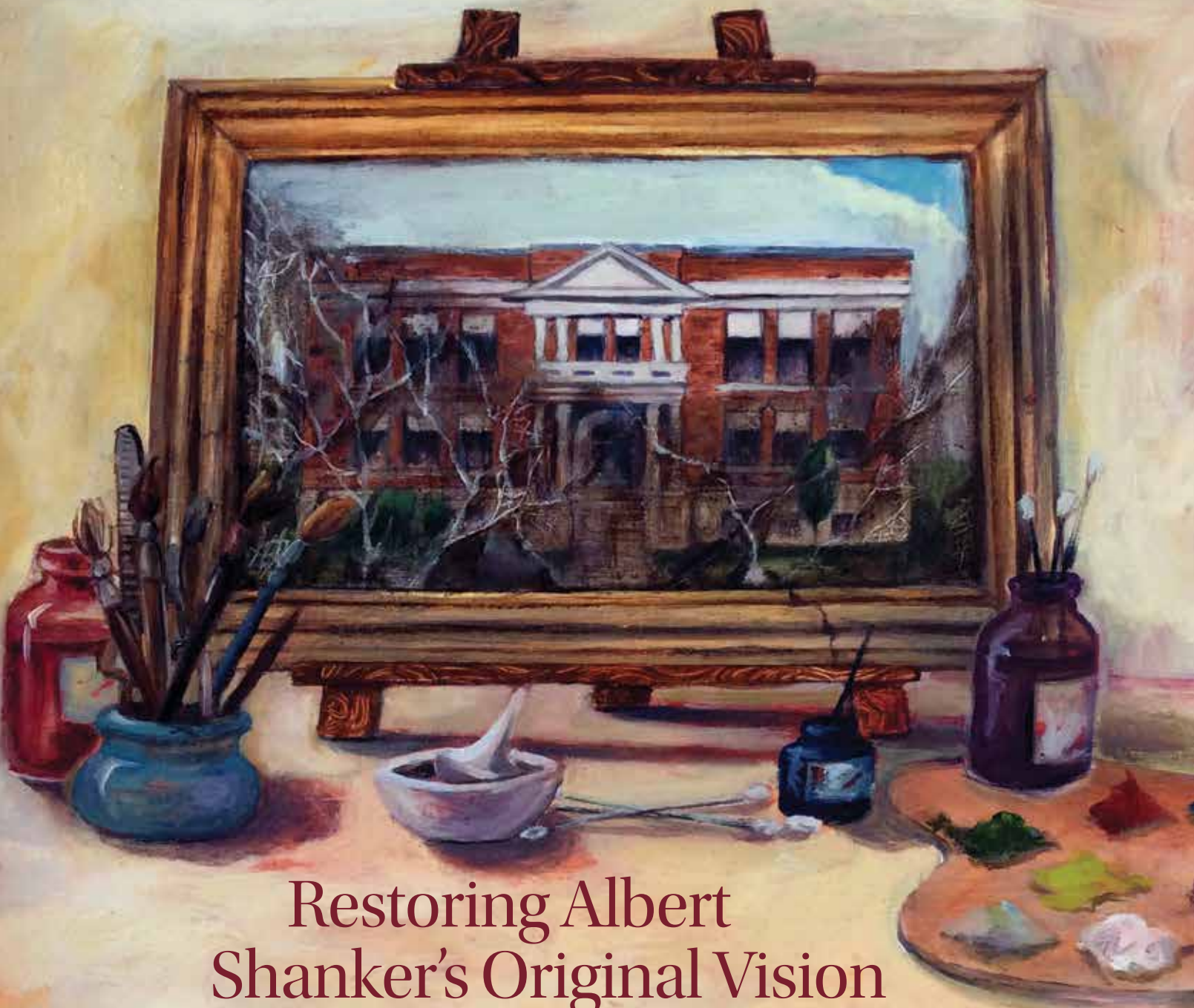




# AMERICAN Educator

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND IDEAS



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## Worth Fighting For

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

FROM CONNECTICUT TO ALASKA, Florida to Pennsylvania, our union engaged in the midterm elections big-time. I was proud to stand with our members as we knocked on doors, made calls, talked to our friends and neighbors, and cast our ballots on behalf of our schools, our kids, our families, and our communities.

As the results came in on Nov. 4, we watched as many of the candidates we worked for lost. It was hard to see but, upon reflection, not hard to understand.

National elections inevitably turn on the choices voters make between the economy and national security, between hope and fear. This one turned on the economy, particularly people's fear and uncertainty about their future. Despite the fact there's been 54 months of private sector job growth, median family income has fallen during the Obama presidency, just as it did during both Bush presidencies and the Carter presidency. As *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt said: "When incomes, the most tangible manifestation of the economy for most families, aren't rising ... Americans don't feel good about the state of the country. When they don't feel good about the country, they don't feel good about the president, and they tend to punish his party."

According to exit polls, 63 percent of voters believe that our economic system generally favors the wealthy, yet virtually the same percentage voted with the party that is known to represent the interests of the wealthy. Those exit polls also showed that people want more public school funding and a higher minimum wage, yet they voted for candidates that oppose those things—out of frustration or a desire for change, or because they felt the Democrats didn't have a compelling economic message or solutions.

While voters want an economy that works for everyone and not just the wealthy few, in many of the highly contested races they didn't believe that those

we endorsed would get them there. They didn't see that the candidates we supported were the ones who are in it "for the nurse on her second shift, for the worker on the line, for the waitress on her feet, for the small-business owner, the farmer, the teacher, the coal miner, the trucker, the soldier, the veteran," as Hillary Clinton famously said in 2008.

It's critical to remember that, in these elections, not everything was washed away. In fact, in places where voters were given the chance to weigh in directly on their values, they resoundingly sent a message that they are on the side of working families and public education. Alaska, Arkansas, Illinois, Nebraska, and South Dakota increased the minimum wage. Massachusetts granted workers paid sick leave. Missouri rejected an initiative that would have abolished due process for teachers.

In California, voters re-elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson over a candidate backed heavily by Wall Street interests intent on gutting teachers' union rights and worker protections. In Pennsylvania, anti-education and union-busting Gov. Tom Corbett lost badly after battling a multiyear community groundswell resisting his attempts to destroy the state's public schools.

Poll after poll has shown us that people actually want public schools. People actually love their teachers. People believe that a strong public education system fills an essential role as an anchor of democracy, a propeller of our economy, and the vehicle through which we help all children achieve their dreams.

But we face a new reality where right-wing, anti-worker interests won big, and their No. 1 target will be unions. We know their playbook. We know that even though the labor movement doesn't have the density or power by ourselves to change the trajectory of our economy, we are still the firewall that thwarts complete control of our economy and democracy by the

anti-union, free-market ideologues and oligarchs. And they will do everything in their power to take us out, dismantle our infrastructure, divide us from the community, and consolidate their power.

We are going to face some real attacks and challenges, but we can't just go into defensive mode. We faced a lot of these attacks in 2010, but we didn't hunker

**We must engage more of our members—because our members are the union.**

down; instead, we were solution-driven and community-engaged, and we became a stronger union.

We need to think about everything we do through the lens of whether it's good for kids, schools, working families, and our communities. And our job is to keep communities and voters with us on the values, issues, and solutions we share.

We must be solution-driven, by being willing to solve problems, to innovate to make things better, to find common ground when possible, and to engage in conflict when necessary. We must connect with our community and make community our new density. And we must engage more of our members—because our members are the union.

The next few years won't be easy. If there's one thing we know, it's that power never yields without a fight. To change the balance of power, we must fight harder and smarter, and stand together.

We will never stop fighting to reclaim the promise of an America where, if you work hard and play by the rules, you can support your family and ensure that your children will do better. I think we can all agree that is a promise worth fighting for.

## 4 Restoring Shanker's Vision for Charter Schools

BY RICHARD D. KAHLBERG AND HALLEY POTTER

Initially conceived to enable teacher innovation in educating students from diverse backgrounds, many charter schools today are a far cry from this vision. They reduce teacher voice and further segregation. Because research shows that students have a greater chance of building knowledge and skills in schools that empower teachers and integrate students, charters have the potential to promote student success, if redirected toward their original intention.



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## TIME COVER TRIGGERS BACKLASH

A recent cover of *Time* magazine, which reads, in part, “Rotten Apples: It’s Nearly Impossible to Fire a Bad Teacher” and shows a gavel about to smash an apple, is generating anger and activism among AFT members and the public at large. On Oct. 30, the AFT delivered a petition with more than 100,000 signatures to *Time*’s editors demanding an apology for the magazine’s incendiary treatment of a major educational issue. “This *Time* cover isn’t trying to foster a serious dialogue about solutions our schools need—it’s intentionally creating controversy to sell more copies,” remarked AFT President Randi Weingarten, who personally delivered the signatures. Read more at <http://go.aft.org/AE414news1>.

Parents and teachers were joined by AFT President Randi Weingarten to protest *Time*’s cover.



PHOTOGRAPH BY BRUCE GILBERT

## PHILADELPHIA IN TURMOIL

The School District of Philadelphia was thrown into turmoil on Oct. 6, when the state-run School Reform Commission dissolved the teachers’ contract and cut teachers’ health benefits. The commission’s action came after it failed, during months of contract negotiations, to force teachers to accept big cuts in pay and benefits. On Oct. 16, an estimated crowd of 3,000 teachers, parents, and students gathered to voice their opposition outside offices where the commission was scheduled to meet. The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers moved quickly to secure a temporary injunction until the courts determine if the commission acted legally. In a joint statement, AFT President Randi Weingarten and AFT Pennsylvania President Ted Kirsch suggested that the commission was making a desperate move to improve Gov. Tom Corbett’s sagging poll numbers and dimming hopes for re-election. In fact, Corbett ended up losing the election to Democrat Tom Wolf. A recent *PBS NewsHour* segment available at <http://to.pbs.org/1sTBd1P> chronicles the long-standing fight over Philadelphia’s schools.

## TENURE LAWSUIT

The New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) has filed a motion to dismiss the lawsuit challenging the state’s tenure law, arguing the suit lacks merit and that the plaintiffs’ policy proposals would harm public education. Former CNN anchor Campbell Brown—whose Partnership for Educational Justice comprises wealthy and self-proclaimed “education reformers”—has been acting as a spokesperson for the plaintiffs. The motion to dismiss was filed on behalf of seven individual teachers and NYSUT, the statewide union affiliated with the AFT and the National Education Association. NYSUT

is aggressively defending the state’s tenure law, which for more than a century has allowed New York’s educators to advocate for students and has also protected good teachers from arbitrary firing. Read more at <http://go.aft.org/AE414news2>.

## MORE ON COMMON CORE

A poll from the Gates Foundation and Scholastic suggests that the Common Core State Standards can work if teachers have the time, tools, and trust to implement them, and if the standards are decoupled from the testing fixation. In 2014, teachers are generally enthusiastic about Common Core implementation, but they are less enthusiastic than last year (68 percent in 2014 vs. 73 percent in 2013). They continue to need support and resources, and identified as critical instructional materials (86 percent), quality professional development (84 percent), additional planning time (78 percent), and opportunities to collaborate (78 percent). The survey is available at [www.bit.ly/1vomlUD](http://www.bit.ly/1vomlUD).

## NOT IN DENIAL

An estimated 310,000 people converged on Manhattan this fall for the People’s Climate March—including hundreds of AFT members, many holding signs that read “Climate Change Is Real. TEACH SCIENCE.” About 70 labor organizations cosponsored the event, which attracted three times the number of participants predicted. “This is a monumental issue for labor,” Frederick Kowal, president of the United University Professions at the State University of New York and an AFT vice president, said at the rally. Read more at <http://go.aft.org/AE414news3>.

## PRIZE WINNERS

The AFT this fall announced two first-place winners of the second annual Prize for Solution-Driven Unionism, a competition among AFT state and local affiliates to find innovative and collaborative solutions to tough public problems. The Milwaukee Technical College Federation, AFT Local 212, won for its solution to lagging graduation and course completion rates. And the United University Professions and the New York State Public Employees Federation won for their successful campaign to save Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York, from privatization and to promote investment in the facility and expanded healthcare in Brooklyn. The prize, created in partnership with the Albert Shanker Institute and the AFT Innovation Fund, comes with \$25,000 for each of the two winners. Read more at <http://go.aft.org/AE414news4>.

Weingarten stands with winners of the union’s Prize for Solution-Driven Unionism at a ceremony in Washington, D.C.



PHOTOGRAPH BY RON AIRA

# Restoring Shanker's Vision for Charter Schools



BY RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG AND HALLEY POTTER

In 1988, education reformer and American Federation of Teachers president Albert Shanker proposed a new kind of public school—“charter schools”—which would allow teachers to experiment with innovative approaches to educating students. Publicly funded but independently managed, these schools would be given a charter to try their fresh approaches for a set period of time and be renewed only if they succeeded.

*Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, is the author or editor of several books, including *Rewarding Strivers: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College*; *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*; and *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice*. Halley Potter is a fellow at the Century Foundation and a former charter school teacher. This article is excerpted from Richard D. Kahlenberg and Halley Potter, *A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education* (New York: Teachers College Press). Reprinted with permission of the publisher. Copyright © 2014 by Richard D. Kahlenberg and Halley Potter. All rights reserved.*

Freed from bureaucratic constraints, teachers would be empowered to draw on their expertise to create educational laboratories from which the traditional public schools would learn. And liberated from traditional school boundaries, Shanker and other early charter advocates suggested, charters could do a better job than the regular public schools of helping children of different racial, ethnic, economic, and religious backgrounds come together to learn from one another.

In the past two decades, charter schools have grown by leaps and bounds, from a single school in Minnesota in 1992 to more than 6,400 charter schools today, serving more than 2.5 million students in 42 states. Between the 2012–2013 and 2013–2014 school years, enrollment grew by 13 percent, and seven districts now have more than 30 percent of public school students enrolled in charters.<sup>1</sup>

But somewhere along the way, charter schools went in a very different direction from the one Shanker originally envisioned. Many charter school founders empowered management, not teachers, and adopted antiunion sentiments. Today, just 12

percent of charter schools are unionized, and teacher retention rates—one possible measure of professional satisfaction—are much lower than in traditional public schools.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, most charter schools largely discarded the goal of student integration. Charters are now actually more economically and racially segregated than traditional public schools. The purpose of charter schools also evolved. Originally conceived as laboratories with which traditional public schools would collaborate, charters became a force for competition, with some suggesting they replace regular district schools.

All in all, the change was quite dramatic. Proposed to empower teachers, desegregate students, and allow innovation from which the traditional public schools could learn, many charter schools instead prized management control, reduced teacher voice, further segregated students, and became competitors, rather than allies, of regular public schools.

thinking skills in schools where teachers have voice and student bodies are integrated.\*

Moreover, these schools offer a sensible way out of the charter school wars by rejecting competing visions in which charter schools are either to be vanquished or completely victorious. On the one hand, we disagree with charter school opponents, who would simply abandon the experiment entirely. Because of their freedom and flexibility, charters have the potential to provide excellent learning environments for students—and many do. Moreover, as a practical matter, even fierce critics such as Diane Ravitch note that charter schools are “here to stay.”<sup>4</sup> Public support for charters has continued to grow, from 43 percent in 2002 to 68 percent in 2013, according to annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polls.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, we disagree with some charter school enthusiasts who argue that charters should try to completely replace the traditional public schools. Despite their enormous

The charter school movement, once brimming with tremendous promise, has lost its way.



The reduced teacher voice and increased segregation might seem defensible if charter schools were clearly providing a superior form of education to students systemwide. But the best evidence suggests that is not the case. While there are excellent charter schools and there are also terrible ones, on average, charter students perform about the same as those in traditional public schools.<sup>3</sup> In our view, the charter school movement, once brimming with tremendous promise, has lost its way.

The good news is that within the varied charter school world, there are a small but growing number of leaders and institutions that are resurrecting the original idea behind charters. To document their efforts, we wrote a book from which this article is drawn. In it, we profile exciting charter schools in California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin that promote teacher voice or economic and racial diversity, or—in a few cases—do both. To us, these charter schools offer the right approach because, according to extensive research, students have a better chance of building deep knowledge and honing critical-

growth, charters still educate only about 5 percent of public school students. The abiding purpose of charters must be not only to educate the students under their own roofs but also to bring lessons to the traditional public schools, which will educate the vast majority of American students for the foreseeable future.

The relevant question today is no longer whether charter schools are good or bad as a group. Rather we ask, can charter schools be taken in a better direction—one that finds inspiration in the original vision of charters as laboratories for student success that bring together children from different backgrounds and tap into the expertise of highly talented teachers?

### Shanker's Original Idea

On March 31, 1988, Shanker, the president of the AFT, rose to address the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. He shook

\*For more about the importance of school integration by socioeconomic status, see “From All Walks of Life” in the Winter 2012–2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at <http://go.aft.org/AE-Kahlenberg-Winter1213>.

the education world with an extraordinary speech in which he proposed the creation of “a new type of school,”<sup>6</sup> which he later referred to as “charter schools.”

Shanker was frustrated by the way education was being delivered in traditional public schools. Schools were run like factories, he said, in which students moved at the sound of a bell from class to class, where teachers lectured to them for hours on end, and where students were expected to learn in the same way at the same pace. This system worked fine for about 20 percent of students, said Shanker. But for the 80 percent of students who didn’t learn well under that regime, he thought different approaches were needed. “Can we come up with a plan for a school which doesn’t require kids to do something that most adults can’t do, which is to sit still for five or six hours a day listening to somebody talk?”<sup>7</sup>

In his speech, Shanker proposed a new mechanism by which a small group of teachers—between six and 12—could come together with parents and propose the creation of a different type of school. These teachers would say, “We’ve got an idea. We’ve got a way of doing something very different. We’ve got a way of reaching the kids that are now not being reached by what the school is doing.”<sup>8</sup>

These schools might experiment with team teaching; greater time set aside for teachers to share ideas; teachers as coaches, rather than lecturers; programs that allow students to learn at their own pace; and cooperative learning in which “kids can sit

around a table and help each other just as the kids help each other on a basketball team”<sup>9</sup>—ideas that, in those days, were pushing the envelope.

These schools wouldn’t proclaim to have all the answers. In fact, Shanker suggested that they should admit this outright—“that we really do not know just how to reach the 80 percent of these kids ... and that therefore we are engaged in a search.”<sup>10</sup> But through experimentation, the new charter laboratory schools might produce breakthrough lessons about curriculum or pedagogy, which could then be applied broadly to traditional public schools.

Under Shanker’s program, proposals for charter schools would be reviewed, evaluated, and approved or rejected by panels that included union representatives, school board members, and outsiders. Charters would be schools of choice—no student or teacher would be compelled to be part of one. And Shanker proposed that the schools be given independence for a five- to 10-year period to prove themselves, because new education ideas need time to be nurtured and cultivated. In order to make these new schools successful, he outlined two critical conditions: that the schools provide their teachers with strong voice, and that the schools educate kids from all walks of life.

In Shanker’s vision, not only would union representatives be part of the authorizing board of charter schools, charter school teachers would be represented by unions, and charter school

## Why Teacher Voice Matters

Research shows that when teachers are engaged in school decisions and collaborate with administrators and each other, school climate improves. This promotes a better learning environment for students, which raises student achievement, and a better working environment for teachers, which reduces teacher turnover.

**Stronger School Climate.** Research finds a high level of teacher voice has positive effects on school climate. Richard Ingersoll, an expert on teacher workplace issues, describes teachers as people “in the middle,” “caught between the contradictory demands and needs of their superordinates—principals—and their subordinates—students.”<sup>1</sup> When teachers have the right amount of control, Ingersoll argues, they are able to do their job successfully, earning respect from principals, coworkers, and students.

Looking at data from the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics Schools and Staffing Survey, Ingersoll found that as teacher control in “social decisions” (such as student discipline and teacher professional development policies) increases, the amount of conflict between students and staff, among teachers, and between teachers and the principal all decrease.<sup>2</sup> As

he summarized in a later article, “Schools in which teachers have more control over key schoolwide and classroom decisions have fewer problems with student misbehavior, show more collegiality and cooperation among teachers and administrators, have a more committed and engaged teaching staff, and do a better job of retaining their teachers.”<sup>3</sup>

**Increased Student Achievement.** Not surprisingly, evidence suggests that having a strong teacher culture also improves student performance. Valerie Lee and Julia Smith measured the effects of teachers’ work conditions and school climate on student achievement using longitudinal data tracking individual student learning gains from eighth to tenth grade.<sup>4</sup> They found that, after controlling for student and school characteristics, student achievement is higher across all subjects when teachers take collective responsibility for student learning and when the staff is more cooperative. The study also showed that schools with high levels of collective responsibility and staff cooperation had more equitable distributions of student gains across socioeconomic status (SES)—lower-SES students in these schools tended to have gains on par with the gains of higher-SES students. Promoting

collective responsibility and cooperation among teachers, then, may improve student outcomes and reduce achievement gaps.

Research on effective school organization also finds that collaboration, which is one manifestation of teacher voice, is an important component of school quality. One prominent recent example is the impressive 15-year longitudinal study produced by the Consortium on Chicago School Research. This study of hundreds of elementary schools in Chicago found that one of the organizational features that distinguished schools showing academic improvement from struggling schools was intense staff collaboration coupled with strong professional development. Furthermore, researchers found that building strong relational trust among teachers and administrators was crucial to school improvement.<sup>5</sup> Greg Anrig recently synthesized research on collaboration and school organization in his book *Beyond the Education Wars*. He found that “one of the most important ingredients in successful schools is the inverse of conflict: intensive collaboration among administrators and teachers, built on a shared sense of mission and focused on improved student learning.”<sup>6</sup>



proposals would include “a plan for faculty decision making.”<sup>11</sup> Rather than having a principal walk into a teacher’s classroom once a year and provide an evaluation, for example, groups of teachers would work with one another in teams, and if some weren’t doing their part, the others would hold them accountable. The idea was consistent with Shanker’s support for peer assistance and review plans in traditional public schools,\* where expert teachers would try to assist struggling colleagues, and if unsuccessful, recommend termination.<sup>12</sup>

In charter schools, certain union-negotiated rules could be bent to encourage innovation. For example, Shanker said, class size requirements might be waived in order to merge two classes to allow for team teaching.<sup>13</sup> But the basic union structures and protections should remain in place, he argued. Shanker noted that traditional school districts that were the most innovative provided such an environment. “You don’t see these creative things happening where teachers don’t have any voice or power or influence.” Only when teachers feel protected from the whims of administrators are they willing to take risks.<sup>14</sup>

In his proposal, Shanker also emphasized the importance of ensuring that charter schools avoid de facto segregation by race,

ethnicity, class, or ability: “We are not talking about a school where all the advantaged kids or all the white kids or any other group is segregated to one group. The school would have to reflect the whole group.”<sup>15</sup>

**Shanker envisioned charters with the potential to be more integrated. As schools of choice, they could be accessible to students from across a geographic area.**

Shanker had long favored integrated schools as a way of promoting both social mobility and social cohesion. Research found, Shanker noted, “that children from socioeconomically deprived families do better academically when they are integrated with children of higher socioeconomic status and better-educated

\*For more about peer assistance and review, see the Fall 2008 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/fall2008](http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2008).

**Reduced Teacher Turnover.** Schools with high levels of teacher voice also have less teacher turnover. Ingersoll found that higher levels of teacher control in social and instructional areas are associated with lower teacher turnover rates. Schools with low levels of teacher control in social areas had an average turnover rate of 19 percent, compared with just 4 percent for those with a high level of teacher control in social areas. A smaller, but still significant, difference in turnover rates was associated with control in instructional areas: the turnover rate for schools with a low level of teacher control in instructional areas was 11 percent, compared with 7 percent for those with a high level of teacher control in that area.<sup>7</sup>

Controlling teacher turnover matters because excessive turnover consumes financial resources, disrupts students’ learning, and reduces the number of highly effective, experienced teachers. Each time a teacher leaves and must be replaced, schools face financial costs associated with advertising and recruitment, special incentives for new hires, administrative processing, and training for new employees. A 2007 study of five districts found that the costs of turnover varied widely—from around \$4,000 per

teacher leaving the Jemez Valley Public Schools district in New Mexico, to almost \$18,000 per teacher who left Chicago Public Schools.<sup>8</sup> Based on these estimates and a national average teacher turnover rate of 12.5 percent, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future estimates that the overall cost of teacher turnover in the United States is \$7.34 billion per year.<sup>9</sup> In an average urban district, these costs break down to \$70,000 per school per year to cover the costs of teachers leaving that school, plus an additional \$8,750 spent to replace each teacher leaving the district.

Teacher turnover also disrupts the school community and hurts student achievement. Research shows that more-effective teachers are more likely to stay in teaching,<sup>10</sup> so teacher turnover could theoretically improve student achievement if less-effective teachers are replaced with more-effective ones. However, research on the effects of actual turnover show that it can have the opposite effect on student learning. A study of fourth- and fifth-grade students in New York City found that students performed worse when teacher turnover within their grade-level team was higher.<sup>11</sup> The effects were most pronounced for

students in grades where all of the teachers were new to the school, but there were also smaller effects observed for students in grades where some of the teachers were new hires. Notably, the harmful effects of teacher turnover were two to four times greater in schools with higher proportions of black students and low-achieving students. In low-achieving schools, even students with teachers who had stayed at the school were harmed by having turnover among other teachers in the school. This finding suggests that teacher turnover can have negative schoolwide effects that extend beyond individual classrooms.

—R.D.K. and H.P.

#### Endnotes

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(Continued on page 44)

families.” He observed, “when children converse, they learn from each other. Placing a child with a large vocabulary next to one with a smaller vocabulary can provide a gain to one without a loss to the other.”<sup>16</sup>

While, in practice, too many public schools remained racially and economically segregated in 1988, Shanker envisioned charters with the potential to be more integrated. As schools of choice, charters, like magnet schools, could be accessible to students from across a geographic area, rather than limiting enrollment based on what neighborhood a child’s family could afford to live in, the way many traditional public schools do.

Four months after his National Press Club speech, Shanker’s idea won the endorsement of the 3,000 delegates to the AFT convention in San Francisco.<sup>17</sup> In the Press Club address, Shanker didn’t actually employ the term “charter school,” but in a July 1988 “Where We Stand” column, he formally gave the name to his proposal. Drawing upon educator Ray Budde’s report *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts*,<sup>18</sup> Shanker said “charter” was an appropriate term, noting that “explorers got charters to seek new lands and resources.”<sup>19</sup>

Reichgott Junge), a member of the Education Committee. She said she had never heard of charter schools but was taken by Shanker’s “visionary” idea to create new schools and empower teachers.

Reichgott Junge, who would go on to author the nation’s first charter school legislation, was excited by the idea of making teachers feel more invested in schools. She noted that “many teachers were frustrated with their work environments and were leaving the profession. I wanted to give them more ownership.”<sup>23</sup> At the time, 8 percent of teachers were leaving the profession or retiring every year.<sup>24</sup> Reichgott Junge recalls, “For me, chartering was all about empowering teachers—giving them the authority to take leadership as professionals by spearheading and forming new chartered schools. I felt it was an option for entrepreneurial teachers to break away from the system—the status quo—and try something new.”<sup>25</sup>

The idea of charter schools received another boost in November 1988, when the Citizens League, a community policy organization in Minnesota, issued an influential report *Chartered Schools = Choices for Educators + Quality for All Students*.<sup>26</sup> Like Shanker, the committee that authored the report argued that charter schools should be guided by two central tenets: empower-

Many conservatives saw in charters the potential to inject greater competition with public schools, forcing them to improve.



Conservatives were initially unenthusiastic about Shanker’s idea of diverse, teacher-led schools that would engage in broad experimentation. William Kristol, then chief of staff of Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of Education William Bennett, said that while the department “didn’t have problems” with the proposal, “we think there is lots of evidence that traditional methods are working.”<sup>20</sup> Assistant Secretary of Education Chester Finn attacked the charter school proposal, saying it suggested that we did not already know what works in education.<sup>21</sup>

But if there was skepticism from the Reagan administration, policy leaders and influential educators in Minnesota, including Ted Kolderie and Joe Nathan, were intrigued.<sup>22</sup> In October 1988, Shanker spoke at the Minneapolis Foundation’s Itasca Seminar about the charter school idea, and among those in attendance was Democratic-Farmer-Labor state Senator Ember Reichgott (later

ing teachers and promoting diversity. The report called first for “providing cooperative management of schools,” giving teachers the chance to have greater say over how schools were run.<sup>27</sup> The second goal was “building additional quality through diversity.”<sup>28</sup> The report specified that charter schools would enroll students of all races and achievement levels: “The committee’s vision for chartered public schools is that they must, like any public school, serve all children.”<sup>29</sup> To promote diversity, the proposal called for charter schools to employ

outreach programs to inform students, living both inside and outside the district, from a variety of income levels and races, about the school, ... curricula designed to appeal to students who would make a diverse student enrollment, ... programs and instructional approaches that encourage the interaction

of students and promote integration, ... [and] culturally- and racially-diverse staff.<sup>30</sup>

The bottom line, the committee argued, was that “the school’s student enrollment could not be segregated.” Charter schools would be required to have “an affirmative plan for promoting integration by ability level and race,” and failing to meet this requirement could be grounds for revoking the charter.<sup>31</sup>

But in a notable departure from Shanker’s vision—and a hint of things to come—the report left the door open for minority-oriented schools. “Although these criteria would prohibit the establishment of schools designed for any single racial or ethnic group, the committee appreciates the complexity of this issue and suggests that the Legislature might wish to deal separately with voluntarily segregated schools established by minority groups.”<sup>32</sup> In addition, the report suggested that schools for academically at-risk students could be allowed as an exception to the policy that otherwise prohibits charters from screening students based on achievement level.

Overall, though, the report said that integrated schools should be the norm. “Rather than roll back the gains made by desegregation over the last generation, or settle for that achievement, we should expand the commitment to go further, to do more.”<sup>33</sup> And in a twist, the proposal also highlighted the importance of economic integration: “Although desegregation rules focus exclusively on students’ race or ethnic background, family income levels better determine children’s preparation for school and academic success.” The committee suggested, therefore, that we should “be at least as concerned about segregation by income as segregation by race.”<sup>34</sup>

In 1990, the charter idea gained further prominence after the state legislature in neighboring Wisconsin passed the nation’s first private school voucher law, providing public support for low-income Milwaukee students to attend private and parochial schools. The argument, advanced by black Democratic legislator Polly Williams, was that low-income black students deserved something better than the dysfunctional urban schools to which they were assigned. This development gave another reason for progressives to back charter schools: as an alternative to vouchers. Charters were a choice option that avoided the concerns posed by vouchers—entanglement of church and state and a lack of accountability for public dollars. Ted Kolderie, former director of the Citizens League and member of the committee that authored its *Chartered Schools* report, noted the news from Milwaukee. He argued in a November 1990 paper for the Progressive Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank associated with the Democratic Leadership Council, that charters were a way to strengthen public education, not abandon it. Again, teacher empowerment was a core idea of the Progressive Policy Institute report. Kolderie wrote that charter schools could provide nothing less than “the opportunity for teachers to own and run the new schools.”<sup>35</sup>

As outlined by Shanker, Reichgott Junge, the Citizens League, and Kolderie, then, the original vision of charter schools rested on three pillars:

1. This new type of school should be allowed to experiment with desperately needed new approaches to reach students, approaches from which the traditional public schools could learn.

2. Charter schools would provide an enhanced level of teacher voice and teacher empowerment compared with the public schools, which saw large levels of teacher frustration and turnover.
3. Charters, by severing the tie between residential neighborhood segregation and school segregation, might help reinvent the old idea of the American common school, where students of different races, incomes, and religions could come and learn together under a single schoolhouse roof.

These were the animating ideas behind the exciting new proposal for charter schools. But the question remained: Once the idea was written into legislation, how faithfully would these principles be honored in practice?

## The Development of a More Conservative Vision

In 1991, Minnesota became the nation’s first state to adopt charter school legislation—and, with it, came the first significant deviation from Shanker’s original vision. Over the years, Minnesota teachers had fought hard to ensure that educators, like lawyers, doctors, and architects, had to pass certification requirements in order to enter the profession. They also fought to ensure that teachers were supported and protected by democratically elected union representatives who could bargain collectively on their behalf.

When Ember Reichgott Junge’s charter school legislation was introduced in the Minnesota state legislature, however, it failed to include either universal teacher certification requirements or automatic collective bargaining rights for teachers. If enhancing teacher voice was a central tenet of the charter school idea, why, teachers asked, would the charter legislation strip teachers of the protections of the district contract? The Minnesota Federation of Teachers strongly opposed the legislation on licensure and collective bargaining grounds.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, Minnesota’s charter law did nothing to prevent the creation of charter schools aimed at particular ethnic and racial minority groups, something Shanker found fundamentally at odds with the very idea of public education in America. Over time, Minnesota would come to host some 30 charter schools focused on students from specific ethnic or immigrant groups, such as Somali, Ethiopian, Hmong, and Latino populations.<sup>37</sup>

The new, more conservative charter vision, which promoted neither teacher voice nor school integration, quickly swept the country. Democratic President Bill Clinton, elected in 1992, became a strong supporter of charter schools and pushed for federal seed money to promote them. Following Minnesota’s adoption of the nation’s first charter school law in 1991, state legislation was introduced and passed in capital after capital. By 2014, there were 6,400 charter schools in 42 states and the District of Columbia.<sup>38</sup>

As states began enacting charter school legislation, the departure from Shanker’s vision was repeated over and over again in the three critical areas: collaborating with traditional public schools, empowering teachers, and integrating students. As the original goals of charter schools were upended, conservatives like the Reagan administration’s Chester Finn came to support charters. And, in a stunning reversal, Shanker came to oppose most of them.<sup>39</sup>

Below, we outline how this remarkable transformation occurred on those three critical questions: (1) whether charters

would cooperate with regular public schools or serve as competitors, (2) whether they would enhance teacher voice or increase management authority, and (3) whether they would promote diversity or cater to niche markets.

### Cooperative Laboratories versus Competitors

Whereas Shanker emphasized the way in which charter schools could serve as a laboratory for testing ideas that could improve public schools, many conservatives saw in charters the potential to inject greater competition with public schools, forcing them to improve. The model was similar to the argument advanced by conservative supporters of private school vouchers: that competitive pressures of charters would compel regular public schools to do better. James Goenner, president and CEO of the National Charter Schools Institute, for example, suggested in 1996 that “charter schools are a vehicle for infusing competition and market forces into public education, a proven method for responsive change and improvement.”<sup>40</sup>

As charter school legislation was passed in state after state, the competition rationale grew in strength. Indeed, in a 2013 examination of charter school laws, researchers found the most popular purpose cited in state law for charter schools was to provide competition.<sup>41</sup> The triumph of the market rationale over the laboratory theory also helps explain why more than 80 percent of states with charter school laws allow public funds to go to private, for-profit charter operators.<sup>42</sup>

Some charter school advocates went further on the competition question and argued that charters should not merely serve as a spur to improve public schools but that, in the long run, the charter schools should replace the traditional public school system entirely. Hugh Price, president of the National Urban League, suggested in 1999 that we “charterize” all urban schools. In 2009, Tom Vander Ark, former education director at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, removed Price’s urban qualifier to suggest, “All schools should be charter schools.” And in 2013, U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), the former U.S. secretary of education, said, “I still wonder why we, over time, don’t make every public school a charter school.” He continued, “You couldn’t do it all overnight, but you could do it over 20, 25 years.”<sup>43</sup> In New Orleans—where roughly 90 percent of public school students attended charter schools in 2013–2014, compared to less than 5 percent in 2004–2005<sup>44</sup>—U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was so enthusiastic that he called Hurricane Katrina “the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans.”<sup>45</sup>

Along with the shift in goals, the public policy rhetoric changed from an emphasis on how charters could best serve as laboratory partners to public schools, to whether charters as a group are “better” or “worse” than traditional public schools. Tellingly, a growing number of studies were conducted to determine not what lessons could be learned from charters but whether charters outperform or underperform traditional public schools.

Over time, the market metaphor came to replace the laboratory metaphor. As Peter Cookson and Kristina Berger observed in 2002, “Much of the charter movement is rooted in the same assumptions and philosophy that [voucher advocates John] Chubb and [Terry] Moe use to support their belief that the American public school system should be transformed into a market-

based ‘economy’ that forces autonomous, publicly funded schools to compete for students.”<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile, given the adversarial and competitive environment in which charters and traditional public schools found themselves, there was precious little evidence that the two sets of institutions were actively cooperating to share best practices. As Scott D. Pearson of the U.S. Department of Education’s charter school program noted in 2010, while “one of the promises of charter schools was they were going to be a source of innovation and be a benefit not only for the children attending charter schools, but [for] all public schools, ... [in practice], ... the collaboration is not as widespread as we would hope.”<sup>47</sup> Originally viewed as “isolated laboratories of innovation,” charter schools came to be seen by many as a replacement for traditional public schools and “charter-school expansion as a solution itself.”<sup>48</sup>

### Enhancing Teacher Voice versus Increasing Management Authority

The second dramatic shift in the charter school vision came in the critical area of teacher voice (for more on teacher voice, see the sidebar on page 6). In state after state, charter legislation followed the Minnesota model of failing to provide all charter teachers automatic collective bargaining rights similar to those enjoyed by regular public school teachers. (Today, just five of 42 states with charter school laws require charter school teachers to be covered by the district collective bargaining agreement.)<sup>49</sup>

In theory, many state laws provided for the possibility of organizing charters on a school-by-school basis, but given the expense of unionizing a small number of teachers, few unionizing efforts have been made. Overall, teachers in just 12 percent of charter schools are unionized.<sup>50</sup> By contrast, 60 percent of public school districts have an agreement with a union, and more than three-quarters of teachers nationwide are members of teacher unions.<sup>51</sup> States did not offer a sensible middle ground in which teachers would, upon the creation of a new charter school, have the automatic opportunity to vote on whether to form a union and create a contract that would be tailored to the individual needs of their school.

Over time, conservative charter school advocates argued that having a nonunion environment in charter schools was a key advantage—perhaps the defining advantage—over regular public schools. Finn, initially skeptical of the charter idea, came to champion them, arguing that “the single most important form of freedom for charter schools is to hire and fire employees as they like and pay them as they see fit.”<sup>52</sup>

Union supporters responded that under collective bargaining agreements in traditional public schools, it is possible to fire teachers, so long as due process is provided; and many unions in district public school systems have embraced performance pay. But conservatives in the business world, politics, and the finance and philanthropic communities saw charters as an attractive vehicle for circumventing teacher unions, organizations they see as harmful to children. Republican Steve Forbes, for example, wrote an editorial in 2009 praising the results of New York City charter schools that are “not burdened with the mind-numbing, effectiveness-killing bureaucratic and union restrictions.” In the same year, Jeanne Allen, then executive director of the Center for Education Reform, flatly argued, “A union contract is actually at odds with a charter school.”<sup>53</sup>

## Promoting Diversity versus Catering to Niche Markets

The third and final major evolution away from Shanker's original vision came in the realm of student diversity. Shanker believed having separate schools by race and class was inherently undemocratic, and he and some other early charter school backers saw charters as a way of breaking down segregation. That priority is evidenced in many early charter school laws, particularly those passed in the early to mid-1990s in states like Wisconsin, Hawaii, Kansas, and Rhode Island, which required all charter schools to take positive steps to promote diversity. According to a 2009

In state after state, charter legislation failed to provide all charter teachers automatic collective bargaining rights.



ity matters more. When confronted by research finding higher levels of racial and economic segregation in charter schools, for example, Nelson Smith, then president and chief executive of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, said, “We actually are very proud of the fact that charter schools enroll more low-income kids and more kids of color than do other public schools.” He continued: “The real civil rights issue for many of these kids is being trapped in dysfunctional schools.”<sup>56</sup>

Two arguments were advanced for targeting low-income, minority, and immigrant groups in racially and economically isolated charter schools: the need to maximize bang for the edu-

analysis by Erica Frankenberg and Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, 16 states had laws that permit or require charter schools to employ positive steps to bring about greater levels of racial and/or socioeconomic diversity.<sup>54</sup>

But over time, concerns about diversity have often been eclipsed by efforts—well-meaning in nature, to be sure—that have the effect of concentrating minority and low-income students in racially and economically isolated charter schools. Rather than emphasizing diversity and the possibility for breaking down segregation, charter school supporters began advocating for schools to target members of minority and low-income groups, who are demonstrably in need of better schools. According to a 2010 study by the Civil Rights Project, for example, almost half of low-income students in charter schools attended schools where more than 75 percent of students were low income, compared with about a third of low-income students in traditional public schools. In addition, 36 percent of all students in charter schools attended schools where 90 percent or more of students were from minority households, compared with 16 percent of all students in regular public schools.<sup>55</sup>

How did a policy that began with the idea of promoting diversity end up exacerbating racial and economic concentrations? Fundamentally, charter school advocates suggested, integration and school quality are unrelated and distinct priorities, and qual-

ity matters more. When confronted by research finding higher levels of racial and economic segregation in charter schools, for example, Nelson Smith, then president and chief executive of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, said, “We actually are very proud of the fact that charter schools enroll more low-income kids and more kids of color than do other public schools.” He continued: “The real civil rights issue for many of these kids is being trapped in dysfunctional schools.”<sup>56</sup>

cational buck, and the belief that the special needs of these communities could be better addressed in concentrated settings. Charter school operators, who are in the business because they believe they can do a better job of educating students than the regular public schools, argue they sought to bring the benefits of their schools to the students most in need. Under this view, the best way to help at-risk students and close the achievement gap is to prioritize low-income and minority students. Given scarce federal, state, and philanthropic dollars, funding a racially and economically integrated school that includes not only substantial numbers of low-income and minority students but also substantial numbers of middle-class and white students may be seen as diluting funding for at-risk students. Based on similar logic, charter school authorizers—the various state, local, or independent agencies charged with approving new charter schools, monitoring their progress, renewing charters for successful schools, and closing schools that fail to meet performance requirements—may favor high-poverty charter schools. Authorizers may choose to prioritize applications for schools located in the areas with the fewest high-quality educational opportunities, which are often communities with concentrated poverty.

Advocates of low-income charter schools further suggest that disadvantaged students need a different set of pedagogical approaches than middle-class students. Highly routinized, “no

excuses” schools set rigorous academic standards but also emphasize “noncognitive skills,” such as self-discipline, and seek to develop an all-encompassing school climate to combat the culture of poverty from which their students come. Paul Tough, author of a book about the Harlem Children’s Zone, describes the philosophy behind “no excuses” secondary schools that target at-risk students: “The schools reject the notion that all that these struggling students need are high expectations; they do need

bathroom at prayer time the way she might have in an integrated school. Likewise, Jewish advocates have called for the creation of Hebrew language schools to “strengthen Jewish communal identity.”<sup>61</sup>

Proponents of charter schools that are self-segregated argue that they are qualitatively different from the segregated schools of the past because they are the product of acts of volition on the part of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities. Bill Wilson, an Afri-

**When schools diminish teacher voice or enroll segregated student bodies, students miss out on important benefits.**



those, of course, but they also need specific types and amounts of instruction, both in academics and attitude, to compensate for everything they did not receive in their first decade of life.”<sup>57</sup>

Journalist David Whitman suggests that highly effective high-poverty schools often employ a “paternalistic” approach specifically tailored to low-income students. He says they teach students

not just how to think, but also how to act according to what are commonly termed traditional, middle-class values. These paternalistic schools go beyond just teaching values as abstractions: the schools tell students exactly how they are expected to behave, and their behavior is closely monitored, with real rewards for compliance and penalties for noncompliance.<sup>58</sup>

Similar arguments are made on behalf of charter schools that cater to targeted immigrant populations. Educator Joe Nathan, for example, supports a pair of charter schools in the Twin Cities that educate mostly Somali and Oromo students, because the schools provide a space where children can retain their home language and knowledge of their home culture.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, Letitia Basford’s qualitative study of Somali youth concluded that “attending a culturally specific charter school promotes positive intercultural competence in which students are able to build a good self-concept and find comfort in who they are as East African immigrants, as Muslims, and as American citizens.”<sup>60</sup> One student told Basford that in a charter school in which 100 percent of students are Muslim, she did not feel embarrassed running to the

can American advocate who grew up attending segregated public schools in Indiana, notes, “We had no choice. I was forced to attend an inferior school, farther from home than nearby, better-funded ‘Whites-only’ schools. Higher Ground [a racially isolated charter school] is open to all. No one is forced to attend. Quite a difference.”<sup>62</sup>

Among the most influential actors in the charter school world—state legislators—the idea of catering to niche markets has, over time, generally trumped the original emphasis on creating schools that promote diversity and reinforce the American common school ideal. Laws in roughly a dozen states, including Illinois, North Carolina, and Virginia, prioritize charter school funding for at-risk or low-income students or, in Connecticut’s case, students in districts in which members of racial or ethnic minorities constitute 75 percent or more of enrolled students. Other state laws restrict attendance zones for charter schools, making it more difficult for charters to attract a diverse population from a wide geographic area.<sup>63</sup> And even state laws that require charter schools to mirror local demographics could end up concentrating poverty. For example, a 2010 New York state charter school law requiring charter schools to mimic the demographics of the surrounding neighborhood—implemented to address gaps in English language learner and special education enrollment at charter schools—might mean, if enforced, that a school in upper Manhattan’s District 6 would need to enroll a student population in which 98 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, a commonly used measure of low-income status.<sup>64</sup>

Likewise, the other key players in funding charter schools—philanthropists—often prioritize education projects in high-poverty locations, providing incentives for charter school creators to maximize the proportion of low-income students in a school in order to gain funding. The Walton Family Foundation, for example, focuses specifically on selected “Market Share Demonstration Sites,” which are all districts with high concentrations of low-income students,<sup>65</sup> and the Broad Foundation focuses generally on urban school districts.<sup>66</sup> Some of the charter school chains that have received the most generous philanthropic support pride themselves on their ability to educate pupils in schools with high concentrations of low-income and/or minority students. KIPP schools, for example, boast that “more than 86 percent of our students are from low-income families and eligible for the federal free and reduced-price meals program, and 95 percent are African American or Latino.”<sup>67</sup>

Rick Hess of the conservative American Enterprise Institute notes the trend among foundations to support charter schools “that have the highest octane mix of poor and minority kids” and outlines how that priority can work at cross-purposes with integration. He wrote in 2011, “The upshot is that it is terribly difficult to generate interest in nurturing racially or socioeconomically integrated schools, even though just about every observer thinks that more such schools would be good for kids, communities, and the country.”<sup>68</sup>

**B**efore his death in 1997, Shanker watched with growing dismay as his idea morphed into something quite different. To begin with, Shanker was disturbed that the market-driven charter school rationale led some states to allow private, for-profit corporations to enter the charter school business. For-profit companies, he warned, would inevitably put shareholder interests before educating children, and “vouchers, charter schools, for-profit management schemes are all quick fixes that won’t fix anything.”<sup>69</sup>

At base, Shanker suggested, the charter school experiment was not working. In a meeting sponsored by the Pew Forum in 1996, he suggested, “In the charter schools we now have, there is no record with respect to achievement or meeting standards.” But Shanker wasn’t willing to throw in the towel entirely. In the 1996 AFT executive council meeting, he suggested it was time to separate the wheat from the chaff. He said the AFT should “put out a careful analysis of the range of types of charter schools and what’s good and what’s bad about different provisions in them and how they work.” Such an analysis “could have a tremendous impact on influencing good legislation and getting rid of lousy legislation.”<sup>70</sup>

The current thrust of the charter school sector, toward non-union workplaces and segregated schools, is troubling for at least two reasons. First and foremost, it is bad for kids. Having vibrant teacher voice can help build a strong school climate and increase student achievement. Likewise, students in socioeconomically and racially diverse schools have shown greater academic achievement and social awareness than peers in more homogeneous settings. When schools diminish teacher voice or enroll segregated student bodies, students miss out on these important benefits.

Second, it is unimaginative. If comparing all charter schools to all district schools is “like asking whether eating out is better than eating at home,”<sup>71</sup> then concentrating resources into the propaga-

tion of nonunionized, segregated charter schools is like going to a buffet and only eating the dinner rolls.

Charter schools should start with big dreams, creative ideas, and experimentation—not repetition of one mediocre model. Why not try to increase socioeconomic and racial school integration through such schools? Why not use them to rethink traditional notions of teacher voice?

Changes to federal, state, and local policy, as well as increased private support, can help encourage innovation in charter schools around these two issues. But there is room to grow even before structural changes take place. We have blueprints to follow in the form of existing charter schools that empower teachers through unions, as well as those that integrate students from diverse socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

Shanker’s ideas for charter schools, formulated more than two decades ago, turn out to be a powerful vision for educational innovation in a new century. Charter schools can address the educational demands of a 21st-century society by giving students the chance to work with a diverse group of peers and treating teachers as 21st-century professionals engaged in collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving. Teacher voice and student diversity, largely forgotten goals from the earliest ideas about charter schools, may hold the best hope for improving charter schools—and thereby illuminate a path for strengthening our entire system of public education. □

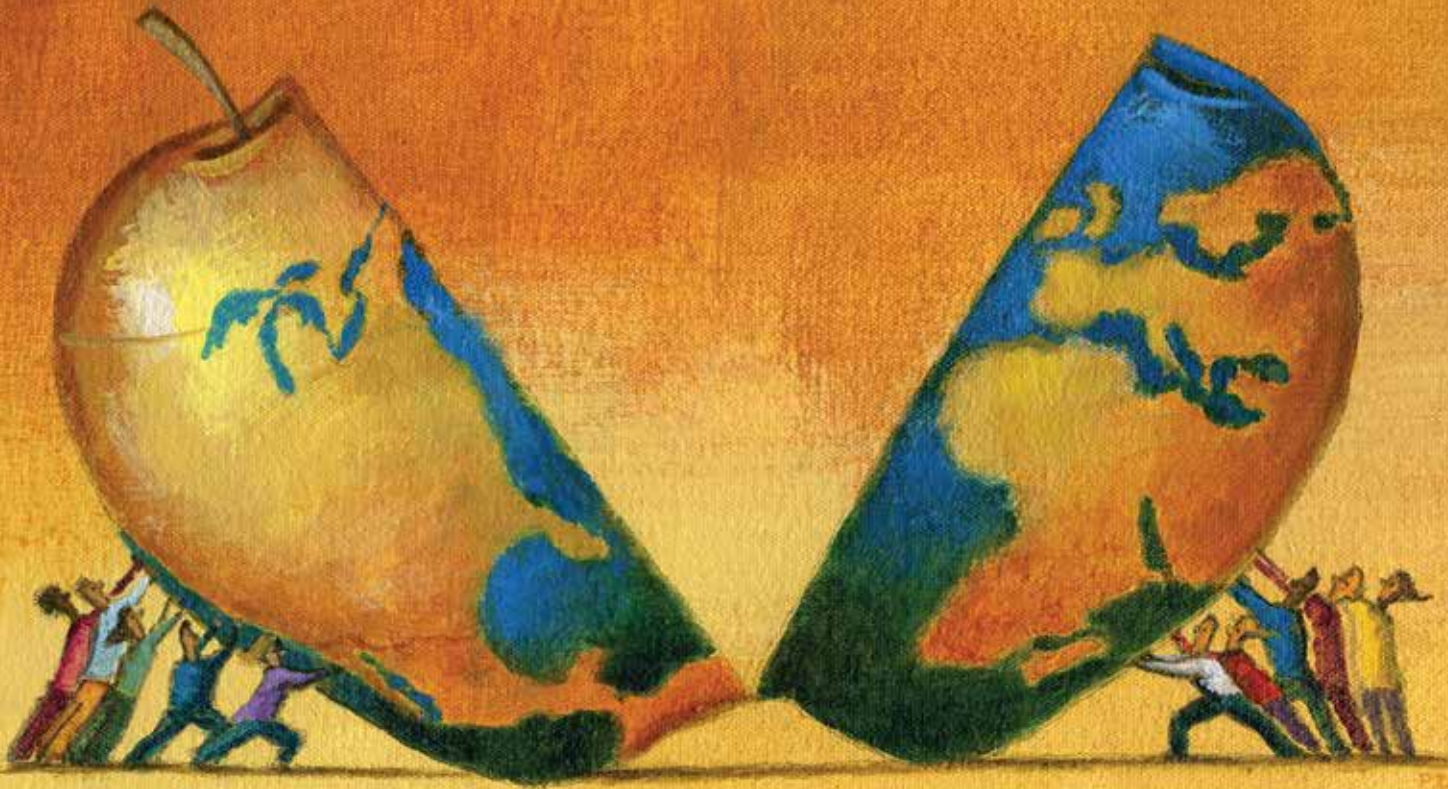
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(Continued on page 44)

# Want to Close the Achievement Gap?

## Close the Teaching Gap



BY LINDA DARLING-HAMMOND

For years now, educators have looked to international tests as a yardstick to measure how well students from the United States are learning compared with their peers. The answer has been: not so well. The United States has been falling further behind other nations and has struggled with a large achievement gap.

Federal policy under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the U.S. Department of Education’s “flexibility” waivers has sought to address this problem by beefing up testing policies—requiring more tests and upping the consequences for poor results, includ-

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ing denying diplomas to students, firing teachers, and closing schools. Unfortunately, this strategy has not worked. In fact, U.S. performance on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), declined in every subject area between 2000 and 2012—the years in which these policies have been in effect.

Now we have international evidence about something that has a greater effect on learning than testing: teaching. The results of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS),<sup>1</sup> released this past summer by the OECD, offer a stunning picture of the challenges experienced by American teachers, while providing provocative insights into what we might do to foster better teaching—and learning—in the United States.

In short, the survey shows that American teachers today work harder under much more challenging conditions than teachers elsewhere in the industrialized world. They also receive less-useful feedback, receive less-helpful professional development, and have less time to collaborate to improve their work. Not surprisingly, two-thirds feel their profession is not valued by soci-



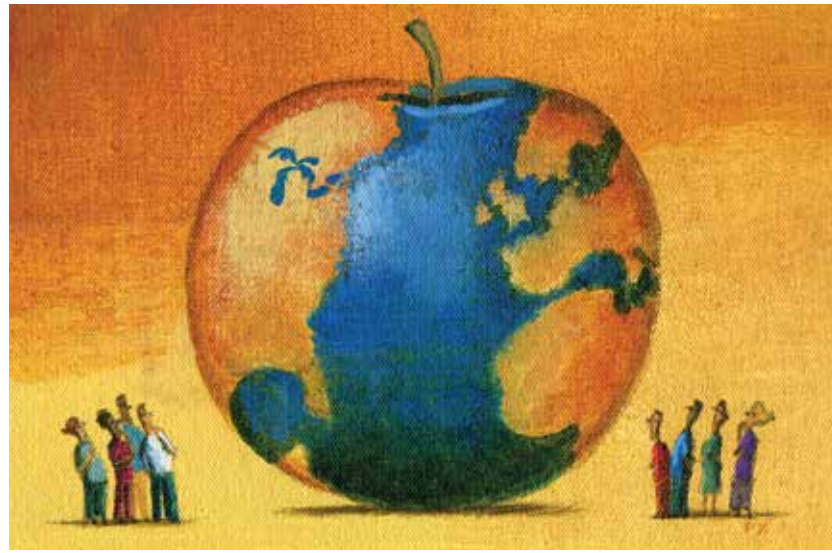
ety—an indicator that the OECD finds is ultimately related to student achievement.

Though it has been conducted since 2008, 2013 was the first time the United States participated in TALIS, which surveyed more than 100,000 lower secondary school teachers and school leaders in 34 jurisdictions worldwide. Although U.S. participation rates fell just below the minimum for full inclusion in the comparative report, the OECD prepared a U.S. country report. These data tell an important story.

### U.S. Teachers Face More Poverty, Larger Class Sizes, Longer Days

Nearly two-thirds of U.S. middle school teachers work in schools where more than 30 percent of students are economically disadvantaged (see Figure 1). This is by far the highest rate in the world and more than triple the average TALIS rate. The next countries in line after the United States are Malaysia and Chile. Ignored by our current education policies are the facts that nearly one in four American children lives below the poverty line and a growing number are homeless,<sup>2</sup> without regular access to food or healthcare, and stressed by violence and drug abuse around them. Educators now spend a great deal of their time trying to help children and their families manage these issues,<sup>3</sup> while they also seek to close skill gaps and promote learning.

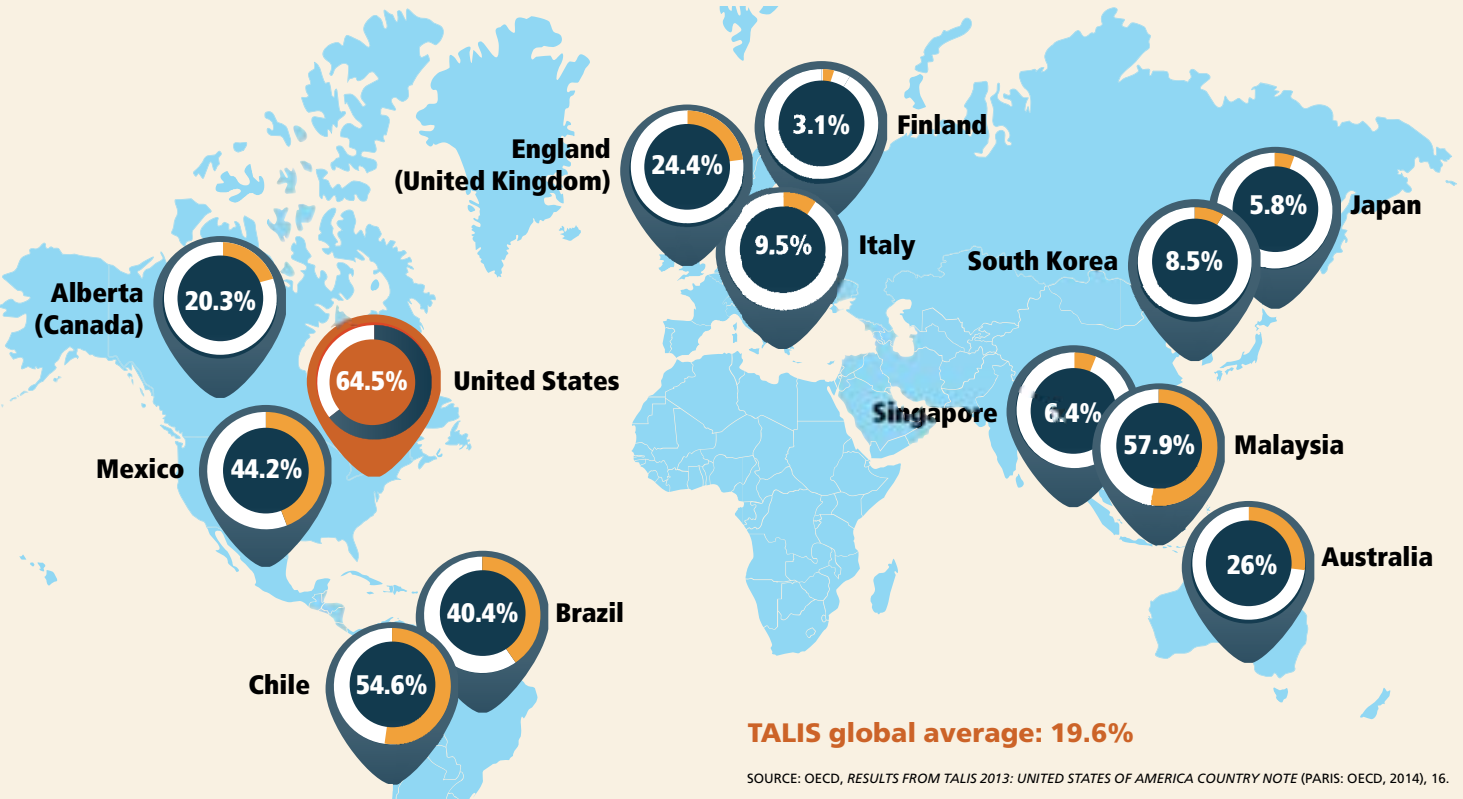
Along with these challenges, U.S. teachers must cope with



American teachers work harder under much more challenging conditions than teachers elsewhere in the industrialized world.

Figure 1. Higher Student Poverty

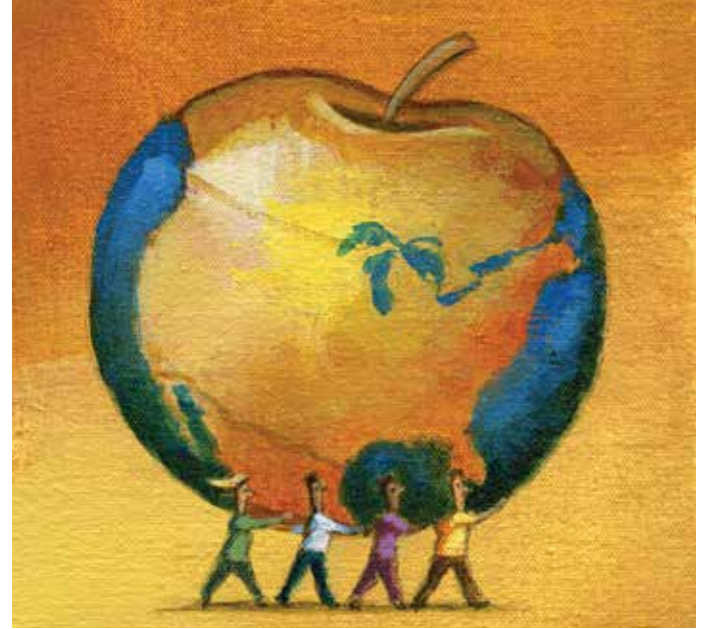
TALIS asked principals in lower secondary education (roughly the equivalent of middle school in the United States) about various characteristics of their schools, including the percentage of students from disadvantaged homes. As shown in the map below, 64.5 percent of middle school teachers in the United States work in schools where principals report that more than 30 percent of students are socioeconomically disadvantaged—the highest reported percentage among all TALIS participants. The TALIS global average is 19.6 percent.



SOURCE: OECD, RESULTS FROM TALIS 2013: UNITED STATES OF AMERICA COUNTRY NOTE (PARIS: OECD, 2014), 16.

larger class sizes (27 students per class versus the TALIS average of 24). As shown in Figures 2 and 3, they also report spending many more hours than teachers in any other country directly instructing children each week (27 hours per week versus the TALIS average of 19). And they work more hours in total each week than their global counterparts (45 hours per week versus the TALIS average of 38), with less time in their schedules for planning, collaboration, and professional development. This schedule—a leftover from factory-model school designs of the early 1900s<sup>4</sup>—makes it harder for our teachers to find time to work with their colleagues on creating great curriculum and learning new methods, to mark papers, to work individually with students, and to reach out to parents.

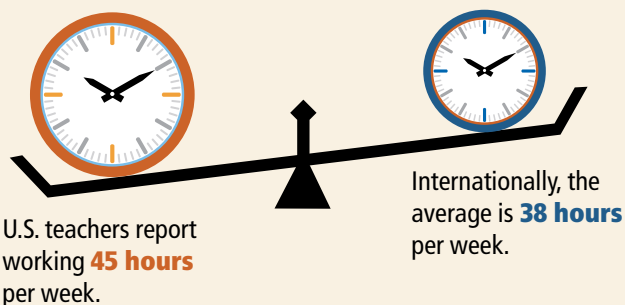
Partly because of the lack of time to observe and work with one another, U.S. teachers report receiving much less feedback from their peers than do their counterparts in other countries (see Figures 4 and 5), which research shows is the most useful tool for improving practice.<sup>5</sup> They also report receiving less-useful professional development than their global counterparts. One reason for this, according to our own Schools and Staffing Survey conducted by the Department of Education, is that, during the NCLB era, more-sustained learning opportunities reverted back to the one-shot, top-down, “drive-by” workshops that are least useful for improving practice.<sup>6</sup>



## Higher-performing countries intentionally focus on creating teacher collaboration that results in more skillful teaching and strong student achievement.

**Figure 2. Longer Hours for Teachers**

Middle school teachers in the United States report working 45 hours per week—nearly 20 percent longer than the average reported by middle school teachers in other countries.



SOURCE: OECD, RESULTS FROM TALIS 2013: UNITED STATES OF AMERICA COUNTRY NOTE (PARIS: OECD, 2014), 12.

### Policy Implications

The picture is very different in countries that rank highly both in the TALIS survey and in student achievement on international tests. Here are some policy lessons we can learn from these high-achieving nations:

**Address inequities that undermine learning:** Every international indicator shows that the United States supports its children less well than do other developed countries, which offer universal healthcare and early childhood education, as well as income supports for families. Evidence is plentiful that when children are healthy and well-supported in learning in the early years and beyond, they achieve and graduate at higher rates.<sup>7</sup> The latest PISA report also found that the most successful nations allocate pro-

portionately more resources to the education of disadvantaged students, while the United States allocates less.

It is time for the United States finally to equalize school funding, address childhood poverty as it successfully did during the 1970s, institute universal early care and learning programs, and provide the wraparound services—healthcare, before- and after-school care, and social services—that ensure children are supported to learn. A bill introduced in Congress this past summer by Senators Jack Reed (D-RI) and Sherrod Brown (D-OH),<sup>8</sup> with a companion bill introduced by Representative Marcia Fudge (D-OH)—the Core Opportunity Resources for Equity and Excellence Act<sup>9</sup>—would make headway on the school resource issues that are essential for progress.

**Value teaching and teacher learning:** Countries where teachers believe their profession is valued show higher levels of student achievement. Nations that value teaching invest more in high-quality professional learning—paying the full freight for initial preparation and ongoing professional development, so that teachers can continually become more capable. OECD data show that these countries also pay teachers as well as they pay other college-educated workers, while U.S. teachers earn only 60 percent of the average college graduate’s wage and receive little support for their learning.<sup>10</sup> To recruit and retain top talent and enable teachers to help all children learn, we must make teaching an attractive profession that advances in knowledge and skill, like medicine and engineering.

**Redesign schools to create time for collaboration:** OECD studies show that higher-performing countries intentionally focus on creating teacher collaboration that results in more skillful teaching and strong student achievement. U.S. researchers have

also found that school achievement is much stronger where teachers work in collaborative teams that plan and learn together. Teachers repeatedly confirm that opportunities to work with their colleagues often determine where they are willing to work.<sup>11</sup>

Collaboration, however, requires time as well as the will to make it happen, and this means that school staffing and schedules must be designed differently. The TALIS data show that U.S. schools generally hire many fewer teachers than schools in other countries. We need to rethink how we invest in and organize schools, so that time for extended professional learning and collaboration become the norm rather than the exception.

**Create meaningful teacher evaluations that foster improvement:** All U.S. teachers stated that formal evaluation is used in their schools, based on classroom observations; feedback from parents, guardians, and students; and review of test information. This is not very different from the TALIS average. What is different is the nature of the feedback and its usefulness. American teachers found the feedback they received to be less useful for improving instruction than their peers elsewhere found. Interestingly, as shown in Figures 4 and 5, U.S. teachers received much more of their feedback from busy principals (85 percent versus the TALIS average of 54 percent) and much less from other teachers (27 percent versus the TALIS average of 42 percent), who can generally offer more targeted insights about how to teach specific curriculum concepts and students.

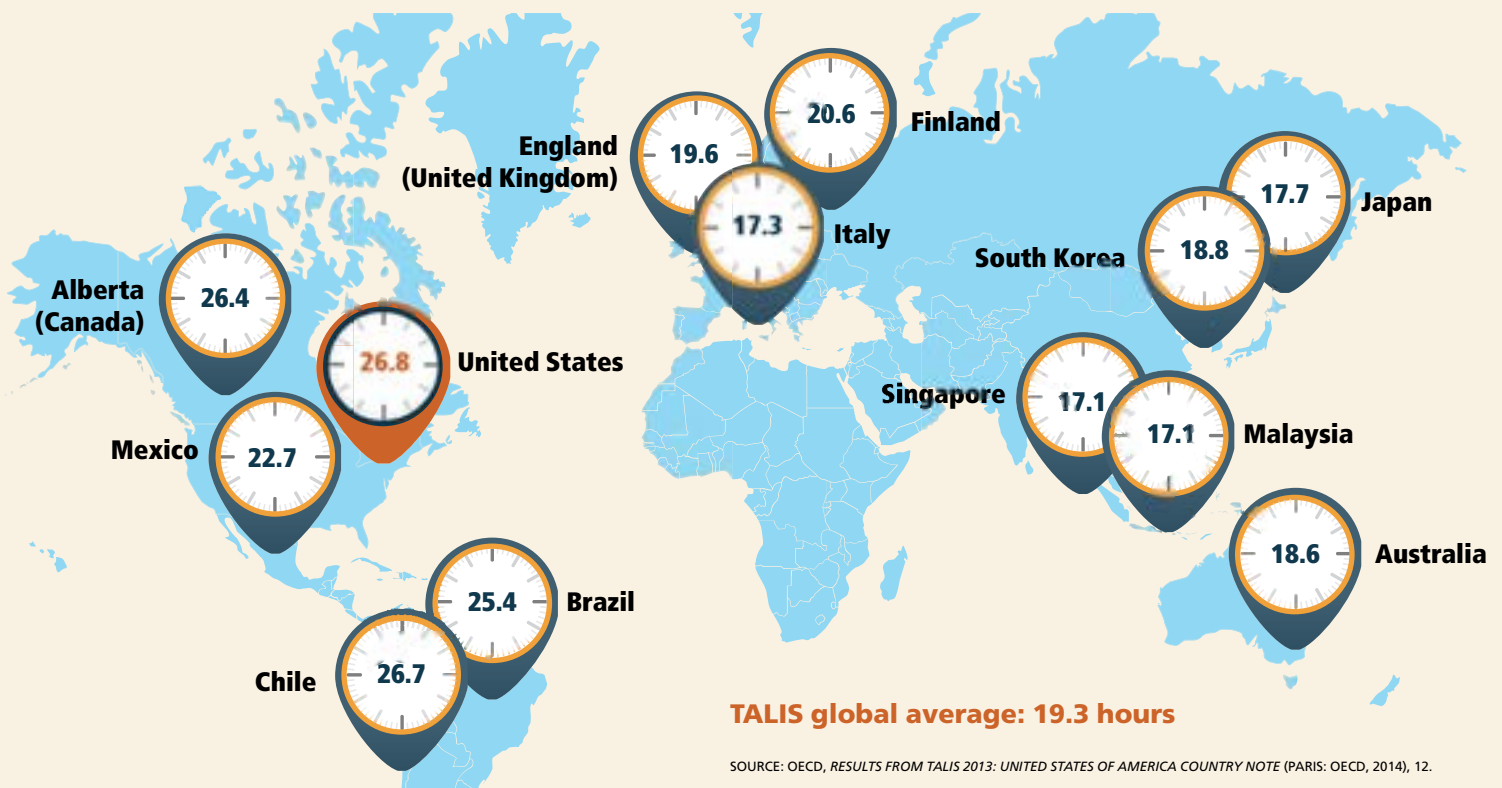
In addition, the feedback from test data is different across countries. Most tests in other countries are open-ended mea-



U.S. teachers receive much more feedback from busy principals and much less from other teachers, who can offer more targeted insights about how to teach.

**Figure 3. More Time Teaching**

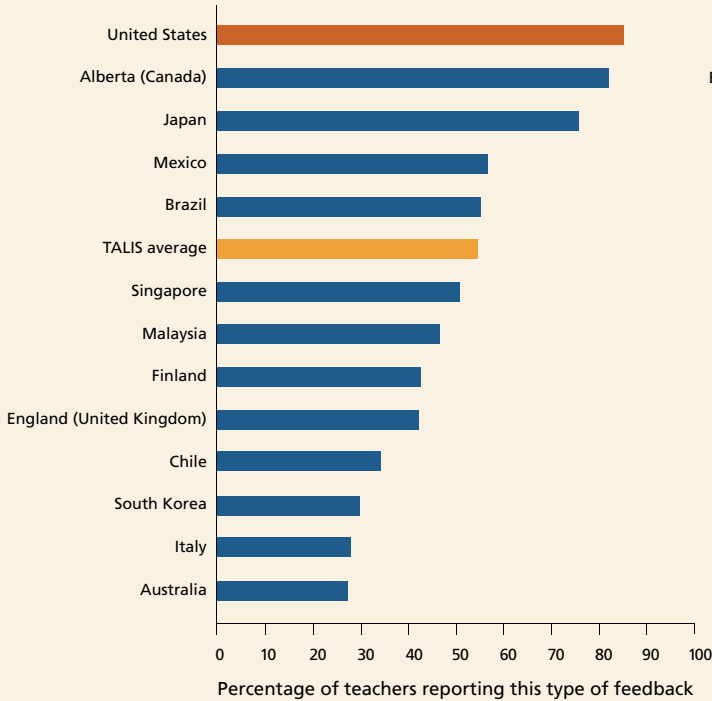
The map below shows the number of hours middle school teachers report teaching class. The U.S. average is 26.8 hours per week, while the TALIS average is substantially lower, at 19.3.



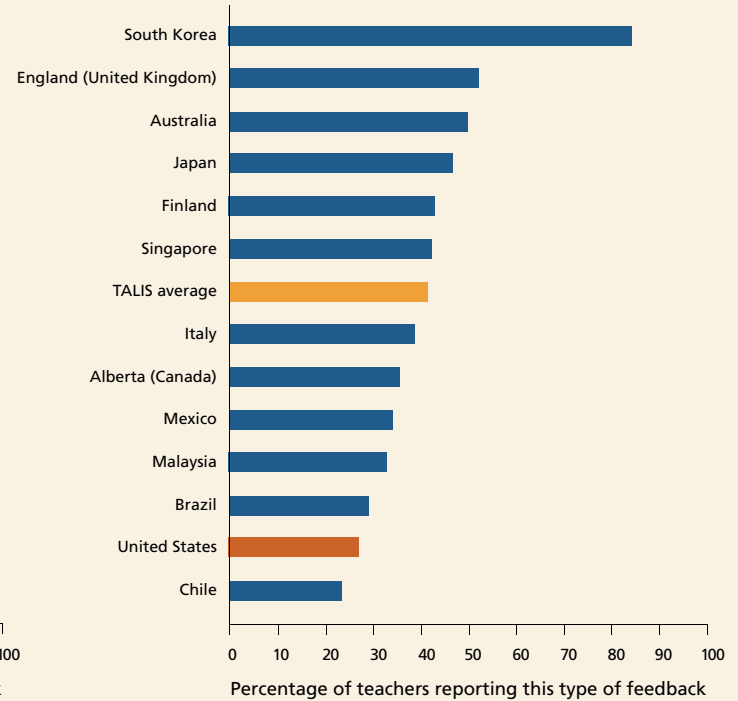
## U.S. TEACHERS REPORT MOST FEEDBACK FROM PRINCIPALS, LITTLE FEEDBACK FROM PEERS

TALIS asked middle school teachers about receiving feedback on instruction. The chart on the left (Figure 4) refers to the percentage who report receiving feedback from principals, while the chart on the right (Figure 5) shows those reporting feedback from other teachers. In the United States, teachers report that receiving feedback from principals is three times more common than receiving feedback from peers. In most countries, teachers report more of a balance.

**Figure 4. Feedback from Principals**



**Figure 5. Feedback from Peers**



SOURCE: OECD, RESULTS FROM TALIS 2013: UNITED STATES OF AMERICA COUNTRY NOTE (PARIS: OECD, 2014), 21.

asures scored by teachers, usually internal to the classroom or, occasionally, standardized across schools (typically in one or two grade levels). The United States is the only country in which students are tested annually with external, multiple-choice standardized tests, with scores reduced to a value-added metric assigned to teachers.<sup>12</sup> Aside from the wide error range found to be associated with these metrics,<sup>13</sup> they offer no information about what students actually did, said, or thought that could help teachers improve their practice. A more meaningful system would use classroom data and feedback from peers and principals in ways that are much more focused on how to teach specific content to particular students.

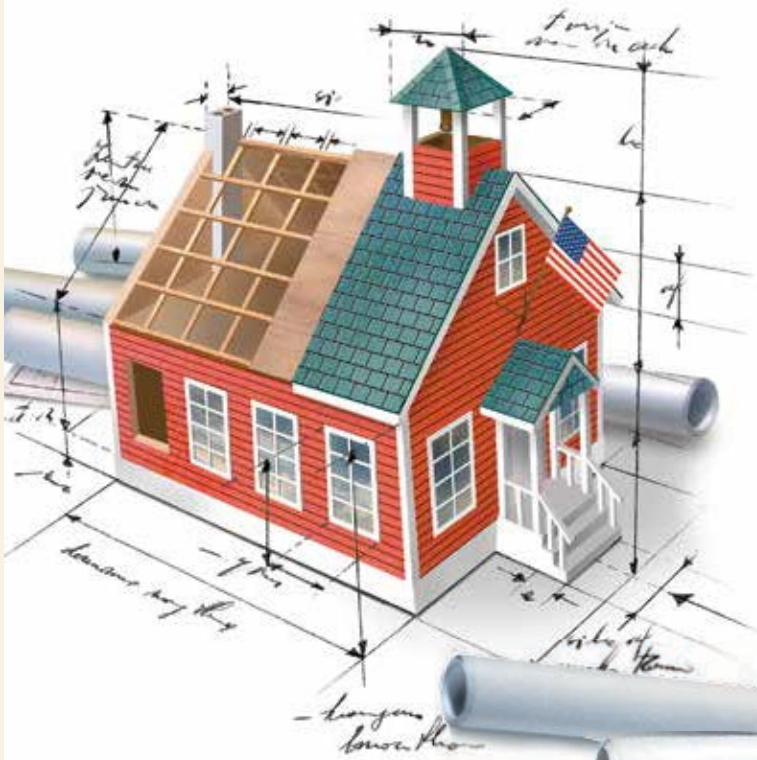
**W**e cannot make major headway in raising student performance and closing the achievement gap until we make progress in closing the teaching gap. That means supporting children equitably outside as well as inside the classroom, creating a profession that is rewarding and well-supported, and designing schools that offer the conditions for both the student and the teacher learning that will move American education forward. □

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# Pushing Back Against High Stakes for Students with Disabilities



Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

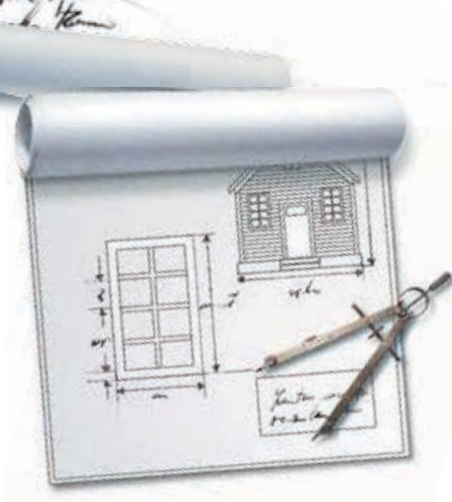
BY BIANCA TANIS

I am a special education teacher in New York and a mother of two children on the autism spectrum. Sometimes it is difficult to separate these two roles. Being intimately involved in the education system has made navigating the world of special education for my children easier in some ways, but also infinitely more difficult and heart-breaking in others. Simply put, I know too much.

When my son began third grade in 2012, it dawned on me that, as required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), he would soon be mandated to take state tests in math and English language arts, aligned to the Common Core State Standards, despite the fact that he reads at a first-grade level and has numerous challenges with language. I was horrified

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that my child would undergo such inappropriate testing.

Unfortunately, since the passage of NCLB in 2002, the practice of compelling all students, including students like my son, to take one-size-fits-all, high-stakes tests has become policy. These tests were originally touted as a way to shine a bright light on educational inequalities based on race, class, and disability. While these tests can have negative effects for many students without special needs, they actually prevent many disabled stu-

dents in particular from receiving an individualized education that meets their needs. Often, they are subjected to emotionally harmful testing. Many special education teachers like myself have questioned why the practice of administering one-size-fits-all tests to special education students persists when it flies in the face of logic and sound pedagogy. Fortunately, many are no longer willing to remain silent about the flaws in this system.

## Testing Too Much

I never set out to be an educator or an advocate for students with disabilities. Teaching was a career change for me. After earning a

bachelor's degree in anthropology, I joined AmeriCorps and volunteered in a homeless shelter. Then, for several years, I worked as a case manager in the same shelter. There, almost daily, I heard the stories of adults who, for a variety of reasons, were unable to find jobs and maintain stable living conditions and relationships. I saw the impact that repeated failure has on one's self-esteem and the paralyzing effect it can have on one's ability to chart a new course in life.

After becoming a parent, and reflecting on my experiences in the shelter, I realized that teachers would shape a large part of my children's lives, particularly their attitudes—not just about school, but about themselves. I came to understand teaching as a profession that reaches beyond the scope of grades, standards, and content instruction. I wanted to join such a profession, and eventually I pursued a dual master's degree in childhood education and special education.

For the past five years, I have taught students with disabilities from kindergarten to fifth grade in an affluent suburb of New York City. My students have a range of strengths and challenges, and although most are classified as learning disabled, they are extremely diverse in their learning needs.

As our school and state have embraced the Common Core, it has been challenging to bridge the gap between what my students know and can do and what the standards require. The implementation of the Common Core across all grades has resulted in many students receiving instruction without being taught the necessary prerequisite skills. The situation is especially problematic for students with learning challenges who are sensitive to change and depend on sufficient scaffolding of information and skills to learn. Students struggling prior to the implementation of the Common Core suddenly find themselves significantly further behind.

The problem has only been exacerbated by the advent of test-based teacher accountability required for states participating in the Race to the Top initiative.<sup>1</sup> My colleagues and I have found it increasingly difficult to differentiate instruction for our students while keeping up with the curriculum so they will be prepared to take Common Core-aligned tests. Throw in the threat of a poor evaluation and the loss of teacher job security, and you have a recipe for disaster.

In an ideal world, if my fourth-graders need to spend an extra week or two working on a math concept, I would use my professional judgment to assess their needs. But as things stand, I am forced to move on, regardless of whether they are ready. There are only so many weeks in the school year, and everything yet untaught in the standards must be packed into the remaining

weeks because it will all appear on the test. Rather than a fluid process in which students' instructional needs come first, teaching has become a marathon to cram it all in. I honestly have heard my colleagues telling their students on the fourth day of school, "We have a lot to do today. We are already behind." Midyear assessments are given despite teachers not having had the chance to teach all the content that will be tested, because administrators "need the data" to assess whether students are on track for end-of-the-year testing.



## The testing frenzy we currently face has been particularly detrimental to students with disabilities.

Accountability mandates and the data that they demand have destroyed teacher autonomy and created a culture of constant testing. We say that teaching is both an art and a science. Art requires free thought, while science requires experimentation. But the way things are now, those who can't keep up will be left behind, because ultimately the tests are in the driver's seat. For that reason, the testing frenzy we currently face has been particularly detrimental to students with disabilities.

Even if policymakers and education leaders come to their senses, disregard the pace of instruction set by the tests, and cast aside all concern for rating teachers based on students' test scores, they must still acknowledge and try to ameliorate the negative emotional and academic consequences of high-stakes tests. In many cases, test scores alone determine program placement or eligibility for grade advancement. Attaching such high stakes to these tests is tantamount to a return to tracking, for students with and without special needs.

Test scores are also used to determine which students will be required to attend academic intervention or reteaching sessions, often by being pulled out of classes for which students are not mandated to take standardized tests, such as music, foreign language, or art. And many of my students excel in music and art. Imagine what it must be like for a dyslexic 9-year-old who loves to play the saxophone to be told that he can't take music lessons or participate in the school band because he performed poorly on the state's English language arts exam.

And then there is the experience of students taking the tests. In the days before they do so, letters go home to parents advising that children get adequate sleep and enjoy a good breakfast. Parents are asked to write notes of encouragement and send children to school with special snacks or treats. To offset the fear and anxiety that many students associate with testing, teachers attempt to create a party atmosphere in their classrooms, putting on music and letting students play games prior to the tests. Some even practice relaxation techniques with their students or encourage positive visualization strategies in which they imagine themselves in a favorite place or engaging in an activity they love.

Every year, I am struck by the lengths that we must go to in an

effort to minimize the harm these tests do to our students. In the end, we are fooling no one. Once the music stops, each child is on his or her own, while the adults stand around trying to hide their frustration and despair.

For teachers, testing days involve gathering those students who need testing accommodations—as determined by a committee on special education—and bringing them to a separate location in the school building where they will ostensibly have fewer distractions. For the majority of my students, the accommodation is extra time to take the tests. Supposedly, this will level the playing field for the student who is taking the fourth-grade English language arts exam but reads independently at a first- or second-grade level.

Once testing begins, it's apparent that the student who can't sit still for 20 minutes can't sit still for two hours or more. Because some of these students also have breaks as another testing accommodation, we stop the test periodically for silent stretching. The stretching must be silent, because if students talk, they might accidentally discuss the test. By the time we reach our first break, I have usually had to make a few phone calls to the school psychologist to counsel students who have shut down or begun crying. (I used to also rely on the school social worker for help, but that position has been exceeded due to budget cuts.) Very often, the psychologist is busy with other students experiencing similar distress elsewhere in the building, and I must send my students to sit in the main office until another adult is available to comfort them.

Perhaps the worst part of administering these tests is being forced to watch the trust that I have worked so hard to develop with my students break down. Great teachers work tirelessly to build relationships based on trust. They let students know they can be counted on and will always be there to help. What message does it send to students when their teacher, who has recognized and celebrated their progress and perseverance all year long, places a test in front of them that they cannot read or compute? How does it affect children when their requests for help are met with "I can't help you" and "just do your best"? Breaking that trust for the sake of the test damages those relationships, sometimes beyond repair.

The time spent testing varies from state to state, but in New York, a fifth-grade student with a disability may sit for as long as three hours, for three days in a row, for just one test. I have sat with a student for that length of time, reading each question aloud, questions on subject matter beyond her ability, watching the anguish grow on her face as she first missed snack time and then later physical education.

Increasingly, as an educator, I have been forced to rely less on my own professional judgment and more on rules and policies dictated by bureaucrats who have never met students like mine or even worked in a classroom. I find myself creating spreadsheets and charts of student schedules in an effort to find a few minutes here and there to fit in the extra time for the instruction my students need, instead of what the test mandates. I question whether I am helping my students. And despite my passion for teaching, I find myself questioning, after only five years in the classroom, if teaching is really right for me. At the moment, what keeps me in the classroom is a love of teaching. But I often wonder how long it will take before teaching no longer feels like teaching.

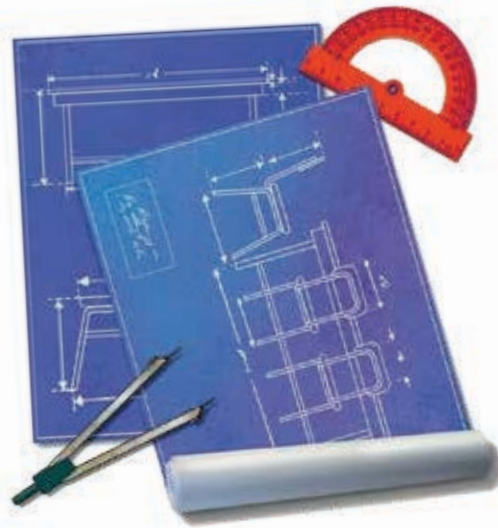
Knowing what I know, it is impossible for me to subject my son to these tests. My son loves school, his teachers, and the routine and security he finds there. It wasn't always this way. When I left him at school for the very first time, he was inconsolable. He shrieked and sobbed. Unlike other students, it took him years, not days or months, to develop trust in an environment different from his home.

In light of my experiences administering tests that are years above children's academic proficiency levels, the idea that I should allow my son (who did not yet understand the concept of "test") to experience such a potentially upsetting situation was unthinkable. However, my son did not qualify for an alternate assessment, which, as per NCLB, is permitted only for the most severely disabled students.<sup>2</sup> It was well documented that his independent decoding level for reading and his math abilities were two years behind grade level, and that his difficulty with language affected his reading comprehension significantly. Yet he was mandated

to take a test that every adult knew would result in frustration and, ultimately, label him a failure.

In New York, the use of high-stakes testing to gauge the progress and success of students, educators, and schools has created a toxic environment in which teachers feel unable to meet students' individual needs. It has also created anxiety-ridden students who are viewed more as test scores than as learners. Across the state, only about 5 percent of students with disabilities in grades 3–8 scored proficient in English language arts in 2014.<sup>3</sup> These scores indicate that no matter their progress, 95 percent of our students with disabilities are considered failing. As a parent and educator, I reject this narrative of failure for my son, and I also reject it for my students.

Anyone who teaches knows that while pretesting is standard practice as a diagnostic tool, posttests, or summative assessments,



## The worst part of administering high-stakes tests is watching the trust that I have worked so hard to develop with my students break down.

are administered on material that students have been taught. The notion that one would give a summative assessment to students on material they have never been exposed to is absurd and would be bad practice by any set of standards. And yet, children with disabilities who receive individualized instruction must submit to homogenous assessment at their grade level, no matter their instructional level. Thus, the current system of high-stakes testing is not a valid form of assessment for students with disabilities.

Take, for example, a student I'll call Mark, a fourth-grader in my class who reads at a first-grade level. Neither one of Mark's parents speaks English, although Mark himself speaks English, French, and Spanish. Despite his trilingual abilities, Mark has a very poor grasp of basic concepts and needs all academic content explained in the simplest of terms. In the middle of the New York state Grade 4 Common Core English Language Arts Test, Mark broke down crying, asking the proctor, "Why don't they give me something I can do?" Because of his status as an English language learner (ELL), state law mandated that he be tested yet again the following week using the ELL version of the Common Core-aligned English language arts test. In New York, ELL students must take both tests yearly until they are deemed proficient on one of them. For many students with disabilities who are also English language learners, this type of double testing goes on for years.<sup>4</sup>

As the parent of a child who requires a modified curriculum, I expect that his teachers will stretch him beyond his current abilities. Sometimes, in the context of a safe and nurturing environment, that stretching may frustrate him. The frustration that comes with academic challenges tailored to the individual strengths and weaknesses of a student greatly differs from the frustration that the one-size-fits-all, high-stakes tests create. Good teachers see the difference between the two, and recognize that the former creates an important learning opportunity while the latter is far from constructive.

My son's teachers, for example, understand that it is equally important for him to practice engaging in a reciprocal conversation as it is for him to compute double-digit addition problems. They understand that any frustration he feels when trying to engage in that reciprocal conversation is very different from the frustration he feels when confronted with a test he cannot access or understand.

### A Better Path Forward

Who are "students with disabilities"? This category is a catchall that encompasses a wide range of learners, including learning-disabled students with higher-than-average cognitive abilities,

students with developmental delays and mild cognitive impairments, students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and students with severe mental retardation. So while all students should have access to a challenging curriculum, what constitutes challenging must be fluid. I would argue that assessments for students with disabilities must be as individualized as their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and that it is perhaps more appropriate to measure progress than benchmark attainment.

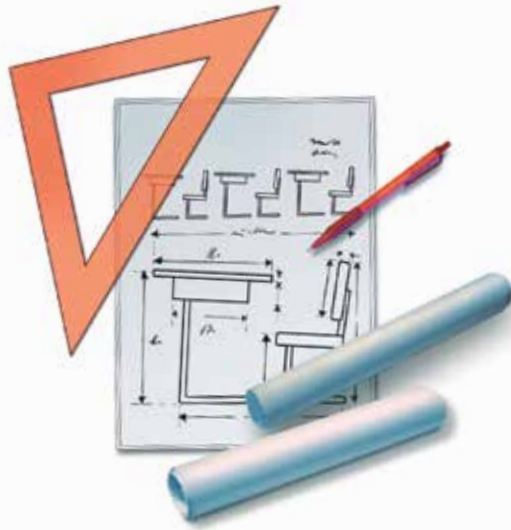
Although NCLB does allow some testing accommodations, most states do not allow any accommodations that interfere with the construct of the test, even if these accommodations are part of a child's IEP.<sup>5</sup> For example, having a passage read aloud on an English language arts assessment may negate the test as a measure of a child's ability to decode, but it also may allow us to obtain a more realistic measure of a dyslexic student's reading comprehension level, or the reading level of a visually impaired child who does not read Braille. These types of accommodations allow for assessments that provide evidence of what a child *can* do, rather than just providing further confirmation of a disability.

Special education teachers frequently administer standardized academic tests as part of evaluations to determine if a student is eligible for special education services. These tests include assessments such as the Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement and the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test. These assessments, which include questions sequenced from

easiest to hardest, identify a jumping-off point based on a student's age or grade. Students answer questions until a ceiling is identified: the point at which the student incorrectly answers a number of questions in a row. In this way, the time spent on testing is minimized and the negative impact of enduring difficult test questions is mitigated. Perhaps these kinds of assessments can serve as a model for high-quality assessments that allow educators to measure progress while maintaining the dignity and emotional well-being of students who already face significant challenges.

Were it the norm, this type of individualized assessment would stop the flow of comparative data currently used to rank and sort students and to judge teachers. But to create an education system that truly caters to the learning and growth of each student (and one that simultaneously encourages students' strengths and supports their weaknesses), we must challenge the notion that learning can be represented by a test score. Only when the needs of children, not the need to assess institutions or educators, become the priority will we be able to consistently administer assessments that yield useful information about our students.

Of course, it's easier to point out the flaws in our education



For students with disabilities, it is perhaps more appropriate to measure progress than benchmark attainment.



system than to offer solutions. First and foremost, we must face the uncomfortable truth that cognitive differences and differences in learning needs exist. But if that is difficult to admit, we can take comfort in the fact that many students who face significant challenges more than likely demonstrate strengths that surpass their weaknesses. Our job as educators is to do our best to ensure our students will have satisfying career choices and the strength of character, and the knowledge, to work toward their goals, overcome obstacles, handle disappointments, and become civic-minded members of their communities. Despite the fact that these skills and outcomes cannot be measured by a test score, they should be the goal of education. To reach it, we must find alternatives to high-stakes tests that hinder our ability to meet some students' instructional needs.

### The Importance of Educator Advocacy and Teacher Voice

Increasingly, educators recognize we can no longer make do with a broken system that labels our students with disabilities as failures. Our role as educators requires that we do more than just attempt to reduce the negative effects of high-stakes testing. We must speak out and teach our students that success in life comes in many forms. When we measure all children by the same yardstick, by the same version of success, we risk limiting the possibilities that our children see for themselves, and we narrow the lens with which we view them. As teachers, that is not in our nature.

At some point in late 2013, something in me changed. My protective instincts as a mother and my experience as a special education teacher coalesced in such a way that I lost my fear of any kind of reprisal for speaking out against harmful testing practices. Ultimately, my husband and I refused to allow our son to take the New York Common Core assessments, despite the insistence of state officials that his participation was legally required. Along with several other parents committed to ending the use of high-stakes testing (many of whom are also educators), I cofounded a parent advocacy group called New York State Allies for Public Education. We represent a coalition of more than 50 parent and educator groups in New York, and our combined voices have raised awareness throughout the state. In the spring of 2014, between 55,000 and 60,000 students in New York refused to participate in high-stakes testing.<sup>6</sup> And in light of pressure from educators and parents, New York state applied for a waiver from the federal government that would allow students with significant disabilities to be tested up to two years below grade level. Although such a waiver would merely act as a Band-Aid, it is a start.

As educators, we should raise our voices and be heard by policymakers who have little to no teaching experience and would relegate classroom teachers to mere foot soldiers marching to the beat of misguided reforms. We must change the culture that exists in schools by encouraging each other to voice our concerns, because in the end, only educators can breathe life into the theoretical discussions that take place regarding testing students with

disabilities. Only educators can speak up for students and ensure that their well-being is considered.

In New York, educators are bound by a gag order that prohibits us from speaking about end-of-the-year state-mandated tests in even the vaguest of terms.<sup>7</sup> Concerned about the quality and content of these tests, Brooklyn teachers took to the street in protest, many with duct tape on their mouths.<sup>8</sup> That teachers have been prevented from speaking out is unacceptable.

Success never will look the same for all. NCLB's goal of 100 percent proficiency as judged by high-stakes testing is antithetical to learning. When we deny diversity in student strengths, weaknesses, and abilities, we risk robbing children of the chance to experience success that begets confidence and perseverance. We risk sending the message that to be different is to be less than. We all know the child who scores off the charts on a standardized test but can't pack his bag at the end of the day or tie her shoes. We also know the child who struggles to read and retain math concepts but is a prodigy on the saxophone. High-stakes testing does not reveal the full picture of who children are. As educators, we must demand better for our students. □



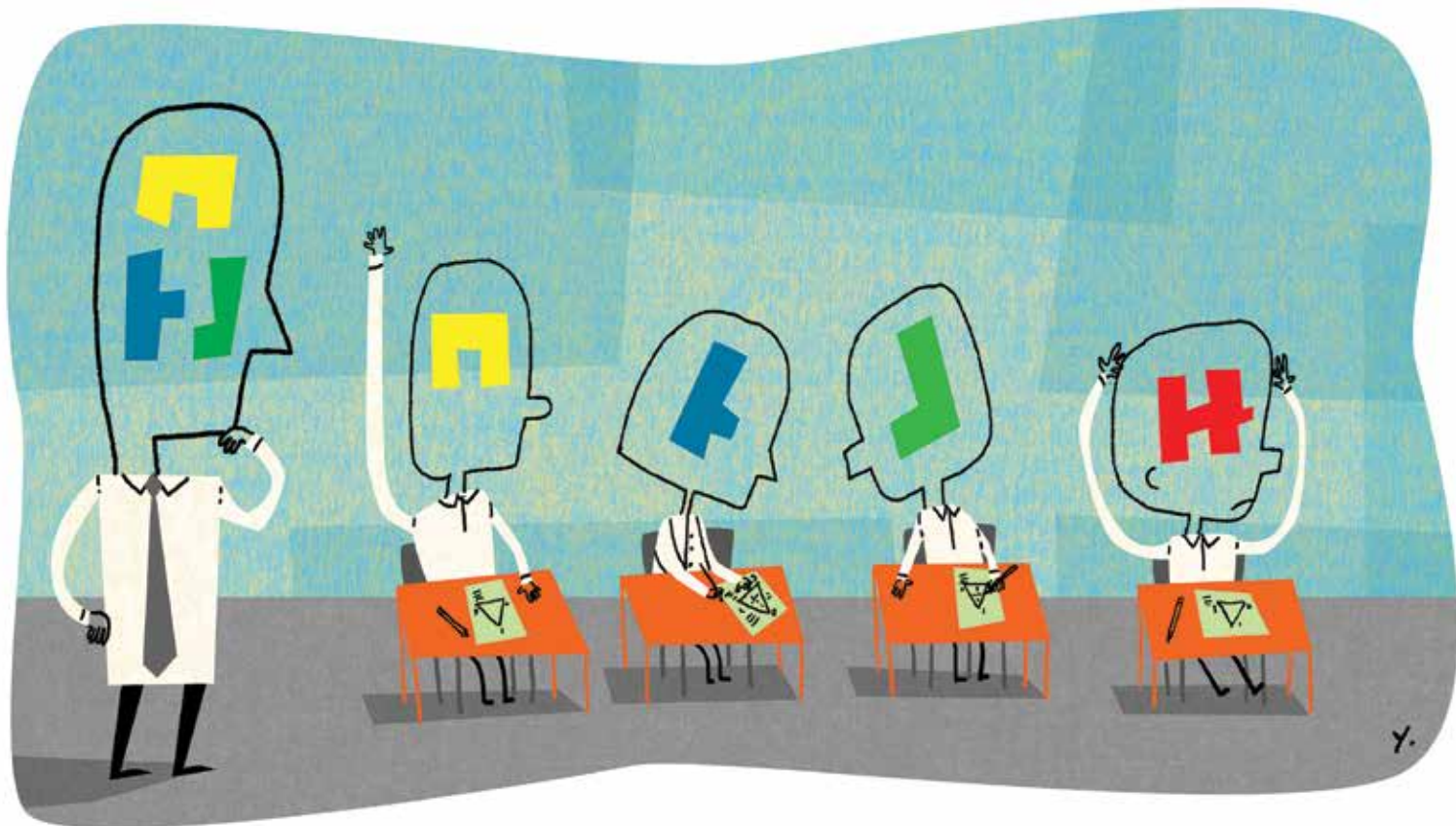
As educators, we must encourage each other to voice our concerns. Only we can breathe life into theoretical discussions regarding testing.

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# Help-Seekers and Silent Strugglers

## Student Problem-Solving in Elementary Classrooms



BY JESSICA CALARCO

One February morning, the students in Ms. Dunham's fifth-grade class were taking a math test. Jesse, a student from a suburban working-class family, was bent over his desk, tapping his pencil, a deep frown on his face. Ms. Dunham weaved her way around the room, glancing over students' shoulders as they worked. Sensing Jesse's frustration, she paused next to his desk. Leaning down, she whispered: "You OK?" Jesse looked up sheepishly. Pointing at question 5, he hesitated and admitted quietly: "I don't get this one." Ms. Dunham nodded and gave Jesse a quick explanation.

After Ms. Dunham finished explaining, Jesse continued to frown, but she did not notice. As soon as Ms. Dunham finished answering Jesse's question, Ellen, a student from a middle-class family, thrust her hand high in the air and whispered loudly: "Ms. Dunham!"

*Jessica Calarco is an assistant professor of sociology at Indiana University and a former intern with the AFT's educational issues department. Her research focuses on social inequalities with respect to children, culture, education, and families. This article is based on research published in the American Sociological Review (2011 and 2014) and in Social Psychology Quarterly (2014).*

Ms. Dunham immediately turned toward Ellen. Ellen let her shoulders fall in a dramatic slump. "What does number 5 mean?" Ms. Dunham gave Ellen the same brief answer she gave Jesse, but Ellen was not satisfied; she immediately followed up with another question: "Wait, but does that mean we're supposed to multiply?"

Ms. Dunham went over to Ellen and squatted beside her, talking her through the problem with a longer, more detailed explanation. From across the room, Jesse watched Ms. Dunham for a moment and then sighed softly, sinking lower in his chair and continuing to frown at his test.

When I talked to Jesse about this incident later, he explained with frustration that although Ms. Dunham tried to help him, he "didn't even understand what she said," and he blamed himself for not understanding: "Ellen is smart, and when Ms. Dunham finished with me, she went over there, and Ellen got the question right."

As Jesse and Ellen illustrate, students' experiences and outcomes—even in the same classroom—often diverge along socioeconomic lines.\* As I will explain, students from different backgrounds tend to manage problems in contrasting ways. Those

\*I determined students' class backgrounds using data from parent surveys. Teachers generally had only a vague sense of students' family circumstances, including knowing which students received free lunches.

differences, in turn, have real consequences in the classroom. They show the pervasive and often nonmonetary ways that social class matters in our schools.

## Social Class Differences in Learning and Parenting

In attempting to explain the role of social class in the classroom, scholars typically point to schools and families. Teachers want the best for their students, but they also face real challenges in their efforts to ensure that all students have equal opportunity to succeed. We know, for example, that students from working-class families often attend schools with limited resources.<sup>1</sup> Even in the same schools, children from middle-class families tend to be assigned to higher academic tracks or ability groups.<sup>2</sup> There is also some evidence that teachers, whether they realize it or not, may hold less-privileged students to different standards than their middle-class peers.<sup>3</sup>

We also know that families from different social classes are not equally equipped to support their children's learning, and that those differences generate advantages for students from middle-class families and disadvantages for students from working-class families at school. In her book *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, Annette Lareau shows that while middle-class and working-class parents both

and activities that research shows are conducive to learning.<sup>6</sup> Compared with their peers from working-class families, children from middle-class families have better access to educational resources,<sup>7</sup> participate in more extracurricular and enrichment activities,<sup>8</sup> and are encouraged to express themselves more frequently and fully at home.<sup>9</sup> As a result, they tend to start school ahead of their peers from working-class families,<sup>10</sup> and they also maintain those academic advantages over time.<sup>11</sup>

Through my research, I have found that these existing explanations for class-based inequalities in children's outcomes are important but limited. Specifically, they are limited by their lack of attention to the children themselves and how teachers respond to them. As my classroom observations show, children are not simply the passive recipients of advantages (or disadvantages) provided to them by their parents and their schools. Rather, the class-based behaviors that children bring with them to the classroom play a powerful role in generating educational inequalities.

As I will show, these unequal outcomes were particularly apparent with respect to children's efforts to manage challenges they encountered in the classroom. In such situations, children used different problem-solving strategies, depending on their families' socioeconomic level. More specifically, children from middle-class families tended to actively seek help from their teachers, while children from working-class families generally



Students' experiences and outcomes—even in the same classroom—often diverge along socioeconomic lines.

care deeply about their children's academic success, middle-class parents are more familiar with school expectations and are more comfortable intervening at school on their children's behalf.<sup>4</sup> This kind of parental involvement in schooling has positive effects on children's learning and achievement, and thus contributes to inequalities in children's outcomes.<sup>5†</sup>

In Lareau's book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, she further shows that middle-class parents are better able to provide their children with the kinds of home environments

tried to manage problems on their own. I found that they did so because of contrasting lessons they learned at home, with parents coaching them to adopt class-based understandings of the "appropriate" way to problem solve. These different approaches, however, did not automatically generate inequalities. Rather, inequalities resulted because teachers—through no fault of their own—tended to respond to children's class-based problem-solving strategies in different ways.

## A Fly on the Wall at Maplewood Elementary

Before reviewing these findings in detail and discussing their implications, let me first set the stage. I base my conclusions on more than three years of observations and interviews with students, teachers, and parents in one suburban, public elementary

<sup>†</sup>Maplewood has very few students who live below the poverty line. Thus, I focused primarily on the differences between students from working-class and middle-class families. If the study had included more students from poor families, I suspect that the social class differences I observed in students' problem-solving would have been similar or even more pronounced.

school. That school—which I call Maplewood—is located outside a large city on the East Coast. It enrolls approximately 500 students in grades K through 5, with four classrooms (and four teachers) in each grade. (The names of all students and teachers have been changed to protect their anonymity.) The low brick building is nestled in a quiet residential neighborhood, surrounded by trees and playing fields. The wide hallways constantly bustle with activity and are adorned with inspirational posters and colorful displays of student work.

Maplewood serves students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds but is also relatively homogeneous with respect to race and ethnicity. The majority of the students (80 percent) are white; the rest are mostly Latino or Asian American, with only a handful of African American students. In my research, I focused on the white students, as they included students from both middle-class (70 percent) and working-class (30 percent) fami-

who were enrolled in third grade during the 2008–2009 school year. I followed that cohort of students over time, observing them in the fourth and fifth grades as well. During that time, I visited Maplewood at least twice weekly, for about three hours per visit. I divided my observation times between the four classrooms in each grade, and I observed each class during a variety of subjects and activities. In the classroom, I was primarily an observer with a notebook—sitting in empty seats or circling around as the students worked—though I sometimes helped with organizational tasks or had informal conversations with students and teachers.

In addition, I conducted formal interviews with all of the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers at Maplewood, and with a group of students and parents in the cohort. I used these interviews to learn more about teachers' goals and expectations, about individual students and their home lives, and about students' interactions with parents and peers outside of school. And I supplemented

The class-based behaviors that children bring with them to the classroom play a powerful role in generating educational inequalities.



lies. This allowed me to compare how students from different socioeconomic backgrounds—but of the same race and ethnicity—interacted in the same classrooms and with the same teachers and peers.

I use very specific definitions of social class, which may differ in some ways from other common conceptions of class in American society. As I define them, the “middle-class” families at Maplewood were those in which at least one parent had both a four-year college degree and a professional or white-collar job (e.g., teacher, lawyer, engineer, office manager). While some of these families had experienced divorce or financial problems (e.g., a parent lost a job), they all led relatively comfortable lives. The “working-class” families, on the other hand, were less privileged overall. Parents in working-class families, per my definition, had lower levels of education and less occupational prestige: most had a high school diploma and worked in blue-collar or service jobs (e.g., food service worker, transportation worker, daycare provider, sales clerk). These working-class families, however, also differed from families living in poverty in that they typically had steady jobs, modest incomes, and stable relationships, with divorce rates similar to those of middle-class families.

At Maplewood, I focused on one cohort of students—those

this interview data with information from parent surveys, which included questions about students' family backgrounds, friendships, and activities, and students' academic records.

Qualitative studies like mine cannot say whether patterns observed in one school can also be observed in others. But that is not their goal. Instead, the goal is to understand the social processes and interactions that produce those patterns. In this study, for example, I show how differences in the support-seeking strategies of students from different social class backgrounds contributed to inequalities at school.

### Contrasting Lessons about Problem Solving

During my time with students, parents, and teachers, I found that children from middle-class families and those from working-class families came to school equipped with different beliefs about and different strategies for managing problems at school. These contrasting approaches to problem solving reflected the class-based lessons children learned from their parents at home. In other words, the children were often doing what their parents told them to do. When teaching their children how to manage challenges at school, middle-class parents encouraged a “by-any-means” approach to problem solving that involved negotiating

with teachers for assistance and accommodations. In contrast, working-class parents stressed a “no-excuses” approach to problem solving that involved respecting teachers’ authority by not seeking assistance.

These contrasting messages were apparent in the lessons that both middle-class and working-class parents described teaching their children at home. In interviews, for example, I asked parents what they thought their children should do if they were confused or struggling at school. Without hesitation, one middle-class mother said:

I always tell them they should go up to the teacher and ask. Whether it’s [to] raise their hand or quietly walk up to the teacher and ask. But they should ask. They should get clarification, as opposed to making a bad decision or getting it wrong. No matter what the question is, as long as they ask respectfully. I think you should always be able to ask questions in any life situation. So I always tell my kids: “The answer’s always no until you ask. So you gotta ask. If they say no, then you haven’t lost anything. But that doesn’t usually happen. Usually they help you—you find out something. Even if it’s not much more, you’re better off for having asked.”

Like this mother, middle-class parents taught their children to feel entitled to assistance and to recognize that asking was always better than “making a bad decision or getting it wrong.”

Working-class parents, on the other hand, worried that teachers might perceive requests for help or clarification as disrespectful. As a result, they offered their children very different lessons about managing problems at school. In interviews, I asked working-class parents the same questions about what they thought their children should do if they were confused or struggling. After thinking about this question for a moment, Mr. Graham, a working-class father, carefully explained:

My kids know that you just do your best and try. I just want my kids to be respectful, responsible. I try to be on the proactive, teaching them about being responsible and just getting it done. I tell ’em to just get it done and not complain. I always tell ’em: “Look, if you’ve gotta give somebody a hard time, give it to me. Don’t give it to your teachers.” And I’ve never had a teacher complain. My kids are good for the teachers.

Mr. Graham went on to recall that when his high-achieving daughter, Amelia, was in third grade, she came home from school confused about a comment on her report card, telling her father that the comment “didn’t seem to make sense.” Recalling his response, Mr. Graham explained: “I told her not to ask about it, cuz the teacher probably wouldn’t be too happy.” Like other working-class parents, Mr. Graham seemed to equate questions with complaints or excuses. He wanted to protect his children from reprimand, and thus taught them that teachers would be upset by requests for clarification. In light of these beliefs, working-class parents encouraged their children to work hard and to manage problems on their own.

### Contrasting Problem-Solving Strategies

Parents’ lessons prompted students from middle-class and working-class families to view classroom challenges in contrasting ways. Students from middle-class families felt entitled to assis-

tance from teachers and were very comfortable making requests. In interviews, for example, they often said things like: “It was easy to talk to the teacher if I had questions,” or “I don’t want to guess and risk getting it wrong, because then I won’t get as high a grade as I should have gotten. So it’s better to go up and ask the teacher.” While shy and high-achieving children from middle-class families were sometimes nervous about speaking up or being perceived as “stupid,” their parents’ persistent coaching helped to reassure these children that teachers would welcome their requests and that the benefits would outweigh the risks.

Students from working-class families, on the other hand, held a very different view. Like their parents, they worried that teachers would perceive requests for assistance as a sign of laziness or disrespect. In interviews, for example, students from working-class families would often say things like: “You need to work hard and learn things. Like, teachers give you work to learn things. And if you get help, you’re not learning,” or “Teachers want you to be able to

## Children from middle-class families and those from working-class families came to school with different beliefs about and strategies for managing problems at school.

figure it out for yourself, because you’re not always gonna be able to ask,” or “If you have a question, like about homework, you should just skip it. You don’t wanna go up and bug the teacher.”

While students from middle-class families felt entitled to assistance and focused on the possible benefits of help-seeking, students from working-class families were deeply concerned about the potential drawbacks associated with such requests. As a result, they typically tried to deal with problems on their own rather than reaching out to their teachers.

An example from Ms. Nelson’s fourth-grade math class makes these contrasting patterns apparent. At the beginning of each math period, Ms. Nelson asks her students to find their randomly assigned “math buddies” and pick a spot in the room to work. She then has each pair work together to complete a worksheet reinforcing the concepts from the previous day’s lessons.

One morning, during a unit on multiplication, Ms. Nelson handed out a worksheet that instructed students to “fill in the blanks” in various sets of multiplication facts (e.g., \_\_, 22, \_\_, 44, \_\_, \_\_, 77) and then “find the patterns” for each row. While the first task was relatively straightforward, many of the pairs found themselves confused by the second half of the directions. Brian and Kelly, both students from middle-class families, completed the facts

# Studying the Ways Students Get Help with Classwork

BY SARAH D. SPARKS

If you need help, raise your hand.

It's one of the first lessons of school, but as students learn in an increasing variety of settings—in and out of classrooms, in person and online—educators and researchers are starting to take another look at how students learn to ask for help.

In a typical classroom, there are those students who raise their hands constantly and others who try to overhear the teacher's response to other students' questions without ever asking their own. And in online classes, some students hit the "help" button over and over to get straight to the answer, while others seek advice on problem-solving strategies. These behaviors can tell educators and researchers a lot about what a student thinks about learning,

Kiefer, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of South Florida. While it's difficult to nail down what "perseverance" looks like in a classroom, she says studying help-seeking can provide not only clear measures of students' mindsets but also an opening to strengthen students' learning skills.

"It's something that's very visible in the classroom, which makes it great for teachers," Kiefer says.

To get help successfully, a student has to understand that he or she has a problem, decide whether and whom to ask for help, do so clearly, and process the help that's given, says Stuart A. Karabenick, a research professor studying help behaviors at the University of Michigan School of Education. Some students ask for help before they even start thinking about a problem, while others

from elementary to middle and high school, the costs of looking foolish in front of their teacher and classmates start to weigh heavily in their decisions about how and when to get help.<sup>1</sup>

In one 2012 study, educational psychologist Allison M. Ryan of the University of Michigan found that as children got older, they became less likely to ask classmates for help in understanding concepts, but far more likely to get "expedient" help—like copying homework.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, in a forthcoming study of sixth-grade girls, Kiefer and her colleagues found that students were often reluctant to ask for help from others who were more popular than they were or who were perceived to be at the top of the class in that subject. It was just "too risky" socially.

Expedient help "is not cheating exactly," Kiefer says, "but [students] are like, 'I just want to get the homework done.' It's less threatening to their self-efficacy and self-worth" than to admit they don't understand the lesson.

Differences in help-seeking can exacerbate achievement gaps between students. Kiefer's research has found that students from low-income and working-class families are often taught that they should not "bother" the teacher by asking for help, while middle-class students are often taught to be "squeaky wheels" and ask for help aggressively.<sup>3</sup> While teachers often appreciated the working-class students' politeness and patience, they were also more likely to overlook them in favor of giving help to the more assertive students from better-off backgrounds.

Ryan and Kiefer have been exploring how teachers can use peer study groups and tutoring to boost students' confidence in asking peers for help. "We have to figure out what are students really striving for in the classroom, not just academically but also socially?" Kiefer says. "If you can take away the mindset that 'I don't want to look like a loser,' and promote a growth mindset, that's huge."

## When Helping Hurts

If students who actively ask for help get more support in the long term, does that mean students will learn more if they all become squeaky wheels? Not necessarily: too much help can hurt as much as too little. "Too often, we don't give students the opportunity to make sense by themselves," says Ido Roll, a researcher on students' help-seeking behavior and the



his or her engagement in the subject, and the student's confidence in the support of teachers and peers.

That makes help-seeking behaviors uniquely useful as educators and policy-makers look for ways to improve not just students' test scores but the deeper "academic mindsets" that form a foundation for student learning—among them, perseverance, intellectual curiosity, and a "growth mindset," the belief that ability and knowledge in a particular subject is gained through experience rather than being innate.

"Help-seeking is actually part of the process of self-regulation," says Sarah M.

*Sarah D. Sparks is a contributing writer for Education Week. This article first appeared in the August 19, 2014, issue of Education Week. Reprinted with permission from Editorial Projects in Education.*

avoid seeking help even after struggling fruitlessly on their own.

Whether a student is managing academic help appropriately can depend on the subject, the classroom context, and the student's personality. "The term 'help-seeking' suggests a deficit, but we need students to think of this as managing resources to solve a problem," Karabenick says. "You are always in the process of learning, and therefore you never know as much as you should. One has to learn the skills to acquire the knowledge you need."

## Afraid to Ask

That doesn't mean students—or even many teachers—are comfortable asking for help.

"Help-seeking is both academic and social in nature, and adolescents are looking at their classroom as an academic and social minefield," Kiefer says. As students move

senior manager for research and evaluation at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology at the University of British Columbia. “We do know that students kind of like to ask for too much help; over and over again [in online systems], students will ask ... for all the help they can.”

While online courses can make it easier for more-reserved students to ask for help, Roll says they increase the risk that students will focus on expedient help rather than help that improves learning, such as problem-solving strategies. It’s easier to simply ask for “the answer” online than in a live class discussion, he says.

In one study published this fall in the *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, Roll and his colleagues tracked when high school students with high and low math skills asked for help on a computer-based geometry tutoring program.<sup>4</sup> As might be expected, the students who overused the

would benefit more from either a longer, straighter path to the restaurant or the opportunity to stroll around and explore a restaurant district.

“Too often, we are adding cognitive load when we give help,” Roll says, because the information provided by a teacher or computer program often still requires a basic level of understanding of the subject, which a student may not have.

“I’m all for giving help, but giving help is not telling you what to do,” Roll says. “It’s giving resources to help you make sense of it yourself.”

### Setting the Tone

That can be challenging, even for experienced teachers. “Teachers may not know why students don’t ask for help,” Karabenick says. “It may be that ‘I don’t know what I don’t know,’ ‘I don’t know how to ask,’ ‘I’m afraid to ask,’ or ‘I just don’t need help.’” “One of the major skills a teacher

frustrated students lean forward but remain upright in their body posture.<sup>5</sup>

The researchers are hoping to make it easier for software programs and teachers alike to recognize subtle differences in students’ postures that might signal when they need help but are uncomfortable asking for it.

From the first day of school, teachers can set the tone in their classrooms to improve help-seeking. For example, Karabenick found that in classes where teachers give short answers to complex questions, students become less likely to ask for help over time.

Teachers in lower grades typically start the year showing students the etiquette for asking questions—building on that old sequence of raising your hand, waiting to be called on, and so on. Karabenick advises also talking with students about when and whom they can ask for help, and letting them role-play different scenarios.

From the first day of school, teachers can set the tone in their classrooms to improve help-seeking.



help feature of the program—who simply clicked through to the answer, for example—learned less in the end, and students who asked for help primarily on the most challenging questions learned more in general. Interestingly, students with little prior knowledge of a particular question learned more when they avoided help and instead tried and failed repeatedly.

Roll and his colleagues also suggest that low-skilled students may not have enough prior knowledge to understand high-level help. Think of giving dining suggestions to two people—a native of your city and a visitor. The native resident, like the student with high math skills in the study, understands the layout and traffic of the city enough to benefit from somewhat convoluted, backroads directions to the hot new hole in the wall. The visitor, like the low-skill student, might be more confused by your insider knowledge and

needs,” he says, “is to be able to distinguish among these, ... but teachers by and large are not given any training in help-seeking, and they may not be comfortable asking for help themselves.”

Sidney D’Mello, an assistant professor of computer science and psychology at the University of Notre Dame, is using facial-tracking cameras and seat sensors to analyze the differences in facial and body posture associated with different emotions of learners in the classroom.

For example, students who are intensely engaged in their work and who likely do not need help—those said to be “in the flow”—lean forward in their seats and look intent, in a way that can seem similar to the posture of a student who is confused and frustrated. But D’Mello and his colleagues found that students actually in the flow lean forward more steeply, leaving the backs of their chairs a bit, while

“Make it explicit, let them practice it. ... It can be very, very effective to make it transparent that this is a normal part of learning,” he says. □

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quickly, but then began to debate what it meant to “find the patterns.” Almost immediately, Brian suggested: “Let’s ask Ms. Nelson.” Kelly nodded and they both jumped up from their seats.

Stopping in front of Ms. Nelson, Brian thrust out the worksheet and declared breathlessly: “We got all the facts, but we don’t know what kinds of patterns we’re supposed to find.”

As Ms. Nelson was answering this question, a number of other students from middle-class families also got up to ask for help with the directions. One of these students, Danny, was working

teachers often assumed, as Ms. Nelson did, that they were off task, and thus reprimanded them for not being more focused. Ironically, however, students from working-class families tended to avoid seeking help out of a desire to avoid frustrating the teachers with their requests. As Sadie explained in an interview, “If you have a question, like about homework, you should just skip it. You don’t wanna go up and bug the teacher.”

While the teachers at Maplewood were generally very willing to answer questions (and I never saw a teacher reprimand a stu-

## Students from working-class families worried that teachers would perceive requests for assistance as a sign of laziness or disrespect.



with Tory, a student from a working-class family. While Tory waited at her seat, Danny got up to ask for help. Ms. Nelson answered the students’ questions patiently, reminding them of the activity the day before.\*

Meanwhile, two students from working-class families, Sadie and Carter, were also struggling with the worksheet but did not ask for help. Sitting nearby, I could hear them whispering as they bent over their worksheets, frowning. Rather than complete all of the facts and then look for patterns, Sadie and Carter had filled in only the first row and were arguing in hushed voices about what kinds of patterns they were supposed to find.

Although Ms. Nelson was circling the room, Sadie and Carter never asked for help. Fifteen minutes after the start of the math period, they were the only students still working. After glancing at the clock, Ms. Nelson turned to them and said: “You guys! Time’s up. You were the only group that didn’t finish. You guys need to work better together.” Sadie and Carter looked down at the floor, squirming nervously, but said nothing. In that moment, they could have explained to Ms. Nelson that they were struggling to understand the directions for the worksheet, but they did not.

This reluctance to seek help was typical among students from working-class families, and it had real consequences. Like Sadie and Carter, students from working-class families often took longer to finish their assignments or completed them incorrectly. Furthermore, because these students did not acknowledge their struggles,

students from working-class families worried that teachers might respond negatively if they asked for help at the wrong time or in the wrong way. This put teachers in a bind. It was hard for them to help students if they didn’t know they were having trouble.

That said, and as we saw with Jesse, the student I mentioned earlier, children from working-class families did sometimes acknowledge their struggles. In these instances, however, they tended to be less assertive than their middle-class peers. Like Ellen, students from middle-class families would often call out to or approach the teacher directly, even interrupting to ask questions. Furthermore, if teachers tried to defer answering such questions, or if they offered only minimal information, students from middle-class families tended to continue asking for more complete or more immediate assistance.

Students from working-class families, like Jesse, on the other hand, would generally wait for teachers to approach them and offer assistance. Furthermore, when these students did try to seek help, they tended to raise their hands rather than call out to teachers or approach them with questions. As Sadie explained in her interview, “If the teacher says, ‘Did anybody have any problems with the homework?’ then you can raise your hand.” Also, like Jesse, these students rarely asked follow-up questions, even when they were still confused.

### How Teachers Can Help

By adopting a more assertive approach to help-seeking, children from middle-class families tended to receive more attention and assistance from teachers and, as a result, tended to complete their

\*When students from middle-class and working-class families worked together, students from middle-class families would often take the lead in asking teachers for help.



work more quickly and more accurately than did their peers from working-class families. Thus, class differences in children's problem-solving strategies often resulted in unequal educational outcomes.

A key question, then, is why? While some might assume that middle-class approaches to problem solving were inherently better, I found that it was not the children's strategies themselves that led to these unequal outcomes but rather the *teachers' responses* to those strategies. I don't at all mean to imply that teachers at Maplewood were overtly biased against children from working-class families. In many ways, it was clear they cared deeply about all their students and worried about those who, as one teacher noted, were not getting enough "support at home." But despite their good intentions, the structure of the school day and the pressures they faced made it hard for teachers to provide equal support to all their students.

The teachers at Maplewood often felt overwhelmed by accountability mandates, mountains of paperwork, large class sizes, curriculum changes, and constant meeting requests. As one teacher explained, "It's not that we don't care. It's just that we've got our heads down trying to get things done." Faced with numerous demands on their time and attention, teachers often found it hard to assess and respond to each student's individual needs. There simply was not enough time in the day to repeatedly check on each student and provide him or her with personalized support and assistance.

My classroom observations suggest that teachers can inadvertently contribute to classroom inequalities, at least in part, by misreading the thinking behind students' problem-solving strategies. That said, this is not the fault of teachers. As one Maplewood teacher pointed out to his students, "I can't read minds. You have to let me know [if you are struggling]." Still, if educators are aware of their students' class-based patterns and possible misperceptions, they may be better equipped to help all their students succeed.

To avoid having social class unduly influence students' problem-solving strategies, teachers can set clear expectations for when and how students should seek help. In some situations, the teachers at Maplewood explicitly encouraged their students to ask for help and actively demonstrated their willingness to answer questions. They did this both through their words (e.g., "Let me know if you have any questions," and "Come and see me up here if you need help") and through their actions (e.g., circling the room, checking students' progress, and watching for signs of struggle). In these instances, students from middle-class families readily sought assistance, and students from working-class families were more willing to do so.

During a fifth-grade art class, for example, the students worked on collages while the teacher, Ms. Cantore, circled the room. Meanwhile, Haley, a student from a working-class family, was struggling to find her collage, digging frantically through the project bin at the back of the room. She did not initially call out or ask for help, but as Ms. Cantore circled past, she noticed the worried frown on Haley's face and asked gently: "You OK?" Keeping her eyes down, Haley said quietly: "I can't find my collage. It's not here."

Ms. Cantore gave Haley a reassuring smile and explained: "I put the ones without names on the table up front. Lindsay [a student from a middle-class family] just found hers up there. Let's see if we

can find yours, too." Haley nodded gratefully and followed Ms. Cantore to the front table, where they searched together through the collages without names and eventually located Haley's in the stack. As Ms. Cantore illustrates in this example, when teachers' willingness to assist was more explicit, students from working-class families were more comfortable seeking help, as they could rest assured they would not be reprimanded for their requests.

Certainly, the teachers I observed did not mean to confuse or frustrate students. Rather, ambiguities in teachers' expectations resulted, in large part, from the dynamic and interactive nature of today's elementary school classrooms. Teachers used their professional judgment to adjust their standards around help-seeking,



doing so for different activities (e.g., tests versus in-class projects), for the time constraints they were facing (e.g., "We have to move on or we won't have time to finish"), and even in response to the appropriateness of particular requests (e.g., "We'll talk about that later"). And yet, when teachers did not make expectations around seeking help extremely explicit, students were left to determine whether and how to make requests. Such decisions, in turn, tended to exacerbate social class differences in student help-seeking.

By no means do teachers intend to respond to students in different ways. Such actions are more often than not inadvertent and unintentional. Outside pressures like testing and paperwork, for example, take teachers' time and attention away from their students. These factors are often outside of the control of teachers.

Yet, they can still take steps to control how they respond to students' requests for help. Teachers can be cognizant of the need to make clear their expectations for fielding questions in the classroom. They can take time—when possible—to check on students as they work and offer assistance to those who appear to be struggling. They can also reassure their students that questions will not result in reprimand, that directions cannot cover all situations, and that confusion is normal. Even beyond these concrete steps, simply being aware of the differences that students bring with them to school can help level the playing field. It is important that teachers realize the power they have to prevent students' social class backgrounds from determining who receives support in managing challenges at school. □

(Endnotes on page 44)

# Beyond the Stacks

## How Librarians Support Students and Schools



BY JOANNA FREEMAN

For years, whenever I met someone who asked me what I did for a living, I simply said, “I’m a librarian in an elementary school.” I had always thought of myself as a librarian first, and I also knew this was an answer people would immediately understand. Almost everyone has an idea of what the job entails, even if that impression is decades old. Cue image of a woman wearing glasses and sporting a bun, sitting behind a reference desk, shushing students, or walking between the stacks to help them find just the right book.

A few years ago, I realized that for me, answering “librarian” was the easy way out. School librarian positions were being cut right and left in districts across the country, including in my own state of Washington, touted as an easy way to save money and jobs that would not directly affect class size or student achievement. Between 2006 and 2011, the number of public school librarians in the United States dropped from 54,445 to 50,300, a nearly 8 percent reduction.<sup>1</sup> Over that time, it became clear to me, and to

many librarians, that most people do not understand the role librarians play in our schools—and we need to correct these misunderstandings.

Today, when I am asked what I do, I say, “I am a teacher librarian in an elementary school.” This response invites inquisitive looks and questions about my job, giving me the opportunity to educate people about what teacher librarians do in thousands of schools. I am putting the “teacher” part of my job ahead of the “librarian” part, though they are intertwined throughout my day. After all, I am a librarian, but I am also a teacher—a teacher of students, staff, families, and community members.

First, I must acknowledge the many different job titles for this position around the country: school librarian, library media specialist, information technology specialist, research technology specialist, and library media coordinator, just to name a few. In recent Washington state legislation, people in my position are referred to as “teacher librarians,” so I now use the term to avoid confusion and because I think it better characterizes my job. Over the years, the position has changed from primarily a traditional librarian position to a balance of teaching and librarianship, and I think it’s important to acknowledge that evolution.

When I was considering becoming a teacher librarian, I was encouraged by other librarians to first become a classroom teacher, so I would better understand the needs of both staff and

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students as a librarian. I took their advice, and I enjoyed teaching in the classroom immensely, but I still had the goal of being a librarian. I entered the Master of Library and Information Science program at the University of Washington and was hired as an elementary teacher librarian in 2002 in Washington's Shoreline School District. This is the suburban district just north of Seattle that I had attended as a child. I have taught in the same school since being hired, despite school closures, tough economic times, and the loss of many teacher librarian positions around the country, and I feel lucky to have remained in the same position without a reduction in my hours.

The five years I spent as a classroom teacher have been invaluable to me. I gained great insight into teachers and their classrooms, including teachers' stresses and concerns, and their joys

and victories. I am aware of the incredible amount of content a teacher is expected to cover in a short amount of time. I understand the difficulty of finding interesting and appropriate materials for a classroom filled with students of different reading abilities and interests. And I can understand the importance of celebrating with teachers when they have breakthroughs with their students.

My elementary school has approximately 565 students in 23 classes, including several special education and gifted classrooms. In the course of a school day, I teach four or more 45-minute classes. During this time, I spend 30 to 35 minutes on instruction, and 10 to 15 minutes helping students find books to check out, which I also consider to be time spent teaching. Every class attends one session each week, though the library is open all day for drop-in visits by students and staff. I have some flexible time to teach outside of scheduled classes, which I do through collaborating with classroom teachers. I also leave the library to teach in the computer lab or individual classrooms when appropriate.

## School library positions have evolved, but our main focus has not changed.



and victories. I am aware of the incredible amount of content a teacher is expected to cover in a short amount of time. I understand the difficulty of finding interesting and appropriate materials for a classroom filled with students of different reading abilities and interests. And I can understand the importance of celebrating with teachers when they have breakthroughs with their students.

My previous classroom experience directly transfers to my school library, as the library is my classroom all day, every day. But my student roster far exceeds the number of students an elementary classroom teacher interacts with. On average, I teach more than 500 students each year, from kindergarten to sixth grade, who come to school with a range of abilities and experiences with books and reading.

School library positions have evolved over the past few decades, primarily as a result of technological advances, but our main focus has not changed: providing curriculum support and teaching research and technology skills, literature appreciation, information literacy, and Internet awareness. In my school, we have a computer lab, roving laptop carts, and more than 250 classroom laptops, including one laptop per student in our fifth and sixth grades. To that end, I provide a lot of hardware and software support throughout the day, but I try not to let those technical tasks take over my time. Parents also ask for help in supporting their children's education, and teacher librarians often offer infor-

### A Collaborative Hub

In my library classes, I cover many topics, including literature appreciation, Internet awareness and safety, research skills, effective searching techniques, copyright and plagiarism, how to cite sources, and how to find books on particular topics in the library, and I integrate my lessons with the classroom curriculum as often as possible. The class time I'm scheduled to teach is precious; as a result of mandated testing days and holidays, I teach each class an average of 30 times in a school year, for a total of about 900 minutes of instruction, or 15 hours. Achieving the outcomes I expect for each grade level while also connecting the library lessons with the curriculum so that I do not teach in isolation is difficult under these time constraints.

In my district, curriculum design is left up to individual teacher librarians, though the district's librarians meet monthly to discuss our teaching and share resources. Many of us rely on combining various sources—such as standards related to information literacy and technology skills from the American Association of School Librarians, the Common Core State Standards, and the International Society for Technology in Education Standards—and we draw upon our knowledge of students and curriculum and the needs of teachers. The freedom to design our own curriculum enables teacher librarians to work closely with teachers in their schools to integrate library skills and knowledge into the actual grade-level curriculum.

To connect library learning with classroom learning, I partner with the teachers in my school. For instance, third-grade students studying rocks and minerals need me to help them identify and pull books from the library so they can research the topic in their classrooms. A sixth-grade teacher expecting students to research ancient civilizations will ask me to teach a lesson on how to effectively search online and find relevant, appropriate, and credible sources for their projects. Fifth-grade students hosting our school's colonial fair need books and research tips to pull together their presentations. Second-grade students studying insects need help creating digital presentations, so I provide support in the computer lab as they learn to use presentation tools such as PowerPoint, and I teach a lesson on how to cite text and image sources.

Such requests happen throughout the school year and succeed thanks to open communication between classroom teachers and myself. Mutual respect and a firm understanding of how we can help and support each other and our students are critical to this kind of collaboration. Positive collaboration happens when teachers trust that the other educators they work with will keep their



students' best interests in mind. We are all working together to support and teach our students, as well as to support each other.

These partnerships work well when teachers think of the library as the hub, or the heart, of the school. While some people think of a school library as simply a place to check out books or learn a lesson on the Dewey Decimal System, the teachers I work with recognize that libraries are vibrant spaces where a lot happens simultaneously: students can hear a good story, find out about a new author, research their new pet, among other things.

Just as the library is a resource for materials, books, and technology, the teacher librarian is a resource for helping in the teaching of research and reading. Questions and ideas flow into the library, and answers and support flow out into our classrooms and communities.

As I mentioned earlier, librarians think of their library as their classroom, albeit with more flexibility than a standard classroom. Our library is open throughout the school day, and students trickle in to borrow books and find resources for projects. If I am not teaching a class, I am available to help them choose that

perfect book for their science fiction genre study or show them where to find the citation for a website they are using. I also help teachers find appropriate books on a specific topic to bring back to their individual classrooms for a few weeks so students have materials readily available for research.

In addition to the time teacher librarians spend with students and teachers, it is critical they have time to manage the library itself, which is often a misunderstood part of the job. Teacher librarians need time to do research, read reviews, purchase appropriate resources, and have the resources processed and available when teachers and students need them. They often write grants to support the curriculum and invite authors or illustrators to visit their schools and work with children. And they need to keep up on recent developments in both technology and materials, which many do through reading journal articles, blogs, and other online content, and by attending conferences and workshops. Being up to date on new ideas and programs is not enough; teacher librarians also need time to learn how to use and apply the programs, as well as time to share them with teachers and students.

Many districts have cut school library positions, so it is not uncommon for teacher librarians to have to drive from school to school throughout the week, with just enough time to teach a few classes before they have to leave and go to the next school. This is a grueling schedule that leaves little time to attend to other important management and professional aspects of the job. Some schools in Washington state employ a teacher librarian only one day a week, so the librarian ends up working at five different schools, without time to collaborate with teachers or determine what materials should be purchased to best support classroom instruction.

### Supplementing the Curriculum

Supplementing the school's curriculum requires that I have at least some knowledge of it at all grade levels. This is difficult, especially at a time when every publisher seems to be releasing new materials aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). My district has recently purchased or will be purchasing new curricula in science, math, and reading. I have asked to be included in appropriate trainings for new curricula so I can have some knowledge of the topics being taught in each class, but that is not always possible due to time or cost. I know a disconnect between a new curriculum and the library program often leads to a more difficult transition for teachers, as teacher librarians scramble to catch up and provide appropriate resources or lessons in the library. I am, however, doing my best to support teachers during this move to the CCSS.

With the new standards finding a foothold in most states, their focus on nonfiction will bring renewed attention to school library collections, particularly to outdated nonfiction sections. Teachers piloting a new reading curriculum in my school have already asked me for materials to supplement their instruction. As teacher librarians, we must have the time and resources necessary to support teachers throughout the adoption of the CCSS; we can't rely only on the appendices of the new standards. If we really want to increase both the quantity and the quality of the nonfiction our students read, teacher librarians need time to find these materials and the funding to purchase them.

Several years ago, my district's social studies curriculum changed to include the study of ancient civilizations in the sixth grade. At that time, I had very few books in the wide variety of reading levels and topics needed for up to 90 students to use the resources at the same time. My five or six books about mummies and King Tut were not going to cut it. I needed books about China, Mesopotamia, India, and other cultures to provide the breadth of understanding my teachers and students required. Their needs informed my book purchasing and budget prioritizing for the next few years, but it took time and my knowledge of the curriculum to order the right materials, and I continue to add to that collection as time and money allows. A school library's collection is never complete.

Now our sixth-grade students study ancient civilizations throughout the year, which culminates with a state-mandated Classroom-Based Assessment in social studies. Students read and do research from multiple sources to answer an essential question about a civilization, and they must include at least three sources, including primary and secondary sources, in their bibliography.



At the request of the teachers, I support this research by teaching lessons either in the classroom or in the library, depending on schedules. I teach several lessons focusing on primary sources, and one or two about effective online searching, refreshing students' memories about a topic I introduced to them in earlier grades.

My partnership with the sixth-grade teachers developed over the years as we all grew more comfortable with the curriculum, and as I better understood how I could support students' preparation for this assessment. At first, when the curriculum and assessment were put into place, the teachers and I would engage in lengthy discussions. But now, when the teachers are ready to introduce this topic, we simply have a short conversation or exchange a quick email, since we are all comfortable with our roles in the students' learning.

It takes time for teachers to learn a new curriculum, but after a year or two, they can make it their own. Classroom teachers create projects to enhance the curriculum, and when a curriculum change occurs, they must find ways to incorporate their

work or develop new projects. Teachers are flexible, but a major change involves other teachers as well, and collaboration between teachers and the teacher librarian can stall as everyone gains familiarity with the new curriculum.

For several years, our second-grade students studied insects in science, and the teachers embraced this topic and used it to teach across the curriculum, incorporating reading, writing, and technology skills. I planned lessons with them, and they encouraged me to be an integral part of the process. After a few years of working together to create materials and plan the unit, we became comfortable enough to meet only a few times before and during the unit, and then after to assess student projects. The teaching happened in the classroom, the library, and the computer lab. The students asked questions, researched a chosen insect, and then created a presentation. They had multiple teachers throughout the process, and we all worked together toward the same goal.

For my part, I gathered materials online and in books and encyclopedias, limiting the choices of insects so students could focus on the research process and not have to spend hours trying

Partnerships between teacher librarians and classroom teachers work well when classroom teachers think of the library as the hub, or the heart, of the school.

to find information about an obscure insect. I helped students craft their questions, and worked with the classroom teachers to help students understand nonfiction text features, so they could find information easily using the index, captions, and table of contents. I supported the students' work in the computer lab next door to the library, and made myself available along with their teachers to help them create a slideshow presentation, including an interactive quiz they shared with each other.

Such collaborations with classroom teachers can happen in a variety of ways. Sometimes I approach classroom teachers after I become aware of a particular aspect of their curriculum or an impending project. I then suggest ways I can support them and their students with materials or teaching, or both. And sometimes teachers approach me with ideas or questions. The interaction depends upon the personality of the teacher and his or her willingness to ask for support. I also need to be seen as someone who is willing to collaborate in classrooms, and I need to be visible around the building as a reminder that I am available and willing to work with teachers.

The recent emphasis on working in professional learning communities has created a positive culture in my school and district, and I am pleasantly surprised that new teachers frequently ask me to work with them and provide resources and ideas. The culture of a building and a district can encourage collaboration, and in the past, I have sometimes had difficulties in getting teachers to work with me. But recently, a deliberate focus on collaboration in our district has fostered the idea that the students in our school belong to all of the staff, not just their classroom teachers, and that we are all responsible for their learning. Teachers are encouraged to think beyond the walls of their classrooms and seek outside opinions and ideas, including those of specialists, such as teacher librarians. This push to work together has resulted in greater communication among teachers and has encouraged everyone to talk about our teaching and our students.



### Making Time and Connections

For all teachers, having enough time—a prerequisite of collaboration—is a constant struggle. Some districts have built collaboration time into their schedules through an early release afternoon once a week or a late start once a month. But this time, however, is often scheduled for building, grade-level, or department meetings. In some districts, the teacher librarian and specialists in physical education, art, and music teach classes so that classroom teachers at the same grade level can meet during common planning time to collaborate on lesson plans and improve their instruction.

While these are very important opportunities for teacher collaboration, how does a specialist find time to meet with a classroom teacher? In my case, collaborations with teachers are almost never scheduled. Most of my planning happens in short bursts: five- to 10-minute chats in a classroom or hallway while students are at recess. Collegial planning time set aside by my district does not facilitate all the communication necessary for collaboration, as every staff member needs more time than is available. Teachers must meet with other teachers in the same grade level, as well as with those who teach in other grade levels and those who teach like subjects. There is no time for a classroom teacher to have a weekly or monthly scheduled

meeting with the teacher librarian, or the art teacher, or the music teacher. Sometimes I can ask for a few minutes in a grade-level meeting, but agendas are so full of reviewing student data and assessments and aligning curricula, among other topics, that they hardly fit into an hour, so I try not to impose on that time.

The idea of having an hourlong meeting where a teacher and I plan a unit down to the last detail is not realistic. Emails can take the place of several conversations. When a teacher sends me the student instructions for a project, I can look through them for important information to support the teacher and students. Stopping to visit a classroom at the end of the day, or sending my schedule to a teacher so she can find a common free time when I can teach in her classroom, takes just a few minutes and is less intrusive to a busy classroom teacher. In my experience, keeping it simple leads to greater success.

For instance, when a fifth-grade teacher stopped by my desk and mentioned that her students would be studying the 13 colonies and then giving presentations, she left me a copy of the handout the students were going to receive explaining the project. She asked me to consider what kind of support I could give her and the students, and then left to return to her classroom. Our meeting was not a formal one; it lasted less than three minutes. But it gave me enough time to think through my response, and we continued the conversation later, both in person and via email. I emailed her relevant websites, scheduled a time to teach a lesson in her room about effective online searching, and gathered materials on the colonies that her students could use in their classroom for a few weeks. This level of involvement did not require a long meeting or discussion.

To connect with classroom teachers, I make an effort to get outside of the library and stop by classrooms. If I expect teachers to want to connect with me, I need to work to connect with them as well. Often this is how I find out about projects or ideas that I can support. I might stop by a class that is starting to examine rocks and minerals from science kits, and a student's question sparks the idea that these students need a set of books in their classroom for a few weeks so they can expand their reading and research beyond what is in the science unit.

Just as important as working closely with classroom teachers is working closely with students. I listen to their questions and book recommendations, and survey them to find out their interests and backgrounds. I use this information to engage all students in what is happening in the library. I want to not only provide them with books, but also help them understand that the library and what we learn here will help them throughout their school careers. Every time I don't have a book a child requests, every time I fail to show a child how to find the answer to a question, I lose an opportunity to make a connection between the student and the library. I work my hardest with students who continually turn down my book suggestions in hopes that someday they will take a book, read it, enjoy it, and realize that the library might actually contain something they would like to read. When that happens, it's a victory not just for me, but for libraries—and teacher librarians—everywhere. □

### Endnote

1. American Library Association, "The State of America's Libraries, 2013," special issue, *American Libraries*, 2013, 28.

# For Grown-Ups Too

## The Surprising Depth and Complexity of Children's Literature



BY SETH LERER

Ever since there were children, there has been children's literature. Long before John Newbery established the first press devoted to children's books, stories were told and written for the young, and books originally offered to mature readers were carefully recast or excerpted for youthful audiences. Greek and Roman educational traditions grounded themselves in reading and reciting poetry and drama. Aesop's fables lived for two millennia on classroom and family shelves. And thinkers from Quintilian to John Locke, from St. Augustine to Dr. Seuss, speculated on the ways in which we learn about our language and our lives from literature.

The history of children's literature is inseparable from the history of childhood, for the child was made through texts and tales he or she studied, heard, and told back. Learning how to read is a

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lifetime, and life-defining, experience. "We can remember," writes Francis Spufford in his exquisite memoir *The Child That Books Built*, "readings that acted like transformations. There were times when a particular book, like a seed crystal, dropped into our minds when they were exactly ready for it, like a supersaturated solution, and suddenly we changed."<sup>1</sup> Children's literature offers more than just a chronicle of forms of fiction or the arts of illustration. It charts the makings of the literate imagination. It shows children finding worlds within the book and books in the world. It addresses the changing environments of family life and human growth, schooling and scholarship, publishing and publicity in which children—at times suddenly, at times subtly—found themselves changed by literature.<sup>2</sup>

But what is childhood? Ever since French historian Philippe Ariès sought to define its modern form, scholars have sought to write its history. For Ariès, childhood was not some essential or eternal quality in human life but was instead a category of existence shaped by social mores and historical experience.

Childhood was not invented by the moderns—whether we associate them with John Locke, the Puritans, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Romantics, or the Victorians—but is a shifting category that has meaning in relationship to other stages of personal devel-

opment and family life. Greeks and Romans, Byzantines and Anglo-Saxons, Renaissance and Revolutionary cultures all had clearly defined concepts of the child and, in turn, canons of children's literature. Children are or become, in the words of the 20th-century philosopher Marx Wartofsky, "what they are taken to be by others, and what they come to take themselves to be, in the course of their social communication and interaction with others."<sup>3</sup> So, too, is children's literature: books that are taken into childhood, that foster social communication, and that, in their interaction with their readers, owners, sellers, and collectors, teach and please.



## Children's literature offers more than just a chronicle of forms of fiction or the arts of illustration. It charts the makings of the literate imagination.

I am interested in the history of what children have heard and read. Their stories, poems, plays, or treatises may well have been composed with children in mind; or they may have been adapted for readers of different ages. I distinguish, therefore, between claims that children's literature consists of books written *for* children and that it consists of those read, regardless of original authorial intention, *by* children.

### A Matter of Interpretation

At the beginning of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, the narrator recalls how, as a 6-year-old, he came across a picture

of a boa constrictor swallowing an animal. "I pondered deeply," he remembers, and he made his own drawing. Showing it to the grown-ups, he asked if it frightened them, but they responded, "Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?" Of course, this was not a hat, but a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. The boy redrew the picture, showing the inside, but the grown-ups were not impressed. And so, the boy gave up a career as an artist. "Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them."<sup>4</sup>

This episode represents two ways of reading literature. On the one hand, we may look for what it seems to us; on the other, we may look for what its author meant it to be. The unimaginative will always see the ordinary in the strange, a hat where there may really be a snake digesting an elephant. Part of the challenge for the literary critic, therefore, is to balance authorial intention and reader response. But part of the challenge for the children's literary critic is to recognize that texts are mutable—that meanings change, that different groups of readers may see different things, and that what grown-ups find as ordinary items of experience may transform, in the child's imagination, into monstrous brilliance.

Some readers have found children's literature to be a rack of hats: didactic, useful books that keep us warm or guard us against weather. I find children's literature to be a world of snakes: seductive things that live in undergrowths and that may take us whole. Like the *Little Prince*, I have come upon volumes that have swallowed me. Children's literature is full of animals, whether they are the creatures who fill Aesop's old menagerie or the islands and continents of the colonial imagination. But they are also full of hats, from Crusoe's crude goatskin head covering to the red-and-white-striped topper that covers, only barely, the transgressions of Dr. Seuss's famous Cat. Each item is a subject of interpretation. Each becomes something of a litmus test for just what kind of reader we may be.

Studies of authorial intention have, over the past three decades, lost ground to histories of reception that show how the meaning of a literary work often lies in the ways in which it may be used, taught, read, excerpted, copied, and sold.<sup>5</sup> Children's literature retells a history of the conventions of interpretation and the reception of texts in different historical periods. But children's literary works themselves take such a problem as a theme. Often, a book instructs the child in the arts of reading. It may tell tales about its own production, or it may—more figuratively—show us how we transform our lives into books and texts, making sense of signs and symbols, life and letters.

I am thus fascinated by the transformations of key books and authors over time. The trajectory of Aesop's fables, for example, writes a history of Western education, of family life, of languages, translations, manuscripts, printing, and digitization. The reception and recasting of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, too, illustrates the changing visions of adventure and imagination, not just in the English-speaking countries and their colonies, but throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas. The schoolroom has remained the setting for children's literature from Greek and Roman antiquity to the present. St. Augustine recalled, in his *Confessions*, how he had to memorize parts of the *Aeneid* as a schoolboy. Medieval and Renaissance classrooms filled themselves with Aesop. Eighteenth-century girls found their experience recast in Sarah Field-



ing's *The Governess*, subtitled *The Little Female Academy*. Boys from Tom Brown to Harry Potter found their most imaginative adventures in the classroom, the library, or the playing field.

In the course of these tales, I find themes that mark defining moments in literary history. Lists and catalogs, for example, seem to govern everything from the excerpts of Homer in Hellenistic papyri, to the medieval and Renaissance alphabets, to Crusoe's inventories, Scrooge's double-entry bookkeeping, and the contents of the "great green room" of *Goodnight Moon*. Simply repeating lists of things—arranged alphabetically, chronologically, or topically—can offer unexpected associations. Every list is, potentially, a reckoning, and in the history of children's literature, lists offer an accountancy of growth. Children's books often illuminate or criticize an actuarial approach to life. What Scrooge learns in *A Christmas Carol*, for example, is to stop making accounts—to recognize that moral reckoning is not the same as monetary, and that inscription in the book of life is not to be confused with entries in the ledger. By contrast, many 20th-century children's books teach the idea of list-making. What is *Goodnight Moon* but a catalog of things: a list of properties both real and fanciful that mark the progress of the evening and the passageway to sleep? Dr. Seuss transforms the list into a wild burlesque of reckoning itself, imagining an alphabet "on beyond zebra," or a fauna far beyond the categories of Linnaean classification.<sup>6</sup>

If children's literature seems full of lists, it also seems full of theater. The schoolroom from the age of St. Augustine to Shakespeare was a place of performance, as boys memorized, recited, and enacted classic texts and rhetorical arguments for the approval of the master. The playing fields of the Rugby School in England or the battlefields of Africa were, for the 19th century, great stages for the masculine imagination. Young women, too, put on their shows—but here, the audiences were more often domestic than martial. *Spectacula theatrica*, the spectacle of theater, captivated young Augustine. It also captivated young Louisa May Alcott, who had aspired to an actress's life and who began her *Little Women* with a little holiday play put on by the March sisters. The theater enticed Pinocchio, too, whose puppet life is derailed by the strange seductions of the showcase (the Disney version of the story even has its Fox, duded up like some vulpine David Belasco, sing, "An Actor's Life for Me"), and part of my interest lies in the ways in which the literary child performs for others.

If there has been a theater of childhood, especially in the modern era, it has been due in large part to Shakespeare. Plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, characters such as Juliet and Ophelia, and figures such as Caliban had a great impact on the makings of children's literature. Shakespeare was everywhere, and his figurations of the fairy world, his presentations of young boys and girls, and his imagination of the monstrous gave a texture to those works of children's literature that aspired to high culture. By the mid-19th century, childhood itself could take on a Shakespearean cast: witness the popularity of Mary Cowden Clarke's fanciful re-creations in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*; witness Anne Shirley in L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, acting out like Juliet; witness the weird soliloquies of Captain Hook, who comes off in J. M. Barrie's play of *Peter Pan* as a Shakespearean manqué.

The world was a stage, but it also was a book, and in particular it was a book of nature. Technology and science had an impact on

the child's imagination long before the chemistry sets and Edison biographies of my own childhood. Medieval bestiaries, herbaries, and lapidaries often offered illustrated guides to God's creation (each item pictured, described, and then allegorized into moral meaning). The great explorations of the 17th and 18th centuries prompted new places of imagined transport—there is a direct line from Crusoe's island to Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. In the 19th century, the work of Charles Darwin had a deep impress on the narratives of childhood. Did children now evolve? Could they devolve, by contrast, left to their own uncontrolled devices? And who knew whether and where new species would be found? From Charles Kingsley and Edward Lear,



**The schoolroom has remained the setting for children's literature from Greek and Roman antiquity to the present.**

through Rudyard Kipling and H. G. Wells, to Dr. Seuss, the endless wonder of the world transformed itself into new creatures, new adventures, and new timelines of development.

Philology, the study of word histories, of medieval myths, finds its way into the children's literary imagination, from the Grimm brothers' fairy tales, through J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth and C. S. Lewis's Narnia, to Philip Pullman's Miltonic *His Dark Materials*. The tradition of the fairy tale is part and parcel of this philological tradition. The Grimms had originally begun to collect their *Märchen* as part of their larger project of recovering the sources of Germanic linguistic and literary culture. Tolkien, the Oxford

etymologist, found sources for his magical vocabulary in the roots of English. There is a mystery to meanings in the dictionary, and fairy tales and folklore share in larger national and scholarly projects that imagine a childhood for the European peoples.

For a long time, what was *not* literature was the ephemeral, the popular, the feminine, the childish. National literary histories tended to ignore women writers, to slight the role of the popular press or the folktale, and to brush aside works of wide circulation that nonetheless did not seem to match the greatness of known authors. In response to these critical traditions, histories of children's literature have tended in the opposite direction: instead of analyzing, they celebrate; instead of discriminating, they list.



**There is no single golden age, no moment when the literature for and of children is better than at any other moment.**

### **A Golden Age?**

We have long sought a golden age of children's literature.<sup>7</sup> Yet there is no single golden age, no moment when the literature for and of children is better, more precise, or more effective than at any other moment. Children's literature is not some ideal category that a certain age may reach and that another may miss. It is instead a kind of system, one whose social and aesthetic value is determined out of the relationships among those who make, market, and read books. No single work of literature is canonical; rather, works attain canonical status through their participation in a system of literary values.<sup>8</sup> At stake is not, say, why *Alice in*

*Wonderland* is somehow better than the books of Mrs. Molesworth, or why the many imitations of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* never quite measure up to their famous model. What is at stake, instead, is how successive periods define the literary for both children and adults, and how certain works and authors were established in the households, schools, personal collections, and libraries of the time.

If the history of children's literature builds on current cultural and theoretical concerns, it also speaks to commerce. Even before Newbery set up shop in the mid-18th century, there was a book trade, and scribes, publishers, and editors included books for children in their inventories (it is significant that virtually every early printer throughout Europe published an Aesop as one of his first volumes). Newbery himself grounded his booklist in the educational theories of John Locke, and the British and American trade in children's books kept up his emphases for decades. In France, the city of Rouen became a center for the children's book trade in the 18th century, and by the late 19th the Paris firm of Pierre-Jules Hetzel set a standard for the making and the marketing of books for younger readers (Hetzel was Jules Verne's and Alexandre Dumas's publisher, and he put out the French translations of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*).<sup>9</sup> And in America, once public libraries became established, once prizes for children's literature were funded, once children's authors became arbiters of taste and tie-ins, children's literature became a public business.

Children's books are now the most profitable area of publishing, and links between traditional and innovative media establish younger readers as the prime market for imaginative writing. European and American demographics, too, point to a rise in the number of school-age children and a corresponding interest among parents not just for new books to read, but for a sense of history to children's reading. Hardly a day goes by when I do not read of somebody rediscovering a "classic" book or author for a new audience. Such accounts reveal, too, how the categories of the children's book are codified not just by writers and readers, but by book sellers, librarians, and publishing houses. To a large degree, the 20th-century history of children's literature is a story of those institutions: of medals and awards, reflecting social mores and commercial needs; of tie-ins, toys, and replications, in a range of media, of characters from children's books. Such media phenomena attest not only to the governing commodity economy in which the children's book now sits. They also constitute a form of literary reception in their own right. The history of reading perennially links together commerce and interpretation.

The history of reading is also the history of teaching, and children's literature is an academic discipline.<sup>10</sup> Beginning in the 1970s, children's literature became the object of formal study and the subject of professional inquiry. Part of this rise was spurred by the new modes of social history of the time. The emergence of family history as a discipline worked in tandem with the emphasis on first-generation feminist scholarship to seek out texts and authors unmarked by the traditional canon. So, the acts of telling stories, writing books, or entertaining and instructing children came to be appreciated as acts of authorship.<sup>11</sup> These developments in social history had a profound impact on the direction of children's literature in academia. The study of children's literature is cultural studies, not just in that it draws on literary, socio-



## Our own acts of reading are educations in the arts of language.

historical, and economic methods of analysis, but in that it may serve as a test case for the syntheses of current cultural criticism. As a result, the discipline of children's literature now flourishes in academia.

Even the most ordinary prose becomes magical when read aloud at home or at school. And even the simplest-seeming of our children's books teaches something elegant and deep. Perhaps the first book I read to my son was *Goodnight Moon*, and in its catalog of little objects, its repetitive idiom, and its lulling rhythm, I found something that I later learned others had seen within it. Leonard Marcus, writing in his biography of that book's author, Margaret Wise Brown, suggestively analyzes the book's form and power in ways I had felt palpably.

A little elegy and a small child's evening prayer, *Goodnight Moon* is a supremely comforting evocation of the companionable objects of the daylight world. It is also a ritual preparation for a journey beyond that world, a leave-taking of the known for the unknown world of darkness and dreams. It is spoken in part in the voice of the provider, the good parent or guardian who can summon forth a secure, whole existence simply by naming its particulars. ... And it is partly spoken in the voice of the child, who takes possession of that world by naming its particulars all over again, addressing them directly, one by one, as though each were alive, and bidding

each goodnight. ... The sense of an ending descends gradually, like sleep.<sup>12</sup>

And yet, that ending is also a beginning. Marcus calls attention, in his analysis that follows, to relationships between the children's catalog and the structures of fiction generally, alluding in particular to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. What I have come to realize is that our own acts of reading are thus educations in the arts of language: in the ways in which our words construct, reveal, or occlude the world of experience; in the power of words read and spoken to present a room familiar and yet always richly strange.

As the historian Roger Chartier puts it, "Reading is not just an abstract operation of intellect: it is an engagement of the body, an inscription in space, a relation of oneself and others."<sup>13</sup> If there is a future to children's literature, it must lie in the artifacts of writing and the place of reading in the home and in the school. To understand the history of children's literature is to understand the history of all our forms of literary experience. □

### Endnotes

- Francis Spufford, *The Child That Books Built: A Life in Reading* (London: Faber, 2002), 9.
- On the rise of what I have elsewhere called biblio-autobiography (that is, the chronicle of life told in terms of books read), see my "Epilogue: Falling Asleep over the History of the Book," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 229–234. Besides Spufford's memoir, another brilliant version of this kind of narrative is Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Knopf, 1999), and also his *A Reading Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).
- Marx Wartofsky, "The Child's Construction of the World and the World's Construction of the Child: From Historical Epistemology to Historical Psychology," in *The Child and Other Cultural Inventions*, ed. Frank S. Kessel and Alexander W. Sigel (New York: Praeger, 1983), 190.
- Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, trans. Katherine Woods (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1943), 1–3.
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- See Seth Lerer, "Children's Literature and the Stories of the List," *Yale Review* 89, no. 1 (2001): 25–40.
- Recent studies that still imagine a golden age of children's literature (invariably, Britain from the 1860s to the 1920s) include Humphrey Carpenter, *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985); and Peter Hunt, *An Introduction to Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). But note, too, the application of this phrase to the postwar period in Peter Hollindale and Zena Sutherland, "Internationalism, Fantasy, and Realism, 1945–1970," in *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History*, ed. Peter Hunt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 256–260.
- I appropriate this formulation from John Guillory, which he set out in his "Canonical and Non-Canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate," *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 54 (1987): 483–527, and developed in his *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- See Michel Manson, "Continuités et ruptures dans l'édition du livre pour la jeunesse à Rouen, de 1700 à 1900," *Revue française d'histoire du livre* 82 (1994): 93–126; Francis Marcoin, "La fiction pour enfants au XIXe siècle," *Revue française d'histoire du livre* 82 (1994): 127–144; and, more generally, Christian Robin, ed., *Un éditeur et son siècle: Pierre-Jules Hetzel (1814–1886)* (Saint-Sébastien, France: Société Crocus, 1988).
- See Beverly Lyon Clark, *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), especially her bibliographical survey of the teaching, study, and criticism of the discipline, which can be found on pages 239–246.
- The spur to a good deal of late 20th-century work in family history came from Lawrence Stone, especially his groundbreaking *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), and the many studies written in its wake. Works that have sought to relocate the role of mother and child in the family and in literature include Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998); and Eve Bannet, *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminisms and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
- Leonard Marcus, *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 187.
- Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and the Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 20.

# “No Teacher Should Be Forced to Plan Alone”

SOME OF THE MOST highly rated resources on Share My Lesson were created by classroom teachers in Boston, backed by their union and grants from the AFT Innovation Fund. Their project, called 21st Century Lessons, took off one recent summer in teacher Tracy Young’s dining room, as teachers designed a collaborative process to produce top-quality materials.

The teachers knew just what they wanted to make: a full package of PowerPoint lessons, assessments, handouts, and activities that would take fellow educators no more than 30 minutes of prep time to teach. And the group had very high standards. The lessons had to be aligned to the Common Core State Standards and flexible enough for users to modify them. If they could create such lessons, then other teachers wouldn’t be forced to plan lessons alone, from scratch—hence the group’s motto, “No teacher should be forced to plan alone.”

“The feedback has been: ‘This is exactly what I’ve been looking for,’” says Ted Chambers, a social studies teacher at the Edwards Middle School in Boston and a codirector of 21st Century Lessons. “In a secular way, this is sort of like a Christmas present—you open it up and you weep with joy because you’ve finally found what you need.”

Chambers and Young, colleagues at

Edwards, put together a talented team of Boston Teachers Union (BTU) members and a careful process for lesson production. The work began at Young’s house and then moved into public schools that could provide space for the group.

Some teachers served as curriculum directors, helping to identify which standards would be addressed in each lesson. Others worked as lesson designers, who submitted their work to members of their team for review. Designers had to revise their lessons, based on team feedback, until everyone signed off. Other team members took care of technology, making the attractive PowerPoints—the lessons that teachers can click on and teach—that Chambers and Young believe are a big part of 21st Century Lessons’ success.

“BTU members are dedicated to providing the highest-quality education to the children of Boston,” says BTU President Richard Stutman. “We are proud to support 21st Century Lessons so that teachers can access—and children can benefit from—lessons produced by some of the most talented and dedicated public school teachers in the country.”

To date, the team has created middle school lessons in mathematics, social studies, and English language arts. The content is very popular on Share My Lesson, with more

than 280,000 views in less than two years. And Boston Public Schools has endorsed the math lessons for use in city schools.

To download these lessons, visit [www.sharemylesson.com/21stCenturyLessons](http://www.sharemylesson.com/21stCenturyLessons). Resources are searchable by subject, grade, and topic. Here are a few examples:

## English Language Arts

**Short Stories and Theme: The Lottery**  
([www.bit.ly/LotterySML](http://www.bit.ly/LotterySML))

This lesson helps students understand and identify themes in a short story.

**Citing Textual Evidence: Salem Witch Trials**  
([www.bit.ly/SMLsalem](http://www.bit.ly/SMLsalem))

Students examine three different types of primary source documents (a letter, a diary entry, and court testimony) related to the Salem witch trials and learn how textual evidence supports their claims.

## History: Early Civilizations

**Athens and Sparta**  
([www.bit.ly/SMLathens](http://www.bit.ly/SMLathens))

This lesson is a series of short, independent activities paired with group work, in which students learn cultural differences between Athens and Sparta by analyzing two primary and two secondary sources.

**Greek Culture: Intro to Alexander the Great**  
([www.bit.ly/SMLalexander](http://www.bit.ly/SMLalexander))

Students read passages, answer reflective questions, and receive whole-group instruction in order to understand the life of this historical figure.

## Mathematics

**Statistical Questions and Data**  
([www.bit.ly/SMLstat](http://www.bit.ly/SMLstat))

Students learn about statistical questions and data collection methods, including organization strategies.

**Introduction to Integers**  
([www.bit.ly/SMLintegers](http://www.bit.ly/SMLintegers))

Designed to help students understand and use positive and negative numbers, this lesson asks students to apply math to real-world situations.

**Introduction to Solving Equations**  
([www.bit.ly/SMLsolve](http://www.bit.ly/SMLsolve))

Students study the distributive property and learn to combine like terms to solve simple linear equations.

**21st Century Lessons**  
Introduction to Ratios  
Primary Lesson Designer(s):  
Stephanie Conklin

**Lesson Overview (3 of 3)**  
Common Core State Standard  
6.RT.1. Understand the concept of a ratio and use ratio language to describe a ratio relationship between two quantities. For example, "The ratio of wings to beaks in the bird house at the zoo was 2:3, because for every 2 wings there was 1 beak." For every one candidate, a school, candidate received nearly three votes.

**Practice**  
Use the CW hand-out to complete the following problems.  
 $\frac{35}{45} = \frac{5}{9}$      $\frac{5}{20} = \frac{1}{4}$      $\frac{5}{35} = \frac{1}{7}$      $\frac{12}{40} = \frac{3}{10}$   
 $\frac{3}{27} = \frac{1}{9}$      $\frac{6}{18} = \frac{1}{3}$      $\frac{35}{50} = \frac{7}{10}$      $\frac{5}{15} = \frac{1}{3}$

1. Write a ratio as a fraction in simplest form comparing **peppers** to **pineapples**.  
 2. Write a ratio as a fraction in simplest form comparing **pineapples** to **peppers**.  
 3. Write a ratio of **pineapples** to **peppers** in two different ways other than a fraction.

**Simplifying Ratios**  
Over the summer, Christian kept track of time spent on different activities during his summer vacation.

Activity	Hours
Swimming	15
Reading	10
Walking	12
Other	3

Write in simplest form the ratio of Christian's time spent running to total hours of activities.  
 $\frac{\text{Time Spent Running}}{\text{Total Hours of Activities}} = \frac{14 \text{ Hours}}{50 \text{ Hours}} = \frac{7 \text{ Hours of Running}}{25 \text{ Total Hours}}$

Let's explain the meaning of this ratio!  
 This ratio means that for every 25 total hours Christian spent on activities, he spent 7 hours running.

# New Accountability



TEST-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY is broken.

More often than not, it has become a way to use large-scale assessments to identify and punish struggling schools. For more than two decades, it has failed to improve student achievement or ensure equity in the distribution of educational resources.

It is time for a paradigm shift.

New accountability systems should be designed to enhance learning environments that ensure the development of the higher-order thinking skills students need, improve curriculum, and increase teacher efficacy. The system itself should be continuously improved, incorporating feedback from parents, teachers, and students.

The most educationally accomplished nations use accountability to support good educational practices and to drive continuous improvement. If we are to compete with these world-class systems, accountability in American education must focus both on gathering complete information on the performance of students, educators, schools, and districts, and on providing the feedback, resources, and supports necessary for their improvement.

“Support-and-improve” accountability systems depend on three crucial elements: (1) meaningful student learning, (2)

adequate resources, and (3) educators’ professional capacity. Such systems are transparent and readily understandable. And they engage school stakeholders in planning and implementing accountability policies tailored to each school and district.

The AFT has joined a diverse group of organizations by signing on to “A New Social Compact for American Education,” a framework for new accountability. These organizations have committed to the important work of implementing the framework’s following principles in our schools, districts, and states:

- We believe the purpose of accountability is to improve education.
- We believe all students can learn and achieve, and accountability must focus on building the capacity of schools to actualize this potential in their students.
- We believe accountability must focus on

meaningful learning.

- We believe accountability is built on a foundation of educational knowledge and professionalism.
- We believe accountability decisions should be based on multiple and varied measures that are disaggregated by student status.
- We believe accountability must involve students, families, educators and other school staff, and the community in decision-making.

To read the full statement and sign on to the principles, see [www.NewAccountability.org](http://www.NewAccountability.org). The website can help you explain to your PTA, school board, and local newspaper why *new accountability* is the way to go. And don’t forget to spread the word on social media!

—AFT EDUCATIONAL ISSUES DEPARTMENT

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES YANG

## RESOURCES

### 12 YEARS A SLAVE TOOLKIT

The National School Boards Association has partnered with New Regency, Fox Searchlight, and Penguin Books to make copies of the film, book, and study guide for *12 Years a Slave* available to America’s public high schools. Educators with school and district approval to teach the film will receive a free toolkit, which includes a DVD of the film (an edited version with parental consent requested), a paperback copy of the book, a printed study guide, and a letter from the film’s director, Steve McQueen. Visit [www.12yearsaslave.com](http://www.12yearsaslave.com) to request a school toolkit.

### COMMON CORE PODCASTS

The Learning First Alliance is using social media to help keep the education community’s ear to the ground when it comes to the Common Core State Standards. The AFT is a member of the alliance, which is producing podcasts that explore Common Core implementation. One recent installment featured Toledo (Ohio) Federation of Teachers President Kevin Dalton and Toledo Public Schools elementary school teacher Amy Whaley discussing how the union and district worked together to develop curriculum maps and teacher-led professional development tied to the standards. Other podcasts have included education researchers and the Delaware PTA president. The podcasts are available at [www.learningfirst.org](http://www.learningfirst.org).

### ESSENTIAL EARLY READING

The AFT’s Early Childhood Education Cadre, which comprises classroom educators from around the country, has produced a new book list to complement the popular Transitioning to Kindergarten toolkit. Developed by the AFT and the National Center for Learning Disabilities, Transitioning to Kindergarten features activities to help children prepare for kindergarten, along with tips for parents, training materials, and more. The book list is the latest tool—offering teachers’ favorite books that concentrate on making the transition. Both the book list and the complete toolkit are available at <http://go.aft.org/t2k>.

### EBOLA 101

The AFT, which is the second-largest nurses union in the United States, is working to keep communities healthy and informed about Ebola. Visit <http://go.aft.org/AE414res1> to learn about the AFT’s plan to contain the threat. The site offers materials for educators, including guidance for schools and daycare centers receiving staff or students from areas affected by the virus. The AFT’s Share My Lesson site also is offering Ebola-related materials. The articles, lesson plans, and activities come from experts and can help students separate Ebola fact from fiction. They are available at <http://go.aft.org/AE414res2>.

## Restoring the Vision

(Continued from page 13)

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30. Citizens League, *Chartered Schools*, 14.

31. Citizens League, *Chartered Schools*, 15.

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