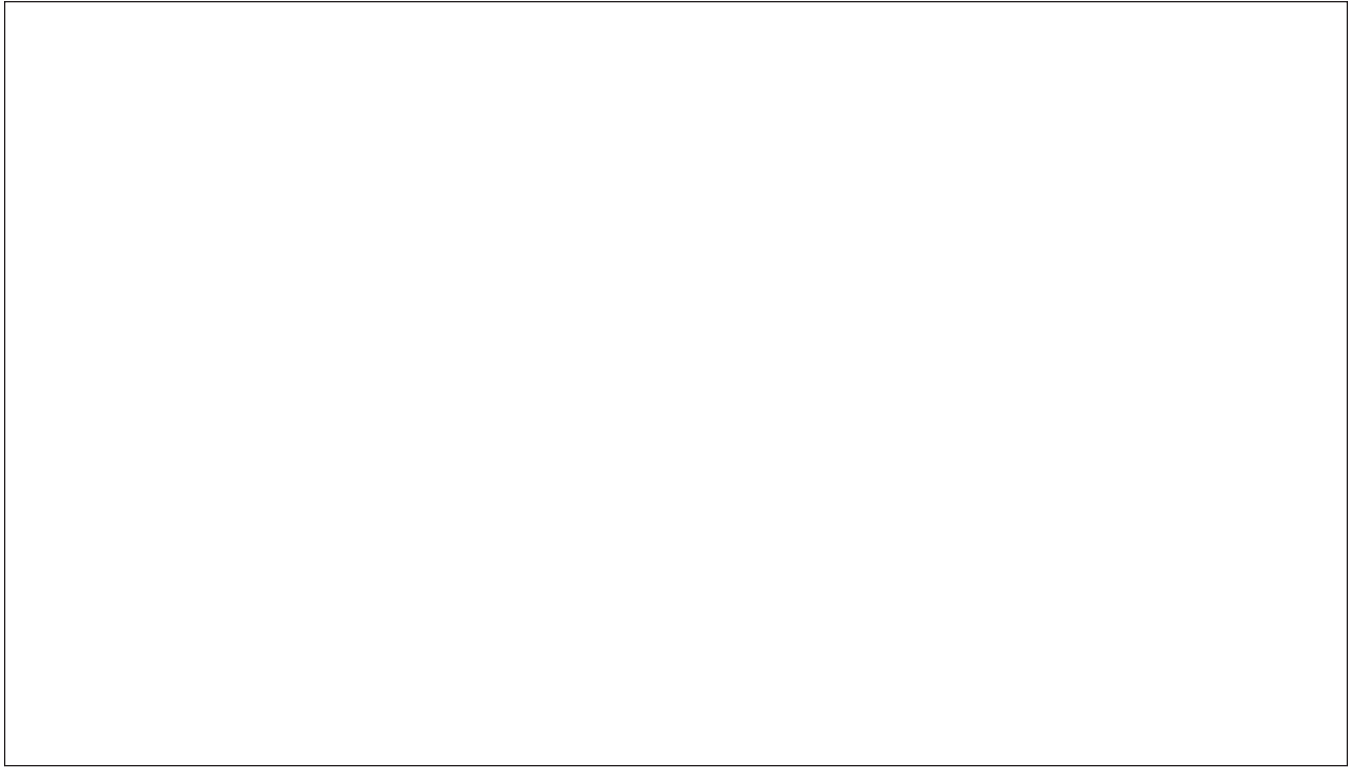

Dare to Be Different

Can a school choose its own path despite the pressures of accountability? In the end, Ms. Wassermann says, it is possible to act on our beliefs within the constraints that bind us.



BY SELMA WASSERMANN

CHARLES Dickens Elementary School, with its scarlet brick exterior, is a hundred-year-old relic from a time when schools were built as no-nonsense fortresses to contain and socialize a swelling immigrant population. In spite of its down-at-the-heels condition, it manages to retain its grandeur, wearing its red coat as a banner of bravado: Dare to Be Different. For Charles Dickens Elementary is as distinct in its ethos as in its appearance from most other public schools in the city of Vancouver — and perhaps throughout

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the entire province of British Columbia.

The Vietnamese pho shops and other low-rent cafés that hawk sushi, samosas, pizza, and dim sum on the Kingsway, just up the block, manifest the diversity of the area and signal the ethnic mix of the children in the school. Many of them are new Canadians; some speak English as yet haltingly; others, not quite yet. In Annie O'Donaghue's class of third- through fifth-graders, a children-drawn world map on the bulletin board shows the students' countries of origin: El Salvador, Honduras, India, Canada, Portugal, China, Vietnam, Philippines, Ireland. Many of the children who are identified as coming from Canada are of First Nations heritage.

Dickens is not the school one would have picked as most likely to defy every new curriculum du jour

handed down by school boards and ministries of education over the last 30 years. It is certainly not the school one would have picked to remain true to its child-centered roots, facing off against such educational tsunamis as the back-to-basics movement, Madeline Hunter's direct instruction, and now the high-stakes testing madness that is passing for educational quality. And this is certainly not the school, given the challenges of the student population, that one would have picked to demonstrate such high performance levels, showing us once again what many educators know: that given the "right stuff" — the right teachers, the right administration, the right conditions — all children can be successful learners.

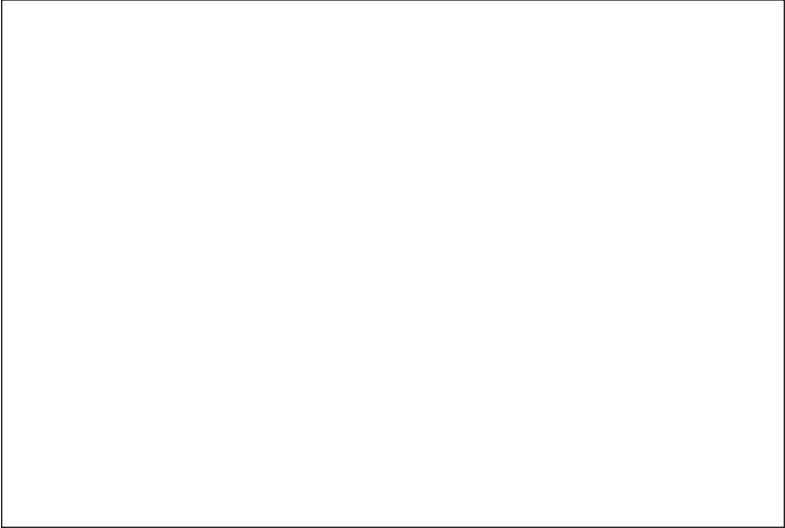
I came to visit Charles Dickens and left humbled at what I saw, for surely this is the kind of school and the quality of education that we all say we want for our children. I wanted to know what made it "work" and how, in the past 20 years, it has held onto its autonomy and endured as a beacon of what a school can and should be.

SCENES FROM THE SCHOOL

I walk up the steep stone steps and enter a large hallway, looking for the general office. The floor is patterned linoleum worn by the footsteps of hundreds and thousands of winter boots, but the visitor's eye is immediately drawn to the colors — children's art on every wall, including large-scale murals painted directly on the hallway lockers. Even the tops of the lockers are used to display children's dioramas. The colorful exhibits speak of the value put on children's creative work, and it is obvious that the students themselves, not the teachers, have put this art on display. In the rear area of the hallway, under the staircase, an old couch, some easy chairs, and a small bookcase containing paperback books and magazines make an informal reading corner. No one is on guard here; all the doors are unlocked, and the school can be entered from any side. There is a sense of "non-orderliness" here — not sloppy or unclean, but put together by children. The informality of it all is striking, and it is immediately clear that children own this environment and that order and control are not key issues in this school.

John Perpich, principal of Charles Dickens Elementary School for the last six years, escorts me upstairs to Annie O'Donaghue's classroom. Like every other

class in the school, this is a multi-age grouping: grades 3, 4, and 5 combined. The rationale for multi-age grouping, Perpich says, is that the numbers of same-age children in the school population of 455 children do not allow for even distribution into grade-level classes. He smiles when he says this, suggesting a hidden agenda, which he immediately reveals. This school believes in multi-age grouping. It is a mainstay of the program. Insofar as logistics permit, teachers work with the same group of children over a three-year period, getting to know them well enough to understand individual learning needs and provide appropriate instruction that addresses those needs. Perpich says that in single-year transitions, it often takes teachers about six weeks to "learn" the learning styles of each new student. In the multi-age arrangement, teachers and students simply pick up in September where they left off in June — a seamless continuum rather than a brand-new experience. It is the kind of organization that allows for and facilitates continuous student learning.



Another advantage of multi-age grouping is that it implants in students the notion that their classroom is a family, in which the older children look out for the younger ones, caring for them, helping them out socially and educationally, and taking responsibility for being the "older brothers and sisters." This outlook filters down through the ages, so that when the "littles" move up the chronological ladder and become the "olders," they too take on the mantle of helpers and caretakers. It becomes natural for children to work with those of their own age, with some who are younger, and with some who are older. Age demarcations that contribute to unhealthy social attitudes simply do not exist here.

My eyes scan the classroom. Bulletin boards “owned” by the children display poems, stories, artwork, and newspaper clippings with headlines such as “Don Baker, 41, Pleads Guilty to Raping Prostitutes, Sex with Kids,” and “Huge Crowds Throng St. Peter’s Square,” and “Canada’s Leading Architect Arthur Erikson Puts His Touch on New Tower.” I am immediately reminded of Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s advice to teachers: “Let life come in the door.”¹ If these are the headlines that children see on newsstands and on the kitchen tables in

me over as if I were last week’s hamburger.

“Hmm,” I look him in the eye. “What would you think?”

The children appraise me and I wonder if I haven’t given them license to stretch the truth.

“I think you’re 49,” Christina says in all seriousness.

“Forty-nine!” I gasp, astonished at this gift.

“But don’t worry,” she quickly replies. “You only look 45.”

After each reading, the children offer feedback, and I hear critiques that go to the heart of what makes a poem good — descriptor words, imagery, cadence, the ability to evoke pictures in the mind.

their homes, why should they not be put under thoughtful scrutiny in the classroom?

The informality I observed in the corridor carries over into the classroom. Annie sits on a low chair, and the children gather around her. They are having “writer’s workshop,” in which they share their poetry with one another and solicit informed feedback. Their poems reflect a previous lesson on alliteration and imagery, and it appears that even children new to English can use language in spectacular and powerful ways. After each reading, the children call on their classmates who raise their hands to offer feedback, and I hear critiques that go to the heart of what makes a poem good — descriptor words, imagery, cadence, the ability to evoke pictures in the mind. These poems are first drafts, and the children, after reading and feedback, will have an opportunity to redraft until the poems reach their final, polished stage. In this group of 24 mixed-age children, there is no sign of restlessness or inattention. In fact, there is a calmness here and an interest in the work that is palpable. Critical feedback is focused on what’s good and what might be added to strengthen the poem. It is always respectful, a learned skill, and a key aspect of “writer’s workshop.” After the readings, the children leave the whole group to work individually to redraft their poems. When Annie has to leave the room, the children seem unaware that she has gone; they simply continue with their work, interacting with one another, talking quietly, and some coming over to visit with me, swarming like butterflies.

“So how old are you, anyway?” Rahul asks, looking

They are as close to Ashton-Warner’s “natural child” as I have seen in many, many school visits.²

Back at the office, Perpich hands me the recent evaluations of students’ progress in “meeting writing goals.” The table for spring 2005 presents data on writing development in grades 5, 6, and 7. At the grade-7 level, a total of four children have been recorded as “not meeting expectations.” Seventeen children are “minimally meeting expectations.” Fifty-three children are “meeting expectations.” And 26 children are “exceeding expectations,” making a total of 96% of seventh-graders who are “meeting or exceeding the standards for that grade level.” Perpich says that “we are still working on the total of 36% from combined grades 5, 6, and 7 who are not yet, or minimally, meeting expectations, which is largely due to the numbers of ESL children in that group.” In the last year, there was a 40% increase in the number of children meeting or exceeding expectations in literacy, and the expectation is that the coming year will show similar if not better results.

KEYS TO THE SCHOOL OPERATION

When parents enroll their children at Charles Dickens, they are handed a brochure with the mission statement of the school, developed by the previous principal, Corine Clark, her staff, and a group of parents. On the front of the brochure, a photo of the school caps the statement: “Together we bring alive our commitment to develop each child’s potential in all do-

mains through a long-established philosophy built on mutual respect, continuous learning, and opportunities for leadership within a child-centered, multi-aged framework.” This statement is expanded in the list of beliefs that underlie the operating practices of the school:

- Learning requires the active participation of the learner.
- People learn in different ways and at different rates.
- Learning is built on individual and social processes.
- The learner is the focus of education, not the curriculum.
- The integration of subjects is necessary.
- Curiosity, creativity, and cooperation should be nurtured.
- Creative and critical problem-solving skills should be taught.
- Play is a condition of learning.
- Questions should be valued.
- A sense of responsibility in decision making should be fostered.
- A sense of self as an individual and as part of the group is important.

The brochure introduces parents to the specific features of the school that are based on these beliefs: an orientation toward continuous progress; appropriate evaluation of progress; schoolwide team-teaching; anecdotal reporting to parents, instead of letter grades; a collegial and collaborative working relationship between teachers and administrators, with consensus decision making in staff meetings; mentoring for student teachers who come from the two major universities’ teacher training programs; advocacy teams to recommend school policy directions and school improvement plans; an active student council; and a parent involvement advocacy team and parent advisory council. Reading the bro-

chure, I am reminded of the quote “What a wise and good parent will desire for his own child, a nation must desire for all children”³ and think sadly how far so many schools have strayed from that standard.

While any child from the school catchment area may attend Charles Dickens Elementary School, out-of-district parents who are interested in having their children attend Dickens can apply for admission. There is currently a waiting list of applicants; many parents willingly drive their children across the city to attend the school.

A LITTLE HISTORY

John Wormsbecker, former assistant superintendent of schools in Vancouver, talked to me about early days, when “open education” was being looked to as an antidote to the “crisis in the classroom” arising from too much emphasis on silence, obedience, and workbook and textbook exercises that numbed the mind and depleted the soul.⁴ In the early Seventies, groups of educators from North America undertook educational pilgrimages to the U.K. to see firsthand the child-centered programs that were part of the British Primary School movement. (After more than 20 successful years of operation, open education in Great Britain was swept away by the broom of the “iron lady,” Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who gleefully presided over its demise. This was not a matter of what was good for children; it was purely a matter of economics and budget cutting.)

During the 1970s, Wormsbecker and others from the Vancouver District Office went to England to see for themselves what the British primary classroom looked like and had to offer teachers and students in Vancouver. When they returned, they brought over specialists to give workshops and provide support to teachers and schools in Vancouver that tilted in favor of more child-centered programs. The child-centered philosophy then spread throughout British Columbia (as it did in places in the U.S.), and more child-centered programs appeared in provincial public school classrooms. While many Vancouver schools were initially involved, the programs began to falter during the reactive “back-to-basics” thrust of the 1980s. Although one can still find classrooms throughout the province where teachers remain wedded to their child-centered practices, it is rare today to find an entire school that is wholly consistent in its dedication to such principles.

When the honeymoon with open education was

over, Dickens found itself, like other schools, with a few teachers outside the mainstream whose practice was guided by their open education philosophy. The arrival in 1988 of George Rooney, the new principal, changed all of that. Rooney, credited with the resurrection of open education at Charles Dickens, stood by his child-centered beliefs and, slowly but surely, took the steps that would ensure that Dickens became a

to dare to march to the drummer of one's educational beliefs.

Most of the school's 30 teachers teach in teams of two and sometimes three. Team-teaching creates opportunities for teachers to examine and discuss instructional strategies, the assessment of learning needs, appropriate interventions, teacher/student interactions, and "whether the plans are working." Every classroom

Because there is no "grade-level curriculum," each child's learning needs are met along a continuum of progress.

lighthouse school for child-centered education. Rooney, who retired in 1995, was succeeded by Tom Robb and then Corine Clark, both of whom committed themselves to carrying on the child-centered programs. When John Perpich took over the administrative reins, he willingly accepted the responsibility of keeping it all alive.

WHAT MAKES DICKENS RUN?

Dickens has officially been granted "alternative school" status by the ministry of education and the Vancouver school board. This designation gives them more degrees of freedom and allows them to depart, in giant steps, from mainstream practices seen throughout the district. For example, standardized tests, such as the CAT (Canadian Achievement Tests), the CTSB (Canadian Tests of Basic Skills), and the Stanford Achievement Test, used in Vancouver and other provincial schools as means of assessing performance, are rejected in favor of the professional judgments of teams of teachers, based on their day-to-day observations and evaluations of students' work. (The Foundation Skills Assessments [FSA], a provincewide test, is mandated for all schools, and Dickens is not exempt from this requirement.) When I asked about how this approach was possible in such a climate of high-stakes testing, Perpich told me, "Of course, we are required to document a student's levels of achievement. And as long as I can document the children's progress and successful performance, 'downtown' is happy. Of course, there are many ways to do this." I was astonished to learn that each school in the district has many options with respect to providing high-quality education for all students and evaluating student performance. Perpich and his staff have chosen "continuous progress." Other schools have chosen differently. I wonder what it takes

is a learning laboratory, every teacher a professional.

As noted earlier, teachers remain with the same group of children for three years. Thus they get to know the students better and to become familiar with their individual learning needs and styles. Because there is no "grade-level curriculum," each child's learning needs are met along a continuum of progress. The teachers use a "theme" approach to curriculum, so that each child may work at his or her own level. In the continuous progress system, no child is a failure who would be subject to the ridicule of his or her classmates. Perpich says, "Our school does not use a 'deficit' model; here, we emphasize efficacy and success."

Perpich tells the story of "Mike," a boy who transferred from another school. Mike had been branded as a "five-er" — that is, a child with letter grades of "E" based on gradewide tests given three times a year, which he consistently failed. After transferring to Dickens, where the pressure to achieve on standardized tests was removed, Mike began to succeed. This is not miraculous or anomalous but is simply an example of learning that builds on success rather than failure.

As explained in the parents' brochure, there are no grades given at Dickens Elementary School. Parents receive anecdotal reports written by the teachers. Attached to these reports are the students' self-evaluations of their performance. Both the principal and the teachers have observed that in such a climate of openness and respect, children evaluate themselves with great honesty and perception — and are often less generous in their assessments than are their teachers.

And the parents' response to narrative reporting? Parents claim that the narratives tell them much more than letter grades about how and what their children are learning. Some parents still ask for letter grades, and the school does provide them if requested. How-

ever, such requests are rare.

There are observable effects on children's behavior in this school. I'm told, "There's no attitude problem here; what's more, as the kids go on into secondary school, there's no attitude problem there, either." Perpich tells me that, as principal in his previous school, he would return from lunch to face a long line of children waiting outside his office to be "disciplined" for biting, kicking, punching, hair pulling, and on and on. At Dickens, there is no line of children, and his disciplinary work is virtually nonexistent.

THE TEACHERS HOLD THE KEYS

It is not difficult to see that the critical force in initiating and maintaining a child-centered philosophy in a school is the teaching staff. Without like-minded teachers who perform at the highest levels and are respected as professionals, no educational program, let alone a child-centered one, can endure. Teachers must see the school as a place where all children can satisfy their curiosity, develop their abilities and talents, pursue their interests, and, through their interactions with their teachers and the older children around them, get a glimpse of the great variety and richness of life.⁵

When Rooney stepped in as principal of Dickens Elementary, he actively searched for and recruited teachers with such a perspective. Rather than rely on résumés and interviews, he actually visited classrooms and watched teachers in action. Based on his observations, he hired his initial Dickens staff. Teachers who "came with the school" and did not share the child-centered philosophy were invited to transfer to other, more congenial schools in Vancouver, and 11 teachers left when Rooney established the operating principles for the school.

Rooney was able to gather a critical mass of teachers who could be counted on to be strong advocates of open education and whose classroom practices matched those principles. Once those teachers were in place, the school began to attract attention for its students' academic success, its high regard in the parent community, and its status in the academy, with both universities in the area vying for student teacher placements. Dickens eventually became a magnet for other like-minded teachers, and recruitment and sustainability were no longer problems.

The staff at Dickens is exceptional in many ways. Teachers share decision making with respect to policy and practice in the school, and their professional au-

tonomy is unquestioned. They function on an extremely high level in virtually every area of teacher expertise. In deciding class makeup for the next school year, for example, teachers are more than willing to accept their share of the "more difficult" children. Children who present the greatest challenges are not "dumped" on teachers who are new to the school; decisions about placement are based on which teacher is best qualified to meet a particular child's needs.

Perpich tells me that in the staff room, when teachers talk about students, they never complain or make negative comments. These teachers, Perpich says, love what they do, and it shows. When there is an opening for a new teacher, several members of the staff join the principal in the interview process. This practice goes to the edge of the envelope of what the union allows, but Perpich is willing to take the risk to get the teachers he wants. The school's job postings these days are worded in a way that will very nearly ensure that only those teachers sharing a like-minded philosophy will even apply.

IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO

If the staff holds the keys to the successes of Charles Dickens, it is the principal who supports, encourages, facilitates, and explicitly appreciates what the teachers do. The teachers could not function at such a high level without strong administrative support, and Rooney, Robb, Clark, and Perpich have all been exemplary in providing it.

A successful alternative school requires an educational leader who is willing to take a stand on what he or she believes and stay the course. As Joanna McClelland Glass writes in her brilliant play, *Trying*, "You just lace up your skates and hit the ice."⁶ Of course, the principal must be clear about his or her beliefs and be able and willing to act on them. As noted earlier, Dickens had to obtain special permission from the school board for some of its practices, such as anecdotal reporting instead of letter grades, and this was granted. Much of what is done at Dickens, however, is done without special permission. "We are quiet about it; my strategy is to do it first and then beg forgiveness after," Perpich tells me. The school is left largely to its own devices because of two essential conditions: there is no flak from parents or kids because they are well satisfied, and the kids are clearly cared about and performing at high levels of achievement.

Perpich is in his last year as principal before he re-

tires, but he already has plans in the works for recruiting and hiring the principal who will replace him. He and his staff will decide on who will next carry the ball to keep the spirit and practice of Charles Dickens Elementary School alive and well.

BUT WHAT HAPPENS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL?

Because Charles Dickens has been in operation for nearly 20 years, there is now a history of reports about students who graduate from grade 7 and go on to junior and senior secondary schools in the district. In June 2004, for example, more than 50% of those who graduated from Dickens and applied to the secondary “mini schools” (schools-within-schools that offer special programs and enroll a small cadre of talented and high-functioning students) were accepted. The feedback from teachers at the mini schools and other high schools accepting Dickens students is that these young people are well-rounded, can carry on good discussions focused on the “big ideas,” are good leaders, are good team players, are autonomous, are flexible and make good adjustments to high school, and are personally responsible. These reports remind me of the descriptions of the high school graduates from the Eight-Year Study program, which emphasized a richer and learner-centered curriculum and a healthy respect for student autonomy.⁷

GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS

My observations at Dickens and interviews with the principal, teachers, and former district officials have provided a richly textured view of how a school with a highly challenging student population has not only survived but flourished. In the face of the prevailing educational ethos, which celebrates the trivial and downplays much of what we know is right and good for kids, Dickens has maintained its dedication to a child-centered program that actively reveres children and treats them with the respect that they deserve while ensuring that each one learns to his or her greatest ability. It’s not a big mystery. All that is needed is the will, the instructional talent, the treatment of teachers as the high-functioning professionals they are, the administrative leadership, and the expertise to pull it all together to make it work. But none of this is news; this is what we, as educators, have known all along — from the early days of the Eight-Year Study to studies of the

open classroom in the 1970s to more recent studies of single schools’ alternative programs.⁸

So what is the bad news? From the safe haven of my office and desk, where I can look out at the cruise ships making their way up the inland waterway to Alaska, I feel sadness in recognizing that there is no magic formula that others can use to replicate what happens in this school. Dickens exists because a group of educators made tough decisions about what they thought was right and good for children. They stood by their decisions and played clean (and a little dirty) to get what they wanted. They never backed down.

In the end, it all comes down to choices — and educators have more choices than they might realize. It’s one thing to knuckle under and accept what we hate and put that into practice, knowing all the while that we don’t believe in it and wish it would go away. It’s another thing to find out what options we do have and see how best we can maneuver to maintain and act on our beliefs within the constraints that bind us.

What can we do? And how far can we go? It may be possible to go much farther than we at first thought, if we can stand up and say, “This is what we believe. This is what’s right.” Having the toughness to do that is perhaps easy for me to advocate but hard in the field. For what it takes is “stand-up” leadership from principals, who must buffer the school from district and provincial demands. It takes school boards and provincial and state authorities who aren’t afraid to give the professionals in the field the autonomy to follow a different pathway in meeting rigorous standards. Without such mettle, we will continue to bend and sway with the winds of change, and children will be the losers.

1. Sylvia Ashton-Warner, *Teacher* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962).
2. Sylvia Ashton-Warner, *Spearpoint: Teacher in America* (New York: Knopf, 1972).
3. Mary Brown and Norman Precious, *The Integrated Day in the Primary School* (London: Ward Lock, 1970), p. 36.
4. Charles Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom* (New York: Random House, 1970).
5. Brown and Precious, p. 42.
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8. See, among others, Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); Mary Ann Raywid, “Central Park East Secondary School: The Anatomy of Success,” *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, vol. 4, 1999, pp. 131-51; and Charles Silberman, *The Open Classroom Reader* (New York: Random House, 1970). **K**

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