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SCHOOL ON A HILL.(education)

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On the design and redesign of American education

Once upon a time, America's would-be architects of utopia aspired to build cities that shone like beacons from hills. Today, they reform education. "Try your design on the best school," Emerson dared readers more than a century ago, and since 1991, when Minnesota enacted the country's first charter-school law, thousands of educators, parents, activists, and corporations have done just that. More than 2,000 publicly supported, independently operated, nonsectarian schools have been chartered nationwide, each with its own special mission. There are charter schools for future entrepreneurs, others for incipient ecologists; charter schools devoted to patriotism, others to multiculturalism; those founded on a theory of "natural learning" and others on a "knowledge-based" curriculum; those motivated by profit, those by charity. Some perform no better than the highly regulated schools they were invented to replace, but others may represent the most promising alternative yet found to what Emerson called our educational "system of despair." Inspired by the example of these best charter schools, Harper's Magazine recently asked four of our nation's leading educators to accept Emerson's dare and try their designs on a school.

The following discussion was held at The New School in Manhattan. Lewis H. Lapham served as moderator.

LEWIS H. LAPHAM is the editor of Harper's Magazine.

JOHN TAYLOR GATTO is a former New York State and New York City Teacher of the Year, and the author, most recently, of *The Underground History of American Education: A Schoolteacher's Intimate Investigation into the Problem of Modern Schooling*.

KRISTIN KEARNS JORDAN is the founder and director of the Bronx Preparatory Charter School, located in New York City's lowest-performing school district, and the former executive director of the School Choice Scholarships Foundation, an organization that provides private-school scholarships to low-income students.

THEODORE SIZER is chairman emeritus of the Coalition of Essential Schools; a trustee and former co-principal, with his wife, of the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Massachusetts; and the author of six books, including *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School*.

THOMAS STEWART is the senior vice president for development of LearnNow, Inc., which this summer merged with Edison Schools, Inc., the nation's largest private manager of public schools. Previously, he served as the founding executive director of the SEED School, a public boarding school in Washington, D.C.

I. STATEMENT OF NEED

LEWIS H. LAPHAM: Before we get around to deciding what sort of school to build, I'd like to ask a somewhat impertinent question: namely, why bother? For forty years I've been reading bulletins from the frontiers of education, and they all read like casualty reports from a lost war--the kids are failing, marks are going down, etc., etc. But at the same time we seem to be doing okay. We're still graduating people who make fortunes or get elected president of the United States without knowing very much of American history. In other words, if the object of an American education is to get ahead in the world, then our schools seem to be doing a good enough job. Our children, after all, spend more hours in the classroom than the children in all other G-8 countries except France. Our primary-school teachers earn more, on average, than their counterparts in any G-8 country except Germany. And our fourth graders perform better on international reading tests than fourth graders in all of the other thirty-two countries tested except Finland. So if our students are getting ahead in the world, if we're spending an enormous amount of money, time, and effort in what is really a very romantic and generous enterprise--that is, we try to educate everybody--then why do we need to reinvent the school?

KRISTIN KEARNS JORDAN: Americans have always given pretty good lip service to the idea of educating all of the public, but in reality we have not done so. We have made school available to all students, but we have not tried to educate them all. I think we are going to have to come to terms with the fact that our ideals--what we say we intend to do--don't match what we have heretofore done. You spoke about inputs, Lewis: the number of hours in the classroom, teacher salaries. And then you used as an output the fourth-grade results. But if you look at the fourth-grade results, then the eighth-grade results, then the twelfth-grade results, you find that our standing in the world goes dramatically downward.

LAPHAM: What happens after the fourth grade?

JORDAN: In the early years, grades K through four, the primary influences on a child are school and family. And we are failing in grades five, six, and above to create that community, that network, that keeps a child engaged. I would also argue that a lot of instruction is painfully dull: we're not offering students a particularly exciting alternative to the media and the Internet. The schools no longer have the kind of captive audience they had in grades K through 4, and frankly I don't know that they deserve one. If you ask a typical student, "Why are you here?" you'll get, "My mom made me come," or, "It's the law." Only once we as educators justify our purpose can we expect kids to embrace it.

THOMAS STEWART: A lot of my work is focused on lower-income children, particularly of color, and I am amazed at the number of people who have internalized the absurd belief that they are innately incapable of learning. As a result, they resist education, because they have this notion that it's just not for them. Somehow we have to help them overcome that--and gain the understanding that learning is

something we all do, that we all start by knowing very little about new subjects and that learning is lifelong.

JOHN TAYLOR GATTO: Three years ago, in a summer issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Mortimer Zuckerman laid out the proposition that no one in the world, for a hundred years, would be able to catch the American economy--not because we had any particular technological advantage but because we had an enormous human advantage. And then he began to detail the characteristics of the American worker. He said, and I'm extrapolating here, that American workers define themselves by what they buy, and so they will continue to maintain the only reliable domestic market in the world. He said that American workers, including management, including district superintendents, live in a state of low-grade fear of being fired and replaced. Reading this, I thought, "How could we have gotten this way, that we're such wonderful fits for the economic machine?" Slowly it began to dawn on me that the schools I'd worked in for thirty years were the factories that produced this perfect fit. We have been schooled to have no inner life at all.

LAPHAM: So we take the caterpillar, and before it can turn into a butterfly we make sure it turns into a silkworm. And that's why it's important to reinvent the school? For the purpose of human freedom?

GATTO: If we want human freedom. If some of the more intense feelings of the first generations of Americans are ever once again to get their play. Most college graduates would be, I submit to you, unable to read Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* today, because of the dense allusions to science and politics and history and philosophy. Cooper's books were absolute blockbusters. And who were Cooper's readers but dirt farmers? I believe it was Chevalier who said that the American dirt farmer goes into the field with the plow under one arm and Descartes under the other. After the Civil War, the lesson was learned that rather than fill one order for a hat, you could stamp 3 million identical hats and get rich. Since then, school has failed in a human sense, but in a systematic sense it's been very successful. It leaves such barrenness in its path that people don't know what to do with their lives other than punch a button and watch television.

THEODORE SIZER: You are assuming that Americans make educational policy rationally. But I think history will show that the system follows a kind of mindless thread. In the sixties, Charles Silverman wandered around and visited all these schools and listened to all these state superintendents, and concluded that the whole thing was mindless, that we do what we do because we've always done it. The basic architecture and the ideas behind the high school haven't changed in a fundamental way since Charles Eliot and the Committee of Ten designed it in the 1890s. We know more about human learning. We understand that the culture and the economy have changed. But we are so stuck in what has become the conventional way of schooling that we don't think twice about it. So we still say that the mainline subjects that Charles Eliot and his colleagues established in 1893 are the core of the school. We still assume that one can test children's mastery of those mainline subjects in a way that is rigorous and useful. We persist in thinking that school is school is school. It runs for 180 days. You take English, math, social studies, science, in forty-seven-minute periods, taught by teachers who have more than a hundred students, sometimes two hundred. The students march forward on the basis of their birthdays, in things called "grades"--like eggs--and we tell ourselves that we can ascertain

whether those kids have profound intellectual competence. The system is mindless. The only villain is a society unprepared to think hard about what it means to learn.

GATTO: I disagree that there is no deliberation here. When the president of Harvard, James Bryant Conant, said flatly, in 1959, in a book called *The Child, the Parent, and the State*, that the schools we have are the result of a coup, I assume he wasn't speaking poetically. He said that if you want to know what the coup is about--and you'd be mad to try to overthrow this now--get yourself a copy of Alexander Inglis's book, *Principles of Secondary Education*. Inglis lays out the principles they were working toward in 1918. These were people seeking to separate themselves from the mass of the human race, because Charles Darwin and his cousin, Francis Galton, warned that cross-breeding with the evolutionarily retarded--and that's about 95 percent of the population--would cause evolution to march backward. So the proprietors of the society founded private boarding schools and about eleven other layers of privilege designed to protect the breeding stock. They set the rest of the people against one another to compete for what jobs and professional licenses the proprietors of society allowed them.

LAPHAM: So we've got a hundred-year-old system set up to turn out sheep.

GATTO: It's about managerial efficiency, and in order to make management most efficient, the working body should be childlike, or childish, because childish people are not independent.

STEWART: I think that's the way it used to be, John, but the new economy is demanding a level of intelligence and skills that the old economy did not. The economy has always influenced the output of the educational system, and the educational system has always given the economy only what it could consume. If you look at the economy up until the fifties or so, what the economy needed most from the school system was unskilled workers. Today technology companies will tell you that there is a dearth of skilled talent coming out of the school system. And the reality for most students is that they are focused on a job.

GATTO: I take issue with the notion that the modern economy requires more of people. I think it requires profoundly less. The top ten jobs in the American economy don't require anything. The single leading job is in fast-food restaurants. Half of the restaurant business is those hamburgers and chicken wings! The fast-food corporations control the beef industry, and they make important incursions into the government to get the regulatory environment they want. You change the schools and you're going to destroy the fast-food business. You're going to destroy the television industry. You provide independent people capable of independent thought and you virtually destroy this entire economy.

JORDAN: I think the difference is that forty or fifty years ago, unskilled workers could get manufacturing jobs that provided a real income and a comfortable life. These McDonald's jobs, these Gap jobs, are great for teenagers, but they do not support a family.

SIZER: In a culture in which commerce controls most of the transmission of information, and at a very low cost, you would think that, because we are a proud democracy, we would place a high value on people who knew how to ask the question "Why?" But increasingly some distant authority decides what it is that kids

should know and what questions they should be able to answer. There is less and less interest in preparing people who have the intelligence and the habit of mind to ask the unfamiliar and perhaps painful questions. Because our long-term economy depends on the informed skeptic, that person who says, "That's interesting--it seems to work, but gee, if we looked at it in a different way, it might work better" is crucial. So it's the increasingly standardized values that trouble me the most. Feisty people are the people who have made this country special.

II. MISSION STATEMENT

LAPHAM: IS that the purpose of this school we're attempting to design? To produce feisty individuals?

SIZER: Right.

LAPHAM: Not to produce a skilled labor force, or docile voters, or simply people who can read a menu and fill out a tax form?

GATTO: Citizens. There are three major purposes that human history has assigned to schooling, in every part of the world. One is to make good people--the religious or ethical motive, call it. Another is to make good citizens--that's a later development. The third is to make people their personal best. Then there is a fourth purpose, which comes in around the turn of the century: to turn people into resources for the disposition of government and the corporations.

JORDAN: Charter schools are often mission-driven schools; most of the students know why they are there. In our school, the mission is to prepare them for college, civic involvement, and life.

LAPHAM: And while we are educating these feisty citizens who have inner lives, we also need to make education relevant, right?

SIZER: It should be relevant to the child and relevant to the culture.

GATTO: But to the local culture, not some fictitious national or global culture. To the parents. To the local community. Otherwise you are dealing in this vast abstract world that is genuinely meaningless.

SIZER: Kids get their sense of life and images and language and so forth outside of school, away from the kitchen table. I was a high school principal in the seventies and then again in the late nineties. A fourteen-year-old today carries into school a much more sophisticated idea of the world than he or she carried into school during the 1970s. We Americans, in and out of schools, are reaching kids. There is a web of influences beyond the school. Not just the family. The street, the media.

We can't design the perfect charter school. My experience with people starting new schools is that unless they can somehow connect in a constructive way with this larger group of influences--mostly families, yes, but other influences as well--the results will follow social-class lines. You got rich kids in your school? They score well and all go to college. You got poor kids in the school? They don't score well and they

don't go to college. But if you get this larger network going--think about education as "schooling-plus"--then you've got some leverage.

LAPHAM: But how do you get "schooling-plus" to the poor kid?

SIZER: The school invests in bringing that family unit along, from the time the kid is small. And invests time in making sure that non-English-speaking Mom understands what is going on in teaching her child English--in making the family members benign co-conspirators. If you reach out and connect kids to the community at large, and in the process help the community see its collective responsibility--store owners, police officers, people on the street--the results are stunning.

JORDAN: Is the problem that we're trying to invent a system with a uniform purpose, and that this attempt at standardization is defeating the very impulse that Ted is trying to inspire? Because if you don't allow each school to define its own purpose, then you are allowing someone in some bureaucracy or some standard from the 1890s to define what schools are. When you have a school system, you have administrations trying to lead and also trying to kowtow to whatever interests are paying their salaries. Nobody wants the awful job of being a principal, and so you have this terrible self-fulfilling prophecy: you don't trust principals, and so you create more rules and regulations--you have to do this and this and this, and you must have these professional-development programs, and you must have these bulletin boards in your school, etc., etc. The people who tolerate that are not the feisty thinkers.

SIZER: You could build a system that would look quite different from the system we've got. Let's say state boards and districts or county school committees don't run schools. They issue contracts. And a group of parents and teachers get together and look at the broad outline of what the county or state board requires; the group then makes a proposal about the way it intends to run its school. If the state board says yes, it comes back in five years to inspect and verify whether the school has accomplished what it set out to accomplish. If not, the state can cut off the funding. The state board doesn't run anything. The decisions about the shape and the operation of the school are made by the teachers and the parents, in response to some basic guidelines from the state, and in response to the state's right, periodically and rigorously, to inspect. All of this reflects the idea of charters.

JORDAN: I think it was Diane Ravitch who said, "We don't need a school system but rather--"

SIZER: "--a system of schools."

LAPHAM: You could break the schools down into niche schools under such a system. Suppose your objective is the feisty individual, and suppose my objective is the happy worker.

GATTO: As long as attendance wasn't compulsory, it wouldn't matter.

LAPHAM: But doesn't citizenship go out the window if any school can teach whatever it wants?

SIZER: There are some essentials that all schools could be required to teach.

LAPHAM: Give me a list of the essentials.

SIZER: Two languages, at the minimum. And a sense of how the system works: civic understanding. And on top of that--and this is much harder to define--a sense of decency and respect.

GATTO: Yes! It's the first thing I would put on the list! What if you said at the beginning of the year, "No one is getting out of this class until you've proven to me that you are honest, honorable, decent, courageous, independent, curious, and generous. That will do for the seventh grade."

JORDAN: I would add adept use of the English language. Words are power in this culture.

SIZER: Words and images.

STEWART: And our young people need to be equipped with a bullshit-o-meter. They need to be able to distinguish between adults who mean them good and adults who mean them harm.

GATTO: Exactly. If you go through the twenty volumes of Thomas Jefferson's writings, you can distill five principles that Jefferson said were justifications for schooling. The first two were to teach people their rights and to teach them how to defend those rights. The third was to know the ways of the human heart so well that you can be neither cheated nor fooled. There isn't a school in the United States, certainly not a public school, that would dream of trying to aim for those goals.

LAPHAM: What are principles four and five?

GATTO: Four deals with the relation of citizens to experts: a citizen must never be intimidated by experts; experts deal only in facts, but important decisions are matters of philosophy and valuing, not fact. So the expert must always be subordinate. And five is that an educated person possesses useful knowledge: how to build a house, how to grow food, how to make a dress, etc.

JORDAN: I would add to our list the ability to work collaboratively toward a common goal. We had an extraordinary opportunity this year to do community-service projects as a team. A hundred kids raised, in a penny harvest, \$800. They each brought in 800 pennies. The kids elected, from each class, two representatives who developed a committee to disburse these funds. They did research on local organizations that were in need. They learned how to negotiate. It started off that whenever Maricruz, a very popular child in the fifth grade--for good reason: she's dynamic, she's honest, she's bright--whenever Maricruz had an idea, everyone would say, "Let's do that. Let's do what Marl says." But over time, they learned how to assess the idea as separate from the proponent of the idea, to ask hard questions about whether this particular charity would benefit most from the money. And they came up with very good results, which they then reported back to the student body. That is what the faculties of good startup schools are doing. They are working together to start a school that is worthy of its kids.

III. EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

LAPHAM: Let's say we're one of those faculties. We've got some sense of what our mission is, and we've identified some of the essentials that must be taught. But what about the details? What is our curriculum?

GATTO: How about the active literacies, to start with? The thing the British colonial government of America hated worst of all was that ordinary people in this country were getting access to the active literacies. Not just to reading, which is useful for clerks to be able to do, but to various forms of public speaking and writing, which enable you to enlarge your zone of influence.

JORDAN: Agreed, but it does start with the book. Our fifth graders are reading *Night John* right now, which is a wonderful Gary Paulsen book about a twelve-year-old girl, a slave girl, who learns to read. And the power of reading is so palpable in that book. It's a wonderful way for the fifth grade--the first year of our school--to begin, because it communicates that reading is not something they are required to do as some sort of punishment between nine and eleven in the morning.

LAPHAM: So the books we pick are not necessarily the ones that would be handed around by a school system.

JORDAN: You find a teacher who knows how to pick a good book.

STEWART: Which has to do with Ted's point about understanding the broader culture surrounding the school. You have to try to tie the curriculum to the culture of the child, of the family. If students can read about places that are nearby or people that are familiar, then it makes reading lively. At LearnNow we have worked with many people who have been isolated in their communities--I mean, they have never gone more than five miles beyond their homes. That makes it really difficult to get them excited about reading. They feel that if what they read is not relevant to their world, their tiny world, then it's not worth learning.

LAPHAM: Then let's be specific. Let's say we're in the Bronx, and we're in the fourth grade. What are we doing with the day?

GATTO: I would use the first week to impose a strong academic structure, but I'd constantly say, and write on the board, that here are all these other opportunities that you can use, in lieu of what I'm doing, if you can get your mother's clearance. By the end of the second week, year after year, there are seven kids who have already identified themselves as being on their own career track. At that point they have a minimum amount of use sitting around in a class and pretending to listen while they're drawing comic books. There is one kid I'm thinking of. We found out that a famous comic-book writer was taking a master's up at Columbia, and I assigned him to spy on her--I guess stalk her--for about four days. He said that she always goes to the V&T pizzeria on 111th Street. I loaned him fifteen dollars and told him to go over there and say, "Listen, I'm a big fan of what you're doing and I want to do it myself someday. I want to buy you a pizza, please, and I won't bother you ever again." Well, he ended up having a weekly apprenticeship downtown for the whole day. So, I get rid of the kids who already know what they are doing, though I'm available to them throughout the day. Now I've got twenty-three kids left, and I say, "Look, you don't have to spend more than two days a week in here. In that

time, we can do about nine times what the gifted-and-talented. classes are doing, so you won't have any trouble holding your head up in the building." And then I'd work with them individually until I had about half the kids out every day.

LAPHAM: In other words, you tried to match what they wanted to know--

GATTO: --with what I knew about New York City and with what I knew about learning. It wasn't always a perfect match, but it was a good enough match that in ninety days, sometimes eighty, I didn't have any discipline problems at all. My kids would turn from, you know, whining, dishonest, greedy boys and girls into young men and women. In front of my eyes.

JORDAN: Your ability as a teacher is exceptional, John, but we take, clearly, a different approach.

LAPHAM: Fill the day in for me.

JORDAN: In the fifth grade, students spend half of their day in some sort of language-arts activity: novel reading, reading-comprehension skills, writing, more traditional grammar; a significant portion of their time in math skills; considerable history and science; and, at the end of the day, between four and five, they will engage, in an indepth way, in the arts. So they won't have a music class for fifty minutes once a week and a visual-arts class for fifty minutes--what do you do in music for fifty minutes a week? A very good music teacher once said, "You know, we don't have algebra appreciation. Why do we have to have music appreciation?" Kids will pick an artistic endeavor--violin, cello, painting or drawing, African dance--and spend three or four hours a week in that activity and develop a real ability to play an instrument. At some point during the day, you build in some physical activity, motor skills. And then you build social capital wherever you can. We have an extraordinary opportunity in that we are actually building our school, our permanent facility. So you bring the architect in to talk with the students and ask for their input in building design. You bring the would-be funders in to talk with the kids: this helps the kids to understand the economic environment in which we are operating. So your students, John, are going out into the world and finding opportunities. We manage it a little bit more and bring those opportunities in.

GATTO: Can I ask a question, Kristin? These lovely kids, who have musical ability and artistic ability and are learning motor coordination--why couldn't all the forlorn old people of New York City, locked up in old-age homes, watch those kids as the art became set design and costume design and the music became recitals? Why couldn't the kids put on a traveling theater program for the old people of New York? Why couldn't they be doing these things in reality rather than simulating them?

JORDAN: Well, they do. They actually have gone to Westchester to perform for elementary-school children. And they do it for our parents.

GATTO: Wonderful. I mean really wonderful. Now, in a forty-week school year, why couldn't we say that one day a week the kids were going to be learning about a different group of people and helping those people pass their day productively?

JORDAN: It's a time-management question. If they are out with their instruments one day a week, they are not in their reading class, reading Night John with their classmates. And I think that becomes a very complicated proposition for a school.

GATTO: What if some of them were doing that?

JORDAN: What happens when only some of them read Chapter 12 in class one day? It becomes very difficult for teachers to manage. I think one of the realities we are facing is that teachers the kind of committed, idealistic teachers who want to work in the South Bronx--are often young and new at their craft. Creating such a loose environment is a profoundly challenging thing to a new teacher.

LAPHAM: But you're both dependent upon improvisation.

JORDAN: Sure.

LAPHAM: And so our school is dependent upon talented teachers. Which may be a problem: we haven't even discussed the teachers' unions.

GATTO: I think I've misled everyone into thinking that what my kids learned depended on me. It did at first, until the kids saw that they were independent of me except occasionally, when they wanted some grounding. My experience with Harlem kids--and I have a funny accent and I'm from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania--was that once they were absolutely certain that I was going to turn the teaching over to them--and I'd extract my pound of flesh: they had to read Moby-Dick, they had to go through seven or eight Shakespeare plays a year--and once they were absolutely certain that they wanted to be an apprentice at Marvel comics or the New York Stock Exchange or at Harper's Magazine, they knew I would move heaven and earth to help them to do that.

JORDAN: Even among gifted kids, the understanding of Shakespeare takes a good degree of collaboration and conversation. Where is the time for that if everyone is off having an internship? When do we sit down, with our play, and analyze the characters, and figure out the author's intent, and uncode this humor? It's really very funny, much of Shakespeare, but as an eleventh grader I didn't get it when I first read it. Students learn from one another, and that conversation is the richness of education--if we're talking not about schooling but about education. It happens in a community, and a classroom is really a microcosm of that community. I would be sad to lose that.

GATTO: What if you intensified it, so that rather than having it in a regular five-day week, you assume that these kids had the ability to truncate that experience--not completely eliminate it, but truncate it to an extreme degree? I will guarantee you that only three of those scenes in any play, and two in most of them, will leap out of all the rest. And in those two or three scenes, you will find the heart of the play, the conflict. All the rest of it is stage business. But the great human questions that are being decided by that play are cast in those two or three scenes. Any Harlem kid, no matter how degraded his or her home life is, will see immediately what is going on. I know. I've seen it.

SIZER: There are a lot of good things that we all want to do in schools, if we have the time. Our school and the schools from which we've learned, Mike Debbie Meier's Central Park East Secondary School and others, focus. You can't do everything. You try to do the most important things, the most essential things, very well. In the school with which I'm now associated, the children arrive at age twelve. They are not in grades. They advance on the basis of their publicly exhibited performance. To oversimplify a little bit, the focus is on two fundamental languages: English, written and spoken, and mathematics. There are no electives in the traditional sense. We believe in teaching foreign languages, but we offer only one--Spanish--and everyone must master it. As soon as you make those choices, which are admittedly painful, you can reduce the load-of students per teacher to no more than sixty-five kids. Most have fewer than fifty.

In contrast to the first school of which I was principal, Phillips Academy, which had every bell and whistle going--eleven foreign languages--this school is substantially different. But it is the same in the sense that everything turns on the performance of the kids. At Phillips Academy, kids came in from all quarters, and each took a ten-week readin'-and-writin' course, and if he or she didn't meet the standard at the end of ten weeks he or she took it for another ten weeks. If the standard was not met at the end of that period the youngster had to do it again--you keep going. What we're trying to say to students in the new school is, "Let's not talk about tenth grade and eleventh grade. Let's talk about your having met a standard that you understand because it's all been explained to you and you've seen a lot of examples and because your parents or guardians have been part of the conversation in drawing up a contract. You know that your progress depends not on just getting older but on having a set of work that is worthy of presenting to strangers and defending." It sounds harsh. In fact, it's not, because in that very simple system there is so much room in which to maneuver. And the kids understand the rationale. They say, "I'm coming to school to be able to learn how to write." So it is not unreasonable for us to say, "Let me show you some good writing. This is what you're going to do, six months from now or seven months from now." And we say, "Wow, I'll never be able to do that." And they say, "Yes, you will." It is a very simple school. All the high schools I visited around the country for my high-school study are incredibly complex. Their schedules are so interlocked they are frozen. This school is not frozen. It's a three-period day two: hours, two hours, two hours. You can stop the school when something happens or when there is an interesting visitor. It is supple, because it is simple and focused.

JORDAN: I think the idea of a contract, an agreement to collaborate, is vital. We are very explicit with our students, families, anyone else who is interested, about the student-family-teacher triangle. We share one another's home phone numbers and talk in the evenings. Usually it's about a simple homework questions, but that opens up lines of communication for when there is a difficulty on the bus. You hear from the child or the parent when that child gets home, even if you're already home. The relationship goes beyond a particular block of forty-five minutes. And it is important to formalize that relationship. Our contract is less than two pages, and it is the basis of each party's understanding: the teacher's commitment, the student's commitment, the parents' commitment.

STEWART: Before LearnNow I co-founded and ran a public boarding school called the SEED School, and we made a huge effort to bring parents into the fold. What we found was that a lot of parents have been marred by their public-school experience.

A lot of low-income parents will tell you, "When I left school, I swore I would never go back." And then they had children. So they are little schizophrenic about schools, because personally they don't want to go back, but they are expected to be advocates for their children. We spent a lot of time trying to reconcile this tension by making home visits to all the families. We showed the parents that it's going to cost us, you know, x thousands of dollars to run this school. We get about half of it through a public-school allocation. We think we can raise about another 40 percent, and then we're still going to 10 percent short. So we tell the parents that we want them to participate in what we call a "time-dollar" concept. We will give them \$15 an hour for every hour that they donate to the school, but we don't give them money. They chaperone, they tutor, they monitor two hours of homework sessions in the evenings, they carpool. And we track their contributions. At the end of the year we can say to them, "You donated \$45,000 to the school." What we said in the beginning is that when people ask us, "Why is your school successful?" if we can't say, first, "The parents," then we've failed.

LAPHAM: This raises an important question: How do we fund this school of ours? What if a school that is truly worthy of its kids simply cost more than taxpayers are willing to pay?

GATTO: Why shouldn't schools be self-funding and self-maintaining?

LAPHAM: How do you mean self-funding? Self-funding in Tom's way? Penny harvests?

GATTO: All I can throw out here are a few experiments that I tried, and I was operating inside a school system with very little cooperation. I would send the kids all over the West Side, from Columbia University down to Lincoln Center, to make a small business map of the area--the location, the type of business. Then I'd distribute the kids for three days to spy on individual businesses and see how many transactions they estimated, and we did this with street peddlers too. Someone came by from the community planning board and said, "You know, we've been talking about doing this for years. Could we have that data when you're done with it?" And it occurred to me that a lot of the things kids can do have cash value. There is no reason that a school should be a parasite at all. I went to school in the forties, and kids always prepared the lunch and did the custodial services, and we fought for the privilege of doing it.

LAPHAM: Oliver Twist. Principal Fagin.

GATTO: I feel like Fagin sometimes.

SIZER: Certainly in the public sector the money should follow the child rather than the district. I, the parent, should pick the school. The money to support the formal education of my child should be made available to that school, as long as it was public. In Massachusetts the money follows the child in the case of regional technical vocational high schools. The money follows the child in the case of children with special needs. I think in the whole blooming system the money should follow the child. And I also think that every child should have the right to apply for admission to any school, irrespective of its immediate jurisdiction. The dirty secret of public education is that it is profoundly segregated by social class. And the only way to break that hammerlock is to get rid of jurisdictions. Any family in the Commonwealth

of Massachusetts, whether they live in the inner city or in a rural area, can get into the lottery to go to our school, which, by the way, has a smaller per-pupil expenditure than most of the comprehensive high schools in our region. So the money following the child serves several masters. It's not just about getting the money where it should go, of the family has choice. It also breaks the back of the segregation of the public sector. Are these "vouchers"? In a way they are--functioning for children in a manner that the G.I. Bill functioned for me and others in my generation.

JORDAN: I think there is a growing realization that just because a school is segregated, just because a school serves primarily low-income kids, doesn't mean that it has to be a bad school. It's similar in some ways to single-sex education. If you have an all-girls school, only girls will be the leaders. All the top performers will be girls; the editor of the newspaper will be a girl. In a school that serves only low-income students, all the applicants to Harvard and Yale will be low-income students. The student-body president will be a low-income student. I would much rather see a system in which the dollars truly follow the children and in which children of different economic classes went to school together. But we can't wait for that to happen. We can't sit back and say, "Well, once the system desegregates itself, then we'll be able to teach poor children."

STEWART: We have to make a distinction between what is allocated for the classroom and what actually makes it into the classroom. If you look at budgets--particularly those of big public-school systems--they include all sorts of inefficiencies: legal services, special education, personnel costs. Only five to ten cents on the dollar actually make it into the classroom. There are tens of thousands, if not millions, of young people who deserve something better. And so our company was created to build an entire system of schools. We go into a low-income--what we call "under-resourced"--community, identify community leaders and parents, and say to them, "We would like you to embrace this approach." And if they are willing to do it, then we sit down with them and refine it, because all schools look different, regardless of what the model is. The reason we went for-profit is that we are able to draw funds through private and public entities and reallocate those resources to places that just don't have them. The Mississippi delta doesn't have the resources that are available in places like New York and Pennsylvania. The other critical thing is the teacher issue. We are able to do national searches on behalf of our local partners and to provide incentives for teachers to go places they wouldn't otherwise go.

IV. FACULTY

GATTO: Do you have to use certified teachers, Tom?

STEWART: In some cases we do. In some states upwards of 75 percent of your teaching staff needs to be certified, and then they give you a reasonable period of time to do something with the other 25 percent or so.

GATTO: That's a real obstacle to getting anything done. There is a huge amount of floating talent that is free in this society. Think of all the retired people, the unemployed artists.

LAPHAM: But how would they get into the system? The unions won't let them in, right?

GATTO: The unions and the teachers colleges, which really are much more sophisticated at influencing legislation.

LAPHAM: Could I teach at your school, Kristin--or your school, Ted--without being certified?

SIZER: Sure.

JORDAN: Yes. We don't have any certified teachers.

SIZER: My only teacher certification is in Victoria, Australia, and I've done okay. But let me give a little pitch for unions. There are several hundred new small schools--actually no longer so new--in New York that would not have been able to do some very remarkable work without the United Federation of Teachers, particularly Sandy Feldman, when she was president. In Boston the eleven pilot schools, which some people call "indistrict charters," are the result of the collective-bargaining agreement between the Boston teachers' union and the city of Boston. Several of those schools have been around awhile now, and the kids don't drop out, they don't get into trouble; they graduate, and they go to college. The charter is simply one of a number of mechanisms. It's a means, it's not an end.

GATTO: But where is the justification for insulating the schools against all the nonunion talent?

SIZER: The historical reason for unions is the corruption of school districts. In many cities the union has been the only protection that kids had from a rapacious city government.

GATTO: But what's the justification for certification?

SIZER: That's a separate issue from the unions.

GATTO: It is--and I'm not beating on the unions--but there is a huge amount of free talent available that we can't access. The Columbia University retired-faculty chapter is enormous, and it includes department heads--there are thousands of people potentially available. There are hundreds available immediately who have tremendous knowledge and ability. And a lot of them just hang around the campus waiting for something to do. The last two years I taught I connected my class with the retired-faculty chapter at Columbia, and there was no resistance whatsoever. I have a feeling that with the sixteen or seventeen universities around New York City alone, you could duplicate that experience very, very easily.

SIZER: I don't think that's going to solve the big problem. The big problem is: good people don't take and stay in jobs that don't entrust them with important things. Smart college graduates look at the way the system works now and say, "Well, maybe for a few years, Teach for America or something, but the system doesn't trust me, and there is no way I am going to make this a lifelong career." So any solution to the teacher-quality problem has to reflect the movement of authority downward. Authority and accountability must be shifted down to the individual school, with the right of those faculties and their leadership to pick their own members, wherever those members may come from.

GATTO: I don't think we disagree, Ted. What I believe possible and valuable, though, is the movement of authority even further downward than the individual school, opening the teaching function to everyone who has value to confer, to retired businesspeople as well as to academics, to housewives, to shut-ins, to college students--the works.

STEWART: In the broadest sense, we are talking about the de-monopolization of public education--not the privatization of public education, not even the deregulation of public education. The de-monopolization. As long as public education in this country remains a monopoly of the state, teachers will take one look at what goes on in a school--particularly a large, urban public school--and say, "I'm not sticking around here for very long."

JORDAN: Earlier in my career I wanted to be a New York City public-school teacher. I knew that because there was such a teacher shortage, I wouldn't have to go to a teachers college, but as I tried to find my way in I got absolutely frustrated with the bureaucracy--I couldn't have gone to 110 Livingston Street one more time and remained sane. The system as it is constructed does not effectively help teachers to develop their talents in the classroom.

LAPHAM: What does a good teacher need to know?

JORDAN: Good teachers need to know how to keep their students engaged in the question at hand, a task that varies quite a bit from the very early primary years to the middle-school years to the high school years. They need to figure out how to reach students who have very different learning styles. They need to define the purpose of their lesson, and then get their students to achieve that purpose.

GATTO: They've got to be real people! The real people don't have any trouble in these schools. The kids understand that there is something authentic. Once a kid came to me and said, "You're different from the other teachers. You talk to us the same way you talk to the principal. You talk to everybody the same way." I was brought up to do that. Not to adjust my discourse from one audience to another. It's why babies cry in my presence.

JORDAN: I take issue with that, because we have brought in regular people whom our kids eat alive.

GATTO: They've got to know something too! And they have to be dynamic. Remember, we've locked these people in and immobilized them; the only hope for a productive encounter in such radical circumstances is to restore vitality to the equation. The kids know if someone is bankrupt of ideas. And they will not forgive lifelessness.

JORDAN: No, no, no! These are very interesting people! But they were not effective in reaching a fifth- and sixth-grade audience. They were using vocabulary beyond the students' reach.

GATTO: I always do that!

JORDAN: They were creating activities that lost their students. There is a skill involved in teaching.

LAPHAM: And how does one learn that skill?

JORDAN: Good teachers find ways to get constant feedback going in their classroom. Some can do the majority of that work on their own, but I think a "master teacher," someone from the outside, who is there to coach, is invaluable.

SIZER: You have to know your subject so well--

JORDAN: Cold.

SIZER: --so well that you have real confidence. Whether you are a first-year teacher or a thirty-year veteran, if you go into an English classroom and aren't well-read, and don't have a passion for reading and writing, then you are just tinkering.

GATTO: Kids know immediately. You have to teach something, and the kids have an unerring radar for whether or not you know what you are talking about. And by "something" I don't mean the Board of Ed's lesson plans--they lack insight and even accurate information. If somebody says, "Why should I learn Shakespeare?" you should be able to answer immediately, because you understand the value of it.

SIZER: In Massachusetts the way to solve a teacher shortage, it appears, is to demand more tests, more training courses, more credits!

STEWART: And the irony is that the people who successfully scale those barriers can become the most harmful types of educators in the classroom. Somebody once said, "Hurt people hurt people." Just as students have an innate ability to discern someone who understands the subject matter, I believe dropouts, or students who cut a particular teacher's class, have an innate ability to discern when somebody is trying to harm them. Unfortunately, a lot of states produce teachers who are better prepared to harm students than to support their development.

JORDAN: Look at what people have to do to get certified in New York State. They have to go through an education process, this vetting system, that will probably cost about \$30,000. This eliminates a whole group of people who could best connect to the low-income kids we're trying to educate. Then these would-be teachers have to take time out from more interesting endeavors in their lives to go through, in some states, an inane examination process, which measures we're not sure what, and then they're forced to spend hour upon hour going to the Board of Ed and figuring out which forms to fill out and getting papers stamped and finding out that they are still delinquent somewhere. The people who are willing to tolerate that are not your feisty types. And so the process is validating exactly the opposite type of person that each of us sees as the most effective teacher.

SIZER: It's always necessary to remember that there are reasons for this gridlock. The history of these oppressive certification laws is that they came out of extraordinary abuse by a system in which some mayor's half-drunk, illiterate uncle was hired to teach twelfth-grade English.

V. ACCOUNTABILITY

LAPHAM: Let's say we do all the things you four have suggested: hire knowledgeable, interesting, and uncertified teachers, including young idealists and retired university professors; encourage students to do internships; make house calls; teach a few essential subjects well rather than many subjects poorly; make the school day more supple. How, then, will we determine whether the program is working? How will colleges be able to discriminate between our graduates and those of competing schools? Do we need a standardized test?

SIZER: We're caught in a rhetorical trap, because the words "standards" and "standardization" now overlap. You are perceived to be against "standards" if you challenge the notion of standardization. The notion that there likely is more than one definition of intellectual power is very frightening to people who say, "We're going to have one best system, and by golly we'll enforce it."

LAPHAM: So you would be against national standards, even state standards?

SIZER: Absolutely, if arrayed in current ways.

JORDAN: And yet, as a result of God knows which forces, there is an entire class of American children who are not learning the fundamentals. They do not know how to decode words. They do not know basic math-computation skills. These skills must be learned. Without content and without skills, critical thinking is useless. It's wonderful for kids to learn how to discuss questions of justice and equality, but their arguments make them fools when they don't know the difference between the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. An enormous number of schools are letting themselves off the hook in terms of skill and content on the grounds that the goal is to teach kids "how to think." I'm not sure that standardized exams are the best way to ensure that some very basic level of skill and content is being learned, but what is the alternative?

SIZER: Well, I think you need a variety of things. I think the good standardized tests are terrific.

LAPHAM: What is a good standardized test? The SAT?

SIZER: In part, but I'm a great believer in resuscitating the nineteenth-century notion of exhibitions, where a high-school student supposedly masters this material and the way to think about it, then defends that mastery in a public setting in front of people who might ask him to apply the knowledge to some unfamiliar situation. That's the real test of serious knowledge. The ultimate test of a good education is what you do by habit when no one is looking. At our school, the kids and parents are shown a set of skills and content standards for the three levels involved, and the kids work to exhibit mastery enough to move to the next level. Every piece of student work is kept and revised until it meets the standard, then it goes into a portfolio. This collection of work that meets the standard is under constant scrutiny by the teacher who knows that kid, as well as by that kid's guardian.

LAPHAM: But if you have no state or national standards, where do you get the material? The content that you are talking about, Kristin? The Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement?

JORDAN: I think at an elementary level we could probably agree on most elements of a curriculum.

STEWART: Our company is getting an increasing number of calls from chartering authorities who raise your point, Lewis. We have fifteen charters under our sphere of influence; now we are being told that we have to hold these charters accountable. The goal is that all students who graduate from one of our schools will be able to research, write, and orally defend a fifteen- to twenty-page essay. They will be able to do advanced mathematics of some form. And science and technology are very important--technology not only as a subject matter but as a tool. But each school has a different approach, a different mission, and that's as it should be. Charters should be as unique as their students are.

SIZER: Right. And this is a central point, because the assumption behind an imposed standard is that the people are not to be trusted. The issue of academic freedom is fundamental here. One need only look at the curriculum frameworks in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to see the ideological spin: it's a consistent spin, but it's just one spin. The trick is to be tolerant of diversity while at the same time forcing the substance of these diverse schools to be put under the klieg lights. Ultimately, though, you have to trust the judgment of the people running them: parents and teachers. The current mood is utterly distrustful. LAPHAM: In Tom's school the student has to defend a fifteen-page essay. In Ted's school the student has to exhibit mastery of the curriculum. What is your measure at the end, Kristin?

JORDAN: It's a combination. It's performance on certain standardized tests; it's the successful completion of a science project, using the scientific method in its traditional form; it's the preparation and defense of an essay on an historical topic; different activities and different standards at different grade levels.

LAPHAM: Do you reserve the right not to award whatever the passing mark is?

JORDAN: Of course. At some grade levels in some subjects, there is an internal committee that evaluates. In others, usually at a benchmark year--eighth grade or twelfth grade--there are outside experts who are brought in to listen to the orchestra play particular pieces or to determine if the students have met a certain standard for writing.

LAPHAM: Can you do that with a for-profit operation, Tom? Can you say to a parent, "Well, the student didn't make it and he'll have to do it again"?

STEWART: The research is showing that neither social promotion nor retention really works. What teachers are being told now is, "Regardless of what grades you give and receive, if your students don't score well on the standardized tests, your job could be lost." And the students are being told, "Do well or you could be retained." Imagine a seventh-grade teacher who inherits half a class of students who are not prepared for the seventh grade--nobody cares about what happened a year before or five or six years before. All the teacher knows is, "These students are now on my docket, and

I'm going to be scored on whether I get them to the next grade level." And that's what happens, in the worst cases.

GATTO: I think genius is as common as air, and we have never had the imagination to figure out a social order or an economy that can deal with anything but a minority of the human talent out there. Why do any of you think that charter schools, or any other kind of schools, need closer scrutiny than, say, Groton or Saint Paul's? By eighth grade, most of the kids know that grades are irrelevant. The kids who are going to be anointed by the system know that whatever they do the grades will be sufficient to move them along to the next level. Very few are dropped out, because their parents will come in and raise hell. And to the kids who know by then that they are losers, and don't see a future in any of the appointed careers, it's irrelevant. It isn't that they don't know science or English. They don't care!

Let me tell you how I know they don't care. I began to sabotage my own tests fairly early in my career by telling kids exactly what the questions would be. But toward the end of my career I became flagrant at doing it, providing the kids with both the questions and the "best" acceptable answers the day before the test was given. It turned out that there was no improvement in anybody's performance. In most cases, it was irrelevant whether they had the right answer or not. The only explanation that makes sense is that, despite protestations to the contrary, the kids knew that the tests would have no bearing on their lives--and they were right.

SIZER: Crime doesn't pay!

GATTO: I'd like to ask you, Lewis, an impertinent question. Did you ever, in your entire life, ask anybody you hired what his or her grades were in English?

LAPHAM: No.

GATTO: And did you ever ask your barber what his grade was in barber college? We all have an innate understanding of quality. I've been a schoolteacher for thirty years, and I've never been in a classroom for more than two days without knowing exactly who would get the A's, the A minuses, the B's. And I would make the subject of the next unit I taught why I knew those things, and why it was utterly irrelevant, because neither standardized tests nor grades correlate with anything of any value other than the peace of mind of the schoolteacher and maybe of the school board.

SIZER: I've been teaching almost as long as you have, John, and I am constantly amazed by what some of my students do and do not do. In my view, and fortunately, kids are constantly changing. The incompetent, disconnected dreamer last year walks in this year and is quite different!

GATTO: As we sit here and talk, 2 million kids, 2 million, are involved in home-schooling, and what we're talking about here is a light-year leap away from that kind of thinking. I would hate my children to have to compete with these home-schooled children twenty years down the line, because home-schooled kids become human beings and people at about the age of ten or eleven, maybe even before that. Read Ben Franklin's Autobiography, and you'll see that out of a family of seventeen in a candlemaker's house, Franklin is putting himself, at the age of twelve, through a curriculum that Harvard wouldn't dream of imposing on its freshmen, and furthermore he's working sixty hours a week while doing it! And he's not some

transcendental genius. He's a nasty little boy, and he grows up to be a nasty man. But when it came time to convince the French to fund the American Revolution, this candlemaker's son apparently had no difficulty with the French language. Under our noses, the record of American history and even the record of the American present is replete with examples of people from every social class shucking this system and beginning to use their time to their own advantage. They just leap ahead. Look at the Williams sisters! They didn't have the money to get a tennis coach or to go to tennis camp. And the father, who was a sharecropper's son, said to the girls, "It's so easy to do. We'll watch videos we check out of the library, and we'll read these diagrams in the book--you know, you put your thumb here and your index finger there ..."

JORDAN: I think we all have the capacity to become feisty individuals like Benjamin Franklin and the Williams sisters, and some of us will do that if left to our own devices. But I would never have done it if I had been left to my own devices. I needed coaxing. I needed teachers. I needed confidence building. I needed engagement with caring adults.

GATTO: For twelve years? I think you're down-rating yourself. It takes about ninety days for the worst kid, who is as timid as a rabbit, or the one who is totally unsocial, to be able to walk over to the Park Bernet galleries to an exhibition and, when someone says, "You can't come in," to say, "I beg your pardon, my mother is upstairs." It takes thirty hours to teach somebody how to read. Thirty hours--that's all. Fifty hours for the entire math curriculum, and I'm citing the guy who was on 60 Minutes recently, Dan Greenberg of the Sudbury Valley School.

JORDAN: I wish it were so easy!

GATTO: Dan Greenberg said to me that in running the Sudbury Valley School he's learned that the entire basic math curriculum is twenty hours of contact time, and then the students are self-managing. I can tell you that kids from Harvard--excuse me, Harlem, though I guess they're equivalent--it takes kids from Harlem just ninety days to win essay contests. Ninety days. Now, if you give them 180 days, you can deepen that a bit, and if you give them four or five years of engagement with the world, you've really got something.

LAPHAM: But how do you do that in a school? Is that your question, Kristin?

JORDAN: Yes. That's always the question. Two students come to mind. Thelma is a student who I think would be just fine without us. She is inquisitive, she is analytical, she learns in the way that I learn, which is probably why I think she's so smart--I'll acknowledge my own biases there. From day one she was on top of the lesson and beyond it. Contrast with her Robert, who is everywhere except on point most of the time. Now, Robert had a substitute teacher the other day who came up with a wonderfully creative way of engaging him. The exercise was to build a structure with a piece of blue paper and a piece of yellow paper--you could cut it, you could tear it, you could bend it, but you weren't given tape. And your aim was to make your structure as high as possible. Robert made an absolutely brilliant structure. Thelma refused to participate in the exercise at all. The point of the story is that it takes something different for each child, and that's why education is so complicated, and that's why education is such an extraordinary experience for the people involved.

WE WANT ONE CLASS OF persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class, of necessity, in every society, to forgo the privileges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks. You cannot train them for both in the time that you have at your disposal. They must make a selection, and you must make a selection. I do not mean to say that in the manual training there must not be an element of liberal training; neither am I hostile to the idea that in the liberal education there should be an element of the manual training. But what I am intent upon is that we should not confuse ourselves with regard to what we are trying to make of the pupils under our instruction. We are either trying to make liberally-educated persons out of them, or we are trying to make skillful servants of society along mechanical lines, or else we do not know what we are trying to do....

{W}hat is technical education? It is one which condemns all but the extraordinary individual to a minor part in life, to a part not of command or direction but of specific performance, to the difficult manual tasks of the world which require skill, a perfect command of the muscles, a trained eye, a definite knowledge of physical relations and of complex machinery; its pupils are men schooled precisely in the particular processes which they are to apply. One of the drawbacks to American industry is that we do not make such men because we overshoot the mark and try to make them something else besides. The consequence is that neither side of the task is completed or perfected, and we make neither liberally-educated men nor serviceable experts. It is not that we should not wish to do it, it is that no matter how hard we wish we cannot do it. It is absolutely an unpatriotic thing to waste the money devoted to education by trying to do a thing which we know is impossible. The majority of men have to be drawers of water and hewers of wood.

-- WOODROW WILSON "Liberal Education" (1909)

THE SCHOOL, like the factory, is a thoroughly regimented world. Immovable seats in orderly rows fur the sphere of activity of each child. For all, from the timid six-year-old entering for the first time to the most assured high school senior, the general routine is much the same. ... There are "study-periods" in which children learn "lessons" from "text-books" prescribed by the state and "recitation-periods" in which they tell an adult teacher what the book has said; one hears children reciting the battles of the Civil War in one recitation period, the rivers of Africa in another, the "parts of speech" in a third; the method is much the same. With high school come some differences; more "vocational" and "laboratory" work varies the periods. But here again the lesson-text-book-recitation method is the chief characteristic of education. For nearly an hour a teacher asks questions and pupils answer, then a bell rings, on the instant books bang, powder and mirrors come out, there is a buzz of talk and laughter as all the urgent business of living resumes momentarily for the children, notes and "dates" are exchanged, five minutes pass, another hell, gradual sliding into seats, a final giggle, a last vanity case snapped shut, "In our last lesson we had just finished"--and another class is begun....

Accompanying the formal training afforded by courses of study is another and informal kind of training, particularly during the high school years. The high school, with its athletics, clubs, sororities and fraternities, dances and parties, and other "extracurricular activities," is a fairly complete social cosmos in itself, and about this city within a city the social life of the intermediate generation centers. Here the social sifting devices of their elders -- money, clothes, persona] attractiveness, make

physical prowess, exclusive clubs, election to positions of leadership--are all for the first time set going with a population as yet largely undifferentiated save as regards their business class and working class parents. This informal training is not a preparation for a vague future that must be taken on trust, as is the case with so much of the academic work; to many of the boys and girls in high school this is "the life," the thing they personally like best about going to school....

Parents insist upon more and more education as part of their children's birthright; editors and lecturers point to education as a solution for every kind of social ill; ... Education is a faith, a religion, to Middletown. And yet when one looks more closely at this dominant belief in the magic of formal schooling, it appears that it is not what actually goes on in the schoolroom that these many voices laud. Literacy, yes, they want their children to be able to "read the newspapers, write a letter, and perform the ordinary operations of arithmetic," but, beyond that, many of them are little interested in what the schools teach. This thing, education, appears to be desired frequently not for its specific content but as a symbol--by the working class as an open sesame that will mysteriously admit their children to a world closed to them, and by the business class as a heavily sanctioned aid in getting on further economically or socially in the world.

ROBERT S. LYND AND HELEN MERRELL LYND "Training the Young," Middletown: A Study in American Culture (1929)

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