
Only for My Kid

How Privileged Parents Undermine School Reform

By Alfie Kohn

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.

— John Dewey, *School and Society*

Mike McClaren, a superintendent in Oklahoma, was attracted to the idea of a “performance-based” curriculum: he believed in specifying his schools’ learning outcomes in advance and shifting the emphasis from memorization to problem solving. This made sense to Mike King, principal of a nationally recognized middle school in McClaren’s district, who wanted his teachers to have more autonomy and his students to have more opportunity to learn from one another. Neither man was pushing for anything too radical; they just thought educators should be a little less concerned with deciding which students were better than others and a little more committed to helping all of them succeed.

As it turned out, both men felt obliged to find new jobs as a result of this agenda, with McClaren jumping before he was pushed. Key people in the community were unhappy, and three newly elected board members made sure that the changes — and the people responsible for them — didn’t last. Predictably, the most vocal opponents were affiliated with the Christian Coalition and other ultraconservative groups. But here is the interesting part: even in small-town Oklahoma, the usual suspects on the Right could not have done it on their own. Their allies, who by all accounts gave them the margin of victory they needed to roll back reform efforts, were individuals who were not particularly conservative or religious. King describes them as “your upper-class, high-achieving parents who feel that education is competitive, that there shouldn’t be anyone else in the same class as my child, and we shouldn’t spend a whole lot of time with the have-nots.”[1]

McClaren, who looks back on what happened from his new post several states away, says he made “two fatal assumptions” when he started: “I thought if it was good for kids, everyone would embrace it, and I thought all adults wanted all kids to be successful. That’s not true. The people who receive status from their kids’ performing well in school didn’t like that other kids’ performance might be raised to the level of their own kids’.”

It is common knowledge that the Christian Right has opposed all manner of progressive reforms. They may act stealthily to get themselves installed on school boards, and they may read from identical scripts in auditoriums across America about how outcome-based education and whole language will destroy our way of life. But they are ultimately identifiable, and, once their core beliefs are exposed and their claims refuted, their impact (at least in many places) can be limited. Far less

attention has been paid to the damage done by people whose positions on other social issues are more varied and more mainstream — specifically, the affluent parents of successful students, those whose political power is substantial to begin with and whose agenda was summarized by another educator in that same Oklahoma town: “They are not concerned that all children learn; they are concerned that their children learn.”

There is no national organization called Rich Parents Against School Reform, in part because there doesn't have to be. But with unaffiliated individuals working on different issues in different parts of the country, the pattern is generally missed and the story is rarely told. Take a step back, however, and you begin to grasp the import of what is happening from Amherst, Massachusetts, where highly educated white parents have fought to preserve a tracking system that keeps virtually every child of color out of advanced classes, to Palo Alto, California, where a similarly elite constituency demands a return to a “skill and drill” math curriculum and fiercely opposes the more conceptual learning outlined in the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) standards; from an affluent suburb of Buffalo, where parents of honors students quashed an attempt to replace letter grades with standards-based progress reports, to San Diego, where a program to provide underachieving students with support that will help them succeed in higher-level courses has run “head on into vigorous opposition from some of the community's more outspoken, influential members — the predominantly white, middle-class parents of high-achieving students.”[2]

Jeannie Oakes, author of *Keeping Track*, calls them “Volvo vigilantes,” but that isn't quite accurate — first, because they work within, and skillfully use, the law; and second, because many of them drive Jeeps. They may be pro-choice and avid recyclers, with nothing good to say about the likes of Pat Robertson and Rush Limbaugh; yet on educational issues they are, perhaps unwittingly, making common cause with, and furthering the agenda of, the Far Right.

The controversies in which these parents involve themselves fall into three clusters, the first of which concerns the type of instruction that is offered. Here we find a tension between, on the one hand, traditional methods and practices, geared toward a classroom that is construed as a collection of discrete individuals, each of whom is supposed to absorb a body of knowledge and basic skills, and, on the other hand, an approach distinguished by active discovery and problem solving by a community of learners.

Second, there is the question of placement, or which students get what. This category includes debates over such issues as tracking, ability grouping, gifted-and-talented programs, and honors courses — as distinguished from efforts to create more heterogeneous and inclusive classrooms.

Finally, there are the practices that take place after (but undeniably affect) the instruction, in which the emphasis is on selecting and sorting students so only a few are recognized: awards, letter grades, weighted grades (which give an additional advantage to those in the selective courses), honor rolls, and class rank — as opposed to the absence of these practices and, sometimes, the presence of an assessment system geared more to enhancing learning than to distinguishing one student from another. It is the difference between a bumper sticker that says, “My Child Is an Honor Student at . . .” (with the understood postscript: “And Yours Isn't”) and one that says, “Every Child Is an Honored Student at . . .”[3]

All affluent parents, of course, do not necessarily line up on the same side of every dispute. With respect to the type of instruction, anecdotal reports suggest that highly educated, middle-class parents sometimes support — or even demand — an emphasis on higher-order thinking, a literature-based approach to teaching reading, and the use of cooperative learning — at least within homogeneous groups. (After all, as Syracuse University's Mara Sapon-Shevin observes wryly, some parents figure, “My kid will have to learn to negotiate with the other Fortune 500 executives.”) But

just because most parents who support these innovations are middle-class doesn't mean that most middle-class parents support these innovations — just as the fact that a disproportionate number of truly progressive schools are private doesn't mean that a disproportionate number of private schools are progressive. The parents who prefer worksheets and lectures can use their clout to reverse or forestall a move to more learner-centered classrooms. Moreover, a tolerance for whole language or cooperative learning often does not extend to the newer approaches to teaching math, as reformers in Palo Alto and other California communities are discovering.[4]

By the same token, resistance to the elimination of letter grades and awards assemblies is not confined to those who live in large houses. Parents in some working-class neighborhoods have been particularly outraged by these proposals, banding together under such names as PURGE: Parents United to Restore Graded Evaluations.[5] Still, the experience of some educators matches that of Bob Gallagher, a staff development coordinator in the Buffalo area, who reports that the “parents of kids who were struggling” were pleased by a shift to rubrics and narrative assessments, while the parents of honors students “absolutely went crazy” at the prospect of losing traditional letter grades. Perhaps the reaction can more accurately be predicted by the status of the student than by the income level of the parent — although the significant correlation between these two is itself cause for concern.

If the position of a certain group of parents is not always clear-cut with respect to teaching and assessing, the battle lines are sharply drawn when it comes to placement and allocation issues, and the “gifted parents,” as some observers like to call them, know what they want and how to get it. Sometimes their success is a function of being able to choose not only classes but schools — specifically, selective independent schools or well-funded public schools in affluent suburbs. American education is so segregated and stratified today that the elite mingle mostly with one another. Annette Lareau of Temple University wanted to study a school in Philadelphia whose student population cut across lines of race and class; she was unable to find a single example. “Who are the middle-class parents arguing against?” she asks. “I think that’s why you don’t see more of these conflicts. Poor kids are generally not in the same schools.”

Pitched battles are more common in integrated schools, but even here they happen rarely because, in large measure, the affluent white parents have already won. The plum classes and programs for their children already exist, as do the letter grades and awards to distinguish them from those other children. The system serves these parents well, and their influence is such — or the fear that they will yank their children out is sufficient — that few superintendents (and even fewer school boards) dare to rock this boat on which first-class cabins are so clearly delineated from steerage. The reformers eventually get tired — or fired.

As Amy Stuart Wells of UCLA sees it, even many liberal white parents may say, in effect, “We like the fact that our kids are in desegregated schools, but the fact that the white kids are in the top classes and the black kids are in the bottom is someone else’s problem.” Last fall, U.S. News & World Report published an article documenting how many “schools that appear integrated from the outside are highly segregated within. . . . Honors classes are dominated by whites, regular classes by blacks.”[6] In response, a liberal New Republic columnist readily agreed that the honors program in his own daughter’s school in Montgomery County, Maryland, amounted to “a school within a school” for the white and Asian students — and then announced that if this program were eliminated, he would pull his daughter out of that school “in a nanosecond.”[7]

What is interesting about this exchange is that the U.S. News reporter had pretty much taken for granted the existence of tracking and seemed concerned only about the racial make-up of each track: the possibility of heterogeneous classrooms was not even raised until the very end of the article, and then it was immediately dismissed. Yet the liberal columnist served notice in a national

magazine that any attempt to create a fairer system would be an invitation to white flight, something in which he would unapologetically participate. Most affluent parents send this message more quietly and locally, of course, but it reverberates through the offices of administrators and effectively discourages meaningful change.

Or consider two essays published independently in 1996. The first, in the *American Educational Research Journal*, describes a series of interviews with “educated, middle-class mothers, perceived by others as well as themselves as liberals who believe in integrated and inclusive education.” In the course of conversation, these women pronounced themselves committed to equity and tolerance but then proceeded (under questioning) to become far more passionate in dismissing these very ideals when it came to the advantages they thought their own children should receive. The self-described liberals tended to “support segregated and stratified school structures that mainly benefit students of the middle class,” the researchers discovered.[8]

The second article, published in the *Harvard Educational Review*, contains a very serious charge leveled by Wells and her colleague Irene Serna: tracking, advanced placement (AP) courses, and gifted programs do not provide differential instruction for legitimate pedagogical reasons — or allow for a system based on merit — so much as they represent a naked grab for artificially scarce benefits by those who have the power to get them.[9]

Think scientifically for a moment about how this disturbing hypothesis might be tested. If it were accurate, the beneficiaries of these educational advantages would “be more concerned about the labels placed on their children than about what actually goes on in the classroom.”[10] And indeed, there is reason to think that this is frequently true. To begin with, AP classes at the high school level are usually difficult but often poorly taught, with an emphasis on short-term memorization of facts presented in lectures and textbooks — in effect, one long test-prep session. Yet many parents seem to care a lot more about who is in these classes (namely, their own children and a few others who look like them) than about how they are taught.

Granted, it is hard to deny the superiority of the instruction in gifted-and-talented programs and some other honors or high-track classes, what with hands-on learning, student-designed projects, computers, field trips, and other enrichments. But research generally shows that it is precisely those enrichments that produce better results rather than the fact that they are accorded only to a select few. What happens in those classes is more decisive than the fact that they are homogeneous.[11] So if parents of those students were concerned about the quality of learning, they would have no reason to object to extending those benefits to everyone.

But object they do. Wells and Oakes have been studying the experience of 10 schools across the country that are trying to ease away from tracking. Many of these schools have taken the advice of Anne Wheelock, who urged educators to help parents of top-tracked students understand that “inclusive schooling offers all students the type of education usually reserved for gifted and talented students.”[12] The detracking in these 10 schools was carefully planned to bring other students up to a high level, but not to take anything away from the privileged children. Yet the reaction from the parents of the latter students has been powerfully negative — often fatal for the reform efforts. These parents have pressured educators “to maintain separate and unequal classes for their children, . . . [demanding] to know what their children will ‘get’ that other students will not have access to.”[13]

This is essentially what happened in San Diego, where an attempt to give a leg up to lower-tracked students was, as Elizabeth Cohen of Stanford University puts it, “the kind of project that you’d think wouldn’t bother upper-status parents at all. Wrong! They said, ‘What are you going to do special for my kid?’” This posture, she adds, goes beyond a simple and commendable desire to do everything

possible for one's own children. "When parents tell me they're terribly anxious about their kids getting ahead, I'm sympathetic. Everyone wants the best for their kids. But when it extends to sabotaging programs that are designed to help people, I have to draw the line."

Notice what is going on here. It isn't just that these parents are ignoring everyone else's children, focusing their efforts solely on giving their own children the most desirable education. Rather, they are in effect sacrificing other children to their own. It's not about success but victory, not about responding to a competitive environment but creating one. As Harvey Daniels of National Louis University sees it, "The psychology of those parents is that it's not enough for their kids to win: others must lose — and they must lose conspicuously."

This explains much of the frustration experienced by educators who insist that narratives or portfolios are far more informative about students' learning than letter grades are, or who cite evidence to show that focusing students' attention on getting A's tends to reduce their interest in the learning itself.[14] These arguments will only persuade someone who is looking for more information about his or her child's improvement or someone who is concerned about sustaining the child's interest. If, however, the point is not for assessment to be authentic but for it to serve as a sorting device, to show not how well the student is doing but how much better he or she is doing than others, then A's will always be necessary — and it will always be necessary for some people's children not to get them. It will be necessary not only to rate children but to rank them, to give out not only report cards but trophies and plaques and certificates and membership in elite societies, all of which are made artificially scarce.

This agenda is arguably anti-child, but should that surprise us? We live in a culture that is remarkably unfriendly toward children in general; a "good" child is one who doesn't cause us any trouble. Even when politicians and businesspeople demand "world-class" schools, they usually mean those that produce high test scores, and their reasons evidently don't have much to do with meeting the children's own needs. As for material possessions, it is true that:

Some parents — those who have enough income — spend lavishly on their children, generating the notion that we are a child-centered society. But public spending for children is often meager and always surrounded by contention, and it embodies the peculiar conception that children are not valuable as persons in their own right but only for the adults they will grow up to be. . . . The saccharine myth [that] . . . children are [America's] most precious natural resources has in practice been falsified by our hostility to other people's children and our unwillingness to support them.[15]

The problem does not rest solely with our attitude toward children, however, but also with our attenuated sense of community. Our culture is distinguished by an ethic of individualism as well as a tendency to collapse all human interaction and most matters of public policy into economic laws. Vouchers and school choice plans effectively say to parents, "Never mind about what's best for kids; just shop for the school that's best for your kids." It's not a community; it's a market — so why would we expect things to be any different inside the school? How much commitment to inclusive education can we expect in an exclusive society? Sadly, when parents (and, shamefully, some educators) go to great lengths to erect walls between the "gifted" and the ordinary, another generation is raised without a commitment to the values of community, and the vicious circle closes in.[16]

Beyond attitudes toward children and community, there is the question of how we view education itself. In a new book titled *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning*, David Labaree of Michigan State University argues that schooling these days is not seen as a way to create democratic citizens or even capable workers, but serves more as a credentialing mechanism. "The purpose of education from this angle is not what it can do for democracy or the economy but what it

can do for me,” and this shift turns our school systems into “a vast public subsidy for private ambition.” One implication of such a transformation is that education becomes “an arena for zero-sum competition filled with self-interested actors seeking opportunities for gaining educational distinctions at the expense of each other” — precisely what we’ve seen affluent parents doing so relentlessly and so well.

Labaree incisively demonstrates another implication of viewing education this way, which is that the quality of learning itself is likely to decline. “We have credentialism to thank for the aversion to learning that, to a great extent, lies at the heart of our educational system,” he observes. While the pages of journals like this one are brimming with suggestions for how to make schools more effective, the impact of these ideas is perforce limited if making schools more effective is really beside the point for most Americans. The point is not to get an education but to get ahead — and therefore, from the student/consumer’s point of view, “to gain the highest grade with the minimum amount of learning.” In fact, efforts to help all students succeed, or to place more emphasis on teaching and less on sorting, would be not merely irrelevant but utterly contrary to the individualistic, competitive credentialing model of school — and so such efforts would be bitterly contested by those with the best chances of getting the shiniest credentials.

It is elite parents [who] see the most to gain from the special distinctions offered by a stratified educational system, and they are therefore the ones who play the game of academic one-upmanship most aggressively. . . . They vigorously resist when educators (pursuing a more egalitarian vision) propose to eliminate some form of within-school distinction or another — by promoting multiability reading groups, for example, ending curriculum tracking, or dropping a program for the gifted.[17]

No wonder a somewhat disillusioned Anne Wheelock now muses that “all the research in the world” about the positive effects of detracking or abolishing letter grades “doesn’t persuade these folks.” No wonder such parents are more likely to ask, “How is my child doing compared to everyone else?” than to inquire about how effectively that child is learning. To paraphrase a popular song, What’s learning got to do with it?

It is through this lens that we might regard the demand in some affluent communities for a transmission-based, “bunch o’facts” curriculum. Why, asks James Beane, an expert on the subject, would there be opposition to the contextual learning and cooperative inquiry entailed by a reform such as curriculum integration, which “seems to offer greater access to knowledge for more young people . . . [and] encourages multiple routes to knowledge and multiple ways of demonstrating it”? The question contains its own answer: if “young people who have traditionally monopolized ‘success’ in the classroom are likely to find themselves joined in success by more of their peers,” this can be “profoundly upsetting to some of their parents whose ambitions for their children include being at the top of the class in school and getting into elite colleges.” What’s more, vocal concern about the effects of innovative teaching on standardized test scores may reflect “not a concern about their own children’s continued success but about the possibility that their monopoly on success will be threatened.”[18]

So, too, for the organized, sometimes virulent, opposition to the NCTM math standards among highly educated parents. In Stanford University’s backyard, a group calling itself HOLD (Honest Open Logical Debate) has lobbied since late 1994 for a continuation of (or return to) the kind of mathematics that stresses direct instruction, standard textbooks, and drills to teach basic computational skills. The highly educated and mostly well-to-do members of this group have used the Internet as well as their political connections and media savvy to persuade California officials to retreat from the state’s new math standards, which had emphasized conceptual understanding, open-ended problems, and student communication about mathematical principles. Indeed, HOLD has gotten some of its members appointed to statewide commissions, and the implications are enormous

for the adoption of curriculum materials in California and beyond.[19]

Of course, reasonable people can disagree about the best way to teach math and other subjects, but more than one observer of the “math wars” has wondered whether we are witnessing a debate over pedagogy or about something else entirely. Are parents really trying to deny that encouraging students to figure out together what lies behind an algebraic formula is more valuable than getting them to memorize algorithms or slog through endless problem sets? Do they seriously doubt that such an approach is better preparation for higher math in college? Or does parental opposition really just reflect the fear that more sophisticated math instruction might be less useful for boosting SAT scores and therefore for getting students into the most elite colleges? Math reformers who counterpose merely doing arithmetic with really understanding (and being able to apply) mathematical principles may be missing the more pertinent contrast, which is between doing what is best for learning and doing what is best for getting my child into the Ivy League.

This trade-off raises the intriguing possibility that the exertions of the moms and dads of top students may exact a price not only from other children but also from their own. Consider those parents who essentially mortgage their children’s present to the future, sacrificing what might bring meaning or enjoyment — or even produce higher-quality learning — in a ceaseless effort to prepare the children for Harvard (a process I have come to call “Preparation H”). This bottom line is never far from the minds of such parents, who weigh every decision about what their children do in school, or even after school, against the yardstick of what it might contribute to future success. They are not raising a child so much as living résumé. As repellent as we might find the corporate groups and politicians who regard education — and even children themselves — as little more than an “investment,” these parents are doing the dirty work implied by this reductive world view, and they are doing it to their own children.

Before long, the children internalize this quest and come to see their childhood as one long period of getting ready: they sign up for activities that might impress an admissions committee, ignoring (perhaps eventually losing sight of) what they personally find interesting in the here and now. They ask teachers, “Do we need to know this?” and grimly try to squeeze out another few points to bolster their grade-point averages (GPAs) or SAT scores. What they don’t know, for their parents surely will not tell them, is that this straining toward the future, this poisonous assumption that the value of everything is solely a function of its contribution to something that might come later, will continue right through college, right through professional school, right through the early stages of a career, until at last they wake up in a tastefully appointed bedroom to discover that their lives are mostly gone.

And those are just the successful students.

These parents, then, could be described as having sacrificed other children to their own, and also their own children’s present to the imagined future. But there is a third sacrifice, too, and, like the second, it does their own children no favor: moral, social, artistic, emotional, and other forms of development are often jettisoned in favor of a narrow academic agenda. (Academics, of course, may simply be a stand-in for the ultimate goal of material success.) By ruling out a heterogeneous classroom on the grounds that it might slow down their precocious child’s race to acquire more advanced math or reading skills, they ignore what he or she loses in other respects. By insisting that students be graded and then ranked against one another — or forced to compete for various awards — they deprive their children of the richer rewards to be gained from attending a school that feels like a caring community.

What Garrison Keillor said about school choice proposals could easily be applied to ability grouping and gifted programs: they seem to make sense “until you stop and think about the old idea of the

public school, a place where you went to find out who inhabits this society other than people like you.”[20] The experiences of students who have to struggle for what they have, who take so much less for granted, are not just valid but valuable for their privileged peers to hear. The latter get less than a full education, arguably become less than fully human, when they are segregated for the purposes of purely academic acceleration.[21]

Here, then, we have parents evincing what Nel Noddings calls a “mean-spirited attitude that they want their kids to have the best, and the heck with the other kids” — and, in the process, actually doing a disservice to their own children. How can we make sense of this? The reasons are multiple, some simple and some complex, some based on judgments most of us would regard as reasonable and some simply abhorrent. The balance is different from one parent to the next and from one issue to the next, but clearly there are several identifiable factors at work.

For starters, it must be conceded that some parents are genuinely worried about the extent to which their children are learning, or would be learning, in a heterogeneous classroom. They are afraid that the curriculum might be “dumbed down,” resulting in boredom and lack of appropriate challenge for their own children. In some places, there is legitimate reason for concern, but as a rule too much attention is paid to the difficulty level of what is being taught, the simplistic assumption being that [harder is better](#). To judge what goes on in a classroom on the basis of how difficult the tasks are is rather like judging an opera on the basis of how many notes it contains that are challenging for the singers to hit.

The truth is that, if tests or homework assignments consist of factual recall questions, it doesn’t make all that much difference whether there are 25 tough questions or 10 easy ones. A basal does not become a more appropriate teaching tool just because it is intended for a higher grade level. Boredom may reflect a problem with the method of instruction (and the underlying theory of learning) rather than with the speed or difficulty with which a lesson is taught. To insist on homogeneity, then, would fail to address what is really wrong with many classrooms, which is not that certain students can complete the worksheets without breaking a sweat but that the teacher is relying on worksheets at all.

The flip side of this is that heterogeneity may be fairer but does not in itself constitute a prescription for effective teaching. In fact, heterogeneity is hard to do well. But the parents of high-scoring students ought to be providing support and respectful pressure for educators to do it better, rather than simply opting out of regular classrooms. “We remove the squeaky wheel, so we never repair the car,” remarks Mara Sapon-Shevin. “We need fundamental changes in how we construct pedagogy and curriculum. If we continue to do segregation” — including segregation of the so-called gifted and talented, whom she prefers to designate as the rich and lucky — “we’ll never get there.”

Some parents are concerned less about the classroom than about their children’s future, and this, too, cannot be written off. Yes, we live in a compulsively competitive culture; yes, the most selective colleges by definition accept only a small proportion of those who would like to attend; and yes, even the upper middle class has begun to grow uneasy now that they, too, may be the victims of mass firings (euphemistically called “downsizing”). “In a way you can’t blame them,” says Amy Stuart Wells of these parents. “It’s a larger systemic issue in how we define intelligence and merit, how we push competition for the few spots at the top of the hierarchy.”

And yet we find many people exaggerating the extent of competition around them, reproducing and exacerbating it by what they do to their children and their children’s schools, overlooking the costs of pushing youngsters to become winners, and becoming part of the “them” to which other individuals will then point to justify their own unsavory behavior. Harvey Daniels suggests that we take a closer look at the explanations offered by people of privilege: “Do they really feel that unless

their kid accumulates a bevy of awards, he or she is going to starve? Usually, these kids are going to be fine; they don't have anything to worry about" — except, perhaps, whether they attend a very elite college or only a somewhat elite college. Decades ago, Bertrand Russell pointed out that what is often meant by talk of "the struggle for life is really the struggle for [competitive] success. What people fear when they engage in the struggle is not that they" — or their children — "will fail to get their breakfast next morning, but that they will fail to outshine their neighbors." [22]

Alongside concern for the success of one's children we sometimes find a sticky attachment to the status quo. Larry Militello, a principal in Williamsville, New York, put it succinctly: "Parents say, 'Look I live in this \$600,000 house. I was successful with the system you currently have. Why do we have to look at anything different?' " The twin premises of this argument, of course, are equally ripe for challenge: that the most important kind of success in life can be measured in terms of real estate and that their own success occurred because of a system that includes letter grades, separate tracks, memorizing the multiplication table in third grade, and so on.

We find a different version of this same resistance when parents assert that the old system is still working — for their children. Why would someone whose daughter is in the top 5% of her class agree to stop ranking students? Here, says Deborah Meier, is the dilemma faced by the Coalition for Essential Schools: the elite students are getting a school-within-a-school with small classes and plenty of attention, so "why should you be for change when your kids are benefiting from exactly what we say is wrong with high schools?" More generally, Glenn Kleiman, a senior scientist at the Education Development Center in Newton, Massachusetts, reports that when educators from around the country are gathered at a seminar, those from "suburban districts have the hardest time making changes. They get the feedback that our kids are doing well; they're getting into the best colleges. . . . It ain't broke; why change it?"

The answer is that the system is quite clearly broken for most students — those who are not among the elect. And even with respect to those at the top, one has only to look past the infatuation with credentials to see the necessity for change: if students can read but don't, if they fail to think deeply or to take satisfaction from playing with ideas, if they are primarily concerned with what is going to be on the test, then something is drastically wrong with the status quo. Ignorance of those harms, obliviousness to the tradeoff between credentials and learning, a simple lack of awareness about what (and who) is being sacrificed when a school is rigidly tracked and how even the winners ultimately lose as a result of competition [23] — these are probably the most charitable explanations for why some people fight reform. They just don't get it. But we cannot discount, at least in some instances, the presence of more malign motives. One is racism (or its twin, classism). This is no less a factor just because it is not splayed out on the surface with ugly, disparaging epithets, as Wells and Oakes explain:

Unlike the more blatantly racist parents of an earlier generation, who resisted school desegregation policies because they did not want their children in schools with "colored" children, [today's] influential parents are more subtle and savvy in their resistance to detracking efforts that lead to desegregation within schools. They couch their opposition to detracking mainly in terms of the low-track students' "behavior" — lack of motivation to learn, lack of commitment to school or interest in higher education, tendency to act out, and so forth — without making the connection between these behaviors and the low-track students' "penetration" of an unequal and hierarchical system in which they are at the bottom. [24]

From personal experience, Hugh Mehan, a sociologist who has worked in the schools of San Diego, can tell you what racism sounds like in the Nineties: "Bringing those lower-achieving students into the classroom is going to water down things for my children. They're not going to be able to keep up, and the teachers are going to have to slow things down." (Interestingly, a parent who dismisses

the capabilities of “those” students may persist in the belief that white, middle-class children are smart — and therefore deserving of special treatment — even when their record of school achievement is not especially high.)[25]

Finally, our search for reasons must include simple selfishness, which sometimes accounts for both the callous disregard for other people’s children and, in the final analysis, what many affluent parents are doing to their own. Social psychologists call it BIRG: basking in reflected glory. “We didn’t realize they had so much emotionally invested in the concept that they were the parents of the ‘good’ students,” recalls Bob Gallagher from Buffalo. “Not to have the bumper sticker to put on their car was more important to some parents than the learning that was going on in the classroom.”

Daniels has seen this, too: “When you meet these people for the first time, they manage to insert into the conversation in the first two minutes the fact that their kid is in some kind of gifted program. It’s not about the kid — it’s about them, their egos, their bragging rights.” The child’s needs and point of view often play little role in decisions that are made by, as well as for, the parents. Indeed, “some of these kids live in constant fear of letting their parents down,” observes Lilian Katz, an authority on early childhood education — and that may continue well after the high school valedictory address has been delivered.

A list of explanations for the actions of these parents, then, would include a simple desire to do what is best for one’s children and a preoccupation with what is most flattering to oneself, as well as anxiety about anything unfamiliar, prejudice about those children who aren’t like us, and simple lack of knowledge. It isn’t clear which of these is a deliberate rationale for fighting change, which is an unconscious determinant, and which is simply a consequence of the others.

It’s not even obvious whether the whole picture is getting brighter or darker over time. Meier sees a disturbing trend: “Fifteen years ago people who were for tracking were on the defensive. Now it’s right out in the open in the middle of the West side [of New York City]. There was a certain noblesse oblige that these parents used to have. Now a green light has been given to greed and self-centeredness.”

Similarly discouraging is the fact that efforts to get rid of letter grades have been going on for decades, with some of the most eloquent articles and persuasive research reports on the subject having been published more than half a century ago.[26] Those districts that have managed to replace letter and number ratings with narrative assessments, portfolios, and the like may find, as one assessment specialist in Kentucky describes it, that some parents “come to the [parent/teacher] conferences and love everything they get. And then, at the very end, they kind of lean over and whisper, ‘But if you were going to give a letter grade, what letter grade would you give my child?’ ” Perhaps this is good news, though, she adds: “At least they whisper now! . . . They are learning to do without grades, although they would still like them. Maybe in a few years they won’t even whisper; they just won’t ask.”[27]

To get to that point — and to a comparable point with respect to other kinds of school reform — will require educators to understand the depth and strength of the resistance posed by affluent parents of high-achieving students. And it will require some or all of the following measures.

Appealing to fairness. We need to invite people to live up to their own best ideals, to impress upon them the moral implications of these policies, and to help them understand that it’s not just other children but the very prospects for a democratic society that are at risk from tracking and other practices.[28]

Focusing on broad, long term goals for their children. It’s easy to get caught up with short-term

issues such as grades, or to collapse all long-term discussions into such questions as college admission. But ask parents what they really want for their children over time, how they'd like their youngsters to turn out, and it's very rare, in my experience, to hear about Harvard or six-figure salaries. As I often do when speaking to such groups, I asked the parents of students at an elite independent school in Texas not long ago what their long-term goals were for their children. Here is the list that resulted: happy, balanced, independent, fulfilled, productive, self-reliant, responsible, functioning, kind, thoughtful, loving, inquisitive, and confident. A week later I asked the same question of another large audience of parents, this time in an affluent Minneapolis suburb. The answers were almost identical.

The reformer's job, then, is to help parents see that favored educational practices — from drill-an-skill teaching techniques to letter grades to awards assemblies — are actively impeding the realization of the very goals that they themselves say they want.[29] A number of parents (and educators, for that matter) may never have thought about the difference between seeing school as a place for learning and seeing it as a place for accumulating credentials. Provoking reflection about the ways these views pull in opposite directions may help parents reevaluate their positions.

Distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate requests and then responding to the former. If parents want to make sure their children are challenged and engaged by what they are learning, it is natural for them to be leery of any reform that might jeopardize that — an entirely legitimate concern. But wanting to make sure that only their children, or an arbitrarily limited group of similar children, receive the best possible education is not legitimate and should not be honored.

By the same token, if grades offer the only window through which parents can get a sense of how their children are doing at school, it is perfectly understandable that they would be nervous at the prospect of eliminating these grades. The educator's job is to show how various forms of authentic assessment can meet their legitimate need for information even more effectively than letter grades can. (In fact, it is hard to imagine something less informative about how well their children are learning than "B.")

But I believe that "How much better is my child doing than the other kids in class?" is not a legitimate question, and the educator's job is to explain why this is so rather than creating a system of ranking (or norm-referenced testing) designed to answer it, thereby doing a real disservice to all children. An elementary school teacher near Kansas City says she responds to this parental question by confiding, "You know, your child is the best in the class!" Then, after a pause, she muses, "Of course, this is the dumbest class I've ever had. . . ." Apart from its wit, her answer nicely points up just how useless norm-referenced evaluations really are.

Offering information. Our job is not limited to educating students; sometimes we are called upon to educate parents and others in the community. Of course, we can also learn from them, and we must be respectful of their concerns and beliefs; finding a balance here is an art and sometimes an agony. But if we know from experience how children of different backgrounds (including the child whose parents brag that he was reading at age 4) thrive when they can learn from one another in a cooperative classroom, if we have witnessed how children both understand and enjoy math better when they are tackling real-life problems than when they are staring at a ditto full of naked numbers, if we realize why it makes sense for children to write even before they can spell, then we need to share our experiences with parents.

Likewise, some parents will be relieved that detracking doesn't mean "teaching to the middle" — but they have to be made aware of this. Parents deserve to know that plenty of elementary schools give no letter or number grades at all without jeopardizing their students' eventual high school performance or chances for college admission. (Indeed, a few high schools, too, have done without

grades — and even more have abolished class ranks — while continuing to place their graduates in the most selective universities.[30] For that matter, some children gain admission to these universities without ever having set foot in a school.)

In fact, rather than abandon reforms designed to make school more equitable or learning more meaningful just because parents express concern about the impact on their children's future, educators can help these parents look more carefully at the chain of associations that are usually taken for granted. College admissions officers are not 97-year-old fuddy-duddies peering over their spectacles in horror at an unconventional application: they are more likely to be recent graduates praying to be saved from another earnest 3.7 GPA, student council vice president, flute-playing tennis star from the 'burbs. Apart from the flexibility about grades, at least 280 four-year colleges are now making the SAT and the ACT optional. <Addendum 2019: That number now exceeds 1,000.>[31]

Parents also might be invited to question the premise that admission to a top-ranked college is necessary or sufficient for success in life; people without the usual credentials (but possessed of determination and genuine love for what they are doing) often flourish, and people with superlative credentials may be summarily sacked. Individuals representing each of these categories ought to be invited to speak to students and parents — possibly in place of the usual lectures offering tips on how to polish a transcript. It might also be useful to hear from well-to-do, educated parents who have had an experience that changed their frame of reference: perhaps their children wound up in a heterogeneous classroom, or in a nearby school that feels like a caring community rather than a nonstop rat race, and they came to realize how much better off their children were there. (The real epiphanies, according to education consultant Willard Daggett, come to those parents who discover that one of their children is disabled.)

Organizing the less-powerful parents. Rather than directly oppose the parents who demand the preservation of programs that benefit only their own children, Jeannie Oakes advises educators to reach out to all the other parents, to “build community advocacy for an equity agenda” so that school board members, administrators, and politicians hear from everyone with an interest in the issue, instead of just from the elite.

At the very least, people typically lacking in wealth, self-confidence, or political savvy can be provided with the skills to be more effective advocates for themselves and their children.[32] Ultimately, though, we want not only to have more parents demanding that their own children get more resources, but to build a constituency for a fairer, more effective sort of schooling for all children.

Respecting a moral bottom line. Educators should do all they can to bring parents aboard, to persuade and inform and organize, but in the final analysis there are some principles that have to be affirmed and some practices that cannot be tolerated. As one Maryland educator put it, “We’re not in the business of educating one group of students. As professionals we’re responsible for educating everyone, and there are things that we must not do. That’s a moral and professional issue.”[33]

NOTES

1. All unattributed quotations in this article are derived from personal communications.
2. Daniel Gursky, “On the Wrong Track,” *Teacher Magazine*, May 1990, p. 43. The program, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), continues to generate opposition from these

quarters to this day.

3. Something similar to the latter slogan is actually used by the Friends School of Atlanta and other Friends schools around the country, as well as by the Drew Model School in Arlington, Virginia.

4. Joseph Kahne, assistant professor of educational policy at the University of Illinois, Chicago, attributes this disparity to several factors. First, there is a single right answer to most math problems, and parents may fear that their children won't know it, particularly when they sit down to take a standardized test. "They aren't nervous about whole language because they know their kids will be reading; their literacy skills aren't threatened." Moreover, these parents are already familiar with reading for understanding; in their own lives, they don't underline the topic sentence or circle the vowels. The more sophisticated approaches to mathematics, by contrast, are utterly alien to most adults, and few people will enthusiastically support — or even permit — a move from something comfortably familiar to something they don't really understand.

5. This particular group was formed in Silver Creek, New York.

6. Julian E. Barnes, "Segregation, Now," *U.S. News & World Report*, 22 September 1997, p. 24.

7. John B. Judis, "Honor Code," *New Republic*, 20 October 1997, pp. 4, 45.

8. See Ellen Brantlinger, Massoumeh Majd-Jabbari, and Samuel L. Guskin, "Self-Interest and Liberal Educational Discourse: How Ideology Works for Middle-Class Mothers," *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 33, 1996, pp. 571-97. The quotations appear on page 590.

9. See Amy Stuart Wells and Irene Serna, "The Politics of Culture: Understanding Local Political Resistance to Detracking in Racially Mixed Schools," *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 66, 1996, pp. 93-118.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

11. "When advantages to students in the high-ability tracks do accrue" — and even this result is not always found — "they do not seem to be primarily related to the fact that these tracks are homogeneously grouped. For example, controlled studies of students taking similar subjects in heterogeneous and homogeneous groups show that high-ability students (like other students) rarely benefit from these tracked settings." See Jeannie Oakes, "Tracking in Secondary Schools," in Robert E. Slavin, ed., *School and Classroom Organization* (Hillsdale, NJ.: Erlbaum, 1989). Slavin's own work, in addition to the research Oakes goes on to cite, is pertinent here.

12. Anne Wheelock, "Winning Over Gifted Parents," *School Administrator*, April 1995, p. 17. See also Wheelock's *Crossing the Tracks: How "Untracking" Can Save America's Schools* (New York: New Press, 1992).

13. Amy Stuart Wells and Jeannie Oakes, "Potential Pitfalls of Systemic Reform: Early Lessons from Research on Detracking," *Sociology of Education*, vol. 69, special issue, p. 138.

14. On the latter point, see Alfie Kohn, [Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes](#) (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

15. W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, *Broken Promises: How Americans Fail Their Children* (New York: Basic, 1982), pp. 56, 85. Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation, a report released by Public Agenda in June 1997, found "a stunning level of antagonism not just toward teenagers but toward young children as well," according to a news story

in the New York Times, 26 June 1997, p. A-25.

16. See, for example, Mara Sapon-Shevin, *Playing Favorites: Gifted Education and the Disruption of Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

17. See David F. Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning: The Credentials Race in American Education* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). The first chapter, which contains the heart of the argument, was also published as “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals,” *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 34, 1997, pp. 39-81. The quotations used here are taken from pages 30, 32, 258, and 259 of the book and, in one case, from Labaree’s article “Are Students Consumers?; The Rise of Public Education as a Private Good,” *Education Week*, 17 September 1997, pp. 48, 38.

18. James A. Beane, *Curriculum Integration: Designing the Core of Democratic Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), p. 79.

19. See, for example, Allyn Jackson’s two-part article, “The Math Wars: California Battles It Out over Mathematics Education,” *Notices of the AMS* (American Mathematics Society), June/July and August 1997.

20. Garrison Keillor, “The Future of Nostalgia,” *New York Times Magazine*, 29 September 1996, p. 68.

21. Educational researchers, of course, tend to share this bias, evaluating the effects of ability grouping, class size, and any number of other variables mostly in terms of their impact on academic achievement — and, indeed, mostly in terms of their impact on standardized test scores.

22. Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1930), p. 45.

23. For more on the pervasive and inherent harms of competition, see Alfie Kohn, [No Contest: The Case Against Competition](#), rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

24. Wells and Oakes, pp. 138-39. Indeed, “advanced and gifted programs began to appear and proliferate at the same time that the schools in these districts were becoming more racially mixed,” according to Wells and Serna, p. 108.

25. See Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, and Guskin, p. 585.

26. “If I were asked to enumerate ten educational stupidities, the giving of grades would head the list. . . ‘But it’s a competitive world!’ I am told again and again. Certainly it is, and a very messy one I should say. Look around. And I should add, ‘It was also once a disease-ridden world and we are curing it.’ . . . If I can’t give a child a better reason for studying than a grade on a report card, I ought to lock my desk and go home and stay there.” That was written by Dorothy De Zouche in “The Wound Is Mortal: Marks, Honors, Unsound Activities,” published in *The Clearing House* — in February 1945. Plus ça change, plus c’est la même merde.

27. The comments of Merry Denny are quoted in Joan Gaustad, *Assessment and Evaluation in the Multiage Classroom*, a special issue of the *Oregon School Study Council Bulletin*, vol. 39, nos. 3 and 4, February 1996, p. 51.

28. See Joseph Kahne, “Democratic Communities, Equity, and Excellence: A Deweyan Reframing of Educational Policy Analysis,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, vol. 16, 1994, pp. 233-48. Nel Noddings points out one difficulty with an appeal to fairness: many privileged parents insist that

the present arrangement is fair, arguing that “if other parents would work as hard as I do, then their kids would do fine. They just have to pull up their socks and get with it.”

29. I suppose it is possible that some of these parents are being dishonest, that they actually are less concerned about their children’s ethics and happiness than about their wealth. But it is more respectful to take the parents at their word and more effective to hold them to their own rhetoric.

30. For example, the Carolina Friends School in Durham, N.C.; the Poughkeepsie Day School in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.; the Waring School in Beverly, Mass.; Saint Ann’s School in Brooklyn, N.Y.; the School Without Walls in Rochester, NY; and the Metropolitan Learning Center in Portland, Ore., give no letter or number grades at all.

31. See www.fairtest.org/university/optional.

32. The Right Question Project, for example, trains facilitators to help parents ask four questions: What is my child learning? What does my child need to learn? Is the teacher teaching what my child needs to learn? If not, what can I do?

33. Jake Burks, quoted in Wheelock, *Crossing the Tracks*, p. 76.