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Debbie Meier and the Dawn of Central Park East

When Teachers Take Charge of Schooling

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In the early 1970s East Harlem epitomized the collapse of the New York City school system. Only 16 percent of School District Four's children were reading at or above grade level; morning attendance at Benjamin Franklin High School on East 116th Street was 44 percent of enrollment, and by graduation time 93 percent of the high school's ninth graders had dropped out. But in 1974 East Harlem's predicament began to change with the founding of the first alternative schools. Ironically, it was the severity of the situation that provided us with the opportunity to spark a revolution in public education. School board officials, community leaders, and parents were all desperate; and the central board, embarrassed by one of its most conspicuous failures, was inattentive.

In 1976, Anthony Alvarado, District Four's School Superintendent, asked me to direct the school district's new Office of Alternative Schools. The few alternative schools recently established in District Four were facing a number of common problems, and Alvarado felt that they needed a "friend in court" at the community-school-district level. For someone whose career had been formed in special schools like P.S. 129 and P.S. 146, this was where I belonged. I said yes.

Two weeks after I had moved into my new office, Alvarado called me with an immediate, urgent assignment. "I've got a problem in the Central Park East School between Debbie Meier and some of her parents," he said. "Go see what it's about."

I went over to Central Park East, which was then a fledgling alternative school just completing its second year, to introduce myself to Debbie Meier, the school's director. I did not know her at the time, but she struck me as a smart, strong woman. I could tell from the way she looked at me that she didn't trust me; to her I was just another annoying bureaucrat from the district office meddling in her affairs.

Her wary demeanor aside, Meier knew she needed help, because a group of the Central Park East parents were unhappy with how she was running the school. They had asked the superintendent to remove her from the directorship, and she didn't understand why the superintendent wasn't defending her unquestioningly. "How could Tony Alvarado have so little confidence in me?" she asked. And I really couldn't answer. We talked a little about the school, and I thanked her and went off to see the parents who were complaining. They proved to be a very articulate and angry group of parents. The problem, as they saw it, was not minor: they wanted Meier removed. "She doesn't listen to anybody," one of them said. "She runs the whole place herself," added another. "She's out of control," said a third.

I was on the spot and had to do something. But what? Debbie Meier has since become a nationally known authority on education, the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "Genius" award, but in June

1976 that wasn't the case. Central Park East was a struggling school that might well fail; in fact, it had attracted conflict from its very inception. What was not yet clear to outsiders was that it had been deliberately designed to thrive on conflict.

Before taking any action I decided to acquaint myself more with this upstart school and its embattled founder.

Deborah Willen Meier had grown up in Larchmont, New York, and had attended the private Ethical Culture and Fieldston Schools in New York City. After two years in the cooperative work-study program at Antioch College, she embarked on graduate-level study in history at the University of Chicago, during which time she married and had three children. Soon thereafter Meier began her teaching career, substituting in public schools around Chicago.

Once this product of private education began to teach in the public schools, she was hooked:

From the first moment I walked into a public school I was intrigued. I started teaching kindergarten in the school across the street from my home, but soon I was substituting all over Chicago from grades one to eight. I frequently went into classrooms which had never had a regular teacher. They were forever assigning me to what were called "opportunity classes," which, of course, meant the reverse. Parents were not allowed near the schools. Principals were unbelievably rude, not only to students and parents, but to their own teachers as well. And the teachers passed it on! The way teachers talked about kids in those days was scary.

Meier continued as a substitute teacher after she and her family moved to Philadelphia. Then she came to New York and began to work full time, first in schools and then in the education program at City College, where she worked with public school teachers committed to finding new ways to reach difficult students. "The principals paid lip service to us and our aspirations," she remembers, "but the changes didn't last." By the end of 1973, just as she was becoming disgusted by her lack of progress working within the established system, she got a call from Bonnie Brownstein, a science coordinator in District Four. Brownstein told Meier that Superintendent Alvarado had heard about her work and wanted her to start a new school in East Harlem. Meier, attuned to the ways of educational bureaucracies, was skeptical at first, but when she met with the new superintendent, he convinced her that he was serious.

Debbie Meier had been thinking for some years about what kind of school she would start if the opportunity ever arose. She had worked with Lillian Weber, the director of the City College Workshop, on open education, and she had tried to create "open classroom" programs in District Two on Manhattan's East Side. She had developed an educational method which she believed reflected the cognitive development of children, combining John Dewey's learning theory with more recent psychological investigations of Jean Piaget. In place of the standard system, which emphasized covering a prescribed curriculum, Meier and her associates proposed a pedagogy based on "open classrooms" where teachers would provide children with stimulating materials, observe them working and playing with those materials, and, guided by their observations, offer each child assistance to extend his or her skills and interests. Meier wanted a school that was small and run by the staff, not from above. Now with Alvarado's backing she would have a chance to put her thoughts into action.

It would not be easy. Meier's new elementary school, Central Park East, was to be housed on the

second, third, and fourth floors of P.S. 171, a run-down, seventy-five-year-old elementary school on East 103rd Street between Madison and Fifth Avenues. The physical facilities could hardly have been less hospitable to the open classrooms the staff aimed to create. Neither the parents in the neighborhood nor the other teachers in District Four understood what the school was trying to accomplish, and they regarded Meier's efforts with attitudes ranging from indifference to outright hostility. Local educational conservatives, on the other hand, were equally mistrustful of what they saw as the school's permissiveness.

Debbie Meier was undeterred.

She wanted to start slowly, with just a kindergarten and a first grade. She asked for the authority to hire her own staff, which would develop its own curricula. There would be one rule: Children would come to Central Park East because their parents chose that school for them. It was a choice school from the start, and parents were required to visit with their children in order to gain admission. Beyond that, Meier set forth no policies and promised no particular results.

Meier had little difficulty recruiting a group of teachers who shared her dream for a new kind of public school. When Central Park East opened its doors in the fall of 1974, there were just thirty-two students, twelve each in two kindergarten classes, and eight more in first grade. Nevertheless, those children who walked through the doors for their first day of classes discovered a rich world welcoming them. As Meier recalls:

When we arrived in mid-August we built at least ten storage units, two playhouses, a puppet stage, three writing tables, several book display racks, room dividers, etc. We organized and stored all our personal materials—paints, magic markers, science equipment, art materials, and books. We bought some things—typewriters, a variety of beginning reading books, wood and drywall for building, paint and brushes, rugs for the reading corners.

As the first school days passed, parents with small children in tow began appearing in Central Park East classrooms, asking to enroll their children. Within three months enrollment in the kindergartens grew by 50 percent, and a waiting list burgeoned of parents interested in enrolling their children the following year. By midyear, as parental interest swelled, enrollment reached eighty-five students. Some parents were well educated and liberal, others were poor and uneducated. But in Central Park East they all found a school that seemed right to them and their children. One of the students later described her experience this way:

Where we came from it was all sitting down at a desk and writing at the same time, and doing math at the same time. As the first week went by at Central Park East we were all very excited about the school, and what we were doing was so different from what we had done before.

From the beginning the staff at Central Park East fought to integrate children who would otherwise be certified as "special education students" into the mainstream program. They resisted giving up any students to the ostracism of a special-education setting, believing that if they could retain slow learners in the regular environment, they would find a way to help them learn. Originally a source of bitter contention, the Central Park East approach was fully vindicated in time by Meier's receipt of the MacArthur grant and the local families' loyalty to the school.

The Central Park East staff tried hard not to pressure students to worry about any “normal” pattern of achievement, but by midyear, many of the older children who had entered Central Park East as nonreaders were reading without difficulty. Meier confessed that their progress was so startling that she suspected that the children already knew how to read, but had been unable or unwilling to reveal it to their parents or teachers.

The school tried to create an environment that was an extension of the children’s families, a place where both children and parents knew they would be accepted and cared for rather than judged. In matters of discipline, Central Park East stressed mutual respect rather than fear. Teachers spent time explaining to students why certain forms of behavior made it impossible for others to do their work; they tried to teach children to empathize with others and to understand the impact of their actions on others. In short, during a decade in which some floundering schools questioned whether any values should be transmitted through public education, Central Park East strove to instill a moral sense in its students.

Central Park East especially tried to enlist parents in the learning process, informing them regularly about what was happening at school so they would not see education as a threatening or alien activity. Parents were encouraged to spend time on homework and to read aloud to their children or to have their children read aloud to them. Moreover, there were frequent parent-teacher meetings, at which teachers dealt with parents on a basis of respect: the message was that Central Park East valued the parents’ ideas and contributions.

The essence of Central Park East was a group of highly dedicated teachers who understood that the child must be the center of education. They believed that educational programs must be built around the abilities, interests, and needs of particular children, fortified by a loving humanism. It was a progressive program of child-centered education. But it required complete commitment, long hours, and many practical innovations to implement effectively.

Meier, for example, organized her own class around the theme of New York City’s natural environment. Children studied New York’s geography and visited Central Park often; they observed animal and plant life and noted the rock formations. These trips were supplemented by visits to museums. Meier believes that such outings enabled her children to get to know the world beyond East Harlem and gave them a sense of resources they could return to throughout their lives. She observed that “outside the classroom children tend to observe things more keenly and to ask more questions.”

Everything went surprisingly smoothly during Central Park East’s first year, and Alvarado expressed his confidence in the school’s success by asking the staff to double Central Park East’s size to 150 students by the next September, adding grades two through five to the program. And yet, in the fall of 1975, Central Park East’s very existence was threatened by deep-seated conflicts. Bedeviled by another of New York’s perennial financial crises, the administration of Mayor Abraham D. Beame had forced drastic cuts in the Board of Education budget, which meant that thousands of teachers were laid off. There was a system-wide reshuffling of teachers, as those “excessed” from one school exercised their seniority rights and claimed positions in others. As Alvarado recalled, “We tried a number of creative ways to ensure the kind of teachers that were required to run a program like Debbie’s, and it involved a lot of risk-taking.”

Bending the rules when hundreds of teachers were defending their rights to their jobs was not always

easy. To make matters worse, when Central Park East opened for its second year in the fall of 1975, two teachers were unexpectedly stricken with serious ailments. Debbie Meier was teaching a combined class of forty-two third, fourth, and fifth graders, most of whom were new to the school, while continuing as director.

As the year went on, strains within the staff began to mount. The democratic staff organization that had seemed to work so well the year before was now breaking down. From the beginning Meier had brought the staff together to function as a sort of teacher collective. “What I was seeking was the kind of ease, trust, and mutual respect that would permit us to avoid absolutely rigid distinctions and fully spelled-out roles.” But in practice, the staff’s search for consensus consumed more and more time. While the teachers acted as if all were equal, they held Meier responsible for solving major problems. And while Meier professed a belief in functioning democratically, she believed she had the right to act unilaterally when it came to make-or-break issues affecting the school’s best interests.

Opposition mounted outside Central Park East as well. The central board refused to grant waivers to keep schools open beyond specified hours for those teachers who wanted to come in early or stay late. The new principal of P.S. 171, which housed Central Park East, waged a series of time-consuming turf wars over who had what prerogatives within the school building. The teachers’ union became suspicious of Central Park East’s flexibility. And a small number of vociferous parents voiced misgivings about having their children’s education controlled by “a white Jewish lady.”

Toward the end of the school year, a group of angry parents brought their complaints about Central Park East to Alvarado, and this is where I came in. For the next week I made it my business to visit the school every day. I talked to Debbie Meier, to the teachers, to the students, and to the parents. I looked around the school. Whenever I go to a school I observe the children, and if they are involved and paying attention, I know that there is learning going on and that it’s a good place for a kid to be. I was not disappointed with what I found at Central Park East.

I held three meetings with the parents before going back to Debbie, listening attentively to their point of view so I really could understand it. There’s a mnemonic I used: AIR, which stands for “acknowledge” (I acknowledged to the parents that their information was serious and important), “investigate” (I spoke to the teachers and observed the students), and “respond” (I met with the parents on a number of occasions to tell them what I had found out).

The truth is, after all my investigating, I determined that Debbie Meier was running a superior school. She regarded kids as individuals, an approach that my own teaching experience had convinced me was essential. She cared about youngsters, about learning, and had assembled a staff excited about education. There aren’t enough people like that in the world, so when you find the Debbie Meiers, the people who really try to do something, you have to stand by them. They will make some mistakes, and they will always draw fire. But ultimately, people like Debbie and schools like Central Park East are always worth protecting.

The dissident parents in this case simply wanted control of the school and would not be satisfied with anything less. They distrusted a white outsider like Meier who thought she knew what was best. I could see how Meier could be too forceful in her opinions, but I also knew that she was the right person for that school. I therefore strongly recommended to Alvarado that we back Meier to the hilt. You support good people, I told him, even when they make mistakes. That’s what support is all about.

And Alvarado agreed.

So I went to the parents. I told them in the nicest possible way that even though some of their complaints were true, they were far outweighed by the fact that Central Park East was a really good place for kids. Meier was staying, I told them, but I would do everything I could to see that their children were placed elsewhere if they so chose. In the end fifteen families decided to leave Central Park East, and I got every one of them into a school of their choice. The crisis was over, the credibility of the new Office of Alternative Schools was enhanced, and a lasting friendship began.

I had learned an important lesson, too. When push comes to shove, you have to support your good people. Debbie Meier soon decided to leave the classroom and assume the role of full-time director. She had come to see the importance of having one person clearly responsible for making sure that staff decisions are implemented, and, taking a page from my book, she told each of the teachers that they were free to leave Central Park East if they wished. Two of the school's seven teachers chose not to return.

When the air cleared, we saw that the over-whelming majority of parents had decided to keep their children in Central Park East, and a similar proportion of the faculty had chosen to stay, a vote of confidence that gave the school a newfound vitality. We did not know it at the time, but we had inadvertently discovered the invigorating power of choice. By the time classes resumed the following year, Central Park East had entered a new phase and had begun to develop its own distinctive culture—and an approach to urban education that would soon spread to other East Harlem schools.

Inside their own classrooms, Central Park East's teachers were able to realize the dream of virtually all teachers—they could run their classes on their own, without interference or interruption from outside authorities. The result was an astonishingly rich educational program. One year, for example, Central Park East's curriculum included extensive mapmaking, studies of Native American woodlands culture in seventeenth-century Harlem, Egyptian and Roman history, the Dutch settlement of New York, printing and newspapers, the emergence of cities (including a mini-study of the neighborhood around the school), and African-American history.

But children at Central Park East were not simply presented with a set of facts to learn from a text book; instead they were given the opportunity to explore unfamiliar territory. They participated in a wide variety of activities aimed at bringing civilization to life, thus enabling the children to understand and appreciate that civilization more fully. When Leslie Stein's third-grade class studied medieval society, they not only read books but built castles, made armor, and visited the Cloisters in upper Manhattan. Carol Mulligan's kindergarten and first grade developed the idea of building a mythical city, one that might resemble one of the very first cities of the ancient world. Central Park East's approach taught children how to ask questions and helped them form the proper foundation for critical thinking.

Meier's pedagogical goals have remained clear and constant for nearly twenty years at Central Park East. She aims to create a better informed, better equipped, and more engaged person who can play a greater part in her community.

My ideas on teaching and learning focus on small "d" democratic values, by which I mean a respect for diversity, a respect for the potential of each individual person, a respect for opposing

points of view, and a respect for considerable intellectual vigor. My concern is with how students become critical thinkers and problem solvers, which is what a democratic society needs. If we believe that our schools are failing us and that children can't learn the basic skills, then what we are saying is that democracy is a utopian ideal, an impossibility, and I just don't believe that. There is nothing in the nature of being human that makes democracy an impossibility.

Admittedly, not every teacher would favor adopting Central Park East's methodology. Debbie Meier is a politically committed, unabashed social democrat, and she and her cohorts were staunch believers in progressive education. In some quarters Meier's agenda provokes substantial skepticism; the average parent may not know much about the educational crisis, but strongly suspects that it all started with the new math. To a lot of people, "progressive education" sounds like something that has failed already.

Disputes about educational methodology, however, miss the point here. In practice a capable, committed, caring teacher can use almost any method and achieve good results. The really important factor is the energy and effort expended. If the school is doing its job well, it will find a receptive audience, and it will provide quality education, as long as it has a methodology and philosophy. Other District Four alternative schools were to be far more traditional in their curriculum and methodology than Central Park East, but they would have no trouble attracting students and parents for whom their approach was well suited. A diversity of schools, in fact, is healthy. I have never felt uncomfortable knowing that Debbie Meier considers Manhattan East, an alternative school we established in 1981, to be elitist, because it seeks out high-achieving students in academics and the arts. She is entitled to that opinion, and the students, parents, and teachers who built Manhattan East are entitled to theirs. As educational researchers have consistently found, schools that are given the opportunity to define their own missions are routinely superior to those that have been dictated to from above.

Thus, a second and equally valuable aspect of Central Park East's "open classrooms organized around a theme" methodology was that it gave teachers an opportunity to follow their own interests, rather than repeat the same lessons year after year. "Curriculum development," as it was called, gave teachers a good reason to read about societies that interested them, to fill in gaps in their education, and to take interesting trips in the summer. It motivated teachers as well as students.

Alice Seletsky, who has taught at Central Park East since 1977, opens a window on the school's ethos when she says, "What I like best about teaching is that there are no easy answers to anything. Even after thirty-five years, I have to keep wondering, tinkering, changing my mind, learning." Seletsky is an innovative teacher, but her innovation is nothing mysterious. What she does is spend time with the kids who most need her. "I believe I come to know children more fully through their works," she explains, "and they begin to know themselves through producing them." These are the words of a gifted teacher. But her gift does not reside in the fact that she uses a particular educational methodology. It resides in the fact that she is willing to give of herself freely, fully, and lovingly to her students in ways that suit her and her students best. All Alice Seletsky needed to be a good teacher was a system that would let her do just that.

By matching teachers with compatible educational environments, schools of choice enabled once-frustrated educators to feel better about themselves. Having teachers participate in curriculum design

might improve the curriculum, but it definitely improves the morale of teachers, who sense that they are making a positive contribution. And good morale, above all, makes for a good school. Classrooms like Alice Seletsky's constantly stimulate children to ask new questions and try out new skills. Her classroom reflects her own personality, curiosity, ethical concerns, and educational commitment. Most of all, it reflects her selfless hard work, a contribution no one in any school can absolutely guarantee, but which a choice system by its very nature does the utmost to encourage.

When you feel you have a stake in your school, whether you're a teacher or a student or a parent, you're willing to work harder, make sacrifices, and protect and build up your highly personal investment. The sense of ownership that naturally develops is what has energized the students, parents, and staff at Central Park East for nearly twenty years.

Central Park East's children came to feel they owned the school, and this is partly because of the enthusiastic participation of their parents. Aurea Fernandez was one of Central Park East's original students in 1974. Her mother, Josie, began to work at Central Park East as a school aide, helping out in the lunchroom. Later, Josie worked as a paraprofessional in the classrooms, and ultimately she became the school secretary.

Two of Josie's other children also came to Central Park East. They were nice kids, and the education they received, coupled with the opportunity to interact with children from other parts of the city, gave them the boost they needed to grow beyond the world they had known in East Harlem. Aurea graduated from Central Park East and went on to an alternative junior high school in District Four. Her brother Manuel did the same, and attended Cathedral High School. Both children went on to Brown University on full scholarships.

Then Aurea returned to New York and entered graduate school at Columbia Teachers College. Josie died a few years ago, but not before she had the satisfaction of seeing her kids make it in the world. In the fall of 1992, Aurea Fernandez joined the faculty at the Central Park East Secondary School.

Teachers at Central Park East show an extraordinary degree of dedication. In the standard New York City public school, teachers rarely talk with each other informally about what is happening in their classrooms. In weekly grade conferences, teachers may discuss issues, but all too rarely is education the focus; more often it's the overcrowded faculty parking lot or some other utterly superficial side issue. In contrast, at Central Park East the teachers talk about what's going on in the heads of children—for instance, do they really understand what democracy means when they have to ask for permission to go to the bathroom? Such child-centered talk is a constant preoccupation of the staff, whether in the teachers' lounge, in car rides to school, in the hallways, on school trips, or on regularly organized staff retreats. All of this dedication and hard work rubs off on the kids—they reflect it right back.

As enthusiastic reports about Central Park East spread, the waiting list of prospective students grew so long that Meier opened a second elementary school in 1980, Central Park East II, and a third elementary school, River East, in 1982.

In the wake of their success, Meier began to see the need for a secondary school as well, to accommodate not only the graduates of her schools, but other students who might respond to open

classrooms. Though Meier had spent her entire career as an elementary school teacher, she was fascinated by the challenge of starting a secondary school that ran from grades seven through twelve. About this time, Professor TheodoreSizer of Brown University was Organizing his National Coalition of Essential Schools. Sizer propounded nine principles. Briefly stated, these principles include the idea that less is more; that it is better to know some things well than to attempt to cover many things superficially; that high standards must be set for all students; that students demonstrate mastery of their subjects through exhibitions and portfolios; that teaching and learning must be personalized; that students are perceived as workers and teachers as coaches; and, finally, that youngsters discover answers and solutions to problems by being active learners. In Sizer, Meier found a kindred spirit and an effective ally. She based her new high school, Central Park East Secondary School, on Sizer's principles, and the school opened its doors in 1985.

The achievements of the Central Park East schools have been gratifying. Out of the more than two hundred students who graduated from Central Park East in the years 1977 to 1984, only two are known to have dropped out of secondary school. (In the city as a whole, more than 40 percent drop out; more than 60 percent of minority children drop out.) Just as impressive, in Central Park East's first decade not a single student was suspended. Of the first two graduating classes of the Central Park East Secondary School in 1991 and 1992, over 90 percent went on to college.

Scores on citywide standardized tests reinforce this picture of educational achievement. Since 1979, at least 90 percent of the school's sixth graders have scored at or above grade level—a startlingly high figure when one realizes that for most of the years under study, a large majority of Central Park East's second graders were reading below grade level. The data indicate that many Central Park East students caught up with and surpassed the national norm during their school years.

Such statistics would be misleading if Central Park East had simply skimmed the cream of the community's students, selecting only the motivated and well-prepared children. But this was not the case. Central Park East generally followed a first-come, first-served policy, from which it deviated only in two ways: it strove to be racially integrated, and it gave preference to the younger siblings of current students. Indeed, in many instances the opposite of skimming took place. Many parents chose Central Park East because their children were not doing well in neighborhood schools and because it had a reputation for handling difficult children. Some 20 per cent of the students at the Central Park East schools have learning disabilities, but they are "mainstreamed" into heterogeneous classes rather than isolated in special ed classes.

Meier's success did not go unnoticed. In 1992, Schools Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez invited Meier to create a series of new schools Working with Theodore Sizer, Meier raised three million dollars to help create six new schools on the model of Central Park East Secondary School. The new schools began operating this fall on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The plan is for the schools to eventually replace Julia Richman High School, a failing school of several thousand students on East 68th Street. Instead of entering Julia Richman, this year's ninth graders have been enrolled in the new schools. In two years, the plan calls for the new schools to move into the Julia Richman school building, whose space they will share. Meier was recently invited to create six more schools, and sites throughout the city are being studied.

The Central Park East schools are an example of what talented teachers can do when they are free to design their own curricula and run their own schools. In District Four, we told teachers with ideas for their dream schools, "Go ahead and try them. We'll support you." The most common initial reaction was disbelief. Their second reaction was to go out and start a lot of wonderful new schools that did not look like one another or like regular public schools.

What started as a desperate response to a crumbling school district has turned into a vigorous and vital renaissance with the potential to transform the city's schools. Indeed, the transformation that Debbie Meier and other educators have brought about in East Harlem can be a model for reversing problems in the schools on a national level. We believe that bureaucracy does not solve problems; it creates them. We understand better than ever today that there is no such thing as just one way to educate all children. These forces are leading us in the direction of de-bureaucratization, decentralization, school-site autonomy, and choice for parents, students, and teachers. It worked in District Four, and there is more than sufficient reason to believe that it will work in many other places as well.