

Reflections on Forty Years in the Profession

By Albert Shanker

I have spent almost 40 years as a teacher and a trade unionist. The majority of those years were spent in fighting to gain collective bargaining rights for teachers and in using the collective bargaining process to improve teachers' salaries and working conditions. But during the past decade, I've devoted most of my time and energy working to professionalize teaching and to restructure our schools. Some of the people who hear me speak now seem to think this represents an about face on my part. They are surprised at this message coming from a union leader—and one who has been in jail for leading teachers out on strike, at that—but they probably put it down to my getting mellower in old age or maybe to wanting to assume the role of "elder statesman." Some union members, too, believe they are seeing a shift in my positions. Perhaps so. But it's not that I have abandoned any of my former views, and it's certainly not an attempt to go back to the good old days before collective bargaining when teachers and administrators in a school were supposedly one big, happy family; and teachers behaved in a "professional" manner. As a matter of fact, memories of those days still make it hard for me to talk about professionalism without wincing.

"That's Very Unprofessional, Mr. Shanker!"

The word professional was often used then to beat teachers down or keep them in line. I can remember my first exposure to it as a teacher. I started in a very tough elementary school in New York City and had great doubts that I would make it; the three teachers who had preceded me that year with my sixth-grade class had not.

After a couple of weeks, the assistant principal appeared at my classroom door. I remember thinking, "Thank God! Help has come." I motioned him in, but he stood there for what seemed like a very long time, pointing at something. Finally, he said, "Mr. Shanker, I see a lot of paper on the floor in the third aisle. It's very unsightly and very *unprofessional*." Then the door closed and he left.

Soon after that, I went to my first faculty meeting. In those days, not many men taught in grades K-8; there was only one other male teacher in my school. The principal distributed the organizational chart of the school with a schedule of duties—who had hall patrol, lunch patrol, and so forth, including "snow patrol." By tradition, snow patrol, which involved giving up lunch period and walking around outside warning kids not to throw snowballs at each other, was a job for a male teacher. And, sure enough, Mr. Jones and Mr. Shanker found themselves assigned to it. Mr. Jones raised his hand and asked, "Now that there are two men on the faculty to handle snow patrol, would it be okay to rotate—you know, the first day of snow, he goes and the next day I go?" The principal frowned at him and replied, "Mr. Jones, that is very *unprofessional*. First of all, the duty schedule has already been mimeographed, as you see. Secondly, I am surprised that you aren't concerned that one child might throw a snowball at another, hit him in the eye, and do permanent damage. It's very unprofessional of you." That was my second run-in with this new and unusual use of *professional* and *unprofessional*.

Of course, I subsequently heard principals and others use these words many times, and I became accustomed (though not reconciled) to the fact that, in the lexicon of administrators, "professional" had nothing to do with teachers exercising "professional

judgment" or conforming to "professional standards." The words were—and still are—used to force teachers to obey orders that go against their sense of sound educational practice and, often, their common sense. Professionalism, in this Orwellian meaning of the word, is not a standard, but a threat: Do this, don't say that, or else.

The Fox and the Grapes

Many teachers were also victims of their own definition of professionalism. They believed it was somehow unworthy and undignified (unprofessional) for teachers to try to improve their salaries and working conditions through organizing and political action. I came up against this definition of professional when I went from school to school as a union organizer, arguing that teachers ought to have a right to negotiate. At first, very few teachers would even come to meetings. I remember that Brooklyn Technical High School had 425 teachers, and only six showed up at the meeting. One of them explained it to me: "We think unions are great. My mom and dad are union members. That's why they had enough money for me to go to college. But they sent me so I could do better than they did. And what kind of professional joins a union?"

This professionalism was not professionalism at all. It was the willingness of teachers to sacrifice their own self-interest and dignity—and the interests of their students—in order to maintain a false feeling of superiority. The issue was really one of snobbery; and in those days, when I was trying to persuade teachers to join the union, I often told Arthur Koestler's version of the Aesop Fable about the fox and the sour grapes.

According to Koestler, the fox, humiliated by his failure to reach the grapes the first time, decides to take climbing lessons. After a lot of hard work, he climbs up and tastes the grapes only to discover that he was right in the first place—they are sour. He certainly can't admit that, though. So he keeps on climbing and eating and climbing and eating until he dies from a severe case of gastric ulcers.

The teachers who heard this story usually laughed when I told them that it was the sour grapes of professionalism the fox was after. He would have been better off running after chickens with the other foxes—just as they would be better off joining a union with other workers—instead of continuing to eat the sour grapes of professionalism that were filled with lunch duty, hall duty, snow duty, toilet patrol, and lesson-plan books.

The basic argument for unionism and collective bargaining is as true today as it was when I went around to New York City teachers talking about the fox and the grapes. School systems are organizations, many of them quite large; and individual employees are likely to be powerless in such organizations. They can be heard and have some power to change things only if they are organized and act collectively.

Can anyone doubt how teachers felt about themselves when school boards, superintendents, and principals could do whatever they wanted without consulting teachers—or even notifying, them? Some teachers would be assigned to be "floaters" in a school and had to teach in a different classroom each hour. A few teachers were always given the most violent classes, while other teachers were out of the classroom most of the time on "administrative assignments." Some teachers got their pay docked if they were a few minutes late because of a traffic jam, but others could come late as often as they wanted because they had friends in high places. Some teachers were always assigned to teach the subject they were licensed in and were given the same grade each period so they would have the fewest

possible preparations. Others almost always taught several different grades, often out of the fields in which they were licensed.

So there should be no hankering to go back to the good old days, because they weren't good at all. The spread of collective bargaining has not made everything perfect, of course. Some people even blame the growth of teacher unions for the problems in our schools and the difficulty we are having in getting school reform. But if that were so, schools would be much better in states where there is no collective bargaining (like Mississippi or Texas) than in states where it exists (like California or Connecticut), and that's plainly not the case.

Collective Bargaining and Educational Issues

When I went to work for the New York City schools in 1953, I joined the New York City local of American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the New York Teachers Guild, Local 2. The union, the predecessor of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), had already been around for a long time. It was founded in 1917 (with John Dewey as a charter member). But it had organized only about 5% of the system's 50,000 teachers. And it was only one of 106 teacher organizations. There was a group for each division, each religion, each race - and each grievance. I remember one called the Sixth and Seventh Grade Women Teachers' Association of Bensonhurst. (Something must have happened there at some point, and they started an organization.) And there was a Bronx Teachers' Association, a Staten Island Teachers' Association, and so forth. Most of these groups were rather small, and most of them had very low dues, some as little as 50 cents a year.

It was difficult to create a single organization from these 106 different groups. As I've mentioned, most New York City teachers were cool to the idea of joining a trade union. Besides, what kind of power could a union have unless it could withhold the services of its members by striking. And strikes by public employees were illegal under New York State's Condon-Wadlin law. This law also said that any employee who went on strike was to be fired and, if hired back, was to remain on probation for three years and get no salary increase during that time.

Nevertheless, in 1960, when a merger with another group had increased our membership from 2,500 to 4,500, we had a strike. Only about 5,000 teachers (out of 50,000) went out, but the school board couldn't afford to fire that many so we didn't lose our jobs. As a result of the strike, we got more members, many of them teachers angry at the do-nothingness of the other teacher organizations. And that was the beginning of a dramatic period of growth. We also got a referendum on collective bargaining that took place in June 1961. Teachers were simply asked if they favored collective bargaining for New York City teachers; the majority said Yes.

We were the only organized group supporting collective bargaining. In fact, all the 105 other groups were strongly opposed, so more teachers joined our union. When the election was held in December 1961 to decide which group would become the collective bargaining agent, we won overwhelmingly; and more teachers joined. In April 1962, we had another strike in order to get adequate salary increases, and more teachers joined. In June 1962, we bargained our first complete contract, with a \$995 salary increase; and more teachers joined. And as we administered grievances under the contract, still more teachers joined. In 1963 and 1965, we bargained two-year contracts with salary increases, increases in health benefits and choice of health plans, reduction of class size, and the elimination of every teacher's least favorite regulation: that they bring a note from their doctor every time

they took sick leave. In 1967, we had a three-week strike to get salary increases and to keep an Effective Schools program that was working well, and more teachers joined. By 1968, when we had a long strike over due process in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn, 70,000 teachers stayed out between September and the middle of November. During this incredible period of struggle and vitality, the union had grown from 2,500 members (about 5% of the teaching staff) to a miraculous 97%. And by that time, teacher unions and collective bargaining had spread to many other states; although today there are still states where teachers do not have collective bargaining rights.

Teachers made great gains in the early years of collective bargaining. There were substantial increases in salaries. In addition, teachers were able to limit and reduce the old indignities, because contracts required that undesirable chores and assignments be shared by all the teachers in a school. And grievance procedures meant that management had to use its authority more prudently, because it was usually subject to external and independent review.

But even in those days, it became evident that the bargaining process was severely limited in its ability to deal with some of the issues that were most important to teachers. In addition to the traditional union goals of improvements in wages, hours, and working conditions, teachers wanted to use their collective power to improve schools in ways that would make them work better for kids. Most teachers entered teaching knowing they wouldn't be well paid; they were looking for the intrinsic satisfaction derived from doing a good job for their students. So they were concerned about conditions that would allow them to enjoy this satisfaction. But as soon as the words "good for children" were attached to any union proposal, the board would say, "Now you're trying to dictate public policy to us," and that was the end of that proposal.

The first time I sat at the bargaining table in New York City, the union submitted 900 demands, many of which were designed to improve learning conditions for students. We were shocked when representatives from the school board told us that they would deal with demands about improvements in wages, hours, and working conditions for *teachers* but would not entertain any demand justified as being good for *students*. The reason? Because we were elected by teachers to represent teacher interests, not by students, to represent student interests. After all those years of being told by principals and superintendents and school boards that it was *unprofessional* to join a union because our primary concern should be the welfare of our students, it came as a shock when we were told that we could not, as a union, deal with educational issues, that they were not bargainable.

Critics have often said that a teacher union can't really be interested in educational issues and that the union's involvement in current discussions of reform are just a ploy for getting bigger salary increases. But from the earliest years of collective bargaining, issues of educational quality were part of the UFT and AFT agenda. And there were times when professional interests and union interests were in conflict. For example, as we headed toward the collective bargaining election in 1961, the issue of granting regular licenses to substitutes came up.

The school board was in a big bind at that time. A group of black parents were boycotting two predominantly black schools and refusing to send their children to school. When the school board went to court to invoke the compulsory attendance law, the parents said they couldn't be compelled to send their children to inferior schools. They offered as evidence the fact that most teachers in predominantly white schools had regular certification whereas most teachers in predominantly black schools did not. They were what were called

"permanent substitutes." Instead of trying to attract an adequate number of teachers who met the certification standards, the school board then went to the legislature to get the rules for certification changed.

At this time, the New York City system employed some 20,000 of these permanent substitute teachers on a regular basis. A disproportionate number supported the union, and we needed their votes to win the upcoming election. Nevertheless, after an extensive debate, we opposed the proposal to water down the license standards. And, recognizing that paper requirements were not adequate anyway, we proposed internships for new teachers. These internships would have involved coaching and evaluating the classroom performance of the new teachers instead of just giving them a paper-and-pencil test. They would have been a step toward the kind of professionalism associated with the medical and legal professions. Our proposal didn't get anywhere. It was 20 years before a school district did implement an internship program like the one we suggested. I'm talking about the Toledo, Ohio, Peer Review program, which was also devised and proposed by an AFT local.

Although educational issues were an important part of our agenda from the beginning, it was difficult to make headway on them. Even efforts to reduce or limit class size ran into snags. Was class size a working condition for teachers or was it an educational issue? (Where can you draw the line between the two, especially since teaching is inextricably linked with educational issues?) Certainly a very large class could be, and was, viewed as an onerous working condition. But the question of the proper class size for effective teaching and learning was considered outside the scope of bargaining. In some states, any consideration of class size was excluded from the list of appropriate subjects for bargaining.

The Treadmill

When we first went into collective bargaining, we were very optimistic. We would bargain one- or two-year contracts so we could get back to the bargaining table believing that, with each new set of negotiations, we would make great gains. But as we got to the late Sixties and early Seventies, the union began promoting three year contracts. Each time we went to the bargaining table, management would try to take away what we had won in the last round. And as we went through a number of years and a number of rounds of bargaining, it became clear that while bargaining gave teachers voice and dignity, the normal bargaining process was not likely to do what teachers believed needed to be done, even in terms of salary and working conditions. Salary pins were made, but then in the Seventies the economy turned sour at the same time as the need for teachers dropped off when the baby boom turned into the baby bust. During those years, we saw many of the gains we had won through collective bargaining wiped out.

For me, the biggest shocker was the day in 1975 when 13,000 New York City teachers lost their jobs. The city was basically in receivership. Other cities were suffering from fiscal crises, too. In that one year, New York City teachers and teachers from Chicago and Philadelphia were all out on strike at one time. And it became very clear that current bargaining power was being weakened by a poor economy and a rapid reduction in demand for teachers because the baby boom was over. More and more, it looked as though we would have a hard time regaining what we had lost, much less pushing with demands we had not been able to achieve earlier.

Our whole outlook changed from the optimistic Sixties when we had been buoyed up by the climate of economic growth, the war on poverty, federal aid to education, and putting

a man on the Moon. It had seemed in those days that all we had to do to get what we wanted was to push harder. Now, we were in a period that did not look as though it would be over soon and we knew we would be lucky to hold on to what we had. In fact, if we were realistic, we had to admit that we might lose a good deal of it.

Indeed, during the ensuing years of tremendous inflation, teachers' salaries were seriously eroded, because salary increases didn't keep up with inflation. We ran very hard to try to stay even but fell behind anyway. Teachers lost 15% of their income in real dollars during that period of recession, and we didn't get back to where we had been in 1973 until about 1988. Now, we are in a new recession. And it's clear that, if we continue to organize our schools and our profession as we have in the past, teacher salaries will never equal those of other professionals, no matter how skilled union negotiators nor how willing school boards. It's just not possible.

For 20 years, the union's agenda was to increase salaries and reduce class size and class loads. As we saw it, salary increases attract and retain qualified teachers, and reductions in class size and class loads would give teachers more time to work with students individually and creatively. They also would give teachers what members of other professions take for granted: time to confer, to share ideas, and work with colleagues. This program was widely accepted by school boards, parents, and communities as a strategy for economic improvement. But by the early 1980s it became clear that carrying out the program would call for an amount of money and level of staffing that, realistically, we could not expect to get.

Bringing the average teacher's salary to \$45,000 per year—a respectable but by no means extravagant amount—would mean an increase of \$10,000 to \$15,000 per teacher. Multiply this by 2.5 million teachers, and it comes to something in the neighborhood of \$30 billion dollars a year more than what the U.S. currently spends on elementary and secondary education. And this is before adding in the cost of fringe benefits. Decreasing class size to the extent that it would make a real difference in the way teachers deal with students runs up against the same arithmetic.

If we were to cut class size by one-third, this would give teachers more time to coach and work with students. (According to TheodoreSizer, it would still take an English teacher with five classes of 20 students each, 17 hours to grade a set of essays.) But to get this kind of reduction nationally, we would need another 800,000 teachers. That represents an enormous amount of money, even with salaries at their current levels. And we would not be able to find qualified people to fill the jobs anyway. We don't have a host of well-qualified candidates who are standing in line to be teachers. In fact, we already have some people in the classroom who are at the borderline of literacy and numeracy; hiring more would mean digging deeper into the talent pool.

So the price for getting smaller class size on a national level (as opposed to a local) level would be putting huge numbers of kids in classes with poorly qualified teachers. Or we could try to attract people who now go into better paying professions by raising teachers' salaries. But that's unrealistic, too, because these other professions or lines of work would raise their salaries to remain competitive.

Rethinking Goals

The arithmetic of salaries and availability of qualified teachers suggests that we need to rethink the traditional goals of teacher unions. There isn't going to be enough money to

raise all salaries in the districts to a professional level. And even if we somehow found the money, where could we find the people to accomplish what we wanted? Unions could continue repeating the same slogans—even if union leaders didn't believe them anymore. Or we could tell members there was no way of reaching the goals we originally set for ourselves. Or we could find some other ways of accomplishing these goals. We could change the way teachers teach; we could change the structure of schools and the structure of the teaching profession.

If all the people working in hospitals had to be doctors, we would have seven million doctors instead of 500,000—and they would all be paid like teachers. There would be too many to educate as rigorously as we do now, so the standards of medical practice would probably be much lower than they are. And undoubtedly we would have superintendent doctors, principal doctors, and department chairman doctors standing over ordinary doctors telling them what to do, because with seven million doctors, we would be dipping down pretty deep into the talent pool. But the medical profession isn't organized that way. So why not follow the model of a hospital instead of the model of an assembly-line factory in organizing schools and the professionals who work in them?

Why not reserve the title of teacher for those who are highly qualified, and pay them accordingly? This arrangement need not mean having fewer adults working with kids. We could have more than we do now: a large number of paraprofessionals, intern teachers, and resident teachers (going through the kind of training doctors get), and parents and other volunteers.

In a system like this, teachers could leave the drill-and-practice and the administrative, clerical, and custodial duties to others. And they wouldn't have to stand up in front of a class of 35 and try to get everybody to learn the same thing at the same time. Instead, they could spend their time working with small groups or individual students, stimulating them, helping them manage their work, and figuring out ways to customize their learning. And they would finally have the time to meet with colleagues to discuss cases and strategies—something that is taken for granted in other professions but virtually unheard of in teaching. Restructuring teaching and schools would also allow teacher unions to make progress towards one of their original, but often frustrated, goals: making schools work better for students.

There is plenty of evidence that schools are not working very well for many of our students. One example is the scores on National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) exams over a 20-year period. True, recent NAEP results offer some encouragement. Nearly all students who are ready to graduate from high school are able to read simple materials, write a simple paragraph, and do simple arithmetic. Moreover, NAEP scores show that African-American and Hispanic children are closing the gap in achievement between them and white children. For instance, in 1980 only about 45 % of African-American and 60% of Hispanic 17-year-olds still in school could read beyond the level of rock-bottom literacy (compared to about 88 % of white children). By 1988 nearly 75 % of African-American and 73 % of Hispanic 17-year-olds had reached beyond that rock-bottom level.

But encouraging though this progress is, few high school graduates perform well enough to qualify for an entry-level job at a top firm. And fewer still reach the level necessary to do real college work. In 1988 only 1 % of 17-year-olds still in school could write a really good, brief discussion comparing modern food and frontier food after reading a paragraph on frontier life. And only 7 % could solve multi-level arithmetic problems. Compare this with student achievement in other industrialized nations where students have to

be able to write an excellent essay and handle complex math problems in order to get into a university. And 16% to 30 % of those young people achieve at these levels compared to no more than 6 % of U.S. students who achieve at NAEP's top—but much lower—levels. These results and others confirm what experience has told us for a long time: schools as they are now structured don't work well for large numbers of kids. They may be adequate for young people who can sit still and learn by listening to the teacher talk. But people—and kids—learn in many different ways and at different rates. Some need to see pictures before they can understand a concept: some need to manipulate things; some learn best in groups; and some want to go off and explore by themselves. So our lock-step system that requires everyone to learn in the same way at the same time is inefficient. It can also be cruel to kids who can't play by these rules and who feel stupid because they are constantly being compared unfavorably with those who can.

Nor can teachers responsible for 30 kids with different ways and rates of learning—or even 30 different kids every period—do much to accommodate these differences. There is a certain amount of material to be covered, probably in a certain way. And there is little time left over from doing what is required to diagnose the individual needs of individual children and to try to find ways to meet those needs. Teachers themselves are constrained by the structure of our schools.

Restructuring Schools

What can be done? There are, in fact, plenty of ideas, even models, for more effective ways of structuring student learning—and not all of them are new. In the late 1950s, Tam Dalyell, a member Great Britain's House of Commons and also a teacher, worried about what would happen when the school-leaving age in Great Britain was raised from 15 to 16. What would they do with these kids, who already signed off on school and couldn't wait to leave, if they were forced to stay on another year? Dayell's solution was to create "ship schools" where students could learn geography, economics, and history by sailing to different foreign countries, as well as by reading about them, and could learn math from shipboard activities as well as through books. But another, less exotic educational institution offers kids a chance to learn by doing and offers even more flexibility than Dalyell's ship schools. I have in mind the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.

There are various levels of achievement in scouting. For example, in the Boy Scouts a boy begins as a Tenderfoot and then, when he gains the skills required, he becomes a Second Class Scout, then First Class, and so on up, perhaps, to Eagle Scout. Scouts move up the ladder of advancement at their own pace; at any level they can choose from among a variety of tasks to reach the next level. Scouts can work individually or with friends. If they need help with something they are reading or doing, they can ask a peer or the scout-master. They may learn a particular skill from a volunteer. They can go for information to a community agency or the local museum or the Audubon Society. If they choose, much of their learning can be private; but in the course of scouting activities, they will have many experiences working together in groups.

Besides being self-paced and individualized, the scout's learning is broader and less abstract than what kids usually get in school. It simulates the real world more closely because it involves more than the manipulation of words and numbers, which make up so much of what kids do in our schools. Perhaps the most important of all, this system makes students responsible for their own education.

I often think of my experience earning the Boy Scouts' bird-study merit badge—the experience of a city kid wasn't very interested in birds—and I think about the difference between school learning and what happened in Boy Scouts. If I had learned about birds in school, my teacher probably would have had flashcards and pictures of birds all over the room. Eventually we would have had a bird test: The teacher would have asked us the birds' names, and we would have filled in some kind of chart to show we knew what part of the country the birds came from. I know I would have forgotten the birds within three weeks of taking the test—and that would have been no loss because I probably would have come to hate them anyway.

But to earn the merit badge, we actually had to see 40 different kinds of birds, *see them*. And we weren't going to be able to do it by looking out a window or by taking a walk in Central Park. We had to get up at five o'clock in the morning so we could be in a swamp as the sun was coming up. Or we had to go at sunset to a hill or mountain. And, of course, since most of us didn't want to go by ourselves, we invited a couple of friends. When we looked through the binoculars, the birds we saw weren't at all like the stuffed specimens in the Museum of Natural History. We would see a certain shape and certain identifying marks—a red crest or a prominent black stripe across the wing—and we would start looking through our field guidebooks. Someone would say, "There it is, that's the one." And someone else would say, "No, you dope, that says Texas; we're in New York." We were learning to look for different things, to use a reference book, to think together with friends.

The final assessment wasn't a multiple-choice test. It was what would now be called a "performance-based assessment." We had to use what we had learned in a number of different ways. We had to build something. I built a birdhouse and tried (unsuccessfully) to attract birds to live in it. The most important part of the test was a walk with one or two people who really knew birds, where you had to identify every bird you spotted that was on your bird list. That's the kind of knowledge that doesn't leave you. It becomes part of you. I don't know of anybody who got a bird-study merit badge who didn't maintain an interest in birds for many years after. Could our schools be restructured to incorporate some of these features of scouting? Of course. The Holweide School in Cologne, Germany, which I visited a couple of years ago, incorporates many of them. So do the medical schools at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, and at Maastricht in the Netherlands. There are many learning models to try, but we won't be sure which ones will work best until people in schools experiment with them.

Incentives for Change

I have participated in my share of commissions and task forces where we talked about education reform and even drafted bills that were supposed to transform public education. But I've become convinced that no scheme imposed from on high, no matter how wonderful, will do the job. Nothing works right the first time you try it, not even a mechanical device. The success of a plan depends on people making a big effort to get it to work. And people won't do that unless they want to—or have to.

I remember years ago getting into a rowboat with an outboard motor for the first time and trying to start it. It didn't start when I pulled the cord out slowly, but pulling it out rapidly didn't work either. Through trial and error, learned I had to use a certain flick of the wrist to start the motor. You can give people a general idea about reforming their schools, but they have to figure out the specifics for themselves.

This means giving them the freedom to experiment and to make changes. They need to be released from regulatory constraints (except for those dealing with health, safety, and civil rights); and they need to be given control over the budgets in their individual schools so that, when they figure out what they need, they can get it. But the freedom to do things is not sufficient. People have to want to do them enough to seek out the knowledge they need and to keep on experimenting until they get it right. I would never have persisted in trying to start that outboard motor if I hadn't wanted to go somewhere.

So there have to be incentives. But what kind? No doubt the greatest incentive is the intrinsic satisfaction people feel when they get something right, but that's not the whole story. There are extrinsic satisfactions like recognition from peers, from leaders in the community, from experts in the field. And most people are powerfully moved by financial rewards and punishments: the fear of losing their shirts or the chance of making it big.

No single incentive moves everybody all the time. Businesses understand this. Though they appreciate the importance of external incentives, successful companies also know that intrinsic satisfactions are important. So they use a whole array of Incentives to reward the results they are after. If we want people in the schools to put their utmost effort and imagination into restructuring American education, if we want them to experiment and take risks, we will have to provide as many incentives as possible moving in the same direction at the same time.

I'm always surprised that people in public education have a hard time recognizing the importance of incentives, and particularly extrinsic ones. In most other areas, people immediately see how incentives—or the lack of them—cause problems that a change in incentives can solve. For instance, when we hear about companies that are run into the ground by managers looking for short-term profits (and the big salary increases that go with these profits), we say that extrinsic incentives were perverted and became destructive to the enterprise. When we talk about how Americans are still driving gas guzzlers, we say the price of gas in the U.S. is too low to provide an incentive for switching to cars that get 45 miles to the gallon.

Many people outside the field of education think we can solve its problems by applying extrinsic incentives, which is why they propose simplistic plans for testing and merit pay, for retaining kids, for vouchers and school choice. We can't counter these simplistic—and often destructive—proposals by arguing that extrinsic incentives are not important; no one will believe that. We have to come up with a system of incentives that will produce the results we want. And we do not have much time.

There is increasing dissatisfaction with the pace of school reform and increasing support for various radical solutions to our education problems, like the massive administrative decentralization program in Chicago or radical privatization plans of the kind we are beginning to see in Milwaukee and Epsom, New Hampshire. In Milwaukee, low-income children are being allowed to attend private schools at state expense. In Epsom, taxpayers are being offered an incentive, in the form of substantial property tax abatement, if parents send their child to a private or religious school. Moreover, proposals like these are beginning to attract a broad base of support, from poor and minority parents whose children suffer particularly in inadequate inner-city schools to middle-class taxpayers and conservatives. If we are not able to produce—and quickly—a credible plan for moving school reform, we may have reached the end of public education.

Public Education and a Multicultural Society

Why do I continue when so much of what I've worked for seems threatened? To a large extent because I believe that public education is the glue that has held this country together. Critics now say that the common school never really existed, that it's time to abandon this ideal in favor of schools that are designed to appeal to groups based on ethnicity, race, religion, class, or common interests of various kinds. But schools like these would foster division in our society; they would be like setting a time bomb.

A Martian who happened to be visiting Earth soon after the United States was founded would not have given this country much chance of surviving. He would have predicted that this new nation, whose inhabitants were of different races, who spoke different languages, and who followed different religions, wouldn't remain one nation for long. They would end up fighting and killing each other. Then, what was left of each group would set up its own country, just as has happened many other times and in many other places. But that didn't happen. Instead, we became a wealthy and powerful nation—the freest the world has ever known. Millions of people from around the world have risked their lives to come here, and they continue to do so today.

Public schools played a big role in holding our nation together. They brought together children of different races, languages, religions, and cultures and gave them a common language and a sense of common purpose. We have not outgrown our need for this; far from it. Today, Americans come from more different countries and speak more different languages than ever before. Whenever the problems connected with school reform seem especially tough, I think about this. I think about what public education gave me—a kid who couldn't even speak English when I entered first grade. I think about what it has given me and can give to countless numbers of other kids like me. And I know that keeping public education together is worth whatever effort it takes.