It was the early, heady 1960s. I was immersed in raising three very young children and trying, simultaneously, to change the world. I was deeply immersed in civil rights work, peace activism, and helping to keep alive a small, democratic socialist group led by Mike Harrington. But I was also short of cash. So, based on what a neighbor on Chicago's Southside told me, I decided it would be easy to pick up $35 a day being a public K-8 substitute teacher. It would work with my schedule—I could offer maybe two days a week while my kids were in nursery school and kindergarten, and I needed only to take a few courses (which were, in themselves, interesting as an insight into "ordinary" schooling)—so off I went.

I was dead wrong. Being a substitute teacher was the hardest thing I had ever done, and I was clearly a failure at it. But both of these factors intrigued me, and I relished the chance to get a sneak-peak into Chicago's mostly black public schools. After my second year as a substitute, though, it was getting tiring, and I accepted an offer to teach
morning kindergarten at the school that my own children attended (which was also mostly black). Me, a kindergarten teacher? Well, again, it seemed like an easy way to pick up a little money and stay close to home. Besides, it was a small school—maybe three hundred kids in grades K–6—and its teaching staff included a large number of local women who were full-time teachers and neighborhood activists. Surely, I thought, this was bound to be easier than subbing all over the city!

Despite the fact that I avoided being a babysitter in my youth and that I refused to take a single course in education (against the wise advice of others), I fell in love with kindergarten teaching and became fascinated with my fellow teachers. I had led a privileged life, attending progressive independent schools in New York City, Antioch, and the University of Chicago. Taking courses at the local teachers college was my first exposure to more traditional public schooling and public school students; getting my teaching certificate at the Board of Education was my first experience of being treated with contempt and condescension. Although my own children had already embarked on long "careers" in public, urban schools, it was utterly new to me. My twice-a-week exposure as a sub offered me a new insight into the nature of America's inequities, the difficulties in creating a truly democratic ethos, and building a movement for change. The public schools were a force, wittingly or not, for preserving the status quo.

I meant to see how, exactly, this might be changed. What are the small and telling ways in which we reinforce the prevailing class structure in our schools, and how do we perpetuate various ways of imagining possibilities? How is it that so many hard working and devoted women tolerate being treated so shabbily in their schools and yet stick with teaching, year after year? Why are mothers so fearful, and often angry, when they come to the school door and hand over their loved ones to the mostly well-meaning staff within? I wanted to find answers.

On a much smaller scale, the life within the classroom itself grabbed me. It was a place of endless fascination and constant intellectual, social, and moral struggle and delight. My first post-subbing classroom had thirty-five four- and five-year-olds and no assistant. Yet my energy was inexhaustible. Even though I only taught for half a day, it was, quite frankly, always a full-time job. In my personal time, I scoured my
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Home and my neighborhood for interesting objects, read books that might be useful for my classes, and met with families in the school and neighborhood to make better sense of what I was seeing and hearing with the children. I had my students dictate stories to me and created little books for them to read, which I then read aloud back to them. The kids' stories were full of wonderfully rich language, a fact counter to what I had been told about these "language-deprived" children.

My experience in those first few years of teaching was central to my forty-two-year career in urban public schools—as well as to teaching Head Start in Philadelphia and kindergarten in Central Harlem, then founding a series of public elementary and secondary schools in East Harlem, and finally, founding the Mission Hill school in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood.

Yes, poverty and racism have a powerful out-of-school impact on the lives of our children, which school alone cannot "undo." But undoing these factors is not the task of schools; the task of schools is to redo schooling so that it meets the strengths that all children bring with them, and joins with their families to make sure that schools are the richest and most inspiring places they can be. All children come to school with their imaginations intact, even where trauma or sensory deprivation has wounded them severely (which can occur to privileged children as well). What traumatized children require is a space to reflect upon life, not boot camps to further alienate them from their human aspirations.

I discovered early on that standardized tests were the most deceptive instruments, hiding rather than exposing the intelligence and capacities of children with societal disadvantages. Through careful and well-documented efforts, I learned that the kids I taught often gave smarter and well-thought-out responses to short-answer and multiple-choice questions than their middle-class white peers, yet those answers were often marked wrong. Whether we were talking about a second grade reading test or a fourth grade math test, what was being picked up from the children were abilities that had less to do with reading and math than educators assumed. Forty years later we can still see this, even on SAT questions!

I also discovered early on that young boys were doubly wounded in schools for reasons both obvious and subtle. The earlier schools sought
to inculcate so-called "academic" skills, the deeper the damage and the more permanent the "achievement" gap.

I found, too, that the remarkable early independence that poverty requires of the young is rarely rewarded in schools and, indeed, is often turned into a disadvantage, along with all the other early skills that come from having to cope with a less accommodating (coddling) environment.

And on and on.

Along with some of the most exciting progressive educators in the 1960s and 1970s, I had an opportunity to explore these questions and imagine how schools could be redesigned to better unleash the intellectual capacities of all children—starting with their natural talent for play and imagination, invention and exploration, and building and creating both material and abstract ideas. I came to see that the harsh discipline we criticized underprivileged, poor families for was often a tough-love response meant to prepare their children for a punitive and discriminatory world and to protect their children from authorities over which these families had little control. It may, in today's terms, be a maladaptive response—but who am I to say? Maybe the institutions of society need to be changed before such adaptive strategies can be dropped.

I reasoned that, if I could create an alliance with these families, I could create a school that would, at least to some degree, allow us all to utilize our intelligence better in the raising of our children. Rather than focus schooling on behavioral discipline we could focus on the intellectual disciplines—from art, science, history, and literature. Was it possible to find the kind of collegiality that was necessary to sustain me personally, and could it collectively produce something more than any one of us could produce in our own isolated classrooms? Collegial critique—a setting in which people were both supportive and critical of each other—was far harder than I envisioned, and more time consuming. Also, the trade-offs in seeking such collegiality were more open to question than I expected. In spending our time in critique, we reduced the time available for other forms of professional growth and for paying attention to our own immediate classroom/student tasks. Finally, there were trade-offs that I hadn't anticipated between a staff-governed school, in which decisions were largely made collectively,
and a family-style school, in which parents felt their voices were critically important. The cohesiveness and empowerment of one often encroached on the other, particularly with respect to those parents who had more choices and a greater sense of entitlement.

It would be untrue to say that I succeeded in all my dreams for the classrooms or schools I was most responsible for creating. But I'm not sure I expected to. I probably thought that I'd at least find the right answers to more of my questions, even if they didn’t become norms. None of the above issues have ever been resolved for me, and they are all ones that I wish I could tackle once again with the energy of my youth. Sometimes I regret that I didn’t stay put at CPE/CPESS schools, instead of reaching for more grandiose schemes.

None of the schools I founded were protected from the drive toward standardization that has surrounded them in the last twenty years. Above all, I never figured out how, in the world of here and now, schools could survive without very particular conditions—strong godfathers, politically strong leadership, and a few politically savvy parents, for example. Sustainability, short of revolutionizing the entire system to one's way of thinking or breaking altogether free of the public system, has eluded me.

In fact, it's the first school—CPE I—and the last—Mission Hill—that have remained more or less intact, in terms of their practices. Begun in 1974, CPE I is still alive today, thirty-five years later. And although some of its fundamental practices are now in question, and may or may not survive its sixth principal (its third in the last five years), for nearly thirty years it took on the fundamental challenges of providing an equitable education without dropping its continuity and tradition. Graduates returned as teachers and parents, and we were able to all keep in touch over the last three decades or more. The next three schools have had a harder time, although CPE II is still a popular and successful school, and River East could still be if it hadn't run into a deep political crisis that led to the removal of the principal and, essentially, the closing of the school itself. CPESS, the secondary school—in some ways the most radical and deviant of all the schools I helped found—survived, alas. I say alas because, after the first twelve or thirteen years, it dropped most of the characteristics it was famous for and became a fairly traditional secondary school of last resort. But the
impact on its first ten graduating classes has been immense; this July they are holding a reunion to celebrate the skills and values they believe CPRESS embodied.

Many of the many other schools modeled on CPE and CPRESS still survive. Some have reverted to quite traditional practices while others still resemble the founding dreams and practices. And many teachers and parents are out there trying to reinvent our stories.

Here are some of my assumptions about schools that have proven only partially accurate. I presumed that a strong community of parents and teachers working together would be nearly impossible to rend asunder and could protect their school in times of trouble. The assumption might be true, but working together under adverse circumstances—especially if the formal leadership (the principal) has other intentions—is far easier said than done. The inequality of power between the school’s constituency and the central system is often too huge. Parents and staff sometimes can work together to remove a hostile or inadequate principal, but even a friendly administration can eventually throw up its hands and say, “enough.” Meanwhile, teachers and parents who have other responsibilities can soon retire from the fight. Even if schools can select their own leaders—which is not built in to the leadership process in New York City—sustainability is not guaranteed.

I read, with envy, the literature from my old independent New York City school, and I visit and talk to current students. I often marvel at how they have kept intact the dreams of their founders for nearly half a century—even some with quite radical beliefs. But I note also how many have made drastic compromises over time, even given their greater freedom.

Relationships to what I’ll roughly call “downtown” required me to rethink assumptions too. I had hoped, even in New York City, that I could focus 97 percent of my energy on the world within the school—kids, families, and staff. Given that the schools I was involved with were not closely defined by their physical borders, I didn’t even need to play as much community politics as many other principals might have. And given various favorable factors, I assumed I could play the political game only when I chose and take risks that other principals didn’t dare take. However, in New York City, I also really wanted to change the world
around me. I was aware that these favorable factors often inhibited my effectiveness. “Oh well,” others might say, “she can get away with, she has other resources, she. . . .” Often these assumptions were untrue. I had, for example, no additional resources at CPE I or CPE II, but there was an “aura” around me that suggested I had privileges and contacts, that I “knew” powerful people. In fact, part of this aura was a sleight of hand on my part, and far more people can and do play it just as I did. You use whatever you can! But you pay a price for it too. It makes your work seem more insuperable to others, if not unfair.

The offer to move to Boston came at a time when we lost the fight over designing a mini-system for both more autonomy and accountability in our New York City schools. This mini-system would have created a free learning zone containing 10 percent of the public school system. While the original proposal, funded by the Annenberg Institute to the tune of nearly fifty million dollars, had been approved by the schools chancellor, school board, state commissioner, and union, it didn’t survive due to two critical changes: New York City got a new city schools chancellor and New York State a new state commissioner.

This interlude of “out of the school” work, including a year traveling around as a Senior Urban Fellow at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, was interesting, but I missed the daily life of school—its three-ring circus of dilemmas and, above all, the sustained human contact with kids and adults. I was running out of good stories to tell, those anecdotes that particularly suit this or that Big Idea.

I had already “retired” from my New York City work, so I accepted a challenge offered in Boston. In 1996, Boston offered a few schools the chance to explore the same idea we had proposed for New York City with the freed learning zone, albeit on a smaller scale. A move to Boston seemed fine, and this time I could do it from inside the schoolhouse. I could start a school which would be exempt from most downtown rules and union rules as part of a network of pilot schools. The offer also came from a superintendent I knew from other national projects and assumed I could trust. At sixty-five, I was sufficiently old enough to want to work not quite so hard, and I figured that with more freedom from downtown the job would be less anxiety-producing. I still had so many unanswered questions going back to my first years of teaching, and now I could focus my attention on those again. Creating waves
was another matter; Boston already had an organization that was set up to do the latter and didn’t need much from me. This organization was modeled after one we had created a decade earlier in New York City—a network called the Center for Collaborative Education. So I took full advantage of the opportunity to keep my eyes on the daily life of school while others handled the system. It was an extraordinary success, both Mission Hill and the Pilot School network. But they all are now struggling with how to sustain themselves under changed district leadership and retiring founding principals.

In short, one pays a price for how one succeeds—everything from legitimate and understandable envy and fear (“what’s she out for?”) to less attractive but natural jealousies that cover up a failure to exert some courage and independence on one’s own. And such responses complicate life when one needs a favor, which is probably inevitable even for completely private schools. We are all embedded in the larger world and every act sets off reactions. Life is full of compromises. It’s a tautology. It’s even part of what we need to teach kids about—how to compromise. It’s not an accident that at Mission Hill, the “office” was my office, the staff office, the parent office, and the place where calls came and went and notes were written on the board. When kids were sent to the office, I wanted it to be a learning experience where they could hear me talking to downtown—cajoling, arguing, conspiring. I wanted them to read the notes on our faculty blackboard about our comings and goings. (The kids at some point asked for their own board.) We added extra computers to the office to insure that kids would have additional reasons to hang out there.

But of course, in my case, I chose a public and political stance because it was that combination of fascination with the actual life of the classroom and school—each child and staff member within it—alongside my lifelong love affair with political democracy that drove me. I thought, occasionally, about keeping a lower profile. I had a friend who did just that and ran a remarkably different kind of public middle school for over thirty years that was known only to those in the know. It just wasn’t in me to do that. From day one I used the pen to express my educational ideas. I wrote friendly, accessible (I hoped) letters to parents starting the year I taught Kindergarten half-time in Chicago. I wrote weekly letters to students’ homes in every role I subsequently
played. From the start, I wrote articles about schooling for various non-teacher magazines—primarily *Dissent* (a socialist magazine with a long history), *The Nation*, and so on. When I began to get concerned with the role of standardized testing in education, I joined with others to form the North Dakota Study Group and examine and resist such forms of evaluation. I began to speak on the subject around the country, and I wrote a few pamphlets and booklets aimed at teachers and parents in an effort to demystify testing. Until I became a “real” principal, I was active in the UFT-AFL-CIO and wrote for the union press. I joined the initial founding board for the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (which is where I met two future superintendents I served under). I was elected to my own local school Board and had a chance to see the world from that stance. And so on.

Of course, I was lucky to be the recipient of a prestigious MacArthur award just after starting CPRESS. Being marked as a “genius,” rather than just a dedicated school person, was immensely useful in elevating the status of my opinions about the world of schooling. And I was fortunate to be part of several movements after the end of the civil rights and peace movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Lilian Weber and Hugh Dyasi of the City College Workshop Center provided a kind of stimulation and excitement around my ideas that many of today’s teachers do not run into in the course of pursuing their professional development. Vito Perrone’s response to Head Start testing initiated the North Dakota Study group, a mini-movement that gave us precious opportunities to argue and discuss ideas that were not fashionable. Finally, a decade later, Ted Sizer’s book *Horace’s Compromise* led to the formation of the Coalition of Essential Schools, a network of hundreds of schools throughout the nation where I felt at home. And each of these led to other offshoots. From Weber, I got to know Eleanor Duckworth and Pat Carini’s work, and our schools had the chance to see themselves not as lonely mavericks but part of an important stream of thought with historic roots and well-established ideas. Later the free school and home schooling movements offered new ideas and ideals to my work.

So it was not entirely surprising that I was constantly frustrated by the claim that whatever I did had no political significance because it was the impact of my “unique” public circumstances, etc. It was as if “they”
were purposely undermining my expertise and example by putting my work on a pedestal and sending the message that it couldn't be generalized. In fact what I did might have required fewer compromises had I not had such a public life.

But we are all unique; and I was neither the best student in any of the schools I attended nor a remarkably good writer or stylist, and my political connections were as much pretend as real. Besides, as my best friends will attest, I have plenty of natural faults that made my work harder. It's choosing to see oneself as a "player" and having the luxury of being able to fail that I excelled in—if one wants to put it that way. Far more of us can do that, in our own way. We need to help one another do it.

What we do can be done to scale, but we need to start from the premise that "doing it our own way" includes making one's work accessible and reviewable by the public. If all good to great schools are unique, expressing the character of their place and particular people, then a good to great system has to start there: encouraging such uniqueness, not undermining it. I was just plain lucky to be in the game when two such systems (District 4 in East Harlem and the New York Alternative School system) existed under Tony Alvarado and Steve Phillips. It took less subterfuge to build one's unique school with these people around as protectors, although even then it needed a few other guardians! And, alas, in the end, they were undermined too.

What it comes down to is each of us taking advantage of our own particular circumstances. That, after all, is what we're educating for. Happily, the purpose of education is consistent with the struggle to create good schools. If we share that struggle with our staff, families, and above all, kids, it needn't be as lonely as we sometimes make it.

Can these coalitions and paradigms from the past sustain a new generation of like-minded maverick reformers? Will they refashion it in ways that might, at first, seem disturbing to me but will, in the end, emerge the stronger for it? Will these difficult trade-offs be met in ways I did not know how to do, or will the trade-offs themselves be new ones I never encountered? A new language will be needed as so much of our language has been co-opted (e.g. school autonomy and empowerment now excludes the ability to make decisions about the essentials of schooling) and the paradigm of accountability to one's public is built
on the model of profit-making businesses with their shoddy record of public responsibility!

Of course, in the end, each of us comes to this with a unique history and enters it at a unique time and place. We step into the stream of progressive education, which has roots that are centuries old, at a particular curve. Our own particular stance will depend on whether the current is faster or slower, the bottom mushier or harsher. I wish I could come back a century from now and see what others have made of the work we did, much as we took the work of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformers and tried to refashion it.