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The Power of Their Ideas

Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem
We started Central Park East Secondary School with an important conviction, that expertise in early childhood development is a good foundation for starting a school for adolescents. In fact, we believe such expertise stands us in good stead in educating ourselves as adults, too.

We all have more in common with five-year-olds than we imagine; adults remain, in Piaget’s terms, “concrete thinkers,” and little kids, lo and behold, are capable of some very fancy abstractions. Think about how deeply we’ve accepted the notion that young students lack “attention spans” because they’re “immature,” when in fact it’s small children who have the longest and most tenacious attention spans. (Watch an infant struggling for half an hour to work out some new theory of how an object moves from one place to another.) It’s boredom and anxiety that drive concentration away; fidgetiness appears in first grade and grows worse over time.

Just as our elementary school was based on the idea of keeping the traditions of kindergarten going through the sixth grade, so for our secondary school we largely imagined our task as keeping the spirit of kindergarten going for a few more years. I do not mean this to sound condescending or belittling. I see the spirit I’m referring to as fundamental to all good education; wouldn’t it be wonderful, after all, if high school students were as deeply absorbed in their “work” as five-year-olds are in their “play”? 
I entered teaching accidentally and became a kindergarten teacher because it was convenient; the work was available part-time and across the street from my house. I didn’t have any intention of becoming a teacher, much less a teacher of little children. And there I was doing both. This fortuitous opportunity to work with young children gave me a particular viewpoint and perspective that has, as much as anything else, shaped all my subsequent efforts. I have carried a kindergarten teacher’s perspective with me, first into elementary school and now into high school.

Kindergarten is the one place—maybe the last place—where teachers are expected to know children well, even if they don’t hand in their homework, finish their Friday tests, or pay attention. Kindergarten teachers know children by listening and looking. They know that learning must be personalized because kids are incorrigibly idiosyncratic. (I speak here of an old-fashioned kindergarten, one that doesn’t look like a first grade.) Kindergarten teachers know that helping children learn to become more self-reliant is part of their task—starting with tying shoes and going to the bathroom. Catering to children’s growing independence is a natural part of a kindergarten teacher’s classroom life. This is, alas, the last time children are given independence, encouraged to make choices, and allowed to move about on their own steam. The older they get the less we take into account the importance of children’s own interests, and the less we cherish their capacity for engaging in imaginative play. (In fact, we worry in kindergarten if children lack such capacity, while later on we worry if they show it too much.) In kindergarten we design our rooms for real work, not just passive listening. We put things in the room that will appeal to children, grab their interests, and engage their minds and hearts. Teachers in kindergarten are editors, critics, cheerleaders, and caretakers, not just lecturers or deliverers of instruction. What Ted Sizer calls “coaching” is second nature in the kindergarten classroom.

A good school for anyone is a little like kindergarten and a little like a good post-graduate program—the two ends of the educational spectrum, at which we understand that we cannot treat any two human beings identically, but must take into account their special interests and styles even as we hold all to high and rigorous standards. A good Oxford education is more like my kindergarten classroom than it is like the typical American high school or public college. We don’t need research on this astounding proposition. The main difference between the advantaged and the disadvantaged is that the latter need such flexible schools even more. When people think “those kids” need something special, the reply we offer at CPESS is. Just give them what you have always offered those who have the money to buy the best, which is mostly a matter of respect.

I think we’ve created a framework at CPESS for creating such a respectful setting, day by day. We don’t create all the conditions that affect our students’ lives; we can’t stop the world our students live in while we do our work, a world that places crushing burdens on far too many of our young people. We have no guarantees to offer our kids, their families, or the wider public beyond trying our best to make CPESS a place that at least temporarily makes life seem more interesting and more worth the effort.

For this to happen, teachers first need a framework that enables them to know their students as learners well. This takes time and trust. Trust can’t be mandated, but because students and families come to us by choice, at least some modest basis for mutual trust is built in—at least choice buys us time. Teachers also need to know—or decide—what they can expect of each other. They need to agree not only on what to teach, but also on how their teaching and their kids’ learning will be assessed. We refuse to let our work be judged on the basis of a students’ capacity to collect trivia. We want it to be judged instead on the intellectual habits of mind it engenders. And we also value certain habits of work: the acceptance of increasing levels of responsibility, the increasing capacity to communicate appropriately to others, a willingness to take a stand as well as a willingness to change one’s mind, and being someone who can be counted on to meet deadlines as well as keep one’s word.

We threw together the “CPESS Habits of Mind” in a hurry as we realized the need to create a unity across disciplines and a focus on the essential that hadn’t seemed so critical in the younger grades. It was all very well to refer to “habits of mind,” but the phrase
seemed too abstract. We didn't want an endless laundry list either, so we wrote down five, based on many years of watching kids and observing our own habits, and now they are posted in most classrooms and appear regularly in our weekly newsletter. They are at the heart of each curriculum as well as being the basis for judging student performance. We have, on occasion, played around with adding a sixth or replacing one with something different, if only to remind ourselves and the world that they weren't handed to us from Above. We never quite write them out the exact same way, and over the years we've realized they are constantly evolving in their meaning. They are: the question of evidence, or "How do we know what we know?"; the question of viewpoint in all its multiplicity, or "Who's speaking?"; the search for connections and patterns, or "What causes what?"; supposition, or "How might things have been different?"; and finally, why any of it matters, or "Who cares?"

Lawyers tell us these "habits" are very lawyerly, but journalists and scientists tell us they are basic to what they do as well. As a historian I recognize them as being at the heart of my field. As a principal I find them useful when "naughty" kids are sent to my office. I ask them to put their version of the story on one side and that of whoever sent them to me on the other, then we consider evidence that corroborates either version, discuss whether what's happened is part of a pattern, how else it might have been dealt with, and, finally, why it matters.

In order to make such "habits" habitual, they need in-depth practice. Young people need to be immersed in their use. We want to demand evidence in the form of performance at real, worthwhile tasks. To do this we devote ourselves to covering less material, not more, and to developing standards that are no less tough and no less rigorous than those associated with traditional displays of academic excellence but sometimes different. It's very hard to use these habits in the typical survey course, no matter how provocatively taught. As we rush through a hundred years of history in less than a week, or cover complex new scientific ideas one after another, there's no time to study conflicting evidence, read multiple viewpoints, detect the difference between false analogies and real ones, not to mention imagine how else it might have happened. The first time I really did these things as a student was in graduate school in a course on the French Revolution. It was the first time I understood what history meant; that the history of the world was at least as complicated as my own family's story (and certainly my brother and I have a hard time agreeing on a single version of that).

As teachers, we see the habit of asking these kinds of questions as critical to our students' education not because our kids have special disadvantages, but because it's what we want for all children. But building standards based on these habits of mind takes time, takes translating back and forth between theory and practice, between our ideas and samples of real student work. Can a student do a distinguished piece of work at CPRESS without demonstrating breadth of knowledge about the larger context? Is it okay if Francis knows a lot about Japan's involvement in World War II and uses diverse sources with considerable discrimination but seems to know very little about the same war in Europe? Is it okay to be comfortable with ideas and experimental evidence in the field of genetics but superficially ignorant about a presumably simpler phenomenon like photosynthesis? Teaching this way requires forms of rigor few of us have ever before demanded of ourselves. It doesn't mean dispensing with all shallower "survey" requirements, but it shifts the balance dramatically. And it creates anxiety as we ask, But what will other people say if our kids don't know x or y? Of course, in reality their peers who take the traditional courses don't remember x or y anyway. But while that's reassuring, it's a cop-out. So it's an endless tension, a see-sawing back and forth between "coverage" and making sense of things.

The resolution of such weighty issues won't matter in the end if we don't simultaneously deal with the relationship of the school to our students' communities and families. Respect among children's families, their community, and the school is an end in itself, as well as an essential means to the education we have in mind. It isn't merely a question of good and frequent contact between school and family. That's hard enough, but it takes more. The gap between the social, ethnic, and class histories of the school's staff and the school's
families is often substantial. Even with the best of intentions, none of our schools have a majority of African-American and Latino teachers on their faculties, and few of our teachers grew up in East Harlem or neighborhoods like it. It's a gap we cannot bridge by good intentions alone. There's a price to be paid. At minimum, parents need to know that we will do our best not to undermine their authority, their values, or their standards, although we will encourage our students to raise questions about them. We don't demand that Seventh-Day Adventists accept our scientific version of the world's origins, but we require that they explore this view with us. We acknowledge the existence of different ways of handling conflict, but we insist that they use our way in school. We can't do away with the likelihood that some of our students' families see white teachers as inherently suspect, but white teachers can listen, we can reconsider our own reactions, offer alternative possibilities, and challenge some implicit assumptions.

We know that the school's pedagogy doesn't always rest easily with parents, some of whom wonder if we're not creating difficulties for children already handicapped by racism or poverty. We're not always going to be convincing, but we need to provide evidence that where we disagree we do so respectfully, that we're not out to frustrate the aspirations parents have for their kids, or to blame them for what goes wrong. Children must take increasing responsibility for who they are and what they accomplish, which includes sorting out the unresolved tensions between school and family. At their best, family and school are allies, however cautiously, but the kid is the performer. Adolescence is a time of experimentation, and we want our students to take on new challenges, to look at the world and their own life histories in novel ways. These two ideas—a commitment to avoid fostering an alienation between students and their families and a commitment to opening new doors and pathways for them—don't always rest easily together. In the end however, CPE and CPRESS are more often faulted by kids for being too close, not too distant, from their families and community. It's amazing how much can be done to bridge the gaps if we eliminate some of the obvious barriers.

When school people complain that parents "these days" don't show up at parent/teacher conferences, especially in high schools, I remember my own experiences as a parent attending school conferences. At best, the teachers restated what I already knew: my child was doing fine or he or she wasn't. Bad news at the conference was more than useless. I left such meetings feeling more inadequate, more guilty, and more helpless. I learned to stop going. It was an act of intelligence and survival, not a lack of concern, that led me to stay away. Such avoidance can produce distrust and wariness, and our children sometimes pay a paralyzing price. Children can get stuck between the two suspicious, warring parties to their education even if no confrontation ever takes place.

One obvious way of maintaining a climate that favors trust is by running a small rather than a large school. In many public schools across the country anything under 2,000 is thought of as tiny, hardly a school at all. We feel our high school enrollment of 450 is actually too big. It requires more subdivisions than is ideal. Incidentally, all 450 kids can fit into our auditorium, which is one criterion for maximum size. The other useful criterion is whether or not the entire staff can meet face to face, preferably in a single circle.

Experts at team building claim a group works best at somewhere between 15 and 20 people. By this standard, both class size and staff size should top at around 20. Having miscalculated a little on size, we divided the school into three major divisions, each with about 150 kids and 8 or 9 primary adults covering nearly all subjects taught, along with a "resource" teacher with a specialty in learning disabilities. The divisions are further subdivided each into two houses of 75 to 80 students, each with its own core faculty of 4. Most teachers are responsible for more than a single discipline, so we can combine courses such as math and science. This reduces the number of students a teacher deals with by half. We've also cut administrators, supervisors, and some specialists.

Thus, with the same budget as the typical city school we've cut the number of children a teacher sees each day from 160 to only 40. More like an elementary school. The 40 includes a group of about 15 students that each teacher sees daily for an extended advi-
sory period—a combination tutorial, seminar, and study hall—and whose families the adviser keeps informed about how things are going. (All professional staff—principal, social worker, librarian, special ed staff—run advisory groups as well.) This means that on parent/teacher evenings each staff member has only 15 families to meet with. Quite a different task than the one that faced my son’s high school teachers. Parents have the opportunity to talk with someone who actually knows their son or daughter! The talk lasts at least half an hour, and both the student and the student’s work are there as well. It takes time: several evenings, one afternoon, and some early mornings to reach everyone. A simple idea, but one that the average urban high school can’t pretend to hold itself to.

Students spend two years in each division at CRESS, and with the same adviser. Division I is the equivalent of grades 7 and 8, and Division II consists of grades 9 and 10. Students remain in the last division, called the Senior Institute, as long as they need to get a diploma and be prepared for the next step in their lives. Within each division no distinctions are made by grade level; everyone studies the same broad subject matter together, and it’s easy for us to forget who is in what grade. But the kids seem to know. Since we avoid holdovers in the earlier grades, there are a number of students who need more time at the end. Students who spend a third year in the Senior Institute work with their advisers more independently, often taking off-campus courses, maybe working part-time, doing more independent study, and progressing as fast as they can toward completion of the required portfolios. Kids still feel strongly about graduating with “their class”; despite our efforts to fudge over these categories, spending that extra time is hard. For a few it doesn’t work, but most proudly show up at graduation the following June to receive their diplomas, and one or two have come back for their diplomas a year or more later! The kids think a CRESS diploma is special.

“Keep the schedule simple, so you can focus on the complexity of the kids and the complexity of the ideas they are dealing with,” Sizer recommended when we began. So we did. We kept it as close to our elementary school schedule as we dared. We decided on the simplest of schedules: two hours each day in Humanities (art, history, literature, social studies), two hours daily of Math and Science, and one hour of Advisory. That’s the routine, day after day, with almost no change for the first four years, from grades 7 through 10. Some kids attend Humanities first, while the others have Math/Science; then it reverses. Within each two-hour block, the staff makes decisions about time and grouping. They can decide to do one thing on Monday and change their minds on Tuesday. They can even quickly decide to spend one whole day on Science! When the kids and teachers complained once that no one seemed really prepared to study hard after lunch, we all grumbled about it until the kids suggested a simple solution: no after lunch. So we run four hours straight three days a week, eat lunch late, and put Advisory at the end of the day. Everyone prefers it, at least for now. This was a decision we were able to make on Monday and put into effect within the same week. In most New York high schools, it would take a task force months to study an idea like this and more months or years to put it into effect. We just sat in our circle, listened to the kids’ proposal and said, Let’s try it.

One morning per week each student in grades 7 through 10 spends in community service, which allows for teacher planning time. Also, between 8:00 and 9:00 each morning we offer foreign language—with a mostly auxiliary staff of language teachers. The kids think 8:00 A.M. is outrageously early and they are still giving us a hard time about promptness. But being on time is a necessity for our kind of schedule, so we aren’t budging. Our policy at present is based on theater time: if you arrive late you have to wait for a scheduled intermission. (It’s somewhat different once you get into the Senior Institute, where students take some courses off campus, are involved in an extended internship at some point, and have a wider selection of mostly one-hour classes.)

We also have an hour for lunch, longer than is typical. This gives the staff time together, and it gives the students time to eat, choose options such as sports or computers, or use the library for independent study or reading or the wide range of modern technology and media facilities located there. Finally, from 3:00 to 5:00 P.M. and on
Saturday mornings the building is open for interscholastic sports programs, study, homework, or tutoring in the well-staffed library, and for a few student or staff-initiated clubs. Between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m. kids and staff are still hanging around, in and out of classes and offices, often together. This kind of schedule is not only simple, it also provides time—six scheduled school hours a week—for faculty to meet and talk to each other, to do collegially what people who work together need to do.

To create a staff-run school with high standards, the staff must know each other well, too, be familiar with each other’s work, and know how the school operates. Each team of teachers that works with the same students and the same curriculum also teaches at the same time and are “off” together. The school’s structure, from the placement of rooms to the scheduling of the day, is designed to enable teachers to visit each other’s classes, to reflect on their own and their colleagues’ practice, and give each other feedback and support. Curricular teams who teach the same division of students the same agreed-upon topics, for example, have a full morning each week outside the classroom to critique student work and each other’s plans, and occasional full days to work on standards and long-range expectations. For the same reason, those who teach the same eighty kids—the faculty of each house—have an hour-and-a-half extended lunch together every week. The entire staff meets from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. every Monday and from 1:30 to 3:00 p.m. on Fridays to make collective schoolwide decisions, discuss ideas, and work out both curricular and graduation standards, issues that overlap all ages and divisions. The staff is responsible for hiring their own members, assessing their own colleagues, and when dissatisfied for confronting colleagues with their concerns. They are responsible for developing and assessing both the curriculum and their students’ success with it. Above all, the teachers are responsible for defining, and defending, the criteria for receiving a CPESS diploma. All faculty sit on senior graduation committees. Each potential graduate’s name comes before the full faculty, who must vote to give them a diploma based on work presented and publicly accessible.

This structure took time to develop and there are plenty of still unresolved issues in the way our school works. How do we know if we’ve developed sufficiently high standards for graduation? We have created a system of regular external reviews by panels of experts consisting of college faculty, high school colleagues, parents, community leaders, discipline experts, and educational policymakers and officials. It’s effective but probably too cumbersome as presently constituted, especially if many schools were to adopt it. Can technology solve any of this for us? What does it mean to tell kids the content of their final exam at the beginning of a course as the Coalition of Essential Schools’ “planning backward” strategies suggest? Can one really design final “essential questions” so craftily that answering them requires a student to deal with the curriculum in a serious and systematic way? So far it seems easier said than done, particularly in math and science. How much should each teacher’s curriculum and pedagogy be the result of team decision making rather than individual inclination? Unlike our CPE elementary schools, where teachers select topics with extraordinary freedom based on personal inclination and professional judgments, teams (and ultimately the whole faculty) make such decisions in the secondary school. While both the elementary and high school faculties accept responsibility for all students, there is more built-in joint decision making on the secondary level. If this is a good idea, should we do more of it on the elementary level?

Unresolved also is our effort to deal with racism. No school in America can avoid the issue, but it’s self-evident in a place like CPE. This means that dealing with such questions among ourselves as staff—honestly and yet carefully—has to happen alongside of our work with kids. How can we ensure that we don’t tear the school apart as we pick our way through such thorny underbrush? There’s no pretending that we don’t need to do this, or that once we clear it all up we can get on to other things. We must deal with this issue over and over if we are to help kids who desperately need to be able to talk with adults about such difficult matters, and must do so long before
we have “solved” them. We need to take chances even though making mistakes can be dangerous. We’ve called in outside experts on racism as well as experts on group relations to work with us on both a regular basis and in times of crisis, when these issues seemed likely to split us apart. A bitter charge by some parents that a white teacher was not only a racist but out to injure children of color, and the overtones of anti-Semitism that went with it, didn’t produce the same instinctive response in all of us. We didn’t reach a consensus, except on how to get through it safely. Acknowledging the depth of harm that racism has caused and yet not allowing it to be an excuse for expecting less of our kids or the school, always plagues us, our students, and their families. Every family conference or student conflict with a peer or a teacher can potentially raise issues of race. These can be excuses or they can be fundamental roadblocks. It’s not easy to know when to open up the topic and when to leave it closed. The very mention of race can be misinterpreted. But it’s not the only super-charged issue. Gender issues for a school full of adolescents are also powerful. And class is even more taboo. The kids are super-sensitive to any hint of a put-down, like being called “disadvantaged,” even by reporters who mean to praise them or the school.

And there is never enough time to work any of these issues through! So we look, usually unsuccessfully, for shortcuts. In a school with a faculty of thirty rather than twelve, face-to-face democratic school governance often seems impossible. What role can a smaller cabinet play? What is the role of inexperienced novices compared to that of the more experienced staff? What are the limits on a faculty’s legitimate right to make decisions versus the necessary controls exercised by a community, school board, principal, or parent organization? In what capacity and by what means should students play a role in governing their own schools?

These are just a few of our unresolved issues. Most will never be finally resolved. But as we struggle with them we’ve seen dramatic changes. Because our adult debates are not hidden from our students, there is no sharp dividing line between “staff development” activities and student educational activities. The deep immersion in a value system that places mutual respect first and encourages a climate of diversity and disagreement becomes enormously powerful over time, and not just for the staff. The kids know we’re serious. It rubs off. Sometimes we fear that they are just parroting our ideas, but mostly we can’t help but be impressed. They are less engaged in battling with us over every imposed limit on their freedom than they once were, and more engaged with us in the battle to become well educated. They get down to business faster and are more cheerful about more things. They read and write a lot. They talk a lot about their own learning and schooling. They are more self-consciously reflective about how they go about it. Yes, it’s partly glibness, but even that glibness is a triumph.

We’re happy but not surprised when alumna Lindsay reports from Cornell that our “habits of mind” language really impresses the college faculty, and we glow to hear Erran, Division I terror and self-proclaimed tough guy, talking about evidence and viewpoint and alternative possibilities as he heads off to an Ivy League college.

It’s hardly surprising that our rate of retention is very high, that only about 5 percent of our students move or transfer annually. CPRESS is a nice place to spend the day and kids willingly travel across the city to stay at CPRESS. Attendance is also extraordinarily high; kids and parents show up at family conferences to complain about things to our faces and risk the necessary confrontations. Violence is rare and incidents we consider serious are probably barely noticed in many large urban high schools. The children are willing to let us catch them acting like nice young people who want to be smart. By tenth grade they say “I’m bored” a bit less and admit to being interested in the idea of becoming truly well-rounded citizens a bit more. (And their boredom, after all, isn’t all feigned; it sometimes requires us to reconsider what we’re doing.)

When they enter the last phase—our Senior Institute—students take on the task of completing fourteen portfolios full of work, including seven major presentations in such areas as math, science, literature, history, the arts, community service and apprenticeship, and autobiography. These “presentations,” made to a graduation committee consisting of at least two faculty members, an
track go beyond the statistics. Recently I dropped in on the ninth
and tenth-graders as they were presenting their scenes from Mac
beth in the school auditorium. They had spent many months work-
ing over their ideas about the play, and now they were presenting
these ideas to each other. The keen sense of ownership they dis-
played over the material was astounding to me. It was the product
of the kind of leisurely pacing only a school like ours can afford, and
they were able to show it off to each other without fear of being rid-
iculed. They knew that the laughter from the audience was the
laughter of colleagues working with not against them. It was a won-
derful few hours.

Another confirmation came under less happy circumstances.
The infamous so-called wilding assault on a Central Park jogger oc-
curred just a few blocks from our building. That event had a par-
ticularly powerful impact on the sensitivities of East Harlem resi-
dents. As I came to school after the four-day holiday during which
the assault occurred, I knew one thing: we needed time to work out
how to deal with the youngsters’ reactions. The staff met at lunch to
talk about what the kids were saying and how we might respond.

We knew we had to address not only the children’s reactions, but
also our own fears and anger. We had to face our different re-
 sponses and learn from them. We also had to help the kids deal with
a hungry press, and prevent their unwitting exploitation as cam-
eras, microphones, and reporters with pencils and pads pushed into
their lives in order to get firsthand “reactions.” The events unfolded
in such a way that adolescents in East Harlem were perceived as a
threat to decent white middle-class joggers. It was easy for kids to
fall into the trap set up by reporters and the general climate and
respond as though they were defending the alleged attackers and
distancing themselves from the victim. Reorganizing to deal with
these issues would not have been possible in a typical New York City
high school. Our size, our simple and flexible schedule, the advisory
 system, and our collegial organization made it feasible to address
the crisis together and immediately. The kids as a result felt less ex-
plotted, had time to sort out their own feelings and develop their
own language for describing them. They also learned that they need

adult of the student’s choice, and another student, are carried out
with enormous seriousness and zeal. They are the primary record—
transcript—of a student’s success at CPRESS, and the basis for re-
ceiving the diploma. The Saturday morning school was the out-
growth of Senior Institute students’ insistence on more time to pre-
pare. They prep each other before, and debrief each other after,
each presentation. Committee meetings, originally designed to last
about thirty minutes per portfolio, rarely get finished in less than
an hour. Starting in seventh grade, kids know what awaits them at
the end and have the opportunity to practice this final process each
semester as they move through the school and sit through a half-
dozen or more meetings as student members of graduation com-
mittees. This process, which has its trade-offs in terms of the time
required for faculty participation, creates a series of tasks that re-
quire a wide range of performance skills, habits of work as well as
mind: the sheer ability to put the material together for their com-
mittee to review, to arrange and schedule meetings, to make oral
presentations and answer unexpected questions with poise and
aplomb!

It also means that early on they must tackle the most important
question of all—what’s this all for? What comes next? Each student’s
post-graduation plan is the first of the fourteen portfolios, the cen-
terpiece of the Senior Institute and the graduation process, the tool
that promises to become the most powerful focuser as we learn to
use it better. Creating this plan—a joint activity of student, family
and adviser—enables us to put together a package of courses (both
on and off campus), internships or apprenticeships, independent
study, and other external experiences that will lead a student from
the protective cocoon of CPRESS’s Division II to his or her next and
more independent task as a graduate. The entire process of the Se-
nier Institute, from the creation of the first post-graduation plan to
the completion of the fourteenth portfolio, brings together our
commitment to a personalized education and our commitment to
high standards for all—standards we take full public responsibility
for stating and defending in ways that all can understand.

The facts that reinforce my confidence that we’re on the right
not answer reporters at all. It helped them avoid feeling like helpless objects of the prurient interest of the reporters, to be more "in control of the script."

They have such opportunities often as crises hit their world, from the death of a fellow student to the events surrounding the Rodney King trial. On the Friday morning following the Los Angeles riots, we were scheduled for a visit from an all-white Michigan high school chorus, who were coming to sing for us. We on the school's staff were nervous about rumors that some of the week's tension and anger might be directed against these frightened out-of-towners—some students, the rumors claimed, wanted a symbolic protest, a walkout to show their distress. After a few introductory greetings before the packed auditorium, just as we could feel a crisis coming, sixteen-year-old Mark walked resolutely onto the stage. "There are no enemies of ours in this room," he announced, and to resounding applause brought us all together.

Above all a school structure such as ours works for the small crises—rumors of a fight or drug use, family crises and homelessness, runaways and attempted suicides, pregnancies and births. We can take the time (the endless hours, it often seems) to attend. Some years ago one of the most beloved members of our larger school community, Josie Hernandez, died. Her children were among our first elementary school graduates, fifteen years before, and one has since returned as a teacher. Ms. Hernandez had become secretary at one of our elementary schools. In short, she mattered to us all in many different ways. Her death could not go by unnoted. We stopped to take stock of her life and its meaning personally and individually. We had to be sure that those students who had known her could attend her memorial service. We had to pay attention to details, not just good intentions.

We can do such things not because we are more caring than other teachers or other schools. Not at all. It's because we have a structure and style that enables us to show our care effectively. What could a high school principal with four thousand students possibly do in the face of such a situation? In such schools a death a day is commonplace, and to take cognizance of individual tragedies would

be to lapse into a state of perpetual grief and mourning. The distancing and numbing required in most schools is a fact of life, a necessary coping strategy.

If we want children to be caring and compassionate, then we must provide a place for growing up in which effective care is feasible. Creating such intimate schools is possible even in an existing system of large buildings if we create smaller communities within them. That's what I think the visitors who come to our schools recognize and acknowledge. That is what is visibly obvious.

Caring and compassion are not soft, mushy goals. They are part of the hard core of subjects we are responsible for teaching. Informed and skillful care is learned. Caring is as much cognitive as affective. The capacity to see the world as others might is central to unsentimental compassion and at the root of both intellectual skepticism and empathy. "Any human being sufficiently motivated can fully possess another culture, no matter how 'alien' it may appear to be," argues noted African-American author and literary critic Henry Louis Gates. "But there is no tolerance without respect—and no respect without knowledge." Such empathetic qualities are precisely the habits of mind that require deliberate cultivation—that is, schooling. If such habits are central to democratic life, our schools must become places that cultivate, consciously and rigorously, these moral and intellectual fundamentals.

Moving on to high school has helped us at Central Park East to see where the qualities of a good kindergarten classroom need reinforcement. The imaginative play that we so eagerly abandon, the attention to children's nascent friendships, these are all merely the precursors of what Piaget called intellectual "decentering," that is, the ability to imagine the world without oneself at its center. As we stunt on one we injure the other. As we eliminate from our schools and from children's after-school lives the time and space for exercising their creative imagination and building personal ties, we've cheated our children and our society in a far more critical way than we're inclined to understand.
Are We the Latest Fad?

Sometimes it seems that way. We're not used to being quite so popular at CPE!

Every report, task force, and study being conducted these days comes out with a set of recommendations that sound like a description of CPE and CPES.

1. Schools should be small and highly personal. Where schools are large they should be broken into interdisciplinary houses.

2. Cooperative learning is a key to successful learning.

3. There should be integration of curriculum: history and literature, math and science, etc.

4. Academic periods should be longer in high schools—at least an hour, ideally two hours.

5. High school homerooms should be full-length periods and serve as serious advisory places, and teachers should stay with the same homeroom for two years or more.

6. Fewer subjects, taught thoroughly, are better than lots of courses taught superficially.

7. Decisions about curriculum, pedagogy and scheduling should be made by on-site professionals.

8. Parents should be informed and involved in their children's education.

9. Students should be expected to demonstrate their abilities directly—to "show" what they know and can do. Multiple-choice tests are not a substitute for the real performance.

10. Students should be expected to engage in socially useful work, and should learn about the world-of-work through school-directed work experiences.

I could go on and on and on! I think of ourselves as having "pioneered" Conflict Resolution, only to discover that it's now on every educator's list of "must do's." CPE has been insisting on writer's journals for 15 years, and now everyone says it's the thing to do. We've been opponents of basal readers and against reliance on textbooks for 15 years. Now that's the fashionable viewpoint.

I'm so accustomed to swimming against the stream that I'm getting worried.

That's not entirely a joke, folks. We need to be careful that these good ideas don't become just another passing fad. That can happen if we become smug, and pretend that the label is the same as the real thing, or that having good intentions is enough.