

**The Challenge of Education:
What, Exactly, are the Right Questions,
and Can Smaller, Alternative Schools Give Us Some of the Answers?**

“Good morning, Alex. You should be happy on this Friday morning,” Roland Baril begins, offering his hand. “The Yankees are a half game up.”

Taking his teacher’s hand and shaking it firmly, Alex corrects him: “A full game. The Red Sox didn’t play yesterday.”

“That’s right,” Roland agrees, and reaches now to greet Sara Mae.

Except for the sea-green, silk window dressings, the veil-painted walls, the lack of visual stimuli, the 11-foot, stamped tin ceilings, and the real slate blackboards, I could be in any number of 6th Grade classrooms in New York State. This Richardsonian elementary school, built in the 1890s to serve as the first public schoolhouse in Saratoga Springs, became the first Waldorf School building in 1986.

It’s a Friday morning in October, and at 8 a.m., as a bell chimes once, all seventeen 6th Graders find their recorders inside their desks or bags, move quietly to the edges of the room, start to play, *Out of Darkness Shall Come Dawn*, and then sing it in a three-part round. A few minutes later, after Roland has led them through two instrumentals and accompanied them on a long, shoulder-hung drum for the vocal, *Firmly on the Earth I Stand*, they all sit down.

Roland’s threefold lesson plan for the morning, simply put -- heart, head, and hands - means he will engage his students’ rhythmic systems and get their blood pumping before he turns to phase two, the thinking part.

Today is the first official day of Fall, their teacher explains, the autumnal equinox, and he talks, briefly, about the changing relationship of earth to sun and how days will now grow shorter until the next, vernal equinox, but only as a kind of introduction to a poem - “The Chambered Nautilus” - that the students all stand and recite. Next comes juggling three bean bags with a partner (“One, two, three, pass. Don’t worry about them falling,” Roland chants), then tossing

one bag from back of hand to back of hand and, finally, balancing all three on their heads as they walk to Roland's desk and let the bags fall into a colored tin. This is 6th Grade? It certainly isn't like any 6th Grade I've ever seen before.

As a writer-in residence over the past ten years, I have taught creative writing in more than fifty public and private elementary, middle and high schools in New York State. During that time, I have not met one administrator or teacher who confided they were doing a poor job of educating their students. If difficult subjects or statistics came up, they tended to highlight the success stories, and many of them were right. I've seen a lot of people helping kids to learn, grow and succeed, and I've read a lot of inspired stories and poems and essays over the years, often from students who had done poorly on state-mandated tests. However, I also didn't need standardized test results or newspaper exposes or a growing SINI list to show me that serious challenges exist in many of our public schools in New York State: I saw them every day I taught.

Often, if I asked 6th Graders to define what a preposition was, or an adjective, or sometimes even, I swear, a verb, and perhaps 2 out of 25 raised their hands to offer some kind of answer, as the rest of the class shifted uncomfortably in their chairs, I had a pretty good idea what kind of ELA instruction the elementary schools in that district had provided before passing their kids along to the middle school. And that was just a rudimentary question about basic parts of speech -- forget the important stuff of writing, like point of view, correct syntax, conflict, diction levels, narrative tone, or the balanced use of dialogue, description, action and exposition.

So if, as the publicized report cards keep reminding us, many children in our public schools are not reading or writing up to the standards we have mandated, how well will they function in the rest of their subjects, and how many will get so frustrated they drop out and never even try to reach college? The standardized tests may provide accountability, but many educators feel

they aren't doing much to improve the fundamental aspects of education, or treating children as unique individuals.

Jonathan Kozol claims in a recent interview that, "The kind of testing we are doing today is sociopathic in its repetitive and punitive nature. Its driving motive is to highlight failure in inner-city schools as dramatically as possible in order to create a ground swell of support for private vouchers or other privatizing schemes." Students in private schools are not obligated to take the standardized tests, but those in all New York's public schools, even the small, alternative ones, are.

Anne Wiener, who founded the Crossroads School at 109th and Broadway in New York City eleven years ago, agrees with Kozol: "What I saw in many schools was a constriction of the curriculum so they could focus tremendously on teaching to the test, on teaching a lot of drills about how you take multiple-choice exams. I saw a cutting down or elimination of the arts or recess and, also, a frightening narrowing of how you look at children. Do you look at them as a 1 or a 2 or a 3 or a 4, you know? You don't see the whole child and delight in his or her abilities to be silly, to think outside the box, to be cheerful, to do art, to be a musician -- all of those types of things that we care about in our school."

Yet, with the accountability demanded by *No Child Left Behind* legislation and public school futures linked to performance on them, most administrators are forced to step into line to avoid the dire consequences of continuously low test scores. Some important aspects of education are being neglected to concentrate on test preparation – many people acknowledge that fact – and yet the standardized tests are clearly here to stay for a while. Can we expect schools to do everything, all at once, and can smaller schools that try less traditional methods of learning provide a viable alternative to this situation?

Anne Wiener posits that small, alternative schools offer an antidote to the environment of fear that enforced testing seems to engender, and can help the whole child flourish: "Small schools are strongly committed to the idea of

democracy and to the idea that there must be an excellent, strong public school system in the United States in order to preserve the foundation of our democracy," she says. "Alternative schools, in assuming many different shapes and forms, work radically and essentially against privilege. They say that all children can learn, and that people construct their own learning from what happens to them."

Her Crossroads School is a small, Title I middle school, and has about 225 students, mostly African-American and Latino, spread equally across its three grades. "It's a beautiful size," Anne believes. "You know every single child, and you know most of their families."

Though the founding of the Crossroads School pre-dates New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's current education initiatives, its success rate with students and strong relationships with families and community illustrate the wisdom of his pledge to overhaul his city's public school system by creating 200 new small schools by 2007. The initial reason for this small schools initiative was to counter the abysmally low 35% graduation rate at the city's sixteen large high school campuses.

Abigail Rubin, Director of Strategic Planning and External Relations in the Office of New Schools, confirms that they are well on their way: Since 2003, 149 secondary schools and 24 charter schools have opened in New York City. Abigail admits there have been a number of instances in the past where small schools have been very effective in New York City, with pioneers like Debby Meier who started Central Park East School in East Harlem over 30 years ago, but believes that those schools may have succeeded on the outskirts of the system or in spite of it, "whereas what the Mayor and the Chancellor wanted to do with this initiative is really to bring the small schools concept to the center of the system." For Abigail Rubin, the three most attractive aspects of small schools are an academic rigor that will help prepare students more effectively for college, the personalization that accompanies a small student body and

manageable faculty size, and the partnerships with organizations that help to enrich the curriculum, offer internships, and provide necessary funding.

Her office has partnered with veterans of the small school movement like New Visions for Public Schools, a non-profit organization which most recently has been funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Through their New Century High School Initiative that has created seventy-eight new high schools in NYC, the Gates Foundation alone has pledged \$2 billion to significantly increase the number of low-income and minority students who can graduate from high school and attend college.

Elana Karopkin, the young principal of the two-year old Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice in Brooklyn, echoes and expands on Abigail Rubin's three important aspects of small schools: "Studies and statistics have shown that kids feel safer, more well known, more cared for, and more ready to learn in small school environments. And parents would want to send their kids to this school because it's a very serious, academic environment."

Elana believes that you certainly won't have a great school unless you have great teachers, and she spent the last two years assembling her staff: She attended all the Department of Education job fairs; she plumbed the New York City Teaching Fellows Program; she navigated all the web postings on idealist.org and craigslist; she contacted all the local colleges and Teach for America.

"We told applicants that this is the kind of school where they would probably have to make family contacts every single day, and where they would have to go far beyond normal service. If that was the kind of person they were, then our school would be a great place. If, on the other hand, they didn't like to collaborate, or weren't interested in the law theme, or didn't want to work insane hours, then they wouldn't be very happy here. This is not just a job where you come and teach and leave - it's much more than that."

Elana wound up with a dedicated staff from prestigious schools like Princeton, Cornell, and Columbia - smart teachers who wanted to work hard

and make a real difference. And they put the fun back in school. Not only do students get to use the 48th Floor law offices of a prestigious law firm that has partnered with the school as a second campus, and conduct mock trials, and run their own mayoral campaigns, but all 9th Graders, instead of starting with earth science or biology, begin with forensics, and can check their methods by comparing them with weekly CSI shows.

In its first year, the High School for Law and Justice had a 92% attendance rate, and all 24 of its students who took the Math A Regents exam passed. Now in its second year, the High School for Law and Justice has 220 students, 95% of whom are students of color. “Kids come from all over the city and they are at all different levels when they arrive at our school,” Elana says. “There’s no application process – they just have to rank it as one of their choices, and we have an unscreened process. We don’t care what they did in middle school. We don’t care what kind of student they were. We just want to know that now they’re ready and they want to be a student who wants to go to college and wants to be successful.”

Back at the Waldorf School in Saratoga Springs, geometry portfolios are out. The students hum, and talk a little with each other, but quiet immediately when Roland asks the first row to stand in front and hold up their 24-point circles with diagonal lines. “If we were living in the time of Plato, Aristotle, or Pythagoras,” Roland says, “we would hear them ask philosophical questions about the nature of straight lines. Is a circle a polygon or is a circle one side? What are your thoughts about this?”

After a few minutes of discussion, Roland draws two lines at right angles to each other on the board, measures out eight points on each line, and connects the points with straight lines. Every student observes quietly as the straight lines slowly present the illusion of a curve on the right side.

Jonathan, a student in the second row, comments without irony, “Hey, that’s pretty beautiful.” That observation launches Roland into a discussion of Siddhartha, of Buddha, and illusion – *maia*. He uses that term, and asks if this is

just an illusion of a curved line that he has created. Then he says, “How do straight lines create circles?”

Maybe the challenge of education isn’t necessarily about small schools or large ones, traditional or alternative. Maybe it’s about asking the right questions. But what exactly are the right questions, then: What should schools teach? Where and how should they teach it? What is the best way to assess what has been taught? How many students should a school have? What methods are best – traditional, theme-based, charter, Montessori, Waldorf? How will schools keep our children safe? What constitutes educational success for students with special needs, or for English language learners? How can they get more parents involved? Where will schools get enough money to operate effectively? Should schools prepare students for college, or vocations, or both? And what are the questions we have all forgotten to ask – the most important questions we need to ask?

As soon as you begin to pose questions like these -- the questions that educational administrators have to consider all the time -- viable answers don’t magically appear and, even if they do, they aren’t always easy to implement. Whatever you state about education, you can be sure someone or some fact will contradict it. And simply because there are new paradigms that look effective, that doesn’t negate the fact that many of our larger public schools in New York State are still working, and working well, at what they do.

However, in the continuing debate about how and where and when our children should be taught, many new small schools demonstrate in their own unique ways that they have constructed educational models that are beginning to reclaim what many people have lamented was lost territory: they get students interested in learning and make them better readers and writers; they make families and community partners willing participants in the educational process; they improve attendance and graduation rates; and they not only prepare more of their students for college but they also prepare them to be better citizens. It’s pretty hard to argue with those answers.