watch as, in divisively political days, those on the right (many of whom do not understand that it is actually the far right which has been so very carefully instigating, controlling and phenomenally benefitting from the past decade of no-excuses test-score invasions) offer a serendipitous anti-testing opportunity *to rid our nation of its impossible addiction to NCLB* – and hear only, that? Rather than taking this amazing opportunity to benefit politically from “working with” his detractors, the President states that he will simply veto any argument which might call for the elimination of testing.

Boarding Lessons

You might ask.

If students, teachers, parents, old-school administrators, school support staff and community members had actually, very loudly and repeatedly, spoken out? If, over long years of a governmentally imposed testing accountability, so many voices had risen in the effort to expose the multiple devastations levied by an invasively detached reform; if such a noteworthy number of participants had actually stood up; if so many concerned citizens had honestly endeavored to reach out and turn on the light – making an articulate effort at pinpointing our nation’s irrational obsession with the blindly ruthless “belling of the cat.” Well, you might wonder why, exactly, so many self-proclaimed “experts” continued to turn a blind eye.

Or, to state it more accurately, a deaf ear.

The answer?

Was, well – just over there.

If, protectively, you shielded your gaze; if, guardedly, you made the effort to peer not at, but *through*, the glitter and glitz now emanating from an incessantly circulated advertising?

Well, you could see that the answer was, actually:

Right over there.

Had, in fact, always been *right over there*, concealed, in days of an always whirling accountability, by an ingenious shift in our national educational philosophy.

Earliest initiatives of NCLB – those initiatives originally forced onto the nation’s poorest and politically weakest schools – had coerced earliest invaded buildings into giving up an old-school-style, community-responsive, neighborhood-protective control. As the widely denigrated test-score-identified *bad* schools of a no-excuses liability, these previously collaborative, voice-inclusive buildings had been forced to accept the competitive consequence of full subjugation to district-adopted “non-negotiable” expectations.

This transformation – from voice-friendly-neighborhood-inclusive to non-collaborative-top-down “business” control – although it transpired most rapidly in lowest-scoring schools? Was, and here was the cleverly secreted key: *additionally occurring elsewhere*. Slowly and incrementally, a little here, a little there, one state, one city, one district at a time, a top-down punishment-

based management was forging its foothold inside the larger world of public school oversight.*

Very few onlookers grasped associated consequences.

Few in the *non-low-income* world?

Even took time to notice.

However, as the low-score management shift occurred; as the voice silencing philosophy of a do-as-you're-told school administration took root – many educational decision-making teams made up traditionally in the form of local school boards began to experience a similar philosophical conversion.

Historically, school districts dependent upon community funding were held to the expectation of responding to local neighborhood concerns; given a financial control over regional taxes, home districts divvied up resources as the means to offer employment to a variety of school personnel. If a district was exposed as being corrupt, choosing to fill positions only through nepotism, forcing women to resign when pregnant, showing an out-and-out avoidance for hiring people of color?

Well, in theory, unfair practices like these might be addressed through the intentional election of a community-diverse, multi-voiced school board. Through a meticulous oversight from disparate, non-political membership, district leaders given access to massive public monies could be held vigilantly accountable. Serving to guard against not only a monetary, but a cultural, racial, and socio-economic abuse; endeavoring to meet dissimilar student needs while allowing concerns from multiple constituents – elected school board members (or so premise held) lived in, and thus represented, various areas of a town, city or county.

However, in modern days; in magically modern days dedicated to the pursuit and procurement of suddenly available *and minimally regulated* bell-the-cat funding disbursements?

Complicatedly diverse school boards comprised of multiple, non-political, equity-minded citizens – citizens who found it necessary to not only listen to, but act upon, the concerns voiced by frustrated educators, students, parents and old-school administrators:

Well, school boards like these?

Really got in the way.†

*For those who didn't think it necessary to know where the massive funding was coming from as a support for the so many recently successful conservative gubernatorial races? Oh, now, get ready: *here it comes*.

†And my, how convenient, in modern days, to work with yet more of those "collaborative" school boards put into place simply through the no-argument-here "consensus" process of a mayor appointment.

Changing Of The Guard

In the effort to prioritize our growing national focus upon an aggressively implemented high-stakes testing and, even more importantly, a subsequently ordered succession of highly remunerative school transformations – well, you first had to make sure that your loudly advertised premise of an absolute need for the invasive, score-based reform of a "broken" system...

Never actually stopped.

Repeatedly, you commanded a largely schematically deprived public to buy into your vigorously published theory that, in a deepest countrywide compassion, an unprecedentedly "benevolent" public school management should permit a never-endingly coerced, if negligibly managed, change.

And, then?

Well, then; with an additionally poignant concern, you had then to instigate the heartrending demand for an immediate shift in our national public school oversight. A full-out change, as it were, of the old-school, old-values, community-collaborative, neighborhood-protective, voice-inclusive democratic guard.

Fortunately, time proved there to be more than one route to eliminating the opposition which came so predictably tied to traditionally elected school boards. The most effective method; the most expedient way to stop the annoying reluctance which came forevermore attached to democratically seated and guardedly watchful school boards?

Well, gee.

Simply eradicate them completely.

Simply eliminate the constricting hesitancy linked to democratically empowered school boards, and, in the name of an uncompromising, we-care-so-much-about-kids expediency (label-

ing your moment in history as nothing less than a true emergency):

Abruptly hand a total and unquestioned administrative power over to one of those self-proclaimed I-do-it-all educational Superheroes. One of those every year louder, every year more self-aggrandizing educational experts. One of those big-name, self-promoting school reformers who, so insistently and repeatedly, commanded a public attention by making loudly belligerent promises for delivering exactly what the so many professed-as-benevolent (if, in actuality, privileged-class-disconnected) politicians of silver bullet days privately desired:

Magic.

Darwin U The King

Prominently inscribed into the back wall of a third-floor girls' bathroom, a handful of girlish letters expressed an intriguing proclamation: *Darwin U the King*. Every once in a while I would catch myself in contemplation of this unambiguously celebrated child. What had he done, this young man, to deserve such an unmistakably public recognition?

As year upon year of test-score reforms invaded our school, destabilizing and disrupting; as one short-lived idea gave way to the next, unregulated and unabated; and as, throughout the many long, destabilizing years, protective, multi-opinioned, reform-resistant school boards came increasingly under fire – frequently I would think back to that public declaration for the unambiguous sovereignty of Good King Darwin when, in response to the decimation of collaborative management?

A suddenly corresponding number of self-declared imperially untouchable “experts” proudly proclaimed themselves to be royalty, and began to demand a highly advertised centerstage attention.

It was so cool; in this newly magical age of a no-excuses accountability?

Well, apparently all you need do, regardless of any hands-on experience or an actual willingness or ability to comprehend the genuine needs of complexly diverse low-income students (or, consequently, their teachers) – well, evidently all you need do was make repeatedly loud and insistently public declarations that you

were, indeed, an Educational Monarch. Declaring it proudly; telling everyone, continually and volubly, that – *exactly like Darwin?*

Oh, undeniably and undoubtedly, you were King.

And, then?

Shazam!

Somebody put you in charge of huge, multi-cultural, highly-complicated school districts and truly unimaginable sums of money.*

My. Talk about the miracles of a modern-day minimally regulated...faith.

The first and foremost item on your proclaimed-as-royal agenda? The immediate elimination of that annoying reform blocking which came so bothersomely attached to a diversely elected school board. As, over the years, the immovable mandates of reform had made steady progress, dissimilar school board members – especially those who represented the true-life needs of constituents living inside poorest neighborhoods – well, hearing increasingly about innovation created problems from students, teachers, old-days’ administrators and parents alike, not surprisingly?

In an old-school democratic response:

Concerned school board members had started to balk.

Keeping alive the national enthusiasm for a minimally regulated Big Money invasion into a “broken” system would, or so it was now quickly recognized, depend heavily upon weakening this every-year-compounding resistance. Public hoopla shaped through a sudden spate in seductive advertising would do the trick. Immediately and aggressively, various powerful media outlets were pulled into your corner.

This, actually?

Wasn’t difficult.

Drama, in particular the glitz and glamor attached to the every year more chaotically deregulated school-reform stage show – that scintillating extravaganza theatrically infused with miraculous promises from spotlight-seeking, self-proclaimed innovative “experts” (self-aggrandizing demigods willing to pose as the latest no-excuses King or Queen of Reform; fame-seeking superheroes anxious to illustrate their personal, god-like ability *for eliminating anyone who offered up any opposition*; self-promoting

educational monarchs willing, even, to be front-page photographed while brandishing a bat or a broom...)[†]

Well, all of this over-the-top dramatization not only sold magazines, but strategically caught the public imagination.

If, through a poignantly affected spectacle, you could convince the nation that our modern-day need for the invasive reform of a “broken” educational system was both abruptly and absolutely *right-this-minute* imperative.

And if, through an anxious, theatrical hype, you could persuade the public that there was, simply, no time, no time at all, to waste on those old-school traditional methods: those old-days’ methods so tediously tied to a tiresomely multi-voiced, fully collaborative educational management.

And if, through a highly staged dramatization, you could both raise and keep voter support for your proposed elimination of that voice-inclusive opposition; and if, in heartrendingly panicked tones, you could refer urgently and emotionally to the unacceptably *slow* oversight attached to a disparately elected and diversely opinioned school board.

Oh, you could, then?

Change the face of public education entirely.

*And: How overwhelmingly useless to hear belated apologies from do-what-I-say Big Money reformers compelled to admit *after the fact* that what they initially forced onto educational systems caused more damage than good; that invading schools and imposing a punitively callous statistical control may have been shortsighted in that the issues around educating children are actually (and I am not kidding, here; this is an actual quote): “*complex*.”

[†]In a moment of frustration against our nation’s growing reliance upon non-vetted but highly paid “experts” (“experts” willing to offer up minimally informed services to any who would use them to promote the issue of the moment, including complicated issues such as the use of drones or a reaction to religious extremism) one critic humorously coined the phrase “The Expert Industrial Complex,” and thereby captured the state of public education exactly.

Magic Mayors

As school-reform advocates began to aggressively promote their case against the tiresomely measured, oh-so-slow oversight brought to public education by non-political, democrati-

cally-elected school boards, within those districts most persuasively panicked, protectively traditional school boards were abruptly disbanded. Full district control, including a deregulated jurisdiction over *all* operational finances, reform dictates, instructional personnel, building administration and curriculum selection was then summarily handed over to...

Well, the new guy.

That undeniably modern, miracle inducing School Reform King; that truly royal, truly inspired leader who, being indisputably The King? Would surely no longer require any bothersomely interactive help from a community elected and complicat-edly diverse school board.

Gosh; now who, exactly, was this to be?

Ah.

Why, of course: *The mayor!*

Because, heck, *everybody* knew this.

Big city mayors?

Gee-whiz, simply through the practical feat of getting themselves elected – well, damn; of course; why didn't we think of it. Unmistakably, all mayors everywhere, through abilities inherent not to any painstakingly accrued hands-on experience, but simply through the magical processes attendant to an election *understood everything anyone might need to know about massively complex, culturally, racially and socially integrated public schools, instructional systems, educational methodology, differentiated pedagogy, language acquisition, building environment, teachers, parents, poverty, diversity, and kids of innumerable ages and backgrounds!*

And, although the act of election surely took precedence over any nettlesome requirement for an actual hands-on experience, mayor after mayor willing to shun a democratic collaboration yet elected to expend a sizable chunk of their newly unrestricted financing in the recruiting of a Personal Right Hand.

Extending huge contracts, no-excuses, reform-intending mayors sat down to peruse the suddenly available spate in self-proclaimed, media deified authorities: that growing number of self-aggrandizing educational “experts” who – although generally lacking in any long-term educator experience; having, even, no educational background at all? Still undoubtedly (gosh, they claimed it *so loudly*) knew absolutely and exactly what would be

required when conclusively “fixing” low-income, culturally-diverse schools.

Certainly?

They knew more than *teachers*. Especially that each year escalating number of school-score-identified *bad* teachers. That burgeoning number of stubbornly selfish educators who, so inexplicably, *kept speaking up against the ruthless invasions of a no-excuses liability*.

And; *oh well*.

Surely it was understandable when so many of these magically omnipotent mayors *and* their extravagantly paid Superhero partners chose to not exactly *live* in the districts they were now set to govern. Surely understandable that, as a general rule? Their own children could not be expected to attend any of the local neighborhood schools.* These were, after all, simply yet more in our nation’s escalating lineup of test-score-targeted *bad* schools. *Bad* schools which, as everyone now clearly understood?

Had to be fixed.

Bad schools which, *in the act of being fixed?*

Would understandably necessitate the implementation of multiple hard-hitting, and, oh my – *Big-Money-garnering* – reforms.

In truly compassionate days bent to the no-waiting miracles of a test-based accountability, it was not simply the mayor, now, but the mayor’s self-proclaimed Superhero Superintendent (two imperial monarchs willing to work side-by-side as an incontrovertible royalty) *who both said so*. Laboring hand-in-hand; uttering statements as a team – mutually these two powerful leaders could make it unambiguously clear:

Both, they now claimed?

Were unquestionably on board; *both* were ready to do whatever was necessary; *both* were willing, even, to spend an unparalleled amount of that governmental and/or philanthropic funding in their effort to prove just how *bad* the so many low-income schools placed under their royal jurisdiction:

Really were.

*In days of a statistical liability, it has become increasingly possible to find “public” school districts where the children of not only the superintendent *but every member of the school board* attend private schools.

Waiting For Supermen

Okay, it was true: not every community was so conveniently naïve; not every community was quite so gullible; not every community was so immediately willing to put full and unquestioned trust into a mayor-led public school management.

Across the nation, in fact?

Arguing the need to sustain traditional jurisdictions, various not-quite-so-anxious-to-get-on-board districts prevented the handing over of an unrestrained educational rule to an elected municipal leader.

Ah, well; a little more patience would be required.

With a touch of judiciously scattered razzle-dazzle here; a flashily disseminated splash of media-created glitz there?

Time offered up an alternate path for reducing the resistance which came so bothersomely attached to diversely elected school boards. In the end – well, in the end it turned out that you could actually function quite well with, if not a full eradication of democratically inclusive boards, at least a general facsimile of the same.

Making your opening move, initially you began to argue the need for yielding to the modern-day call for *getting smarter* – and, in getting smarter? Assertively recruiting a business-minded, top-down, no-excuses superintendent. Taking advantage of multiple media pipelines willing to extend unlimited support in exchange for the double rewards of high drama *and* a solid slice of that reform-money pie, theatrically you presented your newly selected superleader to the voting public as an unprecedentedly heroic citizen: an educational leader so deeply troubled about modern-day student welfare that, in fact, with an exceptionally groundbreaking concern?

He or she would put children first.

Strategically building upon the poignancy brought to your message by a media-churned drama, tactically you endeavored to create the illusion that, for the first time in a public school history, *your* big-name hugely-salaried reform genius?

Cared about children.

And this, as you now repeatedly and enthusiastically told your public audience: oh, *this* was an astonishingly and even breathtakingly new idea.

If, somehow, somewhere along the way?

Well if, unexpectedly, your highly publicized choice for miracle-working Superhero fell through...

Never mind.

As years bent to an ever more deregulated educational accountability advanced, in a truly magical response you could find an escalating pool of options. In point of fact, the more impressive the “big” in Big Money Reform became?

The more exciting the number of self-promoting, I-do-it-all superleaders stridently peddling their services for an increasingly weighty price. (As the years of statistical reform progressed, in fact, it was harder and harder to get rid of those who most vocally told the nation how truly magical they were.) Despite dismal, despite even shockingly abysmal, employment histories – holding little regard for the more than occasional animosity created in communities where many of these invasive “experts” had governed only long enough to be asked, decisively, to leave, self-professed school reform Supermen expensively ejected from one contract after the next:

Yet found an abundance of employment opportunities waiting. Pushed out over here, as if mystically conjured?

They popped up over there.

Anxious to attract a competition-based financing; willing to ignore previous (and often frighteningly antagonistic) administrative records – districts jumped nervously after the most vocally uncompromising, the most media-exciting, the most loudly proclaimed I-do-it-all Superheroes. As the competitive money game raced forward at full throttle, oh, make no mistake about it: Fund-seeking districts could *not* afford to be left behind. Rigidly reform-promoting, top-down, business-trained “non-negotiable” superintendents, especially those who bragged, and posed, and made the biggest, most extreme statements about public education?

Were all the rage. If you were going to be noticed by those guys at the top – those guys tossing out all of that money?

Oh, you just *had* to have one.*

*And; well, now, who would've guessed? Even after dedicating thirteen long years and literally millions of dollars to the vociferous hiring *and, on average, three-years-later buying out the contracts for* so many of these “miracle-working” superintendents – recent statistical evidence suggests that this type of a do-what-I-say top-down management has not, actually, been getting results.

Getting On Board

And then, once you had managed to secure any one of an ever-growing pool of no-excuses, top-down, change-endorsing educational leaders, the bigger the name, the louder the self-aggrandizement, the better?

Well, then you necessarily had to move on.

You had to get on to the next item on your agenda.

You had to advance to the purposeful acquisition of:

The *right* school board members.*

School board members who, in a direct imitation of your newly acquired reform-promoting, innovation-seeking superintendent, talked only and always about how much, in days of a true educational compassion, *they cared about the kids*.

Good school board members who, speaking unceasingly about their own desire to *step up; to stand for, and put children first* – made an adamant claim of holding unbending support for the no-excuses implementation of a punitively nonstop *school-score-based reform*.

To avoid voting stalemates, school boards had traditionally been constructed of an uneven number of members; logically, then – all you need do?

Was get control over the larger vote.

Hard-hitting jurisdiction over the cyclical instigation of short-term, big-money-lucrative innovations could, actually, be guaranteed through the simple expedience of locating, spending massive election money upon, and ultimately installing the requisite number of reform-friendly (heck; since, after all, it had been *your* money which brought them to the table, *reform-fanatic*) politically motivated members. With an essential number of innovation-aggressive partners on board *your* board?

Say five out of nine, four out of seven, three out of five.

Well, you could, then, quite dependably produce that necessarily rubber-stamped approval.

To recruit, and then control, the “right” school board members?

Oh, it wasn’t really all that complicated. You had, after all, so darned much of that modern-day transformative money. In days calling out for the uncompromising “benevolence” of an instantaneous reformation, well, wasn’t it handy that so many disconnected, but, oh, let’s be kind and think of them as well-meaning, middle-class and even wealthy people out there felt it their privileged world duty to step up; to roll up their sleeves; to uncompromisingly put children first *by getting themselves elected to your school board*. To get themselves on board with your board in their effort to “help” kids by unbendingly seeing test-score deficit-labeling *as a reason to invasively and unyieldingly “reform” the bloody hell out of low-income* (and, in extra-benevolent days immovably bent to an exceptionally modern concern?

Any and all public) schools.†

Well, wasn’t it convenient?

That despite repeated claims about wishing to make a difference, so many of these theoretically concerned reform-money-elected, privileged-class members had no idea how devastatingly far their privileged-class views were from the real-life requirements of poor and/or culturally-different children.

Wasn’t it a wonder?

How blindly and passionately so many of these privileged world activists jumped up to board your board; how unreservedly they offered up their rubber-stamped backing for the incessant (but oh, my, *so financially remunerative*) creation of short-term, ever shifting and detachedly invasive solutions. Solutions that, after buying up yet more expensive publicity, you continued to advertise as the only known measure for “fixing” our nation’s mushrooming supply of test-score-identified “failing” schools.

Solutions proposed *not* through the slow and careful isolation of underlying, and truly debilitating, social issues, and certainly – save for dramatically posed publicity shots – not through the physical act of actually walking into low-scoring schools or communities with the intention of honestly hearing (and subsequently responding to) reform-beleaguered voices.

Oh, my, gracious no.

Much more practically, and much more efficiently, in the faster and faster pace of a ruthlessly whirling accountability, solu-

tions proposed through the promoted-as-compassionate if devastatingly-arms-length act of a rubber-stamp voting. Voting which would then enable you to throw huge, minimally-regulated sums of money at reformer after reformer after reformer.

Those so many modern-day Superheroes out there...
Who promised to do it all.

*Events have shown that it is not necessary to secure a business-minded superintendent before seating a reform-fanatic school board: the process might well be reversed. Big-Money-elected school boards, it turns out, have managed to quickly rid themselves of unwanted student-and-teacher-protective superintendents just before assertively installing a reform-friendly leader of their own.

†Throwing out an additional handful of obfuscating razzle-dazzle, in the name of *forcing a truer equity* (and thereby attracting additional Big Money financing), savvy pro-reformers have begun to mandate fund-garnering, community-destabilizing invasions into *non-low-scoring* – but heavily minority serving – schools. (This type of invasion has become especially necessary in those districts where long years of a regentrification-friendly testing has pushed out a significant number of unwantedly poor students and suddenly left those in charge with fewer and fewer low-income-serving schools to lucratively invade.)

Stuck On Stupid

Casualty to the personnel movement now chaotically ordered up by our fully-on-board school-board's attempt at a detachedly rubber-stamped accountability, finding myself forcefully reassigned into yet another low-scoring and relentlessly reformed middle school, it wasn't long before I learned (being told by my students quite often) that – oh well, undoubtedly?

Undoubtedly I was “stuck on stupid,” a favorite phrase of the moment, if I honestly expected the students enrolled into *their* school to sit up, sit still, stop talking and, in a truly preposterous measure:

Work.

Really, this was such a blatantly harebrained audacity on my part. I had already been warned about *these kids*; over the summer when I had offered to lead a computer program inside their school, a harried summer-school facilitator had told me deci-

sively: “Oh, no; we can’t produce that program here. You don’t know these kids; they won’t do the work.”

Okay, I admit it, I really am pretty much stuck on stupid.
I didn’t believe a word of it.

When that summer had passed and I found myself standing at the front of a classroom inside my new building – foolishly, and despite such a notable forewarning?

I continued to expect my students to sit up, sit still, listen and function. And, as I had thought might happen?

Pretty soon they did.

Well, most of them, anyway.

One especially unhappy young lady, never pleased to hear from an unmistakably clueless teacher like me that she needed to stop talking, stop giggling, stop playing with her phone, stop flirting, stop napping and stop combing her hair, arrived late to class one day. In her hand she held an official-looking class transfer form.

“Ms. Carson says that I should give this to you,” the young woman stated, making reference to our school’s most recently hired reform-mandated-but-permanently-busy disciplinarian. Although she had only been working in our building for a few weeks, Ms. Carson had already managed to make it more than clear that *her* philosophy around the discipline of children?

Was, well, to *not* discipline them. Ms. Carson, in fact, had quickly come to recognize that when one is forced to interact repeatedly with confusingly non-standardized students *and* their even more complicated parents – oh, it always turns out to be a whole lot smarter to not get involved at all. Rather than face the time-consuming challenges attached to a long term and interactively demanding discipline, Ms. Carson had rapidly embraced a much more practical M.O. by expediently selecting to follow the accountability policy adopted by her school, her district and her nation:

Blame the teacher.

Glancing down, now, at the transfer form, I saw that it gave permission for this particularly adept at non-functioning young lady to exit my class, and thus strategically leave my difficult – and clearly stupid – expectations behind.

“Ms. Carson?” the girl declared scornfully. “Ms. Carson isn’t like you. *She cares about me.* See?” Here she pointed to

the transfer form. “There’s her signature.” As she turned to leave, she paused long enough to look back over her shoulder. “Ms. Carson says that I shouldn’t stay with a teacher like you; she says that I will do better if I move to a class with a *better* teacher.”

And then, as suddenly as she had come?

She was gone.

Looking down once again, I took another moment to reinspect the authoritative form. In an allotted box, the name of the class selected for transfer had been printed in large childish letters: LITURCY.

I could only hope that it wasn’t Ms. Carson’s writing.

Compassion May Stop When Caring Begins

In order to keep the now years-old craze for an unimpeded flow of big-money-lucrative school reformations alive – well, a patent requirement would be the addition of *good* people to innovation-minded school boards. Warm-hearted, benevolent citizens; people who, exactly like Ms. Carson?

Cared about kids.

Or at least repeatedly said that they did.

Concerned citizens who (after accepting a personal serving of that innovation pie), much like Ms. Carson were willing to show just how deeply and honestly they cared for the true welfare of our nation’s complicatedly non-standardized low-income children.

Keeping the well-funded demand for year upon year of a short-term and cyclically instigated innovation alive ever more increasingly depended upon finding a necessarily continued supply of poverty-detached, privileged-class, innovation-friendly citizens; finding them, recruiting them, and ultimately?

Getting them on board your board.

And so, very carefully and very particularly, whenever you spoke about our national push for building a true educational answerability?

Meticulously you always connected the idea of school reform *to your profound concern for children*. And then, in as many forms of media as you could find to buy, you argued that the wrong type of school board member (that shockingly self-interested citizen, out there, *who clearly didn’t give a good goddamn*

about children) – well, a particularly bad apple like this could, alone and independently:

Ruin school improvement.

Could, actually, illustrating an inexplicable selfishness?

Stop your vitally important shot at gaining yet another minimally regulated disbursement of that reform-attached bell-the-cat money. Because – well, shoot; that was the point, really. You never stopped to consider anything else; you *always* went for the money. Gosh, haven't we already said this?

It was money.

As year after year of a nationally implemented educational accountability continued, through a strategic creation of the media-churned connection between gaining reform monies and a munificently egalitarian concern, ultimately you managed to associate the very act of school reform (no matter where, no matter when, no matter how it might be implemented) to the selfless actions of Superheroes. Those most visibly concerned reformers out there, who so loudly proclaimed that their only goal?

Was to do what was right.

To *stand for* children.

To *put them first*.

These unprecedentedly caring leaders, or so you repeatedly and publicly maintained, were surely the true front-runners; the unmistakable champions; the exactly required kind of citizen who, through a vigorously unquestioned rubber-stamped support for the incessant instigation of punitive, test-score-based innovations?

Showed exactly how much *they cared*.

About the kids.

Definitely you never admitted, nor even allowed the tiniest bit of a hint at, the fact that – well, in truth? As year after year of a low-income liability progressed, a retaliatory test-score reform was actually not so much about *caring* for students, as it was, so much more, about *using* them. Those low-income, often culturally different and politically insignificant children. See, you *had* to have them.

To get the money.

That was the way a low-income test-score reform *worked*.

Rubber Stamp Democracy

Repeatedly, endlessly and aggressively:

You published your reform-equals-caring concept so often; you promoted it so carefully – that should the “right” school board member be elected (a theoretically *good* member willing to vote for any aspect of any proffered reform); well, should a *good* member be elected, and then, unthinkably, *have second thoughts*?

Should a newly seated associate stop to think twice about the overwhelming expenditure of desperately needed finances, or experience any personal guilt at hearing, year upon year, at school board meeting after school board meeting, from educators, students, community members and parents about the devastations created through a forever realigning succession of rubber-stamped invasions?

Well, holding tightly to your media-bought message of an exceptional compassion, you made sure that the *right* school board member grasped a very important fact: Any elected member who took it upon himself or herself to actively resist your latest dictates, no matter how invasive, no matter how expensive, no matter, even, how illogical:

Well, *that member*?

Would soon come face-to-face with an exhaustively financed criticism.

The very *best* members (those most staunchly and irrevocably on board) understood. Any affiliate who presumed a right to function democratically; any member who not only listened to, but acted upon, the impassioned pleas coming from reform-bashed students, parents, teachers and old-school administrators – oh, truly *good* school board members understood that any associate who made the cautious decision for holding back *and not supporting any aspect of any aggressively-ordered reform*:

Well, wrong-headed members like these would soon find themselves openly accused, right out there in an innovator-friendly, reform-bought press, of single-handedly sabotaging the district’s kindhearted intentions. Publicly accused:

Of trying to block unprecedentedly benevolent district actions.

Of sitting in shocking opposition to student-centered transformations.

Of offering untenable support for that old-school ineffectual status quo.

Of engendering public resistance through the use of self-interested emotional rhetoric.

Of holding, in fact, such self-servingly egocentric intentions – that?

She or he did not care about children.

Go ahead; try to get re-elected on *that*.*

As invasive reform-year followed invasive reform-year, over time Big Money proponents managed to construct a highly publicized and loudly proclaimed social schism. Board members and their constituents were either *for* any and all of the money which an unquestioned dedication to the short-lived but oh so remunerative reformations would bring, *and thus cared deeply about children*.

Or they weren't.

In modern days?

Everything was so clear, so obvious.

You either supported *all* aspects of reform?

Or you supported none.

The vigorously publicized message made sure that for concerned citizens – oh, make no mistake about it, there could be *no middle ground*. No place for discussion; no time, nor need, for a thoughtful or slow deliberation.

And, absolutely?

No place for compromise.

Trained correctly, *good* board members never, ever, said no. Pausing; thinking; contemplating; prudently listening to, or making an effort to protect the interests of actual true-life constituents; making cautious decisions; *saying no?*†

Oh, in days immovably bent to the magic of Big Money, the slow-moving, multi-voiced reflective path was simply no longer an option.

And.

Oh well, now; wasn't it handy.

Once you had recruited, spent massive political money upon, and ultimately bought the rubber-stamped loyalty of the larger percent of your school board – well, throwing dissenters a bone, you could continue to argue that decisions made for the continual instigation of short-lived transformations had been

brought to fruition through the collaborative processes of a democratically seated school board vote.

Although – the *direction* of that vote?

Well, happily you always knew how *that* would come out.

*And how bizarre to watch as, in districts where constituents have become increasingly vocal about their unhappiness with test-score-based invasions, each election cycle yet manages to seat *additional* school board members adamantly calling out for yet more test-score-based reforms.

†An ever more popular solution for silencing the noisy resistance now coming so predictably from students, teachers, parents and community members: An increasing dependence upon “closed-door” (no-public-input-allowed) school board meetings.

I’m Not Divisive; The People Who Disagree With Me Are

Maybe by now you’ve asked yourself; maybe by now you’ve had a fleeting moment of contemplation; maybe you’ve wondered about the type of person, group or company which would so intentionally get caught up in not only the promoting of – but the active recruiting of votes for – all of this incessantly advertised test-score-based school reform.

Who, exactly, would choose to get so deeply drawn into the educational debate that they would willingly, and even aggressively, be the generously overwhelming (if often discretely undisclosed) financing source willing to offer up the hundreds of thousands *and even millions* of dollars necessitated as a support for all of this extravagantly expensive reform-promoting advertising, and the each year increasing supply of lavishly funded school board campaigns. With a shimmering, razzle-dazzle intention?

It is a question meant to generate a fuzzily out-of-focus confusion.

On the surface, it might be logically assumed that the most enthusiastic low-income school reform faction would surely be comprised of racially diverse and multi-cultural constituents. Certainly it would appear rational to believe that the highly publicized school innovation movement had not only been started, but was currently sponsored and upheld, by members of the *non-privileged, non-wealthy* classes. Surely, with so much pro-reform

publicity working to convince the average, middle-class-to-wealthy voting citizen, one might assume that – oh well, undoubtedly?

Low-income minority citizens *must be all for it.*

For it; behind it; and even carefully and methodically controlling it.

I mean, well, look: In *all* of those reform-promoting movies and commercials; on all of those billboards; in all of those magazines; in all of those newspaper articles and poignantly presented advertisements – the kids so unmistakably delighted to be receiving that last-chance reform-imperative break?

Were always Black.

Or Brown.

Or whatever.

Just not, well...*White.*

But.

What if, yet again?

We stop.

What if we stop and dig – oh, just a little deeper.

What if we dig a little deeper than your average middle-class, poverty-detached, dominant-culture/dominant-culture-assimilated “investigative” journalist. Maybe you’d be surprised (maybe not, if you’ve been inching closer to an underlying truth, here) to find out that exactly like the each year more entrenched absolutes of separation between the political right and political left in our country?*

Of the two sides arguing endlessly about the benefits (or costs) behind nationally implemented educational actions – those who aggressively promote a phenomenally-costly, student-divisive choice school reform, and those who discordantly fight against it:

Well, one side?

Has a whole heck of a lot more money.†°

And, so very, very importantly:

They are not afraid to use it.

They are, in fact, absolutely ready to take literal heaps of that money as a means to endlessly advertise, to ceaselessly inform, to insistently convince an entire nation that poor, inner-city, culturally-different kids stuck inside a “broken” educational system all desperately, immediately, and imperatively require *a non-stop-invasive, community-disruptive, school-desert-creating, out-*

sider-curriculum-controlled, culture-disconnecting, forced-gang-line-crossing, achievement-gap-building, separated-school-choice-generating:

Reform.

Divisive as it is?

The side with the money (oh, now, let's see; I'll let you work that out – *which side might that be*) will ceaselessly continue to buy up enough publicity, and spend elaborately enough on school board elections, to make sure that you, and anyone else they are able to reach in the comfortably enfranchised voting world, knows absolutely:

In modern days?

There is no centrist position.

You're either *for* the endless array of short-lived invasions demanded by a community-destabilizing, student-separating, test-score-based reform – *and it's all go*.

Or, selfishly and unacceptably:

You're not.

*A few critics have pointed out that we must take care *not* to assume (and in the act of assuming, be blinded by) the idea that the political label of “Democrat” actually means that a legislator, reformer or educational activist (almost all of whom are non-poor, and a preponderance of whom are neither of color nor female) *is actually arguing for the left*.

†Just in case you've been enjoying a life lived in that in-between world where you can tell yourself that there really *is* such a thing as a “liberal billionaire” – and that these same-said “liberal” *but aggressively pro-reform businessmen* have truly heart-felt goals whenever *they* step up to throw *their* massive funding around: It's time to wake up. Think again. (For example: If you happened to be a businessman who had made an unprecedented amount of money in the world of technology, think why it is that – even in the face of an each year growing Opt Out Of Testing movement – you might endlessly make the argument that “we must continue to hold schools and teachers accountable through the use of [*a computerized*] testing.”)

°The conundrum of not being able to pull your hand out of the cookie jar until you let go of the cookie applies well here: Until those who support the more rigorously interconnected curricula brought to education by the Common Core disassociate themselves from those who have heavily invested in assessment

technology, test making, school turnarounds and prescribed programs – their cause will inevitably fail.

Ratrace To The Top

An earliest governmentally mandated NCLB had loudly and publicly founded itself upon the test-score-inflexible act of holding low-income, low-scoring schools accountable. However, as years filled with the ever harsher (and ever more unbending) penalties of a modern-day liability moved forward?

It soon became startlingly clear that no one knew exactly what, with any real consistency, this suddenly legislated act of a “true” answerability might entail.

Oh well.

Knowing *what* to do in order to hold low-scoring schools accountable?

So long as the money kept flowing, that, surely, was a relatively minor detail; simply more of that tediously low-level school reform minutiae. Eschewing, in the rapid pace of modern days, any troublesome need for implementing any of those wearisomely old-school oversight practices – those now outdated managerial practices which had so tiresomely demanded a carefully deliberated and fully inclusive neighborhood collaboration – well, with a disconnected, cat-belling faith?

Year after year lawmakers resolved a continued move forward.

Repeatedly they voted to prolong the retaliatory dictates behind an immutable NCLB. Exhibiting a steadfast lack of examination into the serious problems which might arise when forcing ruthlessly inflexible practices and minimally-planned, bell-the-cat-deregulated invasions – suddenly?

More money was avidly thrust into the test-score answerability pot.

Low-scoring, community-destabilizing, school-invasive years; long, overwhelmingly disruptive years; years imbued with a mounting and nearly unbearable reform-resistant tension...

Shouldered mercilessly on.

Until, one day?

Well, one day, late in the final months of a long and economically challenged year, attended by a vast and possibly even

unparalleled countrywide enthusiasm, a long-awaited, much-voted-for “change” in our national governmental leadership – *unexpectedly and mind-bogglingly* ignored the increasingly panicked call for a highly promised transformation. Standing up in a shocking support for not only the previous administrator’s destabilizing interest in closing low-performing schools, but, now, *in ridding the world of a suddenly recognized epidemic of bad teachers* – a new, change-promoting President confusingly pledged his unbending loyalty for the painful disruptions of No Child Left Behind.

Resolutely ignoring the desperately rising petition for a return to more equitable financing practices, this enthusiastically elected administrator’s educational policies maintained not only an unwavering financial support for the heavy obligations of NCLB, but now belligerently mandated the uncompromising addition of a yet more enthusiastically proffered (if yet more sporadically regulated) funding.

And, suddenly?

The *seriously* big innovation-competitive money started to flow. The horses were off; the *big* race was on.

That Little Matter Of Equity

Pledging personal allegiance for the miracles proposed possible, as a modern-day educational theory now held, only when attached to the “non-negotiable” punishments demanded by a merciless testing – shocking many, a brand-new, change-endorsing President threw down an additional reform-or-die gauntlet.

And, suddenly anointed with the exhilarating name of Race To The Top?

NCLB’s twin sister was born.

In an immediate response, the years-old call for the production of yet more relentlessly recycled test-score invasions was aggressively presented to the public – *again*. Buying up additional media space while carefully tamping down the growing resistance now coming from test-frustrated, reform-weary voters – the latest highly advertised appeal for massively instigated educational reformations came in tones so desperate, so poignant, and so imperative, that it generated an overwhelming countrywide understanding:

The prolonged invasion into an always increasing number of low-scoring schools?

Remained utterly and wholly essential.

Oh, you couldn't miss the heartrending message. Proportionately, as a governmental and/or philanthropic funding for the instigation of educational innovations grew? Massively expensive reform-imperative publicity campaigns intensified in an exact equal measure.

Convinced through a growing assortment of media outlets that school reform of any kind was now an unquestioned national obligation, few voting citizens stopped to wonder if, in fact, the never-ending, change-endorsing, reform-supporting propaganda held any truth. Supporter after supporter simply jumped up, ready to get on board.

Because, well, gosh; the idea of school reform?

Always sounded so, well, you know, democratic.

Egalitarian.

Nice.

And, all of those kids, in all of those commercials; all of those children smiling out so appealingly from all of those billboards: Always such clean, orderly, pleasantly smiling and neatly dressed (*no sagging pants nor worrisomely worn hoodie jackets here*) but, oh my – surely heartbreakingly needy non-White children.

Okay, yes; maybe it *was* true that due to a yawning lack in a tediously regulated oversight, when truly gargantuan help-low-income-kids funding was offered, much of the money raced for, acquired, and then applied to an endless stream of short-lived “reforms” – well, rather than honestly creating the academic equity so loudly argued by reform leaders, much of the money *actually* ended up in the pockets of (oh, now, haven't we discussed this already) *non-poor*, and occasionally even quite wealthy, dominant-culture and dominant-culture-assimilated citizens.

If, as you won *your* funding race?

If, as you gathered up *your* tantalizing chunk of that competitively offered money?

Well if, instead of protectively supporting and adding to the teaching staff you already had; if, instead of preserving and acquiring music, language, gym or art programs; if, in place of maintaining the positions required for developing technology and

keeping your computer labs up and running (although, assuredly, all of this *was* happening in wealthier buildings where private donations brought in the necessarily extra hundreds of thousands each year) – well, if, after winning *your* school funding race?

You accepted your low-income “equity” money, and then, in the name of a “compassionate” accountability, decided that you would have to repeatedly lose staff, cut music, minimize gym, forget languages, forget art, cut technicians, let computer labs languish – and instead?

Spend your newly won money in the hiring, assigning and precipitately reassigning of a never-ending flow of reform personnel, many of whom owned only a minimal to nonexistent in-the-classroom educational experience: A constantly shifting parade of area superintendents, quadrant managers, fixer administrators, department leaders, program overseers, consultants, coaches, facilitators, specialists, advisers, test organizers, test assessors, test processors, test managers, professional development and re-training executives, statistical technicians, curriculum developers, data team analysts, intervention experts and – each year, now, with an increasing frenzy – a newly legalized excess of employee evaluators.

Gosh.

*What was unequal about that?**†

*Recent “bring back art, music and gym” tax proposals popular in the dawning recognition that, over the past decade, these programs have been somehow mislaid, never quite get around to arguing the fact that these same subjects would not be listed there, on the MIA roster, should voters simply choose to eliminate testing – and thereby terminate our nation’s massive expenditure upon the thousands of non-teaching positions now required and paid for by our fanatic reliance upon a test-score-dependent reform.

†For anyone wishing to jump into the political ring, it might be wise to become that candidate very loudly and particularly *against testing*; you might be surprised at how quickly you would be elected. (And how arduous your task once you hit Washington D.C. to find – as so many “Opt Out Of Testing” groups have only just begun to discover – how deeply entrenched the tentacles of pro-testing, pro-reform, pro-school-choice lobbyists have become.)

Factoring In The Testing Factor

What if, as we've stopped here to take a moment; what if, as we've paused to contemplate the possibly of pocketing a personal slice of that competitive R2T funding – well, what if we additionally take a moment to reflect upon the world of testing. A world made vastly and immensely profitable, in über-modern days, through mandates of a governmentally legislated test-score accountability. Massive, gigantic, stupendous sums of money currently support the testing industry. Tests, after all, need not only be produced, but evaluated, updated, analyzed, duplicated, reviewed, reorganized, and then, *voilà*: rewritten, revised and transformed. What had started off as a ten-to-fifteen-million-dollar district testing budget?

Soon grew, uncontrollably, to twenty-five million.

No, oops, better make that thirty-five million.

Oh no, golly; maybe?

Well, let's just say fifty million. Or sixty.

Eighty?

Hell, let's stop and call it *one-hundred mil** – such a nice, round, and clearly reasonable number for something so desperately and indisputably needed, even as low-income school budget cuts decimated music, art, gym, foreign languages, sports, computer labs, support staff, and that surely most unnecessary triviality of truly modern days:

Teachers.

But, then – well.

Whoops.

Due to the suddenly promoted and abruptly legalized push for the annual test-score appraisal of *all* teachers? *More* phenomenally expensive tests would now be immediately required. District tests, subject tests, in-school tests, placement tests, test preparation tests, reading tests, intervention tests, computer tests, program tests, exit tests.

Tests for testing kindergarteners.

And, no kidding?

A recently won funding available and promoted for being used: *In testing preschoolers.*†

Apparently?

There was no level of testing that you couldn't get the public to blindly support. Or for which rubber-stamp-wielding *good* school boards:

Wouldn't vote.

And, always right there; right there alongside, hand-in-hand with the never-endingly compiled testing data generated through the assertive processes of testing? That always increasing number of highly promoted test-score-mandated reforms and reformers:

Curriculum peddlers, program writers, text fabricators, test publishers, test compilers, out-of-town (or better yet *out-of-country*) program consultants, evaluation organizers, assessment instructors, subject coaches, academic facilitators, innovation specialists, area administrators, hierarchy managers, quadrant supervisors, teacher substitutes, teacher trainings, pre-scripted materials, revamped buildings, school closures, building transformations, new school creations, short-lived turnarounds, interim proposals, repeated redesigns – and that everlastingly mandated shuffling, shuffling and reshuffling of employees.

As we work our way through the now over-a-decade-long call for this complicated overabundance of massively demanded test-score reforms and reformers...

Well if, just for the hell of it, we calculate a bit as we go:

How many people; how many programs?

How many trainings; how many developments?

How many briefings; how many debriefings?

How many workbooks; how many documents?

How many supplements; how many texts?

How many redesigns; how many renovations?

How many abruptly mandated invasions; how many short-lived transformations?

How many salaries? *How much money?*

As we do our best to work out *that* number – well, let's stop and regroup. Let's take a guess. Go ahead, now don't be shy: How many of the people jumping up so enthusiastically to enter into this nationally instigated race for a no-excuses accountability; how many participants rushing under, over and around each other in the desperate effort to acquire one of those middle-to-very-high-salaried jobs underwritten by a Big Money innovation – well, how many would you guess might turn out to be both privileged class and culturally similar?

If, hardly thinking twice, you said *most*.

Well, you would be right.

And why not.

Gee, surely this made sense.

Middle-class-to-wealthy, culturally-similar people *needed well-paid jobs*. Shoot, simply through the expedience of having been born into the well educated and upwardly mobile privileged class – oh, undoubtedly they *deserved* them.

So if, in reality, all of these competition-demanded, suddenly-hired employees sort of sucked up all that money and, in the process, accidentally abused the hell out of inner-city, culturally-different, low-income schools on their way to *helping* them (all while endlessly spouting the Children First party line of a test-score-inspired deficit, and remembering, always and forevermore, to tell everyone *just how much they cared*).^o

What, then, was the problem?

*With the advent of the massive computerized testing now demanded by the Common Core, testing expenditures have skyrocketed, and in some districts predictably demand *five-hundred-million* dollar budgets. (And, although I know that this isn't precisely how things work, these days as I barely miss driving my car into yet another yawningly gigantic pothole, I think: *Well, at least our public schools will be administering yet another test!*)

†While the push to guarantee nationally subsidized preschools has been rising, few citizens are aware that under the name of “Paying For Success” *venture capital funding* – that type of funding which threatens a retraction if/when students do not produce results comparable to the dominant-culture norm – is now being attached to the test scores engendered by many of these same-said preschoolers.

^oIt might be a good time to pause and think this through. Of the two candidates for an administrative or political position – that self-promoting, never-took-education-classes, provisionally-licensed wunderkind who quit teaching after only two years but never stops talking about how much she or he *cares about children*, or the teacher *who actually stayed in the classroom for twenty to thirty years* – well, which of these two candidates would be the best bet for an educational leadership job? (And, as we keep promoting the former and viciously firing the latter, what might be a logical forecast for the future of our nation's public educational system?)

Unintended Consequences

Taking a long look back, occasionally I might call to mind my own years in junior high. What I remember most clearly is how my classmates and I found our transfer from elementary school into a larger high-school-like building – a transfer which required us to move from room to room multiple times during the school day – a truly fascinating experience.

In one of the rooms set aside particularly for math, the waist-high wooden cabinets built into a side wall quickly caught our collective imagination. Somewhat accidentally we discovered that if, very carefully, we snuck Darrell Seymore (one of the smallest among us, but easily the most enthusiastically adventurous) into a back-most cupboard, we could then experience great entertainment when our young and easily distracted math teacher heard someone knocking at the door.

Although, as we always knew?

It was only Darrell, knocking unseen from the hidden recesses of his darkly sequestered cupboard.

Each and every time, Ms. Boste went to the door – and found no one there. After one, two, and on a really good day three, door-knocking interruptions, covertly we would slip Darrell back out of his cupboard, thinking way too much of ourselves and our privately hilarious secret.

Like most scam artists, however, it wasn't long before we had grown a little too full of ourselves. Intent upon pulling the same prank in Mr. Thomson's science room, recklessly we interchanged our math room's wooden cupboards for the invitingly tall metal cabinets stacked up against our science room's back wall. With Darrell excitedly eager, taking little time to think things through we quickly jumped in – anxious to go for the sting. Folded surreptitiously into one of the cabinets before the start of class, Darrell awaited his moment.

Gigglingly nervous and giddy with anticipation, we could barely keep ourselves still. When the knock came, however?

It sounded decidedly, and echoingly, metallic.

By no means a first year teacher – in fact a twenty-eight-year veteran – not missing a beat, Mr. Thomson turned and, continuing his lecture, strolled leisurely to the back of the room. After nonchalantly pursuing a side counter and selecting a long-necked lock, he slipped the metal piping through the open handles of two cabinet doors...

And decisively snapped the latch.

Slowly, then, he began to wind his way back toward the front of the classroom where he paused long enough to give us a very humorous and highly effective lecture on what he warned were the inescapable consequences of a poor scientific planning. A few minutes later, after ambling once again to the back of the room, he paused and unlocked the cabinet doors to pull out a grinningly undaunted Darrell.

We always liked Mr. Thomson.

His lessons stayed with us; certainly, his lesson around the dangers of an impetuously shallow planning has always stayed with me. Today, however, it is not the dilemma of slipping an over-excited seventh grader into a metal cupboard which I find myself unraveling, but the much larger, and much more real-world damaging, consequences connected to an aggressively implemented (but egregiously disconnected) public school “reform.” That sort of promoted-as-compassionate innovation entirely dependent upon a governmentally and/or philanthropically offered:

Massive funding.

Perhaps you’ve noticed?

When, in contemporary days so nonchalantly freed from financial regulations, the very soft label of “unintended consequences” is now popularly thrown about by political leaders; governmental employees who find themselves forced to speak out about the embarrassing misuse, or even out-and-out loss, of massively unfettered monies. Funding, for example, misplaced somewhere along the way in dramatically executed – if fuzzily regulated – military endeavors.

Huge sums of money, that somehow?

Went astray.

Somehow can no longer be located.

Somehow, uh-oh:

Ended up in enemy hands.

The massive disbursement of money, literal plane-loads of funding – millions, and even billions – is, in modern days, actively anticipated. Losing much of it, however, through a razzle-dazzle lack in oversight, corruption, graft, greed, a lackadaisical or incompetent management, or the very simple I-take-mine-off-the-top maneuvering?

Well, as we are all so publicly told *after* the fact:

That, simply?
Is *not* what was intended.

The Scientific Value Of Oops

And so it is that, through the assertively advertised urgency behind modern-day deregulated bell-the-cat intentions? *Good* citizens can be taught to not only anticipate, but mindlessly defer to, a nonchalantly irresponsible mismanagement. Bundled up inside the softer, don't-hold-anybody-accountable label of "unintended consequences," everyone might now be expected to embrace (whenever it is offered) a newer, and much more convenient, arm of scientific reasoning – a covers-all-contingencies, surely-you-can't-*blame*-anybody variable:

Oops.

The fact that in our district huge, overwhelmingly expensive compilations of mandatory per-classroom reading libraries ultimately ended up in a jumbled mess, collecting dust inside obscurely distant bookrooms as one newly purchased program gave way to the next.

Oops.

The fact that box upon box of extravagantly forced but suddenly outdated materials and prescribed workbooks, (more than a few large containers never actually opened), lingered in the back corners of classrooms or blocked the isles in out-of-the-way storage closets.

Oops.

The fact that unrestrainedly ordered charts, verbiage, posters, procedures, protocols, strategies and policy statements printed up en masse to be lavishly laminated and handed out one year, were nonchalantly ignored the next: unwanted, unrecognized and eventually thrown into the trash.

Oops.

The fact that per-person binders, multi-colored organizers, professional development texts, expensively collated powerpoints, one-to-two-week-long presentations delivered by expensively contracted (and poshly accommodated) out-of-town "experts" – all were abruptly preempted by the unexpected instigation of yet another transformation and put aside, to be lost in the shuffle, and ultimately forgotten.

Oops.

The fact that pricey, whole-department, reform-ordered text sets forced onto educators as being inflexible curricula inside pre-scripted classrooms were suddenly and unconcernedly relegated to already overburdened book shelves when newly hired innovation-mandated novice teachers demanded alternate materials.

Oops.

The fact that high-salaried innovation specialists demanded hour upon hour for informing school-score-identified employees that they must utilize suddenly decided practices, even as, due to a gaping lack in reform coordination, precipitately hired and also well-salaried curriculum coaches stipulated that – well, in order to avoid punishment? Teachers must categorically *avoid* any use of these very same, but now untenably out-of-date, protocols.

Oops.

The fact that the invasive elimination of upper-level students from low-income buildings was inflexibly mandated as the means to expensively revamp and remodel schools for younger students (all of the disruptive movement and costly construction argued as being necessary so that these newly instigated “limited-seat” schools might re-open under excitingly new names) *only to admit one year later*, that – well, due to a lack in planning, lack in oversight, and lack in experienced personnel:

These schools had performed so poorly?

That they must now be closed.

Oops.

The fact that, as a result of the “expert” contention that an arbitrary three years’ production of low scores stipulated an invasive turnaround in school practice, ruthless reorganizations were mandated for large traditional buildings; the fact that these phenomenally disruptive invasions were then followed not by a statistical growth or academic stability, but by year after year of a never settling and always changing bedlam; the fact that the resulting bedlam inevitably led not only to a lower and lower achievement, but to a lower and lower enrollment, *which was then used as a statistical justification for ordering up an ever churning flow of new administrations, new curriculum, new teachers, new protocols and new mandates* – until, finally? Three years after the orig-

inal community-destabilizing reorganizations had been decreed in the name of helping children:

Never stepping up; never taking a personal responsibility; never recognizing a devastating neighborhood upheaval; never admitting a personal culpability for lost *and even dead* students and ruinously invaded lives – on the heels of the now *publicly recognized transformation failures*?

Leaning heavily upon that modern-day school board’s ubiquitous rubber stamp, district leaders nonchalantly mandated *the additionally invasive and hugely expensive restructuring of these very same schools*.

Oops?

Nope. Sorry.

I just can’t do it.

I just can’t play that dumb.

I just can’t fool myself; I just can’t make myself accept that this endless game of school invasion disasters, this game where faulty innovations – *although publicly admitted as being failures* – never actually lead to a district or national accountability; this game where massively injurious innovative failures can, after heartlessly abusing employees, students and communities, receive only the now governmentally-modeled soft recognition of being simply case after case (after case) of an accidental (and thus surely forgivable):

“Unintended consequences.”

Blind allegiance to a relentlessly destabilizing insanity – *in the name of children*?

The falsely presented tone of caring, of standing strong, of never backing down in order to *step up and put children first*, simply serves as a ruse which, more and more each year, only lightly covers a shockingly irresponsible system’s embarrassing competition for *money*.

Any kind of money.

*Any kind of money, attached to any kind of reform.**

And, apparently?

No one prepared to point out, or long-term stand up to and resist, the incessantly mandated Big Money exploitation of our nation’s lowest-income, culturally-different children.†

*Although there has been an increasing contention that, due to an essential lack in the Department of Education’s intentional focus on integration, after receiving unprecedented “turnaround” monies many minority-serving schools have shown little to no improvement – there has been minimal ancillary criticism of the fact that much of the “discretionary” money forced into these schools has served to methodically undermine, disrupt and repress rather than to collaboratively and organically support. (i.e. when a school has no air conditioning and the classrooms are sweltering – well, if, as an obvious “fix,” you argue that you cannot offer funding to this school unless it will fire/reassign all of its teachers and interchange its many administrators, how exactly does this address the *actual* problem of heat exhaustion?)

†While I recognize that there *are* those who have been working long and hard to expose the massive takeover of our nation’s culturally-different schools, I am also well aware that these very same voices have been repeatedly labeled by both avid reformers and soundbite-seeking journalists alike as being nothing more than inconsequential members of a far-left “cult.”

Naked Emperors (Or: Speaking of Cults)

After yet another highly publicized I-care-about-children declaration, a nationally recognized school reform leader – a leader whose status as an educational “expert” had evidently been founded upon nothing more than his individual willingness to leap irrepressibly after each and every penny connected to an unpredictably shifting reform-attached money – faced criticism from unhappy constituents.

Puffing up, he blustered and spluttered.

Defensively he told everyone, that?

Well, due to his personal desire to protect children, *he* would be the first to back efforts for unveiling tricksters; *he* would be the first to expose, as needed, unacceptably naked emperors.

And, all the while, ironically?

There he stood – an utterly naked man.

Remember the story: The naked emperor, a self-promoting VIP so egocentric and self-important that, in his unrestrained grasp at fame, he had been easily duped by local con artists into believing that they had attired him in clothing so perfect, so delicate, and so beautiful, that only those of highest rank could see it.

Full of himself, yet privately aware that, in point of fact, *he* couldn’t perceive the exceptional garments, expediently this

power-hungry man had surrounded himself with lackeys, neophytes and acolytes – compliant citizens so eager to please (and so anxious to remain within the ranks of the privileged and well-to-do) that they had pretended to believe wholeheartedly in the nonexistent apparel. Citizens unwilling to admit to themselves, and to any of the others who owned advantaged access into the glittering environs of the Emperor, that they couldn't see what was, actually, never there.

Maybe, in fact?

Who knows. Maybe, as the days, months and years passed, these dedicated yes-men (and occasional yes-women) convinced themselves that they really could, on a good day, in a certain light, see the unearthly textiles: fabrics which had been repeatedly and enthusiastically described to them by an always increasing number of zealots (and even more unbendingly by a growing supply of self-interested and craftily enterprising carpet-baggers) – year after year.

After year.

Self-deception is, after all, what faction thinking is all about.

Late one afternoon in the final hours of a long week infused with the demands of a “non-negotiable” teacher retraining, a group of teachers collected informally in the parking lot. Patiently they waited in the hope of questioning the young man who had been very suddenly, and very unexpectedly, hired as an enforcer of fidelity to the newly ordered day-by-day, minutely-prescribed lessons; intentionally these unhappy educators encircled this recently empowered educational “expert,” and, with an obvious agitation, expressed their worries that the blindly forced adherence to a narrowly immovable curricula would generate an inability to meet actual student needs.

Finding himself surrounded, the youthfully handsome specialist turned his head, first left, and then right; surreptitiously he let his glance sweep quickly over the parking lot. Seeing no district administrator in the area, he elected to speak candidly.

Off the record, as it were.

“I know that this isn't going to be easy,” he started out nervously, throwing a second glance around his immediate surroundings. “But, see? You don't understand; *I can't do anything about this*. Those guys at the top? *They're fanatics.*”

Lowering his voice, he carefully ventured a private opinion: “I’m not kidding; *it’s like this is a cult.*” Anxious to put an end to this clearly uncomfortable conversation, just as so many others had done before him, he turned his back before throwing out a final comment: “I wish I could help you. *But I can’t.*”

Ah.

The clear and conclusive: “*I can’t.*”

Learning how to survive under the demanding dictates of an inflexible NCLB; learning how to endure the long years increasingly bent to a modern-day top-down/do-what-I-say management transition. Ultimately? Well, ultimately you accepted that – as over the years public school administrative practices morphed from a voice-friendly, community-inclusive, collaboratively-involved supervision into an unquestioned, top-down, do-what-I-say fealty – in the theoretically “better” world of a Big Money reform:

“Caring about the kids?”

Meant a total and unqualified loyalty to the Big Boys.

Those modern-day, self-aggrandizing educational experts.

Those shockingly naked guys – way up there at the top.

Call Me Daddy

In the cyclically churning atmosphere of a suddenly “benevolent” reform, few educational recruits or their emphatically stated policies stayed in any one place for long. Teachers expected to deal with not only the ever changing flow of management hires, but an additionally attached string of ever realigning (and generally double-sided) directives – struggled to comply. There were the magically invasive reform directives themselves...

And then there were the real-life actions from those employed to enforce them.

In the earliest months of a year already heavily weighted with reform, a recently hired disciplinarian threatened loud consequences for any teacher unwilling to enforce his new year’s innovation-ordered dress code. However, as employees seeking to address issues of discipline were soon to discover, due to the management ideology attached to our school’s latest administrative “fixer” – a suddenly assigned short-term principal well known for his painstaking avoidance of any and all parental reac-

tions to actually enforced policies; a predictably transient leader who would not, actually, back any fundamentally hard-hitting decisions – well, no matter how loudly our disciplinarian called out for a dress code compliance, even more assiduously?

He strove to avoid a real-life student confrontation.

In days committed to the magic of instantaneous liabilities, rather than enforce the emphatically *proclaimed* policies connected to assertively publicized innovations (remember, now, we've already discussed this) – oh, it was always much, *much* safer to side with unhappy students, avoid a parental involvement, and expediently follow the national governmentally-initiated norm:

Blame the teacher.

Nevertheless; having heard repeated threats for punitive action against those who did not enforce our disciplinarian's belligerently delivered policies, as my morning class assembled I asked my students to read through our notably posted dress code regulations before electing to send two overtly code-violating girls to the disciplinarian. Visibly offended, and making sure that everyone in the room knew exactly how they felt, the two code-breaking young ladies stood – sending books flying to the floor. After tendering loud, expletive-spiced opinions, they stalked belligerently from the room.

(And, should it be that you've never seen indignantly outraged fourteen-year-old girls stalk belligerently from a room?

Oh, my. You've never seen it.)

Unmistakably?

They were off to tell the disciplinarian just how poorly they had been treated.

Forced into a true-life dress code dilemma, the advisor now wobbled back and forth, back and forth – clearly unsure about enforcing his own loudly decreed and mandatory classroom-posted policies. Unable, despite the hypothetical title as disciplinarian, to make a necessary move toward any sincerely hard-hitting authority, finally he suggested that we simply sidestep the issue by taking the girls' loudly antagonistic concerns directly to administration.

Surprised at his lack of assurance, and wishing to move things along so that I could get back to planning for my next lesson, I proposed that – as two grown professionals? Surely we

could address this question ourselves. Surely we could agree upon a solution; did we really need an administrator to step in and tell us how to handle ourselves, acting as a daddy to solve what was clearly our problem?

Uh-oh. Shouldna said *that*.

Two days later, out of the blue a glaringly outraged assistant principal – a frighteningly sharp-edged woman whom I had been repeatedly warned by various peers to avoid – stomped angrily into my classroom, reminding me suddenly and unhappily of my old friend Buck from days at Central High: that very large, very forbidding woman who, as an alarmingly well-cultivated bully, used to sneak up and yell so precipitously.

(I still pee a little, just thinking about her.)

In the ensuing he-said, she-said, you-said, the-girls-said, what-a-godawful-mess upheaval: well, ultimately?

I found myself reprimanded, roundly, assertively and solidly. *For calling my principal Daddy.*

Which, in point of fact?

I never did.

Although I tried to explain that while making a case I had simply used the word as a metaphor, and not a name – oh, well, *that*, evidently? Was beside the point. In our compassionate new era committed to a no-excuses don-t-talk-back management, the much, *much* more important point was?

That I had been bad.

And, *being bad?*

Oh, undoubtedly I required a dramatically humiliating castigation; an absolute and unmistakably documented *punishment*.

Treatment as, so very plainly and notably:

An unruly, and disrespectfully wayward, *child*.

Who's Driving The Van

So; well, here's a question.

If the men at the top – and, if you cared to pay close attention, you noticed that when absolute, accountability-based reform practices were forced into play, those taking charge; those most vociferously proposing our nation's unqualified need for a total don't-talk-back punitive control at the very top, were, by and large, *men* – well, if these men were now demanding an unques-

tioned filial allegiance from any and all sundry weaker beings strung down the ladder of employment...

Then wasn't the label of "Daddy" exactly appropriate?

If, in lieu of an old-fashioned, multi-voiced and often *over-eighty-percent-female-included* collaboration, a top-down, punishment-based system of control was, in days of a truer, more benevolent accountability, being strategically implemented; if this method of management repeatedly required those in power to disinterestedly ignore an employee input, and, alternately, stay on guard (defensively watching out for; furtively looking ever more closely to find) a *bad* teacher insubordination – well, if this style of administration expected leaders to publicly chastise, *even to the actual shaking of fingers in a public disapprobation*.

What term of authority more closely fit these newly required administrative actions?

In point of fact, in our district the title of an unconditionally empowered parent had already been overtly claimed. When, in initial years of a suddenly invasive NCLB, employees inside our old-school building had taken note that practices of a democratic collaboration were being systematically routed, a growing number of staff had sent their complaints directly to our then district superintendent. Avoiding a direct look at the probable truth behind such an alarming barrage of anxiety now coming his way, however, this sharp-sightedly futuristic leader had abruptly mandated attendance at an obligatory Central High assembly. And it was there that he had, very assertively, explained:

Like the proverbial father taking a family road trip?

He was fed up.

Furthermore?

He expected the whining to stop.

Educator complaints needed to cease, he warned, or he would personally halt the van *and put the whiners out*.

Surely it is noteworthy that, even in earliest years of test-score-penalty fixers? This exceptionally perceptive leader had held the prescience to describe himself *not* as an old-school democratic, inclusively collaborative partner but, conversely, as an undisputed I-am-the-parent-and-as-the-parent-I-make-all-decisions patriarch. His incipient, modern-day reform argument had, in fact, been that – as, undeniably, *the father?*

Oh, he would *willingly* stop his district-driven vehicle in order to put the children (presumably employees dependent upon a protective supervisor's care) *out*.

Dumped by the wayside.

Left, one might assume, unwanted and vulnerable by the side of the road. An action which, in any *thinking* society?

Might immediately be denounced as being not only a shockingly deplorable *but fully unconscionable* act of paternal abuse.

The Fine Art of Vilification

Kicking teachers out of the van.

Eerily, in ensuing years dedicated to an inflexible low-income school transformation?

It turned out to be a painfully accurate metaphor.

Little by little, over the years, those who most loudly promoted the recurrent implementation of short-term, short-lived school innovations endeavored to shift administrative expectations away from democratically collaborative oversight practices toward policies of a top-down, corporate-style hierarchy. Occurring, as it did, inside the glitter and glow of a never-endingly advertised school transformation, the underlying agenda of a full educational management transition cleverly affixed itself to various low-income reform legislations – and thus stayed largely hidden.

And, as it was secreted there?

Ingeniously it began to bolster the supplemental shift in teacher status which had been pushing to get in at the same door.

As tactics of a top-down punitive (rather than supportively collaborative) management took root, employees in lowest-income schools – teachers historically viewed as being professional partners in the the making of administrative decisions – suddenly found themselves ever more assertively herded into the far reaches of the don't-talk-back, daddy-driven van. Where, more and more unmistakably?

They were threateningly told to *stop whining*.

Artfully applied, the premonitory use of retaliatory threats against outspoken, reform-resistant employees quickly became simply yet another facet of a modern-day low-income-school

management. Teachers who openly voiced concerns, expecting, as they spoke, an old-school democratic respect? Conversely found that, branded now as *childish whining*:

Their thoughts were no longer relevant.

Educators – so many traditionally self-confident, so many old-school independent, so many protectively loyal, so many authoritatively outspoken – painfully discovered that in place of respect for opinions; in place of honor for hard-won scholarship; in place of appreciation for long-term experience: The older they were; the more accomplished and the more immovably protective of a student welfare? The more they attracted the label of being problematically (and very selfishly) *bad*.

Self-involved; rigid; old-fashioned; set-in-their-ways.

Resistant to change; unforgivably lazy; tottering in inept.

Difficult; insubordinate; and oh-so-unacceptably?

Negative.

Surely, under the hard-hitting management of a modern-day liability, it was time, as the nation was now repeatedly and assertively told, to rout these school-score-labeled, self-involved educators *out*.

Taking prudent note of the powerful example set by our nation's second obdurately pro-reform President, school innovators observed as, along with a crew of judiciously selected top-down, daddy-empowered partners, this much acclaimed "transitional" leader now assertively stood up to lead the pack in the fine art of teacher vilification. Citing non-differentiated, amalgamated school test scores as the *only* evidence required, this newly influential executive loudly and unbendingly demanded massively disinterested building closures.

Along with mammoth, school-score-based *bad* teacher dismissals.

With such imposing leadership as foundation?

Oh, it didn't take long.

The shift from teacher as empowered, respected professional, to teacher as deviously inept, self-motivated villain, was so suddenly, and so quickly, complete. Teachers in low-scoring, low-income, politically-weakest schools – educators who at one time (a long time ago, in days which had openly tolerated a collaboratively democratic status quo) had been viewed as respected partners in the public education arena – well, these school-score-

identified teachers were now belligerently informed that in the fast pace of an über-modern answerability?

They had now been irrevocably identified as the statistically *bad*. And, in an aggressive imitation of our nation's "change"-promoting President, as an always fresh supply of test-score promoters stepped up to assertively tell the nation:

They had to go.

No Room At The Table

Incrementally, one state, one city, one district at a time:
The reform-years' educational management transition commenced.

And, in this newly initiated modern-day configuration?

Teachers employed inside lowest-income schools would no longer be empowered to make, or even criticize, school connected decisions. They would, on the other hand (as subtle and not-so-subtle threats in the form of a physical tracking, invasive observations, repeated public chastisings, and an open finger-shaking could now make unambiguously clear) be expected to embrace any and all reform dictates.

Quietly, obediently and submissively.

After all, as was each year more uncompromisingly pointed out?

The back door of the district-driven van:

Was wide open.

And daddy's administrative boot now hovered, there, dominantly poised and ready to lash out, label and expel at the slightest provocation.

In a tactical replication of domineering patriarchy, top-down NCLB now gave a full and unimpeded control to reform-hired "fixer" personnel. Problematically, those hired to "fix" were also expected to know not only *how* to run large, culturally-diverse schools, but to make administrative decisions alone – partnering, if at all, minimally, and only, with hierarchy-approved management hires. Under the non-democratic model of an I-work-alone paternal management, those hired to renovate were expected to execute a staff supervision through the unambiguous employment of top-down "non-negotiable" *do-as-I-say-don't-give-me-any-lip* directives.

Good administrators?

Gave no ground.

Showed no weakness.

Weakness, in the fast pace of modern days?

Now directly linked to that old-school democratic cooperation which had been so tiresomely tolerated by a tediously (and untenably) slow old-days' *status quo*. As, each year, leaders at the top demanded an ever more absolute obedience from various employees strung down the corporate-style ladder of power, reform personnel clinging tenuously to rungs only a little lower in the hierarchy claimed an unquestioned authority over any and all workers positioned below.

And those below?

Went directly for the school-score-identified employees collected together at the very bottom of the ladder:

Teachers.

Despite years of loyalty; despite years of academic experience; despite various university degrees; despite a personal dedication to a subject-specific craft – the school-score-identified teachers of an über-modern test-score-dependent era now found themselves heaped interchangeably at the base of the ladder.

And commanded, as they were jumbled up there together?

To obey. To follow policies, innovations and dictates without question.

Emotionally vested in buildings where many had been employed for years; tied loyally to not only schools, but to larger communities and already-graduated students; often owning homes in surrounding neighborhoods – ignoring the now Presidentially recognized status of being nothing more than irrelevantly lowest-rung employees, many teachers continued to stand up and speak out. Educators who, in old-school years, had been recognized as being a necessary cornerstone for truly effective school governance continued to look for validation. Desperately they sought to resurrect their partnership in the making of school management decisions.

Only to learn that, in days of a quick-fix, students-first compassion?

Under the now Presidentially initiated hierarchy of a don't-talk-back, top-down authority, lowest-level (and therefore

decidedly unimportant) *teachers* – had been unceremoniously stripped of their long established seat at the educational table.

Recycling The Cycle Of Abuse

It was evident to anyone paying close attention, that – in modern days?

The profession of public school teaching (although historically a creatively interactive and collaboratively resourceful occupation) was fast losing ground to the NCLB/R2T competitive-market theory of an immovable top-down control. Inside this modern-day management paradigm, as interchangeably unimportant and lowest-level employees, surely teachers would work best, producing their most impressive results, if kept voiceless, dependent, and continually threatened.*

Teachers relegated to the absolute bottommost rung of the modern-day educational hierarchy – those educators employed inside lowest-income, lowest-scoring buildings? Oh, unmistakably, *these* teachers could no longer be left in charge. After all, according to the top-down, daddy-led reformation of a public school management, well these teachers:

Were, gee, nobody *important*.

I mean, think about it.

They were, after all:

Mostly just women.

If, on your way to seeking a career, you had ever looked into teaching as an occupation in the United States, on the whole you would have found it to be largely a woman's world. Periodic census studies illustrated that up to, and beyond, eighty percent of public school teachers had recurrently been, and currently still were, female. Recognized as fact, it might even be logical to correlate the social issues which had traditionally affected women to the largely feminine domain of education.

One afternoon, after finding a seat inside the waiting room of my dentist's office, I picked up a well-known women's magazine and began to flip through the pages. When an article written around the subject of domestic abuse caught my eye, I paused and began to read about a subject connected much too predictably to the world of women.

Although few people would argue that a physical violence in the home is anything less than debilitating, not as much attention gets paid to a connected nonphysical – yet still highly incapacitating – battering. Attentively, I began to read through a segment of the article listed under a separated heading: *How to Recognize Emotional Abuse*.

When emotional abuse is employed, I read:

The abuser's goal is to have power over you.

The abuser wants to control you.

The abuser will follow you, watching your movements.

The abuser will not allow you to make your own decisions. The abuser will control your actions, finding a reason to chastise you publicly. The abuser will make you ask permission for any desired change.

The abuser will implement rules which you have to follow, but which he or she does not.

The abuser will withhold respect.

Emotional abuse is meant to put people in their place.

Emotional abuse is meant to manipulate.

Emotional abuse is meant to make people doubt themselves.

Emotional abuse is meant to make the victim fearful.

Emotional abuse, I understood when I had finished the article, was exactly what I, as a teacher in lowest-income NCLB/R2T reform-targeted schools had been subjected to now – for years. And here's the thing. It was working.

You're so afraid, I heard from my therapist. You can't go on like this; you're going to burn out your adrenal glands. Stop fighting, I heard again and again, from friends, from relatives, from doctors, ministers, therapists and other teachers.

Stay quiet.

Stay silent.

Stop, stop, stop.

*If we're willing to recognize the critical role played by the "canary in the coal mine," maybe we ought to take note of the fact that previous to the instigation of NCLB teacher job-satisfaction rates were some of the highest in our nation. By the year 2013, however, these same rates (go ahead, look it up) had not only plummeted, but now hover dangerously near the bottom.

No Longer Teaching

For the first fifteen years of my teaching career, I had told anyone who asked, and even those who didn't, that they would never find a job more enjoyable than teaching.

I meant it.

I had never known more happiness, more pride, nor more creative energy than what I had gained from teaching. My earliest experiences inside a stable, old-school system willing to integrate a few new teachers each year, had allowed me to work collaboratively with a variety of highly experienced peers – professionals who, while granting me ample opportunity to teach on my own, had yet expected me to lean upon them, to ask them questions, and to watch them in action.

Our large Language Arts department had met often, and on our own, without an administrative intervention. As recognized, state-licensed professional educators, we had discussed a variety of academic concerns, doing what we could to solve instructional and disciplinary issues as they arose. Although I was never totally on my own, I soon began to thrive in an organically creative world able to offer me the freedom to reach out to the students in my classroom.

To reach out; to take risks; to try new ideas.

To make my own interpretation of lessons, and – when needed?

To learn from my own mistakes.

But, then?

Ah well, *then*.

A suddenly “benevolent” NCLB:

Soon put a stop to *that*.

As the years of a retaliatory accountability grew increasingly callous, the invasive dictates behind reform soon forced not only me but the larger percent of my traditional school's teaching staff away from the much-loved positions we had held at Central High. Via the growing detachment now emanating from our frustrated (and much too often antagonistic) Human Resources' office, I found myself shuffled *not* back into a high school assignment, but sent, instead, to work at a middle school so far across town that – due to that winter's endlessly icy weather – I recur-

rently spent hour-long drives hunched painfully over the steering wheel of my car.

Thrown abruptly into the disorder which tumbled about inside my newly assigned and innovation overwhelmed building – a building where administrator after administrator came and went – it didn't take long to ascertain that, at my immovably appointed middle school?

Few policies, including any which pertained to discipline, ever stayed continually in place. And that those policies which *did* stay in place?

Were seldom consistently or predictably enforced.

Teaching, I will always brag, is my forte. I am good at it.

After twenty years in the business, on my best days?

I am even *very* good at it.

But; if you hire me; if you seriously wish me to do my best; if you expect me to be successful with the largest number possible of complexly diverse students randomly collected together into a too-hot or too-cold classroom – oh, you'll have to offer me consistently ordered *and predictably stable* disciplinary services.

And?

You'll have to trust me to do what I think is best for the kids waiting for me there, inside my classroom.

These are simply the facts, Jack.

You take disciplinary support away?

You don't let me do my job because, in your oh-so-caring Big Money jump at reform, you end up placing a full responsibility for aggressive student disruptions, excessive student absences, shocking student language, unendingly petty violations of dress code, the frustrations of special-needs students no longer receiving services, the palpable malaise attached to a mind-bogglingly poor nutrition and (increasingly in über-political years) the debilitating instability attached to a burgeoning economic inequity – well, you go ahead and stack *all* of this directly onto my shoulders?

And then you tell me through blame, labeling, and endlessly applied test-score threats, that this is all *my* burden?

As a means to compassionately “fix” my school, you tell me that I no longer have the right to listen to my own educator's instincts, my own creative energies, and my own honest connec-

tion to the students seated right there, in front of me; you tell me that I may no longer instruct what I know to be relevant and in the manner most suited to my ability, and I will tell *you*, straight out, no vacillating, no namby-pamby pussy-footing here:

That I am no longer *teaching*.

Strategic Survival

“*Miss?*”

A few weeks after starting to work inside my newly assigned and overwhelmingly innovated middle school, an already favorite, never-shy young lady solicited my attention during the course of one particularly stressful afternoon.

“*Miss?*” she suggested observantly: “You’re always patting yourself on the head.”

Looking at her questioningly, suddenly I realized that at that very moment my hand was actually on the top of my head. Pressing inward, my palm pulled itself downward a few inches, and then, without conscious intention, returned rhythmically to the top of my head. Much like stroking and soothing a jumpy cat, I was, indeed, patting my own head.

Gentling myself; strategically keeping myself in check.

What I knew, after only six weeks in that exceptionally innovated middle school? Was that, if, during the day’s lesson, Tenley threw another temper tantrum, stood up and kicked Sergio, who would, of course, kick her back – administration would consider this to be *my fault*.

If Shavonda, from her seat at the back of the room, a seat strategically assigned in the effort to discourage her endless distraction of others, smacked her gum loudly, blowing bubbles and popping them until she got the attention she desired and was asked to spit it out – she would do so. And then, after returning to her seat, immediately pick up her notebook, and begin to slap it repeatedly and loudly on her desk.

Slap, slap, slap, slap, slap.

This would go on all period.

And that, too, would be *my fault*.

If Antonio got restless? He would soon be up and wandering, occasionally talking to himself and drifting aimlessly about the room – touching a student here, stealing a pencil there. It was

a medication issue, I had been informed. His lack of attention, however, and his invasion of personal space on any given day?

Was my fault.

If I said no to Carol, telling her that she would not be given permission to go to the restroom for the third time that class period, she would soon be on her phone texting her mom to rat me out. Although according to school policy phones were absolutely not permitted, I had learned (as had the kids) that angry mothers took precedence over disciplinary policies each and every time.

Aggravating Carol – or any other student at any time – was (can you guess):

My fault.

And if, in some amazingly serendipitous moment, I managed to pull all of these complexly unique children together; if, somehow, I made my own brand of magic happen in that room, getting Tenley, Sergio, Shavonda, Antonio, Carol *and* the other twenty-five or so students in attendance, to sit still, listen, and *work*?

Well, you can bet that somewhere in the middle of that miraculous moment (always in the middle, thus allowing for a maximum disruption), an administrator, evaluator, literacy coach, subject facilitator, reform specialist, test supervisor or miscellaneous guy at the top (oh, you know, that new guy; the one offered his impressive new title only yesterday) – well, at least *one* of them would walk disruptively into my room, spend a few minutes observing this academic marvel, and then loudly and chastisingly point out that my language objective was missing.

My agenda wasn't complete.

My state standards weren't updated.

My assessment calendar was unclear.

Or, most problematically?

My over thirty squirrely and impossibly social children were sitting still and quietly working independently.

Why weren't they in groups?

Much too often, as the initial months of that abrasive year crept by, in the late afternoon I would get out to the parking lot, collapse into my car, make myself face that very long bumper-to-bumper drive home and – I'd cry.

Unintentionally, one afternoon, I happened upon an additional strategy for survival. If, keeping your eyes carefully focused on the road; if blindly, you reach inside your CD case; if, mistakenly, you pull out a *Holiday Favorites* CD – a CD which includes the song *Frosty The Snowman*. Well, if, then, without looking you insert that inadvertently selected disc into your CD player, and, out of an almost unbearably crushing frustration, you turn that sucker up to a seriously-loud and explosively full volume.

Oh, you can actually blow your own thoughts completely out of your head.

And then, wonderfully?

You're *not* thinking.

Not thinking, just singing.

Crying, maybe, but singing (or yelling, or screaming) at highest volume, making the loudest possible noise at the very top of your lungs. Because you know all of the words about that top-hatted, winter-wonderful, song-and-dance man. Red-nosed reindeer, horses with jingly bells, silvery geese with moonlighted wings, partridges nestled up in pear trees – it all worked. For months that CD helped me escape.

And, incrementally?

Day by day, to survive.

More than occasionally, I would arrive home completely drained – physically and emotionally exhausted, my shoulders aching from that seemingly infinite drive. And, about once a week or so, I would come out of a daze to find myself standing motionless at the entryway to my house. Looking down, suddenly I would realize that I had been standing there holding my keyless-entry car-fob up to my front door and repeatedly pushing the open-door button – wondering why I couldn't even manage to get into my own house.

Returns On The Investment

Only a few years later, after I had fought my way back into a high school teaching position where I could work, once again, as I am best suited – with upper level students getting ready to graduate and head for college – a singularly unhappy administrator forced my return, for the day, back to that particularly

chaotic middle school. Having been trained through the horrific abuses of personnel shifting that modern-day *good* teachers *only and always said yes?*

Indescribably relieved at being restored to a high school position, I had been trying, as best I knew, to keep the waters stilled. Frequently I would look around and realize that not only was I one of the first to show up for the never-ending flow of continually ordered meetings?

I was often alone in having carried out the continually altering lineup of dictates.

However, in modern days; in days filled to the brim and overflowing with the heavy benevolence of an ever more aggressive and ever more punitive liability; in days where money-seeking reformers *increasingly depended upon finding a ready supply of a low-scoring school teacher blame* – well, as it turned out?

Educator rehabilitation was not, actually, a priority reform goal.

In fact, as the test scores inside innovatively disrupted schools remained lucratively and unchangingly low, educator efforts to comply with orders of reform held little relevance. So it was that, at this, my latest hard-won high school assignment?

Whack-A-Mole champion Ms. Hart was able to make it decisively clear:

No matter my efforts?

Oh, *she* was not taken in; oh my, no, *she* was not pleased.

She was, in fact, as Ms. Hart inevitably and always was:

Decidedly unhappy.

Illustrating an unmistakable displeasure at my much-too-independent, old-school, *non-orchestrated* connection with students, Ms. Hart was well aware that through an assertion of the parental power now attached to a modern-day, top-down, don't-talk-back authority – *her* job was not, by any stretch of the imagination, to optimistically support, but to alternately seek out and identify a *bad* teacher sedition. Being, as I was, a clearly old-school experienced, self-confident and much too opinionated educator, oh undoubtedly I could learn a lesson, she now asserted, if sent back across town to that very middle school where I had only just survived a tumultuously disorganized year.

I would be going there, she informed me now as a noted slap on the wrist:

To observe a *good* teacher.

And by *good*?

Oh, make no mistake about it, she meant: *not me*.

In a rush of adrenaline, stupidly I resisted. I simply couldn't grasp the point in leaving my own students – especially when we had only begun to study for semester finals – in order to sit passively inside the classroom of a teacher who, bless her heart, *had only the year before been pushed out of her own high school teaching position and reassigned into that very middle school where I had so recently been subjected to a four-administrators-in-one-year chaos*.

I should have known better; resistance, no matter how rational?

Did *not* sit well with Ms. Hart.

I was *going*.

She had *set it up*.

So, well:

There.

After checking in at the middle school on the day of my forced observation, I was led down a long hallway and up two flights of stairs to finally end up at the classroom of a pleasantly gentle-voiced woman. Although I appreciated the equanimity required for her to work through her day's lesson with no less than five unanticipated and very loud P.A. announcements, I couldn't help but notice that this *good* teacher – this *good* educator whom I had been so assertively sent across town to observe?

Did not actually implement three of the five decidedly non-negotiable lesson plan elements which I had been unendingly told by Ms. Hart and the so many other “experts” assigned to my heavily reformed building, a *good* teacher (oh, if I could only learn to be one) would absolutely employ. When the bell rang to signal the end of her class, aware that like me she had been given no choice, I made a special effort to thank the teacher. And then, intent upon recalling the most direct path back down toward the front office, I had only begun to wind my way through the halls when I felt an unexpected tap on my shoulder.

“Ms Aech?”

Turning, I found, wonder of wonders, a marvelously grown-up Shavonda. No longer a heartrendingly skinny eighth-grader eternally popping her gum, but now an exceptionally at-

tractive young woman. “Miss,” she inquired shyly, “do you remember me?”

Although it skipped briefly through my head that she was pretty hard to forget, reaching out in smiling readiness, I gave her a big hug.

“*Shavonda!* Oh my, but aren’t you grown up!”

“Ah, Miss,” she suggested, glancing down, and then up again, embarrassed. “I was kind of awful back then, wasn’t I?”

Sympathetically, I touched her arm. “Oh no, sweetheart,” I said. “You were just being thirteen.”

However, I thought, not saying it out loud: While you were caught up in being a desperately normal, sometimes sweet and often distractingly obnoxious eighth grade girl just aching for attention? The detached invasions of accountability – those theoretically “compassionate” invasions which so recklessly refused any responsibility for implementing a long-term, relationship-building, behavior-molding discipline:*

Miserably and inexcusably failed *you*.

Two beguilingly pretty eyes looked back at me now, petitioning a release as this engaging girl posed an additional question: “But – we had a good year, Miss; didn’t we?”

Surprisingly; now that it was behind me?

Now that it was *over*?

“Yes,” I responded. “Yes, *Shavonda*, we did.”

Despite that impossible year’s almost unsurvivable lack of support from a hostile parade of reform-shifting administrators; despite the eternal, hurtful criticism coming almost daily from a defensively unhappy “innovative” personnel – as had happened each and every year of my teaching career, my protective herder-dog’s instinct had pushed me to invest myself in those children. And, exactly as had happened each and every year that I had been privileged to teach?

It was, as it always was, the children, who somehow made everything, even inside a whirlingly unstoppable chaos, ultimately – and so rewardingly – worthwhile.

*The increasing lack of interest on the part of “reform” to invest in the pay required for retaining long-term experienced administrators, advisors and counselors – a patiently skilled personnel who recognize how to effectively employ the full array of interventions necessary for working with and long-

term “developing” children – has led us to our now minimalist double feature solution: *Blame the teacher, suspend the student.*

Herding Chickens

As I think back, remembering that year – that year I drove so far, day after day after day. I learned something, as I struggled to survive those turbulent months, about middle school students. If you don’t take the time to know them; if you don’t put personal relationships first? Oh, they’ll ignore you. If you think you can, simply by walking in and throwing uncompromising reform directives around, change their lives? Oh, they’ll make you pay. It is middle school students who, after all, are collectively the very definition of the word *skeptical*.

As a whole, how best to describe them?

Insatiably curious; multi-faceted; easily distracted.

Capricious, erratic and impulsive.

Uniquely and unpredictably enigmatic.

Every once in a while I would tease a class, telling them that teaching kids their age was pretty much the equivalent of having landed a job herding chickens. You might get a couple on track, then one or two more, then another, and perhaps another. You might start to believe that you were, as a group, actually moving in any direction at all, when *whoosh*, suddenly, out of the blue – unexpectedly and excitedly they’d all be back to an uncontrolled bedlam. Totally and completely derailed; pulled wholly off task by a noise in the hall, a hiccup, a sneeze, god-help-us a fart, or a tiny little spider way up high on the wall.

I don’t even want to think about those (thankfully rare) occasions when a bee flew into the room.

Above everything?

You had to make an effort.

If you took the time; if you learned their names; if you asked about their families. If you discovered personal interests; if, every once in a while, you told them a joke. And if, in return?

You listened to their jokes and laughed, even when you almost never understood what was so funny.

If you offered them loyalty; if you kept on trying; if you made the effort to prove that no matter how crazy things got, you were likely to stick it out. Well, you could then, when there was

no support from administration; when you heard nothing but an endless string of criticism from a ruthlessly disgruntled management – fall apart.

You could fall apart, letting them see you at your wit's end, failing and flailing, just so long as you never, and this was the essential bit of magic: You never let them believe that you had lost your faith *in them*. No matter what happened last week; no matter how horrendous the mess from yesterday – every single day? You had to step up. You had to step up and, despite the flood of condescending theory coming at you, at them, at everyone, from so many naïvely inflexible reform hires, *make them sit still*. Get them to sit still, stop talking, listen and work. *Hard*. Not, necessarily, in groups; not everlastingly with partners; not on yet another minimally academic, flashily distracting marker-and-glitter-heavy project, but:

Autonomously.

Independently.

Every.

Single.

Day.

Because, despite the imperious theories of an instantaneous reformation being pushed onto schools by disconnected fixers, *this was and will always be the key*: If, while actively ignoring the endless stream of supercilious advice coming from inexperienced, student-detached “experts,” you stuck it out and made a kid long-term, true-life successful. Not pretend successful, not superficially successful, not sit-in-a-group-and-talk-about-LuLyn's-new-dress partially successful – but truly, autonomously, and individually *I-did-it-myself* hard work successful?

Oh, you could win a convert. For life.

Yanked unceremoniously from my years-long, much-loved position at Central High; thrust impersonally into that reform chaotic and minimally regulated middle school – I had taken with me only what I knew. For close to twenty years I had deconstructed instructional theory and taught myself in how to most effectively reach culturally-diverse, upper-level, college-bound students. What I *could* do, better every year? Was get students to think critically, formulate personal arguments, and write individual opinions into the logical thesis-driven formats expected at universities.

Having discovered, over the years, that kids of any age generally do what they find, at the end of the day, is inescapably expected from them – subversively ignoring the low-level interventions pushed at me by reform-blinded administrators, repeatedly I demanded that my eighth graders stop talking.

Stop talking, sit up, sit still and pay attention.

And then, working independently?

Write papers.

So they did.

Rebel Instincts

Here's a thing about the easily distracted and fleetingly focused world of low-income eighth graders: To manage even a sporadic organization; to make even a limited academic headway; to feel even a most minimal sense of control?

You *really* had to get, and keep, their collective attention.

However, as was increasingly the case in “innovative” years managed by a poverty-detached, top-down, standardizing control, the goddamnit-stay-on-the-page inflexibility forced onto teachers by heavily pre-scripted programs (massive, modern-day programs loudly and lucratively promoted by fatter and fatter curriculum-writing “experts”) seldom did the job.* So it was that – intentionally parting ways with the pre-scripted demand to compel my students' interest in yet another long-dead White male author, somewhere around the month of February?

I selected to alternately present an article written on the subject of nutrition. And, abruptly; all of a sudden – those so easily sidetracked students?

Sat up.

And began, actively, to listen.

Energized by their interest, although the study of nutrition was *not* a part of our proposed miracle-working curriculum, giving in to a rebellious instinct (promise, now, *don't tell anyone*) methodically I pushed my students toward our new subject. Guardedly I brought in articles, books, magazines, poetry, movies and even song lyrics about food, nutrition, obesity, anorexia, diabetes and heart disease. In a nation overwhelmingly obsessed with body image, my kids took to the study with an exceptional energy.

Food issues. Health issues. Body issues.

Not only did they understand it; not only did it make sense?

They found it intriguing.

We went to the library; they read about it. We went to computer labs; they looked for it on databases. They Googled it; they watched TV shows and documentaries about it. And always, eagerly and continually?

They connected it to themselves, to peers, to family, to relatives and to friends. By the end of that school year, led by the carrot of personal curiosity, those children not only knew a heck of a lot more about food – as, incidentally, did I – but had additionally managed, through a utilization of formats traditional to persuasive writing, to argue personally-held, thesis-driven, quote-supporting beliefs about it.

Okay, granted. Much of the work was not, in point of fact, heart-stoppingly stellar. But, had you been there? Had you seen, even for a moment, the look of pure excitement in my strugglingly frustrated second-language-learner Belín's eyes as, enthusiastically, she explained to me, *that for the first time in her life she had written three paragraphs*. She did not literally mean that it was the first time she had written three paragraphs; she was simply trying to convey the wonder of having had her first experience at putting together an I-thought-of-it argument – an argument which she had not only exclusively imagined?

But had then independently formulated into a logical three-paragraph arrangement replete with quotes taken from her own personally collected research.

If you had been there to see her animated little face glowing, oh, you would have known, just like I did, that what was happening? What we had accomplished, *together*?

That was teaching.

Student empowerment – and not an inflexible, “standardized” loyalty to the tightly controlled expectations forced onto teachers and students by a detachedly pre-scripted curriculum – was the point.

The only point.

Labeled insubordinate *bad* teacher or not.

Threatened, harassed, followed, chastised, stripped of voice, honor and respect.

For Belín?
I would do it again.
Oh, I hope I would do it again.

*If you take the time to look behind the recent influx of massively produced academic programs, you might be surprised to find out who, exactly, is benefiting financially from their manufacture and use – including one maybe-I’ll-run-for-President hopeful happy to push our country’s loyalty not only toward the heavily pre-scribed curriculum now mandated by the Common Core, *but to an even more lucratively attached computer testing*. (Oh my; imagine even for a moment having invested in *anything* which might then be forced onto the nation in a “common” measure.)

The Unwanted

After first experiencing a traumatically forced removal from my much-loved teaching assignment at Central High; after then bending myself uncomfortably around a subsequently assigned teaching position far across town inside a confusingly disordered middle school. Well, knowing with every fiber of my being that I missed work at the high school level?

I had immediately begun to navigate the long road back to where I knew I could most effectively excel. Upon hearing, however, that in initiating processes for a following year’s voluntary transfer I had sent paperwork to the office of Human Resources, our chaotically besieged middle school’s most recently assigned administrator-of-the-moment – a woman brought in for a bewildering mid-year shift – stopped by my room.

Why, she asked me defensively, was I choosing to leave *her* school?

I was more than a little flabbergasted.

By that time?

She had been with us all of two and a half months.

Although entirely unexpected, I appreciated being asked to stay; I also appreciated hearing *anyone* say that I was a good teacher. But, well – up to that moment? I had not had the tiniest inkling that she felt anything even anywhere *near* the ballpark of a supportive validation for the teachers struggling to navigate the upheaval which churned endlessly inside “her” building.

As an abruptly installed, short-term fixer she had, in fact, taken pains to articulate that – in coming into our building?

She had been sent *not* to work with, but to watch over, the so many school-score-identified *bad* teachers now employed inside our publicly recognized as “deficit housing” school. In her two and a half months, the only affiliation she had expended energy to build had been based upon the high-voltage menace which she regularly discharged at meetings where (after carefully side-stepping the increasingly panicked calls for a management support) she threatened her staff with the full array of consequences being set aside for any teacher who refused a production of those necessarily higher scores.

Acutely aware that this unhappy woman now stood in the doorway of my classroom, I thought back to the demoralizing tone of her continual threats; her clear lack of interest in a committed supervisory support; her aggressive focus upon test scores in lieu of a much more difficult, yet much more long-term effective, student discipline. I thought, as well, about the hour-long, bumper-to-bumper drive and about gas prices creeping up past the four-dollar mark. The decision to continue my pursuit of a building transfer should have been transparently simple.

But, sometimes?

Well, sometimes, as they say:

The devil you know is better than the one you don't.

In truly modern days; in days bent ever more assertively to the lucrative invasions behind a Big Money accountability – well, sure, you could *ask* the Human Resources department to, in their effort to do a responsible job, look carefully at your résumé; to understand your particular years of experience; to analyze your personal skills; to help you, as a long-term experienced and highly-educated, state-licensed employee find a teaching position best suited to your individual talents.

You could even believe that the very purpose of a Human Resources' department (a department which, in theory, existed solely to interact constructively with a large number of expensively contracted personnel) – well, you could imagine that the purpose of such a department was to conscientiously review employee work histories, painstakingly evaluate instructional skills, and purposefully help teachers find work where they would best fit, thereby both supporting and sustaining an overall system success.

But, well; oh, you'd be forgetting.

In Big Money, standing-for-and-putting-children-first years of a truly hard-hitting accountability?

Times had changed.

Supporting educators, listening to their concerns, making assignments with great care and purpose; avoiding a disruptive turnover; keeping a large district running effectively and smoothly; showing, as the now misleading designation of Department of Human Resources might suggest, care for *humans*?

Having succumbed along with the district to the nationally-led disdain for any and all old-school traditions tediously tied to a democratic collaboration; having adopted the governmentally promoted idea that teachers serving in low-income, low-scoring schools no longer deserved either voice or respect; having lost any expectation for honoring that now outdated, old-days' concept where career-loyal educators had *not* been viewed as valueless, interchangeable employees, but as beneficially skilled professionals – professionals who held a recognized merit for their long years of experience and uniquely crafted ability – well, after being forced by Big Money reform to interact, year after year, with an escalating number of callously displaced teachers?

A defensive disinterest had embedded itself, and now flourished inside our district's office of Human Resources. What that department currently offered to reform-scattered, school-score-unwanted teachers, even after long years of a loyal service?

Was a zombie-like lack of individualized attention.

The increasing disinterest in teacher background, hands-on experience, years of education, subject-specific licenses and endorsements (or lack thereof), geographic loyalties, student and community connections – all simply added yet another layer of whirling frenzy to the destabilizing razzle-dazzle which now strategically shielded our district's attempt at a no-excuses "accountability."

Trusting the Department of Human Resources with a request for transfer?

Meant only one thing in years immovably bent to an ever more deregulated reform:

You could end up anywhere.

Doing anything.*

*And, once teachers had been forced through mandates of reform into assignments for which they were minimally prepared? They could, then, so much more easily be “evaluated” right out of the system.

Putting On Socks In The Dark

An unusually self-contained eighth grader enrolled into one of my morning classes, a young man named Enyeto, frequently employed an intriguing expression. If, at times, he felt that a person’s request of him was not up to par? Avoiding an immediate compliance, he would grumble to himself how wrong-headed it was. He would mutter, almost inaudibly, that it was simply stupid; as illogically stupid?

As putting on socks in the dark.

One day I had the chance, so I asked him to elaborate. Shyly avoiding eye contact, he offered up an explanation: “People who put on socks in the dark can’t see if the colors match. They can’t see if the socks are inside out. They always end up looking later, when it’s too late, and then they see how everything’s *wrong*.”

Gazing steadily down at his desk, he added emphatically: “*That’s just stupid.*”

Ah.

If only Enyeto had been the one asked to take charge of our district’s Department of Human Resources.

Putting on socks in the dark – in other words, exacerbating the chaotic effects of an already whirling reform by shuffling teachers haphazardly around the district with little regard for skills, experience, legal subject designations or personal interests, and thereby manufacturing distressingly unnecessary mistakes. This, as it turned out? Was increasingly our disorganized Department of Human Resources’ best, and too often only, effort.

The continued and ever mounting employee disruption which now existed inside our Nationally Recognized As Reform Serious District had, in just a few years, become the rule rather than the exception. As year after year committed to a no-excuses test-score accountability progressed, those left to deal with the escalating reform-mandated movement of teachers quickly discovered that there was going to be less and less possibility of securing positions for long-term-loyal, reform-shuffled teachers in-

side “good” (high scoringly stable and largely dominant culture) schools.

Due, in fact, to the socio-economic stability connected to the majority of those students who attended our district’s high-score-identified *good* schools? Allowing only minimal legal opportunity for the remunerative instigation of a low-income-dependent, fund-harvesting reform, buildings like these were generally left alone to defensively guard not only their higher test scores, but their much higher incidence of a long-term experienced teacher stability.

Therefore, a nonstop, reform-stipulated teacher movement between schools soon came to mean the repeated interchange, over and over, into and out of the very same low-scoring, high-poverty and continually invaded schools. Schools where an always interchanging parade of reform administrators might now belligerently make everyone aware of the very low status offered, in truly modern days, to traditional, old-school, student-protective employees.

Despite individually successful long-term backgrounds.

Regardless of proven instructional abilities.

Indifferent even to loyalty and experience – warranting nothing less than an immediately punitive judgement?

Reform-shuffled teachers were promptly deemed to be both unworthy and unwanted.

Tactically responding to the rising criticism against this mushrooming invasion into, and disruption of, so many teachers’ lives, a strategic legal language was quickly fashioned by theoretically concerned (if devastatingly arms-length) political innovators. Maintaining that the use of a neighborhood disruptive employee shuffling was necessary for helping teachers and administrators “*find a match*” – well, now, according to a convolutedly worded legalese, if, after a set amount of time, say a month, a semester, a year or an ephemerally decided cycle of hiring – well, if, after this broadly interpreted period of time, no mutually acceptable teacher/administrator “match” had been made?

Then surely all of those previously honored long-term employee contracts could now be neatly and officially terminated.

The cyclically realigning “fixer” principals of modern days understood. In years increasingly dependent upon the non-stop instigation of short-term, money-garnering invasions – loyal

only to the district call for an endlessly initiated change, modern-day administrators quickly understood that they were to hold no truck with reform-shuffled, *long-term system-stabilizing* teachers.

Bad even before they spoke up.

Bad even before they thought to demand either respect or support.

In the fast pace of an über-modern liability? School-score-identified, reform-shuffled teachers were never ever “*a match.*”

Nationally denigrated and irredeemably unwanted, long-term experienced, old-school teachers woke up, one day, to find that in our modern era ever more financially reliant upon the lucrative disruptions of a no-excuses “accountability,” not only were they *bad*, but had now become the legally and indisputably *mismatched*.

Socks which had, so very unacceptably:

Been put on in the dark.

When A Conundrum Turns Into A Paradox

Having asked my upper-level students to write sentences which might incorporate a recently introduced vocabulary, one afternoon I came across an unusually deliberated response:

“If the United States produces most of the weapons bought by Mexico to be used in Mexico against the people who grow drugs or sell them, but then most of the drugs grown in Mexico are brought back into the United States to be bought and used by United States citizens whose taxes are collected and spent in a support of the war on drugs which forces Mexico to buy more guns from the United States, is this circle of interdependence a *conundrum* or a *paradox*?”

Impressed with the question, I added a smiley face.

I did not, however, attempt to answer it.

The intertwining loop of information in this student’s question struck a chord; disconcertingly, it mirrored the ever more convoluted world of a low-income school reform in which I now found myself mired: an interminably circular world which, each year more mystifyingly, I struggled to navigate.

If you could manage (and it was shocking, really, as years filled with the disruptive invasions of testing passed, how few people chose to do so) to stand back just a little; if, purposefully,

you narrowed your eyes in the effort to see *though* the always shifting razzle-dazzle; if, in hoping to eke out a tiny bit of clarity amidst the ever churning chaos, you weren't immediately preoccupied by the glitter and shimmer attached to an endless procession of smoke screens:

Well, you might, then?

End up feeling a tiny bit sorry for the paradox of conundrums – or was that a conundrum of paradoxes – faced by our district's Department of Human Resources.

If, as you labored to disentangle the mess, you took a little time to notice that – well, rather than addressing the growing range of academic handicaps produced by a burgeoning economic, racial and cultural inequity? Under the modern-day theory of a no-excuses liability, efforts to bypass social responsibility simply encouraged the publicly peddled blame of anyone naïve enough to continue seeking employment inside our nation's lowest-income schools.

Once you had gained this perspective; once you had absorbed this as fact?

Oh, you might then additionally recognize that it was this, the exciting surface flash produced by a nationally-led employee abuse, which kept the public eye averted from the intertwining disorder proliferating inside long year after long year of a minimally regulated reform. Serving as cover for the fact that very few reforms engendered any truly recognizable long-term success (many, in fact, being disruptive to the point of ruining even a basic effort at offering an old-school traditional, deeply-embedded education), money-pursuing promoters geared up to expend additional energy in not only loudly denigrating school-score-identified employees – but, increasingly?

Their reform-displaced peers.

Leaning as they did so, upon an ever more popular, if ever more elaborately circular, excuse:

(1) Schools must rid themselves of *bad* teachers.

(2) *Duh.*

(3) Every year with great fanfare, districts teetering on the very edge of innovative magic were encouraged to utilize their amalgamated building scores as a means to focus upon, and ruthlessly eliminate, larger and larger numbers of problematic, school-score-identified *bad* educators.*

(4) Due to the fact that long-term contracted and previously honored educators held the legal right of transfer, but, in low-income lucrative days, the only schools which could be forced through the invasive dictates of reform to accept a teacher movement were already low-scoring buildings?

(5) As aggressively blamed teachers were driven from one low-scoring building into the next, this very movement of *bad* employees was, or so reformers now argued, the latest reason for a continued production of unacceptable scores inside incessantly invaded buildings: those buildings into which these so many school-score-identified *bad* teachers had been so suddenly and aggressively forced to move. Schools which, having been coerced into accepting yet another round of loudly denigrated reform-displaced teachers?

(6) Would now unquestionably require additionally invasive – *but enticingly fund-generating* – building transformations.

Perplexingly, the very same district which so loudly and publicly maligned low-income school teachers, yet expected their Department of Human Resources (7) to shuffle an always increasing number of overtly labeled *bad* educators into the abruptly created slots at *other* low-scoring, reform-invaded schools. Schools where a cyclically realigning supply of modern-day, short-term principals and an ever interchanging flow of reform-ordered evaluators had been previously made aware that:

Old-school teachers?

Reform-displaced, highly-experienced, school-score-identified teachers; teachers forced into alternate assignments through this über-modern flow of whimsically unfettered mandates?

(8) Were, undoubtedly and unacceptably, *bad*.

(9) And – as the irrevocably unwanted; as the indisputably mismatched. Oh, surely these teachers must now be defensively and unconditionally blamed.

(10) And moved.

(11) *Again*.

*Long years after our nation's earliest uprisings against this unscrupulous blame and removal of public school teachers, a "bad" teacher blame is still right out there in the foreground, being aggressively sold to the public. As late as November, 2014, the "bad apples" theory made the cover of a prominent news magazine even as a long-running political program passively allowed one

of its pundits to state that our country's shocking supply of *bad* teachers must now be immediately removed – “*by force if necessary.*”

The Pattern Of Paradox

If.

Well if, intentionally, you took that step backward; if, with a full deliberation, you managed a look behind and beyond the intertwining loop of invasive reforms; if, assertively, you stretched yourself in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the larger, overall picture; and if, in the making of so much effort? Ultimately you found not magic, *but a viciously repeating circle.*

Not a miraculous academia, but a brutally enveloping Catch-22.

Not a simple conundrum, but a malignantly recurring pattern of paradox.

Well, you might, then?

Find yourself beginning to wonder:

When recent publicity pointed to the miracles promised through the extension of school days and the elongating of school years, why, then, did so many already-in-place school reforms order students *to stay home* even as they commanded teachers to come into the school buildings alone?

Why, in the name of elevating test scores, were students repeatedly ordered to skip school, even as, separated from their students, educators were compelled to sit through long day after long day of a professional development, test debriefing, exam preparation, assessment training, and hour upon hour of a data analysis?

If you took an additional moment to realize that, as a result of these increasingly ordered non-student-contact days and repeatedly interrupted classes, teachers inside those schools most “benevolently” reformed were allowed, each year, less and less direct (and essentially contiguous) instructional time with their students – oh, surely you’d think to ask: How, then, was it logical to expect these same teachers to produce those loudly demanded higher test scores?

If you understood that in the name of a hard-hitting innovation lowest-income schools had been forced to instigate an educator loyalty to phenomenally expensive pre-scripted programs –

inflexibly written structures bent to the fundamentals of a contextual reading and writing – programs which *did not allow* (and I am not kidding, teachers were *punished for this*) the explicit instruction of a language analysis: an in-depth language analysis which would have intentionally included a direct focus upon punctuation, spelling and a literary deconstruction.

Well, surely you would find it logical to question:

When students repeatedly earned their very low scores on *the highly analytical* state and national tests, why, then, did district leaders fuss so loudly about *bad teachers*?

If, over the years, you had watched districts not only threaten, but label, those teachers who spoke out against this forced fealty to expensively purchased, heavily pre-scripted programs, *programs which did not directly address state testing expectations*; if you had watched those in charge repeatedly ignore the recurrently argued evidence of a curriculum/test-expectation disconnect brought to the table by concerned educators:*†

Well, surely you'd wonder?

How, then, could districts brag so often, and so publicly, that their true goal was *to bring up low-income school test scores*?

If, as you heard district leaders advancing the need to punitively publish “teacher- produced” test scores in local newspapers, even as they grasped clumsily after ancillary funding in their effort to hire yet another round of short-term inexperienced administrators – poorly prepared school managers who, after finding themselves abruptly placed in charge of the complicated issues attached to attendance and discipline, repeatedly made debilitating management errors – well, wouldn't you want to ask:

Why so incessantly scapegoat educators when an inflexible administrative inexperience so egregiously affected these teachers' ability to teach?

Taking additional note that, as a response to the low scores produced by English Language Learners, teachers pushed into reform-obligated classes had been assertively presented with research arguing *against teaching solely for test results* – compulsory meetings where a presented research contended, in fact, that when used with ELL students? *The test-score-focus approach was academically debilitating.*

Well, wouldn't you want to know:

Why, then, did these same teachers (employees forced into meetings, seminars and classes to read repeatedly that teaching to the test would be detrimental for their students' overall academic success) yet hear endlessly from threatening, top-down fixer administrators that *teaching to the test was the only hope for keeping their aggressively targeted ELL-serving schools open?*

And if, over the years?

Well if, as you had heard educational leaders speaking out about the need to summarily fire an always increasing number of unmistakably *bad* educators; if, as you had found yourself beligerently told by these same self-proclaimed “experts” whose power ran in a direct line up to the highly influential office of the President; if, as you had listened to these loudly self-decreed reformers making the case that our nation must rid itself of not only a couple teachers here, not merely a few teachers there, but forcefully and insistently eliminate *whole complete schoolsful*, all at once, all together.

Oh, certainly you’d think to inquire:

Why, then, did these same leaders not step up and admit to their own monumental culpability when, as union busting turned into a political issue, they found themselves on the other side of the fence blustering loudly that our nation *must take care not to vilify its highly valued public employees.*

And if, as you fought your way through the ever-thickening smoke, you saw that those who had first created and now continued to uphold the invasive mandates behind a ruthless NCLB/R2T were repeatedly lauded as *compassionate educational leaders* even as their disruptive low-income school invasions made callously reckless bell-the-cat-unattainable goals into law.

Oh, surely you’d think to ask:

Why were these same legislators so assertively advertised as being thoughtful, caring and benevolent when the dictates which they so devastatingly mandated compelled teachers, students and communities to comply with the invasions and disruptions *which then methodically recreated the very problems their laws had theoretically set out to eliminate.*

*Heads Up: It is this exact scenario which will be replicated with the implementation of the Common Core. Teachers mandated to forego an explicit fact-based instruction will be pushed assertively into project-based, large-idea

teaching practices; *practices that cannot easily be measured on a put-it-on-paper state testing*. The kind of high-stakes hold-teachers-accountable (and each year more computerized) testing which will continue to demand that children manifest an explicit knowledge of a fact-based instruction – the very type of fact-based instruction for which employees will now be humiliatingly punished by an ever growing number of highly-paid Common Core evaluators if utilized.

†When, not as a supplemental facilitation, *but fully in place of a traditional curricula systematically bent to the analytical deconstruction of literature*, an unbending fealty to contextual reading and writing interventions – tightly monitored interventions focused solely upon helping students learn to read and write more freely – produced results, at the same time our district’s NCLB test scores fell. Students aided in a reading comprehension while intentionally kept from a rote focus upon the mechanics of writing and a literary analysis were then blithely sent off to struggle through the highly analytical NCLB testing. (Their low scores to be then followed by a district-wide blame of those teachers who, in lieu of exercising an old-days’ analytical curriculum, had been punitively held to the non-analytical routines written into the intervention programs.)

Craft Versus Craft

Why, I often wondered, as year after year of a low-income school reform invaded my life; why, when I had managed to accrue close to two decades of experience with upper level students; why, when I had reached that point in my career where I had been garnering a highest success in getting kids of any background or academic interest ready to try college – well, why was I so mindlessly pushed by reform *away* from what I loved, and compelled, instead, into assignments where I was expected to spend such a large part of my day in the passive monitoring of lunchrooms, hallways and playgrounds?

After being hired by my big-city district twenty years earlier, my initial teaching assignment had been the instruction of high school students. Over the ensuing years, as I had pursued my work with upper-level junior and senior classes – due to a regular interaction with a broad assortment of getting-ready-to-graduate teenagers, I had begun to develop my own particular instructional craft.

Through a progressively collected feedback from students, I had begun to see that, slowly but surely, I was making headway. Counting upon the reciprocity of respect which I had for my students and they for me, my instructional ability had become ever more finely honed. A store of complimentary student and parent letters reminded me that I was, or so they told me, making a difference by helping my students move toward higher and higher levels of success. Each year I felt more sure of myself and of the methodology I labored to build.

Time passed, and my instructional skills grew.

Until – one day?

Well, one day, quite unexpectedly.

Totally out of the blue.

A nationally instigated NCLB legislation hit low-income, low-scoring schools and, so very tactically, so very cunningly, so very craftily – my old-school traditional world was both suddenly and uncompromisingly transformed.

Under the brand-new statistically engendered interpretation of an NCLB education, educators employed inside low-scoring-schools would no longer be recognized as uniquely skilled individuals. As the old-school boundaries around public education began to blur (boundaries which had historically promoted teachers as being both competently licensed and longevity valuable), in one of the most debilitating, long-term-handicapping actions imposed by the suddenly concerned leaders of a no-excuses accountability: Citing testing data as the only evidence required?

Teachers employed inside low-scoring schools were unceremoniously gathered up, mashed together, and detachedly transformed into a publicly denigrated mass of voicelessly interchangeable personnel.

Belligerently labeled as being nothing more than a fully culpable school-score-identified *bad* employee; coerced, through a flood of disconnected blame, out of the high school teaching position where I had excelled; pressed, despite my anxiously stated concern that it would not be a good fit, into work at the middle school level – a defensively unfriendly Human Resources' employee irritated at my hesitancy declared:

If I really were a teacher?

Then I should be able to teach.

No matter where; no matter with whom.

End. Of. Discussion.

In economically challenging times, this uncompromising logic – well maybe it sounded, and possibly even continues to sound, entirely acceptable.

Teachers! Oh, for Pete's sake, stop all of that fussing. Surely, after all, *it's a paycheck!* Hush up now, do what you have to do. Buy your gas, feed your kids, pay your mortgage.

And, for goodness' sake?

Stop all of that annoyingly endless *whining*.

But; well.

What if, yet agin, we stop; what if, yet again, we pause.

What if yet again we call up that minute which the Big Money reform promoters of modern days assume that you, as a busy, schematically-disconnected citizen, will bypass. What if we stop to look directly at the possibility that it is this particular line of teachers-are-teachers logic; this exact theory of lowest-level interchangeable employees; this modern-day economic rationale being presented to the nation as a cost-effective solution for low-income (WARNING: read *all public*) schools?

Well, what if it is this very line of an experience-is-irrelevant reasoning which now so very craftily distracts voters from a much larger, and much more long-term debilitating, abuse?

The Cost Of Being Cost Effective

What if, for example, we pretend that you happened to be in need of a heart surgery. What if we also pretend that, because of *your* particular coronary problem?

You suddenly ended up at the hospital.

Would it really be okay with you if just *any* doctor stepped in, ready to cut you open? Maybe, oh, let's say, a podiatrist.

Sure, why not; let's imagine that a truly *excellent* podiatrist chanced to be walking down the hospital corridor at the very moment you happened to require your heart surgery. Although, logically, as a doctor he or she would know a heck of a lot more than the average citizen about medical issues, *do* you passively assume that any doctor, any medical employee, with any diverse background, passion or experience – any medical hire who happened by – would be best able to complete *your* heart surgery?

Golly. Now how about that attractively young and bouncily enthusiastic doctor right over there. That one, the one who graduated from college just yesterday. Gung-ho and ready to try anything, yet lacking practicum; lacking internship; lacking, even, a carefully-vetted state license.

Oh, my.

Does experience matter? Do practice, familiarity and long-term craft make a difference? Goodness. Now why are you fussing? In days bent so assertively to an über-compassionate public school reform when the average citizen has been so easily convinced that (well, at least for those politically irrelevant lowest-income schools) any teacher is a teacher; that experience and long-standing craft have no particular value; that educators in these schools?

Should simply be damned glad to have a job.

Well, by this light, isn't any doctor, no matter background, experience, loyalty or passion, *simply a doctor?*

What if, in the effort to illustrate an additional point, we move you along; what if we say that you are no longer the patient; what if we bump you up and make you the administrator: *The person in charge of that hospital*. If, as the administrator, in a suddenly imaginative effort at saving money you decided that – oh well, hell? Overall, doctors are doctors are doctors. To be more cost effective, what if you abruptly decreed that any doctor employed inside *your* hospital (despite particular skill set, passion, or years of experience) perform, on demand, any procedure.

Wouldn't you get sued?

Wouldn't you get fired?

Changing things up just a touch more, let's look at it one more way.

Let's imagine that you have not been hired to run a hospital, but a very large and very expensive big-money football team. If, after being put in charge of a truly massive financing, you decided to expend a sizable portion of your unfettered funding in the advertising of future miracles; if, expensively and repeatedly, you publicized your anticipated ability to provide that highly coveted winning season: Well, would it really make sense when, after expending so much of your budget in the promotion of your exceptional intentions, in a sudden effort at being more "cost effective" you disinterestedly intermingled your players – ignoring back-

ground, ignoring craft, ignoring personal ability, loyalty or passion?

If, arguing the need to save money, out of a top-down detachment you suddenly interchanged offense for defense, quarterback for receiver, kicker for linesman, all while exhorting your newer and more cost-friendly theory of an employee reform: Hell, they're *all* football players, and being, thus, *nothing more than football players*, surely they should, each and every one of them, be able and willing to perform any athletic assignment (and be damned glad to be getting paid for it).

Well, would that *work*?

Would you, in the end, get your endlessly promised and expensively advertised winning season?

Yet more to the point:

Would football fans sit back, year after year, to passively ignore your lack of interest in a player experience and ability – or would they show serious outrage *by demanding your release*?

Going Home

So, here's a fascinating question:

Should children, *even politically inconsequential, culturally-different poor children*, have access to the highly experienced and long-term-loyal, student-and-culture-protective teachers best suited to address their needs?

Does an actual, honest, true-life concern for reforming the schools of lowest-income children (no, no, not just talking about it; not just parroting the now endlessly repeated statement that each child “deserves a great teacher” but, oh my, *actually showing it*) – well, does a true compassion have any connection to not blaming, *but supporting*, those teachers who hold a strong school loyalty? Is honest empathy for children connected in any way to a carefully protected respect for an educator experience, a recognition of particular instructional skills, an honor for professional passion and the utilization of great care when ensuring that each employee has the opportunity to work where she or he can make best make a difference?

To put it another way:

Should massive amounts of a philanthropic, federal or state money be used, in money-strapped school districts, to ex-

pensively promote the increasingly endorsed Big Money theory that *a long-term teaching craft is irrelevant*?

Passion unnecessary? Experience simply a useless (and, oh, my, *much* too expensive) luxury?

Is a teacher of any age, experience or background, simply a teacher?

Personally I am in awe of those educators who, as they first thought to select a teaching career, on purpose chose to work with elementary level students. The very idea amazes me. Cutely appealing as they may be, working with small children; *teaching* them? *I think* – would be dauntingly hard. (And more than occasionally I also think: Thank heaven for those who are not only willing to do it, but who do it, year after year, with dedication, loyalty and passion.)

On the other hand, I always remain a little surprised whenever anyone asks me, exercising that tone of voice to suggest a shocked incredulity at my surely dimwitted daring, how on earth I could ever choose to work with *teenagers*. I've never thought of what I do as overwhelming, although, technically, it often is. Nevertheless, even before I started my teaching career, the idea of working with young adults energized me and compelled me toward the profession which I ultimately selected.

It was almost unendurable then, as the years of reform progressed, to lose control over my days. As the disconnected directives of reform repeatedly invaded low-income schools, arbitrarily pushing teachers around while proffering little regard for experience, craft or loyalty, finding myself forced into middle school positions for which I was minimally prepared, I yearned with every fiber of my being to be back with the upper-level students I now so sorely missed.

Oh, I admit it. I felt sorry for myself.

I saw myself as (so illogically) being denied my heart's desire; as being callously separated from the work for which, as my students would have told me, I was now feening. Obligated to accept one chaotically reformed middle school assignment after the next; although asked, each year, and at each school, to stay – while there seemed little chance of getting my wish?

I kept trying to find my way home.

However; heavily yoked in years of reform to the increasingly deregulated, fund-garnering act of a cyclically instigated

innovation, the district now made its reform-shuffling teacher manifesto unambiguously clear: *No one* wanted to know about past successes; *no one* was going to ask about personal strengths. *Didn't I get it?* was the ever more assertive message; *didn't I understand?* *Didn't I realize* that I was lucky, as a school-score-identified – and thus publicly labeled – *bad* teacher, *to be assigned into any position at all?**†

Couldn't I grasp the underlying premise of a no-excuses accountability platform:

Hush up; take what you're given; be grateful.

No one wants you anyway.

It was entirely unexpected, then, when late one afternoon I answered the phone and found myself talking to the principal of a building where – as I had only just been informed – I would soon be forcefully deployed; a principal who, very atypically, *had taken the time to look at my résumé*. Missing the fact that as a modern-day school-score-identified *bad* employee I had been given no say in the matter, seeing only long years of high school experience, she asked me *why* I was trying to take a position inside her middle school. A position where, she noted in confusion?

I would be expected to work with *sixth graders*.

She was sorry, but she didn't think I was qualified.

Surprised at hearing the possible note of naïveté, and wondering if I might actually be heard, carefully I explained that the Department of Human Resources had not invited my opinion. And then, in a wildly unexpected (and in modern days highly unorthodox) move, this surprisingly resistant principal immediately called downtown offices.

In emphatic, no-nonsense terms? °

She told important people that I *was a high school teacher*.

Therefore, I must be assigned *back into a high school*.

And, miracle of miracles – I was.

°A principal who, by the way, is no longer in charge at this school.

*This may be hard to believe, but throughout the many years I have been forced to teach under the score-obsessed mandates of NCLB *I have never once been offered, by any evaluator, coach, specialist, supervisor, advisor, counselor or administrator, my own particularly-engendered, student-produced test scores*. I have, on the other hand, been repeatedly and very punitively lumped

together with, for example, “Language Arts Eighth Grade Teachers.” Disinterested, aggregated lumpings where my hard-won years of experience have been very nonchalantly mixed together with the scores generated by brand-new, only-taught-one-year teachers and the ensuing results thrown chastisingly back at me, as if, somehow? I had been logically responsible for the whole.

†In the course of one “we’re-all-in-this-together” lecture, an administrator presented the example where a young, inexperienced teacher struggling with behaviorally challenging children *had been told to transfer his most difficult students into classes taught by a years-long veteran already working with a high number of complexly difficult students*. When that year’s testing results came out and the new teacher’s scores had held steady, it was additionally noted that the veteran teacher’s scores had fallen; the administrator then thought it useful to tell everyone that the veteran teacher had cried. Was this, in some unexplained way, *supposed to be motivational?* Personally, I wanted not simply to cry – but to scream.

Monster Under The Bed

With great anticipation I set up a meeting with the fixer principal who had been recently placed in charge at the building where I was now to be reassigned: Riverside High School. A very large and very old traditional building with close to a century of a culturally-rich, inner-city history. After being introduced to a nervously edgy man – a man who had, himself, been only lately and unexpectedly pushed into this, his most recent reform-mandated position – I was told that:

Well, in point of fact?

I was not actually wanted. Choosing his words carefully, he expressed a personal concern:

“I just don’t feel comfortable taking on a *placed* teacher,” he had told me flatly.

Although a touch kinder than the phrasing selected by an administrator at a previous assignment – an administrator who had made a point of looking me directly in the eye before stating bluntly: “I told them that I didn’t *want* a placed teacher” – oh, make no mistake about it, these words made everyone in the room aware that I had been taken on simply because this unhappy principal had been given no choice. As a statement, it was meant to communicate that – to my new supervisor, to this man who, as it became painfully clear during our preliminary interview, had tak-

en no time to look over my résumé, review my work skills, recognize my teaching designations, or read through my letters of recommendation – I was simply a disagreeable (and now very publicly acknowledged) problem.

Nothing more than the latest, highly-promoted monster under the bed:

A placed teacher

Reform-aggressive year after reform-aggressive year, as the relentless cycle of Big Money mandates pushed teacher upon teacher out of a traditional low-income-school employment, the predicament of finding district assignments for formerly respected and long-term-contracted teachers reared its increasingly ugly head. The old-days quandary of annually moving one or two teachers here, another three or four there – well, with the advent of a no-excuses liability, this originally minor predicament?

Quickly ballooned into a decade-old dilemma.

Feeding upon itself, as earliest mandates of a no-excuses NCLB gorged upon the suddenly unexpected addition of highly retaliatory R2T competitions (funding rivalries which actively encouraged bell-the-cat closures and chaos engendering remove-all-the-employees transformations) – teacher movement began to swell precipitously. This burgeoning transfer of teachers, an action which historically affected only a small percent of employees, and which had, in fact, been kept to a tightly controlled trickle, now began to gush forward in a belligerent response to the implacable “transformations” demanded by a no-excuses reform. Suddenly, what had been a thinly manageable stream?

Became a roilingly unhappy river.

A river which was swiftly turning into a ragingly uncontrolled flood. And, then?

Well, not surprisingly; oh my, no, it really didn’t take long.

Quickly and efficiently, this very act of force-moving employees – this growing exercise in commanding a massive, contract-honoring teacher placement?

Was vociferously channeled into the latest focus for a reformer outrage. Clinging to (while aggressively advancing the theory of) *bad* teacher blame as the singular cause for each and every one of those unacceptable scores, reformers jumped to cover a district collusion in the arbitrary movement of long-term-loyal and protectively resistant educators. Decisively leaping into

the fray, innovators began to loudly advertise the idea, that – well, in truly modern days?

Oh, undoubtedly, it was now this very term *placed* which had become the latest and most indefensible catchword for any and all low-income school culpabilities.

Smoke Screen Financing

When huge Wall Street money system failures became the excitingly big news of late summer, 2008, journalists, financial analysts and loudly concerned political pundits pledged a personal time for delving into the mess; more than a few were ready and willing, or so they publicly avowed, to find and expose both the factors and the players behind this collapse.

As time passed, however.

As month upon month turned into year upon year.

As investigative threads led not to an illuminating clarity, but to one nebulously baffling dead end after another.

Many threw up their hands in frustration. With obvious resignation, analysts described the turmoil they had found inside the profusion of complicated structures which had served to uphold an untold number of complicitly intertwining monetary schemes.

In the end?

Well, in the end it appeared that the intricate entanglement of deregulated funding had become so parasitically intermixed, that, in fact, financial configurations were often held in place simply through juxtaposition: one structure existentially dependent upon the next. Wishing to step up; wishing to point directly to, and thus decisively expose, specific foundational causes, frustrated investigators found themselves lost inside the intertwining web of monetary schemes – the so many über-profitable manipulations which had found a fertile ground and proliferated inside long year after long year of a nonchalantly legislated financial deregulation. More than a few investigators expressed outrage, even as they threw up their hands in defeat.

They, and the public at large, knew?

Although locating and exposing illegal monetary activities was difficult, and in too many cases impossible, those who had so avariciously manipulated the system surely had no right to end up,

after all of the chaos, with not only a continued employment, but huge salaries, shocking bonuses and – most confusingly – the unscathed freedom from taking a responsibility for their egregiously self-interested actions.

Time passed.

And the better part of those who had participated in, and ultimately provoked, the unimaginably deep financial failures?

Were never exposed.

Not running or hiding – staying, in fact, exactly where they were – they remained comfortably protected behind their glittering wall of flashily distracting smoke screens: those so many impenetrably intertwining “legal” barriers constructed through means of a cleverly-knotted financial illusion and an endlessly advertised “growth”-projecting presupposition.

It was, in point of fact?

A web of manipulation so complex that no one person could easily be separated from the whole. No particular player – easily isolated or made to pay.

No one, even?

Forced to stop what he or she had been doing.

And, in a chilling imitation:

As year upon year of an aggressive NCLB/R2T school reform progressed?

The interconnected confusion which had strategically enabled a debilitating, smoke-screen-protected financial mismanagement began its aggressive takeover inside the massively funded realm of public education. Expensively promoted as being the benevolent reformation of a “broken” system, the chaotically deregulated – and in modern days now so often tactically undisclosed – disorder behind Big Money’s demand for an endlessly instigated “change,” rapidly became the ever more impenetrable disguise for the heavily funded invasion into our nation’s lowest-income schools.

No Place For You

As a result of the burgeoning national support for assertively implemented and heavily smoke-screened educational transformations – transformations which then repeatedly demanded the ever more unfettered blame and redistribution of teachers –

well, the very fact that low-income-school teachers had ever been viewed as valuable and had thus been offered long-term loyalty-matters contracts?

Produced a modern-day accountability conundrum.

The very fact that loyal, career-committed teachers had ever held a long-term-contracted value, obligated the district to secure alternate assignments for the each year escalating displacement of old-school educators.

However; the every day louder, reformer-led denigration of this contract-demanded *placement* – an action which teachers couldn't avoid, and one which had, in fact, been created through a district loyalty to, and a heavy dependence upon, long-term reliable employees – quickly became simply yet another distracting facet in the flashily glittering razzle-dazzle. Assertively disseminated, the suddenly public vilification of *placed* teachers was now proffered up as being the latest aggressively argued reason for a supplemental low-income-school failure.

In other words:

If previously honored, highly valued teachers from one low-income, low-scoring school could be forced, through mandates of reform, out of the jobs they had loved and, as a result of esteemed-employee/long-term contracts, be “loyally” placed into another school – but, if, in reform years? The teaching positions available increasingly existed only inside those schools where an aggressive testing invasion had just forced out *that* school's previously loyal, long-term-contracted employees, and, in the process, manufactured multiple reform-mandated job openings...

(Oh, yes; this does get complicated.

Sadly?

That's the point.

As the never-ending flow of reformations continue to intertwine; as the glitter, glitz, razzle-dazzle and flash continue to intermix and camouflage reality? *Very few people make the effort to stick it out: to stick it out and fight all the way through.*)

But if, now, the assertively advertised reason why the *second* low-income building has once again been labeled as failing and can now be deemed in need of additional Big Money reforms? Oh, surely this would simply be the direct result of those so many recently arrived and chaotically *forced-placed* teachers. Those so many unhappy employees obligated to leave both the

teaching positions they had wished to keep, and the schools where, through long years of employment, they had embedded a personal allegiance.

Driven out and reassigned into the newly-forced vacancies created by the non-voluntary movement of teachers into new schools; haphazardly compelled to take instructional positions from their new building's previously loyal and long-term-contracted educators – positions which had only recently belonged to those teachers forced out of what *they* had thought of as *their* schools, and away from the work and communities which, exactly like the employees now forced to appropriate *their* recently-held positions, *they* had been loyal to and loved...

(Confused? Oh, but wait; there's more.

The smoke gets thicker.)

Fully force-transferred into new assignments; starting over once again; making the effort to build an essential attachment to students, parents and a new community, but, in reality, simply employed inside yet another low-income, low-scoring (and therefore reform-funding-lucrative) building where frenzied, poorly-planned reformations and inexperienced, thin-skinned administrators worked to keep the confusing smoke of academic instability securely in place – as the test scores produced within upheaval and chaos remained low, and even dropped precipitously?

Recently forced-placed teachers *could now be additionally blamed.*

Enshrouded within the smoke engendered by an increasingly confusing disorder; viciously subjected to the national recipe for a tumultuously never-ending chaos:

Latest positioned and easiest targeted arrivals?

Could once again be forced out.

Forced out, force-placed and, consequently:

Reblamed.

Again.

A Recipe For Chaos

Through the wonderful expediency of an incessantly published blame, now everyone knew:

Placed and repeatedly re-placed employees?

Were bad.

And, as *bad* employees?

Oh, unmistakably they deserved minimal power, fewer rights, and an ever increasing share of the blame. Seeking a necessarily fresh rationale for keeping the reform money flowing, the newly popularized premise of placed-teacher-as-monster had been neatly packaged and emphatically sold to a confused, but now fully mesmerized, public. After all, in order to hide the constant commotion, the never-ending confusion and (most precarious) the overall, big-picture lack in a long-term *all-student inclusive* academic success?*

Somebody had to be made available for a nationally-led public censure. Some *body* or some *thing*, some additional new focus, had always to be glitized up and made available – flashily presented as a cover for the fact that so many short-term innovative proposals; so many poorly implemented, shiny-penny solutions? Lasted only a few minutes before the next highly promoted scheme was being abruptly introduced and parasitically knotted into the convoluted web of already existing innovations. Suddenly new proposals intermixing and entangling until, as ultimately they upstaged previously implemented programs and took over?

Formerly lauded and highly expensive invasions:

Dropped bloodlessly by the wayside.

All of that money; all of that financing?

All of that endlessly collected capital?

All of that funding expended year after year upon a previously mandated but fleetingly momentary reform?

Now – gone.

(*Oops.*)

But, oh, my; how well this never-ending cycle of a deregulated chaos *kept all other issues hidden*. Much like the frustrations expressed as Wall Street analysts found themselves caught inside the complicated maze of financially entangled monetary schemes (those so many strategically intertwining structures which had ingeniously served to shield an each-year-more-deregulated fiscal abuse) – well, a similar rotation of short-lived and minimally regulated educational reforms offered up a glimmer of understanding: a hidden explanation as to why so many years of an employee-abusive, community-destabilizing, neighborhood-disruptive school innovation had emerged in the first place.

All of that complicatedly interdependent razzle-dazzle; all of that distractingly interconnected glitter; all of that highly publicized sparkle now strategically camouflaging the fast-moving, eye-catching shell game of a temporary, short-lived school transformation and the never-endingly mandated movement of personnel?

Had become the recipe.

Had, in fact, become a working formula which a growing number of “benevolent” districts now stepped up to follow. A carefully replicated blueprint for generating the now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t manipulation of Big Money; a blueprint that, every day more assertively, was becoming lucratively rooted inside a nationally executed “students first” reform.

Having experienced the frightening destabilization of low-income schools firsthand, I struggled to describe this uncontrolled disorder to a friend. When I had finished, she responded quite logically:

But why do they do it?

After having been forced through over a decade bent to a nonchalantly deregulated and ever churning innovation; after having watched as the debilitating disorder increased exponentially inside year upon year of an ever more unfettered upheaval – I had my answer:

Because they can.

Because, over the years?

As media-manipulated citizens have become ever more transfixed by the surface glitter attached to the convoluted flood of reform-engendered smoke screens; as, over the years, everyone has been so distractingly caught up inside this intertwining web of symbiotic chaos?

Nobody can see what anybody else is doing.

*How many times, for example, can voters read headlines such as “Poor Children Not Making Gains Comparable to More Affluent Peers” or “Achievement Gap Widening Despite Slew of New Reforms” and still passively accept the words of die-hard reformers who continue to tell everyone that “overall [*affluent student*] gains prove reform efforts to be working.” How many times can voters read article after article and hear news story after news story where no one finds it necessary to interview *long-term experienced teachers* even as one big-name (never been a teacher, never even been poor) Pro Reformer after an-

other argues against reality – and still, somehow? Is always seen as valuable enough to be heard.

The Wangsta Principal

Although I was greatly relieved to be leaving the pandemonium I had found inside a series of ruthlessly invaded middle schools, by the time I had found my way back into a high school teaching assignment, I discovered that our district's increasingly aggressive reform policies:

Had hardened.

Had, in fact, taken on a stiff, immovable crust.

Punishments created through the invasive mandates of accountability – increasingly merciless actions argued as being an ostensive care for low-income, culturally-different students – had now generated (behind, beneath and within the intertwining web of entangled monetary schemes) the each year yet more labyrinthine fact that, in modern days? Our district's operational budget now increasingly depended upon the continued fund-garnering invasion into low-income schools.

(Or, well – really?

Into any school at all.)

To put it another way: Monies garnered through the invasion of reform had become so symbiotically intertwined with an overall traditional school funding, that the very act of reform – not reform for any particularly selected reason – had become indispensable. *Reform, reform, reform*, the never-ending cry now resounded.

Reform, for the sake of reform.

Change, for the sake of change.

Disruptive, ever more financially imperative incursions (so many dependent upon short-lived, suddenly depleted grants; grants which, only brief years later, ceased to exist) began to require, as time passed and the call for a no-excuses innovation increased, the parallel production of blindly loyal and institutionally “smarter” administrators: contemporary educational leaders who could be trained to pay homage to the don't-talk-back hierarchy of a modern-day top-down management. Game-savvy business leaders who never felt it wise to question upper-level directives –

or larger system goals.* Well-trained leaders of truly modern days who understood absolutely?

The never-ending obligation for handling a growing inundation of *bad* teachers.

Teachers who spoke up.

Teachers who resisted.

Teachers who, being old-school protective and loudly opinionated?

Must now be uncompromisingly isolated, negatively evaluated – and?

Ultimately dismissed.

As a chaotically implemented but reform sanctioned teacher shuffling expanded within our district (a district now recognized as, and even braggingly lauded for, being a system which – when compared with neighboring large-enrollment districts – moved and placed not an equivalent number of teachers each year; not merely an additional few; not even a couple dozen extra, *but literally hundreds more*) – well, those educators who continued an employment inside our district’s lowest-income schools only to be viciously labeled and arbitrarily moved around the district experienced a distinctly unique learning curve.

I, for example?

Learned that eminently disdainful middle schoolers had a name for the strutting, reform-hired, mandate-empowered men of color who flitted impressively in and out of our buildings.

Men, and very occasionally women, who, under the modern-day theory of a don’t-talk-back management, took an administrative job here, an additional promotion there, a newly created power position to follow. Employees seduced by the bonus of power, the higher and higher salaries, and the enticing personal rewards connected to the intimidating demand for a production of ever higher test scores. Short-term, quick-fix managers never permitted, nor expected, to remain anywhere long enough to be ultimately saddled with any long-term academic outcomes.

When, one afternoon, a young man – huge baggy shirt untucked to almost, but not quite, cover pants hanging precariously low on skinny hips – wandered past me in the hall, intending to head him off I warned that his travels were taking him in a perilous direction. “Look,” I said, pointing down through the open stairwell to the marbled floors below.

Pausing mid-stride, the boy hesitated, and stood still long enough to peer through the railings and look down at the tall, thin man now walking purposefully in the direction of our front office. A finely-tailored, commandingly-imperious three-piece suit draped his body; ominously dark sunglasses which he had refrained from removing while in the building threateningly shielded his eyes.

Allowing his gaze to sweep briefly over this imposing figure, the young man snorted derisively. “*Him?* Ah, nah, Miss, no worries. He a wangsta.”

“A wangsta?” I repeated.

“He *think* he a gangsta. But he ain’t gonna stick around; he ain’t gonna mess with nobody. No way he gonna get that shit suit dirty.”

And having, thus, cheerfully enlightened me, the young man returned to his stroll. In our brief interchange, however, calling upon the instincts attached to actually *being* the low-income, inner-city kid about whom everyone claimed so much to care; of being the surely deserving recipient of so much of this unremittingly administered reform – this student had managed to isolate a centrally telling element of school innovator intentions.

If you threw around enough of that seductively deregulated money, literal millions in fact? One day the expensively-tailored suits, the high-end sunglasses, the enticingly-understated jewelry, the hundred-dollar haircuts and, oh, yes, that *very* nice car – the one you had, in fact, just parked outside.

Well, these things?

Become much, *much* more important than any of those complicatedly non-standardized – and so frustratingly difficult – kids.

*Do a little research; look into the “larger system goals” intended for our nation’s public education as they are now being systematically (state by state; city by city; district by district) pursued by conservative think tanks and a very, *very* powerful – and very, *very* far right – Legislative Exchange organization.

Principals For Sale

Wangstas.

As years bent to the implementation of a “compassionate” school reform gained both velocity and clout, you could actually sit back and watch the number grow. Frequently non-White (although this was a mere technicality; as a method, an assertive monetary seduction worked efficiently with pretty much any socio-economic, racial, ethnic or cultural group) – well, generally Wangstas were people who had entered the educational arena with a personal intention to work closely with, and make a difference for, minority and often poor children.

It was this, their honestly held convictions, their deeply ingrained principles, their individually felt goals – which frequently gave them the energy and dedication to make a notable effort. Recurrently, in fact? Their steadfast attempts made a manifest difference by allowing for a better organized and more effective building discipline, a stronger school and community support, and an overall safer, and more academically rigorous, environment.

But.

Well, see; now here’s the thing.

When – holding steadily to their own convictions – career-dedicated leaders like these made an obvious academic headway; when administrators like these started to show a protective pride in their schools; when the schools where optimistic leaders like these were employed started to, uh-oh, *stabilize and show improvement?*

Oh, romantic, culturally-protective idealists like these?

Stood smack-dab in the way of an incessantly-shifting, invasively-unfettered, bad-teacher-blaming, low-score-dependent, community-destabilizing, *Big-Money-fund-garnering* reform.

What to do?

Offer more money.

A lot more money.

And, to complement the money?

Offer recognized-as-effective administrators (those old-school, career-dedicated leaders) freshly new and increasingly powerful management positions just a rung or two higher up on that modern-day ladder of authority; offer positions attached to fancier, if only recently invented and relatively meaningless, titles. Offer a chance to get attached to a suddenly unexpected wealth and an impressively unprecedented authority; offer time

for enjoying the clothes, the cars, the business-lunch expense accounts, and the possibility, even, of hanging out with the *biggest of the big boys*, way up high, there, in Washington D.C.

And then?

Tell them, woo them, push them and train them – to ignore what they had originally thought good for schools. Teach them that, in order to keep the power, the money, the clothing and the car?

They must learn how to say *yes*.

And only yes.

Coach them, instruct them, control them and guide them – in playing their part inside this heavily legislated don't-question-daddy game of a modern-day teacher, student and culturally-different community blame.

Train them well, and then?

Go out, and in the highly publicized name of an each year more invasive intervention:

Recruit.

Recruit, train, retitle, reassign and endlessly interchange many, many more.

One exactly like the next.

Residing In The State Of Lunacy

As the expectations behind a change-attached school financing grew, evolving over time into a no longer simple or small percent of district fiscal proposals, but now increasingly made deeply incursive demands upon entire school budgets – the acquisition of complicity loyal, top-down system managers:

Became proportionately essential.

In short order?

The practice of recruiting, hiring, training, promoting, retitling and unexpectedly reassigning took hold.

Presented to the public as an imperative trend in the nation's benevolent attempt at transforming a "broken" system, a sudden increase in private and philanthropic funding offered subsidies for the argued-as-essential location and schooling of top-down, business-style leaders: That newly essential brand of *smarter* school administrator who, under the corporate practices of hierarchy? Could be trained to eschew any and all of those

now outdatedly old-school traditions – those tediously old-school traditions which had so tiresomely tolerated an interactively union-friendly, teacher-parent-and-community-inclusive collaboration.

Despite a notable, despite even a yawning, scarcity in previous educational experience: Once located; once trained; once abruptly assigned into leadership – top-down recruits could be called upon to make “non-negotiable” administrative decisions even as they initiated that newer and more contemporary brand of a no-nonsense school governance: a staff supervision based upon a stiff-upper-lip-don’t-mingle-with-the-natives personnel management.

Complications arose.

Even as a never-ending flow of top-down management policies kept the always interchanging supply of I-know-everything “chiefs for change” from discussing expectations collaboratively with their school employees?

It also severely inhibited any cooperation between a cyclically intertwining stream of suddenly demanded management hires. Over time, in fact, the no-excuses expectation for a stand-alone, do-not-share-suddenly-decided-procedures leadership forced many inexperienced but outwardly blustering “chiefs” to run headlong, and humiliatingly, into each other’s privately-held, I-work-alone dictates.

By the time I had returned to a much longed-for teaching assignment inside Riverside High, this perplexing hierarchy of a disjointed, non-collaborative leadership (chillingly authoritative yet minimally coordinated) had become fully and illogically established. In the company of repeatedly dumbfounded peers expected to follow directives without input, I watched in amazement as this defensive lack in a collaborative communication repeatedly piloted our building into the confusingly surreal state of lunacy.

When Inmates Run The Asylum

As the signal for a pre-arranged fire drill, two months into our teaching year the piercing din of a fire alarm interrupted our day’s lesson. Standing up, my students made ready to follow the exit path designated on recently distributed fire drill maps: im-

pressively color-coded charts delivered with specific instructions from a newly assigned manager of discipline.

Be absolutely sure, she had made it unequivocally clear:

Be sure to depart the building following a path indicated by *the solid blue line*.

As the shrill whine of the alarm continued, no sooner had my students exited the classroom and entered the hallway to head north, intent upon following a path indicated by the solid blue line, then they found themselves stopped and aggressively herded, in a noisy confusion, backwards. Moved now not north, but south, by an unmistakably displeased administrator – a man commandingly spouting his vehement disapproval. Angrily he threw loud directives at the teachers who, or so he now unhappily proclaimed, were to have informed their students to follow not the blue line, but a path determined by *the dotted red line*.

Bumping into one another, the students intermingled and then stood irresolute. Hurrying to comply with suddenly belligerent orders, teachers urged the students to heed this unexpected change in policy. Slowly the students began to reverse, and then to incrementally trail the now south-moving crowd through a bottlenecked hallway, down two flights of stairs, and out double doors – where, once again?

They paused to congregate tentatively in the parking lot.

Students! You *may not* remain in the parking lot, bel-
lowed an administrator.

Students! You *must* vacate this area, demanded an angry
facilitator.

Students! You *must* move onto the football field, ordered
a program manager.

Students! You *cannot* remain on the football field, argued
the original supervisor.

Students! You *should* be moving north, fumed the anxious
director of discipline.

Students! You *must* cross the street, commanded a notably
unhappy advisor.

Dividing haphazardly, the throng of bodies complied as
orders flew. Waveringly assembled into small groups, the stu-
dents lumped up, here and there, until finally everyone came to a
stand still. Long minutes passed until the re-entry bell rang and,
in an immediate response, a flurry of commands began to echo

once again across the commons. Multiple voices now loudly demanded that *quickly, quickly, quickly* the students move back to the building. Melding together, gradually the various groups headed back – only to find upon reaching the school?

That all outside doors had been locked.

The decision to keep all entry doors secured during business hours had been made a week earlier by an abruptly promoted director of facilities.

Bunching up next to the building, the students hovered uncertainly. Suddenly, an entryway at the bottom of a stairwell which led up to the locker rooms (a door which had been skillfully propped open by a small rock) was located and dramatically released. Held widely open by a red-faced administrator, everyone was urged to hurry inside.

Finding myself standing next to this suddenly operable door, I followed orders to enter the stairwell along with those students around me; together we climbed upward only to come, roughly, to a decisive stop. Those at the front of the line called down to say that the door at the top – the door located at the head of the stairwell? Was locked. And could not be opened. Groaning in unison, with great effort our now tightly-packed crowd struggled to reverse. Information passed up the line, however?

Kept everyone in place. The door which had been conveniently, if illicitly, propped open?

Was now closed.

And irrevocably stuck.

Wedge claustrophobically into that closely secured two-and-a-half-story stairwell along with what felt to be dozens of animatedly squirming teenagers, I glanced down from my perch near the center of the stairwell. Standing only a few steps below, a teaching peer looked up and offered me a cynically lopsided grin.

“So,” she commented wryly. “*This* is what happens when they hire the inmates to run the asylum.”

Never Follow Tuesday’s Policy On Wednesday

When, in fact, reform-blinded inmates had been given permission to run the asylum, you would find, in the course of a day, that you had been chastised a half dozen times for things you

hadn't done, couldn't control, or had, contrarily, been commanded to do by an additionally hired do-what-I-say loudly blustering administrator. And, oh my. In modern days pushing to implement the magical transformations of an über-compassionate accountability?

There were just so *many* loudly blustering administrators.

Blustering, chastising, demanding, fussing.

Interrupting, commanding, accusing, reprimanding and yelling. Occasionally, if thought useful?

Crying.

Having so abruptly become the overwhelmed focus of a national answerability, low-income schools had been almost immediately transformed into powerful magnets: magnets which had then called out seductively to an escalating number of high-salaried supervisors, administrators, evaluators, coaches, facilitators, specialists, testing experts, curriculum peddlers, assessment personnel and...ah, well.

Use your imagination; the list goes on.

The most invaded schools, in fact, had accumulated so many administrators, so many reform-funded testing adjuncts and evaluators?*† That deducing which mandate to enact, which policy was in place, and which dictate was – at any given time – the correct dictate to follow, often turned a low-income school teacher's day into a convoluted game of metaphoric chess.

Time passed. Never stopping and never slowing – the circle of short-term, big-money reforms whirled faster, faster and faster. Newly appointed administrative hires understood: To keep the big-money salaries now underpinning their employment? Oh, they had to get noticed. They had to make waves. No matter what they saw in the classroom; no matter how well a teacher strove to comply with the endlessly shifting commands; no matter how successful any particular group of students – reform-dependent recruits could not, actually, slow down or make an effort at stopping their invasive harassment.

Stopping, in fact?

Stopping to push the endless flow of criticism aside and honestly support a teacher or student activity?

Would be much too big a gamble that they would be seen as *content*. Content, cooperative – oh, just one tiny little step

away from that now fully untenable old-school status quo's *collaborative*.

Reform, you had to remember, meant exactly that:

Re-form.

Re-order. *Re*-organize. *Re*-model.

Change. Transform. Alter. Renovate.

Convert. Invade. Destabilize.

Never ever: Stay the same.

Never ever: Seek out and stick with what's working.

You could (oh, so *very* quickly) lose that enticing, reform-financed salary if you weakened; if you forgot your purpose; if you decided that – in the name of kids and sanity – electing to eschew magic, you should alternately support an intentional stability: that sort of long-term, carefully protected stability which might encourage a slow and incrementally achieved edification.

You might lose, as well, that seductive title of suddenly conferred power if, in making the time, you actively stopped to listen to your overwhelmed and increasingly frustrated teaching staff. And? Rather than adding to the chaos, conversely you decided to help your employees, parents and students organize their resistance to the invasive destabilizations of reform. The now fully entrenched, top-down management club (a club which, in a direct line, ran unswervingly up to the offices of our nation's really cool *non-White* President) kept reform hires on their toes; as they sought to protect a precarious footing established on the temporary rungs of the slippery top-down ladder?

Administrative hires *had* to be seen pushing someone – anyone situated on a lower rung – around:

Teachers, students, parents, communities.

Each other.

As a direct result of the one-dimensional response for solving low-income school problems by demanding the firing of an always growing number of *bad* employees – those easiest to push around; those easiest to manipulate? Were teachers. Publicly labeled as test-score problematic and assertively kicked to the bottom of the ladder, teachers seldom knew why they were being kicked.

Or when the next kick would come.

Keeping track; figuring out which policy, which dictate, which concept, program, regulation, protocol or strategy was, if

only momentarily, applicable (and which, conversely? Would soon drop by the wayside, or actually already *had* dropped by the wayside); which hoop to jump through, which to ignore, which to walk around, and which to avoid completely. The effort required to keep up with the eternally shifting reform-generated commands and, in the process, avoid being kicked, reprimanded, humiliated, chastised and ultimately abusively (and very publicly) labeled, had become, somewhere along the path to a nationally instigated educational accountability, the full-time purpose of a low-income teacher employment.

As the belligerent policies of reform were thrown about, first assertively from the right, and then very unexpectedly from the theoretic left – and ultimately in an unending rain from out of the blue – staying ahead in the circus atmosphere which attended the Big Money liability of modern days?

Demanded incredible energy.

And an ever escalating amount of time.

*Confused by a sudden spate in top-down mandates, one frustrated critic added a little humor with her comment: “It’s as if they think they can get a one-month baby by getting nine women pregnant.”

†After having taken an early retirement from a large, old-school traditional high school, a teaching peer mentioned that once this school had been heavily invaded and “transformed” into three carefully separated academies, the parking lots were suddenly full to overflowing. Not, in this very poor neighborhood where very few students owned vehicles, due to an unprecedented student enrollment – but simply with the cars now owned by each separate school’s modern-day excess of management personnel.

Squaring The Wheel

Inexperienced, suddenly-hired administrators.

Supervisors, directors, specialists, evaluators, coaches, facilitators and managers.

Continually reassigned and re-titled “fixers.”

Wishing to camouflage the weaknesses attached to an often gaping lack in hands-on experience, reform hires determinedly set out to ignore – even as they avoided taking any advice from – a long-term knowledgeable staff (those so many old-school experienced employees who might irritatingly have warned of previ-

ously implemented failures). Holding tightly to the modern-day call for a non-collaborative, top-down “smarter” management, defensive reform supervisors pushed an ever changing flow of “non-negotiable” dictates, one after the next, onto schools, students and educators.

And then, all together?

Everyone watched as, over and over, and then over again:

Efforts floundered, spluttered, fell apart, and failed.

You simply couldn't stop them.

In days of a statistically commanded accountability, punitively silenced low-income school teachers, each year more assertively tasting the humiliation of an ever broader and ever meaner national denigration, learned the hard way, that – when reform programs and regulations came flying? The only tolerated action on the part of lowest-level educators was, in fact, no action at all. Expected in days of a “benevolent” reform to sit quietly, saying nothing; trained assertively into the role of compliantly voiceless observers – educators sat. And watched as a thin-skinned, mind-bogglingly inexperienced leadership imposed the perpetual (and wildly expensive) re-creation of the accountability wheel.

Decisively relegated to their modern-day lodging on the floor *below* the ladder of authority and expected, as they were unceremoniously lumped up there together, to observe in a passive conformity – with an increasing frustration, educators took note that the wheel under construction?

Was seldom round.

More often than not?

It was rectangular.

Or maybe it had been forced into the shape of a square.

Occasionally?

It had even been compressed into a triangle.

Those who, clenching their fists and clearing their throats, mentioned, however politely, that perhaps all of this overwhelmingly expensive, time consuming and ultimately inoperable re-creation of the accountability wheel *was not allowing teachers to work smarter, just a lot harder.*

Well, selfishly resistant employees like these; employees who *spoke up*; employees who thought it necessary to call attention to a seriously faulty mis-management?

Oh, make no mistake about it:
They got *noticed*.

Scapegoating 101

One year as our instructional team met to review disciplinary concerns, a particular student's name – the name of a girl who had already been the frequent subject of discussion that year – headed our list. It was clear that, as a young lady decisively filled with the immovable clarity of youth?

This unhappy student felt it her thirteen-year-old duty to expose, through use of an impressively vivid language, the general ineptitude and inadequacy of...well, by and large, pretty much everyone. At least anyone who happened to be standing in her vicinity.

This young lady's ability to avoid work, act out, and assertively place blame onto others was, as our semester progressed, becoming legendary. Only a few days earlier, a teacher on our team now explained, she had sent this particular student to the dean as a consequence for a confrontation where – in passing – the girl had declaratively referred to her teacher as a *fucking bitch*. To follow up, the dean had asked the young lady to write a letter of apology. Now written and received, the apology was passed from person to person at our table.

"I apologize for my behavior," the letter started out well. "It was not acceptable. I am sorry that I disrupted the class. You are a good teacher and I should not call you names." Optimistically, the girl had then printed the word *sincerely* and signed her name. Scrawled across the bottom of the page, however?

Was a briefly telling postscript.

"PS. I wouldn't have to apologize if you didn't act like a *fucking bitch*."

Ah; such a simple explanation. Oh, the so many things in life that we wouldn't have to do, if other people – ungrateful, uncooperative, selfishly independent people?

Didn't make us do them.

Mirroring the logic adopted by this perpetually dissatisfied student, reform-mandated innovative recruits met privately. Trained in top-down corporate fashion to believe that an intentional collaboration with lower-level personnel was wasted time,

in a carefully protected and fully separated privacy they moved forward – producing, creating, and constructing; entertaining impulsive, shiny-penny ideas even as they rejected any need to share freshly generated intentions with anyone on the staff before an abruptly ordered implementation. When suddenly commanded “non-negotiable” plans failed, as repeatedly, humiliatingly and blatantly they so often did?

Administrators defensively withdrew.

Into further private meetings.

In a clandestine, closed-door intimacy, they licked their wounds and, in the only truly collaborative action encouraged by their top-down superiors? Assertively they avoided responsibility. Collectively they looked for, *and magically always found*, problem-causing individuals to blame.

Hardest to watch; hardest to take?

Although heartbreaking, in years of an über-modern compassion, it occurred repeatedly. (Oh, but really now, wasn't it such an efficient, and, within the privileged classes, already publicly promoted view?) As the non-collaborative, belligerently implemented innovations fell apart; as defensively embarrassed reformers came face to face with yet additional failures – the immediately aggravated badmouthing of low-income, culturally-different students:

Commenced.

The overt, negative pinpointing of frustratingly *bad*, low-scoring students – those decisively *bad* and endlessly problematic children; those uncooperative students who, as a direct result of a suddenly unexpected NCLB, had so quickly and conveniently been transformed into the defenseless guinea pigs of an experimental innovation; those most often culturally different, politically insignificant students forced to function within an escalating chaos; those lowest-income and most socially defenseless students who couldn't escape the invasive reforms any more than could the teachers who wished to protect them. Those students who, when they acted out?

Were such *easily identified scapegoats*. Children so quickly and impassively, and surely most rationally?

Blamed.

Pointed to?

As simply living up to low-income, culturally-different expectations.

Of course; well, now really; who had presumed otherwise?

These children were, didn't we just say:

Poor.

And?

Well – *culturally different.*

As everyone (well, everyone living an arms-length life inside the distant echelons of fully assimilated neighborhoods) already knew: These students, and, undoubtedly, by association their communities, their schools and their teachers – *were bad.* After all, from the comfortable oblivion of carefully protected first-world-privileged enclaves,* concerned reformers and voting citizens watched television. And television?

Oh, surely big-media, big-money television:

Told them everything that they needed to know.

Low-income communities *were bad.*

Their schools *were bad*

Their students *were bad.*

Their teachers *were bad.*

And absolutely; oh my, yes, undoubtedly.

Bad schools so unappealingly filled with a statistically proven *and in über-modern days now relentlessly innovator-identified* overabundance of *bad* children? Surely depended upon the never-ending instigation of a cyclically implemented and forever realigning *Big-Money-subsidized* reform.

*As recent cell phone video has begun to trouble the nation, providing scenes of an ongoing racial abuse, one dominant-culture television personality – an older man who had managed to amass more than a little money along with his long years of fame – turned to a guest on his show and stated: *But I thought racism had gone the way of polio.* Humorists have come to label this particular type of moment as “Columbusing” – that specific type of moment when wealthy, dominant-culture, I-live-in-my-own-privileged-world people “discover” *what everybody else already knows.*

How Thin Is Your Skin

Blame. Always blame.

Rather than a careful reflection.

Rather than a thoughtful support.

Simple, immediate blame, blindly adopted by the district – a district which, in imitating and extending callous national trends, received governmental accolades as it condemned and labeled an escalating tally of *bad* teachers.* Blaming teachers, blaming students, blaming parents, blaming neighborhoods, blaming communities, blaming cultures, blaming school board members.

Blaming the “evil” of anti-reformers.

Blaming anyone.

Anyone *who got in the way*.

Blame, in place of a candid introspection.

Blame, in place of a sincere effort at addressing deeply embedded social issues. Blame, after all?

Was the nationally modeled fast-track solution *to winning reform finances*.

Hired by the bucketful, superficially prepared and abruptly slotted into a non-collaborative control over large, complicated faculties – inexperienced evaluative and management personnel were commanded to enforce an always interchanging string of “non-negotiable” mandates through the simple expediency of tolerating no opposition. Exasperatingly, however?

Teachers, students, parents, old-school principals, school staff, community leaders, union representatives and hesitantly thoughtful school board members – oh, so *many* ungrateful people: Resisted.

And thus unaccountably forced themselves into the role of targets.

As a hard-line reform solution, targeting – the practice of placing a publicly derisive reform-bought blame onto anyone who (in lieu of actually slowing down to investigate the probable truth behind such an ongoing and *each year increasing* resistance) got in the way of a lucratively deregulated accountability – well luckily, targeting?

Was a solution not only nationally supported, but nationally modeled. For so many years now, a loudly applauded testing legislation – along with an excessively financed media advertising and an unprecedented barrage of heavily funded reform campaigns – had all painstakingly led the public to the understanding that, in days of a *truly* compassionate reform? It was vitally nec-

essary to not only locate, but aggressively identify (and subsequently eliminate) that most defective of all public school malignancies: selfishly incompetent teachers. Those literal masses, *those entire schoolsful*, of ineffectually *bad* employees; those so many now even judicially identified “grossly inept” employees who, as the hapless puppets of self-serving unions, were scandalously protected in their shocking inability to teach.

Long-term experienced, *union protected* teachers?

Oh, unquestionably, *the prime cause of each and every one of those indefensibly generated scores.*

The good news, however?

Well, the good news was that nowadays – nowadays in an über-enlightened and technologically imbued era – well, according to the heavily advertised goals of a truly modern reform? These selfishly ineffectual, union-protected teachers *could now be statistically identified*. Identified, isolated and, through the each year more narrowed assertion of an additionally legalized targeting, ultimately *be evaluated right out of the system*. What the public was not to know (and, under the NCLB/R2T tactics of a blame-dependent scapegoating, never likely to know) was that, in truth?

Educators who did a seriously poor job – and despite media campaigns willing to play upon the public propensity to imagine the worst, there weren’t, in fact, all that many:

Well, truly ineffectual teachers?

Were not actually the subject of an immovably targeted blame. Teachers who missed countless work days; teachers who never asked for, nor graded, student assignments; teachers who regularly sent unsupervised children out of the classroom; teachers who repeatedly “forgot” to take attendance; teachers who never made a phone call home.

Not the target.

But.

Teachers who, *oh my, the audacity*, spoke up.

Teachers who pointed directly to administrative weaknesses; teachers who fought against invasively non-democratic dictates; teachers who mentioned wasteful spending; teachers who intentionally avoided dumbed-down and disconnected curriculum mandates; teachers who stood up against the destabilizing invasions of reform in any way at all:

Ah, *there* they were; now you had found them.

The genuine, if razzle-dazzle smoke-screen-camouflaged modern-day target.

When, following highly applauded national trends, political big-boys drew up additional legislation for garnering an appended funding through the “getting rid of bad teachers” – the always churning management hires in charge at reform-invaded buildings knew what to do. Through the handy fact of being not only inexperienced, but self-protectively defensive, extremely thin-skinned, and, most wonderfully, easily and endlessly *annoyed*?

Oh, the “smarter” school managers of modern days were quick to discern their part. Their task, in fact?

Was so simple; so clear. In days looking to the instantaneous magic of silver bullets, they simply had to locate, isolate, and then devote themselves to the negative evaluation (and ultimate removal) of any school employee – any unmistakably *bad* teacher – who had the temerity, the impudence, oh, the insupportable audacity:

To pierce their very thin skins, *and piss them off*.†

*Reveling in a proudly published A+ for the unprecedented dismissal of *bad* teachers, simultaneously our district received a much less publicized D- for the fact that, somehow? They had not thought to recruit and painstakingly license the many *non*-bad teachers who would necessarily be required to step in and and take their place. Oh well: Much better to be decisively rid of *bad* teachers, than to have *enough* teachers.

†While recent statistics around the modern-day “merit” system of teacher retention and dismissal suggest that this structure works best when 3 to 5 percent of teachers are annually released, a differently focused research is needed to find out if the teachers being assertively dismissed are those who actually show weaknesses at the job – or simply those who most vocally resist the endlessly imposed invasions of reform.

Fire At Will

One fall, a boy named Will was enrolled into one of my junior-level classes. Although he showed up only occasionally, on the days that he did come to class – after folding his tall thin

frame awkwardly into one of my room's pre-formed plastic desks, he would sit and smile broadly.

Will attended classes so sporadically that often he had little understanding of the day's lesson. He seldom brought paper or pencil. No one answered the phone at any of the numbers listed for him on our class register, and none of the attendance personnel had managed a successful home contact.

Will wasn't a handsome boy. His patchy, three-toned skin, in fact, was unusually distracting; blotchy dark-to-light, multi-colored freckles covered his nose and part of his cheek. His ubiquitously sported once-upon-a-time-snazzily-patterned but now clearly overworn and unappealingly unwashed hoodie jacket – broke my heart.

On the other hand?

Nobody could smile like Will. His marvelously positive approach to whatever life had thrown at him, his willingness to smile and keep on trying, made a world of difference. It was exactly this exuberant readiness which he always brought to my attention. I would get on him about his attendance, about his lack of supplies, about his scattered focus. How, I would ask, are you going to pull this off, Will? How are you going to get that diploma?

“Ah, don't worry, Miss,” he would tell me, grinning widely and readying himself for a favorite joke.

“You know what they say:

“Where there's a *Will*, there's a way!”

I often worried about how things would turn out for Will; I tried hard to remember, and believe in, his optimism. While so many reform supporters and innovation campaigners never stopped talking about how much they *cared about the kids* – talk, as they say, is cheap. The seriously poor; the kid without parental involvement; the kid living on the street or out of somebody's car; the kid who wasn't clean, who wasn't quiet and well-behaved; the unappealingly stereotypical kid who was an unspoken embarrassment to eminent civil rights' activists and wealthy-to-middle-class voters – wasn't the kind of kid that reform supporters protected or promoted when they pushed their low-income school innovations.*

They didn't put kids like Will in their commercials, on their billboards, or into their movies. Many would prefer, in fact?

That he was never brought to their attention...at all.

Attending high school in days of a highly retaliatory (but, oh my, *surely compassionate*) test-score-based accountability, as Will struggled to find his way through already complicated teenaged years inside a low-income and largely culturally-different high school, his task became increasingly difficult as a ruthless chain of test-score dictates mandated the repetitive cycle of reform. Money-attached transformations, one after the next, hit hard, fast and incessantly, without consideration for him, or any other student at his school.

By the time I knew Will?

His building had already (with great fanfare and big promises) hired, and then almost immediately released, three short-term, quick-change principals; he was headed into his senior year under yet another defensively blustering I-don't-know-you-do-what-I-say "fixer." He had experienced full turnover in all executive and disciplinary offices, and hadn't had the same teacher twice in any of his core classes. Every one of Will's three previous counselors had come and gone; the counselor he would have next year, the one to take the place of a woman abruptly dismissed from our building, had not yet been hired. She, or he, wouldn't know Will, wouldn't know his name, his home situation, his grades, his dreams, his jokes, or his issues with attendance.

Wouldn't, even, know his smile.

The one employee with whom Will had managed to build a small connection – a man hired to work directly with issues of truancy – had recently (and very unexpectedly) been "let go" for speaking up at a meeting: a meeting where he had had the temerity to criticize policies enacted by a brand-new, barely-out-of-college, never-done-this-before assistant principal. A frustratingly unseasoned administrator who had so very suddenly, and so very ineffectually, found herself placed in charge of attendance.

In Will's world – a modern-day world now committed to the no-excuses "benevolence" of an immovable test-score liability; a world where testing concerns took an absolute precedence?

A devastatingly short-sighted management policy had begun to drift ominously into reform-abused schools. Stealing in on the heels of the *bad teacher/bad union* status shift, it was a policy now able to turn Will's academic experience into an eternally whirling Merry-Go-Round; a dizzying amusement park ride lo-

cated immediately next to a relentlessly revolving door. Arriving hand-in-hand with the nationally promoted teacher blame game and efficiently tied to the modern-day theory of a don't-talk-back management, it was a policy now arguing that daddy – *or any one of daddy's abruptly hired and defensively inexperienced cohorts* – would, when placed uncompromisingly in charge of a school?

Know intimately and undoubtedly who should stay.

And, even more importantly?

Who had to go.

Despite minimal, despite even nonexistent, time spent working alongside actual in-house personnel; despite a loudly professed lack of interest in actually knowing or talking with those whom they had been so suddenly hired to identify, evaluate, and aggressively eliminate – a modern-day, corporate-style management conjecture held that *true* educational leaders?

Would instantly and instinctually (presumably through the magical abilities inherent to Superheroes) recognize *bad* employees. Ignoring the demands for due process made by unions, state statutes, and long-term contracts, surely the most definitive “fix” for low-income schools would be the absolute and unrestricted empowerment of top-down fixer administrators – and any one of their bevy of unproven and easily antagonized evaluator personnel – to:

Fire at will.

And, in a truly ironic twist?

The feverishly aimed and indiscriminately deployed weapons of a low-income school reform now struck so accurately, finding their targets so exactly, hitting harder than almost any other contemporary attempt at a socio-economic and cultural devaluation?

That they did, indeed, fire *directly at Will*.

And all of the children like him.

*Possibly missing that fact that, in the United States, rather than spend their days working inside factories or digging minerals out of the earth, *all children are mandated to attend school* – a recently lauded school reform “expert” (the term *expert* being attached, as has apparently become the norm in truly modern days, to the simple fact of owning massive personal income) shockingly argued that *since it is not possible to reach children living in deepest poverty*, we should more expediently reach out only to those who are most motivated by

dumping yet larger sums of money into the sign-up-charter-school movement (and thus, presumably? Help fill the pockets of those who, like this already wealthy man, are most willing to heavily invest themselves in the increasingly popular charter-chain theory of a selective superiority).

Divided We Fail

Life was never easy for kids like Will; poverty was a terrible master, asking too much, taking too much, from a growing number of children. And poverty, no matter how you looked at it (and perhaps this was why so many legislators painstakingly selected not to) wasn't pretty. It didn't always act nicely; often it was loud, self-protective and belligerent. It wasn't consistently polite, and sometimes?

It was dirty.

Occasionally it smelled.

To be poor *and* culturally different?

Just made life that much more complicated.

Although scores of politicians, city planners, privileged liberals, progressive activists and Civil Rights' leaders were talking, these days, about the frightening growth in a two-tiered, rich versus poor, class-divided society, mentioning, as they spoke, the mounting need to make hard-hitting social changes?* Few people living in the self-absorbed-my-comfort-first environs of power actually paid *truly* poor children, and those children who struggled with a culture identification, any honestly straightforward attention. These were the children, after all, as one writer had put it so succinctly?

Easiest to ignore.

Living, as they did, so deep inside our nation's politically irrelevant shadows.

Traditionally-stable, publicly-protected, locally-accessible, equitably-supported *neighborhood* schools? Schools where children like Will, kids of any cultural background or socio-economic status, were not only welcomed, *but wanted*? Schools where, rather than accruing punitively humiliating labels, students like these could find an authentic, deeply-embedded safety in an optimistic and even enthusiastic cultural recognition; local, neighborhood buildings where they could learn pride, self-acceptance and self-expression *in being just who they were*; institutions where,

year after year, they could count upon a teacher, staff and administrative stability – faces they knew; people they could talk to; employees they could trust. This *seemed* so little to ask.

Ah, but.

In the highly publicized name of *caring* about poor and often culturally-different children?

A locally-accessible, neighborhood-protective, community-convenient, long-term stability was one thing that they would no longer be allowed to have.

Because.

Well, jumbled up inside; way back inside; way down deep inside the endlessly churning smoke which had been amassing ever more thickly around each year's appended supply of "compassionate" reforms? There was an additional – if cleverly hidden – objective. Sure, you could call it an accident; you could title it as being simply yet another one of those "unintended consequences." Or you could call it a conspiracy. But, whatever it was; however you wanted to see it (or *not* see it)?

Well, *there it was.*

Dividing populations.

Separating students.

Rich from poor; defensively protective conservative from integrating, tolerant liberal; dominant-culture from culturally-different; fully assimilated from those who had not had the grace, inclination or time to conform.

After more than a decade dedicated to the "compassionate" transformation of our nation's lowest-income schools, it was possible to find (if you were one of the few who believed it necessary to look beyond and behind the distracting glitter of an ever proliferating smoke) – oh, it wasn't really all that hard to discover that so many of the schools now promoted as being *good* schools; so many of the schools now publicly recognized as being likely to produce those much-lauded "better" test scores? Well, these schools were, somehow, after more than ten years committed to a deregulated testing reform, *less* integrated. Kids at these schools were, huh, so often more and more culturally similar, more and more economically stable.†

If, over time; if, with a concentrated effort; if, following the nationally promoted recipe for a deregulated chaos; if, with

not only permission from the government, but with a heavily promoted legislation written to fortify your actions?

Well if, in the name of a charitable concern, you aggressively invaded those schools where – as a result of a forty-year-old Civil Rights’ anti-segregation legislation – student populations had become racially, socio-economically and/or culturally integrated; and if, then, little by little over ensuing years, you called upon rigidly implemented strategies of “reform” to skim off (always in the name of *caring*; always in the name of *helping*) top-performing, most stable, most motivated, most economically capable (read: *highest scoring, most assimilated*) students; and if, in the process?

You continually, and, as you said, benevolently, separated the highest achievers, the most financially and domestically stable, the most culturally test-comfortable from those who were less ready, less able and less assimilated (those who continued to struggle so unappealingly, there, deep inside their ever darkening shadows). What, exactly, would you accomplish?

Thus divided – well, go ahead now, think about it; ask yourself: *Which* students would most likely succeed?

And, even more importantly:

Which students would *most dramatically, most clearly, and most publicly “fail?”*^o

*Recent national statistics recognize that the number of children living in poverty has been growing at a frightening rate across the nation; more and more states – and the public educational systems which each state must sponsor – are now being forced to confront the many debilitating issues attached to this heavily expensive (*and so very academically disruptive*) phenomenon.

†In years after school appraisal websites have become publicly established, I read the comment of a confused parent looking to enroll her child into one of the few “good” schools listed inside her district. All you *really* find, her comment asserted, is the cultural make-up of the student enrollment inside each school. Her observation continued to haunt as a recent real-estate commercial projected a pair of overtly dominant-culture parents looking to buy their first home – and rejecting a property after saying to one another: “But, did you *see* the school rating?”

^oIf schools where affluent, dominant-culture student test scores have earned their building an A rating are forced, by law, to integrate with schools where

non-dominant-culture, non-assimilated poor student test scores have produced, for their school, a rating of an F – well, wouldn't the aggregate school rating of a C be positive proof that this building was doing its best to integrate all student populations? Or would this simply be seen as yet another reason for wealthy, dominant-culture parents to argue that they must now assertively separate their children from this unhappily "C"-rated school by tightly drawing boundaries around themselves in order to once again produce their affluent, dominant-culture-student A rating?

Rules Of The Club

In earliest years of a suddenly legislated NCLB, as I had driven back and forth to Central High – that old, traditional building well-known for its many years of a low-income, culturally-different student service – frequently my attention had been caught by a commercial playing out on a local radio station; repeatedly I had listened as an advertisement endorsed a housing development now under construction in a neighboring community.

Hoping to persuade those citizens who might be out there, sitting on the fence, contemplating the idea of a move, a judiciously selected and sweetly appealing woman's voice promoted the benefits which one might enjoy by choosing to relocate into her attractively protected – and fully covenanted – community. For example, this compellingly gentle voice stated, among the things *never* to be found inside *her* neighborhood?

Sagging pants.

As I walked daily into classrooms filled with a broad range of culturally-different, low-income students and caught sight of their ubiquitously sagging pants – oh, I had no trouble comprehending this presumably pretty woman's message immediately.

The art of excluding those who are not favored; the skill of separating out those who have been assigned to a segregated, lower status. As a social process, it is hardly new; hardly unknown inside historical or political endeavors. Nor is it an enterprise exclusive to any nation, race, culture, socio-economic level or protectively exclusive religious doctrine. In modern days, however?

There is – well, something.

Something different; something that has changed. Something that has shifted, just a bit, in our über-contemporary, enlightened times. Times that some, when referring to the actual *non*-stereotypical inclusion of other-than-WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) citizens in everyday life?

Have begun to label as a “post-racial America.”

There is, well, this *little* difference.

The difference between putting your fully intended objectives of segregation right out there in public, clearly and obviously – posting them right up there in front as a harbinger of your intentions – or pretending, conversely? *That they are not actually there.* Hiding them. Keeping them confusingly disguised but powerfully supported behind an intricately manufactured succession of smoke screens.

Historically, the rules of separation and exclusion in this country were clear-cut. Were, in fact? Aggressively disseminated, publicly posted, and even unbendingly written into an earliest naturalized law. You knew, oh, you never had to wonder about it, who was wanted – and, even more unmistakably?

Who was not.

Carefully lettered and unambiguously posted signs openly delineated cultural expectations, making the intended levels of social status overtly clear (just in case you weren’t sure). Signs stated plainly, and inflexibly, for example: “*White*” and “*Colored.*” Sometimes? “*No Dogs, No Mexicans, No Indians.*” Maybe? “*Only Good People: No Negroes, Irish or Italians.*” Occasionally: “*Chinese And Greasers Need Not Apply.*” Unmistakably posted signs were right out there, visible and explicit, for anyone to read. Signs which not only admitted to an assertive exclusionary prejudice, but lawfully denoted racist boundaries, socio-economic expectations, and a nationally anticipated regulation of caste.

Country clubs, health clubs, social clubs – many assertively posted, as was considered both legal and permissible, immovable membership expectations:

For Men.

Although, unmistakably?

Not Catholic.

Nor (oh my) Jewish.

Authors composing nationally disseminated books felt no compunction nor any sense of impropriety as breezily they referenced an immediately evident, right-out-there anyone-can-see-it racism. Unembarrassed and unfettered, they wrote about a social order which blatantly existed – recording a society which held visibly to an elitist power. A society willing to base itself upon a notable legal exclusion; a society willing to openly recognize, and unconcernedly denigrate, its unwanted classes: *niggers, injuns, wetbacks, nips, micks, kikes, yellow devils, dagos, pickaninnies, savages, gooks, chinks, wops, spics, spooks...*

Ah, the list was clearly, and mercilessly, long.

Decades after the legal segregation of races had been abolished; years after the rules for protecting an intentional social integration had become the nationally enforced law – although legally prohibited? Racist intentions of segregation were still too often openly flaunted; too often a straightforward intention. Inside the small town of a southwestern state, the dominant-culture teenager behind a fast-food counter took one look at the Latina traveling with our group and stated, simply and directly: “We don’t serve beans.”

And turned her back.

Shocking, yes.

Illegal, wrong, insensitive, inappropriate *and enraging*, yes. But – oh, so *out there*. So *in your face*.

Not at all hidden.

Not at all masked.

Not, while the nation pretended otherwise, carefully disguised behind razzle-dazzle shell games and convoluted smoke screens. Not heavily cloaked behind draconian quota-funded deportation laws; not strategically hidden behind the “discretionary” implementation of mandatory sentencing drug laws; not intentionally disguised behind pull-over-any-and-all-suspects traffic laws; not painstakingly camouflaged behind warrantless edicts to stop and search.

And?

Not strategically secreted behind a suddenly “compassionate” test-score-based accountability – a ruthless educational liability which, ever more assertively and ever more punitively, not only promoted but now actively permitted the endlessly destabilizing invasion into our nation’s lowest-income schools.*

*Four years after the sudden mandates of NCLB invaded our ninety-eight-percent non-White school, a social studies teacher known for her Civil Rights activism stood up at a faculty meeting and passionately explained that the punitive testing of socio-economically diverse and culturally dissimilar students was a divisively racist act. As her argument sank in, not two minutes had passed before the vice principal in charge of testing took over the podium and, in belligerent don't-talk-back tones, explained exactly how our school would now be implementing our two long weeks of an inflexibly retaliatory, state-ordered testing.

Laws of Exclusion

In years before the mandates of NCLB pushed assertively into our school to commandeer curriculum expectations at Central High; in years before the innovation-ordered, outsider-controlled programs began to outlaw the *non*-standardized inclusion of “ethnic” studies (totally missing the fact that a forced study into an overwhelming surfeit of White males was, unmistakably, *ethnic*) – I had enjoyed teaching an old-school non-scripted, fully inclusive American Literature class.*†

Hoping to capture a broad student interest while waking less motivated imaginations, I had asked my students to take a time-ordered look into the various cultural settlements particular to the United States. Following events sequentially, we had studied the work produced by a variety of disparate authors writing from dissimilar backgrounds; intentionally, we had read and analyzed the work of the many culturally diverse writers who had most directly helped to fashion our country's best recognized and most iconic social movements.

Due to the fact that Central High served as a home largely to children who knew firsthand how it felt to live with the less-than-comfortable stigma of being not only low-income, but culturally different, it wasn't long before I discovered that my students' interest focused most keenly upon, and repeatedly brought our conversations back to, the particulars which had surrounded our country's most exclusionary legislations. Recurrently my students asked to learn about, read about and better understand the legalized actions behind our nation's most openly mandated separations:

The governmentally supported caste divisions inside a Latino southwest.

The relocation of, and bounded reservations built around, Native populations.

The laws meant to regulate slavery, indentured servants and an inter-racial marriage.

The immigration rulings written to keep Asian cultures from attaining citizenship.

The decades of Jim Crow legislation designed to enforce racial separations.

The legal promotion of women and children as voicelessly owned property.

The ruthless internment of unwanted citizens during years of war.

The emergence, and subsequent suppression, of an intentionally inclusive Civil Rights' legislation.

What most accurately honed my students' attention; what my students most wanted to read about? Was not, specifically, the long years of a legally ordered exclusion. More exactly, they wanted to hear about, read about, talk and write about, real people. Those most visibly intrepid trailblazers who had seen the rules of exclusion, looked directly into the face of intolerance, understood the legal lay of the land – and yet, still?

Resisted.

Those most notably recognized frontrunners who, through their long-term dedication to social opposition?

Had intriguingly changed the rules.

Repeatedly my students asked to talk about, read about, and better comprehend the social transformations made possible in an increasingly inclusive nation through the ongoing struggles against a clear-cut and fully legalized exclusion; time and again they asked to learn about the specific battles for equity which had most overtly illustrated an indomitable human hope. A hope that, as stigmatized and politically irrelevant outsiders?

They recognized as residing intimately within.

The hope that, no matter culture, no matter race, no matter religion. No matter gender, no matter socio-economic standing, no matter sexual orientation. The hope that – one day?

They too might find an inclusive, honored place at the national table.

*For those who wish to argue that the term *ethnic* refers to any subgroup of citizens who do not make up the *largest* cultural population (and taking into account the fact that apparently we are willing to lump *all* European ancestry into the broadly inclusive category of “White”) – well, shouldn’t we then be studying an over abundance of *White women*?

†National news outlets have begun to follow student, parent and teacher protests where right-leaning school boards have begun to suggest the censure of curricula (pushing to add a celebration for the free market while abbreviating those events which might be construed as historically “negative” – i.e. events such as each of those I have listed above.) I would encourage anyone interested in this suddenly “new” phenomenon to instigate an investigation into the already long years of a page-by-page pre-scripted low-income school reform *to see what has already been long-term strategically omitted* – and where the money is coming from as the support for certain of those “pro-free-market” choice schools.

Liquid Latex

Teaching herself in the use of her new cell phone’s camera option, one of the para-professionals inside our building photographed divergent items as they caught her attention. One afternoon she passed around a picture which she had snapped of a large advertising marquee. Positioned on the side of a tall building, additional signage declared this particular establishment to be for *Adults Only*; customers who shopped here, or so the assertive advertising suggested, could expect not merely an X, but a triple XXX, experience. And there, in the center of the large white marquee?

Two dark-lettered words stood alone:

Liquid Latex.

Laughingly passing the picture from person to person, we marveled: What exactly might shoppers expect should they purchase this product? Apparently, we said to each other, there was no limit to the choices available in our modern-day, over-the-top consumers’ paradise.

“But – *some* choices?” declared a peer. “Well, some choices you just have to be smart enough *not to try.*”

Choices, choices, and then?

More choices.

In a first-world nation hell bent upon twisting all human happiness around a never-ending loop of acquisition, choice had become not merely a possibility but an unqualified *right*; a right belonging to *any customer*. Or, to state it more accurately, to any customer who happened to be living in a section of the nation competing for wealthy-to-middle-class dollars.

Addicted to the media theory that Americans not only wanted *but deserved* an endless array of consumer choice, in modern days we fully expected to find fifty stores in one shopping mall, and fifty more in a shopping center located directly across the street. If a large department store was under construction here, well surely there would soon be another even larger department store being built right over there. A huge home improvement business on this block meant that a rival chain – one almost exactly like it? Could be found just around the corner. And, if you had any trouble locating a particular item at the full-to-bursting grocery store located in this neighborhood, surely only a few streets over (well, so long as your neighborhood was *pricey*) you could find an additional supermarket with even better stock.

Captivated by, as we were inundated with, the idea of a first-world-merited privileged-consumer choice, we tended to believe any politician, entrepreneur or self-proclaimed expert who labored to sell us yet another theory bent around the wonders of an additional selection. As the fast-paced discontented, choice-addicted junkies of contemporary days?

We listened open-mouthed to an interchanging chain of option-advocating “experts;” experts who, somehow, never got around to mentioning the high probability that it was this, the never-ending push for a nonchalantly deregulated free-market choice (a community destabilizing process much abetted by our consumer-addicted nod to the ceaseless production of a nonstop change), which had, actually – repeatedly and systematically?

Undermined a now fading old-days community empowerment.*

Had, in fact, through the incessant rearrangement which methodically uprooted long-established neighborhoods, added a substantial weight to our nation’s current state of an increasingly precarious uh-oh-we-seem-to-be-losing-the-middle-class economic insecurity.

The unsettling chaos created by putting local, neighborhood-anchoring businesses and long-standing traditional institutions outside the community picture hit home with us when we found ourselves waxing nostalgic about how life *used to be*. Back in the good old days. Back in days when our lives were simpler; back when we had cared so much more about people, business dependability and safe, interconnected neighborhoods than about this mindlessly rotating world of consumer goods.

Back before anyone had even imagined – that?

One day Americans would deserve yet more of life's true essentials. Like *liquid latex*.

Maybe what we really needed, we would say to one another, nodding our heads sadly, was less choice and more stability. Maybe what we honestly wished for? Was more support for the neighborhoods we were already *in*. And maybe?

Well, maybe in place of political leaders forevermore promoting venture-capital's push to attain huge, lifestyle-killing profits through an endlessly instigated community-destabilizing change: Well, maybe what we really wanted?

Was long-term, community-protective thinkers; neighborhood-protective leaders willing to help us stand up to, and stop, the frightening lack of loyalty created when we were asked to live within the ever shifting and ever moving, never stable world of:

Choice.

*For those who would like a little entertainment while looking into this subject, I suggest a side-trip into the increasingly popular realm of Macro Rap.

Choosing Choice

Food choices; clothing choices; transportation choices.

Entertainment choices; furniture choices; housing choices.

In exceptionally modern years pushing to attract no-waiting sensibilities?

Pharmaceutical choices; technological choices; sexual choices. And, as our nation had lately begun to find itself both loudly and repeatedly told:

Most imperatively necessary?

School choices.

Once educational reformers came to recognize the possibility of counting upon the progressively entrenched forces behind a no-excuses NCLB/R2T, suddenly you couldn't escape the incessantly published message that there *was* no other solution. Low-income children? Simply *must have*, deserved to have – oh, my no, not stable, safe, community-centered, culturally-protective *neighborhood* schools – but an unendingly deregulated and always shifting parade of educational *choice*.*

Somehow, in such a short time, the traditional community school – that old-fashioned ideal built around a free, local, easy-access, full-services institution always there, plugging along, welcoming and serving *all neighborhood children*:

Had been branded as problematic.

Out of fashion.

Unable, in truly modern days?

To compete.

In case you hadn't been paying attention; in case you had looked away and forgotten to keep up: *Competition*, in super-huge corporate-style days of a mammoth business? Had become *the point*. The true national purpose. And, in days of a gargantuan super-business rivalry, there simply was no longer any time nor place, in a faster and faster paced world, for the patient, methodic growing of long-term-stable, community-centered, neighborhood-protective citizens.

Nuh-uh.

Instant gratification.

Competing, confronting, contending and *winning*; getting it all *right now*.

Getting rich – or making somebody else rich – *instantaneously*; raking in huge gains *today*. Not tomorrow; not next year; not incrementally; not slowly or carefully over time. In competitively deregulated days when there was, simply, no other purpose than an immediately recognized profit?† *Even if it meant killing off the goose which had been systematically and necessarily laying those community-protective, neighborhood-sustaining, stable-economy-producing golden eggs:*

Getting that profit *now*.

Now, now, always now.

(And if, maybe, you didn't quite catch that the first time?

Goddamnit, *now*.)

What our country needed, or so in über-competitive days of Big Business everyone was assertively told, was not a slow-growth, long-term, genuinely-implanted educational momentum, but an immediately recognized outcome. Not tomorrow, not gradually, not progressively over time, but *now*. Therefore, as an ever increasing inundation of pro-reform publicity argued, *if* they cared about children? Truly concerned citizens must get on board *right now*, and offer up an immediate and unconditional support for the competitive market-based theory that – truly magical academic results? Could only arrive with the minimally regulated creation of...

More school choice.

Public institutions traditionally established for the purpose of an all-student, full-services education should, no longer, as a response to any of those old-fashioned goals connected to a clearly out-of-date Civil Rights' legislation, simply and democratically set out to offer – through some seriously antiquated egalitarian ideal – an equitably funded and carefully inclusive education for all.

Oh, my no; not any more.

First-world, privileged-consumer choice?

Was, well – so obviously *the thing*.

In fact, framing their concern as The Civil Rights Issue Of Our Time, loudly concerned educational reformers quickly began to argue that the deregulated proliferation of competitive school choice would be the magical panacea; the truest and most miraculous solution for *all* of those historically complex public school difficulties. Taking the high-priced form of magazine covers, newspaper articles, television advertisements, street-side billboards and even nationally released full-length movies – innovation publicity overwhelmed the nation with the repeated proposal that, *everyone? Every single child?*

Deserved – oh no, *not* old-fashioned stable, hard-working traditional, all-student welcoming, equitably supported neighborhood schools, but:

A minimally regulated lineup of privileged-consumer *choice!* And, always right there; right there alongside...

Was the heartrending message that – well, unmistakably. It was *only* through the benevolent legislation for *more* academic options – ah, well, you simply had to believe it. There was, really,

just so much of that scintillating razzle-dazzle making everyone feel so emotionally torn; so deeply sorry for *those kids*; for those *poor children*; for those *unhappily struggling students* forced to endure inside our nation's incessantly denounced as "broken" system; those *frustratedly helpless students* about whom, so obviously in modern days?

Only hard-hitting, no-excuses reformers honestly cared.

With so much heavily disseminated publicity, how could anyone help but believe that in days of a truly heartfelt compassion – oh, surely it was *only* through the increasingly deregulated advocacy for more school choice that our country could not only solve our now more-than-a-decade-old test-score dilemma, but additionally address each and every one of those heartbreaking social issues which, apparently?

Attended low-income, culturally-different lives.

*Maybe you've noticed lately how so many suddenly instigated "choice" schools – schools which one year pop up unexpectedly inside an old supermarket building or maybe inside a small industrial warehouse – are just as suddenly, and just as unexpectedly, closed down and abandoned the next.

†If you've been paying attention, perhaps you've also noticed: Some of those charter school chains; some of those more privatized, corporate-style, for-profit programs? *Are now listed on the stock-market exchange.* So – well, let's stop for a moment to imagine what might happen to the children who attend these schools *if the "wrong" students are enrolled and suddenly not only their scores but their stock values fall* (and why is it that massively wealthy *hedge-funders* now think it useful to give huge donations to that type of politician most willing to adamantly support our nation's burgeoning selective-enrollment/charter-chain movement.)

The Club Of Choice

The publicity?

Was always so good.

Everybody seemed to be getting on board; *everybody* wanted to join the super-benevolent club of choice. Rich people, famous people, so many people who never stopped talking about their own concern for *the kids* – all about *the kids*, and how much they cared for them. Oh, you just knew that there must be an agonizingly immediate need.

Choice schools.

Of course! It was, really, so simple.

And damn, all you had to do?

Was sit back.

Sit back and check out all of that *advertising*.

Man, what a newly created school of choice would be able to do!

For the first time ever, or so you would see published in heavily broadcast TV commercials and on huge roadside billboards, *teachers would care about the kids!* (Imagine!) Teachers would – no kidding – *talk* to the children individually! (My!) Teachers would *know each child's name!* (Unbelievable!) And, for the first time in history? Gosh, how amazing that choice schools had even managed to think this up:

Students would read! A lot.

Oh, they'd read all the time, because?

Choice school teachers *would tell them it was a good idea!*

In an unparalleled number, kids would show up for extra classes, after school tutoring, and even summer school programs simply because truly innovative choice schools would (oh, now, this really was almost too exciting): *tell them to!* Choice schools would even, and oh wasn't this an exceptional idea, intervene when kids thought about dropping out, and – surely unheard of – *tell them it was not a good idea!* Kids would (and, oh my, but here was the truest and most unbelievable wonder) *be given schedules which included Advanced Placement classes*, and then, wow, without even asking to be in these classes or having completed previous preparatory courses?

They'd do amazingly well, because:

Oh, my; choice schools would – now *why* hadn't anyone ever considered this?

Simply enroll them into those courses!

You just couldn't get past the poignantly advertised and movingly argued point: Incessantly created and minimally regulated schools of choice?*

Would, somehow, in some miraculous way previously overlooked by our nation's educational history, transcendently whisk every single child, every single parent, every single home, apartment or guardedly staked-out homeless shelter *out of a complicatedly difficult, multi-faceted, low-income reality*. In a truly

amazing fashion, *whoosh*: Schools of choice would lift every child and every family into the socio-economically stable and fully assimilated world that poor and often culturally-different students currently and frustratingly (evidently through some bumbling, old-fashioned public school incompetence) *had never previously thought to attain*.

And?

Oh, well.

Yes.

Unofficially attached to the seldom-seen underbelly of this highly published call for the unfettered creation of yet more innovatively deregulated schools, there was an interesting little side effect. A side effect which the mushrooming club of compassion-led reformers thought it best not to mention.

But if, in stepping back.

If, in making the effort.

If, in forcing a long-range, decade-wide view.

Well, if you took the time to sift through the now more than ten years dedicated to a transformative educational reformation, you could see just how the burgeoning club-of-choice's demand for so much unencumbered change had begun to not only take on, *but to actually physically address*, an increasingly sinister threat. A threat that, in nationally optimistic days now advertised as being an inclusively "post-racial" America:

Some innovators?

Saw as not only as an alarming, but fully unsustainable, menace.

*A notable side effect for a growing number of deregulated choice schools has been their ability to be exempted from punitive test-score consequences: those increasingly invasive, increasingly destabilizing, and increasingly segregating consequences which old-fashioned "*regulated*" (still subject to state law) schools continue to bear.

Walking The Line

Stepping back.

Stepping back far enough to study the social patterns now growing out of this more-than-a-decade-long call for the unlimited creation of a deregulated school choice. Stepping back far

enough to get an inclusive look at overall national outcomes. Well, if you took the time; if you made the effort; if you thought it necessary to analyze the bigger picture?

You could actually locate, and then walk alongside, a definitive line of social “progress.”* You had to work at it; you had to fight your way through the flashily distracting and ever shifting smoke screens. But if, in keeping your bearings, you stayed true to your course?

You could navigate an unmistakably linear arrangement. If you stuck with it, refusing to look away – you could see:

1. The repeated, chaotic destabilization of test-score reformed and loudly maligned traditional, low-income-neighborhood public schools: an invasive destabilization immediately followed by the assertive demand for a public listing of punitive school-score-amalgamated “grade the school” labels.

2. The subsequent promotion and creation of out-of-neighborhood, limited-seat *application-only* “magnet” schools.

3. The highly advertised call for the sudden construction of loudly endorsed small/charter schools immediately followed by a decade-long cycle of shutting down, reopening, invading and restructuring these very same *politically weakest* schools in a nobody-held-accountable never-ending-loop of publicity where all activity might be lauded as the benevolent test-score-based reform of a “broken” system.

4. The growing solicitation for the development and protective financial maintenance of small *grant-money-dependent*, limited-seat/limited-services choice schools; schools then defensively supported through the disproportionate dissemination of a governmentally “competitive” funding.

5. The sudden escalation of outsider-financed advertising campaigns presenting the ever more poignant demand for the ongoing creation of additionally exclusive limited-seat, charter/choice/voucher schools combining simultaneously with an accelerated national endorsement for “philanthropically” funded, *outsider-curriculum-controlled*, limited-seat/limited-services, *deregulated* (not- subject-to-state-law) “public” schools.

6. The increasing political push for, and veneration of, public-tax-money vouchers (often presented evasively as “scholarships” and/or “tax credits”) slated to be used only in *non-public*,

non-unionized, privately exclusive schools; a political push orchestrated to coincide directly with the added creation of ever-more-elite, limited seat/limited-services, lottery/voucher/charter options.

7. The national aggrandizement of outsider-funded limited-seat/limited-services high-scoringly “good” programs precipitating the increased elimination of democratically-financed, locally-accessible, neighborhood-friendly “bad” schools.

8. The aggressive production of seat-restricted/limited-services *good* schools dovetailing neatly with the test-score-mandated closure of “underused” *all-student-inclusive culture-protective* schools located inside poorest – and heaviest minority – neighborhoods.

9. The ever more legal and ever more tolerated in-school-ticketing and negative-record-building criminalization of non-standardized, curriculum-unassimilated, test-score-labeled, choice-school-rejected, school-desert-displaced, gang-line-crossing unwanted children.

10. The rampant assembly and subsequent governmental subsidy of a quota-based, private-enterprise, funding-per-body, recidivism-dependent, heavily-lobbied, Build-The-Bed-An-In-mate-Will-Come prison-industrial complex.†

11. The dramatically increased social separation of racial and cultural classes.

12. That “post-racial” America conundrum? Solved.

13. That strategically concealed choice school reform goal? *Accomplished.*°

*What many As-A-Democrat-I-Believe-In-Progress voters find confusing is how far so many Progressive actions often are from truly inclusive ideals. In theory well-meaning, much too often the “progressive” theory of a social reform is simply euphemism for “Being Exactly Like Me.” Willing to see the world only from a middle-to-wealthy-class locus likely to produce a disconnected “compassion,” much progressive effort has no ability to see either problems or solutions from any platform other than that of the-world-can-only-get-better-when-everyone-looks-and-acts-just-like-me. And it is thus that we arrive at our modern-day “progressive” approach to social order: a social order which not only allows, but encourages, the ignoring, punishing, rejecting and ultimate incarcerating of anyone who, for one reason or another, does not comply.

†Take a moment to compare incarceration rates for the United States and other of those countries we love to label as being “dangerously intolerant.” You may well be surprised. In the past half century incarceration in the USA has become the go-to solution for a growing number of social problems, including the simple fact of being too poor to pay for the rising costs of running our ever more necessary courts. (And how convenient, in truly modern days, to begin the argument that school districts should no longer be held responsible for educating any of those students whom we have now so massively decided to imprison.)

°More than a few “public” choice schools now present themselves as being adamantly public when it comes to receiving a public funding, but then argue loudly and emphatically that they are *non*-public when it comes to being subject to the rules carefully written into regulatory public (state) statutes.

Look What’s Under The Rug

Small schools. Magnet schools. Limited-seat schools.
Online schools. Charter schools. Accelerated schools.
Abruptly assembled No-Such-Thing-As-Evolution voucher schools.

The truth about such an impressive assortment of “compassionately” (if often very abruptly) created choice schools?

While reform promoters opted to publish a never-ending stream of innovation-friendly information bent to the suggestion that deregulated schools outpaced, outperformed and out-tested sluggishly voice-inclusive, democratically-collaborative, neighborhood-protective traditional methods? Well, there was, although it was not often promoted, other news; additional information could be found – oh, no, not right out there in front, but still there, under the immediate surface.

You had to look for it; you had to dig at it.

You had to find an unruly thread, and pull it up.

You had to put in the effort because, with so much razzle-dazzle, so much flash, and so much endlessly realigning chaos? Truth was often trapped deep inside the intertwining maze of smoke screens set up as a protection for the ever whirling (and ever more deregulated) inundation of invasions.

If you believed – oh, that perhaps it wasn’t wise to leave all knowledge of public school issues in the hands of politicians and self-promoting Big Money “experts;” if you thought it ill-ad-

vised to have the world of public education explained to you by a popular, sound-bite-seeking press – well, a different point of view?

Was actually available.

For each and every energetically published choice-school promotion, you could, with only a little effort, locate information that was just as relevant, just as factual, just as specific – but that was, on the other hand?

Fully oppositional.

It wasn't logical, or even necessary, to refute the fact that *some* choice schools, *some* small schools, *some* charter or magnet schools, had great track records. You might even feel, after reading about the exciting achievement at this school or with that program, so positive and so enervated that you were more than ready to jump up and get on board; more than willing to become an ardent member of the school-choice club. Yet, if that one little word – *some* – bothered you?

Well, you might feel a little foolish for all of your enthusiasm once you read just a touch more. Just enough to find out that, percent-wise? On the whole? Overall?

The true-fact profile of success for non-traditional schools of choice was far from dazzling.*

Was, even, harmfully bleak.

If big-picture, nationally-collected statistics held any truth? Well, you might find yourself taking a pretty big gamble if, jumping up to support the advertising-pushed, panic-driven, parent-triggered rush, you joined up with the latest reform-promoted school creation. Statistically? You'd be fortunate if things worked out; more than lucky once you understood that long-term records actually suggested that only about two out of six, three out of ten, twenty, at the most thirty percent of small, choice and charter schools did as well as, or better than, old-fashioned stable, locally-accessible, all-student-inclusive, traditional neighborhood public schools. A significant number of these abruptly created and suddenly deregulated schools?

Had, in fact, exhibited frighteningly dismal results.

More than a few had even *failed miserably*.

Failures, however – student-abusive, student-handicapping and student-harmful – that mostly?

Oh, you'd never hear about. Never even know had occurred, as, in years ever more ruthlessly bent to the never-ending instigation of Big-Money-lucrative reforms, a negative, cause-undermining choice school information was so hastily and efficiently swept under the rug. Unappealing statistical information so speedily brushed back into the safe haven of an ever whirling reform where the cyclical flow of newly instated shiny-penny ideas might tidily obscure the strategically hidden succession of short-lived mistakes.

Mistakes that in truly modern days?

Could now so neatly and conveniently be filed away as being simply additional examples of our nation's repeatedly manufactured (but, oh my, surely forgivable) *unintended consequences*.

*Perhaps even more detrimental for a growing number of students is the increasing array of choice/charter/voucher programs now being exposed as having simply taken advantage of nonchalantly deregulated funding parameters to line the pockets of those in charge.

Counting To Twenty Percent

Oh, my yes.

You'd certainly think, with all of the carefully selected publicity; with all of the emotion raised by heartrending, choice-promoting, parent-triggering movies; with all of the rush, in some districts, to create not just one or two special new choice schools, but a suddenly deregulated plethora of newfangled institutions; oh, surely you'd think that the system which was allowing such an unprecedented academic diversity?

Was not only working, but working extremely well.

It wasn't.

But.

As Big Money years committed to a lucrative educational transformation progressed, through the fanatic manufacture of choice school after choice school (choice schools which, then, ever so carefully solicited, accepted and, after obtaining a public funding, ultimately retained and educated *only high performing attendance-and-behavior-reliable students*) – well, through this publicly touted proliferation of “good” choice schools?

Dominant-culture, dominant-culture-similar, curriculum-assimilated and socio-economically-stable students could, so very judiciously, be skimmed right off the top. And moved, along with their more politically active (and thus more politically cumbersome) parents, away from those old-school-traditional and fully integrated, full-services, *all-student-inclusive* buildings.

Students left behind in this national call for the unfettered creation of a privileged-consumer “choice;” students who for one reason or another were not a good fit for cautiously selective out-of-neighborhood, score-protective, curriculum-controlled, police-ticketing charters and small, impressively named limited-seat/limited-services schools – found less and less public protection. Left behind to fend for themselves inside each year’s attenuating number of ever more maligned and ever more deficit-labeled traditional buildings, unwanted students (those most likely to negatively affect choice school scores) faced an increasing experimentation. And, as, one after another, the incessantly implemented but “non-negotiable” experiments failed?

Each year less academically able...

Each year less socially empowered...

Each year more notably isolated...

This annually denigrated collection of undesirable students – those students who, under the instigation of NCLB, had for more than a decade, now, been relentlessly and aggressively test-score-identified as being not only non-standardized but statistically unwanted *failures*:

Faced a yet more unbending marginalization.

Rejected, discarded, and made through test-score divisions ever more politically irrelevant, these most objectionable, lowest-scoring students struggled to survive inside their progressively darkening shadows. Shadows where, in *truly* modern days anticipating the massive disbursement of a quota-based financing?

An increasingly privatized build-the-bed penal system:

Opened its arms – and waited.

As the low-income accountability money continued to flow; as über-wealthy outsiders continued to step in, anxious to add both their fortunes and their say to the educational fray – this increasingly marginalized supply of lowest level choice-school-discarded students; the oh, now, if anyone is paying attention; if anyone has the guts to step up and actually *see* the ultimate,

frightening irony of truth: *That about twenty percent. That exactly original percent of lowest-income, lowest-achieving students which an initial NCLB had so “compassionately” set out to aid.* That about twenty percent who, in days bent to a no-excuses educational reform?

Now huddled each year more helplessly inside the fewer and fewer traditional, fewer and fewer local, fewer and fewer community-and-culture-protective, all-student-inclusive neighborhood schools.*†° Students who, with each act of a segregating, isolating invasion?

Became easier and easier to identify.

Easier and easier to label.

Easier and easier to blame.

And, in lieu of an honest recognition, support and aid?

Easier and easier to stigmatize, criminalize – and incarcerate.

*After thirteen years given over to a callously implemented testing, labeling and segregating, it has now become acceptable for those districts originally tasked with reaching out to improve the lives of their lowest-scoring 20% to conversely laud the fact that their more logical modern-day goal *is to provide better schools for their higher-achieving 80%*.

†Lately an increasing number of civil rights activists have begun to point out: In more than a few states the public school system of 2015 is more overtly segregated than the one which existed in the 1970s.

°Adopting yet another avenue to a test-score-based segregation, in one largely dominant-culture suburban district forced to accommodate an increasing number of the non-White/non-English-speaking students pushed, through measures of a test-score regentrification, out of the inner city – concerned local parents have begun to suggest that, “just like those inner-city districts,” their own district should generate more choice school options: options which might be specifically created for “*those students*.”

Selective Spotlighting

Certainly?

Well, certainly you *could* selectively spotlight some choice school creations, some revolutionary practices which had been making a recognized difference. Certainly you *could* promote the

theory that – well, should *all* low-income schools be exactly like one particularly selected charter/choice/voucher program or another:

Oh, you could save the world. It was just that:

Well, wasn't such thinking just a tad bit naïve?

Whether there was even the slightest possibility, in an increasingly diverse nation, that all schools, all parents, all students, all districts, all teachers, and all school personnel could, one day, somehow *be exactly the same*; all an exact mirror of the students, parents, communities, leaders, teachers and staff who momentarily existed inside one or another highly promoted educational program – well, thankfully no one had (as yet) quite had the daring to take on that bell-the-cat magical, but annoyingly difficult, concept.

And, although a few triumphant stories of a non-traditional academic success existed, and could, with a single-minded persistence, be particularly and repeatedly highlighted, very few reform promoters were willing to bring up the fact that – well, over time? The most lauded “choice” success stories had become so profoundly reliant upon an *added* public funding, and an *added* grant or philanthropic money, that, in the process, schools like these had essentially been turned into expensively exclusive, privately funded institutions; programs which, along the way?

Had left the world of public school budget realities far, far behind. Nevertheless.

You'd hear, over and over, and then over again – oh, about *this* great school. Or *that* exceptional program.*

You'd see highly publicized Presidential promotions of one or another particularly successful school: Declarative choice-school promotions which assumed, on the part of the national audience, a passive acceptance of the now politically proffered choice/charter/voucher pathway to an unprecedented academic success. However, as with any other market-manipulating publicity – truth?

Depended upon a particular understanding; an understanding that citizens (people like you; people like me) would simply accept the presented facts verbatim. That, being busy, being disconnected, being fact deprived and schematically removed, we would do no personal research. That, much like the larger society? We would look no deeper as choice school advocates direct-

ed our attention to *this* particular school, or perhaps to *that* one. Attentively funneled time and again, year after year the public focus was strategically led to selectively spotlighted programs where, for one reason or another, there had been a notable (if often short-term and fleetingly recognized) success.

Hooray choice, you'd hear, again and again.

Hooray charters! Hooray exclusive, limited-seat/limited-services small schools.

Hooray, hooray!

What you did *not* hear? What no choice promoter, nor big-money, self-selected educational expert neither recognized nor spoke about: The many, many, *many* innovated, invaded, changed, chartered, choice-deregulated and incessantly reformed schools where the word *successful*?

Never surfaced at any time during a true-life program description. For each nationally recognized and highly acclaimed victory? For each carefully selected and notably spotlighted (if often short-lived) "win?"

There were, actually, double, triple, and even, in a few change-fanatic districts, quadruple failures.

School programs which opened, ran amok, fell apart, forced the disinterested shuffling of teachers, exchanged administrators mid-year, lacked even a slight loyalty to proven disciplinary plans, obligated poorly matched and unknown curricula, forced an influx of inexperienced and unpracticed greenhorns, added no-students-allowed analysis and professional development days on top of already existing no-students-allowed analysis and professional development days – so much Big-Money-lucrative reform occurring, in fact, that along the way?

No one was actually educating the children.

Disastrous, chaotic programs; botched innovations calling out antagonistically for yet more "non-negotiable" invasions; muddled, disordered failures which, more than occasionally, left low-income, politically-irrelevant kids so far behind that – as they struggled to survive the "compassion" brought to education by an über-modern reform? Too many, in fact, took an academic step backward. For each especially choice-successful and assertively spotlighted child: two, three, four, and even five children correspondingly subjected to a disinterested, low-income guinea-pig chaos.†

Sit quietly; do the *moral* math.
You might feel lonely. Almost no one else?
Seems to be doing it.

*If you have become a fan of any particular “proven successful” big-name charter chain, be sure to do your homework. If you take the time to look, you will find that no matter how big or impactful the name, each chain owns its own percentage of well hidden – and strategically never mentioned – short-term, student-handicapping failures. (But hey; that’s okay. Surely these were not *your* children?)

†While the original instigators of NCLB argued that their goal was to protect children from the “soft discrimination of low expectations,” critics note that this has apparently become the justification for implementing the *hard discrimination of physically closing their schools and firing their teachers*. (And for those who would argue that students living inside those communities hardest hit by poverty continue to need “better” schools: PLEASE STOP AND LOOK INTO the already more than a decade of previously instigated governmental and/or “philanthropic” invasions forced into/onto these very same neighborhoods. Is it that our national economy has “accidentally” created this visibly overwhelming poverty, *or that the past thirteen years callously bent to a test-score separating, heavily-regentrifying, school-closing “accountability” has forced our poorest citizens into an ever more notable isolation?*)

Love By Lottery

“What if,” a neighbor suggested, “we decided to run all of our public institutions on the lottery system which has apparently become acceptable in our public schools? What if citizens had to enter and win a lottery before the fire department would come to put out a fire? What if police officers and emergency personnel would only respond to calls where their customers waved a visibly winning ticket?”

“And, what if,” she continued in the same vein, “public hospitals decided to administer help not through an equally funded aid for all, but only to those clients who had had the foresight to have entered, and won, an infirmary sweepstakes?”

Intrigued by her argument and taking it a touch further – I contemplated:

What if.

Well, *what if you had a very large family?*

What if you had given birth to a whole lot of kids, but then decided that you only needed to feed, clothe and educate the two or three children in your household who had managed to jump through a series of complicated hoops in order to get to an inconveniently located jar and pull out a winning ticket – *because you had only promised to care for and protect those children who won your love lottery*. (This in spite of the glaringly visible fact that your very large family included kids who, as a result of special needs, developing language skills, cultural disconnect, domestic abuse, invasive poverty, and/or transient or even nonexistent homes, could not even try for the jar, never mind win a ticket.)*

What if, as our nation enthusiastically bought in to the modern-day trend for a market-competitive, venture-capital-attracting, immediate-result-offering investment speculation: *We only funded some schools*. What if we only funded those schools most likely to make us, as a nation, as a government, as self-proclaimed and highly paid educational experts: *Look good*.

Speculating upon, and gambling with – children?

With actual lives?

In case, over the past decade, you had managed to stay outside the realm of a national public school funding; in case you had somehow remained oblivious – oh, you had missed some pretty darned big fiscal modifications. As a result of not only the conservative-created, big-money-lucrative invasions demanded by a highly punitive NCLB, but the additionally attached, theoretically liberal test score dictates behind a ruthlessly implemented R2T (*all of which exacted an absolute allegiance to top-down, corporate-style competitive controls*), public educational funding – although collected indiscriminately through the taxation of *all* citizens?

Was no longer slated to be distributed equitably, or impartially, to *all* children.

Oh my, no.

Old-fashioned notions of a democratic, Civil-Rights-demanded public-funding-for-all had been converted, inside long years of a “caring” accountability, into a gigantic, nation-sized:

Lottery.

(And, well, okay. Yes, we can, if you’d like; if your comfortably disconnected, privileged-world sensibilities are easily affected – well, we can continue to refer to reform mandated

NCLB/R2T funding configurations as...a lottery. As an exciting *race*. As a necessary *competition*. We won't mention, if it will hurt your gentle, middle-class, poverty-detached disposition, that the low-income public school monetary game had been transformed into something which, in reality?

Looked a whole heck of a lot more like out-and-out prostitution. A funding system where, *if you want the money?*

Do what we say.

Don't resist; don't talk back; don't question our invasive motives; don't, and this is non-negotiable, *give us any attitude*. Don't complain, don't speak up; don't fuss about impossible or denigrating expectations; don't mention the fact that each year the rules change, the requirements shift, a reform focus realigns, and that, ultimately? That final "discretionary" disbursement is both suspiciously slippery and unpredictably arbitrary.

If you want the money?

Debase yourself; embarrass yourself; humiliate yourself – and, well, here's the catch: *Maybe* we'll love you. *Maybe* we'll give you the money.

But, hey?

I wouldn't count on it.)

Coming as a byproduct to the invasive retaliations forced into low-income schools by an ever more punitive accountability, gradually the federal, then state, and ultimately both the city and district approach to funding public schools stopped recognizing any need for implementing a democratic, everybody's-equal, all-student-inclusive public focus. Each year more aggressively caught up in – and dispensed by way of – invasive testing regulations, a modern-day school financing now ordered funding recipients to jump through an always shifting display of "expert"-dictated hoops. When six chaotically long years dedicated to a no-excuses NCLB were mind-bogglingly followed by the even more inflexible instigation of a newly "liberal" President's brutally competitive race?

The unchecked flood of dictates generated by an increasingly deregulated liability strategically camouflaged the burgeoning national disorder. As the demand for callously unbending innovations amplified; as a subsequently ordered succession of test-based transformations became increasingly entangled?

The issues around school financing grew progressively more simple. If, for one reason or another, your school or district couldn't (or, choosing to resist disconnected and unhelpfully out-of-community, student-abusive dictates, *wouldn't*) comply with the ever more narrowed expectations set forth by disinterested educational "experts;" if your school or district couldn't, or wouldn't, through the immovable application of indifferent reform practices, *produce acceptably high nation-, state-, city- or district-aggrandizing test scores?*

Well, simple.

No governmental or philanthropic funding for *you*.

Or for your (too bad, so sorry) *kids*.†

*For those who care to make a note of it: The repeated instigation of that type of reform which depends upon a parental initiative illustrates that participation rates predictably run at about 80% – and thus not only conveniently exclude, but once again refuse any responsibility for, that problematically lowest 20%. Under the dictates of NCLB, in fact, the "standing" of an entire school might be penalized when, due to a variety of reasons including language disconnect, deportation and incarceration, a parental participation is low.

†A recent news segment actively promoted one "public" school in a very poor neighborhood where students accepted by lottery were given extra time, extra materials and extra attention; the President, it was carefully mentioned, had publicly identified this school as being the type of institution which our country needed. As this especially selected school was enthusiastically promoted, in passing a journalist mentioned that a low-scoring school in the same neighborhood was now to be "phased out." Closed. Yet no one took up the argument – nor apparently even thought it necessary to mention – that those children who, for one reason or another, had not been invited into this parent-savvy, lottery-only school, now apparently deserved no school at all; *certainly not one able to offer them extra time, extra materials and extra attention*.

Weapon Systems Failure

Inside ultra-progressive and highly technical years; in years when not only commercial businesses but quite openly the military had moved to an increasing dependence upon robotic technology – frequently you would hear a popular and oft-repeated phrase in the media.

"Today," might be the gist of the news.

“Well, today, way over there in one of them far-off countries; one of them-there unhappily *foreign* places that everybody keeps talking about? Well, today we sent out one of them new-fangled remote controlled robot-like warplanes, and dadblameit if the confounded thing didn’t up and miss the target. It’s just too goldurned bad, but now large numbers of local civilians – totally innocent people, many of them children – are dead, burned, legless, armless and mangled.”

You could, at this point, infer a huge sigh.

“But, really, what *could* we do? Clearly, dadgumit, this was just another one of them-there aggravating *weapon systems failures*.”

Ah, technology.

What a wonderful thing. You could use it to create intricate, expensively computerized mechanical things, and then, so conveniently – if doing so would suit your purpose – step outside huge operational systems and simply blame...well, not people, but *machines*. (Roll your eyes.) Really, what *could* you do?

It was so much nicer, so much simpler, and so much more socially convenient to ignore the fact that *you* had made the machines. That *you* had deployed the technology. In the overwhelming action you had elected to take, you could argue that – well, in fighting against a situation which *you*, personally, didn’t like? *You* certainly hadn’t meant to do any accidental harm to the often extremely poor and politically irrelevant humans who kept trying (so confusingly and irrationally) to survive in the vicinity of your intentionally deployed, but complicatedly unreliable, machinery.

Those poorest citizens; those citizens most politically disconnected. That part of an overall population?

Least likely to fight back.

Those citizens most unlikely, even?

To have been forewarned that they were standing right there in your line of fire.

A few years ago in the middle of a proactively involved 1960s, as a response to the inclusive intentions generated by an optimistic, civil-rights-imbued decade, a sympathetic governmental action had assigned monies to be used legally only as a support for those schools which served the largest percent of families struggling with lowest national incomes. Years passed, and, mak-

ing a change here, adding or subtracting a detail there, ensuring governmental policies had (with only minimal kicking and screaming) kept predominantly to the original intentions behind a generic low-income school disbursement.

And, each and every year along the way?

Large numbers of low-income and often culturally-different students had continued to struggle academically.

As they always had.

But, *then*.

Well, due, as it was nationally published, to the benevolent intervention of a compassion-led president and the many bi-partisan affiliates ready to follow his lead, hard-hitting mandates of a massive test-score accountability – mandates now munificently collected together and dramatically presented under the optimistic heading of *No Child Left Behind* – were turned into law.

Take that Civil Rights' low-income-school-slanted money, was the abruptly legalized NCLB demand, and, out of a deepest concern for our suddenly recognized poorest twenty percent? *Test those children*. Spend unprecedented truckloads of that low-income-earmarked money and test them, again and again – and again. And, then, pointing compassionately to the testing data you have now managed to not only collect but expensively collate and color-code through the expenditure of additional millions, take another chunk of that equal-rights money – and get out there:

Disseminate yet more of that “equity” funding to *reform, reform, reform*. In the name of your profound concern for our nation's poorest children?

Get out there and uncompromisingly *hit* those now unmistakably test-score-bulls-eyed buildings.

And if, along the way?

Well, if, in your argued-as-well-intentioned (*and thus surely forgivable*) desire to insistently and aggressively strike those newly recognized low-test-score-identified targets? If, in your blithely deregulated but enthusiastically implemented incursions, you “accidentally” abused, harmed, maimed and mangled poor, culturally-different and politically-weakest constituents?

Well, *please*.

You certainly *hadn't meant to*.

At least – well, that's what you'd publish.*

*For anyone willing to see the true parameters of the game: When, in the 1960s, an initial Civil Rights funding was intentionally set aside to be used only as an aide for our nation's poorest students – money that was to be utilized only in a direct confrontation of those issues most overtly connected to poverty (money which was then recognized over ensuing years as having made a notable difference) – well, frustratingly this enticingly massive funding was unavailable to Big Money venture capitalists. Until suddenly, one day? It was “benevolently” redirected into the massive test-score invasions of an unprecedentedly “compassionate” accountability. (Oh, now; *surely* students who have not had no breakfast will still very logically get more out of life if given a test rather than milk and a sandwich.)

Sit Back, Relax

So: You *want* a little of that NCLB/R2T-legislated low-income public school money? You're sure, now; you're willing to compete; you're willing to jump through reform-specified hoops in order to gain both a national and theoretically philanthropic monetary support? And (pay attention, now, this is important) in the process, you'll let us help you *care* for low-income, culturally-different children?

Then close schools.

Especially those schools filled with our nation's poorest, and most often minority, children.

Close those frustratingly lowest-scoring and most loudly maligned, most aggressively labeled schools down. And then, in the name of reform? Send those inner-city, low-income, culturally-different kids – oh, who knows, across town. Somewhere else. *That's* really not important. Just get them out of *this* neighborhood. Because *this* neighborhood?

Is slated for a high-finance, land-speculating, enticingly-lucrative regentrification.

Or hadn't you noticed?

(Go ahead, look around.)

Oh. You're not sure; you think it's not, maybe, a good idea to simply, quietly and indifferently *close* deeply-rooted, democratically-public, inclusively-integrated and culturally-protective schools, and, in doing so – through the subsequent creation of all-student-inclusive-school deserts – mortally destabilize low-income communities?

Well.

Oh, certainly we can pretend that we're listening.

We can even pretend to hear your concerns.

But. Go ahead, now – watch.

Watch as, each year more aggressively, we publicly denigrate your low-income, low-scoring schools. Humiliate them. Embarrass them. Harass them. Give them, in the name of a “competitive” motivation, a highly publicized and loudly touted “failing” grade. Watch as (utilizing bucketloads of our outsider financing as the means to generate gigantic billboards, television commercials, school-grade websites, full-length movies and newspaper or radio ads) we circulate a never-ending flow of negative statistical evidence about these schools, including their pretty much guaranteed (and thus endlessly derided) unacceptable scores.

Year after year.

After year.

Watch as, then, we oh-so-cleverly convince you and the nation at large: *That test scores tell the whole story*. That test scores are all that you (*or anyone who cares about children*) need to see. And you?

Gosh, you just sit on back there.

Go ahead now, get comfortable.

Watch as, so very publicly, we call out – showing our outrage; telling everyone how much we care about and stand for children – well, watch as, uncompromisingly? We demand yet another invasive redesign, yet another destabilizing reorganization, yet another chaotically deregulated (but oh-so-remunerative) reform for buildings which, waving our endlessly accumulated test scores, we now hold up to the nation as being clearly and indisputably *bad*.

Watch as, disinterestedly, we force out massive numbers of loyal, long-term- experienced employees. Watch as, strategically, we publish the fact that we are *firing bad employees*, knowing that you won't be able to see through the ever thickening smoke where we've hidden the fact that – well, due to those annoying old-fashioned, honored-employee contracts carrying the guarantee of due process? We are simply force-moving most of these now crushingly maligned teachers to yet another soon-to-be-abused, next-in-line-to-be-reorganized-invaded-or-closed school. A school where we can, then, turn around?

And immediately *reblame* these very same educators for the unacceptable scores now being produced inside their latest reform invaded and chaotically managed buildings.

Watch as, ruthlessly shuffling teachers around, we publicly isolate and blame them for being additionally problematic; watch as we plow them under as they struggle under the stigma of being not simply *bad*, but *placed*. Watch as, in our response to the nationally modeled vilification of teachers and their hard-won union protections, we create freshly imperative evaluation laws: invasive laws of assessment which, as they are both arbitrarily and vindictively implemented, might help us to more aggressively label loudly-opinionated, student-protective teachers as being the modern-day “unmatched.” And thus make them finally and truly:

Firable.

Watch as, then, state by state, city by city, district by district – methodically we deploy our massive outsider-money advertising campaigns in the effort to encourage citizens to continue their mindless support for our now decade-old attempt at not only blaming these teachers? But inflexibly dismantling their self-serving, *child-hating* unions. Watch as, throttling their power, we belittle them, harass them, censure them, fire them...

And, ultimately?

Silence them.

(Golly. *You* don’t want to hear what they’ve been saying.)

Watch as, then, after loudly asserting that *students matter*; after vociferously arguing that we are *standing for children*; after adamantly claiming that we are *putting students first*; after insistently maintaining that parents who care must continue to *pull the trigger*; after unbendingly contending that those who are truly concerned must *step up* and demand an additional succession of deregulated choice school transformations:

Well, watch as strategically?

We cover our ears.

Watch as, never stopping or slowing, we refuse any recognition of the anguish created when teachers, students and community members struggle to tell us *not* to invade, destabilize and close their local student-and-culture-protective neighborhood buildings. Watch as we pretend not to notice how often we have been asked to discontinue our shocking abuse of loyally hard-working and long-term dedicated employees.

Watch as, conversely?

We call upon a massively funded publicity to loudly and mercilessly malign, humiliate, denigrate, and ultimately ignore anyone – *anyone at all* – who cries out to tell us *no, no, no*.

Shut It Down

And – then?

Oh, my, now, don't turn away. Don't shift around, there, in your seat; don't close your eyes.

Sit up straight; keep watching.

Watch as, across the country – one state, one city, one district at a time – we escalate our harassment of low-scoring, low-income, culturally-different schools. Watch as, following the now nationally lauded recipe for educational chaos, we invade and “reform” over and over, never stopping or slowing our poignantly published concern about the *now-more-than-a-decade-old* production of those untenably “broken” scores.

Watch as, in the name of our endlessly necessary invasions; in the name of continuing to put our nation's children *first*? We convert more and more of their test-score “unacceptable” schools into “innovation” buildings where traditional employee contract regulations (those irritatingly old-school regulations which had historically presumed a protective compensation for trivialities such as experience, longevity and the pursuit of a higher education) – well, watch as, in the name of a truly benevolent reformation?

We take these expensive union-negotiated considerations *off* the bargaining table.

Watch as, after the so many unnecessary protections for due process have been methodically eliminated, we continue to raise class sizes – telling the public that a *good* teacher? Oh, you know, one of our brand-new and much cheaper models; one of our miracle-inducing, short-term youngsters who, being both malleable *and* magical, could surely have no need for expendable frivolities such as experience, long-term commitment, passion or craft: Well, watch as we argue that one of our truly *good* teachers?

Can effectively take on larger and larger class sizes.

Watch as, once we've methodically quashed the banal protections negotiated by self-serving unions, we eliminate time for a

teacher planning; watch as we contend that our newer and better (shorter-term) employees will, in fact, be able to take on *more* classes. Watch as we compel our latest inundation of non-contracted and greenly inexperienced educators to shoulder bigger and bigger workloads, even as, in days of an über-magical wonder?

We allow them less and less instructional time with their students.

Watch as, under the guise of an exceptionally caring accountability, we force an ever realigning supply of outsider curricula and technology mandates onto our publicly disparaged staff – despite their objections, despite their mounting claims that these compulsory academic and management dictates don't match actual student needs.

Watch as, then, so very ingeniously?

We begin to micro-manage each and every detail of our employees' lives, contriving in the process to crush both an educator creativity and discourage any of those annoyingly resistant student-and-culture-protective instincts.

Watch as, methodically?

We eliminate, rather than retain, experienced teachers; watch as, in their place, we accumulate a work force made up of lowest-paid employees: cheaper, shorter-term employees who – now lacking contractual protections? Can be forced to work longer days for an ever-shrinking base pay. Endlessly harassed and endlessly evaluated greenhorns who, overwhelmed, minimally supported, and now non-union-protected, *can so easily be publicly blamed, fired, and replaced* in our modern-day rotation of never-endingly solicited cut-rate recruits.*

Watch as, in the name of paying for test-score performance, we push the glories of “merit pay” even as we incrementally dismantle that old-school employee protective payroll system: a payroll system which had not only demanded an old-fashioned monetary value for hands-on experience, but had intentionally guarded a compensation for the pursuit of higher education and instructional mastery.

Watch as, then?

We continue to call out for more. More, more, and then more, NCLB/R2T-mandated, governmentally- and/or philanthropically-subsidized reforms. Watch as, each year, our benevolent

concern first invades and then breaks up ever more traditional, community-serving, culture-and-voice-protective schools. Watch as, along the way, we manufacture an always changing, always shifting number of small, limited-seat/limited-services, ever-more-exclusive, ever-more-private, ever-more-*outsider-curriculum-controlled* choice, charter and voucher schools.

Watch as, then?

We sift, segregate, identify and move out:

Any student and any teacher who is no longer welcome.

Go ahead; are you comfy there?

Sit back, relax.

Keep watching.

Watch as our now nationally promoted fix-your-school-*our*-way approach to an educational funding (an approach not only popular with the government, now, but more and more predictably with Big Money “philanthropic” investors) continues on its steady path. Watch as, systematically, one state, one city, one district at a time – our nationally promoted recipe for a deregulated educational chaos?

First invades, and then decisively shuts down, traditionally-integrated, all-student-inclusive, local-neighborhood-accessible *public* schools.

One by one.

By one.

*Thirteen years after the instigation of a national high-stakes testing, the number of teachers who can count upon union protections – *and thus the actual implementation of state statute regulations* – has fallen to less than fifty percent. A percentage that, with the momentum attached to a well organized state-by-state public union busting, each year continues to fall.

Anchors Away

“Schools have long been recognized for their service as community anchors.” Written into an article handed out on yet another long day of educator development, this statement was followed by a brief but succinct clarification: “Public schools serve to both anchor and sustain a neighborhood stability through their ability to pull communities together. Locally established schools

encourage citizens to meet, interact with, and recognize one another.”

“*Huh*,” a teacher seated alongside our table whispered across the isle. “You know how in the Navy they’ll say *anchors aweigh* when it’s time to pull up an anchor and move the ship?”

She paused to spell out a selected word: “*A-W-E-I-G-H*.”

Glancing around the room surreptitiously – reminding us, with her look, that an unprecedented number of administrators, evaluators, coaches, specialists and facilitators currently executed the modern-day imperative of keeping an eye on the many *bad* teachers now collected together at this, our latest no-excuses training – she continued:

“Well, if, like this says, schools serve as community anchors? Then maybe these days when they keep closing so many, we’ll need to change that spelling. You know, not anchor’s *aweigh* anymore, but *anchors away: A-W-A-Y*.”

Keeping eyes down, privately we smiled.

It was a good pun.

And, so poignantly?

To the point.

To displace long-established traditions; to assertively un-hinge the deeply embedded bolts which, for so many years, had kept the profusion of old-fashioned, community-and-culture-protective anchors in place? You first had to uproot those who could most vocally make a case against you. You first had to identify – and then painstakingly dislodge – those most loyal employees who could complicate, or slow down, your long-range, smoke-screen-camouflaged intentions for an anchor removal. Of your employees, who was most self-confident, most prone to resist, most inclined to speak out, and most likely to point directly to your abusive (if carefully secreted) intentions?

Ah.

Experienced teachers.

Educators who were not only experienced?

But independent, forthright, and oh-so-frustratingly student-protective. And, to a large degree?

Female; dad-blamed *stubbornly* female.

The older, the more experienced, the more community-loyal these unyielding women had become; the deeper had grown their protectively nurturing, heartfelt roots – the more stubborn

they were. It was, in fact, obstinate, old-school educators like these who, each and every time, were the least likely to be bought off with promises of a shallowly flashy merit pay; the least likely to passively accept the idea that invasively expensive pre-scripted programs were not only needed, but better. The least likely to blush prettily:

And subserviently accept top-down, daddy-knows-best directives.

Problematically, however?

It was also these teachers who were the best known, the most supported, and the most community recognized. Teachers whose loyal, long-term commitments had, in fact, for so many years solidly weighted the oft-celebrated traditions inside locally established, all-student-inclusive neighborhood schools. Many of them? Were those long-term, I-taught-your-mother, I-taught-your-brother, I-know-your-family type of educator: the very type of employee whose routinely involved personality helped to bind those long established old-school practices together.*

Ah, those exasperatingly *stubborn* teachers.

Refusing to be intimidated; refusing to be silenced.

Acting as a ballast to stabilize neighborhoods through their long years of an experienced, loyal service – in the past, low-income-school teachers had often been honored; had often been recognized as exceptional citizens; had, in fact, frequently been lauded as the dreamers most willing to take on a thorniest academic employment.

In the past?

All of this extraordinary effort had even led to an overt praise and heartfelt appreciation.

But, now?

Well now, in a fast-paced nation looking to the no-waiting wonders behind a Big Money fund-generating bell-the-cat magic, these protectively committed teachers simply served to anchor ships which, in the name of a “compassionate” land-speculating, population-dividing innovation:

Must be gotten out of the way.

*When, ignoring both state statutes and contractual regulations, our superintendent unexpectedly force-transferred a group of vocally resistant educators out of our building during summer months, not only did our school suffer

greatly from this sudden loss in experienced teachers, but just as devastatingly from the unseen and under-appreciated fact of additionally losing a proactive corps of fundraising supervisors, sports managers, activity organizers, and club sponsors. It was, in fact, a blow from which our school never fully recovered.

Leveling The Great Leveler

For a couple of years, a long time ago when I, myself, was a high school student, our small rural district had searched for a long-term English teacher. When my junior year rolled around, students returning to Language Arts classes had found a shy, pretty young woman named Ms. Wenton in charge. Although Ms. Wenton only taught at our school for one year; although her quiet, tiny-voiced nature kept everyone on edge as we struggled to hear her whispered instructions – for at least half the student body?

Ms. Wenton was a true favorite.

Invariably sporting a then-stylish very short mini-skirt, as she delivered her lessons in her breathy and barely audible voice, Ms. Wenton would scotch herself up onto a desk which she had located at the front of the room.

And, while seated there?

Cross her legs repeatedly.

We didn't absorb a great deal of Language Arts information that year; however, had the young men in our school been polled, Ms. Wenton would surely have been proclaimed *Teacher Of The Year*. Although she wasn't suited to the job, you had to give her credit for trying. Our school, our district, and our nation owed a lot to young teachers like Ms. Wenton. For that matter?

We owed quite a bit to *all* teachers. Teachers who were *not* so young. Middle-aged teachers.

And, even?

Old teachers.

Old teachers like Mrs. James who taught history down the hall. Mrs. James was definitely *old*. Mercifully, she never wore mini skirts. She wouldn't have won any beauty contests, and, hoo-boy, was she strict. But dang, it if she didn't make us *learn*. (Which, now that I'm older, I realize might have been the whole point.)

Whether it was Ms. Wenton, young, inexperienced, but willing to step up and try, or the clearly aging, no-nonsense Mrs.

James who loyally and very effectively stayed true to one school for over forty years – young, old or middle-aged, in a nation which had committed itself to not only building, but guardedly upholding, a democratically public, *all-student-inclusive* school system, we owed a lot to *any* teacher.

Proud as a country to brag about a history of an innovatively entrepreneurial success, our nation had often pointed to the significance of having legally created (and then intentionally protected) an egalitarian, socially integrated public system of education: a system which had served to both underpin and continue our nation's economically advantageous spirit of an enterprising ingenuity. As a comprehensively inclusive system, our theoretically classless *every-child-must-attend* public structure – globally identified and upliftingly labeled as “The Great Leveler” in a progressively more diverse society – drew praise for its ability to magnetically summon a world of pioneering thinkers.

As a publicly inclusive, socially representative structure?

It was a system able to function because our nation had also, very intentionally and very protectively, produced, depended upon, and legally supported a steady supply of state-licensed, practicum-completed, career-dedicated public school employees.

However, in Big Money years; in years calling out ever more loudly for the no-excuses standardization of a merciless liability? This long-established, traditionally respected teacher supply system – a construct which had historically not only allowed, but expected, educators to accumulate experience, take creative risks, and develop a years-long protective relationship with students, parents and communities – was (ah, surely by now you *can't* be surprised):

Under attack.

Teacher Supplies

Year after year, an assertively legislated NCLB/R2T continued its modern-day call for the no-excuses instigation of an incessantly implemented (and ever more lucratively deregulated) flood of educational reforms.

And, as the years passed?

Gathering support, reform promoters accrued both money and an ever mushrooming supply of publicity-seeking “experts.”

However, as the relentless flow of invasive transformations created an each year more confusing chaos inside low-income schools, with a mounting frustration this burgeoning club of school innovators found themselves running headlong and repeatedly into a solidly anchored string of road blocks: road blocks brought to the table by the cumbersome weight of an experienced educator resistance.

Seeking a solution, reform promoters quickly began to level a barrage of accusations. In rising aggravation, they first loudly identified – and then assertively labeled as unsustainable – the longstanding system of a public school teacher supply.

Conveniently, long years of an aggressively advertised publicity had already managed to convince the average citizen that – well, surely it was in the best interests of poor and often culturally-different children to place an immovable blame for their test scores squarely upon the shoulders of their old-school loyally experienced, *but selfishly inept and undoubtedly bad*, teachers. This publicity, loudly denigrating old-school teachers as being the mindless puppets of self-interested, child-disdaining unions, soon commanded a national focus upon, and push for the ultimate repeal of, longevity-protective, due-process-demanding public employee contracts.*

Concealing, in the process?

The possibility that the years-old conventional system of a teacher supply:

Had, in fact, been operating quite effectively.

Anticipating the annual influx of college-trained, practicum-completed, state-licensed graduates, it was a teacher supply structure founded upon the idea that young educators – after years of working interactively with older and more experienced employees (employees who, very stably and constructively, remained on the job until retirement) could take over the role of mentor for the always incoming supply of newer and younger hires. It was a naturally balanced and cyclically interactive, role-model-dependent structure which intelligently combined the more productive, long-term-effectual experience of older employees with the less efficient and less successful, but attractive, willing-to-learn energy of the young.

It was a necessarily balanced structure where inexperienced and overwhelmed youngsters carrying too much on their

shoulders didn't burn out quickly. And where able, stronger but decelerating senior teachers benefited from regular interactions with a youthful inspiration.

This system of teacher supply, one where university-trained, practicum-completed, state-licensed beginners could rely upon a predictable communication with, and much needed role modeling from, those with hands-on experience, had traditionally been recognized as an indispensable leg of our nation's interest in protecting a true equity when employing effectively experienced personnel at all levels of the socio-economic spectrum. It was, logically, the best and most satisfactory teacher supply system available *if* your true goal was to offer a locally-accessible, democratically-inclusive service to *all* students through the intentional maintenance and retention of an ever-fixed and long-term-contracted reserve of classroom-ready educators.

However, as with any public-service system where an employee quality and experience underscored optimal results?

It wasn't cheap.

To support a truly democratic, truly equitable, *all*-student-protective system of public education?

You had to pay.

For the quality connected to a long-term dedication and experience; for the added ability attached to a higher education; for the more effective methodology and craft tied to a years-long employment – oh, you had to pay.†

A lot.

And, well.

Gee-whiz.

In years when governments could so much more satisfyingly deploy massively collected tax monies as the means to cover the costs of other more important, globally competitive things – critically imperative things like, say, invasively endless wars and promiscuously deregulated (but federally insured) financial system bailouts – well, the many, many, *many* public schools out there; the many institutions required for offering *all* students a truly egalitarian and truly public education? Those community-anchoring, stable-citizen-building institutions *and* the expensive, long-term-experienced educators required to most effectively support them?

So annoyingly and so predictably kept draining our nation's increasingly overstretched coffers.

*Too many reformers gloss over the fact that in a country where *more than three and a half million teachers are necessitated each year*, long-term due-process-protective contracts not only serve to keep a ready supply of public educators in place, but protect our educational system from the whim of those administrators who might elect to dismiss teachers of a particular race or sex, teachers who do not share their personal political or religious beliefs, and/or teachers who most vocally step up to protect the true-life needs of students. (Union-protected educator contracts, in fact, came into practice in part because *all these scenarios have*, at one time or another, occurred in the past.)

†Whenever I have had the chance to ask any long-term educator about her/his success in the classroom, when I have asked “Did you do your best teaching right away? After a couple of years? After five years? After ten years, or more?” The response has always been an immediately emphatic: “*More.*”

The Worser Economy

One year a testing prompt directed my ninth-graders to compose a letter for sending their personal concerns to the President of the United States. As I sat down to evaluate responses later in the day, I came across a draft where one young writer had been plainly overwhelmed by the task of not only putting together the spelling, but the acceptable level of reverence required for communicating with a person of such an unmistakable eminence.

“Dear Sir Mister,” had been written and then firmly crossed out. “Mr. Your Hiness,” had been blotted out as well.

“Your Excelentness,” hadn’t fared any better, nor was there any hope for “My Honerble Sir.” Taking note of the toil evident to this student’s efforts; curious to see the salutation which she had ultimately selected – I looked to her final composition and smiled to see her solution. “To Who it Concerns,” her letter now opened pragmatically.

When in doubt?

Forget the fawning; get right to the heart of the matter.

Focused, the young writer had then delivered the body of her message employing the same no-nonsense tone: “I am writing to tell you,” she had stated directly, presuming the President’s attention, “that your going to have to do something. Maybe you

don't know it, maybe you been too busy, but the economy is getting worser and worser."

Oh, she had a point.

Especially for the already struggling culturally-different, lowest-income and politically-insignificant?

Oh, my yes, it certainly was.

You had to wonder, however, in years overflowing with the never-ending drama behind a deregulated, money-spewing accountability; in times when much needed funds evidently existed but, in the name of a competitive liability were now thrown *at* schools in ways that served not to educate, but to invasively disrupt, confuse and ultimately separate – well, you had to wonder who it was, exactly, that the worser and worser economics of public school budgets?

Did concern.

To Market To Market

Ironically, in modern days when school budget crises and huge spending cuts overwhelmed educational agendas – cutting jobs, cutting supplies, cutting programs – many districts had, years earlier, already entered into the age of a theoretically money saving *economist*-run public school administration.

In more than a few cases?

The newest modern-day substitute for educationally-experienced, ex-teacher superintendents; the latest replacement for long-term, educationally-trained, used-to-be-a-teacher principals; the most recently recruited stand-ins for actual hands-on, teacher-experienced evaluators:

Business-world, business-educated, business-experienced and (hazardously for lucratively positioned land titles, building deeds and enticingly large pension funds)* deregulated-market-playing, instantaneous-profit-seeking *economists*. Modern-day magical, free-market speculating, wondrous-“growth” projecting:

Economists.†

School-leader economists hitting their stride inside long years of a no-holds-barred free-market deregulation; district-leader economists produced, supported and protected by our nation's sudden proliferation in profit-deifying legislations. Contemporary economist thinkers well taught in venture-capital/mon-

ey-is-all modern-day business courses? That *nothing* – oh, certainly not compassion, guilt, nor any sort of a protective tree-hugging ideal bent to the theories of an interconnected human responsibility – should *ever* get in the way of the bottom line.

Modern-day economists, who?

Seeing the recently NCLB/R2T-opened world of competitive education as a disinterested game of financial chess, had no reason to contemplate, nor *feel* any personal pain or empathy as, chaotically and never-endingly, they manipulated humans, neighborhoods and communities. All, for them?

Simply nameless, interchangeable pieces in the larger free-market contest.

Modern-day educational strategists who, even after years of enthusiastically burning through an unprecedented governmental support? Had managed to eke out only shockingly small and continually fluctuating margins of a selectively spotlighted success. Market analysts who, in a tactical recognition of the looming flat-lined-test-score predicament, had begun to play with language as the means to shore up a continued national attention – and, much more essentially, a massively attached national funding – by promoting *not* an honest, long-term, real-life achievement, but the glowingly ephemeral possibilities of an excitingly future “growth.”

Truly modern economists who, even after the expenditure of unparalleled innovation disbursements?

Having so little to show but – save for small pockets of a prudently highlighted success – predictably stagnant and even, in too many cases, precipitously dropping overall test scores, nevertheless authorized an ongoing change-promoting advertising: Publicity that somehow, still, after so many years bent to a minimally productive and budget draining spending? Continued to ask citizens to step up and offer an additionally unquestioned support for yet more punitive test-score reformations – due, *even after more than a decade given over to the expending of a truly massive financing?*

To the continued, and even notably growing, production of those so many unacceptably “broken” scores.

Ah.

Well, yes; it was true.

Here was yet another of those fun little reform paradoxes.

Although we continued to devour mountain upon mountain of money; although we had failed, in the process, to make any truly notable *all-student-inclusive* national progress; although repeatedly and insistently the country had been told that our global standing in education was falling to lower and lower levels – well still, persistently?^o

We advertised the theory that: If you *cared about kids?*
You had to support us.

It was, in fact, imperative, that with a blind trust you continued to offer us yet more money so that we might keep on doing exactly what we had already been doing for more than ten years, now, in our compassionate effort at “fixing” a growing number of seriously unhappy schools.^Δ

Go ahead, was our relentless big-money-advertised call. Jump on up here; jump on up and join us here, on our magical “growth”-dependent wagon. Knock those ruby-red slippers together, close your eyes tightly and...*believe.*

Because, in an über-modern twenty-first century looking to the magic of instantaneous economics? Obviously that’s what it would take. *Believe* with us that somehow, even after more than a decade dedicated to an invasively detached and non-educator-led modern-day economist thinking – well, *believe with us that by spending yet more of that really Big Money in our effort to endlessly test and aggressively reform, close, and invade low-scoring schools – oh that one day? Somehow?*

We will miraculously (and inexplicably) turn everything around. And, golly; if you’re really that gullible; if you’re really that naïve?

I’m pretty sure that we still have a little swampland languishing, out there, somewhere in the backwoods of Florida.

(My; we could literally keep on doing this – *for years.*)

*It might be a good time to look into the policies endorsed by your state’s governor when, in über-modern deregulated days, more than a few have discovered the rush of playing poker with the truly massive financing attached to their state’s public employee pensions.

†I am aware that there are those who would argue that a businessman (or woman) and an economist are not cut from the same stone. However, in days when our nation’s overall interest in protecting the “seventh-generation” good

of the economy has so very plainly sold itself out to the more modern-day interest in a nobody-held-accountable pursuit of instantaneous profits – let’s not quibble. It’s all one and the same.

°Should you wish to recognize the statistical fact that *affluent* students in the United States perform as well as, or better, than students from all other countries – well, the fact is there for you to find.

Δ When the inner-city high school in our district known for housing the largest number of our new-to-the-country, language-learning students repeatedly produced blatantly lowest scores, over the following years a string of student-segregating NCLB mandates methodically pushed most of these students out of the neighborhood and into a high-minority suburb located on the far reaches of town. However, as the high school which then absorbed these students began to suffer a visible drop in test scores, thirteen years after the initial instigation of a state-mandated testing, this second high school is now being told that it must dramatically “transform” or close its doors. So, the question now arises: Once the invasive transformations of a “benevolent” reform systematically force these unwanted language-learners out of their most recently selected neighborhood, where will they go...next? (And how sadly ironic to hear, again and again, from reformers and politicians alike that a massive testing *must* continue as the necessary means for forcing these schools to deal with their racial issues – and think, “Oh, my, yes; *it certainly does.*”)

Blowing Bubbles

Totally Out Of The Blue – or so it was loudly proclaimed in the final years of the first decade of our latest millennium – a shockingly unexpected, who-could’ve-seen-it-coming financial crisis, a catastrophe which had remained perniciously hidden (or at least very conveniently ignored) was suddenly, and very scandalously, exposed.

The first-world economic wake up call, arriving as it did at the tail end of multiple years bent to a loudly promoted stock market gambling, hit the realm of everyday citizen life heavily and dramatically.

Wham blam bang!

The country’s smoke-screen-hidden, market-deregulated, magically-unsustainable free-market “growth” bubble (a bubble wherein *everybody* could surely own a three-story five-bedroom McMansion while living unrestrainedly on sub-prime, balloon-attached mortgages and literal handfuls of unpaid credit cards):

Burst.

Sleepily the nation had blinked, forced to wake up to the unappealingly *non*-magical reality of modern-day economic policies. Groggily everyone had struggled to understand. Citizens who had gotten used to living inside the la-la land both created and sustained by a governmentally deregulated *growth*-projecting, *growth*-dependent theory of a free market economics, had to strain and grapple right alongside carefully stunned politicians.

Everybody, apparently?

Had been shocked as the nation wrestled with the idea that – well when you methodically eliminated group-protective regulations; when, in fact, you replaced group safeguards with a free-market *deregulated* self-interest? You ended up with (oh dear, this was just *too* surprising) self-promoting economists, bankers, venture capitalists, “dark pool” investors, stock market analysts, hedge fund manipulators and profit-seeking CEOs who, after taking a full advantage of the legalized free-for-all offered via an unbounded speculation, had used financial markets as a personal casino. And, then:

Sold out not only each other?

But their own companies. And ultimately, the very country which had so blithely allowed them such an untethered economic freedom in the first place. All activity promulgated in an effort *not* to assist, *not* to protect, *not* to aid nor facilitate – but, with an enterprisingly premeditated focus?

To attain unheard-of it's-all-mine personal profits.

To a dazed and confusedly blinking nation, what was apparently even more shocking? As the years of a painful, poverty-creating, class-dividing recession followed the dramatically shattered fiscal bubble – well, evidently these very same self-interested, market-manipulating, and now very, *very* rich citizens:

Did not want to share.

Did not even feel (see how conveniently the profit-is-all, no-taxes-for-me, streets-bridges-tunnels-schools-libraries-and-parks-come-from-the-Easter-bunny theory of a modern-day business plays out here) *obligated* to share.*

Oh, what an astonishingly unprecedented thing to learn. Although perhaps – well, wasn't such thinking maybe just a touch naïve? History itself, in fact, had repeatedly taught this very lesson; could actually have pointed quite overtly to the dangers

skulking behind a free-for-all, let-the-rich-get-richer-and-their-wealth-will-trickle-down financial deregulation.

What a *shocking* thing to learn:

That once you allowed the rich to become not simply *the rich*, but the *super rich*?

They cared *a lot* about money.

And very little about anything – or anyone – else.

*In a paradoxical twist, many corporations originally happy to benefit from our nation's all-inclusive public school system – a system recognized for producing its guaranteed flow of creatively educated personnel – have, by taking advantage of modern-day deregulated markets, grown so fat that they now choose to locate their head offices outside national borders, and thus avoid paying local and national taxes. However, as these taxes have been pulled from state and federal educational budgets, the public school system has grown so frail that it can no longer guarantee the necessarily steady stream of comfortably educated workers upon whom these corporations originally depended. Hence, they have begun to whine and complain that our country “does not produce enough educated workers.”

Bamboozled

As the reverberating shock of a loudly bursting economic bubble hit the nation, what appeared to be self-evident to those who had been paying attention...

Ah, shoot, let's not even go there.

Clearly, let's face it: very few people had actually been paying attention.

What, through the process of a simple deduction, *should* have been self-evident?

Was the fact that our country's long-term stability would now depend upon a meticulous (and very intentional) avoidance or crisis-creating, profit-is-all, *magical-growth-projecting* business leaders. What everyone *should* have agreed would be both assertively and plainly needed? Was a purposeful move to steer clear of that soft-edged, fuzzily-deregulated world where a combination of self-interest and a lack in group-protective regulations had led our nation to the very brink of a Great Depression Era financial abyss.* Perhaps even more manifest; perhaps even more necessary in days of a harshly punishing bursted-bubble reality?

Would be the deliberate empowerment of *not* free-market I-create-magic economists; *not* self-promoting pie-in-the-sky, click-your-heels-and-believe, “growth” projecting (*I-take-mine-off-the-top*) leaders, but:

Accountants.

Simple

boring

pocket-protector-wearing

calculator-punching

one-plus-one-honestly-no-kidding-equals-two

mathematicians.

Because?

Well, inside the many long years committed to a magically deregulated financing; inside the many long, intoxicating years piloted by an ever increasing supply of growth-projecting economists – well, evidently?

No one had been expected – seemingly hadn’t even known *how* – to answer for the actual dollar-by-dollar whereabouts of the handily promised and enthusiastically bell-the-cat-legislated Big Money disbursements. Whirling about inside all of the no-holds-barred, modern-day economist thinking; tumbling about inside all of the excitingly administered everybody-get-on-board-and-trust-the-rich-to-save-the-poor optimism which had, then, so very handily enabled the many strategically thickening smoke screens to both encircle and camouflage Biggest Money payouts?

Well, inside all of that glittering, distracting razzle-dazzle, *who could be expected to keep track of the actual funding?*

Unhappily – oh, but maybe not all that surprisingly. Even after the painful deflation of a magically unfounded economic bubble, what our country needed and what it could, amazingly, even in years of a painfully ongoing recession, still be bamboozled into taking...

Turned out to be two very different things.

*Some financial analysts argue that: Due to the fact that the majority of those who *intentionally defrauded the market* were never directly held to account – well, with so many *willing-to-swindle* players still in power, they will simply continue to weaken the financial system so that our nation’s next economic failure will not only be inevitable, but will come at an even more painful price.

Stepford Principals

As the first-world financial bubble burst; as, hand-in-hand with the general economy, stock markets took a treacherous nose-dive; and as, in a historically unprecedented moment, our national governmental leadership turned over: The magical “growth-bubble” approach to funding and reforming public schools?

Not only stayed blindly on target, but *unaccountably and appallingly* (surprising the hell out of many who had so optimistically voted for change):

Gained momentum.

When, under a new President’s management, the callous invasions of NCLB were not only remandated, but mind-bogglingly offered an additional funding through the abrupt appendage of test-score-dependent R2T competitions, the destabilizing act of bell-the-cat allocating and then throwing huge sums of a minimally-regulated, reform-attached “competitive” capital *at* politically defenseless, each-year-more-upended, each-year-more-divided, each-year-more-test-score-denigrated schools, moved forward.

Proffering a judicious political support for fresh leadership, as the new government’s enthusiasm for test-based retributions escalated, in a calculated measure the I-care-about-kids-let-me-get-on-that-well-funded-wagon club of reform experienced skyrocketing growth. Depending upon the new administration’s continued allegiance to weakly regulated (and heavily smoke-screened) Big-Money disbursements, the parasitic alliance of reformers forged innovatively ahead.

Anxious to buttress the now nationally established modern-day status quo – an increasingly top-down, non-collaborative status quo where the incursions of testing reigned indisputably as king – reform advocates understood: To cement a continued guarantee? An additional funding must now be solicited for Stepford-like trainings. Fast-paced educational trainings able to recruit, educate and deploy an ever increasing number of business-minded, business-experienced, choice/voucher/reform-promoting administrative clones.

Governmental, philanthrocapitalist, and undisclosed “gift” money began to flow.

Superintendent trainings. Principal trainings.

Specialist trainings. Supervisor trainings.
Evaluator trainings. Test-facilitator trainings.
School board trainings.

Trainings that, in über-compassionate days ever more dependent upon the nonstop invasions behind a fund-garnering reform, were turning out to be ever more essential.

Because – well, here’s the thing.

It was not all that easy to train yourself. To condition yourself, as progressively you grew “smarter,” to unbendingly offer only an unquestioned obedience in days of a show-me-the-money management; to coach yourself in how to not only control but retract any tendency toward an interpersonal, neighborhood-and-culture-protective empathy; to teach yourself in how to avoid hearing (or, even yet more unhappily, responding to) the heartfelt concerns coming poignantly from students, teachers, support staff and parents.

And, most essentially?

To train that rubber stamp of an invasively disconnected and disproportionately choice-school-supporting reform approval?

To slap down and hit the paper *each and every time*.

The so many pricey but surely modern-day requisite let-us-do-your-thinking-for-you trainings available, now, for the imperative reform-dedicated, choice-school-promoting *educational leaders of tomorrow*. Those far-thinking, futuristic innovators and evaluators who might be decisively trained in how to keep not only the student-separating mandates of a high-stakes testing, but – even more significantly – the massively legislated sums of a heavily disbursed but minimally regulated accountability money:

Up and running.

Throw-Away Economics

When I had first purchased my small house, a new, natural-gas stove came with the sale. Less than a year had passed, however, before I noticed that small spots on the enameled cover of the otherwise fully functioning appliance had begun to wear thin; apparently the metal hood was rusting through near the vicinity of the always burning (and evidently moisture bearing) pilot lights.

In every other way, the stove was in great shape; it worked well, and overall, in appearance, looked appealingly new. As I set out to address what I thought of as a nominal problem, I was surprised to hear what I had already begun to hear from plumbers, furnace technicians and electricians in my earliest days of home ownership.

Always some variation of the same refrain:

“We don’t have anyone who can fix that.”

A repairman employed by a large home improvement company told me that, in fact, he wasn’t actually permitted to fix existing hardware: he was only available to sell and install new equipment. “I’m sorry,” he had explained. “But, you know? Things just aren’t made the way they used to be. You’ll have to replace it.”

This recurrently stated logic never made much sense to me. Discarding an otherwise reliably functioning and attractively new appliance simply because of *minor* issues which, at the most, affected one-fiftieth of the whole?

However, as a first-world property owner operating in the twenty-first century, I soon discovered that I was expected to get used to this short-term illogical – but clearly popular – economic reasoning. As a now rooted, home-owning cog in the modern-day competitive-market machine, I was meant to accept the idea that my old-fashioned view of fixing the larger and generally well-functioning system simply by identifying, and subsequently tackling, only the smaller, more particular issues:

Well, *that* kind of a solution?

Was now clearly outdated.

Much less cost-effectively rational; much less economically agreeable – than an outright and fully detached replacement.

Living, as I did, in the fast pace of days committed to the magic of “growth”-projecting bubbles; living in days when the competitive, free-market economics of throw-away-and-replace had become a more encouraged solution than locate-and-address-actual-issues – well, it shouldn’t have been a surprise to watch as a similar approach to educational renovation found popularity. It shouldn’t have been a shock to see the deregulated logic of throw-away economics start to first identify, and then rout out, deeply-anchored and traditionally inclusive – but now loudly touted as test-score “broken” – neighborhood schools.*

Counting upon the growing allegiance extended each year more predictably by training-produced, top-down-loyal educational leaders, reformers were quick to initiate the claim that what would now be incontestably required; what would now be imperatively necessitated as part of our nation's benevolent effort at addressing that never-ending production of statistically "broken" scores? An intentional move toward treating *all* public schools as a free market. An intentional move toward seeing the overarching public system as a consumer-based, deregulated-market forum where competitive, demanding shoppers could keep academic services sharp.

The kind of a competitively free market where, if *any* school, for *any* reason, wasn't up to par? If, for *any* reason – oh, like those endlessly produced and district embarrassing minority-school test scores – a building wasn't living up to expectations? Well, falling back upon the fast-paced competitive economics of truly enlightened days:

Throw it away.

Eliminate it.

Close it.

And, then?

Open another school, or, yet more excitingly, two or three small impressively-titled schools under a *new* top-down, non-collaborative, don't-talk-back, daddy's-in-charge management. *New* contemporary, competitive schools with *new* (read: non-unionized, lowest-paid) teachers. *New* non-traditional schools expected to function under a new, ever-more-private, ever-more-exclusive, ever-more-outsider-curriculum-controlled, limited-seat, *sorry but we can't accommodate Special Needs, we don't have facilities for English Language Learners* management.

That type of management which, in far-thinkingly futuristic days?

Could now be ever more reliably executed by a growing number of assertively recruited and carefully trained modern-day educational "experts."

*In place of the nationally popularized use of that terminology which argues schools and students to be *bad*, *broken* and *failing* (a terminology most likely to produce a knee-jerk connection between poor and/or culturally-different students and deficiency), critics propose that those who seek real change must

intentionally re-think a school characterization through the purposeful employment of alternate descriptors; descriptors such as *struggling*, *underfunded* and *underserved*. Descriptors able to push an academic culpability away from those most affected by poverty and social injustice, and drive it back into the realm of a debilitating governmental inequity.

Corporate Education

Running public schools – traditional, nonprofit, location-specific, equitably-funded, democratically-inclusive *public* schools – as *new* corporate-style, for-profit, limited-seat competitive businesses? Treating all students, parents and communities in an increasingly diverse society as equally endowed, equally able, one-size-fits-all clients?

Well; exactly how does that saying go in Latin?

Caveat emptor:

Let the buyer beware.

Reform promoters pushing to preserve and protect the flow of Big Money continued to advertise their demand for the phenomenally expensive test-score-based opening, redesigning, closing, restructuring, and reopening of an apparently infinite extravaganza of deregulated schools.

Science schools. Technology schools. All-boy schools. All-girl schools. Green schools. Extended-day schools. On-line schools. Religious schools. Semi-religious schools. Non-union schools. Innovation schools. National-standards schools. Lesson-reversal schools. Year-round schools. K-12 schools. Voucher-only schools. The unbounded flow of new school proposals hit district leaders at such a fast and furious pace, in fact, that few Big Money reform-dependent innovators managed a breath between rubber-stamped approvals.

Safely tucked in behind the glitter and glow now emanating from each year's additionally confusing smoke screens – smoke screens allowed to grow both thicker and wider with each aggressively implemented (if only short-lived) innovation – reform promoters judiciously avoided the public clarification of two important deregulated-market truths.

Truth number one: When a free market competition had been deregulated to the point where consumer protections disappeared; when, under the free market contention that any regulato-

ry constraint hampered the unfettered “trickle-down” growth of business, consumer safeguards had been eliminated (thinking that some suggested to be perhaps just a wee bit reckless, as, once unleashed? Company after company pulled up stakes to move unconcernedly overseas looking for a cheaper, unprotected labor and resources):

Well, in this blithely deregulated world of falling consumer safeguards, products hadn’t, typically?

Gotten better.

More abundant, yes; less expensive, usually.

But, more often than not?

Much, much less well made.

Once an unrestricted free-market competition had gained a foothold; once quality control legislation had experienced a methodic reversal – quality, in fact?

Was no longer the point.

Cheaper; shorter-term; easily acquired; quickly discarded; *repeatedly replaced*. Instantaneous, no-regulations/no-responsibilities *profits*.*

That was the point.

Truth number two: As this unfettered free-market theory applied itself to the suddenly competitive world of a low-income school reform; as deregulated-market schools began to contend for an innovation-based funding; as rival academic programs started to woo and enroll (and then publicly brag about their success with) *only highest motivated, most capable students?* Each year more inflexibly, turnaround schools depended not upon working carefully *with* hard-to-serve, struggling children, but – just the opposite.

To survive in this theoretically “better” free-market competition, choice schools quickly bent to their progressively tightening role; diligently they began to locate, enroll, support and retain only those students who could produce one thing, and one thing only: *Higher test scores*.†

In the newly competitive era of a cutthroat corporate-style education?

Elevated test scores – as opposed to any non-standardized, old-school attempt at offering an honestly organic, working-with-kids-where-they-are, long-term education – had become the sole and unbending monitor of a contending school’s continued exis-

tence. Anxiously working to ward off the ever widening array of consequences attached to a brutally punitive NCLB/R2T, in the paradoxically *student-protective* days of a truly modern accountability?

There was only one logical avenue for survival.

Protectively protecting your school through the painstaking enrollment, and subsequent retention, of only those students who would most likely test favorably on dominant-culture-skewed, one-answer-fits-all, increasingly-outsider-standardized exams.

*A recent exposé shed light upon one tax-money-funded on-line school making technology investors rich even as it produced abysmal graduation rates; the drop-out rate for this school had, in fact, been abnormally high. The school continued to garner a massive funding, however, not for producing academic results, but by simply taking advantage of a deregulated funding-per-student enrollment process: The more enrollees? The more funding. (*And the more computers mandated for purchase* by those districts willing to offer up any one in a growing parade of minimally regulated on-line options.)

†Recently published test score results (that kind of testing result which die-hard reformers, including the President, keep telling everyone about) pointed to a notable success inside one carefully selective application-only (proactively involved parent) school where services for Special Needs students and English Language Learners had become minimal to nonexistent. Blithely unaware of the segregated elitism now inherent to this school's success, newscasters crowded happily that this was surely one school where our district administrators "got it right."

Wat's The Problem

Low-income, culturally-different schools.

No matter how you sliced them, they offered up some of the most interestingly diverse students. In our large, inner-city district, a district attempting to serve literally dozens of distinctly different language dialects, the art of learning the many and sometimes exceptional student names, could keep both a teacher's attention – and her sense of culturally interactive humor – well honed.

One day?

You might attend a baseball game and find out that when Hu's on first, Wat's on second.

At a basketball game, you might hear kids from one largely Latino school joking, as their team played against students from another largely Latino school, about the obvious need for a better Juan on Juan defense.

If you deduced, finally, that Elemenoh's name stood for the letters LMNO? Perhaps you'd suddenly understand why her twin sister's name was Peekuar.

Once you had grasped that the written name Yo3on was to be pronounced *Yothreeon*, well, likely you'd sit down one afternoon with La—ah, and help her understand that if she wanted her name to be enunciated as *Ladashah*? She absolutely must comprehend the difference between using a dash – and a hyphen.

And if, one year, you came across the name Tsinistintsina Tsosie on your formal class roster:

Did you try to pronounce it?

So many inimitable, and compellingly particular, names.

So many undoubtedly unique children.

If, in the end; well if, honestly, you enjoyed kids? If your intentions were not to aggressively mold students into rigidly assimilated cookie-cutter citizens, but to actively appreciate individualism, and, staying steadily on task, to celebrate identity while educating each child as well as you were able? If, to you, the word *progress* was not a synonym for a standardizing, be-exactly-like-the-dominant-culture behavior?

Then you had no reason to fight against disparate names, disparate fashions, disparate views and disparate worlds. In truly democratic, culturally-assorted classrooms, unique appellations and personalities met, intertwined and melded, as much as possible, tolerantly together. In mixed-race, mixed-culture, mixed-ability truly *public* school classrooms, reality *was* diversity; disparately unique, non-standardized and organically self-celebrating classrooms, in fact, had been a proud facet of the Civil Rights' push toward a truly integrated everybody's-equal, everybody-deserves-attention public education formula.

A formula intent upon protecting an inclusively tolerant diversity that, in fast paced deregulated-market days; in days ever more immovably tied to a severely punishing, all-student-homogenizing, test-score-standardizing accountability?

Was headed directly into hard-hitting reform's line of fire.

Under the harshly punitive laws commanding an each year more unbending test-score conformity, uniquely-integrated, diversity-protecting, multiple-culture classrooms were, in fact, coming face to face with a systematic elimination as the nationally acclaimed *produce-acceptable-test-scores-or-close* club of competitive choice pushed for nothing less than higher and higher, ever more culturally-standardized, *ever more outsider-curriculum-controlled*...

(Oh my.

Go ahead; sit back, now. Sit back and watch, as:

State by state, city by city, district by district, school board by school board – methodically and meticulously we rid our expensively-written, reform-mandated, page-by-page-pre-scripted curricula of those so many annoyingly popular exclusion-resistant *non-White-Male/non-True-American* events and heroes)*

...cookie-cutter results.

*How do *you* feel if an educational emphasis might now be shifted away from Martin Luther King, Jr. and focused, alternately, upon the economic policies of Ronald Reagan? If the word *imperialism* must be painstakingly exchanged for the happier word *expansionism*? If we simply eliminate any mention of those long and so viciously unappealing years of Jim Crow? If the hard-fought struggles for voting rights enacted by both non-White citizens and women must be redacted so that White male lawmakers might be recognized as having offered up these rights simply out of the goodness of their hearts?

Setting Up The Target

Hidden inside; pushed way back inside; secreted far, far back inside the always moving and always flashily distracting razzle-dazzle generated by an increasingly competitive shell game's call for the unfettered production of a deregulated school choice...

Well, if you were paying attention?

You could find it.

The fact that, inside a corporate-style, market-based *competitive* public school system; inside this latest über-modern construct so loudly promoted as an imperative solution for low-income, culturally-different student *problems*? (Ah, gee; go ahead.

You should be able, by now; capable of finding your way through these particularly smoke-screened words to read, conversely: low-income culturally-different children *are the problem.*) Well, buried way back inside the ever darkening recesses of an innovative reform was the fact that – in a selective, parent-savvy, lottery-based, test-score-dependent, limited-seat/limited-services competitive “public school” system?

There simply would no longer *be* any such thing as a fully democratic and inclusively free *all-student-equitable* public education. To offer a truly egalitarian *public* service?

Schools would have to willingly take a direct we-serve-complexly-diverse, non-standardized students test score hit. And, a direct test score hit in the competitive markets of modern days?

Produced a shiningly red-flagged school-as-problem *target.*

Targeting – oh, well, we’ve covered this. Targeting meant that the school pointed to, now, as being test-score problematic?

Would soon be gone. Out of service. Kicked out of the competitive market. Thrown out, and disinterestedly replaced. Swapped out for a *better* school (read: more intentionally and carefully exclusive). Exchanged for a school with *better* teachers (read: shorter-term younger; much more submissive; much, *much* less expensive). Transformed into a school with *better* students (read: more culturally assimilated; more socially mobile; more economically stable; more likely to do well on a *one-size-fits-all, every-year-more-culturally-narrowed testing*).

Selflessly reaching out, solely because it was the right thing to do; putting out a welcoming hand to hard-to-serve, unlikely-to-produce-high-score students? Students who could create *problems* for struggling schools? Students with special needs? Students with language difficulties? Students with precarious, or worse, nonexistent homes? Economically unstable, transient students? Students with attendance issues? Students known, historically and demographically, *to be difficult and disruptive?*

Nuh-uh.

Not on *our* watch.

The entrepreneurial, privatized style of a competitive, modern-day management; that type of management so loudly supported, now, by reformers of multiple racial and cultural backgrounds – reformers who repeatedly argued that they were not

only *stepping up*, but *standing for* and *putting children first*? Held, actually, absolutely no loyalty to equity simply for the sake of equity. In a “limited-seat” choice school world, as each and every newly formed market-competitive building struggled to find autonomy, it drew up against the fact that – well, in order to survive; in order to garner a necessarily recurrent disbursement of that capricious “discretionary” funding?

It *had* to learn almost instantaneously how to implement multiple prudently selective tactics of a student exclusion.

School boards, after all: Those far-thinkingly futuristic boards brought into existence through the Big Money elections of modern days?

Assertively trained in how to wield that rubber stamp of approval for the creation of a randomly unimpeded lineup of choice schools – well, truly benevolent boards like these had also discovered (just as impatiently; just as inflexibly) how to unceremoniously yank a program funding and abruptly shut everything down. Therefore, rather than finding themselves welcomed, particular recognized-as-difficult students were now ever more industriously ostracized.

Labeled, targeted, isolated and segregated.

The point, in corporate-style, immediate-returns school competitions, was *not* support for a slow, conscientiously diverse and incrementally applied academic achievement. So much more typical of a fast-paced-deregulated, no regulations-equals-no-responsibilities, no-one-ultimately-held-accountable *get-it-now* venture-capital investment, reformers soon came to recognize that Big Money was not, actually, focused upon a long-term and deeply embedded student edification – but, much, much more excitingly?

Upon the flashily magical promises of the *right-now* razzle-dazzle race itself. In days of a free-market, throw-it-away economics, who had time, who even felt obligated to slow down, painstakingly analyze and then honestly address true-to-life low-income issues, or sincerely deal with challenging children. Calling upon choice-school market strategies to *not* work with them, but much more expediently *replace* them.

Oh this, surely, was a much more logical solution.

Certainly, it solved that frustrating hard-to-serve, difficult-student *problem*.

Challenging kids who *got in the way*?

Although the original intentions behind both earliest charter schools *and* a Civil- Rights mandated low-income school funding had been to help the our nation's poorest citizens by offering their struggling students a much needed real-life support – well, now, following the economic logic of immediate-profit/ money-not-people markets?

Oh, in days of an über-compassionate accountability dedicated to putting children *first*? These frustratingly poorest and most annoyingly non-standardized students were, in a surreal and oppositionally oxymoronic way:

The first to be thrown out.

The first to be discarded.

The first to be replaced and exchanged.

Expediently traded in for *better* (read: not desperately poor, not homeless, not dirty, not loud, not needy, not other-than-English-speaking) more *acceptable* students – those more visibly assimilated, more economically stable students who could pull off what our government's latest model for a market-competitive “public” system of education maintained was the one and only instructional goal in a newer and much more compassionate national race:

Getting those scores up.†*

*As headlines extoll an elevated “percent” in graduation rates (and thus allow those schools where fewer and fewer behaviorally problematic, non-acculturated and/or special needs students attend to be held up and applauded as being “much improved”) – it only takes a few seconds to read through attendant caveats and note that this highly lauded statistic has *not*, in fact, been reproduced by children with special needs, second language learners, or (and here, now, is a truly modern-day euphemism) those who are “economically challenged.”

†In our newly “public” understanding of education, the argument has begun as to whether or not those limited-seat/lottery-selective “public” schools where, due to a variety of issues including transience, behavior, illness or imprisonment, students have dropped out, should be expected to “backfill” their suddenly available seats with the complicated disruption of new students. Students who, as those who argue against the need to re-fill any newly opened seats suggest, will be “difficult.” (As in: leave *that* to our nation's inarguably test-score-proven *bad – but truly public* – schools.)

The Business Of Oxymorons

Pushed into attendance at yet another low-level, all-teacher-mandatory, reform-funded training, along with other teachers seated around my table, I followed directives to share my instructional strategies. As, in turn, each educator took a little time to detail her or his personally vetted practices, it was hard to miss the fact that a recently hired barely-out-of-college “specialist” included at our table diligently scribed each teacher’s words.

“Have you noticed?” a teaching peer observed during the coffee break.

“These days it feels as if we exist in the middle of some sort of bizarre oxymoron. What a contradiction to label days like this as *teacher developments*. We sit here,” she continued, “doing all of the work alongside these inexperienced so-called “experts” – barely trained outsiders they keep hiring in some nonsensical way to *fix* us. We keep telling them everything we know about teaching, and then watch as they write it all down to then turn around and present our words to the district as their own ideas about what *we* might need to be taught at the next mandatory training which *we* will all be forced to attend.

“It’s like we’re stuck in this never-endingly insane circle. Who’s being *used* – and who, actually, is being *developed*?”

“Also,” she threw in as an afterthought after glancing around our very large and expensively-hired conference hall whose audience consisted of more than one third well-paid non-teachers. “Is anybody out there paying attention? How much does all of this pretending at a teacher development *cost*?”

Under the enticingly deregulated economics of a competitive school reformation, as an expanding number of the entrepreneurial middle-class-to-wealthy kept jumping up to board the lucratively funded educational wagon – professing loudly to know what, exactly, low-income students needed even as, with a growing anxiety, they pushed to attain an even yet more impressive helping of that suddenly dispersed governmental and/or philanthropic financing – the world of public education had indeed entered into the surreal, dreamlike realm of a conflictingly oxymoronic reality.

Somewhere along the way, as our nation had followed compliantly along, we had been ushered across a threshold and into an especially razzle-dazzle, smoke-screen-protected world. A world where an intentionally never-ending movement camouflaged a storm of contradictory (and astoundingly costly) experiences; experiences much like the publicly promoted and hugely expensive idea of an endlessly required *professional development*. Although, in theory, the words sounded useful; perhaps even benevolently helpful – what they actually described?

Translated into nothing more than a relentless string of non-differentiated, insipidly fuzzy, and vaguely understood meetings. Meetings, meetings, meetings.

And then, as a way to solve the problem of having garnered minimal results from the latest rash of “non-negotiably” commanded meetings?

*More meetings.**

Meetings everlastingly and ineffectually administrated by a procession of defensively inexperienced – but highly paid and powerfully titled – “experts;” experts who, knowing little about true-life instructional strategies themselves, forced educators to listen to, read about, and repeatedly discuss lowest level and easiest understood academic proposals.

Recycled, recurring proposals; reprocessed, replicated methods; cyclically re-issued strategies, policies, and protocols; a rebounding succession of presentations built around practices which college-trained, long-term-experienced educators generally understood, but that abruptly deployed non-education-experienced novice hires did not. Due to an I-never-attended-education-classes/I-taught-only-three-months-yet-surely-know-everything-I-need-to-know inexperience, professional development leaders repeatedly presumed that the inflexible, elementary-level concepts which they offered?

Were actually revolutionary, school-changing hypotheses.†

So, over and over.

And then, one more time, over again.

Bending a little this way, or maybe a little that, lavishly expensive and ruthlessly forced professional “development” meetings re-taught, re-vamped and re-discovered lowest-level academic and disciplinary strategies.

Strategies which, more often than not?

Refused any actual, true-life recognition of the authentic needs attached to low-income and/or culturally-different students.

Strategies which would, however?

Most likely garner positive results when applied inside economically stable and heavily dominant-culture schools. The kind of schools that the so many modern-day middle-class-to-wealthy self-aggrandizing educational “experts” had attended themselves – and thus understood.

*Humorously entitled the M&M Syndrome, this is a phenomenon which recognizes the modern-day tendency to hire an overabundance of corporate-style “managers” – managers who then validate their salaries by commanding an employee attendance at a never-ending lineup of officially necessary but minimally productive “meetings.”

†How many times have I been told, for example, that if I just had my junior and senior students write their names onto popsicle sticks and then put these same sticks into a jar to randomly pull out a stick/name to be called upon for an unexpected response – oh, surely in doing so, I could change the world. (And thus ineffectually ignore the fact that, as the teacher who interacts with these students daily, I know exactly which student is new to my class, has been absent for a week, has limited English skills, is hearing impaired, has special needs, or is so shy that he or she will be tongue-tied if forced to answer in public.)

What Students Really Need

Year after year of a nationally-mandated, advertised-as-compassionate, low-income school reform continued: minimally managed, inflexibly implemented, appallingly and aggressively unchecked. And yet – in the passing of so many years? Only the smallest handful of reformers made any genuine headway in the actual isolation (and subsequent confrontation) of real-world, non-standardized, location-particular, poor and often culturally-different student needs.*

Addressing *actual* issues?

Solving authentic, location-particular, low-income student and community problems?

This, apparently, was no longer (if it ever had been) the modern-day goal of a quick-fix reform. In fact, in a world of

cheapest, replace-before-fixing solutions, taking on genuinely organic and truly local issues with the expectation of slowly and intentionally locating and mending only the part that was honestly broken – well, *that* was a solution no longer considered economically sound. If something was damaged; if a system was functioning poorly in any way at all?

Eliminate it; close it down.

Throw it away, and *replace* it.

Detached, unemotional replacement, even at the cost of so many who found themselves silenced, steamrolled, and kicked hazardously to the gutter – *this* was the newer and economically “better” logic of a modern-day education. The perfect sense of competitive, privileged-consumer market days when so many were making the claim that our nation’s growing addiction to an ever realigning and ever more deregulated school choice was the best and only solution.

By now, the top-down/non-collaborative world of reform had turned itself into an organization not only able to recruit, but to decisively train and empower innovation-friendly, business-minded, top-down leaders – up to and including a growing corps of judiciously located campaign-financed and intentionally political school board members. All of whom, having been assertively taught to always and only say *yes*? Showed an industrious disinclination to look behind or beyond the perimeters placed around a forever shifting chain of surface invasions.†

Clinging to a selectively spotlighted blindness, top-down management clones generated a personal support for any and all innovations forced onto schools by self-promoting reformers – that uninterrupted lineup of innovations which, with an increasing predictability, decisively harvested the largest portion possible of a reform-attached funding. As the minimally constrained bell-the-cat monies were eagerly snatched up by a burgeoning *I-want-mine* club of reform, the goal of seriously, slowly and honestly addressing the authentic needs of low-income students:

Moved further and further away from a true-life administrative practice.

Even as outspoken, experienced educators stood up, taking hit after hit, doing what they could to point to, and protect, genuine, real-life solutions; even as, desperately, teachers labored to draw attention to the widening disconnect between the antagonis-

tic reform expectations and locally particular student requirements?

Backed each year ever more aggressively by a burgeoning outsider financial support, hard-line reformers grew progressively more belligerent:

Billboards, television commercials, talk shows.

Radio spots, magazines, pamphlets, door-hangers.

Flyers, newspapers, advertisements.

Mailings, phone messages, full-length nationally-released movies.

Insistently and expensively, Big Money endeavored to convince the average, caring citizen, the so many broadminded, proud-to-be-integration-supporting, socially-responsible, equity-matters liberals – that, should they truly wish to address low-income, culturally-different student needs? They had no choice but to *trust Big Money publicity* and, as good voting citizens, go ahead. Surely it was the right thing to do. *Step up*, and *put children first* by adamantly standing behind our nation’s now more-than-a-decade-old call for yet more enticingly deregulated test-score invasions.

Oxymoronically, then, under the designation of a *benevolent innovation*?

As, rather than experiencing a locally organic and real-world-vetted support, unprotected and politically helpless neighborhoods were turned, one by one, into mercilessly bulls-eyed targets for a repeatedly shifting abuse; as, in place of a truly effectual, real-life aid, lowest-income communities suffered the continual harassment of a destabilizing, all-student-inclusive-school-desert-creating transformation – well, evidently in modern days now fully committed to the “compassion” behind Big Money?

What low-income and most often culturally-different students *really needed*?

Was year after year after year of an unquestioned “reform” support from schematically deprived and easily manipulated (if, ironically, often genuinely concerned) loudly-professed-as-integration-friendly *liberals*.

*Anxious to ward off the disruptive penalties forced onto schools by NCLB, an unusually pro-active rural district sat down to contemplate options. Ultimately, they decided that pushing an academic focus inside their high-poverty build-

ings toward issues of wellness and sickness prevention could best serve their interests. And, as an overall student wellness increased and fewer students missed classes? Scores rose.

†Having witnessed über-conservative suburban school board elections exactly mirror professed-as-liberal inner-city elections where *both* decisions assertively seated members pushing inflexible, test-score-based, population-dividing reforms – conflicted news pundits stutteringly argued that these two parallel election cycles had been, somehow, dissimilar. That reformers “outside the city” had been conservative while reformers “inside the city” had been liberal. However, make no mistake about it: *Reform-intending school board elections*, no matter the locale, no matter the massive funding source, no matter the finally elected “reformers” – are always, each and every time? Simply separate legs of the exact same beast.

A Cry For Help

Not surprisingly, as one short-term, reform-invaded year chaotically followed the next, it was nearly impossible to build honest, heartfelt relationships with the always changing parade of innovation-hired administrators, supervisors, coaches, specialists, facilitators and evaluators – that ever-churning mass of employees forced into low-income schools as a means to keep the school-budget-imperative cycle of Big Money flowing.

Ostensibly hired to “fix” our nation’s suddenly recognized epidemic in *bad* teachers, yet unwilling to manifest a personal vulnerability, few reform-dependent employees ever strayed far from the endless string of belligerently delivered orders. Side-stepping an individual responsibility, almost none attempted a look beyond, or behind, the “non-negotiable” limitations placed around the ever heightening pyramid of innovations.

As a result?

Candidly straightforward educational conversations were not part of the district’s do-what-I-say-do-*not*-try-to-discuss-it-with-me experience.

It was easy enough, then, to think of Mrs. Larson – an exceptionally well-dressed, dominant-culture woman in her early forties – as simply yet another impersonal supervisor in the long line of company hires assigned to oversee literacy in our low-scoring and heavily innovated school. However, as the months passed, with every autocratically led and unhappily contentious

bad teacher meeting; with each inexhaustibly presented and numbly resisted dictate:

Well, if you were watching closely?

You could see tiny cracks starting to show in Mrs. Larson's tightly held resolve.

Clearly, Mrs. Larson wasn't stupid. Atypically, she was neither frustratingly young nor painfully inexperienced. She *was*, however, well aware that her very comfortable, upper-middle-class, reform-funded salary now fully depended upon her own unquestioned willingness to support our district's relentless mandates of innovation.

Any mandate, any directive, any policy.

At any time.

(Really; well surely *you* know how it is? *Somebody* needed to pay for those beautiful shoes. Those perfect haircuts. All those high-end, brand-name blouses. This was, after all, what the privileged-culture, middle-class-to-wealthy American Dream was all about. *Wasn't it?*)

The fact that, over time, Mrs. Larson was turning out to be thoughtful.

Reflective.

Possibly even sympathetic.

Oh, you couldn't count on that.

By and large?

The majority of arbitrarily hired fixer personnel anxious to protect a suddenly acquired reform-dependent paycheck – oh, with great determination “compassionate” reformers like these avoided hearing and/or reacting to any teacher, student or parent input. Pushed around inside the top-down game of reform, the always interchanging supply of retitled, reassigned and reorganized “fixer” personnel seldom remained in any one place, or held any particular job long enough, to either recognize – or be forced to deal with – the yawning disconnect between the district expectations they promoted and the actual, location-specific, true-to-life needs of students, communities and teachers.

Well into a second semester of disappointing Mrs. Larson's unremitting demands, late one afternoon at the tail end of a day already spent in the attempt to instruct multiple wriggly and easily distracted classes; after having already done my best to endure seven seemingly interminable months inside a building will-

ing to offer me only the most minimal (and often zero) disciplinary support; after listening yet again to Mrs. Larson's disapproval – this time finding myself vindictively attacked for not having the abstractly declared, but somehow *imperatively requisite*, reading objective clearly posted in my room...

Something inside me quit.

Sort of imploded, shut down, and gave up.

Brashly, letting my frustration come from a place of total humiliated exhaustion, I declared myself to be finished. Done. Absolutely and positively ready to take this job *and shove it*.

And then – very unexpectedly?

Taking me by surprise, Mrs. Larson sat down, put her hands over her face and began to cry. “I know this is wrong,” she declared between sobs. “I know it’s humiliating; I’m so sorry. I know how hard you work. I’ve seen it. I know that you’re doing your job. I know, in fact, that you’re really very good at doing your job. But – oh, I don’t know how to change this,” she sighed. “I only wanted to *help*.”

Moving tentatively across the room, cautiously I selected a seat at her side.

And then, for the next hour and a half?

I had my first heart-to-heart conversation with a person who, as she now explained it to me, had been hired at a very seductive salary to help me do my job by telling me, from her privileged-world, dominant-culture perspective, that I didn’t know *how* to do my job.

Closet Conservatives

Mrs. Larson, it turned out?

Had been a teacher herself.

Her instructional experience had been accumulated, however, not at a low-income, culturally-diverse, inner-city school, but inside the protective boundaries of an affluent suburban neighborhood – inside a school which she, herself, had attended; a school where, now? Two of her own children were enrolled. Convinced, as a concerned citizen, as a registered liberal, as an egalitarian-minded Democrat, that she could be useful – that she could step up and get involved – she had resolved to leave her own very comfortable affluent-school teaching position and re-

spond to the sudden spate in reform funded low-income-school innovation employment ads.

(And.

Oh, well, yes.

That sizable pay raise?

Well, yes, it *had* helped in the making of this decision.)

She understood – gosh, there had been such a relentless push to expose the shocking incompetence attached to our nation’s so many scandalously *bad* (and now even judicially identified *grossly inept*) low-income school teachers – that, as a person who had managed year upon year of a test-score-proven successful teaching herself?

She could help; *she* could step up.

She could volunteer (all while pocketing that *very* comfortable paycheck) and help to re-educate those inadequately trained inner-city teachers. Having lived her entire life inside the protective environs of a poverty-disconnected privilege; having been able, always, to rely upon the ability and performance of a highly standardized and fully assimilated clientele, Mrs. Larson believed that the teachers working inside poorest schools – those institutions assertively targeted, now, as they struggled to find a test-score recognized success?

Well, surely these teachers were simply unaware of the *good* teacher practices which she, as a wealthy-neighborhood, stable-attendance, high-scoring-school educator knew about, and personally employed.*

And, my. *Wasn't* it the perfect solution?

Rather than having to actually work directly *with* poor and/or culturally-different students; rather than having to step in front of those classrooms filled to the brim with challengingly non-standardized students yourself? As a deeply concerned liberal (well, one of those well-educated, privileged-class liberals *with money*) you could help out, and still – *so cool* – stay prudently outside the highly uncomfortable act of an actual poor-person interaction.

Gee.

Compassionate Big Money school reform?

Was so...*simple*.

As an empathetic, equity-minded liberal, you could show how much you cared *not* by physically working with those whom

you proposed to help, but simply by telling the people actually willing to get their feet wet – those so many clueless employees willing to walk every single day into our nation’s most demanding schools in their effort to teach – *how to do it*.

And, wow. Here was the best part:

You could get paid amazingly well for all of your thoughtful, heartfelt concern! And.

Well, should you wish to generate an even more highly publicized recognition? Should you hope to make an even splashier, *even more publicly noted* difference?

You had only to jump up and get on board to start mingling with the rising tide of enthusiastically vocal *for-reform Democrats* – that suddenly burgeoning number of goddamnit-somehow-I-got-old-wealthy-and-self-protective closet conservatives who, standing in a vociferous measure to back our “progressive” nation’s really cool non-White President, now leapt enthusiastically up onto the accountability wagon and began to demand a hard-hitting battery of harshly punitive (oh, but surely concernedly democratic) *laws*.

No-excuses, make-or-break, fire-all-the-employees accountability laws.

Inflexibly-statistical, test-score-dependent school and teacher performance laws.

Funding-available-only-for-our-highest-scoring-schools financing laws.

All without ever once coming into any direct contact with those difficult, frightening kids, their rebellious, unappreciative teachers, or (oh my, most unnervingly) those so many uncomfortably unassimilated parents.

*While, with the instigation of NCLB, the theory that “good” teachers working inside affluent suburban schools could surely change the world of a low-income teaching if only they were offered enough money to take on their district’s most challenging schools – I have seen more than a few “outside” teachers come into low-income schools only to immediately turn around and leave. Not, as you might think, because of their frustrations with the students, but because they simply refused to work inside buildings so blatantly infused with an endless administrative bullying.

Turn It Around

As a representative of the many well-meaning but protectively distanced privileged-world liberals; as a representative of that growing party of concerned, but privately right-leaning, arms-length Democrats pushing to mingle with those who now so loudly claimed to be Standing for Children – Mrs. Larson had so easily, and so quickly, because the Big Money message had been so expensively and incessantly published, assumed that the *true* problem plaguing our low-income, culturally-different schools?

Was exactly what an overwhelming national publicity wanted her to believe: Low-income school teachers were *bad*.

Lazy, incompetent, stubborn and insubordinate.

Ineffectual, uninspired, obstinate and inadequate.

Teachers, in fact, only allowed to stay in place?

Due to the shameful protections offered them by self-promoting, child-hating unions.

The loudly commanded “turnaround” in a low-income public education: that no-excuses renovation unbendingly demanded by an enthusiastically legislated NCLB?

Had indeed been making great progress inside long years of a chaotically whirling reform. Occurring deep inside the shimmer and glitz which now served as a shield for an ever more invasive – and ever more deregulated – innovation, a transformation in the politics around our nation’s public education had indeed been making a bold and effective headway.

Paradoxically, the old-fashioned inclusively liberal party of the left, a party which, for so many years, had aimed itself immovably at a Civil-Rights-mandated social justice; a party known to take on not only the fight to safeguard an *all-student-inclusive*, equitably-funded, nonprofit, easily-accessible, local-neighborhood truly *public* education, but also – with a strong and unwavering conviction – had backed the teachers’ unions which, year upon year, fought against a disinterested administrative abuse in their effort to enable a fully inclusive school equity to actually happen; well, even while claiming egalitarian intentions?

The old-days’ party of equity-minded, equity-protective liberals had snuck across party lines. And, once there?

Taken up an agenda now conspicuously attached to the profit-is-all, free-market, privileged-consumer right.

Competitive, *non*-democratic, self-interested, limited-seat/limited-services, student-selective market schools?

Yes! Yes!

Break up, vilify, and weaken *bad* unions; disassemble and eliminate resistantly obstructionist unions (those intransigent, self-interested organizations so irritatingly insistent upon holding protections for class size, teacher planning, local control, employee voice, diversity of curriculum, due process, longevity pay, higher education and – oh, heavens – *pensions*); dismantle those obdurately self-serving unions, those infuriatingly self-centered associations forevermore getting in the way, forevermore trying to block the endless flow of enticingly-lucrative, outsider-controlled school invasions?

Yes! Yes!

Anyone who had the gall to say no to a divisively selective privileged-consumer, market-based school reform? *Anyone* who held out even a glimmer of that old-school support for those long-standing union protections?

Oh, now, had you not been watching as, year upon year, we had been pushing hundreds of never-look-any-deeper-than-what-I'm-told “journalists” and political pundits to repeatedly and adamantly convince the public that our country not only needed a never-endingly disruptively score-based reform *but imperatively depended upon it*.^{*} And how much anyone, anyone at all who had the nerve to stand up to and defy any aspect of a surely “compassionate” reform by illustrating an inexplicable support for those selfishly old-fashioned, child-abusing unions – *simply did not care about kids*?

“It’s just so confusing,” Mrs. Larson sighed heavily. “And so ironic. I’ve never met teachers who work harder; I really don’t even know how you do it. Your classes are so big. These kids need so much attention – and still? You’re always willing to come back. I see that; I know that. I know that you’re here every single day.

“This district, *this school* – oh, you get so little support,” she added. “I couldn’t even begin to do what you’ve been doing. Here I am trying to tell you, because I’m being paid to tell you, how to work with these kids. I keep forcing strategies onto you that even I know are superficial. So much stuff that won’t ever help you *or* these children.”

Taking an additional deep breath, slowly Mrs. Larsen sat up and carefully straightened her back. Reaching for a box of tissues, painstakingly she dried her eyes. As she gathered her things; as, head down, she left my room, I wondered if, or when, I would see her again.

But, she didn't quit; she stayed on through the year.

She was kinder, I thought, and more supportive.

And, well – about once a week or so?

I would compliment her on yet another gorgeous set of earrings; maybe an amazing pair of boots. And she would tell me how well her own children were doing, far across town in that high-scoring suburban high school where, not so long ago?

She used to teach.

*As the growing anxiety against testing has begun to make itself ever more manifest, it is difficult to watch as journalist after journalist and pundit after pundit continues to inflexibly back testing. Even in those states where a burgeoning Opt Out Of Testing movement has begun to allow a growing number of parents to speak up and state their concerns, too many only-know-one-side “journalists” continue to argue (with a notable scoff in their voice) that – while in some districts up to twenty percent and more of students have begun refusing to participate in a Common Core computer testing? The eighty percent or so of parents who did not proactively opt their students out of testing surely *unconditionally support “accountability.”*

I Don't Fucking Cuss

To aid a student comprehension of the word *oxymoron*, my junior-level classes recorded favorite examples. Their list of contradictory phrases soon included fighting for peace, screaming silence, heavy featherweight, and supersized bags of mini jumbo shrimp. Requested to add my own example, I momentarily stopped to contemplate the story of an animated young man who, during an auditorium presentation, had been asked by the principal to calm down and watch his language. Angered by the accusation of being disruptive, the boy had made an adamant claim of being wrongfully identified.

Unexpectedly – surprising his students – the principal had admitted to a possible error and apologized. Visibly pumped at receiving such a publicly noted exoneration, the young man had then stood, ready to defend his clearly righteous stance.

“Like I *told* you?” he had stated loudly and indignantly: “*I don’t fucking cuss.*”

Ah.

Life was like that. You never had to go very far to run into an oxymoron. In the chaotically whirling realm of a low-income school reform?

You really didn’t have to go any distance at all.

With only minimal effort, you could, in fact, lose yourself entirely inside the increasingly surreal world of multiplying, and ever circling, educational contradictions.

For example:

National leaders who never stopped talking about our nation’s veritable plague of *bad* educators; *bad* educators who, as they so emphatically and publicly argued, were the sole cause of any and all public school failings. Powerful leaders who disinterestedly called out for, and even outright demanded, appallingly abusive mass firings, but who – when faced with a growing criticism against their shocking disregard for public employees (middle-class, mortgage-paying, kids-in-college, public-service employees overwhelmed to be losing long held economy-stabilizing jobs) – made confusing one-hundred-and-eighty-degree reversals by generating statements about *leading a nation proud to protect its valued educators.*

For example:

Invasive, top-down administrators, supervisors, specialists, coaches, evaluators and an ever growing supply of testing minions who – after repeatedly interrupting classes; after calling students away from instruction in a cycle of unpredictable whim; after forcing an ever increasing supply of days for testing in lieu of academics; after sending children home to accommodate yet additional educator developments; after vehemently imposing lowest-level academic strategies onto frustrated teachers – yet continued to speak out about their own *uncompromising support for an increasing academic rigor.*

For example:

Repeatedly invaded, reformed, redesigned, reorganized, closed and reopened schools compelled to function under a continually shifting management; schools incessantly coerced into accepting a newer and theoretically “better” leadership, in actuality being led by detachedly-interchanged, abruptly-retitled, com-

pany-trained devotees: Short-term, minimally-experienced managers willing to brag openly to students, teachers and parents that – as their neighborhood’s latest academic leader? They had their backs. Would, in fact, *be long-term culturally-protective community advocates*.

For example:

The increasingly popular and highly solicited source for an ever more remunerative public school funding...

Philanthrocapitalism.

My. Really?

Philanthropy mixed directly and interchangeably with *capitalism*? *In the very same word*?

Super wealthy whatever-it-takes-for-profit-that’s-why-I’m-so-frightfully-rich speculators eager to join the governmentally initiated school innovation club; *profit seeking* capitalists willing to offer up a personal funding as the means to edge themselves into the Big Money lucrative, competitive-choice-school race.

Overwhelmingly wealthy investors willing to “donate” larger and larger sums of money to the educational cause, even as they stipulated – and exacted – *personally delineated expectations with each and every generous gift*.* Benevolent patrons of education who, as they so generously “gave,” demanded an inflexible adherence to what they, as super-wealthy-looking-for-profit business tycoons (and, thus, *the most logical prototype for a modern-day educational “expert”*) had been taught to believe imperative by fund-seeking reformers: *Key aggressively-selective, limited-seat/limited-services, test-score-segregating, class-dividing invasions* which, or so they assertively stipulated, must be implemented in their effort to bring about yet more of those nationally mandated low-income school transformations.

“Giving” money – with unbending, *non-egalitarian* school reformations attached? This was heartfelt generosity; this was a selfless, benevolent charity?

Were we, as a nation, so passively willing to allow precise-expectations-super-glued-onto-the-colossally-funded-interest-in-helping-others to be publicly labeled as *philanthropy*?†

Huh.

Were we seriously so naïve?

Were we seriously so gullible that, as we closed our eyes and clicked our heels, we could make ourselves believe that the

gargantuan sums of money now being proffered up by business-minded, business-rich investors – investors who, even as they strategically referred to their invasive manipulations as a benevolent philanthropy *attached exactly outlined expectations for a revenue-seeking, socio-economic-separating school management...*

Well, did we *really* believe that this increasingly popular “stipulations attached” school financing had nothing whatsoever do with an intrinsic move toward the highly lucrative *privatized* control of a long-standing – and carefully democratic – *all-student-inclusive* everybody’s-equal public institution?°

*The act of giving huge sums of money with inflexible student-separating stipulations attached has also been recognized under the oxymoronic title of a “venture philanthropy.”

†It might be wise to sit up and take note as “liberal” *billionaires* (“benevolent” parties who, should you manage a look behind the ever-thickening smoke screens, through a strategic investment *pull in massive profits* attached to one offshoot of a legislated reform or another) push their millions into give-us-more-tax-money campaigns – campaigns advertised as being student-friendly even as they demand a continued protection of currently instigated reform practices. Practices such as: an ongoing focus upon a test creation, test revision and test implementation (*cha-ching!*); a forced addition of pre-scripted, outsider-controlled curricula (*cha-ching!*); a growing dependence upon annually administered, statistically engendered *all* employee evaluations (*cha-ching!*); an unfettered increase in on-line educational options (*cha-ching, cha-ching!*); a deregulated proliferation of limited-services, student-selective, *for-profit* schools (*cha-chiiiiiiiiing!*); the tireless promotion of keep-base-salaries-low merit pay (one tax-funded school proposing, in fact, that when scores are low? Teacher salaries *might well be cut in half*). *Cha-CHING*.

°As über-profitable corporations advertise their interest in making sure that every child has the opportunity to “choose” a *good* school – well, *do* you assume that this sudden interest in supporting yet another lineup of deregulated “choice” schools is actually philanthropic, or that proponents might simply be looking to add yet another generous billion to the pockets of their already amazingly wealthy corporate owners?

The Most Dangerous Game

Maybe, now, while we're hanging out here; maybe while we've stopped and taken note of this contradictory neighborhood of oxymorons...

Well, maybe we should pause for yet another of our minutes. Take a breath; maybe two.

And think, for a moment?

About a massive, governmentally-mandated, Civil-Rights-initiated tax funding now being added to the increasingly popular dissemination of a deregulated (not subject to state law) philanthrocapitalist financing: all of this progressively intermixed capital available, in ultra-modern days, for generating yet more of those expensively advertised competitive school markets. And if, as we've stopped here, we call upon simple logic to recognize that the point of a competitive market inside the world of profits is that there will be winners – *and losers*.

And if, just as rationally, we take an additional moment to recollect that the point of having historically created a democratic, everybody's-equal, all-student-inclusive *public* system of education had been deliberately premised upon the idea that, as we built and safeguarded our equitable intentions?

There would be no losers.

How, exactly, did this glaring paradigm shift exist, in some magically oxymoronic way, *in the same realm*? On the same plain? Inside the very same publicly promoted as compassionate low-income-school-reform statements?

No matter who, in modern days, was holding up the competitive school market as an imperative academic solution; no matter who was claiming it to be an undoubtedly helpful, and even compassionately necessary, educational action – well due, quite simply, to the logistics which surrounded we-win-you-lose competitions, a market-aggressive choice school system could never, and would never, offer a necessarily inherent value for a *truly public all-student* equity. In point of fact, in this model; in this self-protective and tactically selective system?

Certain pre-recognized (and nowadays, my, but wasn't it cool? *So conveniently and endlessly test-score labeled*) students would soon become an out-and-out liability.

A serious negative-outcome risk.

After all, as the bottom-line logic behind unconstrained modern-day markets assured investors, being industry rivals dri-

ving for business? Entrepreneurial competitors had no reason to hold any actual fidelity to a truly philanthropic, truly selfless concern for an *all*-student equity. Defensively shielding outcome margins, contemporary contenders would not – in the name of any honestly felt altruism – feel obligated to offer free or specialized services to less able clients. In fact? The tangible success of an unfettered free-market system, especially when presented with strategically dismantled quality controls, depended not upon a democratically *public* service, but upon...

Well, just the opposite:

The enterprisingly entrepreneurial, immediate-result *selection and use* of public clients.

Closeted deep down inside, way down deep inside the shimmering web of intricately entangled smoke screens – it was, in fact, this, *the unemotional exploitation of publicly vulnerable clients*, which camouflaged the biggest and most dangerous low-income school game. If, being skeptical; if, being aware of an increasingly negative reaction to test-based reforms; if, pulling away from the expensively published pro-school-choice endorsements (refusing to click your heels; refusing to believe) – well, if, intentionally, you looked not at but *through* the eye-catching razzle-dazzle engendered by an ever more confusing and ever more impenetrable smoke:

You could see that, in actuality?

The entire NCLB/R2T accountability process – a process which, for so many years, now, had promoted itself as being munificently necessary for directing money toward *helping the poor* – was simply yet another example of a modern-day deregulated market profiteering:

Getting rich at the expense of those whom you so loudly proposed to help.

With all of its gaudy promotion; with each and every impassioned plea for an empathetic, student-centered action – a low-income public school reform was, in fact?

Nothing more than a minimally-regulated, venture-capital enterprise. One that had not only allowed, but had, for long year after long year, now, been thriving upon the hard-line unemotional (and oh, my, so financially rewarding) act of a low-income-client exploitation. As member after member piled enthusiastically onto the increasingly funded school reform wagon, through the never-

ending endorsement for a minimally regulated flood of endlessly realigning innovations – proactively savvy free-marketeers?*

Had managed to spongily mop up each and every drop of a low-income school financing. Leaving little, if any, *help?*

Behind.

*“A deregulated school innovation” – that type of modern-day school management where apparently no one at the top is ever to be held long-term responsible – has come to mean an endlessly interruptive churn: year after year starting out with this or that administrator, but ending up under the leadership of someone altogether different. Starting out with this or that particular set of teachers, yet ending up at the end of the year functioning under the management of a dissimilar set of educators. Starting out a school year following this or that policy, but then shifting – mid-year, mid-semester or even mid-week – to an abruptly mandated alternate policy.

Two Tier Testing

If I expressly asked for assistance, I told myself, I might manage to build a more comfortable relationship with the defensively distant man who – due to a personal history as a tough no-nonsense Black male leaving a long career in the military – had been hired to lead our almost exclusively non-White school. Aware that this man had grown up in a deeply southern state, I resolved to ask if he would speak to my eighth graders: students currently reading a book written by a woman made famous for her direct involvement in our nation’s midcentury Civil Rights movement.

He would be pleased, he responded, to address our class. And, then?

Along with my students I sat in a stunned silence as this tall, imposing man made what we had been studying come alive. He had not, like so many members of a relatively distanced public, only read about the long, shockingly vicious and still ongoing fight for human equity; he had lived chillingly through it. Although his narrative was enlightening, many of his stories were almost unbearably hard to hear.

And then, letting his memories hang there in the air, heavily weighting our room – suddenly this formidable man changed course. Hoping to communicate more directly with the students seated in front of him, he turned to a subject which had him plain-

ly concerned. As he struggled to make his point, although the kids were polite they weren't sure how to digest his message.

Neither was I.

"You kids. You just don't take this seriously," this clearly frustrated man struggled to compose a warning. *"You just don't understand. You can't keep pretending that your test scores don't matter; you have to understand how important they are. Based upon your scores? This system, this government, already knows what it can do to you."*

His face muscles jumped as he worked to keep himself calm.

"By the time you were in the fourth grade," he stated dramatically, leaning in toward the students: *"They had already started to build jail cells based upon your test scores."*

Now and then, over the years, I had heard rumors that state test scores were being sent, without parent knowledge or consent, directly to the military as information for helping recruiters weed out and ignore those who were college bound, and those who – based upon scores – were never likely to graduate. This was, however, the first time I had ever heard anyone speak so decisively about the premise of an intentionally fashioned two-tiered society. Two tiers; two levels of human worth.

Those deemed "acceptable."

And those who, through the use of a persistently collected testing data, could be assertively and intentionally separated *out*.

No one willing to do even minimal investigation would be likely to argue against the fact that jailed populations in our country had been growing. Lately, in fact? Even the highest courts in the land had been involved in mounting concerns around the conditions inside overcrowded facilities. Jails, reformatories, prisons, penitentiaries – more were slated for construction every day. Repeatedly, news anchors reported upon squabbles erupting around the problem of *where*, exactly, these progressively mandated detention centers might be built. Who, exactly, would be expected to live next door to our nation's ever increasing population of the unacceptable?

Simultaneously, in a desperate effort to galvanize donations for children's programming in tough economic times, public service television pushed the test-score segregation panic button. Poor students, commercials argued (possibly missing the point

that many of the poorest students in our country knew plenty of words, just not in English) had an inhibitingly smaller vocabulary upon entering school. These students *needed*, and could be much aided by, literacy-based public television programs.

In itself, this was a compelling point.

However, in panicked tones?

The argument was pushed just a touch further. With an expanding concern – articulating their point yet more nervously; yet more anxiously – announcers worriedly probed deeper into the pockets of generous, equity-minded liberals: Students who were not on a nationally mandated NCLB-test-score-dictated reading level by the third grade (red-alert, red-alert, panic, panic, panic):

Never caught up!

And jail cells?

Were being built!

Children unmistakably test-score-labeled as being both unwantedly and irreparably deficient by the third grade. Oh, you had to assume, from this desperately presented data, that these students? *Were out and out doomed*. Test-score-proven unacceptable, never likely to catch up, never going to be good enough, patently and statistically identified as being data-deficient *failures* by the time they were...

Well, now, let's see:

*Eight?**†

*What if, a few anti-reformers have suggested, we had initially taken that massive financing spent upon testing and alternately expended it solely upon high quality all-day kindergartens and state-wide, neighborhood-accessible pre-schools. Is it possible that, had we done this from day one (so many long years ago, now), we might have eliminated our current need for building this endless proliferation of jail cells? (As low-test-score/build-a-jail-cell privateers early recognized, a notable percent of our jailed populations are functionally illiterate.)

†Very few citizens are aware that the recent tax-money-funded and widely mandated Particularly and Aggressively Reimburse Computer Companies testing now being forced into schools with the Common Core intends to allow parent (corporate) companies to not only accumulate *but widely disseminate and even sell* a statistically collected “picture” of each test-taking participant: No parental consent asked for – nor required.

Pun Intended

A few years after the apprehensive principal inside our middle school had done his best to articulate personal fears about a hidden, continued segregation, I read the words of a thoughtfully well-spoken school reform critic. Possibly aware of the direct pun in her statement, warily she pointed to our nation's current cultivation of a two-tiered educational system. A system, she warned?

Which served to lock certain children into a downward trajectory.

A two-tiered structure where the test score categories produced by each year's ever more disruptive and ever more community-weakening "transformations" not only separated students, but, through the additional construction of each consequently exclusive limited-seat/limited-services choice school, manufactured a modern-day educational system capable of sustaining an increasingly visible socio-economic and cultural segregation.*

A system where, year after year?

The unfettered inundation of test score separations provoked a supplemental Big-Money-lucrative disruption into our nation's lowest-income schools. A disruption which included:

The assertively deregulated flow of shallowly mismanaged short-lived reforms.

The extreme non-kinetic, non-creative narrowing of local course offerings.

The instructor-weakening rigidity of a punitively forced pre-scripted curricula.

The escalating lack in a sincerely protected student-centered academic rigor.

The humiliating denigration and repeated public labeling of politically weakest schools.

The overtly attacked, disappearing respect for a long-term educator experience.

All of these massively funded modern-day "innovations" expensively advertised as being, year upon year, what low-income children *needed* – being, in fact?

Destabilizing intrusions which, in actuality, served to undermine, isolate, malign and segregate.

Bypassing true-life redress of the many disabling concerns which troubled lowest-scoring schools as they labored to inclusively serve local neighborhood students, minimally regulated reform disruptions alternately forced the poorest, the most culturally different, the most outwardly defiant students (those students most visibly unwelcome in increasingly regentrified, increasingly conservative environments) onto a path which did, indeed, funnel an ever-mounting number of aggressively labeled as “unacceptable” children directly, and almost certainly, into our nation’s progressively more demanded – and strategically waiting – jail cells.

Jail cells which, as our Big Money manipulated nation continued to call out for the ongoing production of benevolently *caring* test scores (test scores now ever more able to help us statistically label, humiliate, denigrate and segregate) were carefully being prepared.

Jail cells which, so unambiguously and vigilantly?
Could then be decisively locked behind them.

Shoot; in days ever more dramatically imbued with the high glitter and flash of an endlessly collected test score data; in days enthusiastically dedicated to the deregulated legislation of a hard-hitting test-score liability, some analysts – a few unusually thoughtful statisticians – had even begun to point to the fact that, with each year more decisively bent to a test-score-separating, statistically-denigrating accountability? Marching reflexively alongside our nation’s “school-to-prison pipeline,” minority male students were progressively more likely to end up behind bars than to enter into a college.

So.
Well, *damn!*

How fortunate was it that our country was already so perceptively on the ball, designing and building those necessarily additional cells.

*A choice-school/student-separating educational structure which critics now recognize as being able to both create and sustain an increasingly inequitable system of race-and-culture-dividing “apartheid” schools. (This is the point, in fact, at which those who most clearly understand the devastations brought by a test-based statistical “reform” say that the grain leaves the chaff: You cannot say that you are against “reform” — but then continue to call out for testing.)

Pubic Intentions

Byproduct of not only the elevated use of technology in schools, but an increased expectation for responses produced through word processing, students across the nation came face-to-face with yet another computerized challenge to literacy:

Spellcheck.

Added to word-processing programs as a practical writing tool, teachers soon discovered that the computerized understanding of a presumably correct spelling did not always match actual student intentions. For pupils holding already precarious literacy skills, more than occasionally a student's intended meaning – and that of the computer's dictionary – collided. You might get, when this happened? A collection of unexpectedly unique statements; you might even begin to wonder if, as a response to some subconsciously Freudian impulse, hormone-driven fifteen-year-olds might be seeking outlet for an underlying communiqué.

On an assignment where I had asked my students to contemplate the concept of utopia through a construction of personal views around perfect societies, my tenth graders submitted a few very particular suggestions.

“People these days,” wrote one thoughtful young lady, “just don't care enough about sex. In a really good society, everyone would be sexually chased until marriage.”

Also, recommend her male peer:

“We shouldn't let everyone be so violent. People in our country need to learn how to be much more nicer, and much more genital with each other.”

Finally, declared a third student?

“Society is only as good as its citizens. In a really good society people would be more involved and be a lot more careful with their pubic responsibilities.”

Pubic responsibilities – or *public* responsibilities.

Either way, the kid was right; as a society?

We really should be a lot more careful.

Hidden inside; secreted deep down inside; strategically buried way down deep inside the confusing upheaval generated by our nation's “compassionate” call for a never-endingly deregulated infusion of *public* school transformations: For every student who carefully and comfortably enjoyed a successful academic

experience? Two, three, four and even five additional students faced a disinterested, invasive turnaround in the Big Money pursuit of a detachedly “benevolent” innovation.

Strategically protected behind their wall of ever more impenetrable smoke screens – smoke screens allowed to amass, each year, ever more thickly and ever more confusingly around each suddenly mandated bell-the-cat educational reform (tightly entangled smoke screens able to exactly replicate those which so distractingly shielded the hedge-fund managers, venture-capital investors, bankers, speculators and CEOs who continued to earn huge bonuses even as their federally protected actions drained the public treasury) – aggressive school reformers quickly recognized: Due to a gaping lack in carefully regulated disbursements?

There was little chance that participants in this deregulated game of a cyclically instigated reform could be individually isolated, held long-term accountable and ultimately forced to take a personal responsibility for disconnectedly invasive mistakes.

Not surprisingly, then?

Mistake upon mistake was made.

Students unlucky enough to be forced through not one, but multiple, innovative mistakes, survived as best they could. However, as building-wide amalgamated test scores were increasingly lauded as the *only* measure of a school’s (and thus by default *all student*) success, children attending buildings most likely to produce their annually lowest scores found themselves callously, humiliatingly and ever more publicly labeled.

For each parent-involved, economically-stable, culturally-similar or comfortably-assimilated child slotted into place inside an abruptly created limited-seat/limited-services choice school – there were other kids. Kids who, due to the many complications attached to poverty, immobility, special needs, language disconnect, unstable and sometimes unavailable homes, missing or abusive parental controls, or the simple fact of now owning a years-long, negatively-noted, police-ticketed disciplinary school record:

No longer fit.

Students who, once discovered to be worrisomely problematic?

Were carefully selected out; isolated, labeled, separated and sent: Well, now...hmmm.

Where?

In a nation still loudly, if each year more paradoxically, touting its allegiance to an all-student inclusive *public* education – well, it turned out that with each year of a limited-seat/limited-services, privileged-consumer reform? Fewer and fewer of the barely surviving but inclusively traditional *public* schools could be coerced, through enforcement of those old-school legislations which continued to mandate that old-fashioned ideal of a democratically *all-student* inclusion, to take on, and – while implementing a forever realigning circle of test score punishments – educate any and all children.

These fewer and fewer old-fashioned, traditionally egalitarian, all-student-inclusive and truly *public* schools? Could never, by law, say no to a problem student enrollment.

Could never, in the hope of protecting or elevating test scores, simply throw out, eliminate services for, or strategically avoid accepting (and then score-devastatingly retaining) any of those children who, so very predictably, would perform miserably on each year’s mushrooming supply of exams.*†

It was exactly these schools, however – these each-year-more-invaded, each-year-more-penalized, barely-surviving, old-school, all-student-inclusive, *genuinely public* schools?

Which in modern days now functioned with progressive necessity as “clean up” institutions: as the all-student/all-services legitimately *public* institutions still legally required to open their doors and take on those most problematic, most complexly challenging students. Those students who, through a use of ever more draconian enrollment, performance, behavior, attendance, and ejection rules:

Protective market-competitive choice school programs?
Had been given permission to shun.

*Tellingly, a recent grade-the-school documentary isolated a three-year reform grant spent in the hiring of truancy personnel. As one new employee tracked down a non-attending homeless teenager, a girl *whose house had been destroyed and parent killed in Hurricane Katrina, and whose child had been taken from her due to her inability to give it care* – the question presented by this reform-salaried employee was *not* in how to effectively offer services to this devastated student, but in how to *make her attend school*. And whether or not her name might be eliminated from school rosters before her test scores and lack in graduation could affect the school’s standing.

†How to deal with students who, through an ongoing truancy, devastate building statistics? Take them to truancy court. And then, carefully pile on the fees when they do not appear/pay until, finally, they are so far in debt that you can send them directly to jail.

On The Bus Or Under The Bus

As, over the years, the invasive divisions of a “no-excuses” testing created student, community and personnel abuses, arguments between big-money-dependent, choice-school-promoting reformers and all-student-equity, local-neighborhood-protective anti-reformers escalated. Proponents on either side of the debate expressed loudly adamant opinions. Presuming absolute value for the disruptions of an ongoing innovation, one activist presented his pro-reform stance in the form of a question.

“Do you want to be,” was his query to the nation:

“*On* the bus, or *under* the bus?”

Sadly, as each year’s supply of ever-more-denigrated, test-score-amalgamated, school-score-identified students were repeatedly forced into the endlessly published description of being academically and/or behaviorally deficient risks, finding themselves assertively placed outside score-competitive, savvy-parent-dependent, privileged-consumer choice school parameters – as life got harder: *Under the bus?*

Was turning out to be not only a legally mandated, but nationally condoned location.

Operating as difficult-student “clean up” institutions in the modern-day competitive market – increasingly dependent upon garnering a per-pupil tax stipend, poorest, lowest-scoring schools could no longer afford to painstakingly enforce discipline, grade or attendance policies. As, following the years-long Big-Money-sponsored and heavily lobbied call for “better schools,” choice programs continued to recruit and enroll only the most motivated, while, at the same time, avoiding or ejecting the most troublesome?

Old-fashioned traditional, legally-bound truly *public* schools:

Shifted defensively into survival mode.

Anxious to garner subsidized funding through the elevation of numbers, the fewer and fewer slowly disappearing, all-student inclusive, low-income *public* schools – *the only schools in über-modern market-competitive days still legally bound to not only accept, but keep, and therefore hold a test-score responsibility for, all students* – now based a financial survival upon the un-failing registration of a continual flow of kids.

Kids who, in the larger competitive system?

Had been deemed unacceptable, and thus fully disposable.

Students legally excluded from, or assertively pushed out of, restrictive, high-score-promoting schools of choice; students who, as a result of limited-seat, we-don't-serve-special-needs, we-don't-work-with-language-learners, no longer fit. Students unwanted and unwelcomed by wealthier, test-score-protective communities; challenging children who, after finding themselves (although perhaps this was not actually legal) kicked out of more affluent, high-score-defending districts?*

Kept showing up on the doorsteps of inner-city poorest, pupil-funding-desperate, legally-bound and genuinely *public* schools.†

The unremitting, over-a-decade-long fealty to not only a high-stakes testing, but to a subsequently generated no-excuses test-score labeling (a concept relentlessly ordered up, now, by not one but two consecutively “caring” governments) – was, in actuality, forcing a modern-day *public* education dilemma. The true question of a modern-day “public” education, or so it was transpiring in days now inflexibly bent to a statistically *visible* social “progress,” was not really how, but more to the point *if*, schools should be obliged to enroll and educate...well, um.

Hmm.

Let's keep this uncomplicated; let's continue to refer to them simply as *difficult* kids.

Kids who were overwhelmingly, seriously and unattractively poor.

Kids who didn't predictably attend.

Kids who were homeless, or frustratingly and endlessly transient. Kids who, dammitall, couldn't read or write.

Kids who were hyper, disrespectful and clearly behaviorally unassimilated.

Kids who had lethally costly special needs.

Kids who were most visibly and uncomfortably culturally different. Kids who, for god's sake?

Didn't even speak English.

Evidently, as both conservative and a growing number of “for reform liberal” citizens joined together in one decidedly compassionate leap up onto the market-competitive, big-money-spewing choice school bus – piercingly denigrating, as they jumped, anyone yet exhibiting the audacity of being in any way *anti-reform* – well, apparently the true *public* school dilemma was no longer going to be in *how* to address lowest-income, culturally-different students:

But, more to the point, *should* we?

Should our nation, a nation so gosh-darned caught up in the costly obligations brought about by globally competitive times – obligations such as the continued bailout of promiscuously deregulated but federally guaranteed financial institutions, massively protected corporate subsidies, and the never-ending “altruism” behind oil-drug-and-mineral-rich-country military invasions – oh, well, really: *Should* our country, a country each year more notably diverse, each year more increasingly filled with challengingly unique and culturally different (and, oh gee, *so often hoodie-wearing*) children, take on the daunting and so darned expensive responsibility:

Of educating *all children*?

I mean, really, *all*-student, locally-accessible, equitably-funded *public* schools? Spending so much of that lucratively collected tax money on *all* students?

For those citizens most willing to extend a personal backing for the uninterrupted construction of our nation's ever more necessary penal institutions, and, lately, a complimentary number of quota-based, funding-per-body immigrant detention centers:

Well, the answer?

Was pretty darned simple.

*A euphemistic argument brought to the table by a few schools serving largely White populations – schools which have been told that they must now accommodate a growing number of non-White students – is that these wealthier, predominantly White high-scoring schools simply cannot afford to incorporate the type of student who will bring with him/her: “*those scores.*”

†As, in some cities, score-protective suburban communities have begun to embrace an increasing array of legal practices now bent to ejecting “unacceptable” students, inner-city districts (districts ever more financially dependent upon that part of the student population *most likely to fail and thus guarantee the continued cycle of a no-one-held-accountable/reform-lucrative transformation*) brag of an expanding enrollment.

Paying For It

Money; big, *big* money.

How to garner money.

Allocate money.

Expend money.

Keep money.

As our latest millennium opened; as, giddily, our nation high-stepped over the threshold; as, all together, everyone enthusiastically entered into a glitteringly “transformative” new age – a truly benevolent new age where a growing supply of self-promoting educational experts had begun to make the claim of *getting smarter*; of *stepping up*; of *standing for children*; as we opened our arms and welcomed in this exceptionally modern new era where not only the Department of Education but a growing number of compliant school districts were no longer led by career-dedicated, long-term-experienced educators, but by hard-line, business-world, deregulated-market idealists...

Well, not surprisingly?

A modern-day profit-is-all leadership began to almost immediately agitate and complain about the colossal fiscal obligation owed to implementing a truly public *all-student-inclusive* system of education.

Layered onto the cost?

Well; as it turned out, a reliable, long-term *public* structure of education depended not only upon building relationships with those so many career-dedicated, student-protective, stubbornly-outspoken educators (those so many unappreciative educators who kept provoking their selfish resistance to an immovably top-down, non-collaborative management) but – these very same employees?

Exasperatingly expected district leaders to value, safeguard, and pay for the quality attached to a years-long, craft-

building experience. This huge, all-student *public* arrangement, in fact, was literally packed with those annoyingly faithful employees: all of whom, in the name of a steadfast public service? Gallingly counted upon realizing not only an incremental longevity support, but, after years of collecting retirement-garnered pay-checks, acquiring back that heaviest of financial obligations:

Pensions.

It was, really, such a gosh-darned expensive thing, this liberal *silly* idea; this impossible goal of offering our nation's children a democratically protected *all-student-inclusive* public school equity. In a smarter, forward-thinking age; in an age bent to a benevolently pioneering reform – well logically, in an innovative era where massively deregulated monetary disbursements (rather than any fuzzily egalitarian all-student-inclusive ideals) were surely a more rational foundation for competitive free market solutions:

Why stick with any of those old-fashioned *all-student* traditions?

Historically, in fact, large inner-city districts had quickly come to recognize that lowest-income and most often culturally-different communities wielded only a nominal to nonexistent political leverage. Despite a slew of Civil Rights' lawsuits arguing the need for intentionally protecting an academic equity, schools exercising the least political clout had been repeatedly forced to function while employing the largest number of brand-new inexperienced, most unreliable and statistically-proven least effectual – but invitingly cheapest – teachers.

Now, as the annually implemented test-score divisions drew ever more visible boundaries around pockets of cultural, socio-economic, and political relevance; and as, each year, these meticulously instigated separations engendered an ever more explicit border around truest political power – bottom-line business leaders stepped in when they saw their chance. *Which* neighborhoods, *which* communities, *which* schools...

Would be least likely to fight back or figure things out if, over time, hiding behind a scintillatingly advertised pull-the-trigger razzle-dazzle?

You robbed their students of a true education.*

As you, *gosh, so compassionately*, simply quit paying for teacher quality.

What if, in place of paying for a long-term, proven-more-effectual teacher experience, conversely you started to complain (loudly, publicly and even judicially) about selfishly inept, change-resistant, intransigently-union-protected, child-hating employees – and then, repeatedly, poignantly and slyly? You began to suggest the growing national imperative for advancing our country’s “benevolent” movement toward the *very profitable* non-profit location, training and hiring of a cyclically interchanging stream of very young, but magically able (read: much less expensive, short-term, non-contracted, non-unionized, *look, ma, no pensions*) *good* educators.†

Hmm.

Which schools would be *least* likely to step in and stop your Big-Money-published, smoke-screen-sheltered, cutting-costs-at-the-expense-of-students intentions: Politically-powerful, affluent-suburban, dominant-culture and dominant-culture assimilated buildings?

Or poorest, most culturally diverse, most socially dissimilar, most politically helpless schools. Those schools which, in a truly old-school democratic, neighborhood-inclusive fashion?

Kept offering up seats to *all students*.

*Or, as this practice has been identified and referenced: offering them only a “share-croppers’s education.”

†And now, in truly modern years, after more than a decade bent to a loudly applauded and hard-hittingly punitive school reform? Our state can boast of having some of the lowest-paid teachers in the nation.

I Am Deeply Regrettable

One morning I discovered, and then carefully unfolded, an exceedingly wrinkled paper which had been crumpled up into my classroom’s homework basket. On an assignment handed in a full week past the due date, a student had printed a briefly explanatory note:

“Ms. Aech,” I read. “I am deeply regrettable that this paper is late. I found it in the pocket of jeans my brother stole to go skateboarding when he didn’t ask.”

Taking a moment to reflect upon life with siblings?

I felt that I understood.

I could, in fact, recall experiencing a similar deeply personal regret the year that my older sister, thinner, prettier, and cool enough to hang with the popular girls, had come into my room without permission and taken my jeans – only to immediately bring them back, asking me how on earth I could possibly wear such baggily ugly *farmer* pants.

Granting the fact that our father was a farmer, I was not exactly sure how to take her highly accusatory complaint. But, suddenly and absolutely?

Oh, I knew that I was *deeply regrettable* about it.

Regret.

An emotion operable only in the realm of hindsight.

Regret connected to year after year of a ruthlessly administered and endlessly shifting reform-mandated, low-income-school invasion?

Oh, there was actually plenty of it.

More than enough to go around.

In one of the most regrettable actions ever undertaken in a country which had worked so hard and actually come so far in offering our nation a truly *all*-student-inclusive public school equity – well, in the effort to break those heavily expensive long-term-loyal public employee protections? Purchasing yet more publicity, school reformers now set out to denigrate what they argued to be the latest foundational cause for each and every one of those public school ills:

Teacher tenure.

Muddily confusing the job-for-life tenure offered to university professors with the much less rigidly protected state-statute tenure offered to public service employees,* a repeatedly circulated press rapidly began to foster the idea that school-score-labeled (and thus unmistakably identified) *bad* teachers – ineffectual educators, the argument went, only allowed to stay in place due to the scandalous protections of tenure offered them by self-serving, child-abusing unions – oh, well, the problem was that, outrageous in the fast pace of modern days dedicated to no-waiting, silver-bullet sensibilities?

These so many school-score-identified *bad* teachers could not, suddenly and summarily, *be fired*. According to the many safeguards so annoyingly written into longevity-loyal contracts,

these *bad* teachers expected (and wasn't this typical of self-interestedly slothful employees): *Legal due process*.

Curiously, somewhere along the well-trodden path of accountability; somewhere along this trail of liability which had become, each year, ever more deeply carved into the public imagination – well, somewhere along the way?

The number of suddenly-identified, contract-protected *bad* employees: Had more than doubled.

Tripled.

Even, in some districts, quadrupled. (But, well now; who out there would be silly enough to deny it? Didn't the never-ending, over-a-decade-long production of those ruthlessly accumulated and ever more publicly denigrated low scores *prove it*?)

A compassionately unprecedented “students-first” testing had certainly done its job. Now, however, there were just so darned many of those school-score-identified *bad* teachers; teachers who, so disgracefully and objectionably, continued to take scandalous cover behind the limitations demanded by due-process-protective, union-negotiated, public-employee contracts. *Bad* educators who, as a relentless outsider-financed publicity now assertively put forward, were unreasonably stubborn.

Not only stubborn?

But unwilling to change.

Out-of-touch, insubordinate, obdurate, inflexible and resistantly negative. Oh, and *most* inexcusably; most unacceptably?

Old.

Good teachers; well, *good* teachers, and oh surely this was obvious – even glaringly self-apparent in the fast pace of magical days devoted to a *truer* national compassion:

Good teachers?

Were *young*.

Oh, very, *very* young.

*While it has been documented that a growing share of the money offered to universities is now being connected to Big Money donors looking to “philanthropically” fund those institutions most willing to guarantee a “shared interest” (i.e. the promotion of a no-regulations economics), tenured professors laugh it off in the belief that they will not be swayed. But, what if – comes the argument from the other side – over time these same universities simply stop offering their professors a long-term professional tenure and begin to function

only with *non-protected, non-unionized and much, much cheaper* adjuncts?
(As in: Welcome to the public school solution.)

Perky And Vivacious

Having expressly made time to watch a newscast advertised for addressing issues of education, I was taken aback when a handsome but aging political analyst unabashedly stated that – well, in his opinion? *Young* teachers were indeed a much needed solution for our nation’s current educational woes.

After casually repeating the standard, if overwhelmingly shallow, dogma that (as he and evidently anyone in the know understood) it was clearly old, tenure-protected teachers who, each and every time, were at the very root of all low-income school failings, he went on to reveal exactly why he, personally, held such a strong support for the now nationally touted young-is-better theory of an educator employment.

“*Wouldn’t you,*” he stated, leering suggestively at the five other males seated around his educational table. “Well, wouldn’t you rather have had *young* teachers; teachers who were *young, perky* and *vivacious*?”

My.

Not just young, but *perky*.

And *vivacious*.

Golly.

What a typically...*American* idea.

In a profession where employees were generally over eighty percent female – well, shoot; obviously; who could dispute it? What would not only be needed, but was surely out-and-out critically essential:

More females.

More females who were not only young?

But *perkily* young.

And *vivaciously* young.

(You could try; but, really, was it possible to imagine that anyone selecting these particular words might be offering them up as descriptors for the more or less twenty percent of the male teacher population?)

Young: as in pretty; easy to look at. And most naïvely likely?

To always, and only, say yes.

Perky: as in well, now, let's see; how to state this nicely.

Oh, uh, well-toned. Especially, um...firm.

Oh, goshdarnit, you know, sort of, uh...*rounded*. And, um, *bouncy*.*

Vivacious: as in breathy, giggly and enthusiastic.

Fun, and a little *flirty*. Like, well, now surely everybody understood this, females *are*.

Or should be.

The exact type of a flirtily naïve, physically distracting teacher that every red-blooded American child – or, oh, now, wait a minute. Was it actually these frustrated students, or possibly their unhappily aging male advocates, who now described the *good* teacher characteristics which, as they sat back to watch their own youth fade, they still yearned for. And, surely, once upon a time?

Had deserved.

The kind of youthfully pretty and innocently compliant employee which an increasingly business-school-trained, top-down, daddy-run system unmistakably warranted. And as, each year, an ever more punitive educational accountability called out for the retaliatory implementation of additionally lucrative transformations – the type of guilelessly biddable employee who, actually?

Was each year more and more unbendingly necessitated.

How was it that *other* behind-the-times, non-enlightened countries – countries like, oh, let's say Finland or, I don't know, China, described *their* teachers?

Highly educated; well qualified; professionally dedicated.

Masters of their craft.

Luckily, however?

This was *America*.

Clearly those other old-fashioned, out-of-touch countries had nothing on our nation's economically innovative venture-capital solution for the costly dilemma of an *all-student-inclusive public* education: A solution ever more loudly promoted by phenomenally rich, business-minded *and almost exclusively male* educational "experts" – experts who knew *exactly* what our far-thinking country's public school system really and truly required.

No, no, not *experienced*.

Oh, no, not *highly educated*.
No, *not* craft-protective; *not* skilled nor professional.†
But, much more simply, and ever so much more agreeably?

Young.

Perky.

And *vivacious*.

Oh, and – well, by the way, just in case you had missed it: Possibly the most important (although strategically most smoke-screen disguised) aspect of an NCLB/R2T reform’s *good* teacher description; the most necessary characteristic attached to those indisputably *good* teachers which every child deserved, and about whom, in modern days, even the President never stopped talking?

Cheapest.

Lowest-paid.

And?

Least likely to stick around long enough to demand one of those goddamned *pensions*.

*After having heard the word *perky* used as a descriptor for a *good* teacher, I have come across it only a few additional times. All but once it was used as a modern-day requisite descriptor for plastically enhanced breasts. The other time? It was used to describe a woman’s buttocks which had been squeezed, for the day, into a surely necessary “butt-bra.”

†The most replicated descriptor for unwantedly resistant reform-blocking experienced teachers? “Old dogs.” As in: We must rid ourselves of those so many stubborn *old dogs* who can’t be (read: *refuse to be*) taught in a use of our detachedly abusive – but oh my, so remunerative – new tricks.

Faulty Replacements

Here I was, yet again, on my way to yet another non-optional, fully obligatory pre-scripted curriculum training. Argued to be a professional development capable of adding a miraculous effect to inner-city teaching, this particular assembly had been mandated for not only the literacy teachers employed inside my school, but for an impressive collection of school-scoringly *bad* educators positioned across our district’s lowest-income buildings.

Two years earlier, the abruptly legislated “benevolence” of a no-excuses NCLB had forced me, along with a schoolful of my peers, out of the much-loved teaching positions we had held at Central High – that very large and very old neighborhood school where, in modern days bursting with reform, old-fashioned highly-experienced teachers like me (school-score-labeled, now, as being the basal cause of any and all low-income student problems) were no longer welcomed. At this latest top-down-mandated gathering, I was allowed only to observe from a carefully-instated distance as a group of recently hired and unmistakably young teachers encircled the Central High training table...far across the room.

Okay. I tried my best.

But, oh my.

My stomach churned as I watched these youthfully energetic and theoretically *better* replacements. I watched as they laughed, talked, played with ubiquitous cellphones and fiddled with omnipresent laptops – all while studiously ignoring, as was the wont of impatiently self-assured young people, the tedious training lecture of the day.

My body physically hurt to be so helplessly excluded. Not only excluded? But forced to view, and accept, from a judiciously established distance, this vigorous display of youthful disregard for not only the day’s training, but for those of us who had been so recently discarded, inflexibly pushed out, and abrasively, thoughtlessly and painfully replaced.

However, no. I didn’t hate them.

Or dislike them, or wish them ill, or even blame them.

Their only crime was their youth, which, in and of itself in the old-school teacher supply system, was no crime. In point of fact, our nation’s long-standing structure of public education had always depended upon, and been energized by, the annual addition of greenhorn educators. Although I knew that these initiates had been invasively hired to take the place of loyally hardworking, long-term teachers like me – logically? It made no sense to place onto their optimistic young shoulders the weight and consequence of our nation’s abrasive intentions.

In truth?

Over the years I had had sufficient conversations with novice, program-trained and precipitously employed *good* teach-

ers hired as part of the low-income test-score solution to know that – not only could I not dislike them?

I couldn't even envy them.

What I could feel, and did, was a deep frustration *for* them. More specifically; more poignantly?

I felt *afraid* for them. Afraid for them, for our schools and, most heartbreakingly, afraid for the truest victims of this devastating low-income-school solution: the real-life low-income students who, so unforgivably, never had any say in this nationally led – and chaotically disinterested – modern-day economist's game.*

"It just doesn't make any sense," one visibly overwhelmed educator in her second year of teaching confided movingly. "My god, they fired *all* of the veterans, and now they expect us to know what to do? How are we supposed to know how to address our school's problems? We don't even know what they *are*."

"And god," she whispered, glancing around surreptitiously. "They're always finding fault. They never, ever stop evaluating us; *they never, ever leave us alone.*"

At an adjoining table, a slight young woman – an implausibly young, dominant-culture novice who, after having completed a weeks-long non-university "conditionally licensed" teacher training program, had been hired to fulfill a two-year commitment inside her ninety-eight-percent-non-dominant-culture inner-city school – noted that, along with other teachers in her building?

She had been working harder, putting in more effort and spending longer hours at her job than any educator she had had ever observed inside her own only lately attended and affluently high-scoring suburban high school.

"It's crazy," she pointed out. "We work ten times harder than teachers in rich schools. But it doesn't matter; no matter how hard we work? They won't back off. "How," she kept repeating her question, "are we supposed to do this job? Between what the kids need, what the district demands, what administrators expect, and what a hundred coaches keep telling us to do, there isn't even any logical plan. They want us to do magic, but we can't. It just ends up?" she concluded:

"That we can never make *anyone* happy."

*Even as, for those who now labor to put an end to a state-statute-protected public educator tenure, it has become useful to publish sound-bites where a particularly disgruntled student complains about *her* school's overwhelming supply of incompetent teachers (and, oh, here I would beg you: please, please, please, go ahead. Walk directly into that singularly unhappy student's school and take a look around. See if it is true that teacher after teacher, as this student would have it, is simply sitting there, off to the side, lazily refusing to engage) – well, somehow, the much, *much* larger number of angry, frustrated, and even crying students who, year after year, beg their school districts to stop firing their much-loved educators? Remains doggedly unheard.

Really?

With each fearful comment made by a suddenly hired new teacher, I found myself mentally comparing our district's current state of affairs to a popular skit played out occasionally on the infamously famous television show *Saturday Night Live*. A parody where, in reference to illogical or ridiculous events, actors sarcastically concluded with one word: a singularly caustic and highly emphasized word meant to illustrate incredulous opposition to a mind-boggling stupidity:

Really?

In a publicly supported, test-based move to *help* poor children, older, experienced teachers – employees who, for years, had illustrated a personal willingness to not only commit, long-term, to low-income school buildings, but to take on the complicated and never simple work required for addressing the issues and impediments attached to a low-income and often culturally-different school job description – well, this kind of selfishly tenure-protected teacher was, now, according to an aggressively published reform conjecture, *the obvious reason why these low-income schools failed*.

No kidding.

Really?

And the plan, the highly-advertised solution for resolving this untenable academic dilemma; the plan for fixing this argued-as-indefensible *bad* teacher conundrum?

Would be to aggressively replace these school-score-labeled *bad* teachers (old-fashioned, student-protective teachers who, before the advent of a high-stakes testing had been repeated-

ly recognized as being workers with the hardest jobs; as being everyday heroes deserving not only the public's backing, but a nation's respect) – well, the newest, most vociferously acclaimed *better* public school plan was to now dramatically rid districts of older, experienced teachers like these, and abruptly replace them *with an ever-changing, conditionally-licensed stream of exceedingly young, privileged-class-educated, two-year-committed tenderfoot recruits.*

Naively young teachers who, with no previous instructional experience, with no college-earned teaching degree, with no carefully-vetted personal skill, craft nor hindsight, with nothing, in fact, save the magic of good intentions – well, these youngsters would undoubtedly rescue a nation.

And this highly lauded plan...would *work*?

This was, now, honestly considered to be the most logical method for not only addressing but “fixing” any and all of those low-income school problems while, simultaneously, *bringing up those test scores?*

Huh.

Really?

You're *not* messing with me? This *was* your proposition?

And the public – *for more than a decade now* – had actually been gullible enough, blind enough, and schematically detached enough to have proffered up an enthusiastic support for this overwhelmingly short-sighted solution?

Well, yes.

Really.

Teach For A Minute

Hang on.

Let's stop here – just for a second.

Let's pause, once again, and contemplate all of the expense, all of the forcefully advocated press, and all of the hugely funded enthusiasm for finding, recruiting and training those brave troops of young people who were surely out there – somewhere. All of those youthfully optimistic heroes intrepidly willing to step up and *take one for the nation*; all of those tenderfoot volunteers so courageously ready to become the desperately needed *good* teacher saviors of our country's lowest-performing schools.

Energetic youngsters willing to get in there *and work with the hardest kids*. Tireless greenhorns willing to *take on the most difficult jobs*. Dedicated initiates willing to *stick it out* (well, at least for two years) *and get that modern-day magic done*.

Fearlessly valiant heroes willing, even, to do it all?

Selflessly.

For America.

And.

Well, while we've stopped here; while we've taken this minute to pause?

A particular memory begs attention. It is a memory linked to an abruptly installed party-line administrator – a man expressly, if very unexpectedly, hired to non-negotiably “fix” our low-income, low-scoring school. A man willing to disinterestedly appropriate the position of a community-popular but problematically resistant old-school principal (an old-school traditional leader who had erroneously believed that standing up to protect his school's interests was an appropriate action.

And had learned the hard way?

That indeed it was not).

It is a memory of a man who, before he had been assigned to “fix” our school? Had already been moved, time and again, about our district.

A man so unquestioningly tied to a cyclically detached management that, in fact, he had allowed himself to be slotted into school after school as a new reform “leader” when, in actuality, his job was not to lead, not to inspire, not to aid nor support, but to belligerently manhandle frightened test-score “deficient” faculties. A man who, after drowning faculty upon faculty in a flood of negative test-score statistics, had then explained to each haplessly blamed staff: Well – due to the obvious data inadequacy created by *bad* teachers?

He simply had no choice but to help the district close down yet another long-standing neighborhood institution.

One after the next.

It is a memory attached to this man who, eighteen months into his latest assignment, had already received word that – as of the end of our school year – his services would no longer be required. Forced to publicly resign this, his latest short-term transitory position, a man who would soon be retitled, reappointed and

distractingly re-placed into yet another reform-financed, quick-fix appointment elsewhere.

It is a recollection focused upon a particular afternoon when this exceptionally malleable “leader” spoke up at a teacher staffing meeting: a meeting intentionally called to address the fact that a parade of young employees were choosing to vacate his building. Youngsters who, under this man’s “non-negotiable” management, had been relentlessly evaluated and overwhelmingly harassed; exhausted greenhorns who, unheard and unhappy, were choosing to abandon ship in the hope of finding employment...*anywhere else*.

Forced to acknowledge the exodus created by his own heavy-handed management, this never stable administrator, this man who clearly held no power over his own long-term employment, snorted derisively. Disgusted at what he viewed to be simply a lack of stamina on the part of weakly ungrateful recruits, he stated his opinion. (This from a man who, for numerous years at school upon school, had so very antagonistically helped the district force long-term, building-loyal teachers to leave the schools and jobs they had loved):

Oh, those *Teach-For-A-Minute* girls, he now declared snidely. Really, who was surprised?

Everybody knew:

You couldn't count on them.

The Brightest And Best

Despite their designated unreliability; despite, even, their surely ungrateful lack of loyalty for stoically sticking around and “taking” the abuses created by an ever-shifting, funding-lucrative reform – huge numbers of these oft-labeled undependable Teach-For-A-Minute girls (and oh, yes, a lesser number of surely just as undependable Teach-For-A-Minute boys) were now being ever more massively produced.

They were also, every day more imperatively?

Being volubly and nationally touted as the absolute must-have modern-day low-income public school *good* teacher solution.

As year after year of a high-stakes educational accountability progressed, an escalating deluge of Teach-For-A-Minute

greenhorns, in fact, were finding themselves pushed ever more assertively – sometimes without even a specific forewarning of the class level they might be expected to teach – into low-income public institutions across the nation. All while the “non-profit” teacher training programs producing them?

Gained both momentum, and, well, huh.

Here was an interesting turn of events: *Profit*.

Magic, *non-profit profitable*, relentlessly recruiting teacher assembly factories; factories which had begun to turn out an ever increasing flow of naïvely inexperienced, weeks-long-program-trained, provisionally-licensed – but arguably bright, unmistakably young, invigoratingly vivacious, and, perhaps most importantly?

Perky girls.

(And; oh, well yes; a smaller number of those maybe not quite so indispensably perky boys.)*†

In a country grown used to an incessant political bombast where leader upon leader declared a personal support for hard-working educators but then showed no honest predilection for the expense of actually backing his or her own words – it had become a sort of tongue-in-cheek joke to acknowledge that, well, as a career choice in our country, in these the United States: In comparison to *real* professions?

Public education was poorly paid and repeatedly maligned.

Those dumb teachers.

I mean really. (Oh, I had heard this, and heard this, and heard this): Who would ever want to be a *teacher*?

Ha ha ha.

Flying in the face of the fact that those who selected public teaching as a career took on the almost unimaginable task of imparting information to huge classes of wriggly-to-apatetic and sometimes belligerent children; children (and in modern days a growing number of parents) both oblivious to, and ungrateful for, the fact that their education was being offered to them as a free, tax-covered public service – well, having casually adopted an old-world disdain, the endlessly argued American joke had been that those who had any talent at all, those who *could*?

Went out and found a *job*. And those who *couldn't*, having no clear or useful purpose?

Became teachers.

Illustrating a monumental lack in overall logic, from this historical habit of an undervalued (and, well, yes: *around eighty-percent female*) teacher denigration, had been cultivated the theory that public school systems – especially those systems expected to house and serve the largest number of those taxingly difficult lowest-income, inner-city schools – suffered and struggled simply because the relatively low-paying (and thus, by simple deduction, *low-level*) work of being a teacher:

Well, as a profession?

It simply didn't attract the Brightest and the Best.

*As a journalist followed the teaching year of a suddenly deployed troop of Teach-For-A-Minute miracle workers, ultimately he found only *one* greenhorn to be exceptionally able. (And so many others who were both frighteningly and disastrously unprepared.)

†While teacher-factory proponents continue to argue that young dreamers can make a “profound” difference by entering the classroom, apparently no one is to be held responsible for the even more profound abuse created when – under-prepared and overwhelmed – unable to fulfill assignments, a significant number of these youngsters abruptly abandon ship. (And, then, even more frighteningly? Often blithely move on to well-paid positions in the now highly politicized world of educational leadership.)

Taking Measure Of The Unmeasurable

Okay; I know that as a nation we are seldom expected to do a lot of deep thinking. But – I'll take a chance; maybe point something out.

Knowing that even after the expense and effort of earning a college degree, you would face long years of nearly impossible work at relatively low pay. Knowing that the government's interest in supporting public school budgets, buildings and materials was, especially in modern days, minimal to nonexistent. Knowing that you would be subjected to an ongoing countrywide derision – a derision predictably centered around a belittling, lazy-teachers-summer-off line of commentary.

Even with all of this, you *still* chose teaching?

And then, *because you wanted to*, you were one of the relative few who, on purpose and by choice, also pursued work in-

side low-income, diversely-complicated and profoundly challenging schools?

And – after your first five years, you didn't, as did over half your peers:

Quit?

Huh.

How, exactly, was this *not* finding the best?

The argument that low-income schools suffered simply due to a lack in attracting “the brightest and best,” a years-old strain of logic which, in days of a remunerative reform, could be shined up and energetically presented to the public as truth, conveniently bypassed an important point. What *did* attract, inspire, and help retain the kind of teacher most likely to not only survive, but thrive, inside lowest-income and most often culturally-diverse schools was, in point of fact, never likely to be magically addressed through an advocacy for minimalist, teacher-factory descriptors – that type of descriptor most often applied to a cyclically rotating run of recruits:

Young, bright and energetic.

Although useful, these character traits?

Were never going to be enough.

Even should the applicants selected?

Happen to be exceptionally vivacious.

Or even perky as hell.

What *would* be required was a complimentary set of qualities much more essential – although, as attributes, almost impossible to measure (and thus judiciously ignored by relationship-disregarding, emotions-get-in-the-way, bottom-line, market-competitive leaders). Essentially necessary traits, such as:

A heartfelt personal conviction.

A dedication for making a committed long-term difference. The courage for building honest relationships and becoming emotionally involved.

The instinct to not only support, but nurture and protect, *every* child.

The individually cultivated aspiration *not* to impose and control, but to serve, aid, underscore and elevate. The innate ability to realize the value of, and hold a protective regard for, the *non-standardized* diversity of cultures. The atypical intelligence required to not only recognize, but to actively and intentionally

avoid, attempts at a fanatical categorization, labeling and segregating – and to, much more effectively?

Enjoy, promote and celebrate.

The genuine interest in working with, and taking pleasure from, students *despite* issues of language; *despite* debilitating problems of transience and poverty; *despite* an unpredictable attendance and special needs; *despite*, even, a belligerently disrespectful behavior. And, most importantly in harshly punishing years ever more dedicated to the immovable “compassion” of a statistical liability:

The independently developed and honestly practiced empathy demanded, in days of a “value-added” test-score punishment where both employment and pay had become increasingly intertwined with the arbitrary collection of data rather than with any true-life student reality – to not only seek out?

But to take on even those most problematic, most dangerous students.

Those students most likely to generate their now legally objectionable, *and harshly teacher penalized*, “unacceptable” test scores.

No Experience Necessary

Certainly you *could* go out there.

Certainly you *could*, as a concerned, self-promoting “expert,” go out there to actively locate and recruit – as you now publicly declared necessary – the “brightest and the best.” You *could* run off to biggest-name, most prestigious (and typically Eastern where, gosh, surely everyone was aware of this: *people were unquestionably smarter*) prep schools, colleges and universities.

You *could*, as true illustration of your endlessly stated compassion, set out to find and enlist those mostly dominant-culture, privileged-class-educated graduates, and convince them that, because they were *the brightest*? Because they were *the best*?

Surely they would require no prior experience.

You *could*, even, enthusiastically persuade them that:

Well – due to the happy facility of being *exceptionally* capable?

They would surely have no need to sit through any long hours of study in an effort to accrue that undoubtedly frivolous

degree in education. Unlike other professions, highly paid and thus publicly respected professions such as engineering, medicine, architecture or law; professions where practitioners faced not only long years of a rigorously focused classwork, but an arduous demonstration of ability before licensing:

Well, *good* teachers?

Oh, *good* teachers taught not through any painstakingly accumulated edification, commitment or experience, but simply through *a wondrously magical – and fully innate – ability*.*

Offering only a few short weeks of training followed by a guaranteed two years' employment at a solid (short-term/résumé-building) lower-middle-class salary – an especially sweet deal in a floundering, undependable economy – well, you *could* win these kids over. You *could* even convince them that: being the *brightest*, being the *best*? In days of an über-benevolent accountability, they were desperately needed.

And, then?

Well, *then*; strategically and plaintively extending your message, you *could*, then, move on. You *could* move on to the poignantly synchronized persuasion of your national audience.

Ardently and repeatedly, you *could* endeavor to convince the entire nation that it was only through your careful recruitment and every-year-more-profitable training of these best-colleges graduates (effort expended on *your* part simply due to *your* profound concern for children) – oh, you *could* emphatically tell the nation that these undoubtedly superior students you had found could not only tackle, but solve, each and every one of those previously too difficult, previously too challenging public school conundrums.

Getting it all done?

In two years or less!

And, oh my, but wouldn't these exceptional low-income-school saviors – these miraculous heroes whom *you* had set out to find – well, wouldn't they be energized (due, as an ever burgeoning club of educational “experts” had now thought it logical to decree: *money was the singular motivation behind all human impetus*) – well, wouldn't these marvel-inducing youngsters be motivated by your enthusiastically endorsed biggest-pay-for-highest-test-scores salary schedules.

Your plan, as you now assertively proclaimed, sounded so good. It was because *you*, as a deeply concerned “expert,” had been thoughtful; because *you* had cared so much; because *you* had fashioned your innovative new system for addressing each and every one of those complicated issues which had traditionally plagued culturally-diverse, low-income public schools...

Well, as you now loudly and unambiguously told the nation?

It was *your* newly hired, short-term committed, minimally-trained super kids who could, quite dramatically, simply *sweep in* (after you had done your best to help *sweep out* those so many selfishly unwanted traditional educators) and take over. Because, as *you* now vehemently asserted, raking in, each year, larger and larger sums of that teacher-recruiting, teacher-training money?

You cared so much.

About the kids.

*Courses in education are apparently not the only classes no longer required for our nation’s youngest and most magical educators. A number of these brightest and best are unlikely to have earned a degree in the subject area which they are then hired to teach. A degree in “hospitality” for example, is surely guarantee that any weeks-long program-trained super teacher will be able to take on five classes a day overflowing with students seeking college-ready credits in Language Arts.

Just The Facts

The fact that so many of these young, brightest and best recruits were, over time, found to be – well, not really so sure that they were all *that* dedicated. The fact that two years was, actually, for a significant number each staffing cycle, turning out to be definitely enough time spent on a selfless (and endlessly harassed) low-income public school devotion.

The fact that so many of these magical initiates were not, in reality?

All that willing, sometimes even blindly unable, to open privileged (although undoubtedly bright) minds to a necessary acceptance of, or understanding, support and celebration for, the *actual* lives of the less privileged, less economically stable, and less culturally assimilated.

The fact that each year an increasing number of these privileged-world “brightest” recruits came face to face with the reality that an honest production of those miraculously high or even stable test scores – well, huh, who would’ve guessed? Due to the multiple intervening and uncontrolled variables, including the so many unhelpful actions from frustratingly inexperienced administrators, producing *high* scores?

Was going to remain an arbitrary – and generally unlikely – possibility.

The fact that, even as these inexperienced newcomers struggled to address the complicatedly non-standardized needs of their students, they were projected capable of functioning sans benefit of traditional education classes *or* an honest collaborative role modeling simply because big-name, self-promoting, business-world “experts” had begun to loudly and persistently claim that the *right* teachers? The *best* teachers?

Could, alone and independently, even while taking on huge classes filled to the brim with low-income, culturally-diverse students:

Perform magic.

The fact that, inside the so many reform-controlled buildings of modern days there was now a very limited non-orchestrated departmental communication; the fact that new teachers were increasingly unlikely to interact honestly and effectively with older, experienced peers; the fact that, unaided and autonomously, new hires were ordered to find success simply by turning a blind eye to an overwhelming reality.

The fact that, after being pushed unceremoniously into heavily reformed buildings, unproven and unsupported youngsters were directed to instruct large and even growing classes even as they were simultaneously commanded to respond to not only the demands of ongoing observations, but a variety of requirements attached to suddenly instigated in-school innovations.

The fact that, ironically, so many of these young dreamers? So many of these low-income school saviors recruited *because* they were the brightest?

Came from privileged-class, economically-stable backgrounds: homes where personal finances had not only been openly discussed, but made an analytic priority – so that, far from being fiscally naïve or mathematically challenged? These especially

bright recruits could look with ease right *through* proffered performance-dependent merit pay schedules and deduce that performance systems where pay would arrive arbitrarily in one-time-only, per-situation, non-variable-controlled bonus monies rather than in base-pay longevity increments – was, in fact?

Unappealingly, a system which never planned to support anything as expensive as personal dedication, building loyalty, hard-won experience, continued education, or a student and community commitment.

The fact that these not-so-dumb recruits?

Could rapidly process the necessary calculations and figure out that, huh, no kidding, they were unlikely *ever* to realize the big-salary-promoted dream; could even see that (there it was, plain as day) the promise of huge, elevated teacher salaries under an unpredictably-shifting, bonus-decided, top-down-punitive, variable-affected, test-score-wobbly merit pay structure?

Was simply yet another razzle-dazzle smoke-screen-camouflaged *non*-reality.

The fact that a noteworthy number of these low-income-school saviors kept choosing to leave; kept choosing to fulfill minimal employment agreements and get the hell out; kept choosing to vacate the premises and allow the next naïvely idealistic conscript to take up the job.

The fact that, oh, well – on the other hand:

The fact that *you* really didn't mind?

The fact that, as a result of *your* now very profitable business of assertively recruiting, short-term training and then ruthlessly placing an unceasing procession of young (and oh my, yes; often vivacious; often perky) teachers – well, the fact that their overall lack in dedication and durability was actually making *you* rich?

Oh, you *could*, of course, in all of your overwhelming concern for the children...

Simply forget to bring that up.

Institutional Memory Loss

Throughout the many years I had been employed inside Central High, the signage and décor of a regularly used space known as the English Teachers' lounge (an invitingly homey

space containing a table, a couch, extra chairs, a microwave, a refrigerator and plenty of cupboards; a room where meetings were held, lunches had, and supplies kept) changed little. Recurrently I had seen, and smiled at, a poster someone had thought to tack up near the copy machine. Below a picture of a drowsily lounging and decidedly laid-back polar bear, a square-lettered caption stated: “Every time I get the urge to do something?

“I lie down until it goes away.”

It only took a second to glance at the sofa – and imagine the possibilities.

For almost as many years, I had taken additional note of a supplemental (and perhaps even more teacher-pertinent) adage which had been placed with a high visibility next to the back exit. In heavily bolded letters, the prominent signage asserted: “Of all the things I’ve lost?

“I miss my mind the most.”

As semester after semester spun toward a climactic conclusion, heavy with project, program, assessment, paper, computer and grading expectations – well, more often than not I felt that I comprehended that particular sentiment exactly.

Thinking back, now, and recollecting that room – suddenly I realize that after being pushed out of Central High, as I had struggled to navigate a succession of forced assignments inside chaotically invaded middle schools – well, somewhere along the way? The old-fashioned, old-school tradition I had come to think of as normal; that conventional system of supporting, encouraging and expecting use of a department-specific/department-friendly teachers’ lounge: Had, within all of the destabilizing movement...

Been lost.

A department-particular, administratively-provided space; a space where an invitingly homey room could be filled not only with familiar amenities, but, much more effectively and much more essentially, with an honest educator interaction. With a sincere interest in one another’s lives; with an authentically interpersonal, morale building camaraderie. An idea that was, now?

Somehow, gone. No longer expected; no longer provided. Evidently, no longer considered necessary.

Or.

Was it possible:

No longer *allowed*?

Having initiated a lunch meeting with an invigoratingly intense teaching peer, I experienced one of those “ah-ha” moments when, during the course of our conversation, she explained: Due to the perspective she brought to teaching as a Black educator, she had rapidly ascertained multiple reforms at her almost all non-White building to be not only disinterestedly abusive, but problematically racist. However, after having called attention to her concerns, this exceptionally intellectual young lady had not only been forced out of her teaching position, but out of (*and assertively “banned from”*) a district loudly claiming to be attracting and retaining the brightest and best.

As she spoke, I found myself untangling yet another of the knots which so tightly secured our nationally acclaimed and philanthropic-capitalist supported educational solution: that *good* teacher solution so loudly bent upon finding, training, and hiring an always fresh supply of newly inexperienced – but surely magically endowed – *good* employees.

“The newest, youngest, and most inexperienced hires?” my youthful lunch companion suggested. “If you’ve noticed? They’re kept carefully separated from an unguarded interaction with older teachers. This isn’t accidental; *it’s done on purpose.*”

Nah, I thought.

Really?

I mean, c’mon, did that even make sense?

However, after taking a rapid mental inventory, it suddenly dawned upon me that in place of traditional department-only, department-led teacher meetings – meetings which for so many years had not only allowed, but encouraged, a democratically inclusive focus upon individual teacher concerns – well, since the advent of NCLB? Those of us employed inside the world of low-income literacy had, all of us, old and young, experienced and inexperienced, everyone all together, been forced into attendance at an apparently endless supply of abruptly mandated *but always administratively-led, administratively-orchestrated* meetings.

Never-ending trainings; countless professional developments. Assemblies where an intentional differentiation for actual background and ability?

Had apparently been moot.

Meetings where – despite ability, despite experience, despite interests – we had all been ordered to sit, individual views

unsolicited and unheard, as data team leader, curriculum specialist, newly-hired coach, score-spewing administrator or minimally experienced evaluator controlled the day's agenda: telling everyone, all together, what and how to think. Meetings where young, greenhorn educators might immediately deduce that – speaking up? Standing up? Expressly drawing attention to self in the effort to state critical opinions?

Was now considered to be not only indecorous, but, in days of an über-modern accountability, had become an activity each year more insubordinately punishable.

And was now, so very actively and visibly:

Discouraged.

Belatedly, then, it came to me. Ever since my forced exit from Central High, there had not been, anywhere, a room set aside – a visibly personalized room with an easy chair or couch, a table, a copy machine, cabinets for supplies. *A space specifically created for use on an every day basis by the teachers particular to my department.* No friendly, voice-protective room which might encourage an ongoing communication, or the tending of unguarded personal relationships.

In hindsight I saw it then: the artful elimination of an unsupervised interaction. The separation not only of physical bodies, but, even more meticulously and insidiously, of thought. Of opinions. Of real, everyday, true-life teacher concerns.

Still, I struggled to grasp the possibility that *thought suppression* could be a purposeful intention of a nationally instigated school reform.*

“Think,” suggested my young and unusually astute lunch companion. “Whenever you set out to destabilize tradition? Well, if your intention is to rout out old-school expectations, you first have to eliminate institutional memory. If your goal is to erase employee’ expectations for a collaboratively democratic management even as you instill the fear of punishment and a subservient acceptance for top-down, corporate-style directives – can you afford to allow your newest and youngest employees to hear, or see, the interactive, opinion-supportive system that *used to be in place?*”

*Even as look-at-me-I-want-to-be-president governors solicit attention by arguing the need to assertively shut down “woe-is-us” teachers’ lounges, it might be

time for the nation to take note that the methodic elimination of a non-orchestrated teacher interaction in lowest-income schools has already been going on, now, for more than a decade.

Teaching To The Test

Actually, I had noticed. In modern days there really were, always, especially in the never-endingly tested Language Arts department, so *many* unfamiliar and barely trained teachers. I had taken notice of, and more than occasionally been frustrated by, the escalating number of brand-new untried, and so often defensively voiceless, educators. Teachers who, even after months of attending meetings and “working together?”

I hardly knew.

And most days?

Never saw.

Teachers starting out with only minimal to nonexistent experience – most often privileged youngsters who had had, previous to being hired, little to no interaction with seriously poor or culturally-different citizens. As projected symbols of the so many emphatically employed Save-Low-Income-Schools *good* teachers now being thrust aggressively into chaotically reformed systems, these unsuspecting recruits? Were no longer mentored in, nor even exposed to, the individually empowering tactic of a non-orchestrated, opinion-generating, department-led interaction.

Short-term educators so naïvely new, in fact – so meticulously trained in how to be reform loyal and hierarchy controlled – that they really didn’t know (and now so methodically disconnected from any old-school traditions which had not only tolerated, but encouraged, a voice-protective collaboration, that they would never find out): Not only *should* they have a voice, but that a genuinely egalitarian *all-student-inclusive* system of public education?

Profoundly depended upon the fact that they would.

As a parent who grappled with poverty?

Oh, *you* knew.

As a parent doing your best to survive inside a visibly struggling neighborhood?

Oh, *you* had figured things out years ago.

As a mobility limited and economically frustrated parent dependent upon sending your kids to a fully-inclusive, local-access, long-term-stable neighborhood school – oh, *you* knew that it wasn't easy dealing with the debilitating issues of poverty.

Harder still?

Doing it by yourself. Going it alone.

Economic instability added to a cultural disconnect and a lack in English language skills had, in fact, repeatedly rendered you, your children and your communities almost entirely without power. Communities which, historically, had been easiest to ignore; easiest to neglect; easiest to abuse and oppress; easiest to, in the name of a “benevolent” economic logic, disrupt and exploit.

Therefore, as a low-income parent *you* counted upon, *you needed and depended upon*, long-term educators who saw your anxiety, heard your worries, and, so very importantly? *Were not afraid to speak up*. You relied upon the kind of teacher who could help – not by being passively quiet; not by submissively accepting invasive commands – but by reacting. By assertively standing up and publicly resisting school and/or student exploitations. You counted upon the kind of loyally committed and highly experienced educator who, willing to bond together with other employees, would intentionally speak out in the effort to protect your children's right to a locally-accessible, guardedly-uninterrupted, full-services, meet-children-where-they-are education.

Dependent upon help, you put *your* trust in your children's teachers: accomplished professionals, or so you believed, who would never allow the impersonal structures of NCLB/R2T – those modern-day smoke-screen-protected structures where an alarming number of invasively reformed schools suffering from a lack in educator experience, committed leadership, and long-term planning failed miserably – to use *your* children's building as simply yet another rubber-stamped accountability experiment.

Ah, but.

Oh well, now; everyone all together?

Let's all slow down.

Let's all be – well, just a touch more realistic.

As an economically unstable, culturally different and politically disenfranchised parent? *You*, and what *you* needed?

Really didn't count.

In fact, your economically limited and often culturally complicated children were not ever (yes, this was pretty ironic, since your kids were the students for whom all of this money had originally been set aside) *going to matter*. Because, well see? *Your kids* were the children who – now how could we put this as directly as possible so that you, and others like you, really understood it? Maybe if you just grasped this as fact, you would stop bothering everyone with your unrealistic expectations for a democratically-protective, *all-student-inclusive* treatment.

See, it was *your kids*?

Who really fucked up those test scores.

And, these days?

Now c'mon. You knew this.

Heck, thanks to the staggeringly financed efforts of a burgeoning club of top-down, business-trained educational “experts” (so many of whom who had never actually set foot inside a low-income, culturally-different classroom, yet still, somehow? Held a magical understanding of exactly what it was that low-scoring students *and* the communities which surrounded them needed); well, thanks to ongoing efforts by deeply concerned thinkers like these?*

Shoot, all of *America* now knew.

Nothing mattered more than test scores.

Everyone understood; everyone had been made fully aware.

Good schools, and thus by default *good* teachers – especially that brand-new model of a top-down-managed, easily-intimidated, minimally-trained, short-term greenhorn; that growing supply of shockingly inexperienced initiates most willing to stick to the national agenda of aggressively invading before negatively labeling, separating and segregating (and thereby long-term *fixing* public schools):

Cared about tests.

Not about *you*.

Or your...*kids*.

*How disconcerting to watch as, after years of forcing so many test-score separations onto their districts that they now oversee schools where the achievement gap between White and non-White students has not only persisted but *widened* – long-term accountability reformers can still look directly into the

camera and say, with a wide-eyed wonder, that they have no idea how this might be happening.

Lessons In Femininity

And so, because they served as a powerful foundation for the growing national obsession with a test-score-based “accountability” (and the über-conservative, smoke-screen-protected social segregation now leaking in by the same portal):

Low-income school teacher divisions increased.

Painstakingly separated through administrative mandate from a traditional old-school-experienced-teacher role modeling, new teachers quickly ascertained that under the top-down theory of a modern-day low-income school management there was going to be little chance of, nor expectation for, a personal expression of...well, pretty much *anything*.

It was lucky, then.

That so many of these new recruits?

Were, really, so darned *smart*.

Due to the happy circumstance of being *the brightest*, and harboring hopes, even, of being *the best* – oh, these newest school-turnaround miracle workers turned out to be exceptionally astute. Conveniently for the don’t-talk-back-to-daddy administrative club, it didn’t take them but a minute to absorb the idea that a publicly noted teacher resistance was not only unacceptable?

But that, in the low-income buildings of modern days, it had become a directly punishable act of an untenable insubordination.

Over the years, Big Money’s obsession with the rubber-stamped approval for yet more highly remunerative school invasions had insistently pushed to acquire an ever more top-down, ever more non-democratic power. As a result, in the name of building a “truer” educational liability, an increasing number of suddenly-decreed-“innovation” buildings had lost union (and thus judiciously-written, voice-safeguarding) protections. As, one by one, elements of a union-negotiated collaboration underwent methodic elimination, having never encountered any old-fashioned support for a loyally outspoken educator involvement, each year’s latest inventory of new teachers discovered that – well, in truly

modern days; in days ever more committed to the whim of competitive school markets?

The act of a teacher punishment had become progressively intertwined with an immediate, no-due-process, *oh-no-you-shouldna-pissed-off-daddy* dismissal.

Good teachers, as these exceptionally intellectual hires might now rapidly deduce (and gosh wasn't it great to work with such unusually clever employees), were those educators who, *much like good women who knew their place*, didn't bother non-collaborative, business-trained, top-down daddy administrators with issues of racial discrimination, poverty disconnect, cultural exploitation, curriculum limitation, testing inequity, or any other of those unhelpfully emotional (and thus so obviously and unwantedly *feminine*) problems. Problems which might obstruct the disinterested economics-before-people financial goals of our nation's truly far-thinking leaders.

As lowest-level interchangeable (and, in days of a deregulated innovation willing to offer only minimal loyalty for hard work, higher education or a student and community commitment, ever-more-quickly-replaced) employees, *good* teachers soon realized that:

As workers struggling to avoid daddy's backhand?

They simply *never fussed*.

Being the publicly lauded *good* teachers of modern days, they kept all opinions – including any of those displeasingly feminine frustrations, worries, uncertainties and concerns – to themselves. *Although?*

Well, one could hope.

That in place of a decidedly *non-feminine* outspoken, student-protective, craft-defending, stubbornly-opinionated *old* teacher resistance? Possibly the younger and younger recruits of “compassionately” modern days might yet manage to pull off what *was*, in the fast pace of a no-excuses educational accountability, much, *much* more effectively expected from top-down, daddy-controlled employees:

Being engagingly vivacious.

And unprecedentedly perky.

Stepping Like A Goose

Kept warily distanced from any old-fashioned expectations for a non-orchestrated, voice-protective, professionally-respected interaction, seated alongside a convoluted mix of teachers mandated into attendance from multiple low-income buildings, experienced and inexperienced alike – in the name of a no-excuses test-score liability?

Novice recruits found themselves forced into participation at a never-ending run of top-down, micro-managed, authority-led meetings. And as, with each year's replenishment of an ever more deregulated funding, a burgeoning club of accountability hopefuls pushed to establish personal footing aboard the enticingly financed innovation wagon – demanding, as they jockeyed for position, yet another round of no-excuses, everybody-must-attend *bad* teacher retrainings: Well, as reform-imbued year followed reform-imbued year?

Each year's supplemental supply of freshly inspired "experts" created the need for an additional run of *meetings*.

Meetings, meetings – and then?

More meetings.

Meetings, assemblies, trainings and conferences.

Workshops, forums, classes and seminars.

An evidently unlimited flow of gatherings ordered up, over and over, and then over again, for the obligatory retraining, curriculum review, data analysis, test administration, assessment preparation, grading preview, reform briefing, school-score debriefing, statistical application, exam interpretation, and day after day (after long, long day) of an assertively decided professional development. And it was here, inside this overabundance of top-down, agenda-controlled, daddy-knows-best assemblies, that new teachers seeking professional identity might find ample opportunity for studying the contemporary educator character. Being exceptionally perceptive?

Studiously they taught themselves how to step in line.

Repeatedly they observed that the *good* teachers of modern days (well, at least those clever enough to grasp what would be required for keeping not only employment but a necessarily attached paycheck) *didn't fight back*. Passively they acquiesced; tacitly they accepted the modern-day, top-down necessity of being treated – no matter age, no matter education, no matter experi-

ence, no matter ability – as flightily irresponsible and annoyingly unruly *children*.

Naughtily *bad* children, perpetually in need of a finger-shaking chastisement.

Disobedient, rebellious children, forevermore obliging a spirit-breaking humiliation.

Problematically resistant children, never-endingly compelling a fear-based emotional manipulation.

Never allowed to experience a self-confidently interactive opposition, the perpetually interchanging stream of newest and youngest hires were strategically kept outside the fact that an especially vital *and even system-sustaining crucial* element of a truly democratic, truly public, truly *all-student-inclusive* structure of education (a sincerely classless structure doing its best to guardedly educate *all students*)?

Well, the *good* teacher recruits of modern days were never likely to see that a critical facet of a truly democratic all-student-inclusive *public* system of education was not only the intentional empowerment of a long-term career-dedicated craft, but an additionally advocated respect for an experienced educator opinion. And the even more necessary, although in days of an increasingly systematic union-busting, tenure-eliminating, test-based liability, each year less likely:

Teacher action.

*Take a few minutes; look up the percent of hands-on educators employed by your district. You may be surprised to find that in modern days, more than a few educational systems are now comprised of *less than 50% teachers*. And that each year as the hierarchy titles instigated by a fanatical score-based reform increase, the number of actual hands-on student-interactive educators? Continues to shrink.

The Disappeared

Little by little.

One school at a time.

A traditional, old-school-collaborative, local-neighborhood-accessible, *all-student-protective*, teacher-and-community-involved, school-based management?

Going, going – in the name of a no-excuses test-score answerability:

Gone.

Under an ever more prescriptive supervision, each year's cyclically interchanging supply of greenhorn educators were less and less likely to recognize that a powerful aspect of a low-income teacher's job had ever, actually, been an outspoken, risk-taking, don't-shut-me-up confidence. What they *did* comprehend; what novice employees *did* absorb inside attendance-mandatory meeting after attendance-mandatory meeting?

Was that teachers of any age or any background – were submissive. Not only submissive, but, due to each year's increasingly vicious use of a retaliatory, shame-based blame and the burgeoning list of vilifications now malignantly connected to a haphazardly (and often illegally) implemented modern-day evaluation – *afraid*. After all, in days of a no-excuses top-down authority, you simply never knew when daddy, particularly any one of the thin-skinned and overwhelmingly defensive program-trained daddies who just a minute ago had been assigned to run *your* building:

Might be pissed off.

What new recruits *were* allowed to see (shoot, it was one of their very first lessons), was that teachers who resisted; teachers who called attention to themselves; teachers who persisted in standing up to question top-down directives – those old-fashioned, oppositionally outspoken professionals who continued to take a proactive role and *voice opinions*? Well, *those* teachers, as the rules around a modern-day evaluation now dictated, could very assertively – and with a blatant disregard for traditionally written rights of due process – be publicly and humiliatingly punished. One day, in fact?

You might come to work and find out that teachers like these...

Had disappeared.

In the name of the *good* teacher assessment practices initiated by privileged-class, department-of-education-friendly lawmakers (well-paid, culturally-blinded politicians who, rather than actually stepping up to address the frightening array of issues debilitatingly attached to our nation's growing and ever more visible social inequity, vociferously proposed that – oh, my; but un-

doubtedly: It was always selfishly change-resistant *old* teachers who created any and all negative press inside low-income buildings). Well, in the chaotic pace of modern days, new educational hires immediately discovered that any employee who, in any way, articulated an unhappy frustration?

Could now be excessively and exhaustively evaluated.

Overwhelmingly and intimidatingly observed.

Ordered to jump, arduously and impossibly, through hoop after spirit-breaking hoop. Placed unexpectedly and intimidatingly on alarmingly formal, don't-talk-back, letter-in-your-file plans for remediation.

Forced, without warning or recourse?

Into no-due-process, no-school-contact, résumé-and-job-killing administrative leaves. And, ultimately? In the most potent and each year more belligerently utilized teacher-silencing tactic known to the district and to a modern-day, privileged-consumer nation:

Forced *out*.

Out of the building, out of the district.

And out of teaching.

The Sound Of Silence

Direct witness to the penalties now being slotted into place as a response to any and all forms of an educator resistance; repeated observers to the consequences now coming ever more punitively as the reform game revoked “tenure” protections of a voice-inclusive due process – greenhorn initiates quickly bowed to expectations. Keeping eyes low; attentively stepping in line – prudently they remained blindly unaware that if the nation’s proposed educational goal was, in fact, an honest protection for an *all*-student inclusive instruction?

Then teachers employed inside lowest-income and most often culturally-diverse schools had, *as had always been the case*, to actively, insistently and consistently avoid being silenced.

No one told them.

And, in days of a deepest educational compassion?

No one modeled it for them.

No one permitted them to see that as educators working inside our nation’s politically weakest (and thus easiest to exploit)

lowest-income schools? Students, parents and proximate communities fully depended upon them to be anything but shy. Diligently kept from recognition that traditional old-fashioned, democratically-collaborative schools had *ever* allowed employees to be not only reactive but resistant – empowered, even, to speak up in the effort to defend student rights, student needs, and student equity:

What new teachers *now* observed?

Were educators who, scurrying furtively, hid protectively in their rooms. Ever more watchful, ever more defensive, ever more voiceless employees who, outside of a mandated attendance at an endless run of top-down, micro-managed meetings, seldom interacted with, or even caught sight of, one another.

What greenhorn educators now *heard*?

Were frightened veteran professionals, including easiest-targeted union representatives, telling them, telling each other, telling anyone who made waves: “*Don’t*.”

“Don’t do anything; don’t say anything; don’t draw attention to yourself.”

“Don’t react or complain. *Just do what you’re told.*”

Imitating older peers, novice recruits whispered anxiously behind secretive hands: “For god’s sake, *shut up.*” No longer exposed to a sincerely collaborative, outspoken role modeling; having experienced only a top-down punitive and hazardously uncurbed negative-evaluation-obsessed management – fledgling educators never grasped the fact that working together in the effort to democratically hear, and subsequently respond to and protect, community or student concerns, was, for low-income, culturally-different schools, not only a necessary?

But fundamental expectation.

No longer expected to participate in old-school-democratic, voice-protective, opinion-friendly meetings; never observing faculty members step up in a respected confidence to express professional concerns or organize a powerful opposition to abuse – with each year of an invasive, teacher-separating reform, as institutional memory of an old-fashioned educator interaction experienced systematic eradication?

More and more often, the only sound that endlessly victimized low-income students and the politically exploited communities which surrounded them heard:

Was silence.*†

*And, oh my, but didn't the summarily-decided, governmentally-endorsed closure of *fifty* non-dominant-culture, poor-neighborhood, locally-accessible, all-student-inclusive schools in a district where (after banding together in the effort to protect student interests) teachers had gone out on strike generate its unmistakable message. (Side note: And how quickly did those proudly displayed posters of our nation's first non-White president – posters so optimistically attached to the words Hope and Change – then come down.)

†How maddening to watch as a cultural implosion now occurs inside those neighborhoods where a relentless string of school closures have been mandated – an implosion documented by a massively reported black-on-black or brown-on-brown violence – *and yet have so little mention of the fact that these two events might be very directly connected.*

Department Of Works

When I had first started teaching at Central High – way back in old-school days; in days long before the benevolent “help” of a no-excuses accountability had thought it useful to sweep in and hostilely brand our suddenly identified as deficit-housing “F” school – well, way back in my earliest days of teaching, I had benefited greatly from a regular interaction with our very large and comfortably stable Language Arts’ department. As had been the case in many sizable schools, ours, in fact?

Had been the largest teaching department in the building.
And, yes; sometimes, as a department, it was overbearing.
Certainly it was strong-willed; now and then it could be?
Oh, just a tad bit self-centered.
Maybe even a touch spiteful.

However, it was a department which necessarily demanded an unusual dedication. No matter how many teachers were involved, as the bedrock of our large inner-city school's literacy expectations, it was a department which *had* to work together. It had to get things done; it had to be organized; it had to be diligent. Because, year after year?

It was a department forced to take on a truly gigantic and close to impossible workload.

In order to cover literacy-heavy graduation requirements, more often than not our Language Arts' class sizes surpassed the

union-negotiated thirty-five students. Although class size attenuation was a real possibility as the days passed and attendance became unpredictable, it was not unusual to start the year with class sizes set in the forties. And when, in an effort to get another shot at graduation credits, upper-level students were registered into lower-level courses, more often than not they sat side by side with squirrely newcomer freshmen. Depending, then, upon any particular year's adopted teaching schedule, at the start of an academic semester an English teacher might expect to face five to six classes per day where rosters of mixed-ability students had been filled beyond capacity.

Repeatedly (oh, you'd come to expect this), students outnumbered desks.

As a means to survive such crushing expectations, our literacy department had grown to be assertively outspoken. Beneficially, our department was known to be not only dependable, but intellectually forthright; as a far-thinking and highly experienced teaching corps, it was a department recognized, and even occasionally referred to, as the backbone of our school. Made up of long-term, career-committed, self-confident educators, many of whom had been teaching inside of, and stayed loyal to, Central High and its surrounding neighborhoods for ten, twenty and even thirty years, our department embodied the very idea of an involved educator professionalism.

And, as professionals convinced, in pre-NCLB days, of our district's protective value for hardworking, career-loyal employees? Safe within that traditional, opinion-generating environment, it was a department which had immediately reached out. Generously and courteously, extending a warm reception in a very real way:

It had welcomed me into the fold.

I have never forgotten how that felt.

As a relatively untried, new-to-the-building educator hired into that huge, low-income and over ninety-percent minority building, the most important teacher's lesson I might have learned I absorbed indirectly. Due to a regularly repeated, non-orchestrated interaction with the various professionals in my department; through a predictably non-prescribed contact with these wiser and more experienced peers – ultimately I discovered that no particularly overwhelming moment, no hugely burdensome day, no

apparently impossible mistake was ever – no matter how disruptive, no matter how lacking in organization, no matter how complex, harried, or even individually devastating – an end.

Teaching days: good ones, great ones, and even seriously *bad* ones?

Came and went.

What mattered, as this repeated interaction with the self-confident and administratively respected professionals with whom I communicated daily helped me to determine, was that I could, as the old saying went, learn to look with grace upon what I perceived only to be intolerable failure, and:

Try, try again.

After all, I saw my peers doing it every single day.

With their help?

I could do it too.

The Best Job

I don't want to give the wrong impression. Teaching huge classes of age-diverse, too often malnourished, pubescently hormonal, literacy limited, frequently low-English-skilled, sleep-deprived lethargic, now and then high, occasionally belligerent and sometimes even dangerously angry kids – wasn't a breeze.

In fact, as a task?

It often appeared to be downright impossible.

If, however?

If you chose to focus only upon *that*; if you let yourself get caught up in, and ultimately overwhelmed by, *that*?

Oh, you'd end up missing the whole point.

If, through a candidly regular interaction with long-term experienced peers, you made the converse discovery that, even though the job felt to be impossibly difficult? *Everybody*, and there were no exceptions, *everybody* had bad days. Even out-and-out horrendously bad days.

Everybody struggled; *everybody* labored to implement effective solutions; *everybody* worried, time and again, about finding a personal success. If, instead of holding yourself up against unrealistic, formulaic expectations, you discovered through a true-life conversation with peers that there really was no such thing as an instantaneous, marvel-producing teaching; and if, then, you

deliberately understood that you could not, *simply through the holding of good intentions and a magical rigidity*, miraculously overthrow the larger issues of a devastatingly inequitable social system:

Well, you might, then?

Be able to take in a more important lesson.

How to forgive your own insecurity; your own naïveté.

How to let go of what you felt to be unforgivable mistakes. How to stop feeling sorry for yourself...and simply stick it out. So that one day, without even knowing it had happened?

You quit focusing upon yourself.

You stopped dwelling upon your own frustrations, and began, not even discerning the shift, to work around the edges of both real and imagined limitations. Somewhere along the line you figured out that – despite the insistently published argument of an unacceptable low-income, culturally-different deficiency? Always, every single year and in every single class, the kids in front of you *were simply kids*. As you began, both consciously and subconsciously, to ignore a relentlessly ingrained privileged-class stereotype; as you learned to refuse the low-expectation blindness perpetuated by a popular media typecasting – well, what you unearthed beneath all of that unnecessary, unhelpful noise?

Was the fact that, *all of your students*?

Were simply children.

And, as children, they were, each and every one of them, eager, enthusiastic, quirky, inquisitive, individually motivated and often hilariously funny. If, as you let your guard down, you let yourself start to laugh along with them. And if, as they learned to trust you, they let themselves start to laugh along with you. Well, somehow, somewhere, one day out of the blue, you understood that – no matter how overwhelming the task; no matter how complicated the work; no matter how many times you struggled to survive an unbelievably hard day and find solutions:

Actually?

You had the best job in the world.

A Peerless Plan

As you opened your mind, you opened your heart.

You quit listening to all of the worry, all of the noise, and all of the panic. You quit trying to beat the eternally accumulating statistics, and avoided stepping directly into data-labeling deficiency traps. Repeatedly you forgave yourself, and accepted the fact that even when you couldn't perform magic or change overall public perceptions – you knew, much more importantly, that each kid you met; each child you taught; every single student, in every single class?

Had hope, and, depending upon your intentionally cultivated patience:

A wondrously unexplored potential.

Even that most exasperating student, that kid who made you imagine putting your head through a wall – that attention-limited ninth grader who threw books, pencils and puzzle pieces around the room, who repeatedly used the punched perforations on the side of homework papers to draw endlessly detailed pictures of lost penises coming through looking for the right “hole,” who told you, loudly, routinely and daily that you really should ask for a raise because you always wore the ugliest shoes – even that kid?

Would grow.

And might, one day?

Become one of your favorite upperclassmen.

Might even, years later, send you an announcement for his college graduation.

And might, one lingeringly pretty day in late autumn?

Get misty-eyed with you at his wedding.*

From my peers; from these welcoming, generous educators who invited me to lunch, who asked about my family, who willingly shared their personal concerns and who, calmly and patiently, taught me how to stay in the game; from these long-term dedicated and highly respected professionals – I learned that no student, no year, and no class ever represented the whole. In their own enduring, dedicated way, these committed educators taught me to see that success in a multifarious, poverty frustrated and complicatedly diverse community?

Was never ever a simple or immediately apparent precept.

If anything – on the contrary, success was a very long and very demanding journey; an often unpredictable adventure where, every year? Each school, each class, and each child was part of

an organically moving, never simple, and seemingly ephemeral but still necessary quest; a quest which, much like in days dedicated to the chasing down of a fleetingly possible holy grail, you made your commitment to, and stayed loyal to, even when there seemed little chance of finding an ultimately positive outcome.†

This lesson I learned as I worked alongside a diverse group of highly experienced professionals; career-dedicated educators who, as long-term-loyal employees, signed up for the amorphously-edged expedition of a low-income culturally-diverse school teaching every single day.

Until.

Well, until one day.

One year.

Quite unexpectedly.

A no-excuses educational program launched abruptly out of Washington D.C. landed ponderously and immovably upon an unsuspecting nation. As a plan for an assertively implemented test-score liability; as a plan forced into low-income schools with a much-lauded Presidential support – mercilessly and methodically, the inflexible platforms of NCLB began the harshly impersonal task of unraveling and destabilizing not only our traditional, multi-voiced-collaborative, all-student-community-inclusive, low-income-neighborhood school, but, additionally?

Our highly-experienced, years-long loyal, self-governing and democratically interactive Department of English.

Argued to be a the most logical response to the sudden demand for punitively assigned testing labels; coming as a byproduct to the shortsighted blame of teachers and a subsequently ordered barrage of school “turnarounds” – abruptly and painfully I found myself pushed out of Central High and into a teaching position at a middle school far, far across town.

To discover, when I got there?

That there was little at my new school which I, or anyone in my disinterestedly assigned Language Arts department, might describe as warm, courteous, generous or inviting. As a school which, prior to my arrival, had already been invaded by multiple destabilizing years of an accuse-and-expel reform – well, rather than being welcomed into an experienced-veteran, sincerely-professional department of my peers?

I soon realized that, as an educator in my new building:

I was on my own.

*The most important lesson I have learned about a truly effective teaching is that it is *not* about simply setting up expectations, spouting information and rigidly dispensing rules and regulations. It is, much, *much* more, about building relationships. I often recall the story of a teacher working in the Appalachian mountains who, frustrated by her efforts to inspire a small student, perplexed by her inability to reach into this little girl's mind – one day picked up the child and set her upon her lap...and thus opened the door.

†Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could somehow relay each of the moments when I have accidentally run into previous students – students who, when I first knew them, barely spoke English, or who had been severely victimized by poverty (one child living in a car after his grandmother was moved to the hospital). Students I talk to now as the bank teller, optician's assistant or supermarket employee happy to tell me that they are doing well; that they are married; have two or three children; own a home. Have even, now and then, earned a college degree late into their twenties or thirties. No matter how poorly they originally performed in school; no matter how predictably low had been their test scores: this, America? *Is not failure.*

Be Ye Mice

At the small midwestern college where I matriculated after high school, the architecturally imposing building which housed our cafeteria funneled students through a narrow foyer and up a short flight of stairs. Languishing in the barely moving cafeteria line – a predictable experience for the late-arriving dinner crowd – it was easy to look down from the stairwell and peer into an adjacent hallway. And there, visibly placed along a short stretch of corridor, were two doors.

One door had been officially labeled: *MEN*.

Leading perhaps into a small custodial closet or storage room, the second door had been given no formal identification. Someone, however, perchance a student of philosophy, had printed neatly in dark square letters on the light brown wood: *MICE*.

The existential contemplation necessitated for making a selection of one of these two doors made sense. It was, in fact, a lesson that this multi-discipline/liberal-arts college had been created to instill. Life was likely to offer more than a few opportuni-

ties for graduates to contemplate these dual options, and decide which door was theirs to enter:

Be ye mice?

Or be ye men.

Unhappily, it was mice I was now to encounter at my newly assigned middle school. Mice which, apparently, the hard-hitting world of a nationally “compassionate” low-income school reform currently required. Educators no longer expected, nor allowed, to openly interact warmly, professionally or personally; passively compliant employees repeatedly convened into an overwhelming abundance of attendance-mandatory, top-down, authority-controlled, don’t-talk-back, daddy-led meetings.

Meetings of modern days?

That were no longer in any way personal.

Assemblies mandated for policy and curriculum review, data analysis, repeated assessments, exam administration, statistical debriefings, program developments, educator retrainings, and that always ubiquitously ordered testing preparation; meetings where, much like timidly fearful mice? Rather than linger; rather than stick around; rather than instigate open, impromptu discussions – gathering up yet another armful of the endlessly circulated handouts, keeping heads carefully down, the *good* teachers of reform scuttled hurriedly back to their rooms.

Guardedly avoiding any individualized attention, at the end of the day the covert scurrying continued. Stealing out to parking lots; slipping cautiously into cars – warily they headed home, driving themselves protectively away from the frightening possibility of an unguarded interaction.

No one suggested lunch.

No one invited a personal interest; few expressed it to others. Outside of the repeatedly commanded agenda-controlled, micro-managed meetings, I seldom saw the educators who, as a widely advertised reform theory loudly and publicly promoted, were *working with me* in my newly appointed Language Arts department. No one dropped by my room; no one interacted personally, daily or regularly, for any reason at all.

Yet, oh *my*.

There was, always?

Importantly produced for the benefit of an outside observer, such an awful lot of official looking – if distractingly impersonal – scurrying.

Youthanasia

As the days passed by inside my newly assigned middle school, finding little warmth in my own halls I soon found myself drawn to a teacher attached to the History department – a woman who, very plainly, was one of the few older educators still employed inside my new building. Late one afternoon, after selecting a seat at her side I sat impassively through yet another evaluator-controlled data analysis meeting. Between speakers, however, this old-school career-dedicated teacher began to point out what I had already started to understand, if only peripherally.

“Those two older teachers over there, Mrs. Gulliver and Mr. Smith?

“They both started teaching this year; they’re part of that training program for adults who get hired without a license and then take college courses as they teach.

“And Miss Tennison,” she nodded toward one of our school’s most visibly active young women: an energetic teacher who seemed to be on every committee, who jumped imperiously to lead team meetings, and who, with an exaggerated authority, repeatedly handed down administrative dictates. “Miss Tennison runs so much around here, you’d think she had been here for years. But she was only hired last year to replace a woman who quit.

“And Bill – that young man over there? He started teaching only two years ago. He told me that he’s planning to move back to Pennsylvania when his contract is up this spring. Also, Ms. Peters,” and here she nodded again, this time to indicate yet another very young and always industriously busy, always scurrying employee. “She started teaching at the same time that he did.”

Continuing around the room to describe details of employment, as she particularly identified teacher after teacher, I began to grasp the fact that – outside of a counselor here, or a science teacher there? There simply was no long-term, years-old connection inside this building. As her chronicle moved on, and

now included the newly assigned never-done-this-before dean, an untested rookie advisor, and *both* of the assistant principals – a light bulb flashed, and I caught on.

The reason I had felt no welcome?

The reason there had been no sense of a building tradition; the reason there had been no deeper spirit of a rigorously protected and interconnected professionalism?

Was, simply, that there wasn't one.

It didn't exist.

In the name of a "compassionate" accountability, as this old-school, neighborhood-inclusive building had been repeatedly invaded, the woman I spoke to now was one of the few who had managed to hold on to not only her teaching position, but, apparently, to her sense of humor. There was a name, she told me with a smile, for all of this invasively impersonal disorder. "All of this emphasis upon blaming, rather than figuring out what's really going on? It simply covers up our district's legally-aided act of euthanasia.

"They keep making laws for putting us older teachers, especially culture- protective non-White teachers like me, out of our misery – laws which can force us out, and make us go away. Then they can start bringing in their ever changing parade of inexperienced, gullible kids. Each year? You see more and more new teachers. They keep changing everything, every level of personnel – so that, in the end? They can get control over the entire building. They do it even if it means that they'll have to use aggression or force.

"All of these closings, all of these turnarounds, all of these new administrators, coaches, specialists, evaluators and supervisors?

"All of it is done simply for the sake of change. Change, change, change; change at any cost, because all of the never-ending movement just keeps teachers – and our whole community – confused. Nobody can get organized; nobody knows how to fight back. For those of us just trying to survive? Oh, we know that our days are numbered; we know that we are next up on their list for a forced removal. So now we call it what it is."

Here she paused to write a word onto a scrap of paper; as she handed it to me, I smiled to read the word which she had printed there:

Youthanasia.

Legalized Shame

Change, change, change.

Change at any cost.

Tellingly articulated by a knowledgeable peer?

These words sent a chillingly threatening message.

Invasive, blame-aggressive, employee-disinterested *change*. Even should it require an unsolicited and brutally implemented character-defaming force. Even should it rely upon actions which, in traditional days of a collaboratively democratic old-school management?

Would have flashed an unambiguous S.O.S. for state statute protections.

Even should it sanction activities which, in viciously modern days now blindly dedicated to the reckless protection of money-magnet invasions, called upon the use of a destructive employee vilification.

The actual, physically visible abuse of employees – an ill-treatment generated by our nation’s callous insistence upon the detached “firing” of malignantly labeled (*and massively school-score-recognized*) “bad” educators – had taken on an insidiously embryonic weight. Little by little, the newly created, minimally regulated practices of a modern-day teacher evaluation (practices brought into existence by self-promoting, arms-length politicians; bell-the-cat practices then raggedly instigated with a shocking disregard *for the actual wording of law*) began to encourage not only an immediate, undocumented dismissal?

But an additional career-crippling public defamation.

Somewhere along the chaotically trodden path of a no-excuses “accountability” – a path worn ever deeper each year by the unbounded instigation of lucrative building transformations – a malicious threat had dropped a seed. Now, as it was nourished; now as it was fed by a burgeoning club of teacher-blaming lawmakers, it took root and grew.

If you had *ever* been employed inside a building producing those unacceptably lowest scores.

If you had *ever* been pushed against your will out of an invasively reformed building generating those unacceptably lowest scores.

If you had *ever* been force-placed into an alternate assignment inside any one of a growing number of buildings engendering those unacceptably lowest scores.

If you had *ever*, as you found yourself knocked about inside this frenetic game of punitive transformations and abruptly decided assignments, been considered too protective, too resistant or too expensively old; if, in the act of being too protective, too resistant or too expensively old, you had *ever* been independent enough to speak up – and in doing so? *Piss off any one of a continually shifting parade of thin-skinned, top-down, market-trained daddies.*

Oh, if you had *ever*, in any way at all?

Been foolish enough to call attention to yourself, and thus earn a *bad* teacher label. Well, in über-modern days calling out ever more loudly for the no-excuses production of statistically engendered teacher evaluations, oh, you might well become not only an unacceptable and unwanted employee, but – due to the years-long blame-game solution for fixing low-income schools?

Your character might well be publicly attacked.

In modern days committed to the magic of an instantaneous culpability?

You might well be openly vilified and degradingly humiliated. The self-interested, quick-fix solution for scapegoating employees in lieu of more directly and more particularly addressing the full (and nationally growing) lineup of academically debilitating social issues had engendered an immediate response; a flurry of laws – laws ostensibly created as a means to locate, evaluate, and retain *good* teachers – began to conversely encourage the burgeoning practice of excessively observing, deprecatingly assessing, and ultimately removing a growing number of suddenly identified *bad* educators. As an ever more popular method for controlling any subversively unwanted teacher resistance, a physical vilification was now an ever more sinister possibility.

Should you, in days of an aggressively implemented “change,” simply through the unconscionable act of a low-income culturally-different school employment, *in any way warrant attention?*

Oh, you and your untenable crime of existence:
Might well be visibly, uncompromisingly and shamefully
displayed.*

*A woman recognized for her long years of an exceptional teaching explained that while she would rather be working with the low-income, culturally-diverse students attending schools in her district, she is now afraid to pursue this interest. And it is thus that we arrive at the truest and most effective irony of a modern-day social-control paradigm – where those who most wish to work with challengingly dissimilar children? No longer feel safe nor welcome to do so.

Walking The Perp

The *bad* teacher purging process – especially in those schools known to historically accommodate the most notable number of culture-protective non-White teachers – had grown into a process not only willing to tolerate, but to viciously propagate the personally devastating act of an employee criminalization.

“Tell them.”

Poignantly expressed, these paired words were knowingly voiced by a woman who, along with the larger percent of non-White teachers employed inside her predominantly minority building, had been forced through a public expulsion. Due to yet another mandate of a highly publicized “compassion?”

Very publicly – and very humiliatingly – she and her peers had been very aggressively *swept out*.*

“Tell them,” she now solicited the members of the anti-school-reform group where she had become a regular member: *“Tell them* how they use cops. *Tell them* how they make their teacher removals into a shameful production; *tell them* how they force teachers to be walked like criminals out of their own buildings. *Teachers who haven’t done anything. Tell them* how they call in the police and security guards; *tell them* how they bully teachers and make them leave in criminalizing perp walks.”

Perp walks. Generating an overt display of the *villain*.

Publicly and antagonistically?

Walking the perpetrator *out*.

Using security staff, in-house police officers, guards sent from downtown offices, any and all now necessarily available, in über-modern days, for the unmistakably public walking of the unsuspecting and often out-of-the-blue-contacted *bad* teacher (a teacher whose most offensive “crime” in days of a no-excuses liability was likely to be only the untenable habit of expressing opinions while employed inside a low-scoring school) clearly and overtly *out*.

Keys publicly confiscated.

District email access abruptly denied.

Contact with building staff, students and parents belligerently forbidden. Physical presence on, or even near, the school property barred.

Continued employment by the district?

Banned.

All as minatory illustration to those employees still remaining, especially those teachers young enough and inexperienced enough to know no other form of a public school management, that problematically unwanted employees? Oh my; unwanted employees like these were no longer worthy of any old-days’ notion which had called for honor and respect, but – being, now, the nationally-recognized and even Presidentially-pinpointed *bad*?

Teachers like these (oh, my; school test scores proved it; accountability reform supported it) were divisively negative.

Morally questionable.

Fraudulently suspect.

And. Oh, well – undoubtedly:

Criminally corrupt.

Teachers who, although they had done nothing even slightly illegal; whose misdeed in most cases had simply been the effort to protect a hard-earned professional status (and thereby a consequently attached student interest) – could, through those processes now attached to marginally honored laws of evaluation, be abruptly and overtly displayed as the *bad* teachers who, in the name of a national accountability no longer willing to hold even minimal tolerance for resistance?

Required an assertively dramatic – and unmistakable public – *removal*.†

*Although it is difficult to acquire true-life statistics from reform-fanatic districts, with a little effort it can be found that over the past decade our nation's employment of non-White teachers has fallen dramatically. (And, even as teacher-training/teacher-college programs argue that they have been soliciting an added number of non-White participants; even as corporate-backed every-student-deserves-a-great-teacher television commercials illustrate this idea by placing young, non-White teachers at the front of wondrously multi-racial "choice" school classrooms – well, after being recruited into our nation's poorest and most often largely non-White schools, as a result of the never-ending blame and harassment brought to these very same schools by relentlessly shifting test-score invasions, few of these teachers actually stay standing there, at the front of these classrooms, for long. Teacher turnover inside our lowest-income schools has, in fact, become more overwhelmingly recognized each year.)

†While studies point to the fact that in years before the instigation of NCLB an average public educator experience landed somewhere between fifteen and twenty years and that, in modern days, in a growing number of cities/states this now compares to an average of *less than five years* (some locale-specific studies suggesting *only one to two years as the new modern-day norm*) – researchers argue that unhappy teachers are "leaving" the profession in droves. And thus miss the fact, or simply choose not to publicize it, that a significant number of these teachers have been very viciously *and often illegally* forced out of the system.

BOHICA

As the rules written around an ever more punitive, ever more invasive and ever more antagonistic NCLB/R2T forced its endless string of invasions onto lowest-income communities...

Well, being, now, nothing more than school-score-identified *bad* teachers – teachers considered in the top-down don't-talk-back hierarchy of modern days to be lowest-level, and thus irrelevantly voiceless? We did our best to come to terms with the always whirling succession of unexpected and often frustratingly inefficient (and, in way too many cases, even debilitatingly harmful) instructional mandates. Gathered together at yet another attendance-obligatory meeting, we would sit and listen to the latest round of "non-negotiable" dictates. Turning, then, we would look to one another.

Upon registering each person's shock, anger and confusion?

We would sigh.

We knew that no one was going to listen if anyone yet had the nerve to speak up; if anyone yet held the audacity to stand up; if anyone yet felt it logical to try to reach out and turn on the light by making an articulate effort at illuminating the impractical – and too often even fully illogical – expectations. To save our sanity? Occasionally we would simply snicker a bit before whispering warningly to the person located in the next seat:

“Hey, look out! *BOHICA*.”

Bend Over. Because, see?

Here It Comes.

Again.

Aggressively coercing a perpetual change by forcing the nonstop flow of deregulated policies and impossible dictates. And, then? Making use of suddenly legislated but arbitrarily implemented mandates of evaluation to prove a teacher compliance. Or, more often and more usefully, calling upon these same minimally monitored procedures to *prove a teacher noncompliance*, and thereby establish, through the ongoing documentation of an insubordinate behavior – that what would ultimately be necessitated?

Was the ever more punitive and ever more public obliteration of professional boundaries; the continued, humiliating beating down of a professional educator voice. All while incessantly creating, and then unbendingly attaching, further impossible score-based invasions which would invariably lead to more and more chastisingly negative evaluations.

Such was the *BOHICA* method of a modern-day teacher control.

It was a method that, as the years passed and a flood of unpredictable school incursions increased, many of us learned the hard way (oh my, yes, pun intended) turned out to be an evaluation-based management technique synonymous with a low-income building reform. It was also a process that, deeply surprising in days of claimed-to-be-severe/each-year-more-educational-bereft economic straits, apparently?

Had no budget limitations.

Funny.

But even as the nonchalantly deregulated growth-dependent free-market bubble burst (*kablam!*), directing national atten-

tion to the alarming state of the overall economy; even as less and less money was making its way anywhere near school budget requirements – somehow?

School reformers continued to garner a surprisingly blind, and even callously insistent, financial support.

Somehow, even in oft-published-as-painful years; even in years when educational budgets had been cut frighteningly near the bone; even in years when an increasing number of critics had begun to argue that districts were simply wasting their money – that an über-expensive merit-based statistical reform hadn't, over more than ten long years, radically changed our nation's overall *all-student-inclusive* test score results or dropout rates: that, in fact, the achievement gap between the rich and the poor was growing overwhelmingly wider.*

Well, somehow?

Reform proponents yet managed to not only demand, but receive, a hugely unprecedented funding. Despite unambiguously noted budget woes, *more* money, die-hard reformers assured everyone, would now be immediately required; financing, it turned out? *Had* to be found, *had* to be set aside, for the unremittingly fashioned (and then expensively and repeatedly refashioned) processes obligated for a massively implemented employee evaluation.† °

The incontrovertible rationale behind such a budget-breaking demand?

The over-a-decade-long, publicly-indoctrinated, governmentally-originated, philanthrocapitalist-repeated and indisputably test-score-proven fact that – teachers?

Were.

Bad.

Due to each year's burgeoning supply of mandates callously aimed at targeting the *bad* employees who, solely and absolutely, continued to hold a full responsibility for the production of those never-endingly generated “unacceptable” test scores, reform leaders began to demand an additionally requisite, if shockingly expensive, bell-the-cat evaluation legislation.

Legislation that, once aggressively and unbendingly enacted, would rely upon the magical, McCarthy-like ability of business-trained, non-education-experienced, short-term, thin-

skinned, endlessly-shifting school leaders to imperiously and definitively isolate, evaluate and then, very dramatically, remove:

Bad employee after bad employee.

Because?

Well, *you* know.

There were just so many of them *out there*.

*In a city where the growing disparity between White and non-White students has become an increasingly hot topic, proponents argue the need to make additional school changes even as they painstakingly sidestep the fact that their city is located inside a state where, under the leadership of a far-right Presidential hopeful, a no-excuses educational “reform” has already made great inroads – allowing the conservative triad of union busting, new teacher turnover, and deregulated school choice to make a years-long and nationally applauded headway.

†Even as an increasing resistance to practices of testing and test-score invasions has escalated, somehow in districts where constituents have been most vocal about a growing unhappiness with testing, excessively funded school board elections yet manage to decisively seat loudly-vocal pro-reformer after loudly-vocal pro-reformer – as if, somehow? *Voters are unable to see the Big Money connection between the two.*

°When, in one district, Do-It-All tax funding was soundly rejected by voters, alternate capital had to choose between offering funding to all-day kindergartens or the now massively required measures of a statistical teacher evaluation. *Which* of these do you suppose ultimately found support: The one that would, actually, change long-term student outcomes – or the one that would allow the lucrative invasions of accountability to continue? (And just as nonchalantly, even as our state’s Common Core computerized testing budget soared past the five-hundred-million-dollar mark, legislators admitted that the two-hundred-and-fifty million dollars requested for the expansion of all-day kindergartens and low-income preschools would – oh my; so sorry – no longer be available.)

There Oughta Be A Law

A weekly news-show pundit, a man who made no secret of his passionately proclaimed pro-reform, pro-school-choice convictions, frequently told his audience (after admitting that *he* had been one of the lucky ones; that, having money? *His* family had enrolled *him* into private schools his entire life), how he now

drove his daughter across town to a beautifully exclusive private school. And how, each day, on his way to drop off his offspring at that expensively restricted building?

He passed a notoriously traditional *public* school.

He shuddered (oh, you could see him do it) to think of the problems faced by the students and parents forced to use...*that school*. “It should be illegal,” he suggested repeatedly. “What they have to deal with.”

Never once, however; never once did he mention stopping and on purpose entering that clearly, to his mind, underperforming, deficit-riddled, problematically-*non*-private, all-student-inclusive, local-neighborhood-serving school. Not once did he talk about taking life into his own hands, and, oh my god, *going inside*. Not once did he suggest volunteering his personal time for meeting any of the teachers; never once did he propose making a personal effort to converse with even one of those pitifully wretched students.

He simply *knew*.

Taking his convictions from the media – and presumably from that magical place where privileged-class thinkers go to experience their most enlightened social epiphanies (very likely, in über-compassionate days now so immovably bent to a no-excuses educational reform, receiving a little help from the incessantly published denigration of low-income public schools and those, oh he said it often enough, so it was clear that he, personally, was very, very sure of it:

Those *terrible* teachers.)

Oh, he’d sigh; oh my, my.

Those poor *kids*.

Well, okay.

No, they weren’t really children with whom he wanted his daughter to associate.

But oh, you know, they were still – *kids*.

And so, at the enlightened call emanating from an increasing number of compassionately concerned citizens: Those so many unprecedentedly benevolent privileged-class, protectively-wealthy liberals like this socially troubled (if so very carefully arms-length) pundit?

Here they came.

More super compassionate laws of an extra charitable accountability.

Legislating Compassion

Making laws.

Gosh, wasn't it such a trendy idea?

Making laws to show just how much you cared; legislating a compassionate involvement in overwhelmingly complex social issues. Gee-whiz, wasn't it such a modern-day *popular* thing to do?

Too bad, maybe.

Too bad that, in self-interested, deregulated-market years of a privileged-class, lobbyist-led political thinking; in years of a hey-look-at-*my-excitingly-huge-full-benefits-salary* – well, rather than taking the time to figure out how to honestly address our nation's growing and very real social inequity (an act which would end up asking *you* to share some of *your* money)?

As a deeply compassionate modern-day lawmaker eager to show everyone how much *you* cared; as a visibly concerned politician talking nonstop about your own heartfelt need to *step up and put children first* – you simply made it unacceptable, and even outright illegal, with all of your thoughtfully-detached, hold-everybody-accountable, withhold-the-funding legislation:

To be poor.

Or homeless.

Or, yet more problematic?

Culturally different.

And, for any person naïve enough to continue working with, and so irritatingly speaking up for, those persons who (with an inexplicable foolishness) persisted in living inside any one of these socially objectionable categories? Oh, look out. There were additional super-expensive laws now being made to control *that* kind of unwanted busybody as well.

Brand-new laws which, in a truly miraculous fashion, would now legally enable a minimally-experienced, top-down, thin-skinned management to radically and magically evaluate. And then? Rather than support and mentor, rather than bolster and encourage, rather than, calling upon an honest empathy and

concern, embrace and nurture – simply fire (*oh, you are so outta here!*) their way to an unprecedented academic success.

Although.

Well if, once again you took a moment; if, once again, you paused. And if, in pausing, you cautiously held back your immediate support for this latest school reform solution – this newest and most imperative bell-the-cat “fix” claimed possible through the abrupt instigation of an annually implemented *all-teacher-statistical, value-added evaluation*.

Well, you could, actually?

Hear other voices.

Of course no one *encouraged* it. But.

If, as you stepped away from the clamor and clang attached to a nonstop publicity; if, as you turned away from the tumult and uproar generated by a highly advertised demand – you made the effort to listen? You could, no kidding, hear previous educational leaders calling attention to the fact that – hey, as it happened:

A rigorously vetted teacher evaluation structure already existed.

A carefully ordered long-term process for recognizing, evaluating, mentoring and, when absolutely necessary, eliminating, poorly performing public school employees was actually already in place. However, as a structure proposing an innate intention for supporting, mentoring and sustaining *before* endorsing a system-weakening dismissal? Well, as a construct it was protectively due-process heavy. And was, concerned innovators now argued, exactly the kind of long-term employee-supportive structure which (in days committed to the magic of instantaneous solutions) *had* to be extravagantly and expensively revamped.

Because, well.

Damnitall?

Being methodic; *being* slow; *being* employee sympathetic – as a complexly interactive, relationship-based, *stable-system-dependent* structure? It stood in the way. It stopped districts from, with an absolute authority, *having their way*. And their way, in super-modern competitive days of Big Money venture-investment solutions, was surely to rid themselves of a financial responsibility for that ever growing number of long-term expen-

sive, budget-breaking, pension-dependent (and oh, so goshdarned opinionated) *bad* teachers.

That old-school-collaborative, *stable-system-dependent*, interpersonally administered process of a teacher evaluation?

That long-term assessment structure already in existence?

Well, in contemporary days looking with an increasing urgency only to the immediacy of silver bullet solutions; in fast-paced days calling out ever more loudly for the no-waiting wonders of magic – it was seldom, if ever, employed.

It was, after all, so *demanding*.

So onerously and inconveniently *time consuming*.

Modern-day quadrant superintendents, fixer administrators, area evaluators, specialists, consultants, facilitators, directors, instructional trainers, curriculum managers, turnaround experts, testing minions, innovation advisors, statistical analysts, assessment tutors, data reducers, assembly orchestrators and subject coaches – *all of whom had so many important meetings to attend* – simply didn't have time, in progressively magical years, to sit still and, over days, months *and even years*, figure out which teachers actually had a clue. What, in technologically-imbued years bent to the wonders of instantaneous results, was much more clearly and much more undoubtedly required?

Well, shoot – no one had time any more for those processes tediously focused upon nurturing, growing, sustaining or developing. What we needed; what, imperatively, we, as a nation, had to have *right now*?

Was something much slicker, much shinier, and much faster. Something capable of offering us speed-of-light results. What we absolutely, in the fast pace of modern days, had to find the money to pay for?

Was the super expensive re-creation of yet another public school wheel.

And Now From The NFL

As the issues surrounding an abruptly legislated educational “accountability” bombarded the media, heated debates generated ongoing sparks. Passionate arguments and fiery squabbles ensued, soliciting supplemental opinions. Added to the school reform fray, an especially useful rejoinder was proffered up by a

well-known and widely recognized man – a man who had amassed a personal fortune while employed by the National Football League. As a famous person; as a career-committed and overwhelmingly well-paid athlete; as a man who lived, as he so obviously did, *in the exact same realm as low-income public school teachers*:

This man's thoughts on educational accountability?

Were undeniably useful.

Because, well; oh, my.

Since professional football players and low-income school teachers – ah, well, hell, *anyone* could see that (gosh, so eerily) they held exactly identical jobs and thus harbored precisely comparable goals. Oh, undoubtedly, this exceedingly famous man knew all that anyone might need to know about a low-income educator motivation. Published as hard-hitting support for the mushrooming club of school choice, this celebrated man's opinion was that – *well, exactly like professional athletes working for the National Football League?*

Low-income school teachers must be held both rigidly and statistically accountable. Because. Well, good golly, now, just think about it. If you didn't hold highly-paid and nationally recruited football players data-proven accountable for their performance?

Imagine what would happen to the NFL!

And so, being, as they obviously were, in the exact same professional boat as members of the NFL, low-income public school teachers – ah, well, surely there could be no doubt about it. These low-performing and undeniably lazy employees?

Absolutely depended upon the merciless whip of a numerical liability.

Forget due process. Forget painstakingly brokered group protections. (Although; well, was it possible that participants in the NFL had ever benefited from group-protective safeguards negotiated by a powerful we-will-strike organization known as the NFL Players Association?): *Teachers should know that they would be summarily no-due-process/no-protections-necessary fired if they refused a production of those nationally requisite scores.*

Because?

Well, c'mon now.

Since *all* teachers, most especially those employed inside lowest-income and most complicatedly diverse schools – well, precisely and exactly like the highly discriminating world of professional football, clearly teachers like these only *ever* worked directly with small, attendance-reliable teams of exceptionally motivated *adults*. And since, in an exact replica of famously recognized football players, low-income school teachers only ever took up their careers dependent upon the fact that *after* putting in sixty-plus-hour work weeks year after year, surely they could count upon receiving back not only phenomenal sums of money?*

But an obsessive public support and adoration.

I mean, no, really.

Can you imagine?

Can you conceive of workers who, demonstrating an unthinkable madness, might choose to work *not* with small groups of high-performing and protectively selected adult teammates, but, inconceivably, with large, frustratingly handicapped and randomly collected squads of poor-attendance, limited-skills, behavior-dissimilar *children*? Kids who had, perhaps, special needs; kids who were, sometimes, homeless and transient; kids who lived, occasionally, with a minimal to nonexistent parental support. Kids who, exhibiting the audacity of being shockingly inconsiderate teammates?

Sometimes couldn't afford to pay for clothing, school supplies, medication or even a daily nutrition.†

Imagine; people who would intentionally choose this kind of work. People who, year after year, would willingly take on the complications attached to this kind of an underperforming, malnourished *and gallingly noncompetitive* team. People who, in fact, already knew, were already fully aware, that – when all of the razzle-dazzle theories behind a statistical reform were swept aside? Due to the instability connected to endlessly shifting variables; due to the dozens of debilitating, true-life-handicapping complications: They would never, ever, get anywhere near magical results.

People who knew that they would never get rich

People who knew that they would never be publicly adored.

People who, *even while knowing all of this?*

Still elected to stick around and take on this scandalously noncompetitive work because they were called to it; *because they liked it*. People who, even as they were so abusively and endlessly flogged by a disinterested, privileged-class *bad* teacher legislation and big-name pro-school-reform-spewing personalities?

Persistently stayed in the game because it was the right thing to do.

Ah, nah.

How silly.

Yes, yes, I know:

A truly preposterous supposition.

*Contrary to the oft-parroted complaint that our nation's self-indulgent public employees retire on lavishly protected pensions, in more than a few states the average public school pension comes in at, *or well below*, \$22,000 a year. (And as, in the name of "caring about the kids," a traditional public educator tenure is now being systematically eliminated across the nation, the number of citizens living precariously on the very edge of poverty has been rising in an exact equal measure.)

†Additionally: While the amount of money spent upon educational testing has been increasing annually, the number of students who are homeless and/or unpredictably fed has been expanding incrementally, right there alongside.

Adding Value To Value

Onward, sounded the rallying cry of a students-first reform. Onward to the now legally demanded (and heavily expensive) creation:

Of yet another *bad* teacher evaluation structure.

Onward to a newer, more contemporary structure. Onward to a faster-paced structure no longer mired down by any of those old-school methods so tediously tied to an incrementally-achieved, years-long-collaborative, interactively-supportive, *stable-institution-dependent* appraisal – but, much, much more quickly; much, much more efficiently?

Onward to a truly modern-day structure founded much more simply upon the immediate, school-competitive collection of an indisputable mountain of statistics. Onward to the production of a standardizing, data-dependent structure; an authoritative-

ly modern-day evaluation structure which, after pointing directly to an irrefutably collected evidence?

Could bring about an immediate, zero-tolerance penalty.

Onward to the creation of a no-excuses “student protective” structure capable of boldly stepping up to save our nation from that number one school-test-score-proven problem:

Bad teachers. (Those so many intransigently lazy and judicially labeled “grossly inept” employees who, even after more than ten long years committed to the implementation of an uncompromising NCLB? Yet, somehow, continued to stubbornly and single-handedly bring about each and every one of those offensively intolerable scores.) Onward to the exciting new world of a statistically-generated, no-due-process, no-protections-necessary, instantaneously-gratifying:

Teacher dismissal.

Ah; so cool.

After all, as anyone living inside truly modern days filled to overflowing with zero-tolerance policies might look around and observe: The no-excuses immediate-punishment, mandatory-sentencing method of social management? Was, really, such a brilliant solution. One that, oh you had only to look around, was currently working out so darned well in not only our plainly effective hundreds-of-thousands-now-dead-and-displaced multi-national war on drugs, but also in our every day more unbearably overcrowded, funding-per-body, recidivism-dependent penal institutions.

Onward, in über-modern days, to not only the construction, but to the unprecedented financing of the no-excuses test-score-dependent teacher evaluation structure now so loudly demanded by a burgeoning supply of educational “experts.” “Experts” willing to not only propose – but heavily promote – the argument that: Well, exactly like workers employed inside the huge-profits world of finance?

Surely low-income school educators could only ever be motivated by the promise of razzle-dazzle bonus monies, the fear of public humiliation, and a forced subservience to top-down, non-collaborative thinking.

Onward to the privileged-class birth of a modern-day “value-added” teacher evaluation structure; a statistical structure ordering that the *value of every educator’s evaluation* be made

more valuable through the addition of an indisputably collected test score evidence. A test score evidence which, as policy makers now pointed out, should, for all teachers, *be made public*. Published in newspapers, posted on school walls, added as a competitive evidence of a school's or teacher's value to performance brochures and those much-touted school appraisal websites. Scores which undeniably were, and thus should be utilized as?

Empirical evidence of success – or failure.

An absolute, unmistakable proof of any teacher's willingness to be a social partner...

Or a social pariah.

At this point, average everyday never-been-a-teacher citizens, up to and including one or two phenomenally wealthy professional athletes, were likely nodding their heads. Generating an enthusiastic, if protectively arms-length, support for such an unmistakably visible *bad* teacher evaluation structure.

Thinking?

Well, damn it, you bet; go ahead and *use* those test scores.

Use those endlessly generated modern-day test scores to keep those so many selfishly ineffectual educators – at least the ones we never stop hearing about – *in line*.

Glitch Ahead

However.

Well, *goshdarnit*?

Whirling about at the very center of all this latest national enthusiasm for the manufacture of that brand-new “value-added” structure of an educator assessment (a magical, modern-day structure capable of implementing an *all-teacher-statistical, test-score-engendered evaluation*) – there was one sort of huge, and, well, unexpected...

Oh, gee-whiz, who could've seen it coming?

Glitch.

In the manner typical to urgently legislated bell-the-cat solutions, these latest abruptly written dictates demanding an all-teacher “value-added” evaluation – mandates imperiously rubber-stamped by privileged-class politicians and modern-day school boards alike – well, these precipitously engendered dictates en-

thusiastically delineated yet more financially overreaching (and, if truth be told, far from monetarily feasible) edicts for a no-excuses statistical accountability.

Suddenly, *not* because so far the mandates behind a retributive testing had worked out so darned well over the past ten years, but simply because assertive, pushed-as-kid-centered laws now demanded it, *all* teachers inside a building – not simply those who, as math, science or literacy employees, had been participating in a legally obligated NCLB testing – but now, *by law*?

All teachers must be “value-added” evaluated and held statistically accountable through a proof-of-ability, test-score-collected evidence.

However, if anyone was paying attention?

These excitingly new and enthusiastically legislated “value-added” laws exacting an *all-teacher statistical evaluation*; well, in actuality? They made very little sense. Should these laws be honestly enforced, they would, in fact, turn out to be possibly the most expensively overreaching mandates yet generated inside the endlessly shifting world of an educational reform.

Because; well, *hello*?

Nonchalantly writing up laws for ordering a hard-hitting *all-teacher* “value-added” evaluation; enthusiastically rubber-stamping the now legalized demand for implementing *all-teacher* assessments based upon an annually generated test score evidence (a practice also known as a value added model, or VAM)?*

Was authorizing the accumulation of a test-score data where – whew boy, surprise! Even with all of the never-ending NCLB/R2T focus upon testing:

Well, in point of fact?

Relatively few tests actually existed.

*To the glutinous delight of test makers (more than a few, in modern days, ever-fatter computer companies): When a suddenly decided state-created legislation demanded that *all teacher* test-score evaluations would now be necessitated as a means to force acceptable outcomes from lowest-income schools, these same *state*-mandated laws? Assertively invaded *all* schools, not merely those already struggling with their visibly lowest scores.

Untested Mandates

Since earliest days of an argued-as-compassionate and legally enthusiastic NCLB testing; since earliest, incipient days when a vocally concerned, poor-student-protective President had proposed legislation aimed at the munificent, if very limited, educational concentration upon two academic subjects: literacy and math. Well, since that time?

State testing had very conveniently ignored most other academic disciplines.

As ensuing years bent to the instigation of a no-excuses educational accountability passed, a vast amount of time and energy had gone, quite logically once participants understood that a low score consequence was going to be not only devastatingly invasive, but made antagonistically public, toward the elevation and protection of these two nationally test-mandated disciplines.

In many low-income schools, the demands around testing had quickly begun to take precedence over any effort at implementing a traditionally rounded curricula. Extra compulsory attention paid directly to literacy and math understandably meant the attenuation of time spent on other subjects; subjects which were, by default – and now, through the modern-day theory of testing, by law – considered to be *much* less important. Subjects such as: science; history; civics; government; business; technology; music; art; gym; foreign languages; and, oh, yes, that surely most unnecessary discipline in a geo-political, global economy:

Geography.

(Because, well; damn it all?)

As the nation had been imperiously informed by belligerently posturing Presidential primary candidates in recently-held political debates:

Where the fuck *was* Libya, anyway?)

Huge, hours-long, multiple-section, high-stakes math and literacy testing – that kind of an examination likely to command one to two weeks of a concentrated and almost militarized school focus – had, over a decade bent to an increasingly punitive educational accountability, become the ever more assertive and ever more uncompromisingly implemented public school expectation. This phenomenally disruptive practice was, perhaps (although clearly no one was encouraged to think about it, and certainly not expected to talk about it): *But*.

Well, wasn't this possibly an incredibly shortsighted fiscal and clock-hour investment considering that these school-disruptive, time-intensive exams addressed only *two* academic subjects?

Years later, after testing guidelines attendant to literacy and math had been bolted heavily into place, the practice of a supplemental science examination was proposed. Rather than abbreviate the now overpowering concentration upon already existing tests, time for an appended assessment was decisively ordered. And (oh, now, don't give me any lip; everyone who cared about kids *knew this was necessary*), even as mandates for an ancillary testing created yet more interruption into the fewer and fewer hours allowed, each year, for a direct academic focus – as time for *more* examination was demanded?

It was, without regard for instructional viability, given.

And, well; as for those so many other academic disciplines... oh, sure, there had always been plenty of talk about testing other of those additional, if, by NCLB law, less essential subjects. But, currently?

No nationally-written tests were required for, *nor had been made available to*: history, geography, social studies, foreign languages, art, music, gymnastics, computer sciences, business, government, reading intervention or language acquisition. Or for any other of those complicatedly school-particular credit offerings. Courses such as: civics, psychology, sociology, journalism, creative writing, yearbook, environmental studies, ecology, robotics, woodworking, drafting, drama, drum line, set design, home economics, anger management, technology, student council or cheerleading.

And, well gee. Due to the fact that a state-ordered testing started, by law, in the third grade, but then, depending upon the state, ended after a student's sophomore year? Multiple literacy, math and science teachers currently worked with kids *in more than a few shockingly untested years*.

No tests were available, even?

For *non* math, literacy or science Special Education.

Dang; *so many teachers out there*?

Who simply couldn't be "value-added" test-score evaluated. Because (oh, and *wasn't* this a scandalous fact to discover in a no-excuses world where not only the act of testing, but the manufacture of a massively collated assessment data, had somehow

become more important, more imperative, and more overwhelmingly funded than any other educational outcome): The actual tests necessitated for producing yet another mountain of a bell-the-cat-legislated statistical data – a statistical data now mercilessly mandated as the means to engender yet more of those irrefutably necessary “value-added-model” (VAM) *bad teacher/bad school* test score results?

Simply didn’t exist.

And it was going to require a veritable king’s ransom to create them.*†

*Belatedly the question arose: Should students enrolled into gym spend their time in moving, or in sitting still to absorb test-producible facts about gym; should students enrolled into music spend their time in generating music, or in sitting passively to study test-producible facts about music; should students enrolled into Creative Writing spend their time in imaginatively writing, or in passively studying test-producible facts about creative writers; should students receiving credit for their participation in Student Council expend their energy in organizing school functions, or in passively assimilating test-producible facts about the generic goals of a student council?

†If we did *not* assertively appropriate our students’ time in the effort to amass the now legally necessary value-added data-dependent statistics – how else to irrefutably evaluate, test-score penalize, and *decisively eliminate* our nation’s overwhelming epidemic of bad teachers?

Oh Lord, Another Mountain

Ah, well.

Wasn’t it, after all, just...money?

Thanks to a decade of an escalating test score loyalty – years ever more fanatically insistent upon *still more testing* (testing, and that now imperatively useful mountain of data it was able to produce) – well, despite impossible odds and an unprecedented expense, the push for all-teacher “value-added” evaluations increased.*

And although, okay.

Although everyone knew that we really (I mean, had you *seen* the state budget recently?) *had no extra money*. Although, no kidding, everyone could plainly see that we hadn’t (go ahead; just *look* at the numbers) had a choice but to be cutting waaaaaay

back on educational support. And, although, well, yes, it was true; we *had* been decimating our funding for higher education.

Yes, yes; we knew that, in the process, we were making it ever less likely that poor and often culturally-different students unable to pay for a skyrocketing tuition would find their way to affording colleges and universities. And, well, yes, we *did* plan to strip out those preschool stipends, although, okay, we saw that a rising store of research pointed directly to the fact that Early Childhood Education was the number one indicator of a subsequent school success. And, yes, it really was too bad but, well, we *had no choice* but to precipitately raise class sizes, even as we eliminated teacher and para-professional positions across the state – although, yes; in point of fact? We had been made aware that increased adult-to-child relationships were considered imperative for a low-income student achievement.

But, see now, what we *had* to do?

Dagnabit. *Stop* all of that fussing; this was only logical for goodness sake. Because you knew, just like we did, that damn it all, what we *had to do*?

Was hold that ever more denigrated mass of bad employees accountable.

And so, because we cared so much about children that, even as we radically reduced their chances for success by assertively cutting back our funding to higher education, ECE, and an in-house school personnel, we continued to push for – yes, yes, at a truly outrageous cost, but heck, it was surely the *only* solution – well, arguing the absolute need *to step up; to stand for children; to put them first?*

Vociferously we legislated our highly-expensive no-excuses focus upon:

More testing.

Because.

Oh, now, had you *not* been paying attention?

There *had* to be testing.

How else to manage all of our excitingly new “value-added” *bad* employee evaluating?

Even while it was already costing the state hundreds of millions to produce, administer and assess our currently prepared if narrowly envisioned NCLB testing, privileged-world “experts” stridently claiming to know what would be necessitated when dis-

tributing benevolent aid to low-income students now loudly demanded that – even in economically challenging days? It was, no kidding, the *best* solution for financially strapped, barely-making-it states to wring out yet additional funding from already foundering budgets by ordering up the overwhelmingly expensive crafting, administrating and evaluating of supplemental tests.

More tests. More instructional time?

To be swallowed whole through the invasive practices of testing. *And:*

The endlessly generated and expensively collated accrual of mountain upon mountain of a cyclically engendered statistical data. Although presently we spent an unparalleled amount of time preparing for and dispensing the narrow focus of our nationally-legislated exams, interrupting over two weeks of instructional time to proctor the tests we already had. Certainly there was no problem?

Because, *even if it meant we would have to start testing in August in order to cover all subjects by May* – well, surely this was all to the good.

All we asked was that you continued to hold on, there, to your original enthusiasm for our avidly promoted “value-added” plan. That über-cool, no-excuses, modern-day assessment plan which would enable us to irrefutably pinpoint that every day increasing number of *bad* employees; that burgeoning number of *bad* employees who (oh, but hadn’t we already argued this unendingly) absolutely must be identified.

Identified, observed – and evaluated.

And, ultimately?

Dismissed.

*As, time and again, massive governmental education funding in the form of “technology grants” gets handed over to the hugely profitable computer companies now generating our nation’s growing supply of “value-added” testing, critics have begun to ask: Is it that our students actually need more testing, or that these phenomenally wealthy technology companies need to manufacture additional tests in order to receive their ongoing stockpile of supplemental grants? (Or, putting it another way, one critic made the comparison: Just as in the world of medicine where pharmaceutical companies maneuver to control how doctors deliver medical care, it is now massively profitable testing companies pushing to control how our teachers are expected to teach.)

Lies, Damn Lies And Statistics

If, through the last decade, you had been watching the talk shows, perusing the documentaries, reading the magazines, and analyzing the political sites.

Well, maybe you had noticed?

There had been increasing attention paid to a confusingly two-sided message. With only a little effort you could, in fact, work your way through two apparently conflicting views repeatedly offered up by Civil Rights' activists: concerned, truly liberal citizens doing their best to grasp the reason why, in years when so much proposed-as- benevolent and unprecedentedly expensive attention had been paid to a low-income public school reform – so many kids of color?

Were still falling progressively behind.*

Unhappy to criticize educational policies endorsed by our nation's so importantly first non-White President, Civil Rights' activists could often be heard to spout the requisite, although perhaps not fully understood, dogma: My! But haven't the compassionate testing policies of No Child Left Behind and an even more exacting Race To The Top – well, my, but haven't these programs helped our nation to take notice of, and focus our attention upon, typically ignored and too often academically short-shrifted minority children.

How truly wonderful, you might hear concerned citizens suggest, to have this important reform-based statistical proof that poor and often minority children struggle. How useful to physically see the repeatedly collected evidence that – in our society?

So many kids of color were not actually progressing and finding a social equity.

I mean, my.

Who would've guessed this to be true *before the instigation of a no-excuses statistical reform.*

However.

Well, lately more and more.

Confused activists couldn't quite put a finger on it, but still, something was pretty seriously wrong. Something wasn't ringing true with all of this so-called benevolent, kid-centered testing. Maybe kids were, a few theorists kept suggesting (now be careful, here; this is truly heretic's logic and might shock you):

Well, *maybe kids were more than test scores*. Maybe more than by-the-third-grade statistically proven failures hell bent on spending entire lives in prison.†

Huh.

See how conflicting, how contradictory, this was?

If, on one hand, we jumped up, ready to extend an unquestioned advocacy for the ongoing production of an aggressively collected statistical evidence, as our professed-liberal President and his so many non-poor, non-educator-experienced, privileged-class reform cronies kept telling us that we should; if we continued to pat ourselves and our leaders on the back for not only thinking up, but then so assertively instigating all of these über-modern, competition-financed, reform-dependent, no-excuses, test-score-based interventions.

But, then.

Well – if, on the other hand?

If, on the other hand, we turned around to realize that (seeing it with an increasing clarity) what all of this fanatic obsession with a data-based test-score/merit-pay reform was *actually* doing? Was allowing an alarmingly conservative, privileged-class push toward the detached isolating, labeling, segregating and disregarding – *even low-life-forever branding and imprisoning* – of unwanted children.°

Well, *hell*.

What to do, what to do, what to do.

Faces got pinched up; eyes narrowed; foreheads creased.

Struggling to first identify, and then decisively isolate, the multiple innovative elements now juxtapositionally entangled inside an ever more complicated reform – elements which had become both intricately and symbiotically knotted together inside long year after long year of a proclaimed-as-charitable testing – advocates fought their way through the conservative-government-created, change-platform-liberal-government-adopted, more-than-a-decade long-smoke-screen-protected chaos. Pushing to unmask truth behind long years of a theoretically democratic action, concerned citizens strove first to see, and then fully absorb, the chilling reality which could be found lurking behind the glittering, shimmering façade:

The strategically generated separations of a cultural elitism which, for so many long years now, had so cleverly under-

pinned the statistics-segregating, social-class-dividing laws of a groundbreakingly “benevolent” educational accountability.

*Time and again pro-reformers have argued that over the past decade an unprecedented amount of money has been directed toward education; the fact that this massive amount of money has been spent – *and not in how it has been spent* – is evidently sufficient proof that the need to throw additionally massive disbursements *at the exact same problem* continues to exist.

†Hounded on the subject of test-score invasions, as avid reformers (including the President) now find it politic to state that “education is more than filling in bubbles on a test” – the dangerous truth lies in the fact that as *value-added, test-score-dependent, computer-company-generated VAM evaluation practices* gain popularity *even as teachers are pushed away from “teaching to the test,”* the remunerative cycle of a teacher-blaming reform will simply gain momentum.

°Don’t run and hide from it: It has become both frighteningly and unavoidably documented that in too many states a shocking number of children – *some as young as ten* – have, for more than a decade, now, been funneled in the name of an educational “reform” directly from in-school offenses into our ever more convenient lineup of detention centers. (One facet of this phenomenon has even been very particularly documented under the heading *Kids For Cash.*)

Clean, Bright And Articulate

A year after having been forced away from my much-loved teaching position at Central High, as I had neared the end of my first middle school assignment inside a repeatedly invaded and frighteningly unstable building, I was informed that eighth grade teachers had been commanded to yet another meeting. Our small team of educators, I was now told, would be running through the roster of our school’s currently enrolled eighth graders. Naïve to the process, I was slow to grasp the idea that – as the employees who had worked with these students all year, and thus knew them best?

Our task would be to identify the *good* kids.

The *acceptable* kids.

The *best students*.

Students who were, as it had been only recently (although, yes, perhaps inadvertently) specified by those who knew best; im-

portant thinkers holding court way up high in the topmost ranks of our nation's political realm:

Presumably clean enough.

Bright enough.

Test-score-proven articulate enough.

And, perhaps even?

Nice-looking enough.

Calling upon this proposed-as-unemotional data-based selection process, conjecture held that through a review of testing results combined with a brief discussion of each student's personality, our small team of almost exclusively dominant-culture, privileged-class educators would be capable of selecting, and thus allowing, a choice school seating only for those students deemed "good" enough. Through this ostensibly impartial – although, in reality, fully subjective – process, we would be able to identify *the right kids*. Kids worthy of being invited into our following year's seating-exclusive/services-limited "college-bound" secondary program.

Maybe.

Oh, by now; *are* you grasping this?

In our publicly-lauded, reward-winning district, as an each year more imperative means for garnering yet more national attention – and, much, much more importantly, yet more national money – more and more blatantly we set out to "fix" our low-income school test scores through the incessant triggering of mandates; mandates which then detachedly called out for *not* sticking with, *not* working with, and *not* being responsible for what we already had, but conversely ordered up the chaotically rubber-stamped approval for more and more (oh, and then, *more*) innovatively brand-new, non-unionized, market-competitive, minimally-regulated choice schools.

Schools then given permission to argue, that?

Well; being innovatively deregulated, being program focused, being grant-money-specific – they had limited seating and, necessarily, a very selective enrollment process. Schools authorized through the modern-day logic of an unfettered test-score reformation, to say that they were sorry, but they didn't have the resources to deal with...

Well, *certain* children.

Sadly?

They just weren't equipped to handle *all students*.

For example (and, oh, now really; how could you expect them to since it was so very, *very* expensive), a growing number of excitingly named new schools simply couldn't afford to offer services for Special Education. (And, my; how convenient was this when, in more than a few low-income, culturally-different buildings, kids who – due to struggles with literacy, homelessness, malnutrition, drug use, transiency, parental abuse, neglect or language disconnect – well, after exhibiting documented issues of behavior, so many of these students might so very handily, if technically illegally, be pushed into that particularly overwhelmed *but now test-score-funding-contingent* department.)*

Dramatically new choice schools which – oh, now, but wasn't it just too bad, simply didn't have the personnel budget to offer services for English Language Learners. Those especially complicated students *who so regularly and so predictably* decimated their school's building-amalgamated test scores.

Enticingly-named new choice schools which, so sorry, just didn't have any way to take on and deal with a growing number of ninth graders who (oh my; just *look* at those test scores) were still reading at a third grade level.†

In case you still aren't quite following the logic?

The truly competitive, truly *good* choice schools of a modern-day reform avoided enrolling or, as necessitated, through the employment of harshly enforced zero-tolerance, police-ticketing, record-building rules of behavior, evicted (after first accepting and ultimately keeping funding-per-body stipends), and thereby refused any long-term test-score-punishable responsibility for difficult or challenging students.°

And, miraculously?

This made building test scores rise.

These, then, the exclusive limited-seat/limited-services school test scores, were publicly, selectively and explicitly lauded. Touted. Proclaimed as national wonders from the rooftops. *This* was the wonderfully compassionate test-score accountability plan which recurrently received a national acclaim. This was the plan argued, notably and repeatedly by educational “experts” and big-wig philanthrocapitalists, to *work*.

And it did work.

Well, so long as you didn't try to peek, goddamnit.

So long as you didn't push your way in, hoping to get a look under that secret, chaos-covering rug.Δ

So long as, sticking to a prudently selective bell-the-cat blindness, you refused any interest in seeking out *and actually seeing* those mostly (oh, but surely irrelevant) minority children who, after being forced through an increasing array of the modern-day legal tactics attached to a choice school elimination into the fewer and fewer genuinely *all-student/truly-public* schools, were – as statistically-labeled, politically-irrelevant, school-score-rejected, and, much, much too often, now, in über-modern days, school-and-police-record-holding constituents – allowed to become the ever more hapless guinea pigs of a lucrative experimentation.

Kids who, through the multiple processes attached to a *non-democratic*, but in modern days legally sanctioned, restrictive school selection? Found themselves increasingly pushed out of limited-seat choice school options into the waning world of an honestly *all-student-inclusive* “public” education. An ever more vitiated world where, with each progressively unprotected and competitively punished year?

They found an additional level of innovative disorder.

Less and less stability.

A minimal, ever attenuating academic focus.

And, well, huh.

The increasingly elevated chance of being not only insistently targeted, but belligerently and publicly labeled as being nothing more than our nation's most visibly data-proven – and thus inarguably unwanted – *failures*.

*When recent governmental leadership mindbogglingly legislated the now “funding-contingent” testing of special education students (and here I would argue that there is something fundamentally repulsive in the very nature of suggesting that if the scores of special needs students do not rise, *you will withhold their funding*) a friend working with integrated needs children sighed heavily. “Just think,” she suggested, “of what we could do for our students if they only allowed us to have the money which they will now spend on testing them.”

†While in many states it is no longer the fashion to have students repeat class levels, in the past those students who could not produce expected results were often held back until requisite skills were acquired. In modern days, however,

it is not unusual to find a growing number of children who have been socially promoted – with or without attaining those necessary skills. (I, personally, have been a witness to more than one middle school where each and every eighth grader enrolled into the school was summarily promoted and moved on into high school, with no concern for ability, attendance or grades.)

°In one low-income, culturally-different neighborhood overwhelmed by years of failed reforms, a few parents argued for additional change. Skeptical citizens raised the question: But, will there be a guaranteed seat for *every* student in our neighborhood? And it is herein that we find the rub. Should *all* students in a non-regentrified neighborhood be enrolled into a “new” school, student-amalgamated test scores *will not rise* – and the community will simply continue to hear, year after year, that they, their schools, and their students have yet again failed.

ΔWhile the argument maintaining that the balance of Special Needs, Language Learner and Behaviorally Displaced students no longer finds an equal distribution across our educational spectrum bounces back and forth between school-choice advocates and traditional-school activists (with choice advocates saying that this fact *isn't* true, and traditional activists saying that it *is* true), my question has always been: In a country obsessed with data, why aren't the *exact statistics* around this concern simply collected, diagramed, color-coded, pie-charted, bar-graphed and disseminated? (Would this help to explain, for example, why it is that the enrollment of Integrated Needs students rises dramatically in non-reformed districts when those districts which surround them have been repeatedly invaded by a test-score-based “innovation”?)

A Darwinian Tweak

Naively out of sync with intentions, after locating a seat inside that decisively ordered *good* student appraisal meeting, with rising disbelief I had watched as my team of privileged-class, minimally-experienced, all-but-one-White educators had systematically offered up student names for consideration...

One after the next.

A wave of nausea had hit me, then, as there in that room?

I was having my first encounter with a sort of Darwinian selection-of-the-fittest taken to a shockingly elitist, class-dividing level. Here, should you be invited?

Well, here you could sit back to observe a small and exclusive team of unseasoned, barely initiated educators from the privileged middle-class-to-wealthy world; shallowly experienced

employees unwilling to question *why* there might be this need to subjectively identify children as being *good enough*. Teachers, in fact, so greenly untested that they could offer up no professional resistance to this divisive call for singling out only those students who, as they had now been empowered to decide, might function at an acceptable level of assimilation inside college-bound social circles.

Even as, detachedly, impersonally and casually?

They eliminated the names of those who would not.

For the majority of these short-term, privileged-world recruits – callously inexperienced hires only recently positioned inside our aggressively “youthanized” building – well, for all they knew, this process; this call to assertively identify, categorize and separate?

Was, in fact, a logical and even necessary function of public school employees.

List; consider; select.

Isolate; eliminate; divide.

As a twenty-year public school veteran, I had occasionally been forced to confront serious conflict-heavy issues; now and then I had been caught up in the thorny complications attached to racism, culturalism or elitism. Over the years I had done what I could, even to occasionally going head to head with those who refused a recognition of critical concerns. But, oh, my, I had never, in all my years of teaching, been asked to participate in anything which I felt to be so coldly, injuriously and ethically *wrong*. As the methodic, unresisted proposal of student names continued, I felt myself become increasingly agitated.

The next child on the list?

Jamal.

A fleeting image of a skinny and often generously stained, tatteredly clothed boy came to mind. Taking a moment, I thought back on this almost impossibly wriggly child: this last and smallest kid in a family of nine. This boy who, certainly, was a handful, especially for marginally experienced and curriculum-rigid educators; this seemingly never stopping, always moving child who – when, actually, he did slow down?

When, finally, he did sit still?

Illustrated that not only was he startlingly and exceptionally brilliant, but uniquely and entertainingly humorous.

Having yielded so unwillingly to the belligerent dictates of reform; feeling overwhelmed, feeling sorry for myself; holding, with both hands onto the idea that I had been heartlessly rent from my previously beloved high school assignment – as I had struggled to make sense of what felt to be the most difficult teaching year of my life, my mind and my heart had been captivated by this unpredictable, enigmatic child. Heavily padded by the constraints of White privilege, my middle-class existence had been disturbed by this boy. Disturbed, rattled, shaken; agitated and unsettled.

And, ultimately?

Oh so rewardingly sweetened.

Listening now, as the privileged-class, poverty-detached educators on my instructional team concluded decisively, heeding none of my escalating protests, that, well – due to a combination of unacceptable test scores and an unattractively active thirteen-year-old physiology? *Jamal just wasn't college prep material* – standing up, I made my excuses. Numbly, and since what I had been ordered to do in that room was a daddy-stipulated, don't-talk-back mandate, insubordinately:

I left the room.

I had cried a lot that year.

I had cried for the loss of my cherished teaching position inside Central High.

I had cried to discover that in the “compassionate” new world of arbitrarily decided teaching assignments?

Apparently I could no longer make anyone happy.

I had cried to realize that within the walls of an endlessly innovated building unwilling to back any predictable system of intentional disciplinary support, I had been working against the tide and was severely, and even dangerously, exhausted. Perhaps it wasn't surprising, then, that once I had stumbled out into the parking lot, settled into my car, and made ready to face that long drive home:

On that particular afternoon?

I cried again. For myself, yes; but, much more helplessly, for Jamal. And for the so many other Jamals out there who, in a “no-excuses” nation now blindly committed to the exclusionary tactics of a statistical accountability, were no longer wanted.

And who, so chillingly and overwhelmingly?

Could no longer count upon any heartfelt advocacy from resistantly outspoken old-school teachers. Old-school, long-term-loyal, student-protective teachers – *like me*.

Afterword

It won't surprise you – oh, surely not, by now?

That I am no longer teaching.

Eighteen months after fighting my way back into a much longed-for high school teaching assignment at Riverside High, abruptly, unexpectedly, and out of the blue I was called into a meeting with administration where, offered only vaguely undocumented *nothing on paper* statements from my good friend Ms. Hart?

I was very assertively and unceremoniously sent home.

Having no useful case against me save my age, my too often and too liberally expressed opinions, and, most annoyingly, my unhelpful ability to see directly through our district's more-than-a-decade-long loyalty to the implementation of community-confusing smoke screens – taking advantage of a union-allowed option for a preemptive and, in days of a faster-and-faster-no-due-process-necessary modern-day evaluation, *no concrete evidence required* perp-walking/keys-confiscated/no-school-contact-allowed administrative leave – the district commandeered an abruptly unanticipated and overwhelmingly painful mid-year separation from my students, offering neither them nor any of my teaching peers an explanation as, strategically, they installed a brand-new never-taught-before replacement.

A few months into my forced disappearance, through roundabout sources I heard that one of my more politically active upperclassmen, Carlos, took it upon himself to lead a few of our school's students into an open rebellion; together they went on a mission to “kick down Ms. Hart's door.”

Ah.

Thank you, Carlos.

More than ever I wanted to...

I understand.