

Chapter Three

“Are They Worried I’m Going to Steal?”

Life in a Neighborhood High School

In his survey research on the lives of teachers, Samuel Bacharach, a professor of organizational behavior at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University, uses words like *scavengers*, *deprofessionalized*, and *makeshift* to describe the work experiences of teachers. He states that “before a job can be performed effectively, it must be properly designed” and concludes that schools are not providing the resources needed for teachers to be effective. He states that “no matter how well-motivated people may be, a lack of resources will prevent them from accomplishing their job responsibilities. In fact, a lack of resources often results in frustration and ultimately de-motivates job holders.”¹ Do Bacharach’s conclusions apply to New York City, with its traditions of progressive politics? Is the job of teacher with the New York City Board of Education designed so that teachers can be effective?

Each of the teachers and principals in the next three chapters have at least fifteen years’ experience. They are not new to the job. They did not drop in from a college campus last year. While they were not scientifically selected on the basis of age, race, gender, and income as in a survey of voters, I believe their experiences do illustrate the lives of teachers in New York City’s public schools today.

The first two teachers worked at John Jay, a neighborhood high school in the well-to-do area of Park Slope in Brooklyn, but in New York City the “neighborhood high school” is often a place to avoid. Built very large, with an average capacity of 2,500 and some as large as 4,000, neighborhood high schools are designed as places for the students who do not have the grades in middle school to be admitted to the city’s elite science high

schools or the city's magnet high schools, called *ed-op* or *educational option* schools. The total size of the student body is the only obstacle to success in these neighborhood high schools. They also tend to stay with the traditional factory schedule of short forty-five- to fifty-minute periods, with each teacher seeing at least 165 students a day.

The third teacher lived in Park Slope but bypassed John Jay to commute all the way into Manhattan to work in a school built on an entirely different model. Supported by the Annenberg Foundation, the New York City Board of Education created fifty New Vision schools in the late 1990s as alternatives to its massive, impersonal neighborhood high schools. With much smaller enrollments, and each teacher facing fewer than eighty students a day and in some cases as few as fifty, the New Vision schools were a new model. Did this model work? Would teenagers become more literate in alternative environments? Chapter 5 will look at some of these questions.

The names of the educators interviewed in this chapter and in the next two chapters have not been changed. When asked at several different times about privacy, they decided to use their real names.

THE YEAR BEGINS AT JOHN JAY HIGH SCHOOL IN BROOKLYN

The first high school in the sample, John Jay, is locally famous because none of the children in the immediate neighborhood go there. They shun John Jay and attend other public schools in Brooklyn or Manhattan or leave the public school system entirely and attend Catholic and private schools.

Visitors to Brooklyn can find John Jay easily. The building is massive. It is the largest structure on a busy commercial street, and it dwarfs the one- and two-story restaurants, bookstores, barbershops, and other stores that line the street. The high school covers the entire width of the block and about one-third of the length of the block.

There is not a blade of grass or a playing field in sight. There are no playing fields or running tracks or green spaces around this high school. The site consists entirely of the five-story brick building that sits right on the concrete sidewalk. There are no setbacks or empty spaces around the building on the east, west, or south sides. There is the building, a short

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stretch of sidewalk, and then the street in these directions. On the north side of the school is a small faculty parking lot, completely filled with cars.

Dr. William J. Hunter, the assistant principal of John Jay and the chairperson of the English department, who is the focus of this chapter, is the administrator with the longest service in the school. He served as a teacher from 1969 as a supervisor from 1981. He recalls when John Jay used to receive student teachers from the schools of education in Manhattan—Teachers College, Bank Street, New York University—but now the professors in these schools feel Jay is too rough. It sits alone on 7th Avenue with only the attention of two or three police patrol cars at dismissal.

Its neighborhood, Park Slope, is full of three-story Victorian brownstones on tree-lined streets. Park Slope is now sought after by those priced out of apartments and townhouses in Manhattan. But the children of the lawyers, stockbrokers, television producers, and journalists of Park Slope do not attend John Jay. With college boards scores around 400, Jay does not attract the middle class, Hunter said. “You see, this is a strange school—you know the school. It’s an inner-city school in an upper-middle-income neighborhood. But the people from the neighborhood do not send their kids to this school. They bus around them; they train under them. They would fly, I suppose if they could do that.”

Its reputation is not for violence, as in the case of Thomas Jefferson High in Brooklyn (with two murders in the building in one year), nor is it for student walkouts, as in the case of Eastern District High School. Rather, John Jay’s reputation is simply for low achievement. In 1999–2000, only 26 percent of the schools seniors took the SAT, with an average verbal score of 383 and mathematics score of 406. The school did not achieve the state standard for the passing rate for the state exit exam in English or in mathematics, and its dropout rate also violated the state standard in this area.² It was very overcrowded in the 1999–2000 school year, operating at 147 percent of capacity.³ Its students are primarily Afro-American and Latino, and they arrive with poor academic skills. What is this school and others like it doing to improve the intellectual skills and the intellectual lives of the teenagers who attend each day?

Hunter said the year began with problems. “The halls started out with a sense of disrespect and violence; the principal suspended people left and right. Ironically, we were very fortunate. There was a massive gang retribution on the Avenue [7th Avenue] and 9th Street, and most of the kids who were the worst offenders in our school transferred out for safety reasons.

Now we just have left students who are disrespectful, and it amazes us how little they have been socialized before they came to high school.

“They act as if they were in the streets. I talk about that to a large extent because it affects one in the classroom sometimes. It affects teachers at meetings where they should be discussing academics; the first thing you want to do you want to do is complain about student behavior. Student lack of control. Student lack of respect. And I think it’s a carryover from a society that does not respect teachers, does not respect education—at least in New York City and probably out of it.

Hunter also had opinions about students’ reading habits and their language skills: “The kids do not have a great working vocabulary. I supervise the after-school program, and there is a little core of kids who just recently entered the Lincoln–Douglas debates. They competed with the Midwood [a high school in a different section of Brooklyn] kids, and they got killed. And they got killed on cross-examination. They had difficulty with the vocabulary the kids were using in asking them questions. It was an interesting recognition on their part as well as the fact that these [Midwood] kids read all of the books that they didn’t read.

“They said, ‘They read the whole book?’ It was a great discovery for them. They’re juniors. I don’t think they are going to be demoralized. The problem is that the teacher is leaving, and one of us has to find a debate teacher, and that’s not so easy to find. A tremendous amount of time involved, and very little money is provided. So you moan for them; you sigh for them. Kathy Roberts, a social studies teacher, has been working four days a week with them, four days a week, an hour and a half, two hours a day, every single day. There’s no way she’s getting paid for what she’s doing. So, you know, you moan for them. . . .

“My son is an inveterate reader. Our students are not. My son is an inveterate television watcher also, but he reads. He also has two English teachers for parents. Unless the parents are willing to make the commitment to their children, the schools are going to find it very difficult to repair the damage that’s already been done. See, the myth is that there was some golden age of schools. There probably was not a golden age but a better age of parenting. When the divorce rate was infinitely lower. When one parent worked and there was much more control over the children.

“I read or my wife reads to our daughter now every night. We have always done that since birth. This is part of what builds that kind of tradi-

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tion of valuing the page, the written page. I don’t know if the SATs are going to ever go up. I don’t know whether there was some kind of mythical golden age. The average when I was going to school was a mere hundred points higher, fifty points higher. Unless there is a commitment by the society and the parents, the schools are going to be able to do something but not everything. The schools are being asked to do everything now, which I find kind of bizarre. They try to train us to do everything.”

Attendance Rate

Hunter had much to say about the obstacles to literacy in the home and in the school.

“You can’t separate home and school,” he said. “We have a high failure rate. One of the major causes of the failure rate is the attendance rate. Students who come here from junior high school, for example—over 40 percent come with more than twenty days absent a year. When you have that kind of absence rate, it is very difficult to have continuity in the classroom. It is very difficult to do group work. It is very difficult to develop projects. Some of our better classes, our Law and Justice Program, has approximately a 95 percent attendance rate, which would match with any school in the city. Their passing rate is over 90 percent. We had an Acorn program for the brighter students—well over 90 percent rate and attendance rate.” (John Jay’s overall attendance rate is 75.6 percent.⁴)

“When you take students who come from troubled homes, or they tell you they have been out and their mother knows they have been out, or they had to go to wherever they had to go because of a death in the family, or because there was a vacation, these are obstacles.”

Skill Deficiencies

“Another obstacle is that the students come here with enormous skill deficiencies,” Hunter continued. “The tendency, of course, is for the high schools to blame the junior high schools. The junior high schools blame the elementary schools. We have social promotion. To a certain extent, social promotion is an obstacle. You could argue, ‘Well, we don’t know how to teach them.’ But students come into the first grade with deficiencies.

They come into the second grade with deficiencies. And over the summer, the deficiencies are extended.

“I would argue that if you see no books in the house, if the sole means of entertainment is television, that’s an obstacle. I’m not going to blame the parents totally for this, but I’m not going to say that schools are totally responsible. I think that’s an inane proposition held forth only by business people who say, ‘Well, if you didn’t sell the shoe, you are a lousy shoe salesman.’ If you didn’t sell the shoe to someone who doesn’t have enough money to buy shoes, I don’t know whether you are a lousy shoe salesman or not.”

Hurry to the Pace (of the State Curriculum)

Silent reading programs are sometimes used as a way to increase the amount of reading done inside secondary schools, and Hunter had clear opinions about the value of silent reading. He said his high school didn’t have a schoolwide silent reading program in which everyone in the school reads for thirty minutes a day.

“No, it’s one that I brought up many, many, many years ago, but we are constrained. A large number of principals—and I have worked under a large number of principals [laughing]—feel that because of the state mandates to achieve a series of calendar lessons, that we hurry to their pace. You have a statewide curriculum in math, in biology, in social studies. Social studies I know has a calendar of lessons. . . . I feel that it’s largely because of the responsibilities they feel they must meet, the pressures they feel they must meet in terms of achieving this calendar of lessons. . . . The only department which can go its own way to a certain extent is the English department. And if I have a very low passing rate, no, I get looked at, askance.

“I think [silent reading] is a fairly decent idea. I think that writing across the curriculum is a good idea. I am aware of the research by Fader in *Hooked on Books* on what people should be doing. Implementing it is another ball game.

“And I’ll go a step further. It’s hard to find a principal who has an academic vision. And understands that in order for the academic vision to succeed you have to have a schoolwide disciplinary policy. They have to work hand in hand. And then get the cooperation of the students and the teachers. It’s a complex juggling act.”

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Hunter believes that state-mandated curriculum may not be what the students need.

“I would say to hell with the curriculum. It’s moronic. . . .

“[The school] could junk the entire state-mandated curriculum and say to everybody that we are going to accept the fact that kids are here not on the four-year plan. Which many of our kids are not. We acknowledge that they are not here on the four-year plan. You are here on a five- or six-year plan. And you are going to spend the first part of your year reading and writing. That’s all you are going to do. We can decorate the rooms. And make the doors very secure. Yesterday one of the loveliest people in this building who is not a teacher, who is a counselor of kids in need, literally had her door kicked off its hinges and her pocketbook ripped off. And so it goes.”

Focus on Reading

“I’d focus on reading. But I’d diagnose the entire school—there are three thousand students—and say, ‘OK, the entering class is about eight hundred or nine hundred. Your reading skills are poor. This is what you are going to do. You are going to read books and then you are going to write about them. You are going to do that. And then you are going to talk about them with your teachers. That’s what you are going to do for a long time. Until you show that you have some skills.’

“‘The rest of you, yes, we are going to move ahead. Forget age. We will just do phasing.’”

Hunter said that he had introduced new programs into his high school, but obstacles to learning continue year after year.

“We have had things come into this school. I brought the Writing Consortium into this school. It originally comes out of the San Francisco Bay area. To a certain extent, it is [used] districtwide in 15 [i.e., School District 15 in central Brooklyn]. It is a methodology which talks about how to enter the student’s world with reading and writing and get him or her interested in what [he or she is] doing—different approaches. It is so far removed from when I went to high school and they said write three hundred words on this particular topic as landing on the moon is from the Wright Brothers. It’s not as if we’ve remained backward. The English department specifically was the first to develop collaborative learning in the school. It does an enormous amount of group work and project work. People have

used us as a model for how you do certain things and how you change your department around.”

TEENAGERS READING FAR BELOW GRADE LEVEL

“But it doesn’t help our passing rate much,” Hunter added. “We just start with a lot of kids who don’t do the reading. They are not going to do the reading. They resist it every inch of the way. They don’t and can’t write. They come to us barely literate. I went to the Annex, and we had three discipline problems. The dean was perceptive enough to say, ‘I thought that you should see this, Bill. These kids have reading problems.’ She had pulled out from the computer—which is a very nice little tool—their whole history, their whole academic history. Reading problems? These kids read on DRP [degrees of reading power] levels of 0 to 10. The average is 50. Fifty is the average; 0 to 10 is where they read. Yes, there was been a programming problem. One kid was special ed. One kid was resource room. And the other kid was just damaged.

“We have a lot of kids who are like that. Twenty-five percent of our population comes in reading like that. Now New York state says they must, and New York City in its brilliance says, ‘Everybody is going to college and everybody is taking four years of this, three years of this.’ This is one of the stupidest educational philosophies that I have ever heard in my entire life. It is contrary to every other school system in the world. Forget this country—the world, where they say, ‘You don’t seem to be interested in academics. You really seem to be interested in acquiring a trade. Let’s get you into that kind of school.’

“We do not link high schools and junior colleges. We do not link high schools and junior colleges with the world of work. We separate things. We compartmentalize things. We make these moronic rulings that antagonize and alienate students and frustrate teachers. People say, ‘Well, you are not in the real world. You are not in the world of work.’ The real world is right in this school. This is not a microcosm of the real world. The real world is a microcosm of what goes on in this school, even if we are smaller than they are. This school is what is going to nourish this economy and make this economy survive, make this world survive culturally. This is not going to happen given this world’s power and this society’s power and its incredible stupidity.”

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Hunter said that the lack of reading skills and the resistance to reading that his students bring to high school makes learning difficult. He feels that this resistance to reading begins early if students fail to become fluent readers in elementary school.

An Insidious Disease

“My first training, interestingly enough, was as a reading coordinator,” Hunter said, “and one of the things that I learned when I was taking reading courses is that when you can’t read, it becomes an insidious disease which feeds on itself emotionally. You feel incompetent, and you feel an absolute lack of self-esteem and ability to function. When you can read, you feel better about yourself. It’s behavioral rather than attitudinal, but the attitude becomes part of the behavior. And you don’t change that so quickly. That’s why small classes, I think, work so well because you can help people who have serious problems and knew they had serious problems, and knew that the only reason they were there was to get help from someone who wanted to give them help. It’s not so easy when you have thirty or forty kids in the class.”

Someplace to Send the Latinos and Afro-Americans

“I think [resistance] starts very early. Most of the evidence shows that if the kid does not learn how to read by the third grade, the kid is going to have troubles the rest of his life. And I think that we have a lot of kids who have troubles by the third grade. I think that the love of reading or the joy of it, or the fun of it, starts when you are one year old, or two years old, or three years old. When your mother or father reads to you. If it doesn’t happen, I don’t think that it starts. I think that you have to come into school ready. I’m sorry to keep harping back to early ages, but I think that it starts there. And I think that the negativity starts there also. ‘Johnny, would you read? Ah, ahh. . . .’ He doesn’t want to. Kids laugh. The kid feels like garbage. The kid doesn’t want to read. The kid doesn’t want to see books. He doesn’t want to see anything associated with letters. It ain’t easy to change that.

“We get them in high school—they’re already fourteen or fifteen or sixteen. By the time we get them in high school, the kid’s reading habits are firmly entrenched. The kid’s attendance habits are firmly entrenched. The

kid's behavioral habits are firmly entrenched. This school, as much as I love it—I've been here a long time—should be broken up into little pieces. Just broken up into little pieces, or sealed off one floor at a time, or redesigned totally. The community doesn't want that. It has to have someplace to send its Latinos and Afro-Americans. This is it."

Federal Aid

As students continue to arrive with poor reading skills and a resistance to reading, there is no longer any federal help to intervene. Hunter explained that his high school no longer received federal Chapter I funds and this change limited the school's ability to help below-grade-level readers.

"I have to laugh. Until two years ago, we had five extra teachers, and they were funded specifically to do remediation. The federal government—in its brilliance—decided that rather than reading scores, we should depend on lunch forms which indicate their financial need. We were not able to do this. We have a large number of students who will not turn in any kind of federal form. I think that they are probably here sub rosa and don't want to reveal it, or they are cheating or whatever. All I know is that I've lost those teachers.

"I had zero remediation in the English department in the main building. I have one class of remediation in the Annex. I have it only because the superintendency has a congruence teacher there teaching one class. That's it. If you want to talk to me about the rest of the borough, I don't have a clue as to what is going on. . . . I have very little money [from the state program—Pupils with Special Educational Needs (PSEN)]; I think most of the money may be in the math department."

Hunter said that the students in the one remedial program did not seem to feel any stigma from their participation in remedial reading. "It's been my experience, contrary to some of the research which shows that children feel negatively about being in the program, that they had no feelings one way or the other. Kids who were cutters cut eighth period or first period anyway. The kids who wanted to succeed did so. For example, the kids who failed the Regents Competency Exam, who were students that we would put into many of our Chapter I classes—we had an extraordinarily high passing percentage from those kids. I did the research because I was curious to see whether the money was being spent wisely. I mean, we would have 97 out of 106 pass. When we had cut down a class, we had

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27 out of 31 pass. That’s a rather high passing percentage for kids who don’t read very well or who don’t write very well to start with. So I was impressed with that.

“The teacher [in the remedial reading program] was generally supportive. We worked only with small groups. There was a paraprofessional in there so that you had seventeen, sixteen students coming. But again, attendance would mar what was going on. If you were scheduled for twenty students, it was possible that you were only seeing twelve. If you were scheduled for fifteen students, it was possible that you were only seeing five. Those five did very well, almost invariably. Even kids who started out with zero scores. I think we did remarkable work with those kids. We don’t do anything now.”

What did Hunter do with those students who entered high school reading far below grade level?

“First of all, every one of those students was diagnosed. We used whatever tools we had to find out whether he just was totally illiterate, had no vocabulary, had no alphabet to start with, or whether he was having specific problems trying to find details to support main ideas. Whether in general he couldn’t find what a main idea was and didn’t understand the concept of what a main idea was. Whether he couldn’t understand sequence. We would assess the child. Then everything would be based on that. Within that construct, students had independent reading. We had full libraries in there. Kids read freely minimally once a week. Talk about silent reading—they did that.

“They did book reports as well—not low-level reading; they chose their own books. Many liked to read Danielle Steele, and why not? She’s a very popular writer. . . .

“They read those books. If we found three kids who had one problem, they would be grouped together. They would be working either with the teacher or under the guidance of the teacher-paraprofessional. They would be working on those skills maybe two times a week so that the week was broken up; it wasn’t drill, drill, drill. We obtained computers to do CAI [computer-assisted instruction], which is not my favorite type of instruction, but we found the kids liked it as a motivator so they went to the room where these special computers were and they did some drill work there. Everything reinforced. Everything picked up. Because the numbers were very small, the teacher kept track of everybody.

“We did the same thing in writing. We did a pretest and posttest right along the way. And the kids evaluated themselves. The kids saw how they were going. How they were making progress. It just happened to be a highly effective program. The rooms were small. They were what we called our labs. They were always decorated. The teacher was there. It was her home so she put up stuff. The kids’ work was all over the place. When I went into evaluate, that was one of the criteria. ‘Yeah, this room looks like a morgue. Let’s make it a little livelier.’

“All the teachers were certified in reading. They were trained in it. And this is in addition to their starting out as English teachers and moving over. But that was when we had the funds.”

New York City’s List of Approved Books

In addition to a lack of federal funds for remedial education, Hunter also faced a New York City book list that he said limited his freedom to buy books.

He talked about the city book list as an obstacle. “Several years ago I wished to teach *Mouse, Mouse 1, Mouse 2*, rather well-known books by Speilman. They are comic novels with Jews being mice and Germans being cats and the Polish being pigs. It is the pre-Holocaust, Holocaust literature. Last summer I had a grant, an NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] grant. I studied Holocaust literature. It was one of the books that was on there. It wasn’t on the New York City approved list at the time. I also wrote a letter to the chancellor telling him that he should cut that junk out. He slammed me down pretty good through the chain of command, of course. This year it’s still not on the approved list. But there is a book company who will get it on the approved book list, quote unquote.

“It’s listed for \$14. I can get a 25 [percent] discount from the company which is not on the approved list. I just bought from this other company. I paid \$14. You figure how many of us are going to get around these stupid rules imposed on us and just get killed with money? But I don’t know an English chairman worth his salt who doesn’t see a book which is a classic or a book which just came out and say, ‘Wow, this is a really dynamite book. This should be taught,’ and not find a way to get it taught.

“I’ll come back to Stuyvesant—if you will. [His son attends Stuyvesant, New York City’s elite science high school.] Stuyvesant’s PTA

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gathers almost \$200,000 a year through its radio phonations. The English chairman there a couple of years ago was given \$7,000. He did not have to account for a nickel of that money. Now, there’s a book company called Dover Books Publishers. Through Dover Publishers, I could get books for a dollar, for \$2 a book—not brilliantly bound and certainly not hardcover, but with the best price. I have to spend \$6 and \$7 a book because I have to follow Board of Ed rules.

“Are they worried I am going to steal? If I buy a VCR, I have the same problem. I can’t go out and buy it—‘Look! Sale, Sharp twenty-seven-inch, four-head VCR thing for Nick who does our video classes.’ Follow Board of Ed rules and spend \$300 or \$400 more. Everywhere down the line, the Board of Ed is an obstacle probably because it doesn’t trust us.”

In addition to the barrier of a list of approved books and approved vendors, Hunter also faced another obstacle. He said that the budget provided by the principal and Board of Education provided funds for few new books for the year.

“One of the teachers wants to teach *Mouse*,” he said, “so I just ordered it for her. We are in an awkward situation, I think, in this school to a certain extent; that is, we have an incredible amount of book loss. So this is almost a filling in of a book loss of 20 to 25 percent a semester. We are not unusual, I think. So we are filling in a lot.” Hunter said that he asked a teacher in the office, “Nick, you know any new books we bought this year, new titles?” “Nothing exciting,” the teacher answered.

“I ordered Kate Chopin’s book, *The Awakening*, and *Billy Budd* will be taught in our AP [advanced placement] class next year,” Hunter continued. “But nothing comes to my mind, either. I’d have to look in the book room. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent*, I bought. I bought *Miguel Street*. *Annie John*, I bought.”

Juggling Books

But Hunter said the number of books he purchased often wasn’t a full class set—that is, enough for a teacher to distribute a copy of each of 165 students.

“It depends. We had a teacher once who wanted to teach—this I remember rather vividly—*As I Lay Dying*. I advised against it. It won’t work. We argued back and forth. He said, ‘Let me give it a shot,’ so I

bought thirty copies for one class. Unfortunately, I was right. Those books are now someplace in the dust in our bookroom.

“But ordinarily if you have three classes, I will try to get three class sets. The problem, of course, is that you have to revolve those among other teachers. So you have to depend on the teachers finishing the books, collecting, giving them out to the students, the other students returning the book. It’s a lovely little game you play when you may have 150 or 170 students in your five classes.”

And at Hunter’s high school, unlike the junior high on the Upper East Side, teachers did not ask students to buy paperbacks on their own.

“At many schools, they do ask the kids to buy them. At our school, they do not come well endowed with funds. So it would be preposterous to ask. You have to understand that our student population is (a) poor, (b) needy. Deficient in skills, deficient in funds. Not everybody, but a chunk of them. “I have stood up in my temple and suggested that maybe the temple was a little racist. I did that on Yom Kippur when it was members’ day. It was an interesting speech and an interesting reception. You want the best for your kid. My kid’s going to Stuyvesant. It is probably the best or one of the best schools in the city. I also would be reluctant to send him here because I go out in the halls, and I don’t want my kid being beaten up because his father is the chairman of the English department. That’s the only way to get to me.

“But it prevents you from doing things you want to do. We do have an AP English class. We have an AP math class. We have an AP foreign language class. And they are for very small numbers. We find a way to carry them.

“But there’s things we can’t do. And that’s one of them: buy books. . . .

“As for as supplies go, I would be a moron if I didn’t order what my teachers needed because they would be pounding me on the head. ‘I don’t have paper; I don’t have pencils; I don’t have chalk.’ So I look at my supplies once a week and I say, ‘I need this; I need this; I need this.’ And as much as I can get, I get from the supply man who I am friendly with. So we have composition paper; we have chalk; we have pencils. We have whatever we need. If they say, ‘I need this and it’s not here,’ I’ll get it.

“A supervisor, as far as I can see, a supervisor’s role is to make the lives of his teachers as easy as possible. Maybe that’s his first job. I don’t know.”

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Teachers as Professionals?

When Hunter and I talked about whether teachers were treated as professionals in his school, he asked me to define a professional. I said private school teachers who could point to a best-seller list and pretty much get what they want three days later were professionals.

“You can’t do that [here],” Hunter said. “Flat-out, we can’t do that. (a) We don’t have the money, and (b) the Board of Ed is too stupid to let us do with it as we think we need. It’s an elephant out there. It just doesn’t want to change as far as I can see. I think most people in the field hold the Board of Ed, the whole downtown, pretty much in contempt. Very restrictive. Not very supportive. I would say that once upon a time, maybe twenty-five years ago, twenty years ago, they put out some fairly good curriculum materials. I haven’t had stuff coming out of them for years. I would sell 130 Livingston Street. I don’t know why they have 65 and 110 [Board of Education addresses]. There are a series of redundant layers of bureaucracy. If they were managed the way corporations were managed, they would be delayered themselves: sending them out to the schools or just firing them.”

He added that the PTA “is very small, is very poor, is very inactive,” and it is not able to provide books for classes.

Finally, Hunter did not expect that changes in leadership at the school would lead to improvement in the academic lives of students. Talking about the leadership of John Jay High School over the years, he laughed.

“I’m sorry I’m laughing,” he said. And then he began to count the number of principals he had worked with over twenty-five years. Let me see . . . I think this is my tenth. In the past six years, I think that I have had four. That’s been a spectacular run.” How effective have they been in improving the reading skills of students in this building? “Not particularly.”

The Unions

In his years in the school, Hunter said that the teachers’ union—the United Federation of Teachers, the local affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers—had done “nothing” to improve the school. The principals’ union, called the Council of Supervisors and Administrators (CSA), had also done “nothing” for the school.

“Ask me how we survive,” he said. “We’re tough. We’re better than most teachers. I mean that very seriously. We are goddamn good at what we do. First of all, in order to deal with our kids, you have to be tough. And yet it’s amazing how much warmth teachers can give. Oh, yeah, we can bitch about them. We can say that piece of garbage and probably mean it, too. In this school, maybe 5 percent of three thousand—is what, 150 kids?—can drive you crazy. And we don’t have the legal power to get rid of them. But we’ve been given a job that is almost undoable given the strictures that society places on us. Given the problems you have with society that are mirrored in here. If you have people running around with guns, you’d be a jerk not to think that you are not going to find knives and guns in here. When you have violence out there, you’d be stupid not to think that you not going to find violence in here.

“Why do we have a city university four-year system, a city university two-year system? It’s a statement of the failure of the schools. We have social promotion. OK, so this high school inherits every social misfit who comes from the public school system through the junior high schools to here, and I know that the junior high school in the neighborhood (and I know it because my kids went there) channels the better kids away from this school. And the whiter, wealthier ones and the blacker, wealthier ones and the browner, wealthier ones probably go to private school. They go to Packer [a private school]. There are about four private schools in the area. So you have that loss. That creaming right off the top.

“This system provides alternative schools, which I think it should—magnet schools. Additional creaming, so we are left with kids who know themselves that they are not brilliant, and they are not successful, and we try to drill into them that they can do it. And you get frustrated. We are human, but we do it. So I think that we are better than most people in the system. I think that if you put those kids there, those schools would be fine. On the other hand, I don’t think they do as well because they are used to asking one question and running with one question, instead of saying, “What’s plan B, what’s plan C, what’s plan D?” You have to think that way in this school.

“I think we’re goddamn good at what we do, notwithstanding the data, which are horrible. And I admit it, they are not very good. But we don’t have a country that values education. For all its baloney about what it says and its goals and this and that, and the other thing, we are putting billions and billions of dollars into starships, warship systems, and we

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don’t want to put anything into education. That’s nonsense. That’s absurd. It doesn’t compare with any, any Western country.

“But come back to the four-year, two-year. Why don’t we have a system that . . . some people are going to be tracked into a six-year system, a high school, a university. . . . We have brilliantly hit upon the notion that everyone is going to college. Have you ever heard of anything so stupid in your entire life? Everyone is going to college.

“What if you don’t want to go to college? What if they are just not apt?” Hunter said that there is no link to the world of work. “None, and that’s a society problem. Not just a school problem. Unions have to make that happen. Industry has to make that happen. Corporate leadership has to make that happen. And the leadership which we don’t have—political leadership—has to be willing to do that. We don’t have that in this country. That’s sad. Really sad.”

CONCLUSION

Hunter shows how the superstructure of the city and state educational bureaucracies hangs over local classrooms and shapes literacy practices:

- City funding is not sufficient for book purchases.
- City purchasing rules limit his ability to use his existing funds correctly.
- State curriculum laws herd teenagers into standard English and social studies classes that they are not prepared for and may have little interest in. Spending a year working on reading and writing skills at the beginning of high school is not possible regardless of a teenager’s skill level. The state’s tests must be passed.
- State curriculum laws may not offer full credit for remedial reading and writing classes.
- Federal record keeping, which depends on teenagers to fill out low-income lunch forms, reduces the funds available for reading and writing classes.

We will see in the final chapters which of Hunter’s complaints will be addressed by new literacy initiatives of President Bush and the 107th Congress. Will the new literacy initiatives on the way from Washington

change the literacy practices now in place in Brooklyn that so limit intellectual development in schools such as John Jay?

Hunter's complaints—state mandates that have become obstacles, a curriculum further shaped by shortages of materials, the absence of help from either the teachers' union or the principals' union, cuts in federal programs that had helped the students furthest behind, and the idiocy of the city's approved vendor list, which raises prices—also exist for teachers in departments at John Jay.

Of course, Hunter and the English department are only part of the opportunity to learn one's native language at John Jay High School. History classes are another. In some high schools, teenagers can read biographies of George Washington, Frederick Douglas, and Susan B. Anthony and social histories of the labor movement, the suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement. In other high schools, the only reading is from guidebooks using outlines to prepare for state-mandated minimum competency tests.

What kind of reading is going on at John Jay High School, and what are the results in history classes through New York City?

NOTES

1. Samuel B. Bacharach, Scott C. Bauer, and Joseph B. Shedd, *The Learning Workplace: The Conditions and Resources of Teaching* (Ithaca, N.Y.: OAP, 1986), 5 (ERIC ED 279-614).

2. New York City Board of Education, *1999–2000 High School Annual School Report, B.A.S.I.S Superintendency, John Jay High School* (New York City: Division of Assessment and Accountability, New York City Board of Education, 2000), 9.

3. New York City Board of Education, *1999–2000 High School Annual School Report, 2*.

4. New York City Board of Education, *School Profile: John Jay High School, 1990–2000* (New York: Author, 2000).