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## Sustaining Change: The Struggle to Maintain Identity at Central Park East Secondary School

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Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) in East Harlem was one of the most highly acclaimed and successful schools to come out of the period of school reform in the 1980s from which the Coalition of Essential Schools emerged. Noted progressive educator Deborah Meier founded CPESS in 1985 not as a reform model, but as a continuation of the specific progressive approaches that had proven so highly successful with students exiting a series of three East Harlem elementary schools (Central Park East I and II, and Rivereast Elementary). The three sister elementary schools, also founded by Meier, were structured as multi-age grouped, open-classroom schools where children moved developmentally at their own pace. Teachers observed, guided, and facilitated each child's educational journey. Parents were an integral part of their child's progress, and the staff worked collaboratively in making all decisions about governance, instruction, and curriculum.

By the time *The Power of Their Ideas*, Meier's book about CPESS, was published in 1995, shortly after her MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," the school had data to solidify its acclaim. At a time in New York when citywide completion of high school was at 50 percent, CPESS's dropout rate was under five percent. Ninety percent of its graduates went directly on to college, many to highly prestigious schools. As Meier (1995) described, CPESS's school population was "roughly equivalent to a cross sampling of New York City." The majority of the students were African-American and Latino, most were from low-income homes, and represented "a full range of academic strengths and handicaps."

I first visited CPESS and met Meier in the spring of 1992, one year after the school had celebrated its first graduating class. For many years after that first visit, I returned to the school, bringing groups of educators to see CPESS and other highly successful, small, public, alternative schools of choice sprinkled throughout East Harlem's District 4. Year after year, CPESS was always one of the high points of our trip, perhaps because it was so strikingly dissimilar from typical secondary schools.

In the late 1990s, however, it became increasingly clear that CPESS was metamorphosing into a different school. On its third leader since Meier's departure in 1994, differences in structure and climate were obvious. In 2002, I launched a research project to assess the extent of and reasons for the changes at CPESS in order to understand the ways a school maintains its identity and sustains its work over the long haul.

### Structural, Curricular, and Pedagogical Changes

My visit and interviews during the 2002-03 school year revealed a significantly different school than the CPESS of previous years. "Almost everything has changed in some fashion," explained one teacher. "The whole notion of CPESS as a staff-run school, which was the mantra and guiding philosophy in 1990, is no longer the case at this point. There is no pretense of it. It's a terminology that you hear some teachers occasionally refer to, and I suppose they might have more input at times than at some other [NYC] schools, but the true notion of asking staff to view the school holistically, and then make all of the decisions is simply no longer the case."

"The whole change from being a staff-run school affects a lot more than just the amount of voice the teachers have," explained another teacher. "It ultimately affects things like the class schedule, what's taught, curricula, pedagogy. Everything is now much more directed by the principal and the two assistant principals."

While there were always district-wide curricula, "We just ignored it," explained a teacher. "We worked together to develop our own—one that made sense to us for our students." Another teacher explained, "We

had team meetings, which gave us the chance to have this constant conversation about what you were teaching, which deepens everyone's teaching."

"The meetings to discuss curricula and pedagogy were especially important because we were all generalists, rather than specializing in just one academic area," explained another. "So English and social studies teachers or science and math teachers had the chance to talk together. We worked with each other on how to teach the area that was not our strength; and we exchanged ideas for integrating the curriculum."

"The overall curriculum, the pace and the content is now dictated by the school," explained one teacher. Teachers at CPESS are now specialists in specific teaching areas, with all of the integrated classes changed to specific academic classes. "All of the integrated humanities and math/science classes have been decoupled," explained a teacher.

Student assessment and evaluation have also changed. Students now receive traditional letter grades. The original family-student-teacher conferences of 30 to 45 minutes held two or three times a year to discuss the students' progress now follows the district-wide pattern of "one 15 minute parent-teacher conference one night a year," a teacher commented. "So it's left up to whatever the board of education prescribes."

Class length now follows a more traditional pattern also, with class periods in Divisions I and II at 45 minutes in length. While slightly different from grades 7-10, Senior Institute (SI) classes now run for one hour each. "In student numbers, this means teachers see a lot more students each week than the 40 they used to see," explained a teacher. "We used to see students four times a week, and some of our blocks ranged up to two hours," commented another teacher. "Over the years that got shorter and shorter. And the SI students now take five classes instead of the four they used to take. So that means students have the same classes every day."

"It has its pluses and minuses," mused one teacher. "In some ways it's easier for the teachers now."

### **Anatomy of Change: External Pressures**

From the very inception of the school, the tensions of traditional instruction pushed against the CPESS model from within and without. Meier designed a structure for CPESS that built in locally constructed and articulated standards for students and for the school itself. Students would demonstrate their knowledge and ability to draw conclusions and connections through their public presentation and defense of portfolios. Similarly, the staff would collectively critique the school's work annually, both internally among themselves, as well as externally by inviting educational experts to examine the school and its programs (Meier, 1995, 2000).

When she started the school in 1985, Meier arranged a commitment from the city and state to allow a reconceived school that did not conform to the traditional Carnegie credit hour system. While there were no standardized state or national test requirements for a high school diploma at that time, a Regents diploma, awarded to students who passed all of a series of Regents tests was available, though not required.

CPESS, like many other NYC high schools, issued its own diploma based upon its portfolio process. When some of the state standardized testing requirements were phased into the schools via state competency tests, the CPESS staff agreed that the math and writing Regents exams were acceptable add-ons to their performance-based system. They collaboratively agreed that while they would give those two tests, they would spend their time with students teaching their own curriculum, not preparing for the tests.

With Steve Phillips, then head of alternative high schools, Meier obtained a six-year waiver from the New York Commissioner of Education for CPESS and all New York City CES schools from the state Regents testing. Once the waiver expired in the 2002-3 school year, all CPESS students were required to pass all five Regents' exams to graduate, which has had a powerful impact on the school's curricula and pedagogy, pushing it away from interdisciplinary, competency-based work and toward more standard approaches to teaching and learning. "Knowing that the ...students will have to pass all five of the [state] tests has been a big driving force in all of the changes at CPESS," one teacher mused.

Since CPESS, as a staff-run school, had a history of collaborative decision-making about both governance and instructional issues, I was curious about how and when the decision to have students take these standardized tests was made. CPESS had the option to join the New York Performance Standards

Consortium, “a coalition of alternative, progressive NYC schools formed to fight the issue of high stakes, externally-developed tests being used as the ultimate measure of what kids know,” as one CPESS teacher explained. That teacher continued, “There was some internal dialogue and conflict among staff at CPESS about what to do at that time. But ultimately, the school administrator determined that we would not join the coalition of other schools fighting the tests. Many of those schools fought longer and harder than we did. That decision pulled us away from a whole network of schools with similar philosophies, and ultimately we lost that source of support, contact, and camaraderie.”

“It’s not like we didn’t talk about [that decision],” another teacher mused. “We spent some time arguing and discussing, but ultimately, Steven [the school’s leader at that time] pushed it through. He said we had no choice; we had to give the tests. He said we’d take a two-pronged stance. We’d prepare our kids for the test in case it came, and then he’d also fight it.”

“But he didn’t join the consortium fighting the tests,” another teacher mused. “So I think there was a lot of [city-wide] politics going on [between him and other school leaders].”

Another teacher was more ardent. “The test situation is an example of how we were railroaded. Because much of the staff at that time, and even for a while after that decision was made, wanted to join the coalition to fight the tests he kept saying it wasn’t such a bad thing.” This teacher remembered some “major fights” at several staff meetings.

### **Domino Reactions to Pressures**

CPESS’s form of authentic learning and assessment had rarely used textbooks, except as occasional reference points for student research. “But in preparing for those tests, you begin to let it dictate what you teach,” a teacher reflected. “And how do you teach for the test? Well, most teachers try to find a textbook that follows the mandated materials so you’re sure you’ve covered everything that will be tested. So some of us fought the whole textbook thing; but others just quietly began to change what they did in their classroom. One teacher stopped doing projects and portfolios altogether in his room. I was shocked when I heard that, but by then no one was really talking about it.”

“The problem became that no one talked about it—not really talked,” another teacher reflected. “And no one was saying that if we changed completely and began basing our teaching around these tests and not our own projects and curriculum, then we needed to redefine who we are and what we value.” Another teacher mused, “The problem is that you’re busy teaching all of the time. You’re trying to work with the curriculum, help specific kids, and give some others the extra attention they seem to need. So after a while you don’t fight quite as hard when things change.”

One of the teachers reflected, “I think the first real textbook was a math text brought in by one of the assistant principals. The purpose was positive, to change the math and science taught at the school to prepare our students for the tests. And it was actually a very good textbook. One of our math teachers felt that it did a good job of combining theory and practice.”

Just as in Dewey’s philosophy from the beginning of the 20th century, CPESS’s project-based learning and graduation by portfolio had always emphasized a focus on examining theory within the constructs of practice. Projects reflected “real-world” issues and dilemmas that students examined together with classroom theory through the lenses of the five habits of mind, as Meier (1995) and Sizer describe.

“In a text that combines theory and practice in math,” continued the teacher, “Someone had actually found a book that would be a fairly good fit for our pedagogy and philosophy at CPESS. But the problem was that we never had those conversations about how to even begin to blend textbooks with our projects. So some of the teachers began to just teach the textbook instead of our curriculum. The focus moved from our curriculum to following the pages of the text. And then, if you did that, there wasn’t time to cover the depth of exhibitions or projects that we had always done in the past.”

“You can’t teach all of that content,” reflected another teacher, “And still have kids get this kind of depth of understanding and learning. And some kids are never going to embrace breadth and spit it back quickly and successfully on tests. But they can learn and understand at incredible levels if we give them the time and the challenge to do that. The question is, do you need to know—by memory—lots of facts and details? Or do you need to be able to access those facts and details and be able to apply it and use it? And if you can’t

apply it, then what's the point of learning [it]?"

"The thing I thought was tragic," mused another teacher, "Was that there was this movement away from a model of authentic assessment, which could have evolved more clearly to a coverage model. I know another school that looked at that same math textbook and switched it around and used it for projects. They adapted it to our kind of teaching. But instead of thinking about how we could adapt the text to our math and science curriculum, and how we could use it to continue building our program, the idea became simply to shift our block schedules to 60 and 45 minute periods, create separate math and science classrooms, and change the whole teacher team."

As I listened and reflected upon the effect the single external pressure of high stakes testing had upon CPESS, I was struck by the enormity of the consequence of a single decision: to give the tests and to organize the curriculum to prepare the students for those tests. The move toward textbook-guided instruction and away from authentic assessment, the decoupling of the multi-aged classrooms together with the change from integrated to traditional curricula were huge changes for this small, formerly non-traditional school. And, while everyone seemed to have their own opinion about how such enormous changes could come about in a school that used to pride itself on these very differences and their effect on student success, the main question that spoke to me the loudest was: What was it in CPESS's culture that enabled this kind of dismantling?

### **Changes in Student Behaviors**

Thomas Sergiovanni has pointed out that careful development and nurturing of the culture of a school is a critical part in successful school reform. Defining the heart of culture as "what people believe, the assumptions they make about how schools work, and what they consider to be true and real," he goes on to caution, "Less obvious is the connection between culture and theory. ... Underneath school culture is a theory, and every school culture inevitably involves changing theories of schooling and school life."

Perhaps the most obvious changes were in student behaviors, both in the hallways and in the classrooms. "They're having trouble implementing the new math curriculum because a lot of the teachers are having trouble getting control of their classrooms long enough to be able to actually teach the stuff," one teacher observed. "The hallways are out of control," still another teacher commented. "And it's the same students that are walking the halls all of the time. The problem is that they influence other kids, who watch them and see what they get away with, and then try it themselves."

These observations reflect drastic changes in student behavior for CPESS. Throughout my years of visiting the school, there was consistently little classroom or hallway misbehavior. Student behavior seemed to go far beyond simply following rules. The behavior itself appeared very tied to the active student engagement in academic work. In fact, one of the things most often noted and discussed by the educators I took with me on these visits was the degree to which students were focused at CPESS, characterized by their consistent ability to explain what they were learning and its implications.

In fact, all of us visiting CPESS over the years frequently saw older students stopping to correct younger students with a casual, "We don't do things like that here." When I asked another teacher if students still correct each other over behavioral issues, the teacher shook her head. "No," she replied, "I just don't think the administrators have time to try to implement some of the programs available to work with students on behaviors and attitudes. Everyone is just so busy trying to deal with the students' [misbehavior] now."

To be fair, while I saw a surprising amount of disruptive hallway and classroom behaviors, I also saw some classes in which learning was obviously taking place. And I saw some students who still handled themselves well during breaks from classroom time. But the dramatic changes in student behavior and thus in the school's overall atmosphere was, nevertheless, unequivocal. One of the teachers commented, "These are great kids. I really don't have any trouble with them in my classroom. They know what I expect, and they do it." Then, turning thoughtful, the teacher ruminated, "But in the sense that the school has gotten more and more out of control, I may not come back next year."

While none of the teachers were able to pinpoint when student behavioral problems first began to escalate, many reflected on their concerns about that escalation. It was unclear as to whether the changes in behavior preceded or followed the changes in curriculum. More likely would be the possibility that these changes in

behavior reflected the changes in the school's theory about learning, as Sergiovanni observes, occurring simultaneously with the changes in curriculum. That is, as students became less engaged with the curriculum preparing them for the tests, behavioral problems began to grow.

### **Teacher Turnover**

It is tempting to attribute the degeneration of student behavior and attitude on high teacher turnover. As staff turns over, the importance of school communities taking extra time and energy to convey and transfer school values and culture increases, per Sergiovanni. The turnover of staff at CPESS began to some degree in 1993 when four teachers left to start new alternative schools that would grow the CPESS philosophy of small, staff-run schools with progressive instructional techniques. "The idea was to cross-pollinate," recalled one teacher. "We all wanted to get our ideas out into other places, to open similar schools for other kids." In 1994, the school lost another four teachers to new schools.

Meier also began a half-time schedule as director of CPESS that year in order to work as a senior fellow and senior advisor for the Network for School Renewal Project and the Coalition Campus School Project at the Annenberg Institute. These two projects used Annenberg funds to begin networks to start new elementary, middle, and high schools throughout New York, as well as to transform two existing large high schools in Manhattan and the Bronx. In an effort to ensure the continued success of the school after her departure, Meier brought in a co-director in 1990, and they had worked together for the four years, helping to assure the continuation of the school's philosophy and practice. While the rest of the departures were, to some extent, planned, and certainly agreed upon by staff members who were eager to see their work expanded, they nevertheless left holes.

"We definitely felt them [being gone]," a teacher recalled. "You lost the voices that you used to know. And they were some of the stronger voices." The absence of those familiar voices resonates, perhaps even louder in a staff-run school, where almost all day-to-day decisions are made collaboratively. As teachers leave, they take part of the collective history of the school with them. As new teachers come on board to replace the departed colleagues, they need time and mentoring to learn that history, as well as the school's collective values. Since CPESS was so drastically different from the experiences most teachers had as students or as teachers elsewhere, it was all the more difficult to transfer philosophy and practice to new people.

CPESS strove to overcome this difficulty by hiring teachers who had similar experiences and nurturing their own novice teachers. Nevertheless, the issue of how to deal with staff turnover while ensuring CPESS's sustainability remained. Indeed, the conundrum with which all progressive schools like CPESS must continuously wrestle is how to continue and sustain a successful, reformed school design that by its very nature demands responsive reactions to daily exterior and interior needs. In other words, if the entity must by its nature be flexible and welcome needed changes, how do you then also ensure continuation of the original philosophy and design?

### **The Importance of Shared Values**

As Meier and her colleagues formed CPESS in its earliest years, they "re-cultured" the school, as Michael Fullan describes. He sees that a re-culturing is a prerequisite of reforming schools and having that reformation sustain. Individually, the stakeholders must form new ways of thinking about both students and learning. Then, collectively, they need to shape those ideas into a set of community beliefs: What do we, as a community, believe about learning and students? This re-culturing then becomes the critical factor in leading all restructuring decisions.

As I have observed school reform projects over the past 20 years, it has become evident that most are guided by one of two different processes. Either the project is defined by a restructuring model, that is to say a locally or nationally developed structure is brought in and followed, dictating the change process, or the school or district enters into a large-scale strategic planning process to define values, set goals, and then shape a long-term plan to achieve these objectives.

In schools, strategic planning usually involves a group of individuals representing the teachers, parents and community members working together for a concentrated, set period of time identifying what the school community believes in and what they want the school to do. Once this is established and documented, the stakeholders develop an action plan to guide them. This action plan contains the specific actions needed and a listing of which key people will be responsible for seeing that these actions are accomplished.

Typically, the plan involves a five-year timeline of actions.

By mindfully identifying and discussing the values and goals of the school prior to any changes of structure or operation, strategic planning comes closest to Fullan's idea of re-culturing prior to restructuring. But traditional strategic planning leaves out two key factors. First, not all of the stakeholders have a voice. And second, the planning process itself, while generating excellent discussions about the school's culture, is at best disconnected from the everyday living of the school and its members.

In her design of the original school, Meier included strategies to address both of these two key issues. First, by insisting that CPESS remain small in numbers (no more than 400 students), she was able to have all teachers at the table, rather than a representative group, thereby empowering each teacher's voice. What was more, conversations about values and goals were not limited to a span of a year or so until the strategic plan was completed, with periodic follow-up meetings to check on the progress of the plan. Rather, these conversations became a constant occurrence, allowing the culture to evolve as the needs changed.

"We used to have retreats," a teacher explained in reflection on the ways CPESS had changed. "All of the staff attended from both divisions and the Senior Institute. We held one before school, and one after school each year. And then, on many years, we also had one in the middle of the year. They were a chance for all of us to break away from the daily teaching and student needs, and really look at the bigger picture."

"We addressed all kinds of things in those retreats," reflected another teacher. "But it also gave us the chance to look at what we did in light of our beliefs about kids and learning." These retreats, together with the time devoted to constant, on-going discussions around curriculum, pedagogy, and governance issues, provided a forum for the communication and continuation of the school's culture, not only for returning teachers, but also for those new to the school. The meetings gave all staff members a voice in the decisions, placing them in a structure that required a constant process of attempting to make sense of their world, both individually and collectively.

### **The Hat Example**

In *The Power of Their Ideas*, (1995) Meier describes an on-going debate among CPESS staff members over whether students should be permitted to wear hats in school. The debate stemmed from two colliding cultural values. In some cultures wearing a hat inside is considered rude and disrespectful, while in others hats are a part of a deep, even religious respect. As I had visited over the years, this debate had surfaced and resurfaced many times, with students and teachers breaking into sidebar conversations about the issue. It was clear to me that the process of discussing and arguing was far more powerful and important to the school and its culture than was the final resolution of hat wearing.

However, when I visited CPESS in 2000, I noticed that the debate and its focus on the communal values of the school had dwindled. While we were standing in the hall outside a Division I classroom, a teacher introduced herself to us, explaining that she was new to the school that year, as were most of the other teachers in Division I. When a student walked past us wearing a backwards baseball cap, the teacher interrupted our conversation to address him. I smiled to myself, waiting to hear the status of that on-going debate.

"Take that hat off your head, now," she directed. "You know the rule!"

The student responded by removing his cap, but simultaneously muttered a series of loud expletives about where the school was heading and how he felt about it. Surprisingly, the teacher did nothing in response to his verbal barrage.

Turning back to our group she explained, "A couple of us were very surprised when we started here this year that students were permitted to wear hats in the building. It's very disrespectful. So we went to the principal and told him that he needed to make a rule forbidding hats in the school. And by the next day, we had a rule." She beamed with pride at the end of this explanation, clearly pleased with the quick resolution of the issue.

At dinner that evening, several of the teachers in our group who had read *The Power of Their Ideas* expressed dismay that the process of debate over that issue could so easily be dropped in favor of a more traditional, hierarchic administrative decision. In retrospect, the decision provided a much clearer picture of

the change in the school's culture than any other single observation.

Are changes in rules and structures necessary as a school evolves? Without question. But it is critical to consider the ways such changes come about. Clearly, the open exchange of ideas and debate among staff members as they wrestle with determining who they are and what they value collectively—an essential piece of CPESS's culture—had not been transferred to this new teacher.

In addition to constructing a collective sense-making process, the structure of a staff-governed school also gave the staff members the ability to shape, mold, and change their path as situations unfolded and circumstances changed. While CPESS's essential values remained constant, the staff was never tied into actions defined in a static five-year plan. Robert H. Hayes and Sergioivanni refer to this process as a "means-ways-ends" structure. Contrasting sharply with the traditional ends-ways-means approach, they see this approach as far more useful for schools. In the traditional ends-ways-means structure, schools must first identify their values and goals. Having done that, they then determine how they will accomplish these goals (the action plan), and finally, they identify the means (who will guide the particular parts of the action plan) through training, supervising and motivating the people involved.

The difficulty in this approach is the amount of time that it takes to develop and accomplish the plan. Because schools are living entities, composed entirely of very real people, with all of their inherent strengths and imperfections, collective and individual needs can easily change in very short order. What was needed two weeks ago, may, due to many possible reasons, all beyond anyone's control, change totally by next month, leaving us, nevertheless, chipping away at the same five-year plan.

Hayes suggests that whenever the venue in which the work to be done resembles "a swamp that is shifting in unpredictable ways, particular objectives are likely to lose their attractiveness over time." He posits that when an organization takes a means-ways-ends approach it "assumes everybody is responsible for its prosperity. Its success rests on its ability to exploit opportunities as they arise, on its ingenuity, on its capacity to learn, on its determination and persistence." So, what happened at CPESS?

### **Where's the Focus?**

The original structure of the school set the stage for on-going discussions within weekly pedagogy and curricular meetings, all-staff governance meetings, and all-staff retreats. But even with that structure in place, the discussions needed to consistently focus on maintaining their commitment to each other.

"There was a sharpness in the way [Meier] held us accountable to each other," one teacher reflected. "Whenever someone did something that was not a part of who we were, she would point that out. It was handled aggressively. It could be something that seemed minor, like kids not becoming a part of conflicts, not cheerleading a conflict. But we stopped and talked about it. We said that if you cared about your community [CPESS], you stopped conflicts, you didn't egg them on."

Meier also helped staff and students to tie their underlying values together with their daily actions. "Our staff meetings were about concrete, specific things that we did. She'd see things happening in the classrooms or hallways, and she'd follow them up with a meeting using those specific examples."

As another teacher explained, "It wasn't that we sat and listened to [Meier]. We all were pretty vocal in expressing our opinions. But she'd ask us questions about specific things we were doing. She wasn't afraid to take you on, and we weren't afraid to challenge her or each other." Sergioivanni describes this important leadership task in covenantal communities as an ability to not only "help bring about a shared consensus of ideas, model these ideas, and then help others to embody them in their daily lives, but [to also] bring together a shared commitment among members to maintain accountability for living the covenant."

Gail McCutcheon points to this lack of hesitation in approaching conflict as a stimulator, reflecting that "conflict plays a positive role in collaborative work by virtually forcing deliberators to examine alternatives meticulously." If faced in an open and non-threatening manner, the very conflict itself, then, helps to nurture and ensure growth for both parties. Meier's consistent willingness to embrace and encourage conflicting view points in staff members not only encouraged professional growth and thought, but also helped them to tie underlying theory and culture to their daily decisions in practice.

The year after Meier left, three critically important events happened. First, the school was asked to increase

its numbers and take in more students than usual, ultimately growing from its original size of 400 students to today's count of well over 500. "In a way, I guess it was a compliment," one teacher reflected. "We had become known as a caring school. So we began to have an increasing number of students who had had trouble fitting in anywhere else. Our reputation around the city was that CPESS was a place where kids could come and be accepted and successful." The second event, not unusual to schools, was the beginning of a series of major budget cuts. This left the school dealing with both a significant growth in student numbers and less money. Third, for the first time in the school's history, some of its students did not choose CPESS, but were placed there by the NYC Schools' District Office. All students in what was at that time District 4 in East Harlem had to choose and apply to a school at the beginning of their seventh grade year. From its beginning, CPESS was always a school of choice, and its students requested to be there.

This student growth mandated a growth in new teachers to accommodate the new student numbers. These new teachers joined the CPESS staff at the same time that another set of four teachers left to start another school. The result was a sizable number of people new to CPESS who did not have its history, nor understand the original shared values. The growth in student numbers and its accompanying teacher expansion after Meier's departure made it increasingly more cumbersome to include all staff members in school governance issues, or even in all school issues of curriculum and pedagogy.

Moreover, none of these new students or adults had been through any process in which they became a part of this covenantal community. Even if a teacher arrives with some understanding and/or experience in developing student portfolios, exhibitions, project-based learning, and authentic assessment, the heart of a covenantal community as evidenced through its shared values would still need to be transferred. And this time it required a transfer to unusually increased numbers of people with varying degrees of "buy-in" to CPESS's values and mission.

In fact, in the year before she left, Meier had reassessed the numbers. "For the first four or five years [of CPESS' existence] every teacher was a part of the discussions. Everyone came to the meetings. But just before she left, we had developed a leadership/executive team of about 13 people. There were representatives from each House and Division." Even though this executive team totaled about one third of the total staff, for the first time teachers' voices could be one step removed from the decisions.

### **The Heart of Shared Leadership**

By consistently asking staff members to examine their classroom practice and school governance decisions through the lens of their shared values, Meier was, in many ways, acting as the community's conscience, constantly calling the group back to its values and original commitment. What is more, by insisting that teachers take the difficult, controversial items in an honest and open manner, she called for a democratic participation that reflects Michael W. Apple and James A. Beane's concept of a democracy that "is not the 'engineering of consent' toward predetermined decisions that has too often created the illusion of democracy, but [instead] a genuine attempt to honor the right of people to participate in making decisions that affect their lives."

This collaborative work toward a true democracy reflected the importance of what Robert J. Starratt has pointed to as a dualism of followers and leaders when he posits that "It is the whole group—leaders and followers—who achieve the breakthroughs in institutional and social systems." With Meier's leadership, teachers were expected, and at times pushed to be fully contributing members of the community, with all involved sharing leadership.

The joint impact of both Meier's leaving and the addition of a sizeable number of both teachers and students new to the school, made the transfer of the school's culture to its new members more critical than ever before. However, instead of increasing the depth and breadth of the discussions, meetings were actually curtailed. "We just gradually stopped holding as many meetings," one teacher recalled. "At first we drifted from the weekly all staff governance meetings to holding them only twice a month. And then we gradually began to hold fewer of the other meetings also."

The substance of the meetings also dropped. "The issues that were brought up at the meetings we had just began to be so tedious and limited that there wasn't much conversation of any real value," a teacher recalled. "We didn't talk about specific practice as much," another teacher mused. "When we did talk, it was more theoretical, but we didn't tie the theory into practice." Gradually, teacher attendance at the meetings



began to drop also. "We hired some new teachers who just didn't realize how we worked, and why the meetings were important. So people began to just not come."

"Now with [Meier]," a teacher chuckled, "if you didn't show up at a meeting, you knew she would call you on it. She'd be in your room the next day asking where you were and why you weren't there. You knew you were expected to be there. And you also knew that you would miss out on some decisions if you weren't there. But after she left, if people didn't come to meetings nothing was said. So it's kind of like a classroom. If the teacher assigns homework, and it's not worthwhile, and no one checks to see if you turn it in, then by human nature, some people will just not do it."

"I think it was a combination of not carefully orienting new teachers into our values and who we were," another teacher reflected, "and a willingness to put down how we handled education. And since there were no longer those times when we came together and really discussed things like that, and weren't afraid to say what we were thinking about it, then it all just kind of quietly evolved."

"[Now] we have teachers who don't know anything about the history of CPESS," a teacher mused. "They have no idea of who we were or how we functioned. So the teachers don't know, and they can't even begin to tell the students. And each year, we have fewer and fewer students who know or remember."

Examining the layers of this complex metamorphosis, I began to understand the ways that additional students, a substantial number of new teachers followed by steadily increasing teacher turnover, difficult budget cuts, and soon after, an enormous external pressure to move toward competitive, standardized testing finally took their toll.

With no thoughtful attempt to transfer the culture of the school, nor to re-establish the commitment to each other as a community with shared values, people became lost in the muddle of everyday life. Staff members and leaders focused on solving individual problems. With the focus slowly turning away from their original commitment, it became easier for school leaders to simply make decisions. Rather than focus upon their accountability to each other for living their commitments, it became easier to move to administrative decisions in place of staff consensus, and disciplinary measures in place of student accountability to each other.

But as Seymour Sarason has pointed out, it is the very synergistic nature of schools "where one action creates multiple interactions" that cries out for multiplicitous, open lines of communication between those carrying out the work with students and those leading the community. "It's not like anyone came in and said, 'I'm going to change everything you do here,'" a teacher mused. "It's just that you're teaching all of the time. And you're trying to deal with all of the issues and problems inherent in that. So after a while you don't fight as hard when you see the changes happening. Some of it may even be natural. I've seen other schools change too. But each piece just kind of got whittled away, until it's just not the same place. And that's really sad."

The time that I spent at CPESS in 2002-3 was made more poignant when one new teacher asked at the end of our interview if I had visited the school before. When I responded that I had visited frequently beginning in 1992, the teacher's face softened a bit. Leaning back in the chair, the teacher asked quietly if I had time to talk about what the school was like "back then," explaining, "I've read some things, but I'd really like to hear what it was like."

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#### Author's Note on Research Methods

This qualitative study was begun in the 2002-2003 school year. During that year, I interviewed 19 teachers who had either in the past or at the time worked at the school. Slightly more than half of these interviews were conducted in person, the rest by phone. All teachers were guaranteed confidentiality, and I have used pseudonyms for both of the school's leaders who followed Meier. The on-site interviews averaged 40 minutes each, with several repeat conversations totaling approximately 90 minutes each. Phone interviews averaged slightly over an hour each. I analyzed these interviews throughout the year, using constant, comparative analysis methods.

Upon completion of the project, I triangulated my findings with four current and former staff members of the school during the 2004-05 school year. Since all of this work dealt with not only the individual perceptions of the educators involved, but also their individual, remembered reconstructions, there were some discrepancies, particularly in dates and numbers. I tried to carefully research these differences through triangulation. When slight discrepancies continued beyond the triangulation, I chose to use the information the majority of interviewees gave to me.

In order to protect teacher confidentiality, I have purposefully mixed present and past tenses as well as pronouns in this article.

Central Park East Secondary School's Habits of Mind, as described by Deborah Meier in *The Power of Their Ideas*:

- The question of evidence, or "How do we know what we know?"
- The question of viewpoint in all its multiplicity, or "Who's speaking?"
- The search for connection and patterns, or "What causes what?"
- Supposition, or "How might things have been different?"
- Why any of it matters, or "Who cares?"

#### SIDEBAR

The Good We Do Is Never Lost, by Deborah Meier

Years ago, I wrote an essay about the once-innovative and much publicized schools that no longer were on anyone's map. While there were, in fact, a substantial (though perhaps statistically insignificant) number of progressive public schools that have weathered the top-down reforms of the past few decades, many do it by staying under the radar—going about their business without making waves. This may be a sound strategy to stay alive, but it's a loss, because the rest of us haven't been able to learn or benefit from their long-term success.

We hope over the next few years to hold regional events to celebrate as many of these survivors we can locate. Alas, Central Park East Secondary School (and River East) won't be among them. Despite years of "preparing" for my departure, it didn't work the way we hoped. The fault lies in too many places—when many possibilities for failing exist, one can depend on it to happen. The perfect storm came upon us from many directions, and we were in a weakened state due to key teachers leaving to start new schools, a second switch in leadership, a requirement to take in more students, including those who had not chosen CPES at all, and the demand that we take the high school Regent subject exams. It hurts me when I go back to visit Central Park East I elementary school (which is in the same building), and I blame myself for (a) leaving when I did, and (b) not having had more foresight.

But I'm very grateful to Diane Suiter for telling this story. There are too few such stories about how schools of promise fail. We forget that the loss of such promise is not inevitable; rather, it is "murdered" by thoughtless and deliberate acts, mostly from the outside, but abetted, even if unconsciously, by those within. It's hard to teach and fight the world at the same time, especially when the opposition are often well-meaning and the changes each seems small—at the moment.

This coming year should have been CPESS's 25th anniversary. But instead, the alumni of the old CPESS celebrated in an Irish pub in downtown Manhattan and then gathered the next day to gossip and play basketball together. They have gone into many fields of work (a lot became teachers), and to a remarkable degree, they and their families keep in touch with each other and with their former teachers. One nice thing about our work is that the good we do is never lost.

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