My Life as a Dog, I Mean a Teacher

A Career in the Los Angels Unified School District

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November 5, 2002

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Preface

The following is what I call an essay/memoir. It is simultaneously an account, largely anecdotal, of my experiences as an elementary school teacher working for the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and an analysis of the state of the public educational system in Los Angeles and in the United States as a whole. When I began this project, I hoped that this approach would enable me to make a potentially abstract and dry subject both more graphic and more interesting.

he piece was written in two distinct periods: Part I in 2002; Parts II and III in 2006. When I first contemplated publishing them together, I considered turning them into a fully unified piece, particularly by eliminating the obvious overlap between the end of Part I and the beginning of Part II. Both of these deal with the question of how much the LAUSD has improved in the years I've been teaching, and particularly whether the rise in students' scores on state tests accurately reflects the actual functioning of the school system. Upon further consideration I decided to leave the parts as written, since they reflect my views at two distinct points in time, despite the repetitiveness that results. I ask the reader's forbearance in this and in whatever other flaws my essay/memoir may contain.

PART I—MALIGN NEGLECT

Introduction—a Story

It was the end of the school year for D Track and I was about to go off-track (meaning "go on vacation," for those working in year-round, multi-track schools). My students' last day was a Friday in mid-May. Monday was a "pupil-free" day (a dayteachers are required to report for work even though their kids are not present). D Track teachers were supposed to work in our rooms, but since another class had moved into mine, I wasn't able to. Instead, I spent the entire day doing paper work, specifically, "closing cums" (pronounced "kyooms"— the students' cumulative records), in the library.I came to school on Tuesday, which was a "buy-back " day for D Track. I still don't know who is buying what back from whom, but since we get paid extra for being there and since our principal wants us to come (unlike pupil-free days, these are voluntary), I decided to show up. Usually these buy-back days are reserved for "staff development": workshops, videos and other activities that are meant to enhance teachers' knowledge and/or skills but rarely do.

On Tuesday, D Track teachers were to go on "Learning Walks." These are excursions into other teachers' classrooms while they are teaching (or trying to), to look at their rooms and to talk, in a non-disruptive manner of course, to their students about what they are learning and why, and how they know whether they are doing a good job or not.

As the name suggests, these visits are ostensibly designed for teachers to learn from each other, but they are really a way for administrators and those above them in the educational hierarchy to make sure that teachers and their classrooms are in compliance with federal and state laws and school district guidelines, and that teachers are implementing the educational fad currently in vogue. (One of these is "clear expectations": kids supposedly learn better when they have a clear idea of what they are learning, what is expected of them, and when they know whether they are doing a good job or not. Hence the questioning of the kids. Believe it or not, somebody is making a career out of this.) As we were waiting in the library to get started, our coordinator (a teacher who volunteers to be out of the classroom for a year or more to carry out and oversee various tasks mandated by federal law in order for our school to qualify for federal monies), came in. She needed a Spanish-speaking teacher to give the SABE exam (basically, an achievement test in Spanish), to some students, and I aggressively volunteered my services, as I was anxious to get out of the Learning Walks (or any other kind of staff development, for that matter).

I followed the coordinator to her office, where we collected the test materials, the students and another woman whom I then didn't know (but who is now my teaching assistant), whence we proceeded to an empty classroom. There the other woman and I were to give the exam to students from at least four different grades simultaneously. The SABE is atest, given over several days, that children who are recent enrollees in the school system and whose families speak Spanish in the home are required to take. It is, roughly, the Spanish equivalent of the SAT-9 test, which has been given to students every year for the past several years and which will be replaced by another test next year.

At some point during the testing session, I noticed that one student, a fourth grader, was having trouble finishing sections of the exam in the allotted time. When, during a break, I spoke to the kids in English, I realized that this particular girl was totally fluent; indeed, she spoke without any accent whatsoever. I asked her whether she spoke Spanish. She replied that she spoke it but read and wrote it "only a little." She also told me that she had been born in Los Angeles and had recently transferred to our school from a parochial school nearby. It seemed to me that this child should not be taking this test, even though she was working at it very gamely.

When the testing was over, I went to the coordinator and asked her why this girl was taking the SABE. She insisted that the child was required to take it because on the Home Language Survey (a form parents fill out when enrolling a child), her parents had written "Spanish" and because the child had been in the country for less than a year. Since this latter piece of information conflicted with what the girl had told me, I decided to pursue the issue. (Nosy me.) I looked in the file drawer where the cums for her class were, but Icouldn't find hers. I then went to her classroom to talk to her teacher. When I indicated my concern, this teacher told me, somewhat exasperatedly, that she had already objected to the girl taking the test, since the child didn't read or write Spanish and was missing valuable instructional time. Despite this, the teacher continued, the coordinator had insisted that the student had to take the exam for the reasons she had cited. I then asked the teacher to see the results of the CELDT, a newly mandated test, to be given annually at the beginning of each school year, designed to assess students' fluency in English. Neither the child's name nor her test results were on the computer printout. It looked to me likeshe hadn't been given the test. As it turned out, the child's cum was in the teacher's mailbox, and when I finally looked at it, it showed that she had indeed been born in Los Angeles and that her parents had written "Spanish" as the language spoken in the home. It looked to me that what had happened was that since the child had arrived at our school in the middle of the school year, after the CELDT had been given to the rest of the class, no one had remembered to give it to her.

And since she was a new enrollee in the school district and since her parents had indicated that her home language was Spanish, it was automatically assumed down at district headquarters that the child was new to the country, knew no English and was required to take the SABE. As a result, her name appeared on the computerized form, indicating who was to take the exam, that was sent to our coordinator. All that needed to be done, it seemed, was to give the child the CELDT, which would prove that she was fluent in English, and to indicate the error to the people downtown, so that the child wouldn't be saddled with low scores on a test she could barely read.

When I mentioned this to our diligent but overworked coordinator, she started screaming: Why did I talk to the child's teacher? She told me I wasn't supposed to. Now the teacher would blame her, etc., etc. I told her that nobody would blame her, that the child just needed to be given the CELDT, and that instead of being pissed off at me for talking to the teacher, she should be glad I had figured out what the problem was. This altercation took place in our school's copy room, where our principal was reproducing some materials. Although I intentionally spoke loud enough so that she could hear the substance of our dispute, she pretended she hadn't heard and walked out of the room. Later on, she asked me whether I had wanted her to intervene in whatever was going on between the coordinator and me. I assured her that we had worked everything out. She never asked me what the issue was.

Two weeks later, when I returned to school for a meeting, I found in my mailbox a copy of a reference sheet, supplied to the coordinator from district headquarters, indicating which students were required to take the SABE. It showed that students who had been enrolled in a California

public school district school for less than one year and whose parents had indicated on the child's enrollment forms that Spanish wasspoken in the home were obligated to take the test. So, the coordinator was right after all; the poor girl was indeed supposed to take the test (despite the fact that she could barely read Spanish), although not quite for the reasons the coordinator had originally indicated.

Welcome to public education, Los Angeles-style, in the early years of the new millennium! I've devoted so much space to this minor incident because the only way to truly understand the state of our school system is to see it from the inside, where the view is graphic but where, in part as a result of inertia and in part by design, those of us who are in the middle of the mess trying to make it work are powerless to do anything to change it.

What follows is an essay on the situation in our public schools, seen from my particular vantage point, a middleaged, somewhat cynical former political activist, working in an inner-city school in Los Angeles, California, part of the massive Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). I will try to convey a feel for what it is like to work in such an environment, as well as my impressions of the state of our public school system locally and nationally. I do not pretend that this is a thoroughly researched, balanced and detailed presentation. Nor is it a fleshed-out memoir. I'm too tired to produce either of these. It is, rather, an impressionistic work designed as much to vent my frustrations as to inform those who may be curious. It is mostly, then, a form of therapy, which I, and I believe most others working in the public schools, need. To those looking for an in-depth critique of what, from a democratic, egalitarian and libertarian point of view, is the matter with our public school system and a creative vision of what truly liberated schools would look like, I apologize. Perhaps I am only making excuses, but I've lived too many years under an unjust social system and worked too long in the public schools to be able to develop such an analysis. In short, I am not liberated: my imagination has been truncated and my hopes tamed. All I am equipped to do is, I hope, shed a little light on why the system cannot even do what it is supposed to: teach our kids how to read and write, do some math, know a few things about science and history, and be able to think for themselves.

The Crisis in Education Is Not New

Over the past few years, we've heard a great deal about the "crisis in education." George W. Bush insists he's the "education president," Congress and state legislatures have passed bills designed to solve the purported crisis and the issue has been discussed into the ground in the media, mostly by people who don't know much about it. To listen to the chatter, one would think the crisis is a relatively recent phenomenon.

In fact, the public school system, throughout the country but particularly in the inner cities (meaning, working-class, poor and minority neighborhoods in urban areas), has been in bad shape for decades. Those who remember the struggles over integration, community control and busing of the 1950s, 60s and 70s can attest to this. These conflicts would not have taken place, or at least would not have been as intense as they were, had the school system been doing its job. As much as these battles were about integration or civil rights, they were also over scarcity, a scarcity of truly good schools and of the resources required to create and sustain them. My guess is that the crisis goes back further than that, but that much of the problem was hidden

from white people, and therefore the consciousness of the country as a whole, as a result of segre-gation. White schools may have been good or at least OK.

But I suspect that schools for most Black and Latino children, with some exceptions, have always been poor (or at least poorer than those for white kids), though most whites didn't know about it until Black people began to mobilize around this and other issues in the mid-1950s.

Another indication that the schools have been in crisis for a long time is the periodic curricular and methodological innovations that have been introduced over the years.

(If the system were working well, why would one want to change it?) As an example, in California for around two decades, students not yet fluent in English were subjected to something that was called bilingual education, whichhas now been largely phased out. This intended panacea would not have been tried had children of immigrant families been graduating from high schools with a good grasp of English and other subject matters. The program was the result of a lawsuit filed in the early 1970s by a Chinese man, a Mr. Lau. He had gone all the way through school in San Francisco, and had even graduated, but, if I remember correctly from my classes in bilingual methodology, hadn't even learned much English, let alone anything else. In other words, California schools were pretty crappy back then.

So, in fact, the crisis of public education has been around for a while, but, at least for much of this period, it managed to remain under the political radar. It became a polit-ical and media issue again relatively recently, primarily as a result of the frenetic economic expansion of the late 1990s.

At that time, the pace of economic growth, particularly in the "hi-tech" sectors, was so rapid that businesses were having trouble finding qualified workers. There was, in other words, a labor shortage, most notably, one of educated, skilled workers. Obviously, the public school system wasn't doing its job. At the same time, the boom created budget surpluses, which made it possible to begin to address the problem; at least it eliminated the excuse for not doing anything about it. Unfortunately, the solutions proposed by both major political parties have been more of the character of tinkering, albeit expensive tinkering, than of making fundamental changes. Thus, the center-piece of President Bush's program is regular testing to hold schools, administrators and teachers "accountable." (Teachers, students and parents are currently being subjected to a barrage—a veritable mania—of testing.) But neither his nor any of the other proposals on the table offers any substantive ideas about how to truly improve poorly performing schools. (Nor are any of the proposed remedies to fix the schools based on a concrete analysis of what's the matter with them.) Consequently, this is how I expect things will work. If, at any particular school, the students' test scores don't improve significantly, the teachers and their administrators will first be given pep talks, then scolded and forced to sign pledges to work harder, etc. (while, throughout, being forced to sit through interminable, utterly boring and totally useless meetings). If the kids' scores still don't go up, teachers and administrators will be fired or transferred and a new crew will be brought in to try their hand at raising the scores under the same basic circumstances. I gather that, in addition, schools whose test scores do not go up sufficiently will be "punished" by having money taken away from them (Naughty schools!) and, presumably, given to parents to help them pay for tutors (or maybe even vouchers). But how will this help the schools in question? To anybody who knows anything about the school system, the result is predictable: angry parents will blame the teachers and administrators, teachers and administrators will blame the parents, and the politicians, experts and bureaucrats will look like they're doing something about the situation. In other words, teachers and administrators, who have little power to institute basic

changes, will be "held accountable," while the politicians, experts and bureaucrats, who do have power (and therefore the responsibility), will be let off the hook. And the kids still won't learn. (Hey, sounds like a plan!) In any case, the economic boom of the 1990s has now collapsed, and the downturn has hit the hi-tech industries particularly hard. As a result, the labor shortage has eased, state budget surpluses have been replaced with deficits, and schools' budgets, never sufficient to enable them to function effectively, and other vital services, are being slashed. In LA, the district has increased maximum class sizes (now up to 36 for gradesfour and five) and cut teachers' aides and other auxiliary personnel and services (such as the time a nurse is on campus).

It also tried to cut our health benefits until, under the union's prodding, it found enough money to maintain them at their current levels, but only for one year. (The district is so incompetent it doesn't even know how much money it has.) Although, as I write this, the district is crowing about the fact that our test scores have gone up four years straight (more on this later), I suspect that whatever progress that may have occurred in recent years will soon end, tests scores will level off or even decline and the "education crisis" will fade away. Until next time.

The Crisis in The Public Sector

Not only is the crisis of education not a recent phenomenon, it is also not an isolated one. In fact, the entire public sector in the United States is in deep trouble. Virtually everywhere one looks, the institutions and facilities thatmake up the country's public and semi-public infrastructure are deteriorating. The highways are in drastic need of repair and expansion. The nation's railroads, bridges, tunnels and overpasses are all overworked and eroding. The airports are over-crowded: access roads are jammed, terminals are too small, gates and available runway space are too limited for the number of planes flown (the risk of crashes on the ground, not just in the air, is very high), and the entire air traffic control system needs to be revamped. Not to mention airport security. County hospitals and clinics and other medical facilities are disaster areas and facing further cuts: beds and staff are being eliminated, emergency rooms are being closed, while those that are left are forced to provide routine, as well as catastrophic, medical care to millions of people without medical coverage.

Emergency medical response teams are also in short supply and overworked. There is a national shortage of nurses and, I assume, all sorts of other medical personnel. They are even cutting funds devoted to financing doctors' residencies, an essential part of doctors' training. Police departments around the country are having trouble recruiting enough people to fill out their rosters. As the recent power crisis in California and the accompanying Enron debacle reveal, the national power infrastructure is in need of expansion (and significant reform). Water treatment and sewage disposal systems are also overloaded and deteriorating. Not least, as we saw during the 2000 election, our voting apparatus, the system for registering and tabulating votes, the foundation of our supposedly democratic system, needs a major overall.

(Have I left anything out?) In sum, the public sector of this country is in a state of decay and needs massive rebuilding and restructuring. Actually, the term "public" is misleading. This infrastructure is essential to the functioning of, and the ongoing accumulation of wealth in, the private sector, particularly of the large corporations, media enterprises and banks, and their wealthy executives and stockholders, all of whom enjoyed such prosperity during the 1990s. Yet, because

these institutions are officially the responsibility of government, they are deemed "public" and the costs of maintaining these facilities, let alone rebuilding and expanding them, are foisted on the taxpayers, particularly middle- and lower-income families and individuals. One way to understand the crisis of the public sector is to view atleast a part of the costs of the maintenance of this infrastructure as a kind of "social wage," a piece of our salaries, paid out collectively, that enables us to survive, raise families, get to work and back, and otherwise be productive employees. Since what goes into salaries is a deduction from profits, it is in the short- and medium-term interest of our corporate leaders to keep their share of these expenditures as small as possible and to transfer the cost elsewhere. At some point, however, the chickens come home to roost: if wages are too low, the workforce won't be reproduced with the requisite strength and skills to function effectively in the profit-producing process. And this is, in fact, what the labor shortage in the high-tech sector represents.

A complementary way of analyzing the situation is to see a portion of infrastructure costs as a part of the collective capital expenditure of private industry, much like factories, machinery, office space, etc., but one which, because of its designation as "public," they do not pay, or of which they do not pay their appropriate share. Taking these two facets together, we can see that the publicly-funded "public sector" functions (and has functioned for decades), as a massive subsidy to private industry, leading to a gigantic, and in the long-run, illusory, increase in corporate profits. By the same token, the crisis of the public sector—its need to be repaired and expanded and the amount of economic resources, i.e., capital, this will require—represents, in effect, a tremendous debt currently being carried by our entire economic system.

The size of this debt is enormous. An inkling of it can be gained by recognizing that, at least according to the figure broached after the disputed election in November, 2000, it will take $8 or 9 billion just to fix the voting system—the polling booths and ballot boxes—throughout our fifty states. If this is the amount needed to repair the voting apparatus, how much will it take to rebuild the airports, highways, railway system, bridges and tunnels, the power infrastructure, the public medical system, the police departments, etc., etc? Oh yes, and the school system. A rough estimate for the latter can be gained from a statistic released in 1995 by the Government Accounting Office: it will take $112 billion just to repair the country's existing schools (forget about building new ones!). In California alone, combined new construction and modernization anddeferred maintenance costs will total over $29 billion just for the years 2001–06 (California Dept. of Education Fact Book 2002, Handbook of Education Information).

In fact, this debt, like the explicit public and private debt load, is waiting to take its toll on all of us in one form or another. It is already having its effect, mostly in the form of bottlenecks and mini-crises in discrete sectors. That's what the labor shortage of the late 1990s, and the "crisis" in public education that it generated, was all about. If we look at the state of our school system in this broader context, we will see that it is a lot bigger than has been generally imagined, and that fixing it will be no easy task. Let's look at it in a little more detail.

Lack of Invesment

Perhaps the most obvious cause of the sorry state of our public schools is that they have been starved of funds for decades: there has been no serious investment in our school system

for 30 years. This has resulted in, among other things, a deterioration of school facilities, severe overcrowding and a national shortage of teachers.

Deteriorating Facilities

There has been no substantial construction of schools in California since the 1960s. (An elementary school was recently completely, to much fanfare, in Los Angeles' densely-populated San Fernando Valley, the first one since 1971.) Nationally, the situation is similar: the average age of school buildings in the United States is 42 years, with substantial deterioration estimated to begin after 40. (Just like people!) In sum, the vast majority of our schools are in disrepair, the facilities are inadequate and there are not enough of them, a problem made worse, but not created, by massive immigration.

A hint of the physical quality of our schools can be gained by looking at one inner-city school in a working-class, but not desperately poor, neighborhood. The school where I work, for example, has no gymnasium. Physical education, when it occurs, takes place in our main yard, which is locat-ed behind the main school building and parking lot. This yard is legally too small for the number of children in our school, now around 800. There is no baseball, football or soccer field. There are no swings or slides. (We do have a handball backboard, basketball hoops, tetherball apparatuses and a volleyball net. We have also been promised new playground equipment, the result of a private donation from actor Kirk Douglas and his wife, but construction has yet to be started.) There is no grass; the yard is paved with asphalt, cracked and crumbling, and it is divided in two (one part for grades one and two, another part for grades three, four and five), by a wall and a fence. There is also a tiny yard for kindergarteners in front of the school. The main yard may have been big enough at one time (it may even have been grassy), but as our enrollment increased, new bungalows, separated from the main building, were built and the children's play space successively encroached upon. Our school has no cafeteria, in the sense of a room where the children can eat in a closed, protected environment. There is a "cafeteria," meaning a kitchen in which food is prepared (mostly heated up) and in which the cafeteria workers suffer on hot days because there is no air conditioning. But the children eat outside, in a part of the yard (now being expanded) equipped with tables and benches and a roof, but not walls.

In other words, the children eat out in the weather. When it is raining or too cold or too hot, the children eat breakfast in the auditorium, on the chairs or on the floor, and lunch in their classrooms. For its part, the auditorium is too small for our school's student body to assemble. (In any case, the entire student body is rarely on campus at one time. As a result of our year-round, multi-track schedule, on any given day, one quarter of the students are not in school; they are "off track.") The bungalows are shoddily built. They also appear to be nesting sights for large, cockroach-like insectsthat can be occasionally discovered running, procreating or dying on the floors. Our school has no computer lab (although there are now computers in the classrooms), no science lab, no music room; the orchestra practices in the all-purpose auditorium. Not least, our nurse doesn't have an appropriate office; her office space is really akind of lobby for two bathrooms. (It used to be the staff lounge.) As deprived of facilities as it is, our school is by no means the worst, or even bad, as far as LAUSD elementary schools are concerned.

Overcrowding

The most significant problem resulting from the lack of long-term investment in public education is overcrowding. Put most simply, there are too many kids in each school and too many kids in (most of) the classrooms. When I first started teaching in Los Angeles, class-size limits (the upper limits) in elementary school was 33 students per class in grades k through three, 34 per class in grades four, five and six. In the middle and high schools, there were (and still are), classes with 40–45 students. (An acquaintance of mine, a teacher at a middle school, recently told me that there are classes in his school with 48 kids in them.) How is any teacher going to reach all the students in his/her class, give each child individual attention, make sure he/she is learning the required curriculum, etc., when there are so many kids in the class? In reality, it isn't possible. Beginning in 1997, with the state flush with money, the class-size for grades k through three was reduced to 20. In my opinion, this has been the only truly substantial step taken to improve the school system. (As a kindergarten teacher, it seemed like I had a new job.) Yet, nothing has been done about reducing class sizes in the rest of the grades. (In LA, as I mentioned before, and perhaps elsewhere, they have gone up). Why? There are not enough teachers, classrooms or schools. If anything, the reduction in class size for grades k through three made the existing teacher shortage even worse. And in the years since thecrisis in education was discovered, aside from the elementary school in the Valley, there have been no new schools built. Construction on a new high school—the new Belmont High School complex—near downtown Los Angeles was halted when it was discovered that the school site leaks toxic fumes. So desperate is the district for schools and classrooms, even sites to build new schools, that serious consideration is being given to completing the project, despite the risk to the health of its prospective students. The board of education recently "awarded" a $2.9 million contract to fund (yet more) environmental studies and engineering designs for the half-built project. (Los Angeles Times, July 10, 2002.) When completed, it is expected to cost $260 million, making it the most expensive high school in California. (LA Times, June 20, 2002.) Progress in building other schools has been minimal. A friend of mine is an architect who has done work for LAUSD. He was contracted to design and produce plans for new schools or school expansions. When I spoke to him about this a year ago, he said that very few of the projects are proceeding. He also told me that the new crew brought in to oversee school construction, presumably to replace those implicated in the Belmont scandal, are even less competent than the old guys. According to the LA Times (June 20, 2002), Superintendent Roy Romer "disclosed last fall that the district faces a shortfall of as much as $600 million for repairs that Proposition BB [a $2.4 billion bond issue passed in 1997—RT] originally was supposed to cover—the result of increasing costs, contractual disputes and poor oversight." As a result, only half of the 12,000 repair and modernization jobs planned under Proposition BB have been completed and the district must find the money for the rest. Supposedly, Proposition BB "launched several dozen new schools," but what this actually means isn't clear. According to recent reports, however, the situation has improved somewhat; the district finally managed to submit its paperwork in time to qualify for nearly $1 billion in state funds for school construction. And a new bond issue, this one for $3.3 billion, is planned for the ballot, although, given LAUSD's past mismanagement, this one faces considerable voter scepticism.

Year-Round Schools

Aside from busing (more than 17,000 kids are bused, often an hour each way, to and from schools every day), one of the negative effects of overcrowding is the existence of year-roundschool schedules. Under traditional school calendars, roughly September through June, school facilities lie vacant and unused for over two months during the summer. Converting to year-round, multi-track schedules allows this unutilized space to be used and thus still more students crammed into already overcrowded facilities. The general idea is that at any given time, while one group of students, that is, one "track," is on vacation ("off-track"), the other students (the other tracks, say, three) are present ("on-track").

This set-up is deleterious for a number of reasons. One, probably the least important, is that except for one or two days per year (and sometimes not even that), the entire student body is never on campus at one time. This has a negative impact on various extra-curricular activities, such as the orchestra, as well as on the effort to generate what we used to call "school spirit." (Since our school has few extra-curricular activities and since the auditorium is too small to seat all of our students, this doesn't account for much.) A more significant drawback of year-round, multi-track schedules is the existence of so-called "roving classes." These are classes, that is, groups of school children, who have no classroom of their own. To understand why this occurs, think of a school that can normally house, say, 600 children with each classroom full and no extra rooms. Now, with a yearround schedule, at any given time, there are an additional 200 children who are not in school; they are "off-track." At the end of a certain period (in our school, every six weeks), one group of (200) kids currently in school goes "off-track," while the group that has been "off-track" comes back to school. But since all the rooms have been full, the group coming back "ontrack" must move into classrooms that were previous occupied by the now departing students. Six weeks later, when an another track goes off and one comes back on, these children have to move again. These are the "roving" classes. During the course of one semester, the kids in these classes are in three different classrooms, and the process is repeated in the following semester. Leaving aside the unsettling effect this has on the students (never having one's own classroom), and leaving aside the fact that having to move every few weeks dampens the "roving" teachers' motivation to decorate their classrooms with instructional material, students' work, etc., this "roving"approaches for one track to go off, those classes whose rooms will be utilized by "rovers" must be cleaned out to make room for the incoming classes. Things must be taken down from the walls, supplies stored, desks and table-tops cleared, and bookshelves emptied or at least covered or turned around.

Students' personal supplies and belongings have to be stowed away or taken home. Meanwhile, the roving classes must clean up the rooms they have been in for the last few weeks, pack their stuff into backpacks and plastic bags, etc., so they can be prepared to move into their "new" classrooms when they are vacated. How many days does this take? At the very least, one, sometimes two or more, every six weeks, days that could be far better spent actually learning something. And, of course, the teachers have to put in extra time after class to get their rooms in shape. But at least the kids (and the teachers) are gaining valuable life experience: a real lesson in the economics of scarcity (and the stupidity and irresponsibility of those who run and have run the school system). But, as George W. says, let's hold the schools accountable.

Another negative effect of overcrowding is the necessity of so-called "split" classes or grades. These are classes that group children belonging to two or more grades in one classroom, taught

by one teacher (and usually a part-time teacher assistant). For example, if by chance a school's enrollment and distribution (how many kids are in each grade and each track, etc.) don't enable all classes to be filled to, or close to, the maximum, there isn't enough space and aren't enough teachers to have classes that are, say, half full.

Let's say that in any given school with a given distribution of kids there's enough space for four kindergartens and four first-grade classes. Let's also say that instead of the 80 kindergarteners and 80 first graders that would perfectly fill up these classes (at 20 children per class), 90 kids in each grade enroll. This leaves 10 in each grade left over. Instead of having two additional classes, one kindergarten and one first-grade class, with 10 kids in each, schools that are short of space will put the 10 kindergarteners and 10 first graders in the same class, to be taught by one teacher.

In a few cases, such a split-grade class may be beneficial, for example, if some slower learners in, say, a fifth-grade class, are put in a class with more advanced children in the fourth grade. But the world (and, needless to say, the school system)is rarely so logical and obliging. Usually, fast and slow learners are thrown in together, so some kids aren't given the opportunity to progress as fast as they might, while others fall further behind and do not get the individual attention they need. This questionable situation is bad enough, but to make matters worse, each grade has its own individual curriculum in each subject area. So, in theory (in, say, a class containing kids in two grades), one teacher is supposed to teach two reading programs, two math programs, two science programs and two social studies programs, not to mention the mandated instruction in art, music, physical education and, where students who are not deemed fluent in English are involved, ESL (English as a Second Language). Here, students are supposed to be further subdivided into groups defined by their level of fluency in English, with a distinct instructional program for each group.

How is all this to be done? Perhaps, the Albert Einsteins or Leonardo Da Vincis of teaching can do it, but ordinary human beings, even very talented and dedicated ones, cannot, and as a result, it isn't done. You do the best you can, which may not be very good, and you try not to let it bother you too much. Where it's convenient, two teachers may swap kids for, say, science or social studies, so that for one hour, the fifth graders are being taught the fifth-grade science curriculum by one teacher while the fourth-grade kids are taught the fourth-grade science curriculum by the other. But this is rarely possible for all subject areas, let alone for all, or even most, teachers. And such an arrangement, which is usually worked out informally between the teachers in question, is further complicated by the fact that teachers and classes are on different tracks, so the whole deal may have to be suspended, if the two classes are on different tracks, when one or the other teacher and his/her class goes off-track. Leaving aside the amount of time lost every day moving the kids.

As bad as this is, in LA, up until the last year, there were three distinct year-round schedules plus a traditional September through June schedule, plus another one that is almost the same as the traditional calendar. As a result, kids from the same family may be in different schools, say, one in elementary school and one in middle or high school, which may be on different schedules, so that thereis no one time when the family can take a vacation together (except Christmas). Unless they forgo vacations altogether while their kids are in school, the family will take a vacation at some time or another, forcing one or both children to miss a lot of school time. In addition, if a childswitches tracks, he/she may wind up ending one school year and beginning another with no vacation whatsoever (except perhaps a weekend), or she/he may wind up having a vacation of 12 weeks (Great! But plenty of time to forget a lot of stuff).

At least the children on our school's calendar are in class for the state's mandatory 180 days per year. Schools on two of the other calendars, with nearly half of the district's 736,000 students (LA Times, June 20,2002), are/were not; they have 17 fewer days, with each day somewhat longer to make up for the time. (As I understand it, one of these calendars was phased out last year.) Several months ago, the state began insisting that all children be in school the mandatory 180 days, and the district started twisting and turning to figure out how to do this. Some of their proposals involve having schools have two "shifts" per day, one in the morning, onein the afternoon. Since the school day is six hours, there will have to be some overlap. But the kids won't all fit.

Another proposal is for some children to go to school on Saturday. (Another gem.) Since this issue was first broached, I haven't heard anything official about it. I'vebeen told, however, that the one remaining "short" calendar will be terminated at the end of this school year in June 2003.

Classes Too Big

The other side of overcrowding is class sizes that, with the recent exception of kindergarten through third grade, are way too high. Try to imagine attempting to teach a full curriculum of subjects to a class of forty-odd kids with a fairly wide range of academic abilities. Just the job of managing the class, aka preventing chaos, is daunting enough, let alone actually teaching something, let alone actually making sure that each child pays attention, does his/her class- and homework, etc., let alone actually attempting to meet each child's individual needs and challenge his/her unique abilities. (Sure!) When I was a kid I was once in a class with 45 kids. Itwas the third grade and it wasn't a thrilling experience.

The teacher was unbelievably strict. We were so scared of her we didn't move. We sat there with our hands "folded" on our desks, even though as she went around the room, having each child answer a question, it seemed an hour before she got back to you. Fortunately, it was only for a few weeks, until the new addition to the school was completed and our class was split into two smaller groups. At the time, we hated the teacher. I now realize that she was not exceptional, just doing her job as best she could under terrible circumstances. Today the job is even harder, since with American culture being what it is, it is almost impos-the board, that is, through all grades, not just k through three. To outsiders, this might seem logical, even obvious.

Fewer students per classroom means more individual attention given to each student, while teachers, with fewer students to prepare for and manage, are less stressed-out, and therefore happier and healthier. (Less yelling means more learning.) Leaving aside the fact that the shortage of space and teachers makes this difficult to achieve in the short run, many of our educational leaders—the bureaucrats, the education professors in the universities, the myriad consultants and other parasites the school system supports (and, of course, the politicians)—don't agree, even in theory.

A recent article in Scientific American (November 2001) is an example of how they think and argue. The thrust of the piece can be gleaned by how it is advertised on the front cover of the magazine, in the table of contents, and in the large print on the first page of the article. On the cover, we read: "Do Small Classes Really Raise Grades?" So here, mind you, we are not talking about (nor presumably interested in) whether the children are actually learning more, only whether their grades (and I presume, their scores on state-mandated tests), go up. In the table of contents, under the heading "Does Class Size Matter?," it states: "Reducing the number of students per teacher is not an educational cure-all." Now, this is a different point.

In fact, it is a red herring being dragged across our paths to divert us from the real issue: nobody contends that reducing class size is an "educational cure-all," only that it is very important. On the first page of the article itself, we read: "Legislators are spending billions to reduce class sizes. Will the results be worth the expense?" Ah, here we have a hint of the real issue, as far as those who have the power to influence political decisions are concerned. In other words, instead of asking what is necessary to have a truly effective educational system, one that really provides a good education to all the children, regardless of gender, ethnic background and economic class, these researchers, and the people who pay their salaries and to whom they are accountable and whose mindset they share, are in fact only interested in incremental improvements in a decrepit, vastly under-funded and grossly mismanaged system. They are, in other words, trying to fix the schools on the cheap. Without actually saying so, they take it asgiven that there will never be enough money to have a well-functioning school system and proceed from there.

It's somewhat like choosing to put money into an old car that needs repair instead of buying a new one. If you have an old car but don't have much money, either on hand or coming in, you put some money into the repair work that is most urgently needed. When you have a bit more money, you have the next few things done. Although the money spent is mounting up, you keep throwing money into the old heap, in part because you don't have the cash to buy a new one and in part because you've already put a lot of money into the old one and do not want to throw that all away. (Hey, I just put $500 to get the brakes done. I can't junk my car now, so I guess I'll spend another $500 replacing the clutch.) Over time, you might wind up putting more money into your old car than it would have taken to buy a new one. And eventually you'll probably buy a new car anyway (or a "new" used one). Many of us have had this experience. This is how the big shots are approaching the school system.

Insofar as the authors of the article have an argument that addresses the real issue, it is that there is little clear-cut evidence to show that lowering class-size helps children learn more. To their credit, they admit that it is very difficult to get good, hard, scientific evidence about anything involving education. This should be obvious. How do you set up a truly scientific study when there are so many variables and no way to control them and thus to isolate the particular cause-effect relationship you are interested in? How do you compare one group of kids, with a given set of gender, economic and ethnic characteristics, in different regions, schools and with different teachers, with another? Even if you choose the same type of kids (ethnically, socioeconomically) in the same region, there are still too many variables to take into consideration. In fact, if you take kids from the same classroom in the same school and split them up in the following year, putting some in a class of, say, 20 students and others in a class of 35, you still have a problem. How do you control for the fact that the kids are unique individuals, some better students, brighter and with more parental support, than others? How do you control for the fact that the quality of teachers varies greatly, even in thesame school? One may be exceptional, the other poor. One may be experienced, the other not. One may be burnt out, while the other is new and enthusiastic. One may just have a bad year, or not get along with that particular group of children, etc., etc. And how do you measure students' progress? Grades given by the teachers? Very subjective. One-on-one assessment? Who's doing the assessment and how many students do they assess before they get tired? State-mandated tests? What they actually test is controversial, and on a given day, how the kids perform may vary. Of course, one may argue that if the samples are large enough, the variableswill cancel each other out. The problem is that they obliterate almost everything else, including discernible trends. As a result, almost any given study in the field

of education is questionable. (Since I entered the school system, I've heard about a long list of studies that purport to prove a variety of different claims, some of them in direct contradiction to the others. My principal is very fond of referring to them, usually as a way to justify the latest bureaucratic demand, although she has never actually shown us any of them to us nor given us the information about where they can be found. I now believe that for any one study claiming to prove one thing, there's another—or another one could be devised—that proves the opposite.) Even though the authors of our article seem to recognize this, they still claim to be able to make scientifically-demon-strated judgments about the issue of class-size reduction.

Their grand conclusion is that there is some modest evidence to show that reducing class size has some beneficial effect in the primary grades, but that the evidence as far as higher grades are concerned is more mixed. In other words, reducing class size in the primary grades, which has already been done throughout California, is worth it, while reducing class size in the upper grades, and in middle and high schools—where, as I indicated before, as many as 45 children are in a class taught by one teacher (who may have 4 or 5 such classes per day)—is a waste of money.One of the things that is most revealing about this and most other studies devoted to educational issues is that the researchers never ask the opinions of those most directly involved in the education of children: the teachers, the students and the students' parents. (I don't even think they ask administrators.) Would you rather teach a class of 20 or a class of 35, and why? Would you rather be in a class of 20 students or a class of 35, and why? Would you prefer your child to be in a class of 20 students or one of 35, and why? Of course, the authors of the article will probably reply, this isn't scientific. But, as they themselves virtually admit, neither are the studies they cite (nor, I might add, is their own).

Insofar as these (and other) researchers have specific arguments about why reducing class size does not matter, they boil down to two. One is that even when class sizes arereduced, teachers don't change their teaching styles. (Implied here is one of the canards that underlies much if not most of the discussion about the educational system today. This is that the problem with our school system is the teachers. We will return to this.) But so what? Even if the teacher does notchange his/her teaching style (maybe that style is very effective), in a smaller class the teacher will be able to reach more students more effectively, will be more familiar with where they are at and how they learn, and be better able to modify the curriculum, or the pace of instruction, or the proportion of time spent reviewing versus teaching new material, to maximize the kids' learning. One way to look at this is to divide teachers' instruction into three main types: wholegroup, where the teacher is addressing the whole class; smallgroup, where the teacher is working with a smaller group of select students; and one-on-one, where the teacher workswith one student at a time. In each of these groupings, isn't it obvious that a teacher will be more effective in a class of 20 students than in one with 35, let alone 40 or 45? In a large class, how does the teacher make sure that all students are paying attention? How does he/she ensure participation of allstudents? How does he/she know whether the students are getting what he/she is trying to teach, that he/she is going at the right speed, etc.? Likewise, with small-group instruction.

At the other end of the scale, isn't it obvious that in a small class the teacher will have more time to work with each child individually, to get to know that child, to find out what he/she knows and doesn't know, to help him/her with the particular problem he/she may be having, etc? And isn't it obvious that all of these things add up to better teaching and more learning, even if the teacher does not change his/her teaching style one iota?And all of this omits the not insignificant fact that it is a hell of a lot easier to manage and teach a class of 20 than of 35, which

means that the teacher will be less stressed out, more positive and encouraging to the students, less punitive, etc. Which means that both children and teacher will enjoy school more and will miss fewer days, that the teacher will last longer in the classroom, thus being able to gain more experience, and that fewer teachers will quit the profession, thus easing the teacher shortage, currently at near-crisis proportions. But, of course, none of this can be scientifically verified, can it? And none of it is mentioned in the article.

The other argument these researchers use to bolster their claim that class-size doesn't matter beyond the primary grades is what they call the "Asian paradox": students in Asia do well (indeed, out-perform U.S. students) even though class-size in Asian countries is large, even larger than in the U.S. It is certainly worthwhile discussing why this may be so, but the argument totally misses the point.

If Asian students do well (even better than U.S. students) in large classes, might they not learn even more in smaller classes? And has anybody done a study about that? This article is typical of the kind of research that is carried on about education in general and our crisis-ridden school system in particular: shoddy, an insult to those, both inside the school system and out, interested in creating truly effective schools, and good only for promoting one or another limited, half-baked proposal or, as in this case, arguing against something meaningful. (It's too expensive to buy a new car; let's patch up the old jalopy.) The absurdity of the claim that class size, at least in the upper grades, doesn't matter can be made apparent by asking that if it is true, why not raise class size to 60? (I hope none of our educational leaders reads this; they may take me up on it.)

Shortage of Teachers

The other main negative effect that lack of investment in the school system has had on the education of our children is the shortage of teachers throughout the country. Thenumber of teachers needed is tremendous. According to the LA Times (August 15, 2001), by 2011, the shortage nationally is expected to reach 2 million, with nearly 300,000 in California alone. The LA teachers union, UTLA (United Teachers of Los Angeles), contends that 2.4 million teachers will be needed in the next 11 years. "The projection jumps as high as 2.7 million when researchers factor in declining student-teacher ratios based on nationwide class-size reduction… In high-poverty urban and rural areas alone, more than 700,000 new teachers will be needed in the next 10 years." (United Teacher, September 21, 2001.) The main reason for this, although by no means not the only one, is money: teachers are not paid enough for what we do. Along with other factors (the retirement of "baby boom" teachers, the shitty conditions teachers work under and the way we're treated, plus the increase in the school-age population—21% over the past ten years), the low pay scale for teachers is the main reason not enough people are attracted to the profession (I balked when I wrote that word). It is also one of the reasons why, equally important, so many teachers quit after trying it for a while. Those opposed to raising teachers' salaries argue: why should we pay them more if they're not doing a good job? (Of course, this doesn't stop the bureaucrats and politicians from raising their own already exorbitant salaries periodically.) But the argument is backward. The proof of the pudding is in the eating: the undeniable fact is that there is a teacher shortage of monstrous proportions. In other words, the job is not attractive enough as it is to draw and retain the required number of people. And one of the main reasons for this is the low level of teachers' salaries compared to other occupations requiring the same, or even less, edu-

cation, skill and dedication. “Teachers ages 22–28 earned an average $7,894 less per year than other college-educated adults of the same age in 1998. The gap is three times greater for teachers 44–50, who earned $23,655 less than their counterparts in other occupations. The salary gap is worst among teachers with a master’s degree—teachers in that category earned $32,522 less than non-teachers.” (United Teacher, September 21, 2001). Others argue that teachers shouldn’t be paid more because we get so much vacation time. In an article on the Op-Ed page of the LA Times, one brilliant commentator even suggested requiring teachers to attend professional development classes and carry out other tasksduring their time off. If the teacher shortage is bad now, you wouldn’t get anybody to do the job if this proposal were implemented; those who tried it would be dead from exhaustion after two years. (And if the professional development he has in mind is anything like the kind I’ve been subjected to, teachers would die of boredom and low self-esteem after one.) Actually, the teacher shortage has been around for a long time, but before 1970 the problem was hidden by the fact that the system was staffed by a de facto captive work force: women. Prior to the women’s liberation movement, there were very few jobs open to college-educated women (and not that many woman going to college). Two careers that were available to them were teaching and nursing. Among other things, the women’s movement opened up a lot of new opportunities to women, and the captive workforce was (at least partly) liberated. Although this has exacerbated the teacher shortage over the years, it has had a positive impact: an increase in the number of men in the classrooms, particularly in the elementary schools.

Simple economics should suggest that the main way to eliminate the teacher shortage is to raise salaries until the market reaches equilibrium, in other words, until the supply of teachers equals the demand. (People who support vouchers talk about bringing “market forces” to bear on the school system; here is where they really matter.) But this would cost a lot of money, which the economic and political decision-makers are not willing to spend (or to shift from their higher priorities, such as the military budget, agricultural subsidies and their own outrageously inflated incomes). So instead of the drastic increase in teacher salaries that is needed to really cope with the shortage, our leaders are resorting to moral exhortation to convince idealistic people to become teachers and make the world a better place. Undoubtedly, some will respond to this appeal, but will it really be able to solve a teacher shortage of the magnitude the system is facing? I wouldn’t count on it. In a country whose culture increasingly stresses making money (and being famous), relying on idealism to fix the school system will not take us very far. It is also unfair to teachers; we should be idealistic, while everybody else (including the politicians) goes all out to get rich. It should be obvious that the schools would function a lot better if teachers’ salaries were substantially increased, even leaving aside the not irrelevantfact that our morale, now not very high, would improve if we were paid more. To see why, it’s worth looking at how the teacher shortage actually affects the schools.

Anyone Need a Job?

One of the things the teacher shortage means is that the school system has been willing to hire almost anyone who met (extremely) minimal criteria. In the LAUSD, if one has a BA degree and passed a state test (the CBEST, or California Basic Educational Skills Test) which requires reading, writing and math skills on approximately the level of a sophomore in high school, one can get what is called an “emergency credential” and start teaching. (I almost forgot, you also need

to be interviewed by one of the generally stuffy interviewers in the recruiting office in LAUSD headquarters. But since the district is in chronic need of teachers, only the most obviously unfit candidates are weeded out by this process.) With an emergency credential one can get hired and teach full-time in a classroom (even special education classes), while one pursues a teaching program at a bona fide educational institution. I believe one has five years to complete a program and get a credential, although extensions are often granted. Moreover, with an emergency credential (I'm not sure whose emergency it is, a school system desperate for teachers or the prospective teacher desperate for a job), one can be a substitute teacher forever, and never be required either to be enrolled in a teaching program or to get a teaching credential.

As a result, the school system has become a kind of dumping ground for all sorts of people who do not really want to be teachers and shouldn't be. Some of them are people who were failures in other careers and decided to be teachers because they couldn't find other jobs. (Lest people think I am judging, I confess that this was my situation.) Others are people who, when they started teaching, preferred to be pursuing different careers, such as acting or writing or opening a business, but who have not (yet) been able to make these paying propositions. So they teach as a way to survive until they can make a living doing what they really want to do. Now, some of these people go on to become good, dedicated teachers. Others stay on only as long as they get established in their desired vocations or until they can't take being a teacher any longer and then quit. Still others, never get established in their preferredcareers and continue teaching out of desperation, even though they hate their jobs (and the kids).

Some examples will demonstrate how this works out in practice. When I first started teaching, I taught a combined fifth and sixth grade class, starting in the middle of the school year.

At the end of my first day, a teacher from across the hall knocked on my door. He was a tall man in his mid-50s, with thinning, graying hair, a beer-belly and a tired expression on his face. After introducing himself, he began complaining about the job: the kids don't want to learn, he can't control them, he's got to get of out of here, etc. He obviously needed someone to commiserate with. Even though his political views were extremely reactionary, he seemed like a nice guy and, since I didn't know anybody at the school, we became friends.

We wound up having our classes take physical education together and occasionally hung out. But his tune was alwaysthe same. He couldn't take the job anymore, the kids were driving him crazy, how can you teach when the kids don't want to learn and their parents don't give a damn?, etc. And he always had just heard about another job somewhere else that sounded easier, a "better gig," and wanted me to look into it with him. One of these was teaching convicts in a state prison, where, he told me, you don't have to worry about controlling the class. Another was to teach English in an Asian country where—apparently a prime consideration for him—you could have all the women you want, since they're so anxious to meet a rich American. Despite the problems I was having controlling my own class, I was glad to have a job (any job), and wasn't tempted.

Eventually, I learned his story. He was the son of an army officer (a general, if I remember correctly), and was never able to live up to his father's expectations. He wound upworking in the business world somewhere, but didn't like the job very much and had heard that teaching was an "easy gig." (Do I detect a pattern here?) After all, you get out of work early and have a lot of vacations. But teaching turned out to be harder than he thought. His big problem was that he couldn't manage his students yet refused to set up a "behavior management plan" (a system of rules, rewards and punishments most teachers use as a tool to control the kids). The way he figured it, the kids were supposed to behave because they should want to learn. (What planet

was he from!) Since they didn't, work was a living hell for him: 34 pre-teens in an unstructured environment will do that to you.

At one point, he was so desperate that he decided to teach kindergarten, despite the fact that he had no experience at this level and, by his own admission, didn't know the first thing about teaching reading, the main curricular task in that grade. Since his seniority was high enough (in LAUSD, teachers have the right, now somewhat constricted, to choosetheir positions based on their seniority), he bid for kindergarten and wound up with a combined kindergarten-first grade class, one of the hardest "splits" to teach. By then, I was teaching kindergarten and had an afternoon class, so I was required to help out in his. The first day of school was chaos.

Kids were crying (a few usually do) and a couple tried to run out of the classroom. (I had to physically restrain one girl, with the permission of her father). Distraught parents were screaming and wouldn't leave the room (you have to kick them out, I mean, firmly encourage them to leave). My friend didn't have a clue about what to do. I don't think he had planned anything; he was just going to "wing it." His biggest problem was (you guessed it), he couldn't get the kids to pay attention to him and do what he wanted them to do. He couldn't even get them to line up. When I tried to show him how to do it, the kids began following me; they thought I wasthe teacher. After several days of mayhem (and many parent complaints), the administration convinced the man to take an upper-grade class again and brought in a new teacher who had some experience in kindergarten. A year or so later, my friend injured his foot kicking a ball in the yard, and took an extended disability leave. When, after many months, his disability ran out but his foot had still not healed, he resigned his position.

The last I heard he was teaching English in Thailand, surrounded, I presume, by a lot of women.

Although this teacher's saga may have been unique, his situation is not. At any given time, in any given school, there are several-to-many teachers who are not up to the job (I am not now talking about lack of experience): they are there because of an accident, because they can't do anything else, because they used to be capable but have gotten burned out, etc., etc.

And yet, despite the man's obvious incompetence, to my knowledge he never received an unsatisfactory evaluation from an administrator, had never been reprimanded or disciplined, was never asked to leave the school. I'm not sure he was even given any advice. Oh yes, he was once asked to take a workshop on dealing with difficult students, but since he didn't believe in setting up a behavior management plan— one of the key points of the workshop—and nobody insisted that he do so, it was a waste of time. How many teachers like this does a child need to have before he or she falls hopelessly behind? And once children fall behind, every teacher who has those kids afterwards has to work twice as hard to try to get them caught up to where they are supposed to be, which slows down the progress of the rest of the class (and lowers test scores). Finally, if you realize that given the way the school system is run, a child may not have just one teacher like this in his/her school career, but two or three or more, you can get an inkling of why our school system doesn't work very well.

Another example will flesh out the picture. One year a young woman in her 20s (maybe she was 30), was hired by our school. Because she was fluent in Spanish, she was required to take a lower grade class on D Track, then the so-called Hispanic track. She landed a combined first-second grade class. However, because of bureaucratic mix-ups, she was not able to start work until sometime in September, even though year-round schools' academic year starts at the beginning ofJuly. (To get processed by the district, the woman needed her college transcript. But since her alma mater, including its administration, shuts down for the summer, she had no way

to get a transcript to turn in to district headquarters. And the district wouldn't approve her to start working, even though she had landed a position at our school, until they had the transcript.) As a result, during July and August her students had a series of substitutes (I remember three; there may have been more). When she finally was allowed to start work sometime in September, she was thrown into the classroom, like all new teachers, without any help whatsoever. She didn't even have an aide. (When she finally got one, months later, the aide was not Spanish speaking, but spoke Armenian, even though all the kids in her class were Latino. She didn't need a Spanish-speaking aide, she was told, because she herself spoke Spanish.) Since once again, I had an afternoon class, and since my room partner was off-track, I was directed to help this new teacher in her class.

When I arrived (she had been there several days), it was clear that she, too, had no idea what to do. The room was filthy. Some of the kids were wrestling on the carpet. Others were practicing skating (in their socks), on the smooth part of the floor. They were all talking or yelling. All of this while she was in the front of the room trying to teach them something (I presume). Since I didn't feel it was my position to interfere directly (as opposed to give her someadvice when, say, the kids were out at recess), I asked her what she wanted me to do. She didn't know. After suggesting that I read with some of the students one-on-one, I asked her how their reading was coming along. She replied that none of them was reading. When I asked about a particular boy who I had had the previous year, one I knew was reading well, she insisted he wasn't reading either.

I asked her to show me. She gave the boy a book that was appropriate for a third or fourth grader (the boy was in the first grade) and when he couldn't read it (big surprise), she said, "See!" I went to my classroom and got a book I knew to be on his level and he began reading it very competently.

When I suggested to the teacher that she find material that was appropriate to the child's reading level, she replied, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." This, as I soon learned, was her standard reply to every teacher's attempt to help her. She already knew everything.

When it was time to have the kids go to recess, she couldn't get the kids to line up without pushing, fighting and screaming. I asked her if I could show her how to do it. (Getting kids to line up at recess, or before any activity that they want to do, is relatively easy. You just make it clear that they're not going to do it until they are all lined up quietly, and then you wait.

Eventually, they get the point.) But my demonstration was in vain. The kids responded well, but the teacher didn't understand and could never figure out how to do it. When I talked to other teachers who had had contact with this woman, they all told me they had had the same experience. When one teacher, a personal friend and an experienced teacher who had recommended her for the job, showed up one afternoon to give a sample lesson, the new teacher wouldn't even let her in the room. After a while, I became so concerned about the children in her class, who clearly weren't learning anything, that I spoke to the principal about the situation. She suggested I talk to her mentor (new teachers are assigned mentors, more experienced teachers to whom one can go for advice and suggestions) and told me who it was. Since this individual didn't seem to be concerned about the situation (I assume he had visited his charge's classroom), and since the principal obviously didn't want to talk to either him or the teacher, I didn't pursue this. I kept trying to give the teacher advice, but she always acted as if she knew everything already. The situation became so bad that parents volunteered to be in her class-room, both to help her out and to be able to document her incompetence. Some parents tried to get their kids transferred

out of the class, but were told there was no space in any other class. At one point, one of the parents who had been in the classroom on a regular basis, questioned the teacher's competence at a meeting at which the principal was present. The principal defended the teacher, whom she described as "excellent," despite the fact that I and several others had told her what was going on. Eventually, the parents just gave up and decided that their kids just had to survive the year. After all, what could they do? Most of them weren't even very angry. They saw the teacher as a young, well-intentioned person who couldn't control the kids.

The woman survived that year and one more. I think she left when she was asked to enroll in a teacher training program. In any case, she told me, she wasn't able to save any money and never really wanted to be a teacher anyway. (I don't remember what her preferred career was. I think she wanted to write children's books.)

High Rate of Turnover

As this story suggests, another of the big problems associated with the teacher shortage is a tremendous turnover of teachers, particularly in the inner-city schools, where they are needed most and where teaching is the most demanding. The figure I've heard cited most frequently since I've been teaching is that, over the course of 5 years, 50% of new teachers quit. In other words, if 10 new teachers enter the field in one year, in five years' time, 5 of them will have left. And if this is the average for, say, all of LAUSD, it is even higher in the schools serving the poorest, most oppressed communities, where the facilities are worst, the problems the children bring with them to school are greatest and teacher morale the lowest. Here, the turnover has a powerful cumulative effect. High turnover and consequently fewer experienced teachers results in a poorly performing school, as defined, for example, by low test scores, high absence rates, greater disciplinary problems, less parental involvement, etc. Yet, these very problems make it that much harder to hold onto teachers until they get the necessary experience. Many teachers who can leave do so, either by transferring to another school in the district, transferring to another district, or abandoning the field altogether.This forces the school to hire yet more inexperienced teachers, which keeps the test scores down, etc.

As this shows, one of the things the high rate of turnover means is that at any given time, there is a large number of inexperienced people in the classroom. A rough indication of this is the large number of uncredentialed teachers currently working in the school system, that is, teachers who have not been trained to be teachers and have not received their state credential. In 1999–2000, in California, there were 40,000 teachers, or roughly 14% of the workforce, working on emergency credentials. In urban schools generally, the percentage is closer to 20%, while in LAUSD, the figure is over 35%. (Nearly half of California's teachers working on emergency credentials are in LA County.) In some poorly performing schools (usually those in the poorest communities), 50%-90% of the teachers may be working on emergency credentials. Moreover, these teachers tend to be concentrated in "hard to fill" subjects, such as special education, math and science. (All these figures are from the California Educator, June 2001, pp. 8–9.) As should be obvious, this situation has a profound impact on the students and their progress, because in this business, the most important factor in the making of a good teacher, leaving aside questions of personality (liking children, being able to manage them and communicate with them, etc.), is experience. (In my opinion, it is considerably more important than formal training, most of which is worthless.) It took me three years of teaching kindergarten before I felt I had even a modest idea of what

I was doing, and another two before I felt I was not unfairly damaging the kids I wasn't able to reach. And I was lucky, since I had the opportunity be a room partner with—that is, to work with, watch and learn from—an experienced and highly effective teacher. (If I had taught a higher grade, I would not have had this advantage, and it would have taken me that much longer to become a decent teacher.) If it takes three-to-five years to become competent and if, at any given time, there is a significant number of teachers in the schools who do not have this amount of experience, it should be obvious how deleterious the teaching shortage is. But instead of doing what is necessary to overcome this shortage, most importantly, raising teachers' salaries (and treating teachers with respect) our political and educational leaders have little more to propose than moral exhortation. I suppose GeorgeW. will take up teaching, to continue making the world a better place, after he leaves the White House.

In middle and high schools, one result of the teacher shortage is the large percentage of classes taught by teachers with little academic training in the subjects they are teaching. According to a report by the Education Trust, an "advocacy group" based in Washington, DC, "27% of math, English, science and social studies classes in California's secondary schools are taught by people who had neither a college major nor a minor in the fields they are teaching. Nationally, the number is 24%." The educational bureaucracy's attitude is typical. "It is better to have someone at least trying to teach science than to have absolutely no science," says Kerry Mazzoni, California's education secretary (LA Times, August 22, 2002). (Absolutely!— although God forbid anyone suggest raising teachers' salaries enough to attract fully qualified people.) Still another effect of the teacher shortage is the large number of substitutes, many of whom have only emergency credentials, in the classroom on any given day. I am not talking primarily about the use of substitutes (many of whom have no regular credential) when a teacher is sick or otherwise absent for a day or two. That's bad enough. I am referring to the use of substitutes on a relatively long-term basis when a regular teacher, with either a full credential or emergency credential,has not been hired for the position or when the assigned teacher is out for an extended period of time. In the example I just discussed, during the period the woman was waiting to be cleared (July and August), her prospective students had, at a minimum, three different substitutes. At least these subs were there for a week or more, so the kids had some sense of continuity. In some cases, classes like that might get a different sub every day! How are the kids going to learn anything if there is a different person in the classroom each day, one who doesn't know the children, doesn't know what they know or what they've been taught (or even what the previous sub did the day before), and who may not have any experience teaching that particular grade, or any teaching experience at all? There was another teacher at our school who was on an extended disability leave for months (I think she had hurt her back), but refused to resign her position. It seemed like there was a different substitute in her class (which was a kindergarten) every day or every few days. I remember one of them.

He was an older man, who wore suspenders and whose pant legs ended considerably above his ankles. His teeth needed cleaning and he had an odd look in his eyes. A baseball cap completed the picture. He appeared to be a few steps removed from a homeless shelter. From the homework he was sending home with his kids (which I spotted when our kindergarten classes were eating lunch in the kindergarten yard), I saw that he was trying to teach his students a new letter every day.

Either he was Super Teacher or he didn't know what he was doing. (When I teach a letter, both its name and its sound, I need several days to do so, sometimes even a week, using a variety

of activities, and at the end of that time there may still be one or more kids who can't tell you what the letter is or what sound it makes.) When I asked him if he needed any help, he politely declined. "I've been doing this for 40 years," he said. (God help us!) Of course, not all the teachers on emergency credentials, and certainly not all of the substitutes, are incompetent or teaching only as a means to survive until they "make it" in the movie business, or until something better comes along, or because they've heard it's an "easy gig." Many talented, dedicated teachers have entered the profession via emergency credentials, and it is probably a good thing there's a way forpeople who may have studied something else in college or pursued other careers to become teachers. Yet because of the teacher shortage, the students, the school system as a whole, and the new teachers themselves pay a price. This is because they walk in the door and start teaching with virtually no help whatsoever. As a result, they and the kids suffer until they (the teachers) figure out what they're doing.

Swim or Sink

This was my own experience, which may be instructive here. Prior to teaching I was working in the film and television industry as a freelance script reader or, as officially titled, a "story analyst." I read screenplays, books and other materials for movie directors, producers and other people in the business. Like most freelance jobs, my career had a "boom or bust" cycle. There were times when it seemed that everyone I had ever worked for each wanted me to read ten screenplays and four books and to send them my "coverage" (essentially, written synopses and evaluations of the material I had read) within two days. There were other times when weeks would go by when I got no work at all, not even a phone call from my "employers" asking how I was doing. (Producers and directors are always so busy.) On the whole, though, I wasn't making a living. At my best, I was barely paying my bills; at worst, I was running down my savings. (An old car I was continually throwing money into didn't help.) After three years of this, I came to the conclusion that I was not likely to land a full-time salaried job as a script reader anywhere (there are a few such positions, mostly at the major studios, and they are very difficult to get), or otherwise move ahead in the entertainment business. I also concluded that since I was well into middle age, I needed to think seriously about putting money away for retirement. After answering various job ads, and realizing I wasn't qualified for a job in the modern world, I decided to become (you guessed it) a teacher. Fortunately, I did have a BA. Moreover, when I first arrived in California I had, on the advice of a friend who was a high school teacher (when she suggested that I consider teaching as a career, I just laughed), taken and passed the CBEST as a kind of safety net (which I now needed). I had an additional asset. I have a modest grasp of Spanish andmanaged to pass the district's Spanish fluency exam, earning its top grade. Since at that time the schools were still committed to bilingual education and since, obviously, one of the main languages of the bilingual program in LA was Spanish, this made me a relatively hot item.

I first applied to be a high school social studies teacher, but when I visited Cal State LA (the California State University at Los Angeles), to look into enrolling in the appropriate teacher training program, I was effectively rebuffed. At the administration building, I was told I needed to speak to both the chairman of the history department and the chairman of the education department. Fortunately, the latter was on campus.

Among other things, he told me that I needed to take courseX in one department and course Y in another, but that I had to take one before the other. (I don't remember what these courses were about, their numbers or which one I needed to complete before taking the other.) Although the chairman of the history department was not on campus and was not scheduled to return for several weeks (this was in December), I did manage to reach him by phone. He was extremely impressed with the schools I had attended, but when I asked him about course X and Y, he told me the exact opposite of what the chairman of the education department had said. When I returned to the administration building and asked them for clarification, I was thoroughly beaten. Aside from being lethargic and bored, they were unable to help me out.

Along with the general state of the campus(clean it was not) and the overall atmosphere of the place, I was demoralized by the thought of having to negotiate the institution for however many years it would take to get a credential. I returned to the district's recruitment office and asked to apply to teach elementary school, for which, I had been told, the district offered an intern program. In this program (which I will discuss in more detail in the next installment of this essay), one could take the requisite courses gratis, and without having to a navigate a university bureaucracy, while teaching at an elementary school.After getting processed a second time, I was given a list of district elementary schools, with addresses and telephone numbers, and a map, and was told I had to find a job myself.

I decided to start with schools near my house, made an appointment and got an interview. The principal at the school there was nasty. When she asked why I had decided to become a teacher and I replied that I needed a job (and also that I liked kids and thought I'd be able to do a good job), she snorted, "So, you think teaching is easy, don't you?" I replied as politely as I could that I knew it wasn't (that's one of the reasons I had never wanted to be a teacher). She then told me that there was a Spanish-speaking teaching assistant at the school whom they were coaching to be able to pass the CBEST, but that if she didn't, they would call me. I left theinterview with a sigh of relief, happy that I had been rejected.

(I needed a job, but not that badly.) When I called the next school, the principal was at least polite. She told me that they were not offering any full-time positions, only week-by-week substitute slots, but if I were willing to take such a job, they'd try me out. At my interview there, with the principal, the school's coordinator and some other people present, I was asked how I would organize a language arts program and instructional programs in other subject areas. Of course, I didn't have a clue and mostlyhemmed and hawed, but since, as I later found out, they were desperate to fill two positions (it was several days before the Christmas break and they needed people to start right after New Year), I got the job. I agreed to take a combined fifthsixth grade class (I was shocked they had such things), and, at the principal's suggestion, I sat in on the classes of three upper-grade teachers (they didn't appreciate my presence in their classrooms) to see how things worked. I was also given the Course of Study—a humongous loose-leaf binder of several hundred pages, containing a detailed description of the required curricula for each subject area for each grade—and urged to study it before school started up again in January.

Frankly, I couldn't make head or tail of it; it had so much stuff in it you couldn't possibly cover all the material in the time available and there was no way to know what was essential and what was not or how much of the material one could feasibly cover.

During the Christmas vacation, I spoke to several of my teacher friends and asked their advice. All I remember was them warning me that if I had trouble handling the kids or needed some other kind of help I should definitely NOT go to the principal. They have too many other things

to do, they told me, and don't want to be bothered with helping new teachers (!?). If I wanted to keep the job, I needed to figure things out for myself or speak to another teacher.

Improvising on the Job

When I arrived at school on the first day of classes after the break, I was told where to pick up my class, got the kids, and walked them to classroom. After they put their stuff away and took their seats, I introduced myself and took attendance. Now what? I didn't have any idea what to do and nobody at the school had told me or even made any suggestions. Since I supposed that all kids like to write (and I knew that trying to get pre-teens to do something they don't want to do is a lost cause), I asked my students, "Who wants to write a story?" Hands shot up. Heaving a sigh of release, I told my students to take out a pencil and piece of paper and start writing. One boy raised his hand and asked, "Can we work with friends?" A light went on in my head (I had heard that "cooperative learning" was in favor), and I said, "OK, pick a partner," and the kids started working…reasonablyquietly. A bit later, the assistant principal came in and looked around the room; she wasn't smiling. The kids were working, but there was some talking (they were discussing their stories), and I didn't know whether that was acceptable or not.

The assistant principal then asked me, "What are they doing?" I answered, "They're writing stories." The woman then left without saying anything further. Of course, I was very worried, but as I was to discover later, this was a significant improvement over the previous teacher.

The class consisted of 34 kids, equally divided between fifth and sixth graders. Their ages were roughly 10–11, but some of them, particularly the sixth grade girls, were emotionally going on 16. All but one had Spanish last names (what the one Anglo kid was doing in the class, supposedly a bilingual one, I never did figure out), and most of them, but not all, spoke or understood Spanish. (One boy had a Spanish surname—I presume his natural father was Latino—but he had been raised by Anglo parents—an alcoholic and a coke addict—and only spoke and understood English.) The kids seemed to enjoy writing their stories (most of them were about serial killers until, after several weeks, I put my foot down and insisted they write about something else), and reading them to the rest of the class. After a week or so, it rained heavily one day, so during recess time, I had the kids play inside, while I took the opportunity to read with each one individually, using basal readers, books whose story content and vocabulary are geared to each grade. I was shocked to find out how poor their reading skills were. Fully one third of the class was reading on the second grade level.

Others were reading on the third and fourth grade level, while just a few were reading "at grade level," the level at which they are expected to be able to read. Math was the same. One third of the class did not have a solid grasp of the basic multiplication and division facts and most of the students' ability to do word problems was next to nil. They also couldn't do long division because they couldn't keep the columns straight. As a result, I decided I would work on their basic skills and worry about other things later. My language arts program consisted essentially of running a writers' workshop; the kids wrote stories, read them to the class who then discussed them. We talked about characters and plots, at least so they'd know the terms. A couple of times a week, Ihad the slower readers read aloud to me around a table at the back of the class, while the others read on their own and wrote synopses of what they had read. (When I first started doing this, some of the better readers snickered. I told everyone to stop everything and asked "Which one of you is perfect?" When no hands went up, I gave them a short lecture about people being good in

some things and not so good in others, etc., and told them that I wouldn't tolerate any snobbery. There was no more snickering after that.) For math, I worked through the grade level math book.

For practice, I divided the class into teams and had a math contest: I'd write a problem on the board and the teams would compete to see who came up with the right answer first. They seemed to like that. Occasionally, we studied science using the grade level science book. For social studies, I first tried to use the current, mandated and very "politically correct" textbook. It looked good, with a lot of pictures and maps, but it was so wordy and used such high flown language that most of the kids couldn't get through it. Instead, we used the old, outdated text; at least the kids could read it. As the time to take the yearly achievement tests approach, the class and I went through a booklet designed to prepare students for the test. Mind you, through all this time, I had no idea whether I was covering the required curriculum, nor did I really care. My students obviously needed help with the basics, and I was determined to focus on this regardless of what anyone would say. In any event, not one person from the administration ever gave me any direction about what I should be doing, although they did come in occasionally to check how things were going, mostly, I presume, to see whether I was managing the kids.

I myself wondered whether I was doing any good, when two things happened. The first was that, after taking their annual achievement tests (I don't remember which ones they were), my students' scores in reading had gone up noticeably. I don't know whether this had anything to do with me, but when the assistant principal praised me for it, I was willing to take the credit. More important, three of the fifth-grade girls had written a wonderful story about a girl their age whose parents were getting divorced. I naturally assumed that they were writing from experience and asked if any oftheir parents had been divorced or were now getting divorced. They answered no, they had just made it up. I was very impressed, but most of the kids kept writing about people being murdered.

I didn't realize it then, but I later found out that what I was doing was significantly better than the previous teacher.

Although she was fully trained, and a big fan of the newest methods then being touted, she was young, inexperienced and couldn't control the class. She also played favorites and screamed a lot. When I asked other teachers and administrators about her, they either spoke very highly of her, praising her use of the most up-to-date teaching methods (mine were anything but), or else described her as horrible.

The assistant principal, who had so intimidated me the first time I saw her but who eventually came to respect me (at least I controlled the class), just rolled her eyes. I got the impression that the kids had run the teacher off, that is, made her life so miserable that she left in despair. Her training may have qualified her to teach middle-class kids, but she was clearly out of her league with the group she wound up with.

Behavior Management

I screamed, too, but after a while the kids seemed to respond to me and appeared to be learning something. Most of them. There were several kids whose sole purpose in life seemed to be to come to school to piss me off (or any other teacher they had; it wasn't personal). Usually it was talking out of turn, interrupting me or other students, or failing to line up properly—pushing, shoving, talking and occasionally, hitting and cursing (those were the only times I sent kids to the office). There were days when I had half the class (usually, the boys), eating lunch in the classroom and

not allowed to play. (I told them that I was paid for the whole day, that I didn't eat lunch, and that it was all the same to me whether I was in the class with them or sitting in the staff lounge.

One boy actually begged to be allowed to stay in at lunch, even though he was behaving well enough to eat and play outside with the other kids. He wanted to use the computer, which, because he never finished his work on time, he never got to use.) Although one teacher suggested I use more positive reinforcement, I couldn't quite figure out what kind ofrewards would work. Eventually, the kids themselves came to my rescue. Up until then, we had been taking PE (Physical Education) at the end of the day, when our class was officially scheduled. (It had taken over a week to get even this started, because nobody had told me I needed to have PE instruction until one of the boys asked, "When are we going to have PE?" Of course, that was their favorite subject.) After several weeks of this, another boy asked if we could take PE earlier, before lunch. Once I discerned that there was room on the yard at an appropriate time, I agreed, but only on condition that they do a good job (that is, behave reasonably well), during the rest of the day. Wonder of wonders, it worked, although I have to admit that the last part of the day, after lunch, with an hour and 20 minutes left before they went home, was usually a lost cause. At one point, when I had the kids lined up in the hall to go outside, I ducked inside to get a ball, leaving the kids unsupervised for a couple of seconds.

Just then, the principal came in. Although she politely reprimanded me for leaving the kids unattended, she also said that I had created a "major miracle," referring to the kids.

They were lined up like soldiers.

As the due date for report cards came, I was informed by the teacher in the next classroom that I was required to send home "unsatisfactory notices" to those parents whose kids were going to get less than satisfactory grades on their report cards (say, Ds and Fs). Since fully a third of the kids were reading on the second grade level, I sent home a lot of these notices, which include requests that the parents come in for conferences with the teacher. To my surprise, most of the parents showed up and, even more to my surprise, they seemed to like me. They had noticed, they told me, that the kids were excited about school (I think they were calling each other up to talk over their stories about serial killers), and assured me that I was doing a good job. I recently ran into the mother of one of the boys I had that semester. He was in college somewhere and doing well, and they both remember, she insisted, what a great teacher I was.

There was one woman, however, who stormed into the classroom and started cursing me out. She was white and rather well-dressed, as if she had come from an office job. She was the mother of the one Anglo kid in the class, whose reading skills were very poor and who seemed, overall, to be verydemoralized about school and his life in general; nobody wanted to write stories with him and his efforts usually amounted to about three or four feebly scribbled lines. When I assured her that I was new at the school and was only trying to help her son, she apologized and then began a tirade against the principal and the entire school. She knew her kid was way behind, but why was she always being told that he didn't qualify for any special help; he wasn't learning-disabled and there was no after school tutorial program. She couldn't believe that her son was the only kid in the school like this and that nothing was being done to help them. She hated the previous teacher. When she had calmed down, she pleaded with me: would I agree to tutor her son on a private basis? After demurring (I was already exhausted and didn't want to tie up any time over the weekend), I agreed to tutor her boy at their home for an hour every Saturday.

Overlooking the Basics

What I learned from this was instructive. To find out more about the boy's reading skills (one doesn't get much of a chance to work one-on-one with 34 kids in a class), I had him pick out one of his books and read it to me. He read a few words until he came to one he didn't know. He then just took a wild guess, usually coming up with a word that started with the same letter as the one he saw on the page but no others.

He made no attempt to sound out the whole word, letter by letter. I showed him how to do this, explaining, however, that in English the letters do not always sound the same, and had him try it a few times. If he got the word, we went on, but if he didn't, I eventually told him the word and then had him proceed with his reading. We did this every Saturday morning for about an hour and a half, and eventually, his reading began to improve. What I realized from this was: (1) nobody had specifically taught the kids how to sound out words; and (2) mostly what the poorer readers needed was a lot more practice reading. As I was to find out later on in my teaching career, with all the emphasis placed on the latest, supposedly scientifically-demonstrated methods of teaching reading, the basics were being overlooked. As a result, a lot of kids were either not learning to read well or were not learning to read at all.

I also learned something about the boy and his mother's situation. From what his mother told me, she and her husband hadbeen high livers who had gotten into a car accident while high on an illicit substance; someone was either seriously hurt or killed. As punishment, her driver's license had been revoked and she lost custody of her boy. He wound up living with his grandparents, while his mother and father had gotten divorced. After she had stayed clean for several years, her son was allowed to live with her, although she still was not allowed to drive. They lived in a very small but immaculate apartment over a garage behind a house, from which vantage point, she told me, she could see one of the neighbors dealing drugs.

Although the boy was now living with his mom, he apparently had found the entire experience very demoralizing and had fallen behind in school. After the boy graduated, I occasionally ran into his mother in the local shopping mall. She thanked me for what I had done for her son and assured me that he was doing a lot better. "You're a good guy, Mr. Tabor," she said.

Even after I got the class somewhat under control, two boys, sixth-graders, continued to give me trouble. One of them, the leader of the two, had extremely poor reading and writing skills. He could barely read the second-grade reader, and as far as his writing was concerned, I couldn't figure out what he was trying to say. I later found out his story. He had not yet learned to read well when, in the first or second grade, he and his family had moved back to Mexico. There, he attended school but fell further behind because his reading skills in Spanish were worse than those in English. After several years, they returned to United States, where his education (if it can be called that), continued. Academically a disaster, he had real leadership skills, and his chief pleasure in life was organizing mayhem in the class.

His sidekick was only a touch more academically proficient than he was. This boy's father, I was told by the woman in charge of the lunch tickets at our school who knew many of the families in the community, was an alcoholic who regularly beat the boy. Apparently, the kid needed a father-figure and went along with whatever his pal cooked up. When they got too out of hand, I sent them to another classroom, whose teacher had agreed to provide this service for me.

I eventually got them under control, although they were never angels. The breakthrough came from an opportunity they themselves offered to me. We were out doing PE (eitherplaying kickball or running relay races), when one of the boys, the leader, challenged me to a race. I laughed and replied "You want to race me?" But inside I wasn't so cocky.

Since it had been some time since I had sprinted (in addition, I was in my late forties), I suggested we race at the end of the week. I went home and did a few squats with my barbell and practiced a few starts outside. When it came time to race, I suggested we run to the fence dividing the primary yard from the upper-grade yard and back, a total distance of about 150 yards: in case I fell behind at the start, I wanted to have space to catch up. As it turned out, this wasn't necessary. I was ahead after 10 yards and ran the rest of the distance looking over my shoulder and laughing at them. TheyI did have a serious run-in with one of the boys, the follower of the two, also during PE. We were choosing sides for a kickball game and the boy refused to be on the same team as one of the less popular girls in the class. Although she was sweet, she was not very attractive or academically capable. Whatreally did her in was the discovery one day by the nurse of lice "nits" in her hair. (This occasionally happens at our school.) So, when it looked like this boy was going to wind up on the same team as the poor girl, he refused. I told him either to be on the team or to sit down and not play at all.

He said "no," directly defying me in front of the other kids, and started crying. I told him again to join his team or sit down (I wasn't going to put him on the other team); if he didn't, I was going to send him to the principal's office. He again refused and off he went. (I very rarely sent a kid to the office, since it usually didn't do any good, but did piss off the kid's parents, who were often obligated to come to school for a conference.) At the end of the day, I saw the boy in the school yard as I left the school, certain he hated my guts.

He waved and called out cheerfully, "Hi, Mr. Tabor. Bye, Mr. Tabor." For needy kids, I guess some kind of attention is better than none at all (certainly better than a beating).

Several years later, I saw this boy doing gardening work in an upscale house in a nearby neighborhood, obviously working in his father's business. He was very friendly. The other boy, the one with leadership skills, wound up being the leader of a local gang and had gotten shot in the hand. A real shame.

He was a very bright kid whose life circumstances, particularly, his education, didn't point to much of a future.

I realized that the kids liked me (this was, and still is, important to me) when, by a bureaucratic mix-up, I almost lost the job. After working as a week-by-week sub, I had been offered a contract by the school. This meant being processed again, which in turn required me to submit my college transcripts (again) to the district. Although one school, which I attended for two years, sends official transcripts directly to former students, the other will only send official transcripts directly to the institution that needs to see them, in my case the LAUSD. Without going into details, my transcripts had gotten lost in the mail and someone downtown at LAUSD headquarters had decided to replace me with another teacher, rather than wait until the mess was straightened out. My soon-to-be former students were very upset; they bought me gifts and cried. On the day the new teacher was to start, my principal (I will be eternally grateful to her for this), advised me to show up for work anyway. "You never know what will happen," she said. Sure enough, it rained heavily that day and my intended replace-ment never showed up. In the meantime, the head of the official region our school was located in (we now have subdistricts, after a stint with "clusters"), returned from vacation and, irate at district headquarters for going behind her back,

insisted I be hired as the regular teacher. The next day, the crisis over, the kids were back to their usual antics.

I did managed to survive the semester without too many mishaps. At graduation, the kids were happy and the parents told me how pleased they were at their children's progress.

One couple even thanked me for giving their kids (there were two of them, a girl in the fifth grade and a boy in the sixth), Fs on their report cards. They were having trouble motivating them and hoped this might help. (Back in the days of "social promotion," when every student was passed on to the next grade whether or not he/she had mastered the curriculum, giving Fs wasn't considered acceptable, presumably because this might hurt the child's self-esteem.) The assistant principal, who wasn't a fan of the new methods or the indulgent platitudes that went with them, even complimented me on my courage. Who needed courage? The parents wanted their kids to be educated and were glad somebody seemed concerned enough to try to help them.

Teacher Shortage Remains

My main point in relating these stories is to illustrate the reality of a school system operating under the burden of a chronic shortage of teachers. Large numbers of children spend years with teachers who are inexperienced, incompetent and in some cases downright unfit for the job. Even when the individual is committed to being a teacher and has the raw abilities to do a good job, his/her inexperience takes its toll on the kids; they suffer inferior instruction while the teacher is learning the ropes. Although it is easy and convenient to blame the teachers, the culpability lies elsewhere: with the overall conditions in the school system and with those, the bureaucrats, politicians and corporate leaders, taken collectively, who are responsible for this mess. It is also easy (and convenient) to forget the large numbers of capable-to-highly gifted teachers and administrators who are killing themselves to make the system work, in spite of the obstacles they face, including the "leadership" they are obligated to follow.There is an additional effect of the teacher shortage that in a way sums up everything I've tried to portray here. This is the fact that as long as there is such a shortage, there is no incentive to get rid of poor teachers. (I am not now talking about teachers who are still gaining experience. I am referring to those who, despite years of working in the schools, do not know how to manage and/or teach the kids very well.) Admittedly, once a teacher has a regular teaching credential and has passed probation, it is very difficult to fire him/her.

Yet, the bigger problem is that as long as there is a significant shortage of teachers, there is very little reason to do so. If a teacher can hold down a class with some semblance of order and prevent the kids from killing each other, it is better to have that person in the classroom, even if he/she is not teaching the kids very much. Why? Because even if (speaking from the administrators' point of view), you get rid of the individual, you have no reason to expect that the person you get to take his/her place will be any better. In fact, you have no reason to believe that you will be able to get anybody at all. If so, you might get saddled with a class that has no regular teacher. You will then try to arrange for a long-term substitute to take the spot, but you might not get one of those either. Instead, you may have to call in for a sub every day and hope that one gets out to your school. And if not, you will have to split up the class each day, sending some kids to one room, others to another, hoping that the teachers of those classes can come up with work for them to do. In short, if you do get rid of a poor teacher, you may wind up with a bigger headache.

The problem of the teacher shortage may be coming to a crisis in the state. According to an article in the August 6 LA Times, the U.S. Department of Education is accusing California of "skirting" the country's new education law. The so-called "No Child Left Behind" law, passed in 2001, requires teachers in every state to be "highly qualified," that is, fully credentialed, by the end of the 2005–06 school year.

Teachers hired this year for schools in low-income neighborhoods must already be so designated. California, however, is defining "highly qualified" in such a way as to include teacher interns and those with emergency credentials. Yet, "if California follows the letter of the federal law, schools in low-income communities will be unable to hire enough teachers this fall, state officials said. That could push someclass sizes up to 50, 60 or more students, they said." Since that article appeared, the issue seems to have dropped out of sight. Perhaps the state and the federal government are working out a deal. Whatever happens, it will not solve the issue of the lack of teachers, a problem for which our country's political and economic elite, past and present, should be held accountable.

Despite the overall crisis, the situation at our school with respect to overcrowding and the shortage of teachers has improved somewhat in the past couple of years. There is now less turnover of teachers and fewer inexperienced and incompetent ones. I attribute this to several factors. One is that our overall enrollment has declined. The neighborhoods that our school serves have seen a substantial run-up in rents, so that many of our poorer residents have had to move. Many landlords have also evicted their so-called Section 8 tenants (those who get rent subsidies), further exacerbating the situation. With fewer kids attending the school, teachers who have left have not needed to be replaced. (There have also been fewer roving classes.) An additional factor has been that fact that teachers won a substantial salary increase, which, in the context of the collapse of the hi-tech boom of a few years ago, has made teaching more attractive. As I understand it, teacher turnover throughout the district has declined somewhat, but the overall teacher shortage, along with its negative consequences, remains.

In addition, while new teachers are still expected to swim or sink, that is, to survive their first few years with little or no outside help, they no longer have to invent their own curriculum. In contrast to a few years ago, all teachers are now required to follow highly structured, extremely detailed (the technical term is "scripted," meaning the teachers are supposed to read from the teacher's manual) programs in reading and math, whether or not these programs are designed and appropriate for the particular types of students each individual teacher is trying to teach. While this may be better than nothing, it is a typical example of the way the district and the educational bureaucracy as a whole deals with these issues, swinging from extreme to extreme, without finding and stopping at some reasonable point in between (indeed, without realizing that such a happy medium even exists).The new approach flows from and reflects the current (but not publicly articulated) belief among our educational leaders that the problem with the system is the teachers. Hence the desire to come up with "teacher-proof " programs. The ideal is now the so-called "corporate" (or, as I prefer to call it, military) model of the schools: every teacher in the same grade doing the same lesson the same way on the same day throughout the district. (What a vision!)

Progress in the LAUSD?

Despite the fact that conditions in the school system remain atrocious, Superintendent Roy Romer (former governor of Colorado and member of the Democratic National Committee), the LAUSD and the members of the Board of Education are bragging about their achievements. The chief evidence they cite is the rise of school children's scores on the mandated state tests for four years in a row. If newspaper accounts accurately reflect our educational leaders' claims, they are attributing this improvement primarily to the mandated reading and math programs and the corresponding teacher training they have implemented. Significantly absent from their analysis are two factors that I believe are much more important. The first is the reduction in class size (from 33 to 20) for grades k through 3. Interestingly, the rise in test scores tends to fall off after the fourth grade, while scores for middle and high school students have seen little increase or have remained flat. (Superintendent Romer insists that scores for middle and high school kids will go up as the kids now in elementary school reach those schools. Permit me to remain skeptical.) An additional factor behind the rise in test scores is the substantial salary increase won by the teachers which, as I've mentioned, in the context of the economic recession, has tended to stabilize the workforce.

There are other factors worth mentioning to explain the rise in test scores.

1. Teachers are "teaching to the test," that is, orienting their instruction to the kinds of questions and skills that they know, from previous tests, will be on the exams. I don't criticize this; while kindergarten students don't take state-mandated examinations (maybe they will in the future), I am required to give certain tests to my students, and I do mybest to prepare them. If "they" (our bosses) want test scores to go up, let's get them to go up; besides some of the tested skills are legitimate.

2. Teachers, certainly in kindergarten and first grade, are focusing on reading and math and downplaying or ignoring other subjects, such as science and social studies, let alone art, music and physical education. Speaking personally, I am doing a lot less art than I used to.

3. Teachers are also pushing their kids harder, whether or not this is emotionally or developmentally in their best interests.

4. In addition, students' test taking skills are improving. This makes a big difference, since some of the kids have little or no idea how to perform well on exams. As one who has administered quite a few of these tests, I can vouch for this. Among other things, some kids don't budget their time well and never finish sections of the test, while those kids who finish a portion early rarely go back to review their answers. ("You have ten minutes left, perhaps you might want to go back and review some of the problems." "Nope." "Are you sure all of your answers are correct?" "Yep.")

5. There has also been an end to the policy of social promotion. Up until recently, kids who were not performing "at grade level" or anywhere near it were promoted to the next grade. Leaving a child back, that is, "retaining" him/her, was deemed harmful to the child's self-esteem, so that whatever might be gained by repeating a year would supposedly be lost because of its negative emotional impact on the kid. I personally pleaded with my principal more than a few times to have some of my kindergarteners repeat the year because

> they were woefully unprepared—academically, emotionally and developmentally—for first grade. I've had children arrive in my class, fresh from Mexico or Central America, with no English and no prior school experience, in March (my track's school year ends in mid-May), and watch, helplessly, as they were promoted to first grade. Much more often than not, our principal refused my request: "There's more instructional time in first grade" (kindergarteners come for half a day), she insisted. Although I've personally heard first grade teachers say that it's not their job to teach the ABC's and I've even mentioned this to the principal, my appeals were usually invain. This has now changed: retention is now "in," although here, too, the new policy is limited because of lack of space. The principal is a convert to the new policy. She recently told me that some schools who have seen their API (Academic Performance Index, a school-wide average of test scores weighted, supposedly, to take the socio-economic level of the school's student into consideration), go up substantially have achieved this through a militant policy of retention: any child not meeting all of the appropriate "benchmarks" is now automatically retained. The district even set up special classes, with 10 children in each class, for those kids required to repeat the second grade. Typically, due to the budget cuts, the past year the size of these classes was raised to 20.

Further undermining our leaders' contention that the scripted programs and teacher training are the main factors behind the rise in test scores is the fact that scores were going up even before the programs and training were implemented. Equally significant, they don't attempt to explain why test scores were so low before. Aside from the factors I've discussed, some of the problem may have resulted from the previous round of bureaucratic fads, including a poorly designed and even more poorly implemented stab at bilingual education and the attempt to mandate the use of "whole language" reading methods. (Whatever the merits of the original theory, by the time "whole language" got through the bureaucracy and hit the classroom, what it came down to was: "Don't teach the kids the ABCs.") Given all this (and leaving aside whether test scores measure much beyond the ability to take tests), I'm not sure there's as much to gloat about as our leaders think. Moreover, they may be undermining the very achievements they are bragging about. As I mentioned above, teaching assistants have been let go, class sizes have been increased, including in remedial classes, and essential services, have been cut, all because of the economic crisis, the state budget deficit and resultant budget cuts. One wonders, given our educational leaders' failure to mention the class-size reduction and increase in teacher salaries as factors behind the rise in test scores, whether they aren't planning to raise the class size in k through 3 and reduce teachers' salaries. The threat to cut our health benefits, now in abeyance for one year, points to such a strategy.Yet, while all this is happening, our leaders continue to set an example of intelligence, dedication and willingness to sacrifice for the common cause. While schools are suffering from budget cuts, Superintendent Romer and all the members of the board of education are each having new, private bathrooms built for them in the new LAUSD headquarters, which itself cost $74.5 million to purchase and is estimated to require an additional $60 million to renovate (LA Times, September 26, 2001), at the tune of $80,000 apiece! Leaving aside the waste of money, what kind of example does this set for teachers, students, parents and everybody else working in or having anything to do with the school system, let alone struggling to make ends meet in a questionable economic climate? Are they corrupt, stupid, or some combination of the two? All I can say is, whatever it is that they're going to be doing in those bathrooms, I sure hope they enjoy it.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do in my modest essay is discuss the fact that the public education system, particularly in the large urban areas, has suffered from years of underfunding and neglect and to show concretely how this affects the education of the children. Of course, there are other problems afflicting our schools. As I've suggested, one of these is the role of the educational bureaucracy and the other members of the "educational establishment" that manages and purports to lead public education. This, along with the related issues of curriculum and teacher training, will be discussed in the next installment of this essay.

PART II — NOXIOUS INTERFERENCE

Introduction

In 2002, I published an essay—part analysis, part memoir—of my experiences as a teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Aside from allowing me to blow off steam (a necessary activity in my profession), its purpose was to offer a view of the public school system in the United States, largely by taking a look at the inside of the second largest school district in the country, and more specifically by describing conditions at the school where I worked. My intent was to present a personal take on what I believe to be the major problems plaguing public education today: dilapidated facilities; lack of space and the resulting overcrowding; and the longstanding shortage and high turnover rate of teachers, caused in large part by the low salaries we receive. All these afflictions are caused, I argued, by the fact that the school system in the United States, like the public sector as a whole, has been systematically starved for funds for decades.

In this continuation of my memoir/essay, I would like to focus on another issue affecting schools in the country: the destructive role of the educational bureaucracy. This will include a discussion of the continual abuse teachers are subjected to, an additional cause of the national teacher shortage. As in the first part of my piece, I do not pretend to present a fully developed, thoroughly researched analysis. Instead, I offer a more "existential" approach: what it's like, concretely, to be a teacher in the public school system; a view, to paraphrase George Orwell, from "inside the whale."

Changes Since I Began Teaching

Before getting to the meat of this part, and at the risk of repeating some of what I wrote at the end of Part I, it is perhaps worth presenting an assessment of at least some of what has happened to the school system in Los Angeles since I began my career.

As far as I can see, that is, judging largely although not exclusively from the state of my own school, there has been some progress. As mentioned in Part I, class size has been reduced in grades kindergarten through third grade (K-3 in educationese). More recently, the LAUSD began a substantial program of school construction, and a few new schools have opened recently. The state of California passed a set of "standards," a detailed list of concepts and skills, broken down by grade, that each teacher is expected to teach and that each child must master. Steps have also been taken to ensure a more unified curriculum on the elementary school level, with the adoption of mandated programs for reading, mathematics, and other subjects. A substantial increase in teachers' salaries, which has attracted more people into the field, combined with certain economic and social conditions (the recession of 2000—2001, a somewhat sluggish economy in general, and—at least in the Los Angeles area—a significant decline in enrollment) has led to

a considerable easing of the teacher shortage. (Special education teachers, as well as qualified teachers of science and math on the high school level, are still in short supply.) This abatement of the teacher shortage, along with an insistence on greater (formal) qualifications of newly hired teachers, may have resulted in some improvement in overall teacher quality. There are now far fewer "vagabonds" in the profession, meaning people trying to earn some easy money while they pursue more desirable career goals outside of teaching. The increased emphasis on testing (close to an obsession) has also been the cause of some student progress, although to what extent and at what price is arguable. Finally, as a result of a voter initiative, the bilingual program in Los Angeles and throughout California was eliminated in all but a very few schools, where it is available by parental request. Given the way it was (rather, was not) working in LA, its removal was a good thing.

(Whatever one thinks of bilingual education in theory, as actually implemented in the LAUSD it didn't work. As I reply when asked about it, a system that can't teach kids to read and write in one language can't do so in two. Among the reasons for the program's failure was the lack of adequately trained bilingual teachers. The figure I heard in reference to the LAUSD was that 90 percent of the bilingual classrooms were not taught by bilingual teachers. In these classes, Spanish oral language and reading were taught by a teaching assistant, often fresh out of high school, under the supposed supervision of the English-speaking instructor, who usually didn't know anything about teaching kids to read in Spanish.)

As a result of the changes I've mentioned, students' test scores have gone up and, at least according to reports from upper grade teachers, the children are coming into their classes better prepared.

However, these improvements are not as substantial as they may appear, and they may have come at a significant cost. Scores on the state tests taken in the spring of 2006 throughout California declined from the year before. Our school's API (Academic Performance Index, i.e., a school's ranking based on test scores) declined from 788 (out of a possible 1000) in 2005, to 781. While not astounding, this drop is noteworthy, especially considering the fact that it was concentrated among the Latino students; the scores of white (in our school, largely Armenian) students went up.

In addition, although some new schools have been built, there has been no further progress in reducing class sizes in grades four and higher. In our school, fourth and fifth grade classes still have up to 36 children, and it is my impression that middle school and high school classes have 40 or more students each. The question now is less one of space than one of money. With declining enrollment, more rooms have become available, but the mandated class sizes in the fourth and fifth grades and in the middle and high schools have not been reduced. Even more worrisome is the fact that there has been no talk, at least none emanating from the LAUSD leadership, of addressing this problem. The teachers' union (UTLA—United Teachers of Los Angeles) claims to be pushing the issue in contract negotiations, but I doubt anything will come of this. At the secondary level—where classes are huge, conditions terrible, test scores low, and the dropout rate somewhere around 50 percent—all the talk is about breaking down the gigantic high schools (some with thousands of students) into smaller "learning academies." This would be a positive step, to be sure, but unless class sizes in these "academies" come down significantly, the creation of such "academies" will not be enough to address the staggering problems facing secondary education in Los Angeles.

The adoption of state standards, though positive overall, has had its downside. In the school system, very little is done in moderation. Especially when it comes to curriculum, the machine lurches from one extreme to another. (Some teachers call it the "pendulum.") So, in contrast to when I first entered the system—when it seemed that nobody was held to anything—current standards are unbelievably detailed and probably quite confusing to newer, less experienced teachers. The reality is that you can't do everything; there simply isn't enough time. In that case, what should you focus on? While certain concepts and skills are highlighted as "key," one effect of the proliferation of standards is likely to be that many teachers will stretch themselves too thin trying to cram too much stuff down their kids' throats, with the result that they (the kids—forget about the teachers) won't learn anything really well.

The adoption of a more unified curriculum has had another negative impact, at least in some subject areas. Most significant has been a stifling of teacher initiative (and creativity) and, among many teachers, a decline in morale.

Although I believe the increase in teachers' salaries, the insistence on certain minimal formal qualifications, and the easing of the teacher shortage, taken together, have improved the overall quality of teachers coming into the district, this may not be so. For one thing, teacher training programs do not necessarily prepare would-be teachers to be effective in the classroom. Judging from the training I experienced (the LAUSD's District Intern Program), such programs include an unbelievable amount of fluff, do not address the very real gaps in the overall education of teacher trainees (such as in math and science), and do not really train teachers how to survive and function in our problem-ridden school system. In other words, the training programs are vacuous and totally out of touch with reality. Thus, the fact that someone comes into the system with a credential (that is, after having completed a certified training program) may not mean he or she is "highly qualified," let alone more qualified than someone just walking in the door after having been, say, a lawyer. For another thing, I doubt that the salary increases have significantly reduced the high turnover rate of new teachers.

Another reason I may be overestimating the quality of newly hired teachers relates to the decline in student enrollment at our school. Our enrollment has dropped, and drastically—probably more than the average decrease for LAUSD as a whole. As I mentioned in Part I, this decline has been caused by rising rents and the transformation of rental units into condominiums (which our students' families can't afford to buy) in our school neighborhood, and the existence of better opportunities—jobs and lower home prices and lower overall cost of living—elsewhere. One result of this drop in enrollment is that, rather than hiring new teachers, our school has had the unwelcome task each year of letting teachers go. This, naturally, leaves the more experienced teachers on staff, thus increasing the overall quality of instructors. This may not be the case—or may not be the case to such an extent—in the system as a whole.

There is an additional complication. Although the decline in student enrollment may have raised the level of teacher competence throughout the district, this effect may be temporary, due to the approaching retirement of many, many teachers who were part of the post—World War II baby boom. (According to the LA TIMES of June 9, 2007, California officials estimate that 100,000 teachers—over one-third of the workforce—will retire over the next decade.) As substantial numbers of them (us) leave the system, the teacher shortage may well get worse, and the overall quality of the teaching staff may well decline once again as younger, less experienced teachers take the retirees' places.

Moreover, while I believe students are progressing better than they have in the past, this progress may be exaggerated by the improvement in test scores. I discussed some of the reasons for this in the first part of this essay and they still apply. For one thing, at least a part of the rise in scores may merely be the result of pushing students harder. To a degree, this may not be bad; the kids could use some pushing. But if this is overdone, it could be at a price. Too much pushing in the lower grades can lead to burnout down the road. As an example, kindergarten, the grade I taught for 12 years, used to be a time for a lot of playing, which the kids need. They need the fun, of course, but they also need the opportunity to develop the cognitive, physical, and social skills that play provides. Now—with the "pacing plans" teachers are obligated to follow, the curricula (good or bad) in many subject areas they are required to use, and the excessive testing they must do (yes, testing in kindergarten)— who can afford to let their students play very much? This can't be good for the kids (or the teachers).

Another reason that test scores may overestimate actual student achievement is that as the pressure to raise test scores intensifies, teachers are resorting more than ever to "teaching to the test," that is, focusing on those concepts and skills—along with specific types of question—that, judging from the past, are likely to be emphasized on the exams. Some outsiders might be critical of teachers for this, but it's easy to point fingers when you are not on the hot seat. If you were being evaluated by your administrators, the parents of your students, and your fellow teachers (test scores are often made public to the entire faculty of a school), you might feel differently. It also isn't as if the concepts and skills, etc., that one is emphasizing ("teaching to") are inappropriate for the students to learn. They usually are important, but perhaps without the constant stress on test scores, one might not spend as much time on them as one does.

In addition, the heavy emphasis on testing and test scores has definitely encouraged teachers to spend less time on other subjects, specifically those that have not (yet) been subject to testing. I am speaking primarily of the arts (music, the graphic arts, drama), physical education, and the other subject areas that are essential to teaching what one very experienced (I'm talking about 40 years) teacher at my school calls the "whole child." If the test maniacs in the educational bureaucracy do get around to mandating testing in these areas, I suspect that the children will not perform well in these now-ignored subject areas, and that this will bring down overall scores.

Lastly, some of the increase in test scores may well be the result of a change in the attitude toward retaining struggling students. As I discussed in Part I, when I began teaching in 1994, virtually all students were promoted to the next grade regardless of whether they had mastered their current curriculum. This policy was necessary, it was argued, to avoid damaging the children's self-esteem. However, such an approach tended to depress test scores because many students were being tested on material that was over their heads, that is, on the subject matter of the grades to which they had been (improperly, in my opinion) promoted. When principals figured this out, many reversed course and instituted a policy of militant retention: any children not clearly meeting the official goals for their current grade level in at least the key areas (reading and math) were automatically retained. While this was probably good for all concerned, it also led to a more rapid rise in test scores than would have been the case had such an approach been in place all along.

Given the failure to deal with the fundamental issues affecting the system, it was only a matter of time, it seemed to me, before the test score curve would flatten out and decline. Which it has. In other words, to refer to the analogy I used in Part I, one can go only so far in an old jalopy that's been patched up many times.

The Bureaucracy

Behind the problems plaguing the school system that were analyzed in Part I is another that loomed in the shadows of the entire discussion. This is the educational bureaucracy, the humongous machine that claims to lead our system of public education.

When I refer to the bureaucracy, I mean, first of all, the educational "establishment," beginning with local school boards and district bureaucracies and the state and national departments of education. I also include in this term the various institutions that surround and live off the school system: the departments of education at the university and college level; the publishers of educational materials, including the reading and math programs we are obligated to use; and the private outfits that specialize in various aspects of teacher training. On the broadest level, I also include the politicians, corporate leaders, and bureaucrats—the political and corporate elite as a whole—who are ultimately responsible (because they have the authority and the power) for the present abysmal state of the public school system. However, I would like to focus on the educational elephant that I and my colleagues have grappled with on a daily basis, the Los Angeles Unified School District, the LAUSD.

Mammoth-sized

One of the most striking things about the LAUSD is its size. The LAUSD is the second largest school district in the country. (New York City's is the first.) In 2002, it purported to educate around 748,000 children and 159,000 adult students and had a budget of $9.8 billion (comparable to the gross national product of Costa Rica). (All these statistics and examples come from an article by Solomon Moore, published in the LA TIMES of August 11, 2002.) There are somewhat fewer students in the system today, but there are still a heck of a lot of kids struggling under the LAUSD's not-so-benevolent regime. In addition to Los Angeles, the LAUSD encompasses, in whole or in part, 25 cities. If it were ranked as a corporation in the list of the FORTUNE 500 with its budget considered as revenue, it would come in at 196. If its budget were counted as gross national product, it would rank 85th among the nations of the world. It covers 703 square miles and employs somewhere in the neighborhood of 85,000 people. One reason I put it this way is because, according to a 1999 audit conducted by L&L Fuller, Inc., "the LAUSD does not know how many employees it has working in what positions at any given time, or how much they get paid." Every year, the district purchases 1,766,100 rolls of toilet paper, 2,273,900 combination spoons and forks (called "sporks"), and 51,660,100 pints of milk. The district has more than 50 discrete computer databases, as well as offices full of student records on paper and microfiche that have never been computerized. It cannot keep track of all its supplies nor its 6,000 distinct financial accounts in "real time." It is able to determine its actual, as opposed to its estimated, expenses only once every quarter. One year when the district claimed it did not have enough money to offer teachers a raise, under prodding from the union it "discovered" $228 million it didn't know it had. Overall, the district's data systems are so obsolete that it would take years and millions of dollars to update them. Despite its size and inefficiency, the LAUSD has managed to defeat all attempts to break it up. In an effort to ease the pressure, the district reorganized itself into 11, and then 8, mini-districts, with separate officials, offices, and staff. Although the reorganization was trumpeted as a way to make the district more responsive to local communities and to cut down

on the number of administrators, the net results in these areas have been negligible. As far as I can tell, neither rank-and-file teachers nor parents (let alone the students) have noticed an iota of difference in the district's response to our needs (needs, what needs?), while the reshuffling added over 500 new administrative jobs.

(Since 2002, when Moore's article was published, many of the numbers it cites may have changed and the district may have incrementally improved its functioning, but the overall picture is undoubtedly the same.)

As these facts suggest, the district is characterized by inefficiency and incompetence, despite the "economies of scale" that supposedly come with size. Here anecdotes may be instructive as well as enjoyable.

Some Stories

Several years ago, a fire drill was held at our school when the children in two of our kindergarten classes were outside playing in the K yard in front of the school. Neither the kids nor the two teachers supervising them, one of whom was me, heard the bell. Since this seemed like a safety hazard, we complained and then forgot about it. Many, many months later, a bell was installed on the exterior wall, and we were able to hear it when we were outside. Still more months later, somebody from "downtown" visited the school (I'm not sure who he was or what he was there for; it might have been a safety inspection). He noticed the bell and asked my colleague how long it had taken for it to be installed from the time we had requested it. The teacher replied "about a year," at which point the inspector commented, "That sounds about right."

Another story. When the state mandated that the maximum class size for kindergarten be reduced from 33 to 20 students per class (this was eventually to encompass grades K through 3), our school didn't have enough classrooms. After having us improvise the first year (an additional teacher was hired who was shared among the K classes, each still with 33 kids, thus fulfilling, pro forma, the requirement of 20 students per teacher), someone in the LAUSD bureaucracy decided to divide one of the existing K classrooms into two smaller rooms. This meant, first, enlarging the room by tearing down one wall and building a new one in what had been a workspace for the kindergarten teachers. (This turned the work area into little more than a corridor.) It also meant reinforcing the ceiling to enable it to support a massive soundproof sliding partition that would divide the enlarged classroom into two smaller (tiny, actually) ones. Typically, just to plan the project required many trips by a horde of inspectors. I remember several of them.

One man came into the work area when I was preparing for my class. He was holding and pondering a large map. He pointed south and said to me, "That's north, right?" "No," I said, "that's south," and, nodding in the opposite direction, I added, "That's north." Somewhat confused, he responded, "But it says here on the map that that's [pointing south again] north." Getting annoyed (he was interrupting my prep time), I retorted, "Turn the map around! Take my word for it, that [pointing the other way] is north; we can go outside and look at the sun, which should be nearly due south at this moment, if you want to." He finally figured it out and left.

Several weeks later, another guy from downtown showed up. He too had a map. Pointing south, he said to me, "That's north, right?" Rolling my eyes, I indicated the opposite direction and said, "No, that's north." He then said, "But it says here on the map…" Getting exasperated,

I said, "Turn the map around," and again pointing north, I nearly screamed at him, "THAT'S NORTH!" Needless to say, I was not sanguine about how the project was going to turn out.

Still more weeks later, additional men arrived, this time a whole troop, seven or eight, I think. I was in the class with my (33) kids trying to teach them something (oh that) when these men, without knocking and without asking whether this was a good time to enter, just barged in and stood among the children as if they weren't there, pointing in various directions and talking loudly to each other. I was ready to start yelling ("North is over there, you morons!"), but worried about keeping my job, I held my tongue till they left. (How many LAUSD inspectors does it take to change a light bulb…?)

When the new wall was finally built and the enlarged room was divided, the results were about what you'd expect. The supposedly soundproof sliding partition wasn't, and the new carpet was so cheap that when anything got spilled on it (such as urine), it left a permanent stain. To make things worse, the geniuses who handled the project had forgotten to reconfigure the heating/air conditioning system and to install separate controls. As a result, one room was hot while the other was cold, and vice versa, and there was no way to adjust the system so that all the kids (and teachers) in both classes were comfortable at the same time. As it turned out, it was all for nothing. As our school's enrollment dropped, we no longer needed the extra room. Now, one of the K classes has a cavernous space at its disposal, and the teachers lost a work area. (At least somebody learned where north is… I think.)

Like most bureaucracies, the LAUSD has an inherent tendency to punish individual initiative, to squelch the urge to do a good job and/or take on additional work. I live near my school and see an optometrist in the area. He's a nice guy, and knowing that I'm a teacher, he told me the following story during one of my visits. He has a friend, he said, who's a licensed electrician. The man had his own electrical contracting business but was unable to make a go of it and landed a job working for the LAUSD. On his first day, he got a work order to handle some kind of repair at a school. Although the order implied that the job would last the whole day, he finished early. He happened to notice that a young teacher across the hall was having trouble with the door to her classroom. He offered his services and fixed it. The teacher was thrilled and so thankful for the (unusually) prompt attention that she asked for his name and phoned, or wrote a letter, downtown to commend the man to his supervisors. Instead of being praised, the man was "written up" (that is, disciplined) for doing work that was not mandated by the work order. Now when he's sent out on a job and gets done early (the work orders always overestimate the time it takes to complete an assignment), he goes out for coffee and doughnuts to kill the rest of the day, just like the other people in his department.

Of course, these are minor incidents, hardly worth mentioning except for their humor interest. There are more serious examples of the LAUSD's incompetence. In Part I of this essay, I mentioned the fact that several years ago the district missed out on several million dollars made available by a voter-approved bond issue because it was unable to get its paperwork in on time. After several years of practice, it finally managed to improve its performance. (Even a blind pig can eventually find its way to the trough.)

Of comparable import was the way the district used to handle teachers' salaries. In the LAUSD, teacher salaries (within the overall guidelines set by the contract with the union) are largely determined by teachers' positions in a two-dimensional grid.

Going across the grid, salaries are set by how many years a teacher has worked for the district. Every year, up to a certain maximum, teachers get a yearly increment, with additional increments

every five years. Salaries also depend on how many "professional development" credits teachers have—that is, how many postgraduate courses they've taken, and/or how many other supposedly skill- or knowledge-enhancing activities, such as conferences, they've participated in. Every 14 units/credits, the individual teacher moves (downward on the two-dimensional grid) to a new "schedule," which determines her/his salary based on her/his seniority. (There are additional factors, such as differentials for specific academic degrees, etc., but I will ignore these here.) Since the base pay, even with accrued seniority, is so low, most teachers take classes—some given by the district, some by other institutions—or engage in other activities that give them the units that enable them to move to the higher-paying "schedules" on the salary grid.

To get credit for a class, for example, you must fill out a form— indicating the course's name, the institution under whose auspices it was taken, the dates of the course, and how many credits it entailed—have the principal at your school sign it, and take or mail it down to the "Salary Allocation Unit" at district headquarters. (I always took mine down there personally so I'd have proof that I had actually turned it in.) There, usually after signing in and waiting for one of their energetic employees to notice you, you submit your form. Ideally, the information would immediately be logged in your file, so that in the event you've reached a new schedule, you would get paid your new salary on your next paycheck. But, as we all know, the real world is not the ideal one. For some reason (presumably the backlog of forms waiting to be logged in, combined with the procedures and overall work ethic of the LAUSD bureaucracy), it would take months (often, nearly a year) for the little bit of data indicated on your form to get entered into your file. In the past, teachers were not moved to the new schedule on the salary scale until this information was officially entered into their files, which was, as I've indicated, a great while after they had completed their courses. As a result, teachers were being cheated out of substantial amounts of money simply because of the district's incompetence. In fact, the district had a positive incentive not to improve the efficiency of the Salary Allocation Unit, since the longer it took to process the forms, the later the teachers who were to move to the next schedule received their new, higher salaries, and the more money was left to the LAUSD. Eventually the union made an issue of this, forcing the district to credit the new increases from the date teachers submit their forms instead of from the date the district employees finally get around to entering the credits into the teachers' files. It still takes a long time for the district to enter the information and for teachers to get their salary increases, but now, after the district enters the data and we ultimately start receiving our new salaries, we get a separate check in the mail, which gives us the increments that we are owed (but not, of course, the additional interest we might have earned had we had the money during that period, assuming that any of us could have saved any of it).

The incompetence and wastefulness of the bureaucracy extend to almost every aspect of its functioning. Another example is its handling of the purchasing of instructional materials. In the late '90s, administrators and teachers at our school (and many others, perhaps even all of the elementary schools in the district) were told that we had to buy a new "reading series." This is a set of instructional programs, one for each grade, created and produced by an educational publisher, designed to help teachers develop our students' reading, writing, and oral language skills. It didn't matter if the teachers at the schools given the order were satisfied with the reading series they had been using. Somebody, somewhere, made the decision that the old series was no good—obsolete or whatever— and that we had to get a new one. Moreover, we were not allowed to consider all the reading series that were available at that time. Instead, we were given a list of

(I think) four publishers whose programs had been approved by the state, and we had to choose from these.

I don't remember whether the process occurred over the course of one day or two, but, whatever it was, during this time we spent hours listening to the representatives of each publisher present their materials and explain to us why their reading series was better than the others and why we should buy it. Now when I went to school, it seemed to me that our "reading programs" were pretty basic. We had what were known as "basal readers." These were books, one or more per grade, consisting of little stories. Each story utilized a very controlled vocabulary and sentence structure, while the stories increased in difficulty as one went through the book(s). (Some of you might remember DICK AND JANE.) I think we also had workbooks that went along with the readers and, I suppose, a teacher's manual for each book or grade. (It's possible that the programs were more elaborate than that, but I don't think so.) Today, in contrast, reading series are highly elaborate productions with all sorts of supplementary materials: big books teachers can hold up and read to the students, little books for the kids to read themselves in class, throwaway copies the students can take home, workbooks, letter cards, word cards, picture cards, charts, transparencies for overhead projectors, audio tapes, etc., etc., not to mention the elaborate Teachers' Guides, all done up very elaborately with attractive color pictures and covers. Not surprisingly, these programs cost a lot of money.

After listening to the publishers' reps give their spiels, and after having some additional time to look at all the materials on display, we were required to vote on which program we wished to buy. As it happened, the lower grade teachers preferred one program, whereas the upper grade teachers wanted another. But since the staff had been told that we had to purchase one and only one program for the entire school (the programs are supposedly so highly integrated that if we chose different programs for different grades the children would somehow miss out on learning crucial concepts and skills), somebody had to compromise. The upper grade teachers, to their credit, agreed to order the program preferred by those teaching the lower grades, and this is what the school purchased. Probably not surprisingly, it turned out to be the one with the prettiest, most elaborate supplemental materials (aka bells and whistles). If I remember correctly, our school spent $120,000 for the program, not counting our pay for the day (or days) we spent choosing it or the cost to have all of us "trained" in it, which training occurred over several more days, during which we, and the trainers, were also paid. (Most of this so-called training is inane; what is usually done over two to five days could probably be covered in a couple of hours if somebody made the effort. But since everybody's making money, who's going to complain, right?)

Although I didn't particularly care for the program on the K level (in case you haven't figured it out, I don't like anything, really), most of the teachers at our school were happy with the series, and most important from the district's point of view, the reading scores of our students on the state tests went up. Despite this, two years later we were informed that the program we had just spent over $120,000 on was no longer on the state's approved list (apparently, it didn't cover all of California's newly adopted "standards") and that we had to purchase yet another one. So, over $120,000 worth of books and other stuff was rendered obsolete—virtually useless— overnight. Most of the program materials wound up in the school's basement, where it remained until much later, when the fire marshals inspecting the premises told us that all that stuff was a fire hazard, and we had to junk (hopefully, recycle) it. Now, multiply the amount of money our school spent on the relatively new but now discarded reading series (never mind the even older program that

was still good) by the number of other elementary schools in the district, and perhaps throughout the rest of California, that had the same experience, and one can get an inkling of the amount of money (and time) that is wasted by the educational bureaucracy. (So much for the economies of scale.) Please forgive me for wondering whether some additional money didn't change hands to influence the district's and/or state's decisions in this matter. As if this weren't enough, we had a similar experience with the selection of a new mathematics program at about the same time. And since then, we've gotten yet another math program and have had to discard still more stuff. (That's a lot of trees.)

Not all the waste is monetary. Despite how it may seem to the bureaucrats, no reading or math program is perfect. One can't just open the teachers' manual to the first page and go through it, word by word, sentence by sentence, section by section, and expect every child to learn what she/he is supposed to. Even where the programs are generally appropriate to the students one is teaching—taking into account the children's socioeconomic status, what kind of prior exposure they've had, whether they know English, how much support they get at home, etc.— they still need to be tweaked (the programs, not the kids)— modified, adapted, supplemented—to work effectively. Any given program may not be challenging enough for the quicker children and/or may not provide enough reinforcement and review for the slower ones; its approach to teaching any specific skill may be inadequate; it may omit some crucial concepts, etc.

Because of this, teachers have to learn how to use a program effectively, and this isn't a matter of the "official" training one always gets when a new series is adopted/imposed. It takes time, at least a year, usually two or more, until teachers get truly knowledgeable about, and comfortable with, a specific program. And the students the teachers have in their classes during this time are generally not going to progress as well as the children the teachers have when they've got the program down. In a sense, the system is experimenting with the kids. Ultimately, just when the teachers fully understand, and know how to utilize, a given program, a new one is imposed and the process starts all over again.

It is often not clear, certainly not to me, exactly who is responsible for these decisions and the incredible waste they entail; is it the LAUSD or the state Department of Education? But this is one of the ways bureaucracy works. It's divided into so many pieces—each of which has its own mandate and distinct interests, and communicates poorly with the others—that the effect is something close to chaos. And since its personnel, at least at the top, turn over so often, there's no institutional memory and no one to take responsibility for anything. It's always the "other guy's" fault. This is one of the reasons the teachers, with little voice, even less power, and no status (at least within the system), are blamed for everything.

The history of a computerized reading program that was implemented in many elementary schools in the district offers another example of bureaucratic inefficiency. This was a pet project of then LA mayor Richard Riordan. The LAUSD spent a lot of money (several million, I suspect) buying the hardware, software, service contracts, supplemental materials, and (you guessed it) teacher training that made up this program. Inside the classroom, the program (for grades K through 2, if I remember correctly) entailed having the children take turns during instructional time (that is, when the teachers were trying to teach language/reading, mathematics, and other subjects) going to the computers (we had three) to work on their reading skills for 20 minutes each day. An important feature was that the programs were designed to allow the children to progress at their own rate. Sounds good, doesn't it?

There were problems from the beginning. For one thing, the children who were not on the computers kept turning away from the teacher to look at the computer monitors to see whether their names or pictures were being displayed, which meant that it was their turn to go to the computers. In fact, even after they had completed their sessions, the children still kept looking at the screens because what was there was much more interesting than a boring teacher trying to teach boring skills via a boring reading (or math, or whatever) program. (It was like TV or a video game.)

To make matters worse, teachers had previously been told that all children had to participate in the entirety of the directed lessons of the mandated reading program. The bureaucrats also insisted that every child had to spend at least 20 minutes at the computers each day. Given the fact that the K classes were then on a traditional half-day schedule, and given the time required for recess, lunch, and all the transitions (e.g., cleaning the room, getting lined up, putting on coats and jackets to go outside or to go home), there was no way the K teachers could fulfill both orders. (This is typical of the school system. It is literally impossible to do everything the bureaucracy demands.) I don't know how that issue was resolved, but we had a great deal of difficulty keeping track of which student had heard or not heard which part of which lesson, who had done or not done such and such an assignment, who had or had not had a turn at the computers, etc.

Causing further headaches was the fact that the computerized program was not in any way dovetailed with the regular reading program in terms of the sequence and methods of teaching the concepts and skills (letters, letter sounds, sight words, rhyming words, etc.) that the kids were to learn. In fact, in some ways the programs were in direct conflict. For example, the official reading program for kindergarten spends considerable effort trying to teach the kids the ABC song in a different way than they (and we) learned it. Instead of LMNOP…Q the new version goes LMN…OPQ; this is supposed to teach the children how to discriminate the letters LMNOP, which many kids think is one letter, or maybe two or three, when they can even say the sequence correctly at all. (How many "experts" did it take, how long did it take them, and how much were they paid to come up with the new song?) Even with the new version, which never completely replaces the old tune in their heads, the children are still confused about LMNOP. But the computerized reading program, in contrast, has the kids sing the song the old way. So, which one are they supposed to learn? (As if it really matters.) Likewise, the official program goes to some effort to teach the children to write the letters according to one procedure, top to bottom, left to right. The computerized program teaches them a different way. Etc., etc.

Not to mention that the computers would periodically freeze or otherwise malfunction and the teachers would have to stop whatever they were doing (like teaching) to try to fix them. Often we couldn't, and we had to call in either our school's technology expert or the outfit that had the service contract to repair the computers, which might take several days. One year, all three computers in my class froze at the same time. When the repairman came and looked at them, he said the only way he could unfreeze them (or whatever the technical term is) was to eliminate all the data from the computers, including my name, all the kids' names, and the records of how far each child had gotten in the program. All that stuff was erased. Fortunately, the technology expert at our school was able to get my name back into the computer, so I could reenter all the children's names and they could use the program once again. However, they all had to start over from the beginning. A few weeks later, the same thing happened: all the computers froze. The repair guy erased everything, but this time our technology person couldn't remember how to

reenter my name into the computers, so I wasn't able to enter my kids' names and they weren't able to use the program for the rest of the year. Which was fine with me.

Eventually, two years or so after we had started the program, we received a memo from the district. Somebody had discovered that not only was the program not helping the children, it was actually interfering with instructional time (duh!) and thus having a negative impact on the kids' progress. We were therefore ordered NOT to have the children go to the computers during directed lessons. The program was to be used only during play time, and then only for those students who needed remedial help.

Of course, we teachers could have told them this from the beginning, but nobody would have listened to us. (In fact, some of us tried, and nobody did.) Instead of having Godknows-how-many classrooms in how many schools buy the program with all its paraphernalia, it might have made more sense to try it out in a few schools and get feedback from the teachers before spending all that cash and wasting all that time and energy. But as we know, the bureaucracy is always right whatever it does and whenever it is doing it, even if it is counterproductive and a waste of resources, and even if it is directly contrary to what it was doing the previous year or will be doing a year or two down the road. The old Soviet economy—indeed, the entire society—functioned like this, and look what happened to it. (You mean, there's hope?) I believe that Riordan, the inspiration for the decision to adopt the program, went on to become, at least for a while, a big shot in the state's education department, helping to solve the education crisis in California.

Of course, one cannot discuss the question of incompetence and waste involving the LAUSD without referring to the Belmont High School scandal. As I mentioned in the first part of this essay, the construction of this already very expensive new high school near downtown Los Angeles was halted after it was discovered that the site leaked toxic fumes. After much toing and fro-ing on this issue—many discussions, more studies conducted, more consultants consulted, and more money spent—the district decided to go ahead and complete the school, presumably with adequate measures to protect the health of the students and staff… until it was discovered that the project sits atop of a significant "thrust fault" and is therefore threatened by a possible earthquake and a catastrophic release (not just a leak) of toxic gases. You'd think that someone would have thought to look into this beforehand. This is southern California, aka earthquake land, after all. (Hey, which way is north?) As far as I've heard, the Belmont project is going forward, now to be the site of new "learning academies." (I don't know what's happened to the toxic fumes. Maybe we won't have an earthquake for a while.)

Feedback Shmeedback

One of the things the computerized reading program episode reveals is the absolute lack of meaningful feedback mechanisms in the LAUSD. The operative word here is "meaningful." Because, yes, there are some mechanisms in place to give various employees (including the teachers) and others involved in the system (such as the parents—but not, at least on the elementary school level, the children) some input into the running of the system. But the feedback mechanisms are very few, and they are not, to repeat the word, meaningful. For example, we have two councils at our school: one is called the Leadership Council, which consists, I think, of administrators and teachers, along with a parent representative (or representatives); the other is the School Site Council, whose precise composition I do not know—I think there are more parents and fewer

teachers on it, but I'm not sure. I'm also not clear on what the distinct purviews of these councils are, even though I was on the Leadership Council for several years. (I usually tried to fight the urge to sleep, but sometimes managed to get in a few naps. I also did an occasional crossword puzzle.) This set-up is part of what is called "School-Based Management." Though we (the Leadership Council) discussed and voted on a good many issues, very few of them were (here I go again) meaningful. It's more like somebody else decides we're going to have so many days of "professional development" (whether any of us want it or think it useful or even interesting), and we get to decide the precise days on which we are to have it. Or, someone decides we're going to have two earthquake-preparedness drills and we are directed to choose on which days they will occur. We do decide certain budgetary issues, but the funds are so limited (we don't even have a nurse on site every day of the week and our budget for classroom aides has been cut to the bone) and they are so earmarked for specific purposes (there are "categorical" funds, "governor's initiative" funds, etc.—don't ask me what these terms mean) that our decisions are very circumscribed. I, for one, was never able to follow such discussions (it was my own fault, of course, because I was too busy nodding off or doing a crossword puzzle). Do you remember the old saying, They tell us to jump and we ask, "How high?" On the Leadership Council, it felt much more like, They tell us to wipe our behinds and we ask, "Which hand should we use?" (I hope fastidious readers will forgive me that one.)

In truth, we have no say over anything that really matters: curriculum, pacing plans, testing, class sizes, whether or not we need math or literacy coaches, etc. (Our school, because of our declining enrollment, has several empty classrooms. Meanwhile, our upper (fourth and fifth) grade classes have 36 or so students in them. Do we have the power to divide up those classes, hire additional teachers, set up new classes in the empty rooms, and thus lower the class sizes across the board for those grades and give the upper grade teachers and students a break? Don't be ridiculous!) Actually, I'm stretching the truth here (as usual). We do have some control over curriculum. As is implied by our selection of reading programs, we are indeed given a choice in the matter. But the reality is that our options are so limited (only certain reading programs meet all the state's criteria, for example) that we have little power at all. Technically, we did choose our current reading program. After the program we so had laboriously selected (in the process I so laboriously described) was declared obsolete (you recall that we had no say in that decision), we were ordered to choose a new one. On a certain day, a team of teachers was scrounged up. (No one was elected; the team was made up of people who happened to be around at that moment and didn't beg off when asked by the principal.) When we got downtown (I wasn't quick or decisive enough to refuse), we were shown a very few items of the, I think it was three, programs from which we were allowed to choose. Most of the materials from each of the programs were not there (whether by accident or by design), so it was quite impossible to make an intelligent decision. We were saved the agony of that by being very strongly steered toward the Open Court program, which, not surprisingly, we picked. (So, did we or did we not have meaningful input into the selection process?)

You'd think that in this business (or whatever it is), one that involves people at all levels—parents, students, teachers, administrators, functionaries—the top bureaucrats would want feedback, would want to know what's happening at various levels of the hierarchy, would want to know what's working (meaning, helping the children learn?) and what isn't, what needs to be changed and how, whether people are happy and throwing themselves into their work or grumbling and just going through the motions. Even the big corporations (some of them, at least)

have feedback mechanisms through which they can find out how to increase production, how to improve quality, how to raise productivity and cut costs, and how to assess employee morale. But the Board of Education and the top LAUSD bureaucrats don't want to know anything about this. They know everything; their minds are made up, so don't confuse them with facts (let alone somebody else's opinion).

But the rhetoric is certainly there. In various "mission statements," documents describing the LAUSD's ethics, presentations from administrators, memos, and videos, we hear all about the need for collaboration and cooperation, the need to respect differences and value diversity, how we are all part of a team committed to helping the children learn to become creative thinkers and active, intelligent, and informed members of the community who give back more than they take, etc., etc. But as I've indicated, this is empty chatter. Nobody at the top of the heap really wants to know what parents, teachers, and students think about anything. We are ignored, ordered about, and insulted, with some saccharine language thrown in. Can we actually decide that all this testing is disruptive and destructive to teaching, and dispense with it? Can we decide that class sizes in grades 4—12 are way too high and should be lowered? Can we decide that a given program is not appropriate to the children's needs and should be junked? Can we decide that such and such an administrator is effective and needs to be recognized, but another one is horrible and should be gotten rid of? Don't even think about it.

The contradiction between rhetoric and reality reveals itself in the district's professional development activities. When our latest math program was adopted (I don't remember voting on this), we were required to attend two professional development sessions. One was offered by the publisher in an old hotel in Hollywood. That one was surprisingly refreshing. True, it was thin, but at least the trainers didn't try to bamboozle us into thinking that only their program was based on the latest research, that all other programs were obsolete, and that their program alone was capable of teaching kids math. Instead, they tried to familiarize us with how the program was structured and how to use it. In short, they were pleasant and enough for our students to be able to get the right answer to any particular problem; if anything, that was least important. More crucial, each child needs to be able to explain how he/she arrived at the answer, what procedures he/she used to get the answer, and why he/she chose them. Also, we are to make sure that our students recognize the legitimacy of different methods of solving problems. We were therefore instructed to encourage our students to ask questions, to disagree, and to propose and argue for alternative methods. Finally, we were told, the presentations in our workshop were designed to "model" the desired approach, that is, to demonstrate how we are to encourage this type of creative thinking.

After this introduction, one of the trainers presented us with the problem. This was, that if we were each given 27 presents, all in the shape of cubes of the same size, how would we wrap them—individually, in two or more groups, or in one group— and in what configuration would we arrange them, to minimize the amount of wrapping paper we would need. After giving the question some thought, my table partner (the other male kindergarten teacher at my school) and I decided that the key was to minimize the exposed surface area of the presents (the cubes) or, conversely, to maximize the number of sides of the cubes that would face/touch each other. We then deduced that to do this, the best procedure would be to put all the presents together to make one big cube with the dimensions 3 x 3 x 3 and then to wrap that. Using the toy cubes (manipulatives) that we had been given, we checked various possible arrangements to make sure we were right, and we waited. And waited. And waited. Nobody else in the room came up with an

answer, any answer. Several teachers pleaded with the presenter to tell them what the solution was, but he refused, urging them to keep trying. Eventually, he relented and asked if anyone had an answer. I raised my hand and was called on. I announced that the solution was a large cube, three little cubes in each dimension. I then expected to be asked how my partner and I had come to that conclusion (that is, to be asked what procedure we had used to solve the problem), whereupon the presenter would ask others to suggest alternative ways to approach it. That, and not the right answer, was supposed to be the point, remember? After acknowledging that our answer was correct, then waiting for the oohs and aahs to subside, the presenter turned to the next item on the agenda. No discussion of how my colleague and I had come up with our solution. No discussion of, or requests for, alternative methods. He didn't even explain how he would have solved the problem. The clock was ticking and we had to move on to the next part of the session.

This was a presentation, offered by another one of the trainers, about the history of numbers—how numbers have been written over the ages and how our modern system of numerals evolved. After the talk, I raised my hand to take issue with one of the things the man had said. But he brushed my comments aside with a wave of his hand and a "We don't have time to get into that now." So much for encouraging questions, critical thinking, and creativity.

Another event that occurred at our training is even more revealing of the gap between rhetoric and reality in the district. At the beginning of another session (on computer technology for teaching math), a woman rose to speak. I believe she was the head all mathematics instruction for the LAUSD. She introduced her talk with something like, "If you're looking for answers to questions about algebra, geometry, trigonometry or calculus, don't ask me, because I don't know." (This really happened.) She then went on to brag about how rigorous California new standards for math instruction were, how much tougher they were than other states', how wonderful California was for adopting them, and how much was expected of us teachers to teach the kids all this stuff. I don't remember a great deal of what she said after that. Why would anybody, least of all the head of math instruction for the entire district, boast about not knowing anything about mathematics? And what kind of outfit would have such a person in charge of this crucial area? And what about the insistence that all teachers be "highly qualified"? Shouldn't this also apply to the LAUSD functionaries, if only to set a good example? I still can't fathom it. (My problemsolving skills are not that developed—I was raised on DICK AND JANE, remember?)

Of course, being ignored, as I was during this math training, may be insulting, but it isn't the end of the world. Sometimes in the LAUSD, the consequences for speaking up are worse. I remember one man in the District Intern Program who had the temerity not only to ask an embarrassing question but to call into question the validity of virtually all of what we were being taught. After he had done so, he disappeared from our class and, I presume, from the District Intern Program as a whole. I never saw him again. Did he resign? Was he expelled? I don't know. But I'm so paranoid about the LAUSD that if somebody told me that he'd been taken outside and had his legs broken, I'd believe it.

Lest people think I'm exaggerating, here is some other evidence:

The first is from the CALIFORNIA EDUCATOR (the magazine of the California Teachers Association) of October 2006.

> "The loss of academic freedom is linked to the loss of freedom of speech, say some teachers, who confide that they are afraid to deviate from the script in any way, afraid to use supplemental materials, afraid to voice their opinions about scripted

> curriculum, whether it's at school or in staff meetings, out of fear that they will be punished or ostracized. Probationary teachers who can be terminated 'at will' are especially afraid to question the status quo.
>
> "'My school doesn't encourage any kind of discussion about Open Court,' says one long-time UTLA member. He and some colleagues are concerned about some obvious omissions from the curriculum, 'but we don't say anything. We don't speak out or ask questions. I think one of the major concerns I have about the teaching profession is that teachers are being put in a position of silence.'
>
> "The one time he did speak out Open Court coaches were sent to his classroom to monitor his compliance with the program."

And a letter that appeared in the August 18, 2006, issue of UNITED TEACHER, the newspaper of the UTLA, relates,

> "Since the inception of Open Court in 2000 and Foro Abierto in 2003, the District has opted for a zero tolerance level toward differing opinions and even less for open dissent. The dangerous aspect of Open Court and Foro Abierto is not that they are phonics-based programs or that they provide assessment. It is the intolerance for flexibility based on student need that they demonstrate. It is that they leave teacher judgment and alternative approaches out of the mix. Teachers have been routinely told that there is only one way to teach reading. Teacher expertise is frowned upon. We must look out of the classroom for real experts.
>
> "It has been reported to me that at a Local District 5 training last month, a teacher from an East Area school dared to express an opinion regarding Foro Abierto as a program lacking excellence. She was immediately accosted by some District people who escorted her out of the room, where her principal was called to direct her to "cooperate." Upon returning to the training session, this teacher again expressed an unpopular opinion regarding Foro Abierto. This time a Local District 5 director sat beside her for the remainder of the training day, not unlike my handling of unruly five-year-olds in my kindergarten class. As apocryphal as this report seems, it has been substantiated by other teachers who were present. I was instantly put in mind of exactly the same scenario occurring three years ago at another Foro Abierto training. The District must actually have a protocol in place for handling those unruly teachers with opinions." (More, much more, on Open Court later.)

One result of the gap between rhetoric and reality in the LAUSD that these incidents reveal is the heavy aura of hypocrisy and cynicism that permeates the entire system. Nobody (among teachers, at least) takes the rhetoric seriously. Nobody believes the LAUSD means any of it. The actions of the bureaucrats always belie their words. Yet how can teachers be expected to teach their students to be independent and to think creatively, when the teachers themselves are not allowed to be independent or to think creatively (e.g., to adapt a reading program to the specific needs of their students) and when nobody listens to anything they have to say?

Curricular Fads

The area in which the impact of the bureaucracy is most toxic is that of the choice of curriculum. The bureaucratic apparatus careens from one extreme to another, never stopping at some reasonable middle ground, and never asking teachers what actually works. Fads come and fads go, and the bureaucracy seems to follow them with doglike loyalty. At one time, concepts are stressed at the expense of skills and rote knowledge. At other times it's the reverse. In some years, the curriculum is very "child centered" (aka touchy-feely), with few if any demands placed on the students or the teachers. In others, rigor and regimentation (to hell with individual needs) are in. I believe that in California programs (with their own distinct approaches and underlying philosophies) are usually adopted for eight years, whereupon new, often completely different, programs are taken up. It is not quite clear what motivates these changes (swings of the "pendulum"), but many veteran teachers ascribe them to the educational publishers. After all, you can't make a lot of money selling the same product over and over again, so it's in the publishers' interests to, shall we say, reinvent the wheel, so that entirely new programs (e.g., reading series) can periodically be peddled and adopted. It's a form of planned obsolescence, like changes in the styling of automobiles.

Conceivably, some of the motive force behind the swings comes from the universities, where educational psychologists and others pursue their own research and come up with the latest findings. Whenever anything is changed or something new is introduced—for example, in curriculum, teaching methods, mandates about how the children's desks are to be arranged, etc.—it is always accompanied by the phrase, "The latest research shows…" Of course, we never get to see any of this research; we're just supposed to take it on faith that it exists and that it's valid. (So much for independent thinking.) As a result, most veteran teachers are skeptical about such research and, if they can, continue to do what they know from experience truly works. Very early in my career, one teacher, now retired, gave me some of the best advice I ever received in the field of education. During a particularly inane professional development session, I leaned over to her (she was very attractive) and asked her how she could stand it, just sitting there, appearing to pay attention, without groaning, screaming, or at least rolling her eyes. She replied, whispering in my ear, "Never say anything, but when you go into your room, you lock your door and do what you think is best." That was a great revelation. Unfortunately, administrators have recently been ordered to come into our rooms unannounced to make sure we're doing the "right thing," e.g., teaching the (currently) mandated program, based, of course, on the latest research. My own belief is that, especially in education, there's research to prove anything and everything you'd want, including propositions that are absolutely contradictory to each other.

Yet I believe the ultimate cause of the lateral swings the system experiences is the failure—despite all the periodic changes and innovations—to deal with the fundamental problems: large class sizes, teacher shortages/turnover, poor working conditions, bureaucratic meddling, and lack of meaningful feedback mechanisms. Since the big issues are never dealt with, the changes and innovations don't work, or don't improve things very much or for very long, and the bureaucrats and researchers go looking for another explanation and another gimmick to try.

In the course of my 12-year career, I have seen the pendulum at work. When I first began teaching in the LAUSD, there was very little mandated curriculum. It was the era of bilingual education, integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, whole language reading instruction, the use of manipulatives in math, learning by doing, multiple intelligences and modalities, selfassess-

ment (portfolios), social promotion, etc., etc. It would be tedious to try to explain all these things to the non-initiate, so I will focus on one or two, using illustrations, many from the District Intern Program in which I was honored to participate. (Unlike teacher training programs at the state universities and elsewhere, the District Intern Program was free.)

One of the chief fads 12 years ago was "integrated curriculum." Ideally, this involved tying all the material—content, concepts, and skills—of all the subject areas to be studied in, say, a month or two, under the rubric of one overall unit or theme. I remember a kindergarten teacher held up as an expert in this type of curriculum who spoke at one of my salary point classes. One of her units was about ants. The idea was to teach reading, math, science, social studies, art, drama, music, and physical education through the exploration of ants. She had books and songs about ants. She had the kids do elaborate projects (such as murals) about ants, presumably had them count and add and subtract ants, and might even have had the children do a play about ants. She told us that on Back to School night or Open House, the students' parents were thrilled to see how much the children had learned about ants. But while I was listening to this and feeling guilty that I could never, ever, come up with a unit that was so elaborate and tied together as this one, a couple of thoughts crept into my mind: The kids may know a lot about ants, but are they learning to read?ow is she managing to teach the kids the ABCs, the sounds of the letters, some sight words, the numbers, the geometric shapes, and the other things I thought kindergarten children need to know? It's hard enough to cover, and to keep track of, all this material when one isn't trying to tie it all together under one topic.

Integrated was justified by (you know where this is going) the "latest research." Believe it or not, it was called "brain-based learning," as if there were any other kind. (Butt-based learning, elbow-based learning? Even rote memory involves the brain… I think.) One of the bosses of the District Intern Program tried to explain this to an audience of several hundred eager new interns at our introductory assembly. After introducing his lecture with the revelation, "Now we know how the brain works" (⁉??), he started to draw a diagram on his overhead projector and began to try to explain something. But he never completed the diagram, got very confused about what he meant to say, and never finished his thought (such as it was). I certainly couldn't follow him, and despite the fact that I learned to read with DICK AND JANE, I think I'm almost as smart as the next guy. My guess is that what he was trying to show was that integrated curricula reinforce the connections (synapses) between various neurons in the brain, a process called long-term potentiation. But he didn't know his axons from his dendrites, his synapses from his neurotransmitters, his gates from his myelin sheaths, so he got lost. But all learning—even of the most rudimentary kind— such as conditioned reflexes, involves long-term potentiation, so he really wasn't proving anything at all (except perhaps how his brain works…or doesn't).

The answer to my question about whether the kids were learning the ABCs, the sounds, the sight words, and the other things necessary to learn how to read, through the study of ants, was that, at the time integrated curriculum was mandated, you weren't supposed to teach those things. You were just supposed to expose them to a lot of literature and text, and somehow they would learn (or osmose—my word—as in osmosis) how to read. This type of approach was advocated by what we were told was the "whole language" method, which was de rigueur during this period.

Lest I invoke the ire of the proponents of this approach (are there any left?), let me repeat what I said in Part I. I have no idea of what the real, the true "whole language" method is or was, or how it is/was supposed to be taught. (The whole language advocates I have spoken to insist that one teaches phonics, that is, the names and sounds of the letters, and related things "through

whole language," but I have never understood concretely what that means.) What I do know is that by the time the method got to the bottom of the heap, that is, to the rank-and-file teachers in the LAUSD, it was presented as one side of a debate: whole language vs. phonics. And, since the LAUSD had come down on the side of whole language, this meant, at least in the LAUSD, that phonics was out. And what that, in practice, signified was, Don't teach the children the ABCs, etc! I also heard that some teachers in our enlightened school district were actually reprimanded and formally disciplined for having taught kids the ABCs!

As then practiced, integrated instruction meant that teachers developed their own curriculum. In the District Intern Program, for example, we were required to prepare a portfolio that, among other things, was supposed to include four or five fully elaborated, integrated units. This entailed a lot of work. During our two-year training, one dedicated young intern spoke of staying up until 2:30 A.M. every night in an attempt to integrate all her curriculum. But there was often little to show for it. At the end of our training, another intern, a second grade teacher, discussed her experience trying to teach reading with the method we were being instructed to use. At the end of the school year—that is, after nine months of devotedly trying to teach her students to read (remember, without teaching them the ABCs and the sounds of the letters)—not one child was reading (at the end of second grade‼!). At least she was trying. One man, hired by my school at the same time that I was, also had a second grade class. He admitted to me in private that he just had the kids play all day.

Another one of the fads being touted at the time was "learning by doing." Now, I'm all for kids learning by doing (thank you John Dewey and Maria Montessori), but in the LAUSD these fads, as I've tried to show, are usually taken too far. So, in science this meant having the kids do, or try to do, a lot of "experiments" (demonstrations under the direction of the teacher), and supposedly they would learn some science. Accordingly, the person instructing us District Interns in the proper method for teaching science showed us, and/or had us do, a lot of these "experiments." One of them was rather ingenious. It entailed taking an uncooked egg and putting it into a bowl filled with vinegar. Eventually, the calcium shell dissolved, and we all beheld a whole membranous egg, that is, the raw egg, held together by its outer membrane, without its shell. The teacher then put the egg into another bowl filled with a carob solution, whereupon it shrank. When she put the egg in a bowl of water, it expanded back into its original shape. After we had gasped appropriately, the teacher challenged us to explain, scientifically, why the membranous egg behaved as it did, that is, shrank in the carob and then expanded in the water. One intern ventured something about a "semipermeable membrane." When nobody else had a good idea, I raised my hand and suggested that, as the other intern had said, the egg's membrane is semipermeable. Specifically, it is permeable to water, which consists of small molecules, but not to carob, which, as a form of sugar, consists of large molecules. So, when the egg is put into the carob solution, the water inside the egg flows out, to try to equalize the concentration of the solutions on both sides of the membrane. But since the carob is a large molecule, it can't go through the membrane and enter the egg, so the egg shrinks (as the water flows out). The teacher immediately waved her hand, announced, "Oh, that's beyond my level of expertise," and turned to another subject.

Now, I may be old-fashioned, but it seems to me that a teacher should not do a scientific demonstration in class unless she or he can explain why it works as it does. Otherwise, what are the kids learning? They're not learning the scientific method, because the teacher isn't using it; they're just looking at some things happen. But our teacher (selected to instruct us because of her supposed expertise in the teaching of science) seemed to think that even if she didn't know

the answer (she certainly didn't offer one), the children would still learn something. But what would they be learning? Water is wet, science is fun, and the teacher doesn't know the answer either. Apparently, the teacher's expertise is limited to knowing a lot of cool experiments to do with her classes.

Model Classes?

I remember two elementary school classrooms that I visited during the two years I was a District Intern. Both classes exemplified the methods in vogue at the time. One, officially part of the District Intern Program, was at the school to which I was assigned during a three-week preliminary training session in June, prior to my actually going to work as a teacher. This aspect of the program entailed two or three days a week attending lectures (on such topics as how the brain works) and two or three days in a classroom observing exemplary teachers at work. The class I was assigned to was a kindergarten taught by two young and dedicated teachers. One taught the morning class, which was bilingual (EnglishSpanish); the other taught the afternoon class, which was just in English. The teachers had fabulous management skills and the kids seemed to enjoy themselves. But the teachers told me very explicitly that when children came to me to show me something they had done, such as writing and naming a number or letter or a shape, I should just praise them and should not correct them, even when they were wrong. In other words, if a student came to me with a number, say 5, written upside and backward (some of the kids are very good at this) and told me that the number is seven, I should just say something like, "Wow, that's wonderful! You're so smart." (Seriously.) Although that was at the end of the school year, most of the children in the class were writing (sort of) only some of the numbers from one to ten, while many were not able to correctly identify the number they had written. (In my kindergarten class, at the end of each year my students can write and name all the numbers from zero to one hundred and can do addition and subtraction in two columns. But then again, their learning is based in their knees and they probably feel shitty about themselves.) And that was a meant to be model classroom.

(One of the things that happened during the experience of observing those classes, which I recall with pride, involved the afternoon class, the one that was not bilingual. A Black girl, Keana, one of the brightest kids in the group—she had written and identified the number 26—and I had really hit it off. She was big, assertive and one of the leaders of the class. One day, when the children were lined up in the yard, waiting for their teacher to take them to the classroom after lunch, Keana starting chanting, "Mister Ta ble, Mister Ta ble, Mister Ta ble." (My name, as she understood it.) Soon all the kids in the yard were chanting, "Mister Ta ble, Mister Ta ble, Mister Ta ble, without having the foggiest idea what it meant. Egotist that I am, I really enjoyed that.)

I remember another kindergarten class, one that I observed in December of that year, after I had been teaching for five months, that is, since July, which is when year-round schools start their school year. This class, too, exemplified the methods that were then popular. The teacher was my coach or coordinator or something like that in the District Intern Program, and while chatting with me after an intern class one evening, she invited me to visit her classroom. She told me that she spoke Spanish and taught a bilingual program, but didn't speak Spanish in the class, for some reason which she didn't explain. Eager to learn, I accepted her invitation. When I arrived in the classroom, the kids, mostly African American and Latino, were sitting in three

rows on the carpet for the day's greetings, the attendance, the calendar, and a directed lesson. The children in the Spanish reading group sat in the back row (in a "modified" bilingual class, as then practiced in the LAUSD, one group of kids learned to read in English, another learned to read in Spanish, and both groups learned oral English) and didn't seem to catch much of what was going on. This group was taught by a bilingual teaching assistant, who looked like she had just started college.

After the lesson, the class divided into reading groups. I sat with the children in the Spanish reading group. Although this was language arts time, the children weren't doing any reading or practicing any of the skills I thought necessary to learn to read. Instead, they were crumbling up little pieces of green tissue paper and gluing them onto donut-shaped pieces of art paper to make Christmas wreaths. As far as I could see, the activity had very little academic content. The kids weren't even talking about what color the tissue was, what shape the piece of art paper was, what shape or color the little balls were. They weren't singing Christmas songs or talking about Santa Claus or what they wanted for Christmas. They weren't talking at all. And they didn't seem to be very happy. When I asked the teaching assistant how her students were coming along in Spanish reading, she replied, "We never have any time, because Mrs… (the teacher) has us doing so many projects."

Later on, the kids were sitting at their desks drawing pictures of railroad trains. (I'm not sure how that was integrated with Christmas. Maybe the teacher had read a story about Santa coming in a train.) One boy, a good-looking, very large Black kid, was drawing a terrific train. He had the wheels of the locomotive tilting forward and the smoke from the smokestack going backward, giving the illusion of motion. He had drawn the train solidly on the tracks, with the rails and the ties clearly distinguished. He also had a great color sense and was very meticulous in his work, which was quite detailed. The boy, at five or six years old, was an artist. I was so astounded that I burst out, "Wow, what a fantastic train!" While he beamed, all the other kids in the class held up their papers, yelling, "Look at mine, look at mine!" Of course, I went around the room looking at their papers, telling them how great their trains were. But for the rest of the day, the teacher wouldn't let up on the big Black boy, constantly reprimanding him for one thing or another. He seemed to me to be very sweet and well-behaved; I don't remember that he did one thing wrong, but she rode him all day. Was she jealous of him, or of the kids' response to me? Watching this, I became thoroughly depressed. When I left at the end of the day, I thanked the teacher, told her I had learned a lot (indeed!), and got out of there as fast as I could.

Believe it or not, we District Interns were actually told, over and over again, that the methods we were learning and were watching being applied were based on the very latest psychological and neurological research, and that it was our job to go into our schools and show the fuddy-duddy older teachers, who were stuck in the past, the right way to teach. So, instead of informing us that the most important thing in teaching (after intelligence, dedication, and love for the children) is experience, and that, consequently, we should show some humility and ask the more experienced teachers for advice, our instructors told us to ignore the veterans' advice and insist that only we, the interns, really knew how to teach.

You're In the Army Now

Today, the pendulum has swung all the way in the other direction. As I mentioned, one reason for this is that when the pendulum was at the other end of its arc, about ten years ago, the system wasn't working, so there was nowhere else for it to go. The No Child Left Behind Act (and its demand for "accountability") is also a significant factor; it has the bureaucrats whipping administrators and teachers into a frenzy to raise test scores. So, instead of making up your own curriculum, it's regimentation time, with a vengeance.

An additional cause of the regimentation was the adoption of the Open Court reading program. In 2000, all elementary schools whose test scores were below a certain level were required to adopt and implement this program. Open Court is what is known as a "scripted program," meaning, it is designed so that teachers can (and increasingly today, must) follow the teachers' guide step by step, doing precisely what it tells us to do, having the children do precisely what it mandates, and literally reading what it directs us to say to the children. In this way, supposedly, the children will learn everything the program's developers think they need to know about reading, writing, and speaking. It's not clear whether the scripted aspect of the program was originally designed to be mandatory or voluntary; that is, designed so that every teacher, without exception, had to follow the program word-for-word, or prepared to help new teachers, and older teachers at a loss about what to do, impart the requisite content, concepts, and skills in the subject area today called language arts.

Interestingly enough, our math program, adopted after the reading program, is not a scripted program. In fact, at least according to what we have been told by various math coaches, we are free to—indeed, are expected to—use additional materials and techniques to cover the requisite concepts and skills. When some questions involving material not specifically covered in the math program showed up on the periodic math assessments that teachers are required to give, teachers were explicitly told that the program was a tool, not a blueprint, and that they needed to supplement it with other materials to teach the math standards for their grades. Now this, it seems to me, is an intelligent way to instruct teachers in the use of a program. A program should be something to help teachers teach what they are supposed to, which they may supplement when they feel it is necessary to teach particular concepts or skills. It should not be a recipe that one is ordered to follow in every detail, whether it is appropriate or not. I don't know whether the district intends to continue its current—for the district, uncharacteristically intelligent—policy regarding the math program, or whether it will soon start directing teachers to follow the program, word for word, activity by activity, as is now the case with the reading program. (I also have no idea whether the people in charge of math and reading instruction, or the people above them in the LAUSD hierarchy, are aware that the mandated reading and math programs are based on different philosophies, or even whether these people communicate with one another.)

When Open Court was first adopted, the district went to considerable pains to enforce a strict reading of the program. It recruited working teachers to become "literacy coaches" whose job, ostensibly, was to help teachers learn how to implement it correctly. These coaches were sent to special training sessions, where they were, in my opinion, brainwashed in the specific philosophy and methods of the program. (Among other things, they were told that the program was based on the "latest research.") However, it soon became clear that the coaches' job entailed more than giving teachers advice. The coaches also became enforcers, making sure that teachers were following the program page by page, word for word. Teachers who didn't have the Open Court

teachers' guide for their grade and unit in their hands or on their desks in front of them, and turned to the appropriate page, were singled out for special censure. The coaches were also, I believe, reporting back to their superiors (the coaches' coaches or whatever they're called) and even to principals about who was or was not "doing" the program. In other words, the coaches, who were still officially rank-and-file teachers, were being turned into the equivalent of supervisors, rather than mentors whose job it was to give advice, when requested, to the teachers in the classroom.

I and many other teachers were extremely critical of the union for allowing teachers to be used for what were clearly administrative functions. The union has argued that it is better to have fellow teachers coming into the classroom than to have administrators doing so. But this is spurious, since we now have both coaches and administrators coming in. Moreover, a major function of the coaches is to oversee the periodic testing that teachers are required to do. This job includes delivering the test materials to the teachers and, once testing is completed, collecting these materials and the completed tests, then entering the test results into the district's computers. If these aren't administrative tasks, I don't know what are. (If the district wants people to carry out these tasks, let them hire additional administrators and pay them administrators' salaries to do them.)

Over the years, it has become apparent that many, if not most, coaches see themselves as superior to the teachers still in the classroom. They can come into a room and offer all kinds of advice and demonstrate all sorts of beautiful model lessons without taking any responsibility for whether the advice and the lessons are any good, or for whether, if one followed such advice and taught such lessons regularly, there would be time for other activities that were more effective. The coaches are never subjected to testing; they never have to demonstrate that they know how to teach or to get good test scores, or even that they could make the program work if they had to "do" it. They can just act as if they are wonderful, creative teachers who certainly would be successful if they were in the classroom. Rank-and-file teachers started calling the coaches the "Open Court police."

When I first began to "do" Open Court, it became obvious to me very quickly that the program by itself, with no additional materials or activities, would not teach my students how to read. I thought that its most glaring problem was that it wasn't capable of teaching the children the skills it purported to, such as recognizing the letters, memorizing the letter sounds and sight words, and being able to identify and generate rhyming words, etc., not to mention the more sophisticated skills that were being demanded on the periodic assessments we had to give the kids. So, I began to develop and to use various work sheets and other activities designed to help the children learn what the program intended, most crucially, the basics I have just mentioned. All of this material meshed, in terms of subject matter and/or specific skill, with the Open Court program. And I found that the more I utilized these supplemental activities to reinforce the concepts and skills the program was attempting to deliver, the faster the children learned and the more secure was their grasp of the concepts and skills in question.

However, this didn't meet the approval of our school's literacy coach. She had been a teacher at the school for many years and, when I first began teaching, she had been a practitioner and advocate of Whole Language. At one point relatively early in the school year in which we were to utilize Open Court, she came into my classroom and saw the children doing an activity that wasn't in the Open Court teachers' manual. She accused me of not "doing" Open Court. I replied that I was "doing" Open Court and showed her in the teachers' guide what lesson we were on

and how, precisely, the activity she found so questionable reinforced the concepts and skills the lesson was intending to convey. She wasn't satisfied and we had, shall we say, words. She left, obviously not pleased. I don't know whether she reported me to someone or not.

A month or so later, after the coach had actually seen me do an Open Court lesson as described in the teachers' guide, virtually the same thing occurred. The coach saw the children doing an activity that was not specifically mandated in the teachers' manual and, once again, accused me of not "doing" Open Court. And I, once again, explained to her and showed her how the activity the children were doing meshed with the program and in fact reinforced the skills covered in the Open Court lesson. When she, yet again, accused me of not "doing" Open Court, I answered that yes, I was "doing" Open Court, that I was in fact making it work, because without these additional activities, the children wouldn't learn what they were supposed to. By this time, we were out in the corridor, basically screaming at each other. She said if I weren't "doing" Open Court, "They're going to write you up" (meaning file formal disciplinary charges against me). I replied, "Then let them write me up."

Despite her threat, I never heard anything more about this, and nobody wrote me up (as far as I know), although perhaps somebody did put something in my file.

Several months later, after the Christmas vacation, the coach came to my room to read with some of my students. She was visiting all the kindergarten classes and wanted to read the little pre-decodable books that the Open Court program uses to teach kindergarteners various sight words (words they need to recognize on sight, rather than decode, that is, sound out). Since she didn't have time to evaluate all the children, she wanted to read with the top five and bottom five students, that is, the five most fluent readers and the five least fluent readers, in each class. When she was done assessing my kids this way, she came to me and told me that she was really impressed with the way my students were reading. It wasn't so much the top children that amazed her, but the slower ones, because they could all read the predecodables. She was so knocked out, she declared, that she wanted to return to classroom teaching the following year and to bid for the D track first grade class so she could get my students when they were promoted. Of course the main reason, in my opinion, the slower children (in fact, all the children) were reading as well as they were was not the Open Court program, but the supplemental activities I was having the kids do.

As things turned out, the coach did not return to the classroom the following year and did not get to teach my students. She remained the coach for another year and then went back to teaching, taking a second grade class (but not my former students). That year, I'm told, she had a lot of trouble. She couldn't keep the children under control for the lengthy period of time required by the Open Court program, and she failed miserably in trying to reach the bottom half of the class, the slower learners. Both outcomes were predictable. She retired shortly thereafter.

Fortunately, after the first year of Open Court's implementation, the literacy coaches seemed to back off, and teachers were informed (orally, but not in writing) that we were allowed to adapt, modify, or supplement the program. Thereafter, at least under the administration then in charge of our school, coaches were no longer running around accusing people of not "doing" the program (at least they weren't accusing ME).

Before I get into the latest episode of the Open Court saga, it is worth discussing what I believe to be the most serious problems with the Open Court reading program. I am referring here exclusively to Open Court's program for kindergarten, the only one I have taught and know well. However, I have trouble believing that the deficiencies I have encountered exist only on the K

level. In fact, virtually all the teachers from various grades I have spoken to insist that they do, and must, supplement the program.

(For whatever it's worth, somebody in the district, at some time, knew the program had serious problems. I remember a lecture in one of my salary point classes. The speaker was the former head of one of the geographic areas the LAUSD was divided into at the time. At that point, Open Court had been adopted but not yet implemented, and she warned us that the program needed a LOT—she stressed the word—of supplementation.)

Open Court: A Closed Program

The following is my critique of the Open court program for kindergarten. I have numbered the sections in the interests of clarity, despite the fact that there may be some repetition. I apologize to my readers if they find this section particularly tedious, but I wanted this essay to include a rather full critique for those who are interested.

(1) Open Court is a "one-size-fits-all" program. As I have mentioned, the program is scripted, designed to be followed as written and without substantial modification. This is a huge flaw. I have already mentioned that in my opinion, no program, no matter how well crafted, no matter how well based on the "latest research" it may be, can be truly effective in the classroom without any adaptation, modification, or supplementation whatever. (Most people who have never been teachers and, of course, those who have, understand this almost instinctively.) This is because every child is different; each is a unique individual. Children come from different backgrounds, different social classes, different ethnic groups and different cultures. Their parents have different levels of education and provide varying amounts of academic support in the home (not to mention things like care, love, and structure). The children enter school with different needs, different levels of emotional maturity, and widely disparate cognitive/academic backgrounds. This is true even when all the children in one classroom come from one community, one ethnic group, and one social class. Given this, it makes no sense to take one program and insist that all teachers just follow it, that is, read the teachers' manual to the children. Yet, this is what teachers in LAUSD are expected to do with Open Court. It should be obvious that to teach effectively, teachers must be able to adapt the material, at least to some degree, to the specific needs of each child. But they cannot do this if they are ordered to follow the Open Court teachers' guide word for word, without deviation, addition, or deletion or even a change in sequence.

The rigidity represented in the demand to teach Open Court exactly as scripted extends to every aspect of a teacher's language arts program: how the children's desks are to be arranged, how the children are to sit on the carpet (in kindergarten, at least), where they are supposed to be sitting when a teacher teaches or demonstrates something, exactly how the teacher is supposed to teach or demonstrate that something, which books the children are to read and in what order, what activities they are to do, which letter they are to learn, which sight word they are to memorize and how they are to memorize it, etc. All is specified, to the smallest detail. The program is also accompanied by a "pacing plan" that tells teachers exactly when, and for how many days, they are supposed to teach the specific units and lessons of the program. Thus, the first serious flaw of the Open court program is that it is scripted and is presented as perfect for all children at all times and in all places. If, as I mentioned, this is merely to help new or otherwise struggling teachers to come up with a language arts program, it might be acceptable, although

with the caveat that such teachers be informed that this is not the optimal way to teach. But if experienced teachers are being ordered to read the program word for word, if they are being prohibited from adapting and/or supplementing the program as they judge appropriate, and if they are being threatened with being disciplined for deviating from the program, then this is a travesty of sound educational practice and a recipe for disaster.

(2) Open Court was not designed for "English language learners," that is, children who speak or have spoken a language other than English in the home and who are learning to speak English in school. These children constitute the majority of students in the LAUSD, yet the program was not developed with them in mind. It is very obvious that it was created for kids whose first language is English. Thus the program attempts to teach certain concepts and skills way before English language learners are ready to master them. In kindergarten for example, the program, at the very beginning of the school year, jumps right into teaching the children rhyming words at a time when most of the kids can hardly understand what the teacher is talking about and are still learning how to ask permission to go to the bathroom. Now, if you think about it, rhyming is a rather sophisticated idea, and even the children who are deemed to be fluent in English usually don't know what you are demanding when you ask them to give you a word that rhymes with "cat." Despite this, Open Court crams this stuff down the kids' throats from the first day of school, during the time when other things could be much more effectively conveyed to them. Interestingly enough, by January or February (assuming school starts at the beginning of September) most of the kids are ready to grasp rhyming words and to learn to generate their own rhymes. This is when it would make most sense to work on the concept. But no, the program says do rhyming words in the first weeks of school, so that's what we have to do, even if the kids have no idea of what we are talking about.

The inappropriateness of Open Court to English language learners is apparent in almost every facet of the program, such as the books that are read to the children, the language used to explain things to them, and the kinds of activities they are expected to do. The problem is so glaring that after the program was developed, the publishers hired people (perhaps the original consultants, perhaps others) to go through each of the teachers' manuals and add little boxes, shaded purple and headed ESL (English as a Second Language). These contain suggestions for how teachers might make the lessons understandable to children who are learning English. Mostly, this involves showing them pictures of many of the words used in that part of the program. As if that were sufficient. As if the kids can actually learn the words—that is, assimilate that much English vocabulary—in such a short period of time. And as if the teacher has the time to do all this when he/she has so many mandated activities to cover. It's truly absurd.

(3) The program is very, very, very, very boring. It's boring enough for kids who already understand and speak English. But for children who are still struggling to understand the simplest things, it is truly mind-deadening. It is worth remembering (as if I need to remind anyone) that kids these days are growing up on a lot of TV, movies, and video games that aggressively grab and hold their attention. In contrast, listening to a teacher read a story or lead them in various phonemic-awareness exercises must seem incredibly dull. In fact, one of the most crucial skills a teacher must teach children in kindergarten is how to pay attention; that is, not only to look at what the teacher is doing at any given time, but also to think about and to try to remember what is being said. Believe it or not, many children today do not enter school with this ability and find it very difficult to master. But Open Court makes this problem much, much worse. Among other things, each day it requires the kids to sit on the carpet for long periods of time (an hour and a

half in kindergarten) without moving or doing anything—without writing, coloring, or cutting, and without talking to their friends (let alone playing)—while the teacher leads them in a long series of oral exercises, recites poems, and reads and analyzes stories.

One of the skills the program intends to impart to the students is how to read a story in such a way that they think about and understand what's being read. This entails teaching them various "reading strategies," such as predicting what's going to happen, clarifying what's going on in a story, making emotional connections to the characters and their experiences. A laudable intention, to be sure. But the program does this in arguably the worst possible way. The major stories (and the other selections; not all are fiction) in each unit are read many, many, many times. After several complete readings of the story, the teachers are directed to take the children through the book, sometimes just two pages at time, stopping at the precise places indicated in the teachers' guide, and reading specific sentences that are scripted there, to demonstrate one or another reading strategy. This goes on for days—days and days of having the children listen to and analyze the same story. After the third day, the children are usually going crazy. They start yelling: The story is boring; they want to read another one, etc. And who can blame them? The teacher is usually bored too. And this is with stories the kids like. Try it with material they don't like. Fortunately, after a few years of this, we were given a set of books, thematically integrated with each unit in the program, which we were allowed to read to the children, presumably when they got tired of the "main selection." All this reading and analyzing, as well as the boring nature of the Open Court program as a whole, may well wind up conveying to the children something different from what the program's designers intended. It just might teach them that reading is a chore and certainly a lot less fun than watching TV or playing a video game. Is this what we want?

(4) The Open Court program assumes that our children enter school with more of an academic background than they in fact have. I remember an article, written by the chief consultant to the publisher of Open Court, that was distributed to us during the three-day training in Open Court we were required to attend. In this article, which I have unfortunately misplaced, Marilyn Jaeger Adams contended (and I paraphrase) that, by and large, when our children enter kindergarten, they know (meaning, can distinguish and name) all or almost all of the letters. When I read this, I was truly astounded, because this is definitely not true of the children who enter my kindergarten class each year. The greatest number of students I have ever had who could recognize all or most of the alphabet (uppercase and lowercase) when they entered school was six (out of twenty). Usually, it is two or three, sometimes one, sometimes none at all. Most of the children cannot sing the alphabet song correctly. Yet, the chief consultant (with access to the latest research, presumably) for the reading program that we are required to use to teach our students how to read insists that all or most of the children know their letters when they enter school. Moreover, it is quite clear to me that this is a central assumption underlying the overall conception and specific design of the program. Yes, the program does go through the motions of teaching the children the letters (remember the new alphabet song, with LMN…OPQ?), but the methods and techniques it uses are completely inadequate to the task. This might be OK if teachers were allowed to supplement the program with additional materials to accomplish this, but it is a catastrophe when we are not.

I was so stunned by our expert's claim (one so contrary to my own experience) that at an appropriate time (at least I thought it was appropriate) during one of our training sessions I raised my hand to address the issue. When I was called on, I drew attention to the article and its

author, then read aloud the sentence about most of our children knowing all or almost all of the letters when they enter kindergarten. When I had finished, I stated (somewhat disingenuously, I admit), "I don't know about children entering other kindergarten classes, but for the kids I get, year after year after year, this is definitely not true." The other teachers present were nodding their heads vigorously. But the trainer brushed my comment aside with a wave of the hand (do they practice this?) and said, "We don't have time to talk about that." (!!!???) Gee, the program we are being trained in (designed, remember, to teach children to read) assumes that our students know the ABCs when they enter school when in fact they don't, and we don't have time to talk about it. (I guess it was beyond our presenter's level of expertise.)

(5) The Open Court program is based upon an assumption that is definitely contestable, and one that I think is downright wrong; namely, the belief that what our children most need, that is, what is most lacking in their academic and cognitive development, is "phonemic awareness." Phonemic awareness, a subset of phonics, is the ability to discriminate and identify the sounds human beings make when we speak, and presumably, say to ourselves as we read. This includes the knowledge of the sounds the letters make in various positions within words. For example, if I say a letter, can a child tell me the sound it makes when it comes at the beginning of a word? Conversely, if I say a word, can the child identify the sound (and the letter that goes with the sound) with which the word begins? More sophisticatedly, can a child identify the distinct sounds that make up the beginning, middle, and end of a word. Can the child discriminate—say, by clapping—the syllables that make up a specific word? Can the child identify and generate rhyming words?

There is no question that these are crucial skills and that most of the children in school today are deficient in them and need to develop them. What I object to is the claim that this is the fundamental weakness in the children's cognitive development and education. And since this is an underlying assumption behind the design of the program, the program skips over, or woefully underemphasizes, the development of other skills I believe to be more basic and more essential. And insofar as it does so, the program, at least on the kindergarten level, is not well adapted to teach the vast majority of children coming into the LAUSD how to read.

Most of these children are from working-class families whose dominant language is not English. Moreover, by and large, the kids' parents are not well educated. What these children lack, most glaringly and most fundamentally, is a knowledge of the visual symbols that are the key to academic knowledge and skills. Contrary to what Open Court's chief consultant wrote and to the underlying assumptions of the Open Court program, the vast majority of these kids are not able to recognize, that is, identify/name, the letters of the alphabet. (They are also not able to identify/name the basic geometric shapes—circle, square, triangle, and rectangle—nor can they identify/name the numbers beyond number one.) This is not an issue of intelligence. Overall, the children are as intelligent as middle- and upper-class children. It is a question of exposure; they have not been exposed to, and they have not been systematically taught to identify, the fundamental symbols required for reading and carrying out mathematical operations.

Probably the most crucial deficit in these children's academic development is the inability to identify—to recognize and name— the individual letters of the alphabet. Some of the kids can sing part of the ABC song, but the majority cannot sing the song correctly from beginning to end. Most of them, even those who can sing it through, do not know that the song names the letters of the alphabet. I had to learn this from experience. On my first day of teaching kindergarten, not knowing quite how to begin, I had the kids sing the ABC song. I then took out a big chart of the

letters, held it up to them, and indicated the first letter (Aa, as it appears on the alphabet chart) with my finger, with the expectation that they would start chanting the letters as I pointed to them in sequence. There was dead silence. Not one child could name the letter Aa. In fact, they had no idea the song had any connection with anything on the chart. It might as well have been "Mary Had a Little Lamb." And these kids had gone to preschool (which only 37 percent of Latino children in LA attend). The children who do not attend preschool, most likely because it is not available where they live, are even further behind.

Even after a child has learned to chant the letters Aa to Zz, he/she usually cannot identify any significant number of letters when they are pointed to out of order. I have had the following experience innumerable times: I approach a parent before or after school and ask if he/she has been reviewing the letters with his/her child at home. The parent insists the child knows the letters. I then take out a small alphabet chart and have the child do what he/she can, which is usually to chant or sing the letters in order Aa—Za, as the parent nods approvingly. Then I point to a letter at random and ask the child to tell me what letter it is. He/she can't do so. I then point to another letter somewhere else on the chart and ask the child to name it. He/she can't name that one, either. I do this a third time, with the same result. The parent, of course, is shocked. Then I explain to the parent that being able to sing the ABC song or to chant the letters in order is not the same as being able to identify the letters out of order. I then show the parent things he/she can do to teach the child to be able to identify the letters. This has happened over and over again, and this is with caring and concerned parents who work with their children, believe in education, and want their children to do well in school.

In general, these parents (and I think it is true of lower-class parents in general, not just Latinos) do not, and/or do not know how to, teach their children the letters and the other fundamental academic symbols. (Many do not teach their children a variety of things, such as the names of the colors, the parts of the body, and objects in the household. In general, the poorer a family is, the less of this type of teaching is done in the home.) There are many reasons for this. The most basic one is that, as I mentioned, these parents are generally not well educated. From my discussions with the parents of my students, I would guess that most of them went to school until the sixth or eighth grade. And their parents, that is, the grandparents of our students, had even less education (if they could read at all) and had trouble putting food on the table and clothes on their kids' backs. Even had they wanted to buy books and could afford them, there may well have been no place to purchase them for miles around. In short, our students' grandparents probably did not read to their children and teach them the letters, so their children (the parents of our students), as adults, don't tend to read to their children, teach them the letters, etc. It's not their fault. It doesn't mean they are bad parents or don't care about their kids or their kids' education, as many prejudiced people believe. It does mean that we (the teachers and all who work in the school system) need to tell the parents, as clearly and as respectfully as we can, that they need to do these things with their children (read to them, teach them the letters, the shapes, the numbers, the colors, etc.). And we need to show them how to do this, and explain, among other things, that teaching the children the ABC song, or how to count, is not enough. It also means that teachers must systematically teach these things to the children in school to make up for lost time and to get them caught up to middle- and upper-class children. And this requires, definitely in kindergarten and probably in the other grades, a lot of repetition. Infinite repetition. And this means (dare I say the word?) a lot of drill. This, of course, is not the only thing they need, but the kids do need this, and Open Court does not supply it (since, as I've said, it assumes that they already know this stuff).

In short, the first and most basic thing most of the children entering kindergarten in the LAUSD need, as far as learning to read is concerned, is to learn to recognize the letters. While they are learning this, they need to be taught the sounds that go with the letters. This should be done with the constant association of the sounds with the letters, both the names of the letters and their written forms. The kids certainly need all the phonemic-awareness skills touted by Open Court, but the task of teaching such skills must be integrally linked to teaching the children to recognize the letters, so that the sounds and the letters are intimately associated in the children's minds. If the children cannot identify the letters, the phonemic awareness skills are virtually useless.

(6) An additional deficiency of the Open Court reading program is that it attempts to teach the phonemic awareness skills through almost exclusively auditory means, independently of, and prior to, the visual aspect of learning. This is true not only of the relatively simple skills, but also of the more sophisticated ones. To learn rhyming words most effectively, for example, the children need much more than being exposed aurally to the repetition of words that rhyme, as in poems. They also need practice in identifying rhyming words visually. That is, beyond recognizing rhyming words when they are spoken and practicing generating their own rhyming words, the children also need to LOOK AT and SEE such words. I mean this in at least two senses. First, the children need to practice recognizing rhyming words as they are represented in pictures: for example, to identify and color the pictures of rhyming words on a worksheet, and then repeat the rhyming words to and/or with the teacher (or aide or classroom volunteer). Aside from helping the children learn to recognize rhyming words, this also significantly expands their English vocabulary, which is crucial. Second, the children need to see rhyming words written down, as in a list of words whose last sounds are the same, e.g., bat, cat, hat, fat, mat, etc., and to practice, with the help of an adult, sounding the words out. This not only teaches the children to recognize rhyming words (because they hear them being spoken), but also reinforces their knowledge of the letters and their ability to associate the letters with their respective sounds. The Open Court reading program is totally deficient in providing for the first kind of activity, that is, identifying rhyming words as presented in pictures. It does direct teachers to carry out the second type of activity—recognizing written rhyming words—but by no means sufficiently, and usually only as part of a whole-group activity, when one can't be sure that every child is listening or is understanding what is being required.

(7) Open Court does not provide effective means for the children to learn to recognize high-frequency words, so-called sight words. These are words that occur most frequently in English, such as the, I, you, he, she, we, they, here, is, a, an, etc. Learning to identify and read such words on sight is particularly important, given that so many of these words, like so many English words in general, cannot really be "sounded out"/decoded (especially words beginning in th, ch, sh, or wh). To its credit, Open Court does see the need to teach the children these words. And it attempts to teach them through one reasonably viable means, pre-decodable books. These books (copies of which are read in class; other copies are sent home so the children can practice) contain little stories using simple sentences made up of sight words, plus pictures, such as "I see the …" and a picture of, say, a school. There are 25 such books, each of which tends to increase in difficulty—that is, to feature more and more challenging sight words than the previous books in the series. These books are effective, but they go only so far, since after several readings the children can "read" these books by memorizing the story, without being able to recognize the sight words. What the children also need, and what Open Court does not provide, is the opportunity to see—to read and to write—these words in other contexts: sentences incorporating sight words to be

copied and read back to an adult; lists of words to be copied and read to an adult; flashcards, etc. As with learning to recognize the letters, children who have not had the prior academic exposure that most middle-class children receive in the home need to be visually exposed to these words an infinite number of times so that the kids can learn them and be able to recall them when they see such words in reading material. Open Court does not provide this.

(8) Open Court does not offer sufficient opportunities for the children to learn, and particularly to practice, the skills necessary to reading, most crucially, being able recognize the letters and to associate the letters with their respective sounds. To be more specific (and more blunt), Open Court provides pathetically little supplementary material to provide our children with the reinforcement and review that the kids need, even of the concepts and skills Open Court wishes to teach. There is a workbook, whose activities consist mostly of identifying a picture and writing the letter that makes either the first or the last sound of the particular word represented by the picture. This book has a total of about 120 pages for a school year that consists of 180 days. There are also two books that exist only in teachers' editions, which provide a page or two of reinforcement activities, similar to those in the workbook, for each letter/sound. There are activities that focus on sequencing and describing little stories, but as far as the basics are concerned, there is excruciatingly little. This deficit, I believe, flows directly from Open Court's underlying assumption that what the children most need is to develop their phonemic awareness through purely auditory means, and from its even more fundamental misconception that our children enter kindergarten with a knowledge of the letters.

(9) The Open Court program is overly sequential or "stage-ist." In other words, it unnecessarily separates the teaching of certain concepts and skills—presenting them in sequence—that can be more effectively taught together. Thus, as mentioned, phonemic-awareness skills are taught overwhelmingly through auditory means in a distinct stage, when in fact they can be better taught and reinforced when combined with a visual presentation. In a similar manner, the program spoon-feeds the children the sounds of the letters, one by one, and actually restricts exposure to the sounds of the other letters. For example, on the front wall of the classroom, in a position each child must be able to see, each teacher is supposed to put up Open Court letter/sound cards. On one side of each card is printed a letter, presented in its uppercase and lowercase forms, e.g., Bb. On the reverse side, the letters are presented once again, but this time accompanied by a picture that represents the sound associated with that letter, say, a ball. At first, all that the children see are the sides of the cards that show just the letters. As the program teaches the sounds, it goes through the letters one by one, the teacher turning over the card of the particular letter being studied to reveal the picture that represents the sound. Until a particular letter is reached, the picture side of the card is not exposed to the children. Presumably, this procedure is designed to avoid confusing the children, but this concern is silly. The kids are quite capable of learning many of the sounds simultaneously or very quickly one after the other. To help them learn the sounds, I designed a chart that presents the letters along with pictures representing their sounds. I ran off copies, one for each child, laminated them and sent them home, for the parents to review with their children. And every day, in class, I hold up the chart and, pointing to each letter and its associated picture, lead the children in a chant: "Aa (the name of the letter) for apple, Bb for bee, Cc for cat," etc. After completing this, we go back to Aa and chant: "Aa" and then the sound a (as sounded in cat), "Bb" and the sound b (as pronounced in bee), etc. This way, the children learn many of the sounds quite rapidly. And since they do so (while they are learning to recognize the letters), they also learn to read by decoding (sounding out the letters in a word)

much sooner than in Open Court's unnecessarily stage-ist approach. In fact, Open Court does not present kindergarten children with any reading material that they are actually to decode, under the assumption (I guess) that the children are not ready for this type of activity. The only reading material they are given is the pre-decodables, which they read by memorizing the sight words. The children are presented with material to actually decode only in the first grade. Why? If taught well, if drilled in recognizing the letters and in associating them with their sounds, and if presented with enough material to read, our kindergarten students are quite capable of learning to decode, and, by the end of the year, some of them decode very well. Thus, the Open Court program unnecessarily retards our children's progress in reading.

(10) Open Court has virtually no copying/writing component, aside from the recommendation that the children write in journals every day and a (very) few additional writing activities. Kindergarten students need frequent opportunities to develop their writing skills, beginning with copying from models and progressing to self-generated words and sentences. This is especially true of those children known as tactile learners, those who need to touch, feel, and move, rather than just to see, hear, and speak, in order to master literacy (or math) skills.

(11) The Open Court program does not give the children enough material to read, and what it does give them is not sufficiently challenging. If one thinks about this a minute, this is a truly astounding charge; so I'll repeat it. Open Court DOES NOT GIVE THE CHILDREN ENOUGH MATERIAL TO READ, AND WHAT IT DOES GIVE THEM IS NOT SUFFICIENTLY CHALLENGING! In learning to read, as in most other activities that entail difficult skills, such as playing sports or learning a musical instrument, the most important thing is to practice. Practice, practice, practice, practice. Especially since so many of the students in the LAUSD are not exposed to the things that most middle-class children get exposed to in the home, it essential that the children read as much as they can, and that they be given a wide variety of reading material (at the level appropriate to them, of course) on which to practice. But the much-touted Open Court program gives kindergarten children very, very little to read. There are the 25 pre-decodable books. There are (I think) 5 other stories, called "First Step Stories," each consisting of no more than a few lines that the students, as with the pre-decodables, tend to memorize. And there are a handful of activity sheets, each containing a sentence or two, along with a couple of blanks in which the kids write a word or two, plus a space in which to draw a picture. And that's it! Where's the other reading material? Where are the books the children desperately need to practice their reading? Where are the books the children can use to practice their decoding skills? In Open Court, they don't exist. Now, this (and the other deficiencies of the Open Court program) might not be so bad if teachers were allowed (let alone actually encouraged) to supplement the program with additional materials (SUCH AS BOOKS!) and to modify and adapt it as their experience suggests. But it is a serious deficiency if teachers are prohibited from doing anything except following the teachers' manual word for word. And this is increasingly where the LAUSD is headed.

(12) Ironically then, the Open Court program, which was not designed for kids learning English as a second language, is nowhere nearly demanding enough for our students. If they are taught well, kindergarten children, including English language learners from lower-class immigrant families, can learn to read at a far more advanced level than the Open Court program believes. I know this from experience, because every year most of the students leaving my class can read at such a level. But this is not because I have followed the Open Court teachers' guides line by line. It is because I have used my knowledge, experience, and judgment, and my ability

to communicate with my students and their parents and to know where they are at, to modify, adapt, and supplement a woefully inadequate and very poorly conceived reading program.

Bureaucratic Pressure Increases

For some years our school had not really had the opportunity to experience the LAUSD bureaucracy in action, up close and personal, as it were. This was because, I now realize, we were being protected by our previous administration. The principal had come to the school in the early 1990s, I believe, and the assistant principal had been there since the mid-1970s. When I arrived at the school in January 1994, the district, as I have indicated, was in one of its more laissez-faire periods. But as the rhetoric about the education crisis heated up, and particularly when Open Court was adopted, things started to change.

I have already described, from a personal angle, what happened during the first year of Open Court's implementation, when the literacy coaches were being used as enforcers, the so-called Open Court police. But after one year under that regime, it seemed to me and other teachers at our school that the powers that be had backed off and might even have been convinced that the program could be better utilized if the teachers were allowed to modify, adapt, and supplement it, in other words, if we were permitted to use our knowledge, judgment and experience to make the program work. This definitely seemed to be what was going on at our school. However, I had an inkling that this might not be the case throughout the district as a whole. Specifically, at the salary point classes I attended, I would hear from teachers who worked at other schools about principals who insisted that each teacher in a grade teach the same lesson, the same precise way, at precisely the same time, each day. (This was truly terrifying to me, especially since, as the years had gone by, I had developed more and more supplementary material to make the program work for my students, and every year they did better and better.) Thus, it looked to me like our school might be different from other schools in the LAUSD, perhaps even unique.

This feeling intensified when some of us at the school started to sense that our administrators were coming under pressure from a bureaucrat higher up (perhaps right above them) in the LAUSD bureaucracy. This person began visiting our school more frequently than the person she had recently replaced (so it seemed to us) and began, also, to evince a tendency toward micromanagement. During one excursion (I was told this by other teachers, since my class did not enjoy the pleasure of a visit), she criticized a kindergarten teacher for doing a mathematics assessment with the children on a one-to-one basis, claiming that it was a misuse of instructional time. Now, all the K teachers at our school agree that the only way to get an accurate view of the children's progress is to test them one at a time. If one tests them in a group, even a group of three, the kids can't focus on the testing materials and won't mark the correct answers, even when they have mastered the concepts and skills being assessed. You might as well not test them at all. But our visiting bureaucrat had little more to say than to criticize the teacher for testing the children one on one. (If there's a waste of time involved, it's because of the unbelievable amount of testing we're required to do.)

We had other hints that things were awry. I recall one time when our assistant principal (AP) darted into my room unannounced. It turned out for the good, because I had just introduced subtraction in two columns to my class, all the children were getting it, and the AP was suitably impressed. Afterwards, she apologized for the intrusion. The AP explained that the bureaucrat in

question had made a surprise visit to the school, and since she was insisting that administrators spend most of their time visiting classrooms, our AP had to duck into a classroom to get out of the line of fire. (As if she didn't have other things to do, like the mountain of paperwork on her desk, she told me, rolling her eyes.) So, through this type of incident and in other ways, we began to sense that our administration was experiencing considerable pressure from the micromanager "upstairs."

In hindsight, this was not surprising. On the most basic level, our (then) administration followed a distinctly different style of management. Get a good staff, treat them with respect, encourage an atmosphere of collaboration and a sharing of ideas, give teachers the autonomy to try new things, and let them teach. This approach included allowing the teachers to adapt and supplement the mandated programs. Of course, the school was not perfect. A few individuals on the staff abused the confidence that was placed in them, arriving late and/or otherwise not fulfilling their duties as conscientiously as they might have. One or two could have used a real talking to, such as the plant managers who did no more than they absolutely had to. Also, a couple of teachers would occasionally get their way by bullying the principal, who didn't care for confrontations. And perhaps some student discipline problems were not handled as firmly as they could have been. In other words, the school wasn't as clean, and the ship wasn't as tight, as some others. But, at least in my opinion (anarchist that I am), this was well worth the trade-off, especially since I kept hearing about the regimentation going on at other schools. In short, our school was a bit ragged, but it worked.

Naturally, one could see why, from the point of view of a true believer in time-and-motion studies, it might seem as if our school was rather like an asylum being run by the inmates. Yet, despite the obvious pressure from "upstairs," our administration was left largely alone, leaving aside surprise visits and other forms of petty harassment. The rumor we heard was that our principal was being protected by someone still higher up in the LAUSD hierarchy, perhaps the head of the local district. Indeed, our tests scores were very good and going up, and we were, consequently, a "high-performing" school despite the modest socioeconomic status of most of our students' families. After all, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Right?

Not in the Alice-in-Wonderland world of the LAUSD. It seems that after several years of chomping at the bit, the micromanager "upstairs" was finally to get her chance. In the middle of the 2004—2005 school year, our principal announced, rather unexpectedly, that she would be retiring in June. She told us that she had been offered a job at a private school near where she lived, and the opportunity to avoid a one-and-a-half hour commute each way and to be able to collect a pension and a salary at the same time was too good to pass up. (Perhaps the pressure from "upstairs" also played a role.) Our assistant principal, it turned out, was also leaving, although this, I heard, was not voluntary. She had retired several years earlier but, after a hiatus of a couple of years, had returned to our school, working as well as receiving her pension. But in so doing, she had paid a price. Because she had retired, she was placed at the bottom of the seniority list when she was rehired, and when our principal left, our assistant principal was bumped out of her job.

So after years of frustration, Margie Micromanager upstairs was finally to get a chance to strut her stuff at our school. She would show us mental cases who was boss. We would then see how a school should be run.

PART III — THE BUREAUCRACY IN ACTION — A CASE STUDY

Because our school was under School-Based Management (under which we teachers supposedly run things), our more experienced faculty members thought that we, through a hiring committee, would have the right to choose the new principal. But since somebody had forgotten to file a "waiver" of some sort, this was nixed. We were thrown a bone, however, and it was agreed that the hiring committee would be allowed to choose a principal from a slate of candidates selected by the forces "upstairs." (Do I sense a pattern here?) From what I heard from a member of the committee, the person the hiring committee chose seemed to be the best of the several candidates offered. At least she responded with the appropriate language about collaboration, cooperation, and teamwork, being more a player-coach than a manager, etc., which she must have picked up over her years in the LAUSD. (Perhaps she was prepped for the interview.)

At a faculty meeting at the end of the school year, our principal designee had the opportunity to address the teachers. She spoke well: She was happy to be here, flattered to be chosen to lead such a high-performing school that she had heard so much about. But it soon became apparent that, as in the LAUSD as a whole, there was a gap between word and deed.

To be blunt, collaboration was not her style. Our new principal (let's call her Mrs. X) arrived on campus in August of 2005, when most of the school's staff was still on summer break. During that time, she began to reveal her approach. A man, a teaching assistant who had worked at the school for many years and who was known for his hard work, dedication, and intelligence, approached the principal with a suggestion for handling a certain matter. She responded with something like, "Thank you very much, Mr…, but I'm the principal here and I'll be making all the decisions."

From the beginning of the school year proper, Mrs. X was determined to put her stamp on the school and its activities and to ignore the input of teachers and other staff members. Our previous administration had made it a point, after the first few days of classes each school year, to ask parents to leave the yard and the school corridors after they had dropped off their children. Mothers and fathers of school-age children, particularly parents of those in the lower grades, are very protective of their kids and often hover about them as they wait in line for the opening bell. Some of the parents even spoon-feed their kids at breakfast or hold the bottles of juice as the kids drink. But these children are quite capable of taking care of themselves, and in fact need to do so, without constant doting. Equally important, having parents in the yard can be a real problem: many will not discipline their kids when, in my opinion, they should—for example, when the children are running, swinging their backpacks at each other, and fighting—while the parents' presence inhibits others, such as teachers or aides, from intervening. For this reason, most teachers preferred the old policy of insisting that parents leave the school after they bring their children. But Mrs. X mandated that the parents were to have full access to the school's play areas and the corridors during this period and even while the teachers are escorting their students

to their classrooms, although having a crowd of parents in the halls at this time is extremely disruptive. Several of us teachers tried to explain our thinking on this issue, but our input was ignored. Mrs. X said she wanted the school to be more welcoming to the parents than it had been, although, as far as I know, parents had never complained about an unfriendly atmosphere, and the school had always been supportive of their involvement in school activities.

Mrs. X's bureaucratic style was revealed when she addressed an issue concerning union representation at our school. Up until then, we had had two "co-chairpersons" of our UTLA chapter. One was a woman who went to meetings at the union headquarters, handled grievances at the school, gave union reports to the faculty, and chaired our not-too-frequent chapter meetings. The other, a man, knew the contract exceptionally well, had considerable experience (including a stint as a principal, I was told), and had various contacts throughout the district. In practice, the woman was the chapter chair and the man vicechair, but they were both officially co-chairpersons. This was a relic of the time when the school was on a year-round schedule and we needed an official chairperson on site when the other chairperson was off-track. Apparently, this situation disturbed our new principal's sense of propriety. She called the first chairperson into her office, showed her the contract, insisted that since our school was no longer on a year-round schedule, the union chapter could have only one chairperson, and demanded that the other chairperson be removed from his position. The directive was duly carried out without any discussion among, let alone a vote by or even a report to, the membership. This didn't sit well with the man who was so unceremoniously ousted, let alone, when we found out, some of us paranoid schizophrenics among the faculty. Of course, all Mrs. X had to do (if something needed to be done at all) was to call both chairpersons into her office, suggest that there was a problem, and urge them to take the issue back to the membership in order to come up with some kind of solution, for example, making one person the chairperson and the other an assistant chairperson or vicechairperson. But no, given the choice between a nice, collegial way of handling the situation and an officious one, Mrs. X deemed the latter preferable at this stage in her career. (She must have read Dale Carnegie's classic, HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE.)

I was personally introduced to Mrs. X's special touch when I noticed a message in the Spanish version of one of the school bulletins that are issued to the parents each month. The message, an excellent one in terms of its content, discussed how parents need to help, and in what ways they can help, their children with their homework. Unfortunately, the translation was poor; perhaps it had been done hurriedly. Since Mrs. X had complimented me on my Spanish after she had heard me speaking to some of my students' parents after school one day, I mentioned the problem with the translation to her. She didn't look happy. She asked me if she could count on me for regular translations, but I told her there were other people at the school who were far more qualified than I, and I named two university-educated native speakers, including the teaching assistant mentioned above. I did offer to revise the translation, and I spent a couple of hours doing so, but when I returned it to Mrs. X, she received it coldly.

Another aspect of Mrs. X's leadership conception was suggested by an incident that occurred a month or so later. In an attempt to improve our school's attendance (good, but a bit lower than it ought to be), Mrs. X had instituted monthly awards ceremonies during which children who had perfect attendance for the previous month, as well as students selected by the teachers for noteworthy academic achievement, academic improvement, or excellent behavior, receive certificates and special pencils. (Under our previous administration, we had had these assemblies only twice a year. This was fine with the teachers because these assemblies take up consider-

able time, which we'd prefer, believe it or not, to use for instruction.) As our new principal and assistant principal announced the winning students at one of these ceremonies, it became clear that they were having trouble pronouncing the children's names (50 percent of our students are Latino; 35 percent Armenian). They also erred, but in a different way, when reading the names of some of the Latino children. In Spanish-speaking countries, people often have two surnames. In such cases, the first of the two surnames is usually the person's father's last name, the second his/her mother's maiden name. When speaking formally, as in an introduction at a public event, one would use both last names, e.g., Pablo Sanchez Gonzalez. In informal situations, one might use just the first of the two surnames, as in Pablo Sanchez. However, when Mrs. X introduced several of my students, she announced the children's first names and the second of the two surnames (i.e., the children's mothers' maiden names). After the ceremony, I went to Mrs. X's office to inform her, as politely as I could, of her error. Her mistake might be taken as an insult by the Latino parents, and I was concerned that she make a good impression on them. As it turned out, the mistake was mine. She reacted very defensively. "Don't blame me," she said. "Blame … He made up the certificates" (from which she had read the names). I meekly suggested that the certificates had been done correctly, and I tried to explain the Latino custom about surnames, but the damage had been done. (When I went home, I looked for my copy of Dale Carnegie.)

Our new leader's dictatorial approach was revealed in virtually all areas of the school's functioning. Around Halloween, our school would traditionally have a Halloween parade. Those children and faculty members who cared to would dress up in costumes and walk around the school's largest play area, whereas those who didn't care to participate, as well as parents and others, would watch from the sidelines. Participation in the parade was strictly voluntary and the event a charming break from the school's routine. Under Mrs. X's leadership, however, participation became mandatory (although students whose families' religious convictions prohibited them from participating were exempt). And what had been a rather enjoyable occasion was turned into something closer to a chore.

The school's Christmas program was handled the same way. Previously, those classes who wished to perform (many, if not most, did) were encouraged to do so. The other classes would attend the program and celebrate the winter holidays in other ways. To my knowledge, no one—not parents, students or teachers—had ever objected to this policy. But under the new regime, participation was obligatory: all classes were required to do something, although classes were allowed to perform together—for example, as a grade— if they wished. These changes were simply mandated from above. There was no effort to convince anyone, to get anyone's suggestions, or to hear anybody's objections. Mrs. X didn't care to go through the motions, even to pretend that she was listening to what other people had to say. The new modus operandi was simply fiat.

Although our new principal's innovations may have been designed to increase parental involvement in the school, their effect was to alienate the faculty and other members of the staff. The result was a widening gap between appearance and underlying reality at the school. On the surface, things might have looked OK, but underneath they were not. The school's personnel was being regimented, ordered about, and disciplined, our suggestions and objections ignored. So much for collaboration and teamwork. One colleague described our new principal as "not teacher-friendly."

The change in atmosphere was eventually to be noticed by the more discerning parents. Every year, in the spring, our school holds an International Day celebration to recognize our school's ethnic and cultural diversity, which is considerable. Traditionally, the program consisted of two

parts: a parade, in which those students who wished promenaded in the clothes of their or their parents' countries of origin and, after the parade, performances (usually dances) representing various countries around the world. Also traditionally, participation in this event was voluntary. Now, this is no longer the case: every child is to parade; every class must perform. The first International Day program under Mrs. X's leadership went reasonably well (although, for some reason, there was no dance or song representing Armenia). For some reason, however, the principal singled out one class and its teacher for particular criticism. This was a first grade class whose teacher, though not Latina, had lived in Mexico for six years as a child, and as a result, was fluent in Spanish and knowledgeable about Mexican history and culture. Given her fluency, and a credential to prove it, this teacher's students are generally Spanish-speaking or at least of Latino background. For International Day, the teacher had decided that her class would perform a traditional Mexican dance, which her students had practiced for a month. And it showed. The performance, with the children dressed in elaborate costumes, was excellent, probably the best in the entire program, and the parents observing the celebration, certainly the Latino parents, were thrilled. It was impressive to see little first grade children performing a rather elaborate dance in genuine traditional dress (which I assume the parents helped make). However, some time after the event, Mrs. X reprimanded the teacher for spending too much time rehearsing! What's the old saying, "You can't win for losing" (or is it "lose for winning")? When the parents of the children who had performed found out about the criticism, they were not pleased.

In addition to the changes we have discussed, Mrs. X began to make frequent visits to classrooms to observe teachers at work. Our previous administrators had made such excursions, but once they got to know you and could see how your students fared, such forays became less frequent—a couple of times a year, not counting formal evaluations. Moreover, after virtually all their visits, they made it a point to compliment teachers on what they had liked as well as to mention whatever criticisms they might have had. As a result, visits, while not exactly welcomed, were certainly not feared. Our new principal's approach was, predictably, different. Not only were her visits much more frequent; we would now get memos in our mailboxes with a slew of criticisms, some highlighted with yellow marker, and usually a note requesting a conference in her office. There was rarely a compliment, and the criticisms, frankly, were not very useful.

I was the beneficiary of several such drop-ins, one of which I remember well. After observing me reading and discussing a story at some length with my students, Mrs. X left the room. The inevitable memo in my mailbox asked me to meet with her in her office. At the meeting, she accused me of not "doing" Open Court, because she had not seen the book I was reading with the kids mentioned anywhere in the Open Court teachers' guide. I explained to her that the book was one of the set that we had been given by our literacy coach to supplement the program. These books, organized into the specific units into which the Open Court program was divided, were to be read after the class had read and discussed the selections mandated by the teachers' manual. In fact, the book we were exploring—using all the strategies stressed in the program—was longer, meatier, and more sophisticated than the stories in the guide. I made no headway with Mrs. X; she didn't see the book I was reading listed anywhere in the teachers' manual, therefore I wasn't "doing" the program. She also expressed concern that she never saw me refer to the letter/sound cards in the front of the room and said she was worried that my students wouldn't know their letters and the sounds when they went to first grade. I assured her that whatever I might not do well with my students, they were all solid with the letters and the sounds (and the sight words) when they left my class. I urged her to speak to the first grade teachers to verify this if she wished.

I also invited her to visit my class the next day to watch us do an entire Open Court lesson. She did. But I never heard from her, positively or negatively, about what she saw that day. I hoped I had mollified her, but I definitely became much more paranoid. From that point on, I always made it a point to have some obvious Open Court worksheet on my desk for the children to do, even though everything I did was in fact integrated with the program. Interestingly enough, when she did visit my room, she never concerned herself with how the children were actually progressing in their reading and other skills; she was only interested in what I was having them do, that is, whether or not I was "doing" the required program.

During the course of the year, various rumors made the rounds of the school. Such and such a person had been reprimanded by the principal, threatened with suspension without pay for some infraction or other. A teacher who was being officially evaluated ("stulled"—named, I believe, after the person who invented the evaluation process) was under the gun; all sorts of big shots, in addition to the literacy coach and principal, were regularly in her classroom, observing her teach. A custodian had been "written up" for allegedly refusing a direct order of the principal. (Much admired for his positive attitude and hard work, he soon transferred to another school.) The plant manager, not known for the alacrity with which he handled his work, was also under fire. The Resource Specialist (a Special Education teacher who works periodically with students from regular classes) had been ordered to use only Open Court materials (of which there is very little) when teaching the children. Other people were being upbraided for going to the assistant principal (a much more amiable fellow) on some minor matter, rather than to her. Unfortunately, we were not able to get full and accurate information about these incidents because, under the district's enlightened policies, once an employee files a grievance against an administrator, she/he is not allowed to talk to anyone about it (nor is anyone else, not even the union chairperson who handled it).

It was unclear what the overall purpose was behind Mrs. X's innovations, except to prove—to the school's staff, the LAUSD higher-ups (and probably herself)—who was in charge. Apparently, the leadership training sessions (assuming there were any) of the administrators' classes she had taken hadn't clued her into the fact that strong leaders don't have to resort to such clumsy methods to demonstrate their authority. Or, perhaps she was indeed following what she had been taught. In the field of education, one never knows.

To be fair, Mrs. X was new to the job. She had never been a principal before, only an assistant principal, and her teaching experience was limited: 12 years, I was told, plus some years as a teaching assistant, all confined to the upper grades. (There was also a rumor making the rounds that she had failed the principal's test when she last took it.) Lastly, Mrs. X was undoubtedly under a lot of pressure from her superiors in the LAUSD bureaucracy to kick us into line after our previous, supposedly overly permissive, administration. But beyond her limited experience and questionable ability, there was a purely personal, even vindictive, aspect to Mrs. X's style. This was revealed in an incident involving a high school student who periodically volunteered on our campus.

Our school had always welcomed the presence of such student volunteers. They are students from the local middle and high schools who, during their off-track times, offer their services to the local elementary schools and perhaps to other institutions, such as hospitals. I don't know if they are required to do this or are offered extra credit for doing so, but for whatever reason, these kids come and help out at our school, in the classroom and elsewhere. Though occasionally one or two don't take their responsibilities very seriously (missing days, for example, or not being

diligent in doing what they are asked), most of them are hard working and a pleasure to have in the classroom. In many cases, after a bit of training, they are as good as adult teaching assistants. Quite a few of the volunteers I have had in my class have been former students of mine, kids I had when they were in kindergarten and whose memories were positive enough for them to want to come back and relive the experience.

One of these volunteers was a boy who had been in my very first kindergarten class. I remember him as being bright, but with a tendency to get distracted while working independently. As a result, he had trouble finishing his work. (Once, during a writing assignment, he had chewed an entire pencil— these are big kindergarten models—down to the tip, swallowing both wood and graphite core.) Despite his distractibility, and despite the fact that he was overly protected by his nervous, doting mother, by the end of the year, he was reading well (in Spanish — these were the years of the bilingual program) and knew his math. He later spent some time in special education classes (the official reasons for which I never discovered) but managed to survive them, and had turned into a mature, intelligent, and responsible young man. He liked the children and worked well with them, and they liked him back. (He initially told me he thought I was too "mean" to them—I think he meant "strict"—but later, after some weeks of trying to manage them, he conceded that it was necessary if they were to learn.)

Volunteers like this student became even more valuable to the primary grade teachers after our new administration cut way back on our budget for teaching assistants. These cuts left us without vital help during crucial blocks of instructional time, particularly those in which we taught language arts and mathematics. It also meant that there was insufficient adult supervision in the yards during recess and lunch periods. The situation had gotten so bad—and unsafe—that the principal, assistant principal, and even the office manager were often, but inconsistently, outside, watching to make sure there were no disasters. (Early in the school year, two kids had fallen off the play apparatus in the primary yard and had broken their arms.) But for much of the time, one or two teaching assistants were attempting to supervise a large number of playing (and occasionally fighting) children all by themselves.

Concerned about this situation, one aide who had worked at the school many years, several in my class, asked my volunteer (whom she had taught in kindergarten) to help her out in the yard during lunch. After clearing the request with me, the boy was out there dutifully trying to maintain control of the kids, despite the fact that they realized he wasn't a teacher, an aide, or even, really, an adult. Instead of thanking him for his efforts, Mrs. X reprimanded him. He was supposed to spend all his time in my classroom, she scolded, even though he told her that he had asked for and gotten my permission to be outside. Some time later, when he arrived at school one morning (remember, he wasn't being paid for this), our kind leader upbraided him for not saying "Good morning" to her and, as if in exchange for his many hours of dedicated service, told him he would no longer be welcome on campus; in other words, she banned him from the site.

The net result of Mrs. X's methods was an increasingly poisonous atmosphere at our school. The morale of many teachers and other staff members was poor and sinking further. Things people once did out of a sense of concern for the school, such as picking up trash or trying to prevent kids from running in the halls, were no longer being done. There was less comradeship among the faculty, and a palpable aura of intimidation pervaded the school. People didn't know whom they could talk to and whom to trust. Some of the parents saw what was going on. The atmosphere had changed, they said: the school was no longer a happy place and the faculty appeared to be divided.

Toward the end of the school year, Mrs. X was to pay a price (admittedly small) for her leadership style. She wanted to change the school's bell schedule, delaying the starting bell in the morning and all other bells by nine minutes, so that the first bell would ring at 8:00 A.M. rather than at 7:51 A.M. Her reasoning was that starting later would cut down on the number of "tardies," kids arriving late to school. This issue, unlike many others, was referred to a faculty meeting for a discussion and a vote. Several teachers, including myself, suggested that changing the bell would have little impact on tardies because, judging from our personal experience, people who generally run late will almost always run late, no matter what time they are supposed to be someplace. In other words, students who are late at 7:51 A.M. will probably be late at 8:00 A.M. The issue wasn't intrinsically important to us; in fact, had Mrs. X not been so brusque and quick to shoot down other people's input, we probably would have acceded to her request. But since she had been so rude, the teachers, almost instinctively, decided to push back, and her proposal was voted down.

The faculty was to flex its muscles on another issue at about the same time. In the LAUSD, teachers in each elementary school are allowed, within certain limits, to select their class assignments for the coming year. This was something won by the UTLA (in exchange for a wage cut, I believe) before I began working for the district. Although the bureaucrats had nibbled away at the gain, they hadn't been able to get rid of it. As a result, toward the end of a given school year, the administration of each school posts a list, based on the school's projected enrollment, of the classes it expects to have for the following school year. The list is called the matrix. At our school the teachers have a run-through at a UTLA meeting, during which, in order of seniority, they indicate on the matrix the class they want for the next year. (A few teachers, because of particular credentials they may have, are obligated to take certain classes, but most teachers may choose any class.) This dry run is held to avoid having teachers squabble in front of the administration. The process is then repeated, this time officially, at a regular faculty meeting some time later. Although this procedure had worked well in the past and was satisfactory both to teachers and to the previous administration, our new principal insisted it now be done differently. She had no control over the run-through, since that was strictly a union matter. But instead of allowing the official selection process to take place as it had, she demanded that the teachers, after school hours on a designated day, enter her office one at a time to choose their classes. Most teachers were bothered by this, since it seemed to serve no purpose except to remind us who was the boss. Consequently, the teachers decided to meet on the assigned day in the school library (where faculty meetings are usually held) and to post the matrix there. After each teacher was summoned to Mrs. X's office and wrote his/her initials on the appropriate line on the official matrix, he/she returned to the library and repeated the process on the unofficial matrix there, thus rendering Mrs. X's procedure a formality. It was a small thing, no doubt, but it showed that a majority of teachers were not enthusiastic about the new principal's style.

It was during this process that the faculty had a chance to learn what was really going on with the teacher who, we had heard, had had a bad evaluation earlier in the year. When, during the run-through of signing the matrix, it was her turn to select a class for the next year, she announced that she wouldn't be coming back; she had received an unsatisfactory "stull," she said. (These are very rare in the LAUSD.) She couldn't get through this announcement without falling apart. Amid tears and sobs, she gasped that for 15 years she had been told that she was a good teacher; now she was being informed that she was unfit to educate children. Not only had she gotten a bad "stull," the union chairperson told me later, but the principal had refused

to let her transfer to another school ("Why should we inflict our 'garbage' on somebody else?" she was reported to have said), thus possibly forcing her out of her job. The teacher in question certainly could have used some help. Her English wasn't perfect (she had not been born in the United States), her management skills were not the best, and she was generally disorganized and accident prone. But she was a sweet and caring person and didn't deserve to be treated as shabbily as this. She could have been urged, for example, to take an English class and a classroom management workshop to improve her skills. But no, our new principal, secure in her prowess as an administrator and educational leader, was determined to make the teacher eat crow and to run her out of the school system. Fortunately, the teacher was convinced to file a grievance and to try to stick it out. So, by the time the official matrix-signing process took place, she duly went in and signed up for a class. She would have one more year to prove herself.

I should mention that Mrs. X did have a positive vision for the school, one facet of which was to improve the overall look of the campus. Consequently, trees were purchased, then planted around the perimeter of the school one Saturday by volunteers from among the school's staff, parents, and students. Several bungalows, once utilized but now no longer needed, were removed, and arrangements were made to have the school painted. Another aspect of the principal's vision was to increase parent involvement in the school's activities. Hence the monthly award ceremonies and the mandatory Halloween, Christmas, and International Day activities. Mrs. X also instituted a "Family Math Night," during which parents and students visited classrooms one evening to observe, and participate in, various math activities. (Teachers' participation in this was voluntary, probably because it was held after hours.) And an ESL (English as a Second Language) class for parents, which had been held periodically in the past, was started up again. Some of the motivation for this vision was our school's declining enrollment. Not only were families leaving the area, some of those remaining were enrolling their children in a school in a more upscale neighborhood nearby. Aggravating the situation still further was the fact that a group of (presumably) middle-class parents in our school's area had organized a charter school. (Such schools are freer to utilize more innovative instructional methods than district schools.) The charter school had not yet found a site in our neighborhood but was already functioning at a temporary location not too far away. This charter school, so Mrs. X told us, was attracting students who would otherwise attend our school. Increasing parental involvement and prettifying our campus would, she hoped, make our school more attractive to families in the area, enabling us to compete with the other schools.

It should have been obvious, though, that regimenting the staff, stifling creativity, destroying teacher morale and angering parents would not likely help our school to vie with a charter school—in other words, to attract parents already leery of the LAUSD—no matter how pretty the campus might look. But Mrs. X's vision was limited entirely to the external. Our school might look better on the outside, but inside, its soul—what made it work—was being destroyed.

Tempest In A Schoolyard

I spent the summer trying not to think about what was taking place at our school and what might happen to me the following year. It was my year to be "stulled."

In August, I came in to school on several days to set up my room after the summer cleaning. It was at this time that I learned something particularly disturbing to me. A parent (call her Ms. C)

who was very active in the school—and whom I knew and respected—would no longer be working in the school's after-school program. This was a significant blow to the school community. Ms. C had been involved with the school for 25 years. All her children, including several she had adopted, had gone to school there. She had worked as a teacher's assistant and had been in charge of the lunch tickets when the school, under Title I of the Civil Rights Act, was required to have them. She volunteered in various other capacities, such as collecting dues and organizing activities for the PTA, helping to set up International Day parades, and assisting in many other ways. Most recently, she had worked in the afterschool program, supervising the kids, helping them with their homework, and talking to them about their personal problems. She was extremely well liked and admired by virtually all the people who dealt with her: students, parents, teachers, and at least until recently, administrators. In short, she was a tremendous asset to the school. Now, it turned out, she had been kicked out of the after-school program.

It seems that sometime during the previous spring, Mrs. X, had contrived to replace the then current after-school program with a different one. There may have been other advantages to the new program over the old one, but not the least of them was the provision that principals at each school would have the final say over who worked at their site. Although Ms. C had been hired by the organization that ran the programs, Mrs. X had refused to allow her to work at our school even though (or, as it turned out, because) she (Ms. C) had been such a fixture at the school. To make matters worse, Mrs. X lied to the parents about her role in the affair. When, at an orientation meeting for those whose children would be in the program, the parents found out that Ms. C would not be involved, they were quite upset and wanted to know why. At this point, the school's office manager, who was attending the meeting and translating, tried to deflect the blame from Mrs. X, claiming that she had not been responsible for the decision. But a parent present, who had also been active at the school and who knew what had happened, revealed the truth: the decision to remove Ms. C from the after-school program had been made entirely by Mrs. X. Needless to say, this didn't sit well with the parents. To make matters worse, many kids who had been in the program the previous year were not able to enroll in the new one. The reason was that the previous year, their parents had been told that the children who were in the old after-school program didn't need to be signed up for the new program but instead would be "rolled over" into it. It turned out, however, that this wasn't so, and the kids had been excluded (the number of students allowed in the program was limited) and were placed on a waiting list. As one can imagine, these parents, and many others, were angry.

The background to Ms. C's removal was something like this. In her paranoid way, Mrs. X made a concerted effort to collect all the keys that various teachers and other people involved in the school had in their possession but that, according to Mrs. X, they shouldn't have. She was particularly concerned about one kind of key, which opened a number of doors. The previous administration, who had more trust in the staff and volunteers than did Mrs. X, had allowed people to keep these keys, and as far as I knew, there had never been a problem. But Mrs. X wanted all the keys. Although Ms. C had told Mrs. X that she didn't have the key in question, Mrs. X started to talk about this—that she suspected Ms. C really did have the key—behind Ms. C's back. When Ms. C found out about this, she confronted Mrs. X in the yard after school one day, berating her for spreading rumors and not coming directly to her.

There was an additional, more personal, side to this affair. Since her time at the school, Mrs. X had become very close with the office manager. They were often seen going out together, and he spent a lot of time in her office instead of taking care of his other responsibilities. Moreover,

the office manager, who was considerably younger than both Mrs. X and Ms. C (both were in their forties), had been close to Ms. C. She was his godmother, he had been the best man at her wedding, and he had lived at Ms. C's house at a crucial period during his life. As a result of these ties, Mrs. X, Ms. C, and the office manager had socialized together. This, as well as the fact that Mrs. X was jealous of Ms. C's relationship to the office manager and had shown it in rather rude ways, made Mrs. X's rumor-mongering even more offensive to Ms. C.

Ms. C told me later that during their confrontation, Mrs. X had admitted that she felt intimidated by Ms. C because Ms. C had so much "history" at the school, specifically, that she was so well known and liked by people in the school community. Apparently, Mrs. X's response to Ms. C's impertinence, and to her own insecurity, was to finagle Ms. C's removal from the after-school program. As a result, the school lost a dedicated and capable person. (Perhaps it made Mrs. X feel better.)

The New Year

During the week prior to the start of the official school year, the school held three days of "professional development." These were optional. Although I had no reason to believe that these sessions would be any less vacuous than the others I had attended, I decided to show up anyway. I could certainly use the extra money. But more important, I was hoping it would help my standing with Mrs. X; I believe administrators are evaluated in some way by the number of the people who come to these things.

At the end of that week, on the Friday before Labor Day, we had a "pupil-free day." This is a regular work day; staff members are required to come to work, but no children are present, and the day is usually devoted to meetings of some kind or another. At one of these meetings, we discussed and evaluated our school's test scores, i.e., the results of the state examinations the students had taken the previous spring. As I mentioned, our scores had gone down, with the decline being concentrated among the Latino students. We discussed this and related issues—the test results were broken down by grade level and subject areas—but I don't remember much coming out of these discussions. Mrs. X did inform us, however, that if our scores on the tests to be taken the following spring were to decline again, the school would be put on "Program Improvement." This meant that we would no longer be considered a "high-performing" school and would require special help. (According to an article in the LA TIMES of December 12, 2006, 309 out of 874 schools in the LAUSD are in this category.) From what I had heard and from what could be surmised, that would signify, among other things, more bureaucrats visiting the school and even more regimentation. (Just what the doctor ordered.)

Personally, I wasn't surprised by the test results. Having read a considerable amount of military history and watched a lot of football games, I believe morale plays a tremendous role in how any group of people who work or play together actually functions. And it was obvious to me that the morale at our school had been significantly eroded; certainly mine had. On top of this, it was my firm impression that one of the reasons our school had performed well over the years was that it had a dedicated and experienced staff that had been allowed a considerable degree of autonomy in the implementation of the mandated programs and in other areas of the school's functioning. And it was just this autonomy that the new principal, egged on by the bureaucrats upstairs, was so intent on eliminating.

At another meeting on this pupil-free day, we discussed our school's "culture." This discussion was based on the tabulation of questionnaires we had filled out the previous June, requesting our impressions of how the school functioned; e.g., did people work well together, was the overall atmosphere at the school positive, did the school encourage innovation, was the administration sensitive to the needs and feelings of the staff, were the parents involved, etc. As it often is in such sessions, the faculty was asked to break into small groups (based on the tables at which we were sitting) to discuss our ideas on how the school might improve. Under Mrs. X's regime, I tried to avoid speaking at these meetings. I knew from experience that input from the school's staff was almost always ignored. Moreover, what I, in particular, had to say—that Mrs. X didn't listen to anybody, that she took suggestions and criticisms as personal attacks, that this and the regimentation going on in the school were destroying morale—would certainly not be appreciated by her, and I sensed that I was already in hot water. However, other staff members hadn't reached the same degree of enlightenment (or cynicism) as I had, and they ventured their opinions.

One colleague suggested that, instead of discussing these questions just twice a year, we address them periodically at our monthly faculty meetings to see how we're progressing. I actually thought this idea might be welcomed, since it seemed to take the question seriously, but Mrs. X rejected the suggestion on the grounds that there wasn't enough time at the meetings. Another teacher, the former UTLA vice-chairperson, raised the point that, in his experience, there was a direct correlation between a school's academic achievement and the number of teaching assistants on its staff, implying that the administration's drastic cutback of teaching assistants (TAs) would hurt the school. In reply, Mrs. X charged that when she enters classrooms, she often sees TAs checking students' homework instead of working directly with the children. In other words, she scolded us for not knowing how to use our TAs correctly. (I confess that I have my TA—when I have one—go through the kids' folders, take out the homework done the night before, check to see whether it has been done properly, or done at all, and put the new homework in the folders. This is the only clerical task I have ever asked my TAs to do, and I still don't know what the matter with it is, if it enables me to spend more time working with the children or to relax a bit during my breaks and lunch periods, instead of having to go through the children's folders at those times.)

Another faculty member, who often went out of her way to pick up trash around the school, raised her concern that the school wasn't as clean as it might be. Among the reasons for this, she felt, was that many students were littering—dropping their napkins or other papers and not picking them up. She thought that if the principal made a firm declaration at the beginning of the year that this would not be tolerated, it would help. This suggestion, too, was dismissed. The problem, Mrs. X contended, was the plant manager, and she was working on this, insinuating that she was trying to get rid of him. This response, like the others, typifies Mrs. X's approach to leadership. Instead of welcoming the teacher's suggestion, coming as it did from a real concern for the school, and asking for additional input about how to deal with the problem, she simply rejected it out of hand, laid the blame entirely on one individual—who wasn't even there to defend himself—and broadcast her intention of getting the man fired, or at least transferred.

As if by design, our afternoon meeting was devoted to the annual presentation and discussion of the district's "mission statement" and ethics policies. This is where we get the largest dose (including inspirational videos) of the verbiage—de rigueur in the LAUSD—about how we are to treat each other, the students, and their families: about collegiality, cooperation, creativity, sensitivity, service to the community, and the other fine principles that the district tramples

underfoot every day of the year. So devoted is Mrs. X to these ideals that she deemed it necessary to read these statements and policy memoranda word for word, stopping to expatiate upon those issues she considered deserving of special emphasis. She spent a great deal of time talking about humiliation: that we, as educators, should not humiliate the children when we reprimand them and that we shouldn't humiliate each other. She also ventured a personal complaint: she herself had felt humiliated by the way other staff members had spoken to her at meetings, and she insisted that if we had criticisms to make of her, we should do this in private. This, remember, came after a meeting (indeed, after an entire school year) in which she had so unceremoniously (rudely and publicly) rejected any and all suggestions raised by staff members about how the school should be run and had personally humiliated several teachers and other members of the staff. This is the LAUSD in a nutshell.

When the children arrived at school the day after Labor Day, I jumped right into my academic program, most important (believe it or not), Open Court. Among other things, I wanted to give the kids a head-start in learning certain skills the program addresses. So, in addition to doing what the teachers' guide calls for, each day I read the first two or three pre-decodable books to the kids. I reviewed the sight words featured in these books (the, here, is, a, an, I, see) with flash cards and on the board. I explained rhyming words to the children and came up with examples as often as I could. I started to teach them the ABCs in the ways I had used effectively in the past, and to review the sounds of the letters. I read the first of the predecodables with the class, sent copies of the book home with the kids, and found time to read the book with each student over the course of the following few days. Also, each day after I had gone through the first two sections of the Open Court lesson, I had the children trace and recite the alphabet, copy and read back the sight words, identify and color the rhyming words. I also read additional stories, most in big book format, with them. In short, I was supplementing the program—modifying, adapting and adding to it to meet the specific needs of my students.

The children were doing very well. I was particularly impressed with how fast they were picking up the calendar; for example, not only identifying what day of the week it was, but also determining what day it had been the day before, what day it would be the next day, etc. The previous year it had taken quite a few weeks for the kids to figure this out, and this class was responding well after just a few days. I was also excited by how rapidly they were learning the sight words. After less than a week, they could all identify the word "the" out of context and could also, therefore, read the first of the pre-decodables. As a result, we were ready to move on to the second one, even though it didn't come up in the program until quite a few lessons later. Also indicating the kids' progress, six students had already known or had quickly learned the ABCs (out of order, uppercase and lowercase), and I had started them in an old basal reader that is considerably more challenging than the pre-decodables. The parents were thrilled because their children were learning so much.

True, there were some behavior problems. Several kids were having trouble sitting still, standing in line, finishing their work, or not bothering other kids, but this behavior isn't that rare for this early in the school year, and I usually get the children well under control after a few weeks. I also had one boy who had been identified as requiring special help.

Though physically adept—strong and coordinated—he was extremely immature and delayed in his language development. He couldn't sit still for more than a minute, could hardly work without supervision, and tended to distract, and even hit, the other children. But, amidst large ups and downs, he did seem to be making progress, both academically and behavior-wise. Besides

the behavior problems, some of the kids were way behind academically: they couldn't say the ABCs, didn't know any letters or numbers, didn't know the basic shapes and colors. But this, too, wasn't out of the ordinary, and given the way I run my class (if I'm allowed to), these children would get caught up. All in all, it looked like it would be a very good year.

My euphoria, however, was tempered by Mrs. X's interventions. She had come into my room at about 9:00 A.M. on the third day of school. We had completed the phonemic-awareness exercises mandated by the Open Court teachers' guide and had just finished analyzing the first story in the unit, about a dog going to kindergarten. While the children were still on the carpet, I was showing them the various papers they were to do. These included one for tracing and reciting the ABCs, another for copying and reading the sight words, and a blank sheet of paper on which they were to practice the correct method, according to Open Court, of writing the letters. I then demonstrated this method several times on the board in the front of the room, handed the children the blank sheet, and told them to go to their desks, write their names on the paper, and wait for me, so we could do the exercise together. At that point, Mrs. X stormed out of the room.

During my recess, I checked my mailbox, and sure enough, there was a memo, complete with yellow marker. On it, Mrs. X accused me of not following my posted schedule (that is, not teaching language arts when I was supposed to), not "doing" Open Court, and not following the mandated pacing plan (telling me what lesson I should be on), and asked me to see her. At our conference, she repeated these accusations. I insisted that I was teaching language arts at the scheduled time, that I was "doing" Open court and was indeed following the pacing plan. She didn't respond to this. Instead, she mentioned the sheets that I had demonstrated to the children, admonishing me that they were not officially Open Court materials. I told her that I was under the impression that we were allowed to supplement the program, adding that virtually all the supplemental materials I use are integrated, in terms of content, concept, or skill, with the program. She demanded that I show her, in writing, where it says we were allowed to supplement the program. (I couldn't do so because it had never been put in writing.) She also accused me of having the kids do the writing exercise by themselves (horrors!), instead of under my direction as mandated by the teachers' guide. I informed her that she had left the room early and perhaps hadn't heard that I had told the children to write their names on the papers and to wait for me before starting the assignment so we could do the exercise together, which we did. She didn't reply to this either. She then reprimanded me for demonstrating the exercise while the kids were on the carpet instead of at their desks, and for not having the children trace the lines with their fingers in the air, as the guide mandates. After that, she criticized me for having the children trace, write, or color on reproduced worksheets. "We used to teach that way," she said, "and it didn't work. Now we teach differently." Finally, she ordered me to follow the Open Court teachers' guide word for word, sentence by sentence, without deviation, omission, or addition, and explicitly forbade me from using any supplemental materials.

Deep inside, I felt there was little to be gained by arguing with her. She had decided that I wasn't "doing" Open Court, and my protestations to the contrary had been, were, and would be, disbelieved and ignored. Instead of recognizing that what I was doing was making the program work for children for whom it wasn't designed, she saw me as perversely subverting district policy and doing my own thing. The fact that my students have received excellent tests scores over the years; that most of my students' parents think very highly of me; that each year, large numbers of my kids are younger siblings, relatives, friends, and neighbors of children I have taught previously; that every year, during enrollment of new kindergarten students, my class

fills up first because so many parents request that their children be placed in my class; that the first grade teachers tell me they enjoy getting my former students because they can read—none of this mattered to Mrs. X. As she saw it, I wasn't "doing" Open Court, and that was enough.

It also became obvious to me that she didn't know anything about kindergarten. I knew that she had never taught it, but she was, apparently, not even familiar with the Open Court program for the grade, and had no idea about—and didn't care to learn—whether the program actually worked with the children we teach. But there was more to it than this. Mrs. X seemed to believe that the program was somehow magical, cabalistic, that if it were followed literally word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, without any change, addition or omission, all the children would learn how to read. It was like an incantation: one word, even one syllable, altered—mispronounced, omitted, added—and the spell would be broken. I sensed, also, that I was dealing with someone so insecure and so defensive that nothing I could possibly say would persuade her. The fact that I was older and more experienced than she was, that I had, in particular, more experience teaching kindergarten than she did, meant nothing. In fact, it probably made things worse. I recognized that somebody who, throughout her first year at our school—her first year as a principal—had not been able to accept a single suggestion, let alone a criticism, from anybody on any issue, and who couldn't even pretend to do so, wasn't going to listen to a thing I had to say. So I told her that she might as well start writing me up, because I couldn't follow her directive. I could not and would not just read the Open Court teachers' manual to my students without using any supplemental materials and doing whatever else I could to ensure they learned as much as they were able.

Aside from worrying about my fate, I spent the next few days talking about what had happened to teachers I felt I could trust. I was particularly interested to learn whether they were adapting Open Court in their classrooms. To a person, they said, "Yes, you have to." Apparently, Mrs. X had not prohibited them from doing so (perhaps that was for the future); it seemed that I was being singled out for special treatment. I also spoke to our UTLA chapter chair on the telephone. She had not been at the school for several months, having fallen the previous year and injured her knee, which had required surgery and extensive physical therapy. Periodically during the previous year, I had asked her whether teachers had the contractual right to adapt the mandated programs, particularly Open Court, to suit our students' needs. She had assured me we had; it was in the contract, in the clause concerning academic freedom. Questioning this, I had asked her to get official clarification, either from the union or from the district itself, but given her other concerns (besides her injury, her mother had been ill and then passed away), she hadn't done so. When I spoke to her by phone, she suggested I talk to a teacher (also under attack from Mrs. X) who, she claimed, knew the contract thoroughly. But the only thing this teacher could find was the clause on academic freedom. When I read it, what it seemed to indicate was that in terms of specific subject matter, teachers were allowed to express their personal opinions, as long as they were delivering the required instruction to their students. In other words, if a teacher were teaching his/her students about, say, the Civil War, he/she would be allowed to express his/her personal opinions about it. There was nothing, as far as I could see, about our right to adapt, modify, or supplement mandated, scripted programs.

Those few days were not pleasant, although I tried to do the best job I could with my students. I wasn't going to give them anything less than what I felt they deserved. In fact, three kids were reading independently—after only a few days of kindergarten! But as happy as I was about this, I lived in fear of another of Mrs. X's visits.

On Thursday, during the second week of school, Mrs. X came in, once again, for an observation. Pretty much the same thing happened as the previous time. It was about nine o'clock. I had finished with the formal Open Court lesson—the phonemicawareness exercises and reading and analyzing the story—and was demonstrating the papers I wanted the children to do. These included a sheet on which the kids had to identify, match, and color pictures representing rhyming words. I then passed out copies of the second pre-decodable (because the kids had read the first one), had the children go to their desks, write their names on the books, and wait for me. We read the story together, and then, while each child practiced reading it alone, my student volunteer, my aide, and I went around the room, reading the story with the kids two by two. (At the beginning of the year, it's usually awkward doing this, because many of the children don't know what the front of the book is, can't turn the pages correctly, can't find what page they are supposed to be reading, etc., but I do it this way because, once they get the hang of it, it's easier to read with them individually or in pairs.) Mrs. X then left the room.

The expected memo in my box demanded another conference. But because she was busy and wasn't on the campus the next day, this didn't take place for a couple of days. When our meeting did take place, it was, as Yogi Berra said, deja vu all over again. Well, not quite. In a subtle yet significant way, Mrs. X had changed her tune. Instead of accusing me of supplementing Open Court, she now charged me with "supplanting" it. (Had she spoken with someone upstairs about this?) She reiterated her conviction that the papers I had the children do did not work and, once again, prohibited me from using them, any of them. She was particularly offended by the rhyming-word worksheet (Oh my God, kindergarten kids coloring!), but she had copies of the other offending papers in a folder (probably my personal file) on her desk. (Ironically, the assistant principal had visited my room earlier in the week, conceivably at Mrs. X's instigation, and when I showed him the papers the children were doing and explained to him how they were integrated with Open Court, he said he thought they were perfectly reasonable.) Mrs. X also criticized me for reading the pre-decodable book while the children were at their desks; the Open Court manual directs that this be done with the kids sitting on the carpet. I tried to explain why I do it the way I do, but she wasn't interested. Once again, I asked for precise clarification: Was she ordering me to do everything in the teachers' manual as written, word for word, sentence by sentence, with no additions or omissions of any kind, or any change in sequence? Was she explicitly prohibiting me from using any supplemental materials whatsoever? Her answer to both questions was a firm, "Yes."

Like the previous time, I sensed that nothing would be gained by argument. Aside from the fact that, when I had tried, several times, to explain that I was "doing" Open Court and that all my materials reinforce the skills taught in the program, she had never believed me, I also felt that if I followed the program exactly as she ordered, she would always find something to criticize: I called on two students to do a particular exercise, rather than three; I had the kids do an activity at their desks instead of on the carpet; I slightly altered the sequence of such and such a part of the lesson. I tried to fathom her intent. Was she trying to get rid of me? Or was she just trying to get me under her thumb? I couldn't tell, and I still don't know. What I did know was that I couldn't teach that way; it's not in me. So I told her, "Show me how to resign."

I could see her blanch. She tried, rather feebly, to convince me: "You should try the program. It really works." I told her I saw no point in discussing the question, then left her office—relieved and sad at the same time. I had done it, and that was that.

Over the weekend I again spoke with the UTLA chairperson. She urged me to file a grievance. When I asked her how long it usually takes to get one resolved, she said it might take months, perhaps a full school year. She also reiterated what she had told me previously, that once a grievance is filed, the person filing it is not allowed to speak with anyone, including parents, about it. Doing so is grounds for disqualifying the grievance. To make things worse, she reminded me that refusal of a direct order (such as to read the Open Court teachers' manual word for word, and not to use supplemental materials) was grounds for immediate dismissal. The chairperson also suggested I look into a transfer. But I had no idea how to do this, nor how to find out which schools, if any, might have more-enlightened principals. She also informed me, as if in argument against her own suggestion, that she had been hearing stories about principals going into classrooms, looking at their watches, and saying to the teacher, "It is now 9:50 A.M; you should be doing such and such activity on page x of the teachers,' guide"; that principals wanted to walk out of one classroom, where the teacher was reading a sentence in the manual and, upon entering another in the same grade, to hear the teacher reading the next sentence. It seemed, as I had surmised, that this regimentation was district policy. Moreover, any school that was located anywhere near where I live would be under the purview of the same bureaucrats who were in charge of ours. In fact, they probably already knew my name (from conversations with Mrs. X) and would call the principal at whatever school I might wind up at to warm him/her to keep an eye on me, that is, to make sure I "did" the program. So, transferring did not seem like a viable option. As a last resort, the UTLA chairperson suggested I apply for a leave of absence on the grounds of mental health, i.e., stress. Since this might give me time to think about what to do, I left a note, stating that I was considering this, in Mrs. X's mailbox, but various people I consulted urged against this course, saying that such a leave would not look good on my employment record.

The following Tuesday, the school celebrated its annual "Back to School" event, during which parents visit their children's classrooms after regular school hours, listen to the teacher explain certain policies, and speak with the teachers about their children's progress (although, at our last faculty meeting, Mrs. X had expressly prohibited us from doing this). My turnout, as it always had been, was excellent. But instead of giving my usual talk to the parents, I related to them what had been happening to me: Mrs. X's accusations of not doing Open Court; her forbidding me from using any supplemental materials; her criticism of everything I did, even when I did follow the Open Court script; my belief, based on my experience, that if I did as demanded, none of the children would learn to read. I was hurt and frustrated, and it showed. I told them I was thinking of resigning, but was considering taking a leave of absence.

The parents were very upset, and angry at Mrs. X. Many of those whose older children I had taught told the others what a great teacher I was. Some of those whose children I had not previously taught said they had heard this from other parents; "Everybody says so," they said, waving a hand toward the school yard. Many indicated that they had already noticed how much their kids had learned. They urged me to take the leave of absence, but said they all said they would stand behind me and wanted to know what they could do. One father suggested they write a protest letter and have everybody sign it, so a sheet was circulated and people wrote down their names and telephone numbers. One mother, who was fluent in both Spanish and English, volunteered to write the letter. The parents told me they supported me 100 percent and would back whatever I chose to do.

Upon further consideration, I decided that the best thing for me to do was to resign. I had gone over and over the same questions. With the trend throughout the entire district being toward

ever-increasing regimentation, I felt that whatever I did to stay on the job, or wherever I went in the district, sooner or later, the demand of the bureaucrats—read the script and do nothing else—would catch up to me. If I filed a grievance, I would still have to follow the Open Court script without any deviation or supplementation, probably for the entire school year, and wouldn't even be able to notify the parents why I was not giving the kids the extra materials many expected and even demanded. I suspected, even were I to toe the line, that Mrs. X would still find fault with what I did and that, at best, I was likely to wind up with an unsatisfactory "stull." This would mean coming under even greater scrutiny the following year. More likely, Mrs. X would accuse me of disobeying her order and I would be dismissed, despite my best efforts. It seemed like a lost cause. Better to leave the district now, to resign voluntarily and to start looking for a job somewhere else, rather than to risk getting a poor evaluation or being fired outright. So I informed Mrs. X once again that I wished to resign, and when she gave me the papers, I filled them out, signed them, and put them in her box.

Meanwhile, the parents had gotten their letter written. It implied that I was being fired, so I explained that officially I was resigning, but that I felt I was being forced out. They agreed to change the wording, and once reaffirmed their support for me. By this time, the resignation papers had gotten to the assistant principal's desk. He tried to dissuade me from my course, told me that he thought I was a good educator and that he had enjoyed working with me the past year. I certainly wasn't convinced to change my mind, but I did agree to check the box on the form indicating that I would consider teaching adult education under the LAUSD auspices.

On the day I submitted my papers, Mrs. X spent one full hour in my classroom. During that period, I went through an entire Open Court lesson, following the script as best as I could, without missing, changing, or adding anything. The children responded fantastically. They sat still for the entire time (pretty good for five-year-olds); they answered the questions I put to them and carried out the other tasks I asked of them. They knew their letters, their sounds, and their sight words. They showed that they understood the reading selection and were able to analyze it. Despite what I thought was a stellar performance (any objective observer would have been impressed), Mrs. X was scribbling furiously, covering more than a few sheets of paper. I assumed she was trying to cover herself, to prove I wasn't really following the script, lest I change my mind about resigning or in case there was some controversy about it afterward.

On Friday, my last day at the school, I told the children I would be leaving. I tried to explain why, without going into too much detail and without badmouthing Mrs. X too much. I told them it wasn't their fault: they were doing a great job and I loved them. I don't think they fully understood what was happening. Later, the literacy coach came into the room, pale and upset. When we had time to talk, she told me there had been a parent meeting in the library. The parents were furious and had charged the principal with forcing me out. Instead of admitting that she had prohibited me from using any materials to supplement Open Court, she asked the literacy coach to explain the program to them. The coach felt that she'd been put in the middle of the dispute; without quite saying so, she was apologizing to me. I said it was all right, but I repeated what I had told her in the past, that the coaches were being turned into administrators and this is the position she could expect to be put in. Of course, she could have refused Mrs. X's demand on the grounds that that wasn't her job, but that would have put her in jeopardy.

I later found out that the parents had demanded that Mrs. X summon me to the library to answer her charges, but she refused, saying that it was instructional time and I couldn't be asked to leave the room. (This is nonsense, since teachers are periodically pulled from their classrooms

when they have meetings to discuss those of their students who are involved in, or being assessed for, special education.)

Many parents were angry—not only those of my students, but others as well. They were upset about what was happening to me, about the treatment of Ms. C, and about other issues. Some felt that Mrs. X was a racist, hostile to Latinos (even though she herself is half Mexican). Some parents told me that at one meeting she had provided for an Armenian translator but not a Spanish one, even though most of the participants were Spanish speaking. At another, she had announced that she wanted to get more white kids into the school (presumably to raise test scores). She also claimed that Latino children learn differently from white kids.

All these issues prompted a protest meeting in a nearby park over the weekend. The letter my students' parents had written was signed, reproduced, delivered to Mrs. X and, I presume, sent to various LAUSD functionaries. Several other meetings and other activities were planned, but ultimately, after a few weeks, the movement fizzled out. Probably the main reason for this was that the faculty didn't respond with equivalent militancy. There were two union meetings to discuss the issues, but at the second one, a vote to have Mrs. X removed failed. Of those present (not a high percentage of the faculty, in fact), the majority voted to try to get her some help, whatever that meant. Several teachers felt sorry for her; others were scared, and/or cynical that anything could be done. I don't blame them for being frightened. As her treatment of Ms. C revealed, Mrs. X was not above acting dishonestly and vindictively. The UTLA chapter chairperson, as well as the on-site leadership, had invited Ms. C and me to attend the first of the two UTLA meetings. But despite this invitation, and despite the fact that Ms. C and I were both members in good standing of our respective unions, Mrs. X ordered the acting UTLA chairperson to bar us from the meeting. As a result, we were not able to explain in person what had happened to us. Fortunately, the former UTLA cochairperson did post a letter I had written to the parents, explaining why I had resigned, on the UTLA bulletin board in the staff lounge. Mrs. X felt obligated to reply to this. At a faculty meeting, she claimed that all she had done was to ask me to make minor changes in my program. So much for the LAUSD's ethics policies.

Some time after I had resigned, a friend, the other male kindergarten teacher, reported to me that a teacher at our school had recently attended a conference. There, our colleague met a man who taught where Mrs. X had worked as a teacher for one year. When the man found out that Mrs. X was the principal at our school, he said he felt sorry for us. The other teachers at his school didn't consider Mrs. X to be a good teacher, he related, but she went around telling everybody what to do. (Sounds like administrator material for the LAUSD.)

The Union?

So, where was the union in all this? Although the UTLA has a reputation for power and militancy, it is very weak on the ground: its ongoing presence in the schools is limited. Its strength varies greatly from school to school, depending on the faculty at each site and, probably most important, on the ability and energy of the chapter chairpersons. At a few schools, the faculty is well organized and militant; at many others, it is divided and passive. At some sites, the union doesn't exist at all; the chairperson never calls meetings and never attends the broader gatherings held at union headquarters. The union leaders either don't know or don't care about the union's on-site weakness; they hardly ever visit the schools. In the twelve years I worked at my

school, I saw a union leader (a vice-president, I believe) only one time. She came to explain a contract that had been negotiated but was facing rank-and-file opposition because it included a concession the district demanded. (This limited teachers' rights to choose their classes.) Even during elections for the top offices of the union, nobody showed up at the schools to campaign. (Mainstream politicians travel, give speeches, shake hands, pat backs, and hold babies, but not UTLA leaders.) As a result, participation in these elections (merely voting) is very low; in the last election for union leadership, the victorious slate got the votes of only a small minority of the membership.

Part of the reason for this state of affairs is that the leaders are too involved in politics, locally and in Sacramento. An unbelievable amount of money, time, and other resources are devoted to supporting and campaigning for local and state-wide candidates and for or against ballot initiatives. Often (surprise, surprise!) the people the union has supported turn against it when they get elected. This has happened many times, but the union leadership never seems to learn anything from this. After the UTLA supported Antonio Villaraigosa (who used to work for the union) in LA's recent mayoral elections, he came out with a plan to take over the district. The union leaders initially saw this as an attack on the entire district, including the union and the teachers, and opposed it. Then, after they had been included in secret discussions in Sacramento over the legislation to enable the mayor's plan, the UTLA leaders, elected on a militant slate, came out in support. They claimed they had won key concessions (including some talk of teacher empowerment). They also argued, somewhat more quietly, that they were involved in the process to prevent the bill from being even worse than it was. But the rank-and-file teachers didn't go for these arguments, and the leadership was rebuked in a meeting of UTLA's House of Representatives.

Certainly the union is capable of organizing militant, and occasionally huge, demonstrations. Sometimes, during contract negotiations, the union threatens to strike and the teachers take a strike authorization vote, but this is just a negotiating tactic. I doubt the union could organize a successful work stoppage at this point; too many teachers would cross the picket lines. There was a strike in 1989, but a lot of teachers continued to work and there was a lot of bad blood afterward. Several years later, during California's deep recession in the early '90s, what had been won in the strike was given back and rank-and-file cynicism toward the union increased.

One cause of the weakness of the union is that the leaders see themselves (privately; this is never publicly articulated) as being in a bloc with the school board. Partly, this is simply to oppose efforts to break up the district, a step that would threaten the union's contract and its hegemony over the teachers. More broadly, the union leaders believe they are defending public education from its enemies, such as proponents of vouchers, private schools, and charter schools. For this reason, the union has generally supported the district's efforts to raise test scores (insisting, however, that the teachers, rather than the district bureaucrats, are responsible for whatever improvement occurs). To a point, this isn't so bad. But it has led the leadership to support the adoption and implementation of scripted reading programs, under the belief that they raise scores. Recently, in fact, the union president, A.J. Duffy, conceded in a public statement that scripted programs raise scores, but then added that test scores were not the beginning and the end of the world (because, among other reasons, they don't encourage critical thinking). But the problem is that he accepts the district's claim about scripted programs, a premise that I, and many teachers, believe to be false. As I have argued, while mandated programs are certainly better than the invent-your-own-curriculum policies of the 1990s, they are not responsible for the

rise in test scores. Math scores have also gone up but, as I discussed, the program in use is not scripted; it allows teachers to modify, adapt, and supplement it as they see fit (and as they should). So, given that the union leaders accept the district's false premise, it is no surprise that except for some occasional rhetoric about teacher empowerment, they have never seriously opposed either Open Court or the district's read-the-program-and-nothing-else policies. The combination of the union's weakness on the ground and the leadership's outlook has meant that the UTLA has done very little to defend teachers, undoubtedly not just me, who have been, and are, being victimized by the district's increasingly totalitarian approach. In fact, when I spoke to a union representative about what had happened to me, he said that district policy has increasingly been to enforce a strict reading of the program, and that no arbitrator would rule against them on this. When I sputtered, "They're crazy!", he replied, "Yes, but they have a right to be crazy."

Conclusion

So, that was the end of my career in the LAUSD. As I write this, I am now working as a substitute in a nearby school district and looking for work elsewhere—charter schools, private schools, county schools, pre-school, tutoring—anywhere but in the LAUSD. It's been an experience. I hope I had an impact— not only academically but personally—on my students and the other kids at the school who knew me, as well as on their parents. I know they affected on me, deeply, and I will always remember them. When I bump into parents at the supermarket, they tell me how much their children miss me. I miss them too—a lot—and periodically relive my last few weeks at school, trying to figure out if there was something I could have done differently. I don't think so.

The Outlines of a Program

Before I conclude, let me try to answer those readers of Part I who have asked me what I think should be done to improve the school system. I will try to summarize my main points.

1. Lower class sizes in all grades. Thirty-five to 50 kids in one classroom is too many. The figure should be around 25 per class for all grades. (Some of my older acquaintances have told me that when they went to school, they had 50 to 60 kids in a classroom. Despite this, they insist, order was maintained and they received an excellent education. But times have changed. Today, the cultural atmosphere—in good measure created by the mass media, video games, etc.—is no longer such, as it was then, to back up unquestioningly the authority of the teacher: sass and rebellion are in. This is probably better than passive obedience, but it does make teaching a lot harder. Equally if not more important, contemporary popular culture does not help inculcate a positive work ethic among our students; many are simply not very motivated.)

2. Build more schools and hire more teachers, both necessary if class sizes are to be reduced.

3. Raise salaries sufficiently and improve the way teachers are treated sufficiently to attract and retain qualified personnel. Teachers' salaries are still lower than those for other professions requiring equivalent levels of education, while teachers are subject to a much higher level of abuse. For these reasons, turnover of teachers, particularly new ones, is still exorbitant. As I mentioned, roughly 50 percent of new teachers quit within five years.

4. Devolve authority to elected on-site councils of administrators, parents, teachers, and, at least in the high schools, students. Local staffs and communities must have the power to truly run the schools, with control over curriculum, testing, hiring, teachers and administrators. They must be able to restrain, and if necessary, get rid of, incompetent and abusive administrators. At the very least, it is essential that classroom teachers have the right to adapt, modify, and supplement programs to meet the specific, and individual, needs of their students.

5. Incorporate more on-the-job experience in teacher training programs. A few student-teaching sessions is not enough. Would-be teachers should be encouraged, or even mandated, to spend at least a semester, and perhaps a full year, working full time in a classroom under the guidance of experienced teachers.

6. Cut the bureaucracy to the minimum and drastically reduce its now virtually totalitarian powers. Keep the politicians' hands off the school systems.

7. Equalize funding for schools. The reality is that for a variety of reasons, schools in wealthy areas get more money—much more money—than those in poor neighborhoods. If the country wants a good school system, this disparity must be eliminated.

8. Improve the living conditions of our students and their families. Although a discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this essay, the question is crucial. One of the things experience (and, yes, even research) shows is that academic achievement generally correlates with social class (the income and educational level of the students' parents). This correlation is not only the result of the varying quality of the schools that children from different socioeconomic backgrounds attend. It is also grounded in the different levels of academic preparation and ongoing support the children receive in the home, the extracurricular activities that are available to the kids, and the kinds of expectations their parents have of them. Our poorest families struggle just to survive, obviously not a situation conducive to academic achievement. Most important, all families need good jobs with health and retirement benefits. They also need affordable housing, childcare, preschools, after-school tutoring programs, and ESL and parent training classes, among other things.

Obviously, the program I have just summarized would cost money. But the money is there. Look at the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq! The question is, is the country serious about having a functioning system of public education or not? If it is, a program that includes the measures outlined is necessary. The current approach, which does not address the fundamental issues, won't work. For my part, I still can't discern precisely what the people who run the country actually desire. Do they want a truly good educational system? Do they want merely to make marginal improvements in the existing one? Or do they want to destroy public education altogether? I don't know. But I suspect that they would like to have a good school system (they're having trouble finding competent people to fill jobs in science and industry, and even teaching positions in middle and high school math classes) but don't know how to create one and, even if they did, wouldn't want to spend the money that would be necessary; they have other priorities. Whatever the case, it will probably require a mass mobilization of the population to achieve significant improvements in the public school system.

Coda

As I finish this piece, the Los Angeles school system is continuing to suffer the fate of political toy. Although the courts have thrown out the mayor's attempt to take over the school system,

the majority on the newly-elected Board of Education is made of up the mayor's supporters, and they are trying to come up with a scheme that will give the mayor some control over certain schools. But I have yet to hear a single concrete idea from him about how to actually solve the problems of the system. In the meantime, the LAUSD continues on its inspired way. Before the election, and when the mayor was out of town, the old board selected David L. Brewer III, a retired rear admiral with no experience in education (oh yes, his parents were teachers) who, by his own admission, isn't good at working with people, to be the new superintendent of schools. He's being paid a salary of $300,000 per year (20 percent more than his predecessor, Roy Romer), a $3,000-per-month housing allowance, and a $45,000-a-year expense account. Does this look like a solution to the LAUSD's problems?

Rather than going on about this, I include here a letter to the LA TIMES, dated October 16, 2006:

> Re "Ex-Admiral Is Named New Schools Chief," Oct.13
>
> "It is precisely because of decisions by the Los Angeles Unified School District, such as the choice of a Navy admiral with no educational leadership credentials, that parents like me hustle our kids out of the public system as soon as we are able. The tone and values of any organization are signaled from the top. The choice of David L. Brewer III clearly demonstrates that the district favors bureaucratic efficiency and regimentation over creating a culture of educational excellence.
>
> "I predict that on more school sites than ever before we'll find principals enforcing an atmosphere of command, control and compliance without the cooperation and collaboration essential to organizational vibrancy and a sense of a genuine learning community. We'll see fewer and fewer of those small pockets of outstanding teachers, the ones who are usually younger and energetic enough not to have succumbed to the dominant, repressive bureaucracy.
>
> "Brewer's selection at least represents an honest statement by board members about what they hold dear for students in the district. It's sad that education excellence lost out in the deal."

Another letter, this one from the NEW YORK TIMES of August 6, 2002, can serve as the epitaph to my LAUSD career.

> "To the editor:
>
> "The debate over reading methods referred to in "Tutoring Gives Pupils an Edge…for Preschool" (EDUCATION page, July 31), reminds me of the half-dozen elementary schools I toured in my Brooklyn district in 1998, looking for a kindergarten for my son.
>
> "One school took my group through the reading resource room, where the reading specialist told us, with understandable pride, that she typically received third-grade students who could hardly read and had them at grade-level within a few months. I was so impressed that I stayed behind to ask her how she could succeed in months where the classroom teachers failed in years.

> "She then closed the door, unlocked a cabinet and in a conspiratorial manner showed me several well-kept copies of the old 'Dick and Jane' readers."

Why write an essay?

Ron Tabor
My Life as a Dog, I Mean a Teacher
A Career in the Los Angels Unified School District
November 5, 2002

Retrieved on 7th May 2021 from utopianmag.com
Part I published in *The Utopian*, Vol. 3. Parts II and III published in *The Utopian*, Vol. 6.

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