

THE TEACHER WHO THREW AWAY THE BOOK: DEBBIE MEIER TORE DOWN
THE WALLS STANDING IN THE WAY OF LEARNING

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If the New York City schools had not been such a collection of cracked-window disasters in the late 1960s when Deborah Willen Meier wandered in, she would have been fired a long time ago. Today Debbie Meier is one of the best-known and most celebrated educators in the country, her work and one of her schools the core of the new Frederick Wiseman documentary, "High School II," premiering tonight on WETA (Channel 26) at 9. She has won a \$335,000 MacArthur Foundation award, sometimes called the "genius grant." She has helped revitalize the public schools in New York's East Harlem district and has been hired by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University to spread her gospel touting education as a lifelong conversation.

But two decades of battles with frustrated administrators, suspicious parents and jealous teachers has left this wry 63-year-old woman intensely aware of how often she has faced catastrophe, and how little patience there would have been for her impolitic ideas and experiments at the beginning of her success if her supervisors had been less desperate and her critics more powerful.

Meier is, in a way, the Mikhail Gorbachev of American education, a social democrat who grew up with the values of the progressive left but concluded later that some ideas with a rightist taint -- like choice of schools for parents and students -- were necessary to kill off a bureaucratic monster strangling the profession she loved. As Gorbachev helped fracture the old Soviet Union, so Meier has led the movement to chop America's big high schools into vibrant little educational enclaves, many schools within a school. Last week she was at the Vanguard School, a new mini-campus on the second floor of IS 22 near the Williamsburg Bridge, helping teachers prepare for 150 students sent to them as part of the dismemberment and eventual reconstruction of Julia Richman High School. Outside, graffiti decorated several buildings and glass covered the sidewalk where a car's rear window had been shattered, but inside, new computers were being set up and teachers briefed on how to change a culture.

At the end of the Wiseman documentary, Meier, distinguished by a crown of thick, curly hair, tells visiting parents that good education should be "what a good life is like, finding people to have interesting and important and powerful conversations with and then seeing what else you can do to extend that conversation... with more facts, more information and in a more powerful position to think through those issues." She notes with a smile, however, her recent encounter with a seventh-grade girl exposed for years to the Meier philosophy. The child loved the school, and yet dallied in her classes and did not show the slightest inclination to turn her young life into a never-ending seminar. She relishes the clash between practice and theory.

"She is wonderful dealing with the immediate, the particular youngster, the particular teacher," said Brown University Prof. TheodoreSizer, "but at the same time she is a first-class intellectual." It is Meier's view, enthusiastically promoted by Sizer, chairman of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and their admirers across the country, that students and teachers should deal with each other in smaller schools as human beings,

rather than as lines on an organizational chart. Such intimate environments allow experimentation with the reality-based lessons -- mapping Manhattan, testing East River water, searching for remains of Dutch settlements -- that are at the core of Sizer and Meier's method.

Not that her approach has not caused her, and many others, a great deal of pain, as usually happens when weary old empires break up. Sy Fliegel, once one of her bosses here, remembers receiving a delegation of black and Hispanic parents determined not to have their children molded by "a white Jewish lady" and demanding her head. Meier recalls the moment some of the teachers who had worked with her to create her first school turned on her when she decided she could no longer leave everything up to consensus, that she had to begin making some decisions. Her schools remain largely staff-run, however, with teachers often outvoting Meier. At Central Park East Secondary School she accepted the judgment of younger staff members that students ought to call them by their first names, even though Meier was uncomfortable at first hearing ninth-graders call her Debbie.

"She regarded kids as individuals, an approach that my own teaching experience had convinced me was essential," said Fliegel, explaining in his book "Miracle in East Harlem" why he backed her during the initial parental rebellion. "She cared about youngsters, about learning, and had assembled a staff excited about education. There aren't enough people like that in the world."

Devotees of Sizer and Meier populate every state now. Tonight's documentary offers a three-hour, seemingly formless slice of life at Central Park East, full of the individual teacher-student encounters that Sizer's group wants to become standard classroom fare. Central Park East shares a large, time-worn building in a crime-ridden part of the city with other schools. It has just 475 students, most from minority and low-income families. Its graduates have a 90 percent enrollment rate in four-year colleges. Its dropout rate of 5 percent compares with the citywide average of 40 percent. Studies show it does this at no extra expense, Meier said, because it uses fewer administrators and organizes its faculty in an inventive way.

This was not, as Meier often reminds readers of her essays published in the *Nation* and several educational journals, the sort of school she first encountered when her life finally led her into teaching. Her mother, a founder of the American Labor Party, was president of the National Council of Jewish Women and once ran for the New York city council. Her father was executive director of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. She attended Ethical Culture schools, the Fieldston School, Antioch College and the University of Chicago, on her way to what she thought might be a career as a writer or journalist or something "intellectually exciting." Teaching was not considered a suitable occupation for someone with her scholarly background and clear, often vivid writing style.

A professor at Temple University, where she later took some courses, once said upon seeing her resume: "Why are you teaching? This is ridiculous. With this kind of education you could do anything." When she took her first education courses in Chicago, "I was intrigued by how bad they were," she said. At her first job as an elementary school substitute, she found that "principals were unbelievably rude, not only to students and parents, but to their own teachers as well." Married at 20, she delayed full-time work because she had three children to raise, an enterprise to which she applied some of the

same views about youthful initiative and independence that later characterized her work in East Harlem.

Her daughter Becky, now a fifth-grade teacher in Williamstown, Mass., said she had no sense at the time of being treated differently from other children, but remembers how much her friends enjoyed coming to her house. Today her mother's cousins tell her Meier was, at the time, their model for a different kind of mothering. Meier's marriage ended after the family moved to New York. She began to work full time in experimental elementary schools, testing what came to be known as "open education." Teachers, often with the help of Lillian Weber of the City College Workshop, gave children stimulating materials, observed them working and playing and then offered each child assistance in developing the skills each seemed most interested in.

At that time a rare daredevil in the New York schools, Anthony Alvarado, had just been made superintendent of District 4, which ran East Harlem. Seeing an intellectual soul mate in Meier, he offered her a chance to start her own school. She gathered a few friends in 1973 with a tacit agreement that no one would be the boss. They took over the second, third and fourth floors of run-down PS 171 on East 103rd Street between Madison and Fifth avenues and called it Central Park East Elementary School. They visited Head Start centers and promised parents of children about to enter full-time schooling that they would provide small classes that operated like friendly workshops.

"I don't think too many people were listening to what we were saying," Meier recalled. But they signed up anyway because they liked the way the teachers spoke, or were told by other teachers that this would be good for their children.

Envious teachers at other schools asked why they couldn't start their own projects, and were encouraged to do so. "Schools were no longer equated with buildings," Meier wrote later in the Nation. "Where there had been twenty-two schools in twenty-two buildings, in less than ten years fifty-one schools occupied twenty buildings (along with two housed in a nearby high school)." She insisted that only students whose parents wished them to come be assigned to her campuses. All of District 4 moved toward a choice system.

Conservatives had fought for this idea in school systems across the country, and Meier, an unashamed liberal, defended it in the Nation: "Because progressives are on the defensive, their concern with equity leads them to attack choice reflexively as inherently elitist (naturally, it has few friends among educational bureaucrats either). This is, I believe, a grave mistake.... After all, it wasn't so long ago that progressive educators were enthusiastically supporting schools of choice, usually called 'alternative schools.' However, those alternatives were always on the fringe, as though the vast majority were doing just fine, thanks."

Meier, interviewed last week in the midst of the Vanguard School preparations, has retired from the New York system but now heads Sizer's group in New York, helping any school that wants to pursue their kind of reform. She plans to keep working "as long as it still remains fun and interesting," she said. "Although this week," she added, mentally reviewing the obstacles to a smooth beginning for another new venture, "only the word 'interesting' applies."