

# My Life as a Dog, I Mean a Teacher

## PART I—MALIGN NEGLECT

### Introduction—a Story

It was the end of the school year for D Track and I was about to go off-track (meaning “go on vacation,” for those working in year-round, multi-track schools). My students’ last day was a Friday in mid-May. Monday was a “pupil-free” day (a day



Left: Elementary school class; right: Adriana Mendez teaches two Texas school districts, one via TV hookup. (Coastal Bend Telecommunications Network)

teachers are required to report for work even though their kids are not present). D Track teachers were supposed to work in our rooms, but since another class had moved into mine, I wasn’t able to. Instead, I spent the entire day doing paper work, specifically, “closing cums” (pronounced “kyooms”—the students’ cumulative records), in the library.

I came to school on Tuesday, which was a “buy-back ” day for D Track. I still don’t know who is buying what back from whom, but since we get paid extra for being there and since our principal wants us to come (unlike pupil-free days, these are voluntary), I decided to show up. Usually these buy-back days are reserved for “staff development”: workshops, videos and other activities that are meant to enhance teachers’ knowledge and/or skills but rarely do. On Tuesday, D Track teachers were to go on “Learning Walks.” These are excursions into other teachers’ classrooms while they are teaching (or trying to), to look at their rooms and to talk, in a non-disruptive manner of course, to their students about what they are learning and why, and how they know whether they are doing a good job or not. As the name suggests, these visits are ostensibly designed for teachers to learn from each other, but they are really a way for administrators and those above them in the educational hierarchy to make sure that teachers and their classrooms are in compliance with federal and state laws and school district guidelines, and that teachers are implementing the educational fad currently in vogue. (One of these is “clear expectations”: kids supposedly learn better when they have a clear idea of what they are learning, what is expected of them, and when they know whether they are doing a good job or not. Hence the questioning of the kids. Believe it or not, somebody is making a career out of this.)

As we were waiting in the library to get started, our coordinator (a teacher who volunteers to be out of the classroom for a year or more to carry out and oversee various tasks mandated by federal law in order for our school to qualify for federal monies), came in. She needed a Spanish-speaking teacher to give the SABE exam (basically, an achievement test in Spanish), to some students, and I aggressively volunteered my services, as I was anxious to get out of the Learning Walks (or any other kind of staff development, for that matter).

I followed the coordinator to her office, where we collected the test materials, the students and another woman whom I then didn’t know (but who is now my teaching assistant), whence we proceeded to an empty classroom. There the other woman and I were to give the exam to students from at least four different grades simultaneously. The SABE is a



Spanish-style architecture, Palm Springs, CA. (Arthur Coleman Photography)

test, given over several days, that children who are recent enrollees in the school system and whose families speak Spanish in the home are required to take. It is, roughly, the Spanish equivalent of the SAT-9 test, which has been given to students every year for the past several years and which will be replaced by another test next year.

At some point during the testing session, I noticed that one student, a fourth grader, was having trouble finishing sections of the exam in the allotted time. When, during a break, I spoke to the kids in English, I realized that this particular girl was totally fluent; indeed, she spoke without any accent whatsoever. I asked her whether she spoke Spanish. She replied that she spoke it but read and wrote it “only a little.” She also told me that she had been born in Los Angeles and had recently transferred to our school from a parochial school nearby. It seemed to me that this child should not be taking this test, even though she was working at it very gamely.

When the testing was over, I went to the coordinator and asked her why this girl was taking the SABE. She insisted that the child was required to take it because on the Home Language Survey (a form parents fill out when enrolling a child), her parents had written “Spanish” and because the child had been in the country for less than a year. Since this latter piece of information conflicted with what the girl had told me, I decided to pursue the issue. (Nosy me.) I looked in the file drawer where the cums for her class were, but I



Los Angeles Central Library and Library Tower. (Matthew Weathers)

couldn't find hers. I then went to her classroom to talk to her teacher. When I indicated my concern, this teacher told me, somewhat exasperatedly, that she had already objected to the girl taking the test, since the child didn't read or write Spanish and was missing valuable instructional time. Despite this, the teacher continued, the coordinator had insisted that the student had to take the exam for the reasons she had cited. I then asked the teacher to see the results of the CELDT, a newly mandated test, to be given annually at the beginning of each school year, designed to assess students' fluency in English. Neither the child's name nor her test results were on the computer printout. It looked to me like

she hadn't been given the test. As it turned out, the child's cum was in the teacher's mailbox, and when I finally looked at it, it showed that she had indeed been born in Los Angeles and that her parents had written "Spanish" as the language spoken in the home. It looked to me that what had happened was that since the child had arrived at our school in the middle of the school year, after the CELDT had been given to the rest of the class, no one had remembered to give it to her. And since she was a new enrollee in the school district and since her parents had indicated that her home language was Spanish, it was automatically assumed down at district headquarters that the child was new to the country, knew no English and was required to take the SABE. As a result, her name appeared on the computerized form, indicating who was to take the exam, that was sent to our coordinator. All that needed to be done, it seemed, was to give the child the CELDT, which would prove that she was fluent in English, and to indicate the error to the people downtown, so that the child wouldn't be saddled with low scores on a test she could barely read.

When I mentioned this to our diligent but overworked coordinator, she started screaming: Why did I talk to the child's teacher? She told me I wasn't supposed to. Now the teacher would blame her, etc., etc. I told her that nobody would blame her, that the child just needed to be given the CELDT, and that instead of being pissed off at me for talking to the teacher, she should be glad I had figured out what the problem was. This altercation took place in our school's copy room, where our principal was reproducing some materials. Although I intentionally spoke loud enough so that she could hear the substance of our dispute, she pretended she hadn't heard and walked out of the room. Later on, she asked me whether I had wanted her to intervene in whatever was going on between the coordinator and me. I assured her that we had worked everything out. She never asked me what the issue was.

Two weeks later, when I returned to school for a meeting, I found in my mailbox a copy of a reference sheet, supplied to the coordinator from district headquarters, indicating which students were required to take the SABE. It showed that students who had been enrolled in a California public school district school for less than one year and whose parents had indicated on the child's enrollment forms that Spanish was

spoken in the home were obligated to take the test. So, the coordinator was right after all; the poor girl was indeed supposed to take the test (despite the fact that she could barely read Spanish), although not quite for the reasons the coordinator had originally indicated.

Welcome to public education, Los Angeles-style, in the early years of the new millennium! I've devoted so much space to this minor incident because the only way to truly understand the state of our school system is to see it from the inside, where the view is graphic but where, in part as a result of inertia and in part by design, those of us who are in the middle of the mess trying to make it work are powerless to do anything to change it.

What follows is an essay on the situation in our public schools, seen from my particular vantage point, a middle-aged, somewhat cynical former political activist, working in an inner-city school in Los Angeles, California, part of the massive Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). I will try to convey a feel for what it is like to work in such an environment, as well as my impressions of the state of our public school system locally and nationally. I do not pretend that this is a thoroughly researched, balanced and detailed presentation. Nor is it a fleshed-out memoir. I'm too tired to produce either of these. It is, rather, an impressionistic work designed as much to vent my frustrations as to inform those who may be curious. It is mostly, then, a form of therapy, which I, and I believe most others working in the public schools, need. To those looking for an in-depth critique of what, from a democratic, egalitarian and libertarian point of view, is the matter with our public school system and a creative vision of what truly liberated schools would look like, I apologize. Perhaps I am only making excuses, but I've lived too many years under an unjust social system and worked too long in the public schools to be able to develop such an analysis. In short, I am not liberated: my imagination has been truncated and my hopes tamed. All I am equipped to do is, I hope, shed a little light on why the system cannot even do what it is supposed to: teach our kids how to read and write, do some math, know a few things about science and history, and be able to think for themselves.

## The Crisis in Education Is Not New

Over the past few years, we've heard a great deal about the "crisis in education." George W. Bush insists he's the "education president," Congress and state legislatures have passed bills designed to solve the purported crisis and the issue has been discussed into the ground in the media, mostly by people who don't know much about it. To listen to the chatter, one would think the crisis is a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact, the public school system, throughout the country but particularly in the inner cities (meaning, working-class, poor and minority neighborhoods in urban areas), has been in bad shape for decades. Those who remember the struggles over integration, community control and busing of the 1950s, 60s and 70s can attest to this. These conflicts would not have taken place, or at least would not have been as intense as they were, had the school system been doing its job. As much as these battles were about integration or civil rights, they were also over scarcity, a scarcity of truly good schools and of the resources required to create and sustain them. My guess is that the crisis goes back further than that, but that much of the problem was hidden from white people, and therefore the consciousness of the country as a whole, as a result of segre-



Justice William O. Douglas wrote 1974 "Lau" opinion on bilingual education. (U.S. Supreme Court)



gation. White schools may have been good or at least OK. But I suspect that schools for most Black and Latino children, with some exceptions, have always been poor (or at least poorer than those for white kids), though most whites didn't know about it until Black people began to mobilize around this and other issues in the mid-1950s.

Another indication that the schools have been in crisis for a long time is the periodic curricular and methodological innovations that have been introduced over the years. (If the system were working well, why would one want to change it?) As an example, in California for around two decades, students not yet fluent in English were subjected to something that was called bilingual education, which



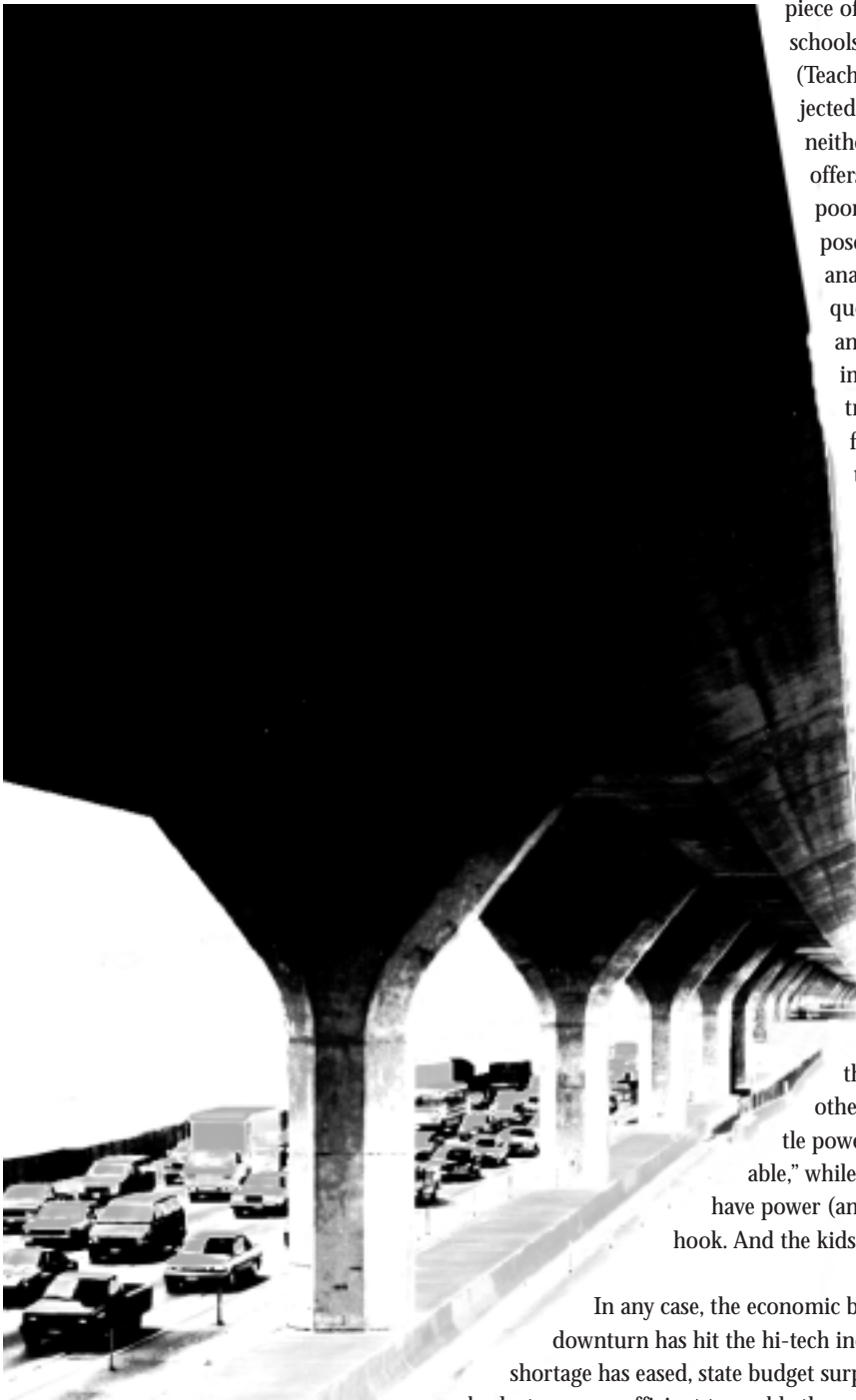
**Teachers and administrators will blame the parents, and the politicians, experts and bureaucrats will look like they're doing something about the situation. In other words, teachers and administrators, who have little power to institute basic changes, will be "held accountable," while the politicians, experts and bureaucrats, who do have power (and therefore the responsibility), will be let off the hook. And the kids still won't learn. (Hey, sounds like a plan!)**

has now been largely phased out. This intended panacea would not have been tried had children of immigrant families been graduating from high schools with a good grasp of English and other subject matters. The program was the result of a lawsuit filed in the early 1970s by a Chinese man, a Mr. Lau. He had gone all the way through school in San Francisco, and had even graduated, but, if I remember correctly from my classes in bilingual methodology, hadn't even learned much English, let alone anything else. In other words, California schools were pretty crappy back then.

So, in fact, the crisis of public education has been around for a while, but, at least for much of this period, it managed to remain under the political radar. It became a polit-

ical and media issue again relatively recently, primarily as a result of the frenetic economic expansion of the late 1990s.

At that time, the pace of economic growth, particularly in the "hi-tech" sectors, was so rapid that businesses were having trouble finding qualified workers. There was, in other words, a labor shortage, most notably, one of educated, skilled workers. Obviously, the public school system wasn't doing its job. At the same time, the boom created budget surpluses, which made it possible to begin to address the problem; at least it eliminated the excuse for not doing anything about it. Unfortunately, the solutions proposed by both major political parties have been more of the character of tinkering, albeit expensive tinkering, than of making fundamental changes. Thus, the center-



piece of President Bush's program is regular testing to hold schools, administrators and teachers "accountable." (Teachers, students and parents are currently being subjected to a barrage—a veritable mania—of testing.) But neither his nor any of the other proposals on the table offers any substantive ideas about how to truly improve poorly performing schools. (Nor are any of the proposed remedies to fix the schools based on a concrete analysis of what's the matter with them.) Consequently, this is how I expect things will work. If, at any particular school, the students' test scores don't improve significantly, the teachers and their administrators will first be given pep talks, then scolded and forced to sign pledges to work harder, etc. (while, throughout, being forced to sit through interminable, utterly boring and totally useless meetings). If the kids' scores still don't go up, teachers and administrators will be fired or transferred and a new crew will be brought in to try their hand at raising the scores under the same basic circumstances. I gather that, in addition, schools whose test scores do not go up sufficiently will be "punished" by having money taken away from them (Naughty schools!) and, presumably, given to parents to help them pay for tutors (or maybe even vouchers). But how will this help the schools in question? To anybody who knows anything about the school system, the result is predictable: angry parents will blame the teachers and administrators, teachers and administrators will blame the parents, and the politicians, experts and bureaucrats will look like they're doing something about the situation. In other words, teachers and administrators, who have little power to institute basic changes, will be "held accountable," while the politicians, experts and bureaucrats, who do have power (and therefore the responsibility), will be let off the hook. And the kids still won't learn. (Hey, sounds like a plan!)

In any case, the economic boom of the 1990s has now collapsed, and the downturn has hit the hi-tech industries particularly hard. As a result, the labor shortage has eased, state budget surpluses have been replaced with deficits, and schools' budgets, never sufficient to enable them to function effectively, and other vital services, are being slashed. In LA, the district has increased maximum class sizes (now up to 36 for grades



four and five) and cut teachers' aides and other auxiliary personnel and services (such as the time a nurse is on campus). It also tried to cut our health benefits until, under the union's prodding, it found enough money to maintain them at their current levels, but only for one year. (The district is so incompetent it doesn't even know how much money it has.) Although, as I write this, the district is crowing about the fact that our test scores have gone up four years straight (more on this later), I suspect that whatever progress that may have occurred in recent years will soon end, tests scores will level off or even decline and the "education crisis" will fade away. Until next time.

## The Crisis in The Public Sector

Not only is the crisis of education not a recent phenomenon, it is also not an isolated one. In fact, the entire public sector in the United States is in deep trouble. Virtually everywhere one looks, the institutions and facilities that

make up the country's public and semi-public infrastructure are deteriorating. The highways are in drastic need of repair and expansion. The nation's railroads, bridges, tunnels and overpasses are all overworked and eroding. The airports are over-crowded: access roads are jammed, terminals are too small, gates and available runway space are too limited for the number of planes flown (the risk of crashes on the ground, not just in the air, is very high), and the entire air traffic control system needs to be revamped. Not to mention airport security. County hospitals and clinics and other medical facilities are disaster areas and facing further cuts: beds and staff are being eliminated, emergency rooms are being closed, while those that are left are forced to provide routine, as well as catastrophic, medical care to millions of people without medical coverage. Emergency medical response teams are also in short supply and overworked. There is a national shortage of nurses and, I assume, all sorts of other medical personnel. They are even cutting funds devoted to financing doctors' residencies, an essential part of doctors' training. Police departments around the country are having trouble recruiting enough people to fill out their rosters. As the recent power crisis in California and the accompanying Enron debacle reveal, the national power infrastructure is in need of expansion (and significant reform). Water treatment and sewage disposal systems are also overloaded and deteriorating. Not least, as we saw during the 2000 election, our voting apparatus, the system for registering and tabulating votes, the foundation of our supposedly democratic system, needs a major overall. (Have I left anything out?)

In sum, the public sector of this country is in a state of decay and needs massive rebuilding and restructuring. Actually, the term "public" is misleading. This infrastructure is essential to the functioning of, and the ongoing accumulation of wealth in, the private sector, particularly of the large corporations, media enterprises and banks, and their wealthy executives and stockholders, all of whom enjoyed such prosperity during the 1990s. Yet, because these institutions are officially the responsibility of government, they are deemed "public" and the costs of maintaining these facilities, let alone rebuilding and expanding them, are foisted on the taxpayers, particularly middle- and lower-income families and individuals. One way to understand the crisis of the public sector is to view at

least a part of the costs of the maintenance of this infrastructure as a kind of “social wage,” a piece of our salaries, paid out collectively, that enables us to survive, raise families, get to work and back, and otherwise be productive employees. Since what goes into salaries is a deduction from profits, it is in the short- and medium-term interest of our corporate leaders to keep their share of these expenditures as small as possible and to transfer the cost elsewhere. At some point, however, the chickens come home to roost: if wages are too low, the workforce won’t be reproduced with the requisite strength and skills to function effectively in the profit-producing process. And this is, in fact, what the labor shortage in the high-tech sector represents.

A complementary way of analyzing the situation is to see a portion of infrastructure costs as a part of the collective capital expenditure of private industry, much like factories, machinery, office space, etc., but one which, because of its designation as “public,” they do not pay, or of which they do not pay their appropriate share. Taking these two facets together, we can see that the publicly-funded “public sector” functions (and has functioned for decades), as a massive subsidy to private industry, leading to a gigantic, and in the long-run, illusory, increase in corporate profits. By the same token, the crisis of the public sector—its need to be repaired and expanded and the amount of economic resources, i.e., capital, this will require—represents, in effect, a tremendous debt currently being carried by our entire economic system.

The size of this debt is enormous. An inkling of it can be gained by recognizing that, at least according to the figure broached after the disputed election in November, 2000, it will take \$8 or 9 billion just to fix the voting system—the polling booths and ballot boxes—throughout our fifty states. If this is the amount needed to repair the voting apparatus, how much will it take to rebuild the airports, highways, railway system, bridges and tunnels, the power infrastructure, the public medical system, the police departments, etc., etc? Oh yes, and the school system. A rough estimate for the latter can be gained from a statistic released in 1995 by the Government Accounting Office: it will take \$112 billion just to repair the country’s existing schools (forget about building new ones!). In California alone, combined new construction and modernization and

deferred maintenance costs will total over \$29 billion just for the years 2001-06 (California Dept. of Education Fact Book 2002, Handbook of Education Information).

In fact, this debt, like the explicit public and private debt load, is waiting to take its toll on all of us in one form or another. It is already having its effect, mostly in the form of bottlenecks and mini-crises in discrete sectors. That’s what the labor shortage of the late 1990s, and the “crisis” in public education that it generated, was all about. If we look at the state of our school system in this broader context, we will see that it is a lot bigger than has been generally imagined, and that fixing it will be no easy task. Let’s look at it in a little more detail.

## Lack of Investment

Perhaps the most obvious cause of the sorry state of our public schools is that they have been starved of funds for decades: there has been no serious investment in our school system for 30 years. This has resulted in, among other things, a deterioration of school facilities, severe overcrowding and a national shortage of teachers.

## Deteriorating Facilities

There has been no substantial construction of schools in California since the 1960s. (An elementary school was recently completely, to much fanfare, in Los Angeles’ densely-populated San Fernando Valley, the first one since 1971.) Nationally, the situation is similar: the average age of school buildings in the United States is 42 years, with substantial deterioration estimated to begin after 40. (Just like people!) In sum, the vast majority of our schools are in disrepair, the facilities are inadequate and there are not enough of them, a problem made worse, but not created, by massive immigration.

A hint of the physical quality of our schools can be gained by looking at one inner-city school in a working-class, but not desperately poor, neighborhood. The school where I work, for example, has no gymnasium. Physical education, when it occurs, takes place in our main yard, which is locat-





ed behind the main school building and parking lot. This yard is legally too small for the number of children in our school, now around 800. There is no baseball, football or soccer field. There are no swings or slides. (We do have a handball backboard, basketball hoops, tetherball apparatuses and a volleyball net. We have also been promised new playground equipment, the result of a private donation from actor Kirk Douglas and his wife, but construction has yet to be started.) There is no grass; the yard is paved with asphalt, cracked and crumbling, and it is divided in two (one part for grades one and two, another part for grades three, four and five), by a wall and a fence. There is also a tiny yard for kindergarteners in front of the school. The main yard may have been big enough at one time (it may even have been grassy), but as our enrollment increased, new bungalows, separated from the main building, were built and the children's play space successively encroached upon. Our school has no cafeteria, in the sense of a room where the children can eat in a closed, protected environment. There is a "cafeteria," meaning a kitchen in which food is prepared (mostly heated up) and in which the cafeteria workers suffer on hot days because there is no air conditioning. But the children eat outside, in a part of the yard (now being expanded) equipped with tables and benches and a roof, but not walls. In other words, the children eat out in the weather. When it is raining or too cold or too hot, the children eat breakfast in the auditorium, on the chairs or on the floor, and lunch in their classrooms. For its part, the auditorium is too small for our school's student body to assemble. (In any case, the entire student body is rarely on campus at one time. As a result of our year-round, multi-track schedule, on any given day, one quarter of the students are not in school; they are "off track.") The bungalows are shoddily built. They also appear to be nesting sights for large, cockroach-like insects

that can be occasionally discovered running, procreating or dying on the floors. Our school has no computer lab (although there are now computers in the classrooms), no science lab, no music room; the orchestra practices in the all-purpose auditorium. Not least, our nurse doesn't have an appropriate office; her office space is really a

kind of lobby for two bathrooms. (It used to be the staff lounge.) As deprived of facilities as it is, our school is by no means the worst, or even bad, as far as LAUSD elementary schools are concerned.

## Overcrowding

The most significant problem resulting from the lack of long-term investment in public education is overcrowding. Put most simply, there are too many kids in each school and too many kids in (most of) the classrooms. When I first started teaching in Los Angeles, class-size limits (the upper limits) in elementary school was 33 students per class in grades k through three, 34 per class in grades four, five and six. In the middle and high schools, there were (and still are), classes with 40-45 students. (An acquaintance of mine, a teacher at a middle school, recently told me that there are classes in his school with 48 kids in them.) How is any teacher going to reach all the students in his/her class, give each child individual attention, make sure he/she is learning the required curriculum, etc., when there are so many kids in the class? In reality, it isn't possible. Beginning in 1997, with the state flush with money, the class-size for grades k through three was reduced to 20. In my opinion, this has been the only truly substantial step taken to improve the school system. (As a kindergarten teacher, it seemed like I had a new job.) Yet, nothing has been done about reducing class sizes in the rest of the grades. (In LA, as I mentioned before, and perhaps elsewhere, they have gone up). Why? There are not enough teachers, classrooms or schools. If anything, the reduction in class size for grades k through three made the existing teacher shortage even worse. And in the years since the

crisis in education was discovered, aside from the elementary school in the Valley, there have been no new schools built. Construction on a new high school—the new Belmont High School complex—near downtown Los Angeles was halted when it was discovered that the school site leaks toxic fumes. So desperate is the district for schools and classrooms, even sites to build new schools, that serious consideration is being given to completing the project, despite the risk to the health of its prospective students. The board of education recently “awarded” a \$2.9 million contract to fund (yet more) environmental studies and engineering designs for the half-built project. (*Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 2002.) When completed, it is expected to cost \$260 million, making it the most expensive high school in California. (*LA Times*, June 20, 2002.) Progress in building other schools has been minimal. A friend of mine is an architect who has done work for LAUSD. He was contracted to design and produce plans for new schools or school expansions. When I spoke to him about this a year ago, he said that very few of the projects are proceeding. He also told me that the new crew brought in to oversee school construction, presumably to replace those implicated in the Belmont scandal, are even less competent than the old guys. According to the *LA Times* (June 20, 2002), Superintendent Roy Romer “disclosed last fall that the district faces a shortfall of as much as \$600 million for repairs that Proposition BB [a \$2.4 billion bond issue passed in 1997—RT] originally was supposed to cover—the result of increasing costs, contractual disputes and poor oversight.” As a result, only half of the 12,000 repair and modernization jobs planned under Proposition BB have been completed and the district must find the money for the rest. Supposedly, Proposition BB “launched several dozen new schools,” but what this actually means isn’t clear. According to recent reports, however, the situation has improved somewhat; the district finally managed to submit its paperwork in time to qualify for nearly \$1 billion in state funds for school construction. And a new bond issue, this one for \$3.3 billion, is planned for the ballot, although, given LAUSD’s past mismanagement, this one faces considerable voter scepticism.

### **Year-Round Schools**

Aside from busing (more than 17,000 kids are bused, often an hour each way, to and from schools every day), one of the negative effects of overcrowding is the existence of year-round

school schedules. Under traditional school calendars, roughly September through June, school facilities lie vacant and unused for over two months during the summer. Converting to year-round, multi-track schedules allows this unutilized space to be used and thus still more students crammed into already overcrowded facilities. The general idea is that at any given time, while one group of students, that is, one “track,” is on vacation (“off-track”), the other students (the other tracks, say, three) are present (“on-track”).

This set-up is deleterious for a number of reasons. One, probably the least important, is that except for one or two days per year (and sometimes not even that), the entire student body is never on campus at one time. This has a negative impact on various extra-curricular activities, such as the orchestra, as well as on the effort to generate what we used to call “school spirit.” (Since our school has few extra-curricular activities and since the auditorium is too small to seat all of our students, this doesn’t account for much.)

A more significant drawback of year-round, multi-track schedules is the existence of so-called “roving classes.” These are classes, that is, groups of school children, who have no classroom of their own. To understand why this occurs, think of a school that can normally house, say, 600 children with each classroom full and no extra rooms. Now, with a year-round schedule, at any given time, there are an additional 200 children who are not in school; they are “off-track.” At the end of a certain period (in our school, every six weeks), one group of (200) kids currently in school goes “off-track,” while the group that has been “off-track” comes back to school. But since all the rooms have been full, the group coming back “on-track” must move into classrooms that were previously occupied by the now departing students. Six weeks later, when another track goes off and one comes back on, these children have to move again. These are the “roving” classes. During the course of one semester, the kids in these classes are in three different classrooms, and the process is repeated in the following semester. Leaving aside the unsettling effect this has on the students (never having one’s own classroom), and leaving aside the fact that having to move every few weeks dampens the “roving” teachers’ motivation to decorate their classrooms with instructional material, students’ work, etc., this “roving” entails a colossal waste of instructional time. As the time

approaches for one track to go off, those classes whose rooms will be utilized by “rovers” must be cleaned out to make room for the incoming classes. Things must be taken down from the walls, supplies stored, desks and table-tops cleared, and bookshelves emptied or at least covered or turned around. Students’ personal supplies and belongings have to be stowed away or taken home. Meanwhile, the roving classes must clean up the rooms they have been in for the last few weeks, pack their stuff into backpacks and plastic bags, etc., so they can be prepared to move into their “new” classrooms when they are vacated. How many days does this take? At the very least, one, sometimes two or more, every six weeks, days that could be far better spent actually learning something. And, of course, the teachers have to put in extra time after class to get their rooms in shape. But at least the kids (and the teachers) are gaining valuable life experience: a real lesson in the economics of scarcity (and the stupidity and irresponsibility of those who run and have run the school system). But, as George W. says, let’s hold the schools accountable.

Another negative effect of overcrowding is the necessity of so-called “split” classes or grades. These are classes that group children belonging to two or more grades in one classroom, taught by one teacher (and usually a part-time teacher assistant). For example, if by chance a school’s enrollment and distribution (how many kids are in each grade and each track, etc.) don’t enable all classes to be filled to, or close to, the maximum, there isn’t enough space and aren’t enough teachers to have classes that are, say, half full. Let’s say that in any given school with a given distribution of kids there’s enough space for four kindergartens and four first-grade classes. Let’s also say that instead of the 80 kindergarteners and 80 first graders that would perfectly fill up these classes (at 20 children per class), 90 kids in each grade enroll. This leaves 10 in each grade left over. Instead of having two additional classes, one kindergarten and one first-grade class, with 10 kids in each, schools that are short of space will put the 10 kindergarteners and 10 first graders in the same class, to be taught by one teacher.

In a few cases, such a split-grade class may be beneficial, for example, if some slower learners in, say, a fifth-grade class, are put in a class with more advanced children in the fourth grade. But the world (and, needless to say, the school system)

is rarely so logical and obliging. Usually, fast and slow learners are thrown in together, so some kids aren’t given the opportunity to progress as fast as they might, while others fall further behind and do not get the individual attention they need. This questionable situation is bad enough, but to make matters worse, each grade has its own individual curriculum in each subject area. So, in theory (in, say, a class containing kids in two grades), one teacher is supposed to teach two reading programs, two math programs, two science programs and two social studies programs, not to mention the mandated instruction in art, music, physical education and, where students who are not deemed fluent in English are involved, ESL (English as a Second Language). Here, students are supposed to be further subdivided into groups defined by their level of fluency in English, with a distinct instructional program for each group.

How is all this to be done? Perhaps, the Albert Einsteins or Leonardo Da Vincis of teaching can do it, but ordinary human beings, even very talented and dedicated ones, cannot, and as a result, it isn’t done. You do the best you can, which may not be very good, and you try not to let it bother you too much. Where it’s convenient, two teachers may swap kids for, say, science or social studies, so that for one hour, the fifth graders are being taught the fifth-grade science curriculum by one teacher while the fourth-grade kids are taught the fourth-grade science curriculum by the other. But this is rarely possible for all subject areas, let alone for all, or even most, teachers. And such an arrangement, which is usually worked out informally between the teachers in question, is further complicated by the fact that teachers and classes are on different tracks, so the whole deal may have to be suspended, if the two classes are on different tracks, when one or the other teacher and his/her class goes off-track. Leaving aside the amount of time lost every day moving the kids.

As bad as this is, in LA, up until the last year, there were three distinct year-round schedules plus a traditional September through June schedule, plus another one that is almost the same as the traditional calendar. As a result, kids from the same family may be in different schools, say, one in elementary school and one in middle or high school, which may be on different schedules, so that there

is no one time when the family can take a vacation together (except Christmas). Unless they forgo vacations altogether while their kids are in school, the family will take a vacation at some time or another, forcing one or both children to miss a lot of school time. In addition, if a child

in the afternoon. Since the school day is six hours, there will have to be some overlap. But the kids won't all fit. Another proposal is for some children to go to school on Saturday. (Another gem.) Since this issue was first broached, I haven't heard anything official about it. I've been told, however, that the one remaining "short" calendar will be terminated at the end of this school year in June 2003.



### Classes Too Big

The other side of overcrowding is class sizes that, with the recent exception of kindergarten through third grade, are way too high. Try to imagine attempting to teach a full curriculum of subjects to a class of forty-odd kids with a fairly wide range of academic abilities. Just the job of managing the class, aka preventing chaos, is daunting enough, let alone actually teaching something, let alone actually making sure that each child pays attention, does his/her class- and homework, etc., let alone actually attempting to meet each child's individual needs and challenge his/her unique abilities. (Sure!) When I was a kid I was once in a class with 45 kids. It

switches tracks, he/she may wind up ending one school year and beginning another with no vacation whatsoever (except perhaps a weekend), or she/he may wind up having a vacation of 12 weeks (Great! But plenty of time to forget a lot of stuff).

At least the children on our school's calendar are in class for the state's mandatory 180 days per year. Schools on two of the other calendars, with nearly half of the district's 736,000 students (*LA Times*, June 20, 2002), are/were not; they have 17 fewer days, with each day somewhat longer to make up for the time. (As I understand it, one of these calendars was phased out last year.) Several months ago, the state began insisting that all children be in school the mandatory 180 days, and the district started twisting and turning to figure out how to do this. Some of their proposals involve having schools have two "shifts" per day, one in the morning, one

was the third grade and it wasn't a thrilling experience. The teacher was unbelievably strict. We were so scared of her we didn't move. We sat there with our hands "folded" on our desks, even though as she went around the room, having each child answer a question, it seemed an hour before she got back to you. Fortunately, it was only for a few weeks, until the new addition to the school was completed and our class was split into two smaller groups. At the time, we hated the teacher. I now realize that she was not exceptional, just doing her job as best she could under terrible circumstances. Today the job is even harder, since with American culture being what it is, it is almost impossible to maintain that kind of control.

In my opinion (and I think most teachers will agree), one of the most important things to be done to improve the school system is to lower class sizes to a manageable level across



the board, that is, through all grades, not just k through three. To outsiders, this might seem logical, even obvious. Fewer students per classroom means more individual attention given to each student, while teachers, with fewer students to prepare for and manage, are less stressed-out, and therefore happier and healthier. (Less yelling means more learning.) Leaving aside the fact that the shortage of space and teachers makes this difficult to achieve in the short run, many of our educational leaders—the bureaucrats, the education professors in the universities, the myriad consultants and other parasites the school system supports (and, of course, the politicians)—don't agree, even in theory.

A recent article in *Scientific American* (November 2001) is an example of how they think and argue. The thrust of the piece can be gleaned by how it is advertised on the front cover of the magazine, in the table of contents, and in the large print on the first page of the article. On the cover, we read: "Do Small Classes Really Raise Grades?" So here, mind you, we are not talking about (nor presumably interested in) whether the children are actually learning more, only whether their grades (and I presume, their scores on state-mandated tests), go up. In the table of contents, under the heading "Does Class Size Matter?," it states: "Reducing the number of students per teacher is not an educational cure-all." Now, this is a different point. In fact, it is a red herring being dragged across our paths to divert us from the real issue: nobody contends that reducing class size is an "educational cure-all," only that it is very important. On the first page of the article itself, we read: "Legislators are spending billions to reduce class sizes. Will the results be worth the expense?" Ah, here we have a hint of the real issue, as far as those who have the power to influence political decisions are concerned. In other words, instead of asking what is necessary to have a truly effective educational system, one that really provides a good education to all the children, regardless of gender, ethnic background and economic class, these researchers, and the people who pay their salaries and to whom they are accountable and whose mindset they share, are in fact only interested in incremental improvements in a decrepit, vastly under-funded and grossly mismanaged system. They are, in other words, trying to fix the schools on the cheap. Without actually saying so, they take it as

given that there will never be enough money to have a well-functioning school system and proceed from there.

It's somewhat like choosing to put money into an old car that needs repair instead of buying a new one. If you have an old car but don't have much money, either on hand or coming in, you put some money into the repair work that is most urgently needed. When you have a bit more money, you have the next few things done. Although the money spent is mounting up, you keep throwing money into the old heap, in part because you don't have the cash to buy a new one and in part because you've already put a lot of money into the old one and do not want to throw that all away. (Hey, I just put \$500 to get the brakes done. I can't junk my car now, so I guess I'll spend another \$500 replacing the clutch.) Over time, you might wind up putting more money into your old car than it would have taken to buy a new one. And eventually you'll probably buy a new car anyway (or a "new" used one). Many of us have had this experience. This is how the big shots are approaching the school system.

Insofar as the authors of the article have an argument that addresses the real issue, it is that there is little clear-cut evidence to show that lowering class-size helps children learn more. To their credit, they admit that it is very difficult to get good, hard, scientific evidence about anything involving education. This should be obvious. How do you set up a truly scientific study when there are so many variables and no way to control them and thus to isolate the particular cause-effect relationship you are interested in? How do you compare one group of kids, with a given set of gender, economic and ethnic characteristics, in different regions, schools and with different teachers, with another? Even if you choose the same type of kids (ethnically, socio-economically) in the same region, there are still too many variables to take into consideration. In fact, if you take kids from the same classroom in the same school and split them up in the following year, putting some in a class of, say, 20 students and others in a class of 35, you still have a problem. How do you control for the fact that the kids are unique individuals, some better students, brighter and with more parental support, than others? How do you control for the fact that the quality of teachers varies greatly, even in the

same school? One may be exceptional, the other poor. One may be experienced, the other not. One may be burnt out, while the other is new and enthusiastic. One may just have a bad year, or not get along with that particular group of children, etc., etc. And how do you measure students' progress? Grades given by the teachers? Very subjective. One-on-one assessment? Who's doing the assessment and how many students do they assess before they get tired? State-mandated tests? What they actually test is controversial, and on a given day, how the kids perform may vary. Of course, one may argue that if the samples are large enough, the variables

strated judgments about the issue of class-size reduction. Their grand conclusion is that there is some modest evidence to show that reducing class size has some beneficial effect in the primary grades, but that the evidence as far as higher grades are concerned is more mixed. In other words, reducing class size in the primary grades, which has already been done throughout California, is worth it, while reducing class size in the upper grades, and in middle and high schools—where, as I indicated before, as many as 45 children are in a class taught by one teacher (who may have 4 or 5 such classes per day)—is a waste of money.

**In a large class, how does the teacher make sure that all students are paying attention? At the other end of the scale, isn't it obvious that in a small class the teacher will have more time to work with each child individually, to get to know that child, to find out what he/she knows and doesn't know, to help him/her with the particular problem he/she may be having, etc? And isn't it obvious that all of these things add up to better teaching and more learning, *even if the teacher does not change his/her teaching style one iota?***

will cancel each other out. The problem is that they obliterate almost everything else, including discernible trends. As a result, almost any given study in the field of education is questionable. (Since I entered the school system, I've heard about a long list of studies that purport to prove a variety of different claims, some of them in direct contradiction to the others. My principal is very fond of referring to them, usually as a way to justify the latest bureaucratic demand, although she has never actually shown us any of them to us nor given us the information about where they can be found. I now believe that for any one study claiming to prove one thing, there's another—or another one could be devised—that proves the opposite.)

Even though the authors of our article seem to recognize this, they still claim to be able to make scientifically-demon-

strated judgments about the issue of class-size reduction. One of the things that is most revealing about this and most other studies devoted to educational issues is that the researchers never ask the opinions of those most directly involved in the education of children: the teachers, the students and the students' parents. (I don't even think they ask administrators.) Would you rather teach a class of 20 or a class of 35, and why? Would you rather be in a class of 20 students or a class of 35, and why? Would you prefer your child to be in a class of 20 students or one of 35, and why? Of course, the authors of the article will probably reply, this isn't scientific. But, as they themselves virtually admit, neither are the studies they cite (nor, I might add, is their own).

Insofar as these (and other) researchers have specific arguments about why reducing class size does not matter, they boil down to two. One is that even when class sizes are

reduced, teachers don't change their teaching styles. (Implied here is one of the canards that underlies much if not most of the discussion about the educational system today. This is that the problem with our school system is the teachers. We will return to this.) But so what? Even if the teacher does not

with one student at a time. In each of these groupings, isn't it obvious that a teacher will be more effective in a class of 20 students than in one with 35, let alone 40 or 45? In a large class, how does the teacher make sure that all students are paying attention? How does he/she ensure participation of all



change his/her teaching style (maybe that style is very effective), in a smaller class the teacher will be able to reach more students more effectively, will be more familiar with where they are at and how they learn, and be better able to modify the curriculum, or the pace of instruction, or the proportion of time spent reviewing versus teaching new material, to maximize the kids' learning. One way to look at this is to divide teachers' instruction into three main types: whole-group, where the teacher is addressing the whole class; small-group, where the teacher is working with a smaller group of select students; and one-on-one, where the teacher works

students? How does he/she know whether the students are getting what he/she is trying to teach, that he/she is going at the right speed, etc.? Likewise, with small-group instruction. At the other end of the scale, isn't it obvious that in a small class the teacher will have more time to work with each child individually, to get to know that child, to find out what he/she knows and doesn't know, to help him/her with the particular problem he/she may be having, etc? And isn't it obvious that all of these things add up to better teaching and more learning, *even if the teacher does not change his/her teaching style one iota?*

And all of this omits the not insignificant fact that it is a hell of a lot easier to manage and teach a class of 20 than of 35, which means that the teacher will be less stressed out, more positive and encouraging to the students, less punitive, etc. Which means that both children and teacher will enjoy school more and will miss fewer days, that the teacher will last longer in the classroom, thus being able to gain more experience, and that fewer teachers will quit the profession, thus easing the teacher shortage, currently at near-crisis proportions. But, of course, none of this can be scientifically verified, can it? And none of it is mentioned in the article.

The other argument these researchers use to bolster their claim that class-size doesn't matter beyond the primary grades is what they call the "Asian paradox": students in Asia do well (indeed, out-perform U.S. students) even though class-size in Asian countries is large, even larger than in the U.S. It is certainly worthwhile discussing why this may be so, but the argument totally misses the point. If Asian students do well (even better than U.S. students) in large classes, might they not learn even more in smaller classes? And has anybody done a study about that?

This article is typical of the kind of research that is carried on about education in general and our crisis-ridden school system in particular: shoddy, an insult to those, both inside the school system and out, interested in creating truly effective schools, and good only for promoting one or another limited, half-baked proposal or, as in this case, arguing against something meaningful. (It's too expensive to buy a new car; let's patch up the old jalopy.) The absurdity of the claim that class size, at least in the upper grades, doesn't matter can be made apparent by asking that if it is true, why not raise class size to 60? (I hope none of our educational leaders reads this; they may take me up on it.)

## Shortage of Teachers

The other main negative effect that lack of investment in the school system has had on the education of our children is the shortage of teachers throughout the country. The

number of teachers needed is tremendous. According to the *LA Times* (August 15, 2001), by 2011, the shortage nationally is expected to reach 2 million, with nearly 300,000 in California alone. The LA teachers union, UTLA (United Teachers of Los Angeles), contends that 2.4 million teachers will be needed in the next 11 years. "The projection jumps as high as 2.7 million when researchers factor in declining student-teacher ratios based on nationwide class-size reduction.... In high-poverty urban and rural areas alone, more than 700,000 new teachers will be needed in the next 10 years." (*United Teacher*, September 21, 2001.) The main reason for this, although by no means not the only one, is money: teachers are not paid enough for what we do. Along with other factors (the retirement of "baby boom" teachers, the shitty conditions teachers work under and the way we're treated, plus the increase in the school-age population—21% over the past ten years), the low pay scale for teachers is the main reason not enough people are attracted to the profession (I balked when I wrote that word). It is also one of the reasons why, equally important, so many teachers quit after trying it for a while. Those opposed to raising teachers' salaries argue: why should we pay them more if they're not doing a good job? (Of course, this doesn't stop the bureaucrats and politicians from raising their own already exorbitant salaries periodically.) But the argument is backward. The proof of the pudding is in the eating: the undeniable fact is that there is a teacher shortage of monstrous proportions. In other words, the job is not attractive enough as it is to draw and retain the required number of people. And one of the main reasons for this is the low level of teachers' salaries compared to other occupations requiring the same, or even less, education, skill and dedication. "Teachers ages 22-28 earned an average \$7,894 less per year than other college-educated adults of the same age in 1998. The gap is three times greater for teachers 44-50, who earned \$23,655 less than their counterparts in other occupations. The salary gap is worst among teachers with a master's degree—teachers in that category earned \$32,522 less than non-teachers." (*United Teacher*, September 21, 2001). Others argue that teachers shouldn't be paid more because we get so much vacation time. In an article on the Op-Ed page of the *LA Times*, one brilliant commentator even suggested requiring teachers to attend professional development classes and carry out other tasks



during their time off. If the teacher shortage is bad now, you wouldn't get anybody to do the job if this proposal were implemented; those who tried it would be dead from exhaustion after two years. (And if the professional development he has in mind is anything like the kind I've been subjected to, teachers would die of boredom and low self-esteem after one.)

Actually, the teacher shortage has been around for a long time, but before 1970 the problem was hidden by the fact that the system was staffed by a de facto captive work force: women. Prior to the women's liberation movement, there were very few jobs open to college-educated women (and not that many women going to college). Two careers that were available to them were teaching and nursing. Among other things, the women's movement opened up a lot of new opportunities to women, and the captive workforce was (at least partly) liberated. Although this has exacerbated the teacher shortage over the years, it has had a positive impact: an increase in the number of men in the classrooms, particularly in the elementary schools.

Simple economics should suggest that the main way to eliminate the teacher shortage is to raise salaries until the market reaches equilibrium, in other words, until the supply of teachers equals the demand. (People who support vouchers talk about bringing "market forces" to bear on the school system; here is where they really matter.) But this would cost a lot of money, which the economic and political decision-makers are not willing to spend (or to shift from their higher priorities, such as the military budget, agricultural subsidies and their own outrageously inflated incomes). So instead of the drastic increase in teacher salaries that is needed to really cope with the shortage, our leaders are resorting to moral exhortation to convince idealistic people to become teachers and make the world a better place. Undoubtedly, some will respond to this appeal, but will it really be able to solve a teacher shortage of the magnitude the system is facing? I wouldn't count on it. In a country whose culture increasingly stresses making money (and being famous), relying on idealism to fix the school system will not take us very far. It is also unfair to teachers; we should be idealistic, while everybody else (including the politicians) goes all out to get rich. It should be obvious that the schools would function a lot better if teachers' salaries were substantially increased, even leaving aside the not irrelevant

fact that our morale, now not very high, would improve if we were paid more. To see why, it's worth looking at how the teacher shortage actually affects the schools.

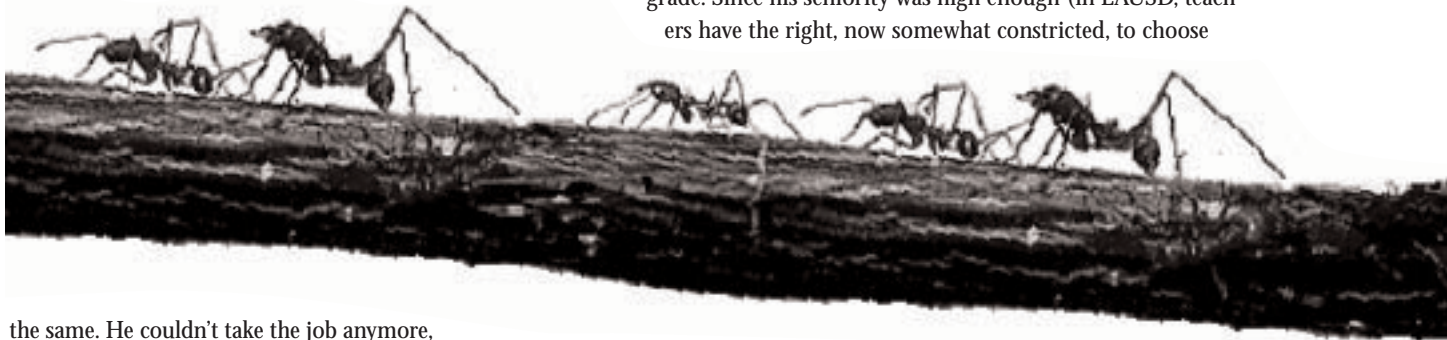
### **Anyone Need a Job?**

One of the things the teacher shortage means is that the school system has been willing to hire almost anyone who met (extremely) minimal criteria. In the LAUSD, if one has a BA degree and passed a state test (the CBEST, or California Basic Educational Skills Test) which requires reading, writing and math skills on approximately the level of a sophomore in high school, one can get what is called an "emergency credential" and start teaching. (I almost forgot, you also need to be interviewed by one of the generally stuffy interviewers in the recruiting office in LAUSD headquarters. But since the district is in chronic need of teachers, only the most obviously unfit candidates are weeded out by this process.) With an emergency credential one can get hired and teach full-time in a classroom (even special education classes), while one pursues a teaching program at a bona fide educational institution. I believe one has five years to complete a program and get a credential, although extensions are often granted. Moreover, with an emergency credential (I'm not sure whose emergency it is, a school system desperate for teachers or the prospective teacher desperate for a job), one can be a substitute teacher forever, and never be required either to be enrolled in a teaching program or to get a teaching credential.

As a result, the school system has become a kind of dumping ground for all sorts of people who do not really want to be teachers and shouldn't be. Some of them are people who were failures in other careers and decided to be teachers because they couldn't find other jobs. (Lest people think I am judging, I confess that this was my situation.) Others are people who, when they started teaching, preferred to be pursuing different careers, such as acting or writing or opening a business, but who have not (yet) been able to make these paying propositions. So they teach as a way to survive until they can make a living doing what they really want to do. Now, some of these people go on to become good, dedicated teachers. Others stay on only as long as they get established in their desired vocations or until they can't take being a teacher any longer and then quit. Still others, never get established in their preferred

careers and continue teaching out of desperation, even though they hate their jobs (and the kids).

Some examples will demonstrate how this works out in practice. When I first started teaching, I taught a combined fifth and sixth grade class, starting in the middle of the school year. At the end of my first day, a teacher from across the hall knocked on my door. He was a tall man in his mid-50s, with thinning, graying hair, a beer-belly and a tired expression on his face. After introducing himself, he began complaining about the job: the kids don't want to learn, he can't control them, he's got to get out of here, etc. He obviously needed someone to commiserate with. Even though his political views were extremely reactionary, he seemed like a nice guy and, since I didn't know anybody at the school, we became friends. We wound up having our classes take physical education together and occasionally hung out. But his tune was always



the same. He couldn't take the job anymore, the kids were driving him crazy, how can you teach when the kids don't want to learn and their parents don't give a damn?, etc. And he always had just heard about another job somewhere else that sounded easier, a "better gig," and wanted me to look into it with him. One of these was teaching convicts in a state prison, where, he told me, you don't have to worry about controlling the class. Another was to teach English in an Asian country where—apparently a prime consideration for him—you could have all the women you want, since they're so anxious to meet a rich American. Despite the problems I was having controlling my own class, I was glad to have a job (any job), and wasn't tempted.

Eventually, I learned his story. He was the son of an army officer (a general, if I remember correctly), and was never able to live up to his father's expectations. He wound up

working in the business world somewhere, but didn't like the job very much and had heard that teaching was an "easy gig." (Do I detect a pattern here?) After all, you get out of work early and have a lot of vacations. But teaching turned out to be harder than he thought. His big problem was that he couldn't manage his students yet refused to set up a "behavior management plan" (a system of rules, rewards and punishments most teachers use as a tool to control the kids). The way he figured it, the kids were supposed to behave because they should want to learn. (What planet was he from!) Since they didn't, work was a living hell for him: 34 pre-teens in an unstructured environment will do that to you.

At one point, he was so desperate that he decided to teach kindergarten, despite the fact that he had no experience at this level and, by his own admission, didn't know the first thing about teaching reading, the main curricular task in that grade. Since his seniority was high enough (in LAUSD, teachers have the right, now somewhat constricted, to choose

their positions based on their seniority), he bid for kindergarten and wound up with a combined kindergarten-first grade class, one of the hardest "splits" to teach. By then, I was teaching kindergarten and had an afternoon class, so I was required to help out in his. The first day of school was chaos. Kids were crying (a few usually do) and a couple tried to run out of the classroom. (I had to physically restrain one girl, with the permission of her father). Distraught parents were screaming and wouldn't leave the room (you have to kick them out, I mean, firmly encourage them to leave). My friend didn't have a clue about what to do. I don't think he had planned anything; he was just going to "wing it." His biggest problem was (you guessed it), he couldn't get the kids to pay attention to him and do what he wanted them to do. He couldn't even get them to line up. When I tried to show him how to do it, the kids began following me; they thought I was

the teacher. After several days of mayhem (and many parent complaints), the administration convinced the man to take an upper-grade class again and brought in a new teacher who had some experience in kindergarten. A year or so later, my friend injured his foot kicking a ball in the yard, and took an extended disability leave. When, after many months, his disability ran out but his foot had still not healed, he resigned his position. The last I heard he was teaching English in Thailand, surrounded, I presume, by a lot of women.

Although this teacher's saga may have been unique, his situation is not. At any given time, in any given school, there are several-to-many teachers who are not up to the job (I am not now talking about lack of experience): they are there because of an accident, because they can't do anything else, because they used to be capable but have gotten burned out, etc., etc. And yet, despite the man's obvious incompetence, to my knowledge he never received an unsatisfactory evaluation from an administrator, had never been reprimanded or disciplined, was never asked to leave the school. I'm not sure he was even given any advice. Oh yes, he was once asked to take a workshop on dealing with difficult students, but since he didn't believe in setting up a behavior management plan—one of the key points of the workshop—and nobody insisted that he do so, it was a waste of time. How many teachers like this does a child need to have before he or she falls hopelessly behind? And once children fall behind, every teacher who has those kids afterwards has to work twice as hard to try to get them caught up to where they are supposed to be, which slows down the progress of the rest of the class (and lowers test scores). Finally, if you realize that given the way the school system is run, a child may not have just one teacher like this in his/her school career, but two or three or more, you can get an inkling of why our school system doesn't work very well.

Another example will flesh out the picture. One year a young woman in her 20s (maybe she was 30), was hired by our school. Because she was fluent in Spanish, she was required to take a lower grade class on D Track, then the so-called Hispanic track. She landed a combined first-second grade class. However, because of bureaucratic mix-ups, she was not able to start work until sometime in September, even though year-round schools' academic year starts at the beginning of



Interactive learning in science. (DuPage Children's Museum, Naperville, IL)

July. (To get processed by the district, the woman needed her college transcript. But since her alma mater, including its administration, shuts down for the summer, she had no way to get a transcript to turn in to district headquarters. And the district wouldn't approve her to start working, even though she had landed a position at our school, until they had the transcript.) As a result, during July and August her students had a series of substitutes (I remember three; there may have been more). When she finally was allowed to start work sometime in September, she was thrown into the classroom, like all new teachers, without any help whatsoever. She didn't even have an aide. (When she finally got one, months later, the aide was not Spanish speaking, but spoke Armenian, even though all the kids in her class were Latino. She didn't need a Spanish-speaking aide, she was told, because she herself spoke Spanish.) Since once again, I had an afternoon class, and since my room partner was off-track, I was directed to help this new teacher in her class.

When I arrived (she had been there several days), it was clear that she, too, had no idea what to do. The room was filthy. Some of the kids were wrestling on the carpet. Others were practicing skating (in their socks), on the smooth part of the floor. They were all talking or yelling. All of this while she was in the front of the room trying to teach them something (I presume). Since I didn't feel it was my position to interfere directly (as opposed to give her some

advice when, say, the kids were out at recess), I asked her what she wanted me to do. She didn't know. After suggesting that I read with some of the students one-on-one, I asked her how their reading was coming along. She replied that none of them was reading. When I asked about a particular boy who I had had the previous year, one I knew was reading well, she insisted he wasn't reading either. I asked her to show me. She gave the boy a book that was appropriate for a third or fourth grader (the boy was in the first grade) and when he couldn't read it (big surprise), she said, "See!" I went to my classroom and got a book I knew to be on his level and he began reading it very competently. When I suggested to the teacher that she find material that was appropriate to the child's reading level, she replied, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." This, as I soon learned, was her standard reply to every teacher's attempt to help her. She already knew everything.

When it was time to have the kids go to recess, she couldn't get the kids to line up without pushing, fighting and screaming. I asked her if I could show her how to do it. (Getting kids to line up at recess, or before any activity that they want to do, is relatively easy. You just make it clear that they're not going to do it until they are all lined up quietly, and then you wait. Eventually, they get the point.) But my demonstration was in vain. The kids responded well, but the teacher didn't understand and could never figure out how to do it. When I talked to other teachers who had had contact with this woman, they all told me they had had the same experience. When one teacher, a personal friend and an experienced teacher who had recommended her for the job, showed up one afternoon to give a sample lesson, the new teacher wouldn't even let her in the room. After a while, I became so concerned about the children in her class, who clearly weren't learning anything, that I spoke to the principal about the situation. She suggested I talk to her mentor (new teachers are assigned mentors, more experienced teachers to whom one can go for advice and suggestions) and told me who it was. Since this individual didn't seem to be concerned about the situation (I assume he had visited his charge's classroom), and since the principal obviously didn't want to talk to either him or the teacher, I didn't pursue this. I kept trying to give the teacher advice, but she always acted as if she knew everything already. The situation became so bad that parents volunteered to be in her class-

room, both to help her out and to be able to document her incompetence. Some parents tried to get their kids transferred out of the class, but were told there was no space in any other class. At one point, one of the parents who had been in the classroom on a regular basis, questioned the teacher's competence at a meeting at which the principal was present. The principal defended the teacher, whom she described as "excellent," despite the fact that I and several others had told her what was going on. Eventually, the parents just gave up and decided that their kids just had to survive the year. After all, what could they do? Most of them weren't even very angry. They saw the teacher as a young, well-intentioned person who couldn't control the kids.

The woman survived that year and one more. I think she left when she was asked to enroll in a teacher training program. In any case, she told me, she wasn't able to save any money and never really wanted to be a teacher anyway. (I don't remember what her preferred career was. I think she wanted to write children's books.)

### **High Rate of Turnover**

As this story suggests, another of the big problems associated with the teacher shortage is a tremendous turnover of teachers, particularly in the inner-city schools, where they are needed most and where teaching is the most demanding. The figure I've heard cited most frequently since I've been teaching is that, over the course of 5 years, 50% of new teachers quit. In other words, if 10 new teachers enter the field in one year, in five years' time, 5 of them will have left. And if this is the average for, say, all of LAUSD, it is even higher in the schools serving the poorest, most oppressed communities, where the facilities are worst, the problems the children bring with them to school are greatest and teacher morale the lowest. Here, the turnover has a powerful cumulative effect. High turnover and consequently fewer experienced teachers results in a poorly performing school, as defined, for example, by low test scores, high absence rates, greater disciplinary problems, less parental involvement, etc. Yet, these very problems make it that much harder to hold onto teachers until they get the necessary experience. Many teachers who can leave do so, either by transferring to another school in the district, transferring to another district, or abandoning the field altogether.



This forces the school to hire yet more inexperienced teachers, which keeps the test scores down, etc.

As this shows, one of the things the high rate of turnover means is that at any given time, there is a large number of inexperienced people in the classroom. A rough indication of this is the large number of uncredentialed teachers currently working in the school system, that is, teachers who have not been trained to be teachers and have not received their state credential. In 1999-2000, in California, there were 40,000 teachers, or roughly 14% of the workforce, working on emergency credentials. In urban schools generally, the percentage is closer to 20%, while in LAUSD, the figure is over 35%. (Nearly half of California's teachers working on emergency credentials are in LA County.) In some poorly performing schools (usually those in the poorest communities), 50%-90% of the teachers may be working on emergency credentials. Moreover, these teachers tend to be concentrated in "hard to fill" subjects, such as special education, math and science. (All these figures are from the *California Educator*, June 2001, pp. 8-9.)

As should be obvious, this situation has a profound impact on the students and their progress, because in this business, the most important factor in the making of a good teacher, leaving aside questions of personality (liking children, being able to manage them and communicate with them, etc.), is experience. (In my opinion, it is considerably more important than formal training, most of which is worthless.) It took me three years of teaching kindergarten before I felt I had even a modest idea of what I was doing, and another two before I felt I was not unfairly damaging the kids I wasn't able to reach. And I was lucky, since I had the opportunity to be a room partner with—that is, to work with, watch and learn from—an experienced and highly effective teacher. (If I had taught a higher grade, I would not have had this advantage, and it would have taken me that much longer to become a decent teacher.) If it takes three-to-five years to become competent and if, at any given time, there is a significant number of teachers in the schools who do not have this amount of experience, it should be obvious how deleterious the teaching shortage is. But instead of doing what is necessary to overcome this shortage, most importantly, raising teachers' salaries (and treating teachers with respect) our political and educational leaders have little more to propose than moral exhortation. I suppose George

W. will take up teaching, to continue making the world a better place, after he leaves the White House.

In middle and high schools, one result of the teacher shortage is the large percentage of classes taught by teachers with little academic training in the subjects they are teaching. According to a report by the Education Trust, an "advocacy group" based in Washington, DC, "27% of math, English, science and social studies classes in California's secondary schools are taught by people who had neither a college major nor a minor in the fields they are teaching. Nationally, the number is 24%." The educational bureaucracy's attitude is typical. "It is better to have someone at least trying to teach science than to have absolutely no science," says Kerry Mazzoni, California's education secretary (*LA Times*, August 22, 2002). (Absolutely!—although God forbid anyone suggest raising teachers' salaries enough to attract fully qualified people.)

Still another effect of the teacher shortage is the large number of substitutes, many of whom have only emergency credentials, in the classroom on any given day. I am not talking primarily about the use of substitutes (many of whom have no regular credential) when a teacher is sick or otherwise absent for a day or two. That's bad enough. I am referring to the use of substitutes on a relatively long-term basis when a regular teacher, with either a full credential or emergency credential,



Kerry Mazzoni, California State Education Secretary  
(Office of the Secretary for Education, California)

has not been hired for the position or when the assigned teacher is out for an extended period of time. In the example I just discussed, during the period the woman was waiting to be cleared (July and August), her prospective students had, at a minimum, three different substitutes. At least these subs were there for a week or more, so the kids had some sense of continuity. In some cases, classes like that might get a different sub every day! How are the kids going to learn anything if there is a different person in the classroom each day, one who doesn't know the children, doesn't know what they know or what they've been taught (or even what the previous sub did the day before), and who may not have any experience teaching that particular grade, or any teaching experience at all?

There was another teacher at our school who was on an extended disability leave for months (I think she had hurt her back), but refused to resign her position. It seemed like there was a different substitute in her class (which was a kindergarten) every day or every few days. I remember one of them. He was an older man, who wore suspenders and whose pant legs ended considerably above his ankles. His teeth needed cleaning and he had an odd look in his eyes. A baseball cap completed the picture. He appeared to be a few steps removed from a homeless shelter. From the homework he was sending home with his kids (which I spotted when our kindergarten classes were eating lunch in the kindergarten yard), I saw that he was trying to teach his students a new letter every day. Either he was Super Teacher or he didn't know what he was doing. (When I teach a letter, both its name and its sound, I need several days to do so, sometimes even a week, using a variety of activities, and at the end of that time there may still be one or more kids who can't tell you what the letter is or what sound it makes.) When I asked him if he needed any help, he politely declined. "I've been doing this for 40 years," he said. (God help us!)

Of course, not all the teachers on emergency credentials, and certainly not all of the substitutes, are incompetent or teaching only as a means to survive until they "make it" in the movie business, or until something better comes along, or because they've heard it's an "easy gig." Many talented, dedicated teachers have entered the profession via emergency credentials, and it is probably a good thing there's a way for

people who may have studied something else in college or pursued other careers to become teachers. Yet because of the teacher shortage, the students, the school system as a whole, and the new teachers themselves pay a price. This is because they walk in the door and start teaching with virtually no help whatsoever. As a result, they and the kids suffer until they (the teachers) figure out what they're doing.

## Swim or Sink

This was my own experience, which may be instructive here. Prior to teaching I was working in the film and television industry as a freelance script reader or, as officially titled, a "story analyst." I read screenplays, books and other materials for movie directors, producers and other people in the business. Like most freelance jobs, my career had a "boom or bust" cycle. There were times when it seemed that everyone I had ever worked for each wanted me to read ten screenplays and four books and to send them my "coverage" (essentially, written synopses and evaluations of the material I had read) within two days. There were other times when weeks would go by when I got no work at all, not even a phone call from my "employers" asking how I was doing. (Producers and directors are always so busy.) On the whole, though, I wasn't making a living. At my best, I was barely paying my bills; at worst, I was running down my savings. (An old car I was continually throwing money into didn't help.)

After three years of this, I came to the conclusion that I was not likely to land a full-time salaried job as a script reader anywhere (there are a few such positions, mostly at the major studios, and they are very difficult to get), or otherwise move ahead in the entertainment business. I also concluded that since I was well into middle age, I needed to think seriously about putting money away for retirement. After answering various job ads, and realizing I wasn't qualified for a job in the modern world, I decided to become (you guessed it) a teacher. Fortunately, I did have a BA. Moreover, when I first arrived in California I had, on the advice of a friend who was a high school teacher (when she suggested that I consider teaching as a career, I just laughed), taken and passed the CBEST as a kind of safety net (which I now needed). I had an additional asset. I have a modest grasp of Spanish and

managed to pass the district's Spanish fluency exam, earning its top grade. Since at that time the schools were still committed to bilingual education and since, obviously, one of the main languages of the bilingual program in LA was Spanish, this made me a relatively hot item.

I first applied to be a high school social studies teacher, but when I visited Cal State LA (the California State University at Los Angeles), to look into enrolling in the appropriate teacher training program, I was effectively rebuffed. At the administration building, I was told I needed to speak to both the chairman of the history department and the chairman of the education department. Fortunately, the latter was on campus. Among other things, he told me that I needed to take course X in one department and course Y in another, but that I had to take one before the other. (I don't remember what these courses were about, their numbers or which one I needed to complete before taking the other.) Although the chairman of the history department was not on campus and was not scheduled to return for several weeks (this was in December), I did manage to reach him by phone. He was extremely impressed with the schools I had attended, but when I asked him about course X and Y, he told me the exact opposite of what the chairman of the education department had said. When I returned to the administration building and asked them for clarification, I was thoroughly beaten. Aside from being lethargic and bored, they were unable to help me out. Along with the general state of the campus (clean it was not) and the overall atmosphere of the place, I was demoralized by the thought of having to negotiate the institution for however many years it would take to get a credential. I returned to the district's recruitment office and asked to apply to teach elementary school, for which, I had been told, the district offered an intern program. In this program (which I will discuss in more detail in the next installment of this essay), one could take the requisite courses gratis, and without having to navigate a university bureaucracy, while teaching at an elementary school.

After getting processed a second time, I was given a list of district elementary schools, with addresses and telephone numbers, and a map, and was told I had to find a job myself. I decided to start with schools near my house, made an appointment and got an interview. The principal at the school there was nasty. When she asked why I had decided to become a teacher and I replied that I needed a job (and also that I liked kids and thought I'd be able to do a good job), she snorted, "So, you think teaching is easy, don't you?" I replied as politely as I could that I knew it wasn't (that's one of the reasons I had never wanted to be a teacher). She then told me that there was a Spanish-speaking teaching assistant at the school whom they were coaching to be able to pass the CBEST, but that if she didn't, they would call me. I left the



Behavior management: Julian Mithchell's film "Another Country." (Anita C. J. Olsen)

interview with a sigh of relief, happy that I had been rejected. (I needed a job, but not that badly.)

When I called the next school, the principal was at least polite. She told me that they were not offering any full-time positions, only week-by-week substitute slots, but if I were willing to take such a job, they'd try me out. At my interview there, with the principal, the school's coordinator and some other people present, I was asked how I would organize a language arts program and instructional programs in other subject areas. Of course, I didn't have a clue and mostly

hemmed and hawed, but since, as I later found out, they were desperate to fill two positions (it was several days before the Christmas break and they needed people to start right after New Year), I got the job. I agreed to take a combined fifth-sixth grade class (I was shocked they had such things), and, at the principal's suggestion, I sat in on the classes of three upper-grade teachers (they didn't appreciate my presence in their classrooms) to see how things worked. I was also given the Course of Study—a humongous loose-leaf binder of several hundred pages, containing a detailed description of the required curricula for each subject area for each grade—and urged to study it before school started up again in January. Frankly, I couldn't make head or tail of it; it had so much stuff in it you couldn't possibly cover all the material in the time available and there was no way to know what was essential and what was not or how much of the material one could feasibly cover.

During the Christmas vacation, I spoke to several of my teacher friends and asked their advice. All I remember was them warning me that if I had trouble handling the kids or needed some other kind of help I should definitely NOT go to the principal. They have too many other things to do, they told me, and don't want to be bothered with helping new teachers (!?). If I wanted to keep the job, I needed to figure things out for myself or speak to another teacher.

### **Improvising on the Job**

When I arrived at school on the first day of classes after the break, I was told where to pick up my class, got the kids, and walked them to classroom. After they put their stuff away and took their seats, I introduced myself and took attendance. Now what? I didn't have any idea what to do and nobody at the school had told me or even made any suggestions. Since I supposed that all kids like to write (and I knew that trying to get pre-teens to do something they don't want to do is a lost cause), I asked my students, "Who wants to write a story?" Hands shot up. Heaving a sigh of release, I told my students to take out a pencil and piece of paper and start writing. One boy raised his hand and asked, "Can we work with friends?" A light went on in my head (I had heard that "cooperative learning" was in favor), and I said, "OK, pick a partner," and the kids started working...reasonably

quietly. A bit later, the assistant principal came in and looked around the room; she wasn't smiling. The kids were working, but there was some talking (they were discussing their stories), and I didn't know whether that was acceptable or not. The assistant principal then asked me, "What are they doing?" I answered, "They're writing stories." The woman then left without saying anything further. Of course, I was very worried, but as I was to discover later, this was a significant improvement over the previous teacher.

The class consisted of 34 kids, equally divided between fifth and sixth graders. Their ages were roughly 10-11, but some of them, particularly the sixth grade girls, were emotionally going on 16. All but one had Spanish last names (what the one Anglo kid was doing in the class, supposedly a bilingual one, I never did figure out), and most of them, but not all, spoke or understood Spanish. (One boy had a Spanish surname—I presume his natural father was Latino—but he had been raised by Anglo parents—an alcoholic and a coke addict—and only spoke and understood English.)

The kids seemed to enjoy writing their stories (most of them were about serial killers until, after several weeks, I put my foot down and insisted they write about something else), and reading them to the rest of the class. After a week or so, it rained heavily one day, so during recess time, I had the kids play inside, while I took the opportunity to read with each one individually, using basal readers, books whose story content and vocabulary are geared to each grade. I was shocked to find out how poor their reading skills were. Fully one third of the class was reading on the second grade level. Others were reading on the third and fourth grade level, while just a few were reading "at grade level," the level at which they are expected to be able to read. Math was the same. One third of the class did not have a solid grasp of the basic multiplication and division facts and most of the students' ability to do word problems was next to nil. They also couldn't do long division because they couldn't keep the columns straight. As a result, I decided I would work on their basic skills and worry about other things later. My language arts program consisted essentially of running a writers' workshop; the kids wrote stories, read them to the class who then discussed them. We talked about characters and plots, at least so they'd know the terms. A couple of times a week, I



had the slower readers read aloud to me around a table at the back of the class, while the others read on their own and wrote synopses of what they had read. (When I first started doing this, some of the better readers snickered. I told everyone to stop everything and asked “Which one of you is perfect?” When no hands went up, I gave them a short lecture about people being good in some things and not so good in others, etc., and told them that I wouldn’t tolerate any snobbery. There was no more snickering after that.)

For math, I worked through the grade level math book. For practice, I divided the class into teams and had a math contest: I’d write a problem on the board and the teams would compete to see who came up with the right answer first. They seemed to like that. Occasionally, we studied science using the grade level science book. For social studies, I first tried to use the current, mandated and very “politically correct” textbook. It looked good, with a lot of pictures and maps, but it was so wordy and used such high flown language that most of the kids couldn’t get through it. Instead, we used the old, outdated text; at least the kids could read it. As the time to take the yearly achievement tests approach, the class and I went through a booklet designed to prepare students for the test. Mind you, through all this time, I had no idea whether I was covering the required curriculum, nor did I really care. My students obviously needed help with the basics, and I was determined to focus on this regardless of what anyone would say. In any event, not one person from the administration ever gave me any direction about what I should be doing, although they did come in occasionally to check how things were going, mostly, I presume, to see whether I was managing the kids.

II myself wondered whether I was doing any good, when two things happened. The first was that, after taking their annual achievement tests (I don’t remember which ones they were), my students’ scores in reading had gone up noticeably. I don’t know whether this had anything to do with me, but when the assistant principal praised me for it, I was willing to take the credit. More important, three of the fifth-grade girls had written a wonderful story about a girl their age whose parents were getting divorced. I naturally assumed that they were writing from experience and asked if any of

their parents had been divorced or were now getting divorced. They answered no, they had just made it up. I was very impressed, but most of the kids kept writing about people being murdered.

I didn’t realize it then, but I later found out that what I was doing was significantly better than the previous teacher. Although she was fully trained, and a big fan of the newest methods then being touted, she was young, inexperienced and couldn’t control the class. She also played favorites and screamed a lot. When I asked other teachers and administrators about her, they either spoke very highly of her, praising her use of the most up-to-date teaching methods (mine were anything but), or else described her as horrible. The assistant principal, who had so intimidated me the first time I saw her but who eventually came to respect me (at least I controlled the class), just rolled her eyes. I got the impression that the kids had run the teacher off, that is, made her life so miserable that she left in despair. Her training may have qualified her to teach middle-class kids, but she was clearly out of her league with the group she wound up with.

### **Behavior Management**

I screamed, too, but after a while the kids seemed to respond to me and appeared to be learning something. Most of them. There were several kids whose sole purpose in life seemed to be to come to school to piss me off (or any other teacher they had; it wasn’t personal). Usually it was talking out of turn, interrupting me or other students, or failing to line up properly—pushing, shoving, talking and occasionally, hitting and cursing (those were the only times I sent kids to the office). There were days when I had half the class (usually, the boys), eating lunch in the classroom and not allowed to play. (I told them that I was paid for the whole day, that I didn’t eat lunch, and that it was all the same to me whether I was in the class with them or sitting in the staff lounge. One boy actually begged to be allowed to stay in at lunch, even though he was behaving well enough to eat and play outside with the other kids. He wanted to use the computer, which, because he never finished his work on time, he never got to use.) Although one teacher suggested I use more positive reinforcement, I couldn’t quite figure out what kind of

rewards would work. Eventually, the kids themselves came to my rescue. Up until then, we had been taking PE (Physical Education) at the end of the day, when our class was officially scheduled. (It had taken over a week to get even this started, because nobody had told me I needed to have PE instruction until one of the boys asked, “When are we going to have PE?” Of course, that was their favorite subject.) After several weeks of this, another boy asked if we could take PE earlier, before lunch. Once I discerned that there was room on the yard at an appropriate time, I agreed, but only on condition that they do a good job (that is, behave reasonably well), during the rest of the day. Wonder of wonders, it worked, although I have to admit that the last part of the day, after lunch, with an hour and 20 minutes left before they went home, was usually a lost cause. At one point, when I had the kids lined up in the hall to go outside, I ducked inside to get a ball, leaving the kids unsupervised for a couple of seconds. Just then, the principal came in. Although she politely reprimanded me for leaving the kids unattended, she also said that I had created a “major miracle,” referring to the kids. They were lined up like soldiers.

As the due date for report cards came, I was informed by the teacher in the next classroom that I was required to send home “unsatisfactory notices” to those parents whose kids were going to get less than satisfactory grades on their report cards (say, Ds and Fs). Since fully a third of the kids were reading on the second grade level, I sent home a lot of these notices, which include requests that the parents come in for conferences with the teacher. To my surprise, most of the parents showed up and, even more to my surprise, they seemed to like me. They had noticed, they told me, that the kids were excited about school (I think they were calling each other up to talk over their stories about serial killers), and assured me that I was doing a good job. I recently ran into the mother of one of the boys I had that semester. He was in college somewhere and doing well, and they both remember, she insisted, what a great teacher I was.

There was one woman, however, who stormed into the classroom and started cursing me out. She was white and rather well-dressed, as if she had come from an office job. She was the mother of the one Anglo kid in the class, whose reading skills were very poor and who seemed, overall, to be very

demoralized about school and his life in general; nobody wanted to write stories with him and his efforts usually amounted to about three or four feebly scribbled lines. When I assured her that I was new at the school and was only trying to help her son, she apologized and then began a tirade against the principal and the entire school. She knew her kid was way behind, but why was she always being told that he didn’t qualify for any special help; he wasn’t learning-disabled and there was no after school tutorial program. She couldn’t believe that her son was the only kid in the school like this and that nothing was being done to help them. She hated the previous teacher. When she had calmed down, she pleaded with me: would I agree to tutor her son on a private basis? After demurring (I was already exhausted and didn’t want to tie up any time over the weekend), I agreed to tutor her boy at their home for an hour every Saturday.

### Overlooking the Basics

What I learned from this was instructive. To find out more about the boy’s reading skills (one doesn’t get much of a chance to work one-on-one with 34 kids in a class), I had him pick out one of his books and read it to me. He read a few words until he came to one he didn’t know. He then just took a wild guess, usually coming up with a word that started with the same letter as the one he saw on the page but no others. He made no attempt to sound out the whole word, letter by letter. I showed him how to do this, explaining, however, that in English the letters do not always sound the same, and had him try it a few times. If he got the word, we went on, but if he didn’t, I eventually told him the word and then had him proceed with his reading. We did this every Saturday morning for about an hour and a half, and eventually, his reading began to improve. What I realized from this was: (1) nobody had specifically taught the kids how to sound out words; and (2) mostly what the poorer readers needed was a lot more practice reading. As I was to find out later on in my teaching career, with all the emphasis placed on the latest, supposedly scientifically-demonstrated methods of teaching reading, the basics were being overlooked. As a result, a lot of kids were either not learning to read well or were not learning to read at all.

I also learned something about the boy and his mother’s situation. From what his mother told me, she and her husband had

been high livers who had gotten into a car accident while high on an illicit substance; someone was either seriously hurt or killed. As punishment, her driver's license had been revoked and she lost custody of her boy. He wound up living with his grandparents, while his mother and father had gotten divorced. After she had stayed clean for several years, her son was allowed to live with her, although she still was not allowed to drive. They lived in a very small but immaculate apartment over a garage behind a house, from which vantage point, she told me, she could see one of the neighbors dealing drugs. Although the boy was now living with his mom, he apparently had found the entire experience very demoralizing and had fallen behind in school. After the boy graduated, I occasionally ran into his mother in the local shopping mall. She thanked me for what I had done for her son and assured me that he was doing a lot better. "You're a good guy, Mr. Tabor," she said.

Even after I got the class somewhat under control, two boys, sixth-graders, continued to give me trouble. One of them, the leader of the two, had extremely poor reading and writing skills. He could barely read the second-grade reader, and as far as his writing was concerned, I couldn't figure out what he was trying to say. I later found out his story. He had not yet learned to read well when, in the first or second grade, he and his family had moved back to Mexico. There, he attended school but fell further behind because his reading skills in Spanish were worse than those in English. After several years, they returned to United States, where his education (if it can be called that), continued. Academically a disaster, he had real leadership skills, and his chief pleasure in life was organizing mayhem in the class.

His sidekick was only a touch more academically proficient than he was. This boy's father, I was told by the woman in charge of the lunch tickets at our school who knew many of the families in the community, was an alcoholic who regularly beat the boy. Apparently, the kid needed a father-figure and went along with whatever his pal cooked up. When they got too out of hand, I sent them to another classroom, whose teacher had agreed to provide this service for me.

I eventually got them under control, although they were never angels. The breakthrough came from an opportunity they themselves offered to me. We were out doing PE (either

playing kickball or running relay races), when one of the boys, the leader, challenged me to a race. I laughed and replied "You want to race me?" But inside I wasn't so cocky. Since it had been some time since I had sprinted (in addition, I was in my late forties), I suggested we race at the end of the week. I went home and did a few squats with my barbell and practiced a few starts outside. When it came time to race, I suggested we run to the fence dividing the primary yard from the upper-grade yard and back, a total distance of about 150 yards: in case I fell behind at the start, I wanted to have space to catch up. As it turned out, this wasn't necessary. I was ahead after 10 yards and ran the rest of the distance looking over my shoulder and laughing at them. They were a lot better behaved after that.



I LA School Supt. Roy Romer (Slobodan Dimitrov/LA Weekly)

did have a serious run-in with one of the boys, the follower of the two, also during PE. We were choosing sides for a kickball game and the boy refused to be on the same team as one of the less popular girls in the class. Although she was sweet, she was not very attractive or academically capable. What

really did her in was the discovery one day by the nurse of lice “nits” in her hair. (This occasionally happens at our school.) So, when it looked like this boy was going to wind up on the same team as the poor girl, he refused. I told him either to be on the team or to sit down and not play at all. He said “no,” directly defying me in front of the other kids, and started crying. I told him again to join his team or sit down (I wasn’t going to put him on the other team); if he didn’t, I was going to send him to the principal’s office. He again refused and off he went. (I very rarely sent a kid to the office, since it usually didn’t do any good, but did piss off the kid’s parents, who were often obligated to come to school for a conference.) At the end of the day, I saw the boy in the school yard as I left the school, certain he hated my guts. He waved and called out cheerfully, “Hi, Mr. Tabor. Bye, Mr. Tabor.” For needy kids, I guess some kind of attention is better than none at all (certainly better than a beating). Several years later, I saw this boy doing gardening work in an upscale house in a nearby neighborhood, obviously working in his father’s business. He was very friendly. The other boy, the one with leadership skills, wound up being the leader of a local gang and had gotten shot in the hand. A real shame. He was a very bright kid whose life circumstances, particularly, his education, didn’t point to much of a future.

I realized that the kids liked me (this was, and still is, important to me) when, by a bureaucratic mix-up, I almost lost the job. After working as a week-by-week sub, I had been offered a contract by the school. This meant being processed again, which in turn required me to submit my college transcripts (again) to the district. Although one school, which I attended for two years, sends official transcripts directly to former students, the other will only send official transcripts directly to the institution that needs to see them, in my case the LAUSD. Without going into details, my transcripts had gotten lost in the mail and someone downtown at LAUSD headquarters had decided to replace me with another teacher, rather than wait until the mess was straightened out. My soon-to-be former students were very upset; they bought me gifts and cried. On the day the new teacher was to start, my principal (I will be eternally grateful to her for this), advised me to show up for work anyway. “You never know what will happen,” she said. Sure enough, it rained heavily that day and my intended replace-

ment never showed up. In the meantime, the head of the official region our school was located in (we now have sub-districts, after a stint with “clusters”), returned from vacation and, irate at district headquarters for going behind her back, insisted I be hired as the regular teacher. The next day, the crisis over, the kids were back to their usual antics.

I did manage to survive the semester without too many mishaps. At graduation, the kids were happy and the parents told me how pleased they were at their children’s progress. One couple even thanked me for giving their kids (there were two of them, a girl in the fifth grade and a boy in the sixth), Fs on their report cards. They were having trouble motivating them and hoped this might help. (Back in the days of “social promotion,” when every student was passed on to the next grade whether or not he/she had mastered the curriculum, giving Fs wasn’t considered acceptable, presumably because this might hurt the child’s self-esteem.) The assistant principal, who wasn’t a fan of the new methods or the indulgent platitudes that went with them, even complimented me on my courage. Who needed courage? The parents wanted their kids to be educated and were glad somebody seemed concerned enough to try to help them.

## Teacher Shortage Remains

My main point in relating these stories is to illustrate the reality of a school system operating under the burden of a chronic shortage of teachers. Large numbers of children spend years with teachers who are inexperienced, incompetent and in some cases downright unfit for the job. Even when the individual is committed to being a teacher and has the raw abilities to do a good job, his/her inexperience takes its toll on the kids; they suffer inferior instruction while the teacher is learning the ropes. Although it is easy and convenient to blame the teachers, the culpability lies elsewhere: with the overall conditions in the school system and with those, the bureaucrats, politicians and corporate leaders, taken collectively, who are responsible for this mess. It is also easy (and convenient) to forget the large numbers of capable-to-highly gifted teachers and administrators who are killing themselves to make the system work, in spite of the obstacles they face, including the “leadership” they are obligated to follow.



There is an additional effect of the teacher shortage that in a way sums up everything I've tried to portray here. This is the fact that as long as there is such a shortage, there is no incentive to get rid of poor teachers. (I am not now talking about teachers who are still gaining experience. I am referring to those who, despite years of working in the schools, do not know how to manage and/or teach the kids very well.)

Admittedly, once a teacher has a regular teaching credential and has passed probation, it is very difficult to fire him/her. Yet, the bigger problem is that as long as there is a significant shortage of teachers, there is very little reason to do so. If a teacher can hold down a class with some semblance of order and prevent the kids from killing each other, it is better to have that person in the classroom, even if he/she is not teaching the kids very much. Why? Because even if (speaking from the administrators' point of view), you get rid of the individual, you have no reason to expect that the person you get to take his/her place will be any better. In fact, you have no reason to believe that you will be able to get anybody at all. If so, you might get saddled with a class that has no regular teacher. You will then try to arrange for a long-term substitute to take the spot, but you might not get one of those either. Instead, you may have to call in for a sub every day and hope that one gets out to your school. And if not, you will have to split up the class each day, sending some kids to one room, others to another, hoping that the teachers of those classes can come up with work for them to do. In short, if you do get rid of a poor teacher, you may wind up with a bigger headache.

The problem of the teacher shortage may be coming to a crisis in the state. According to an article in the August 6 *LA Times*, the U.S. Department of Education is accusing California of "skirting" the country's new education law. The so-called "No Child Left Behind" law, passed in 2001, requires teachers in every state to be "highly qualified," that is, fully credentialed, by the end of the 2005-06 school year. Teachers hired this year for schools in low-income neighborhoods must already be so designated. California, however, is defining "highly qualified" in such a way as to include teacher interns and those with emergency credentials. Yet, "if California follows the letter of the federal law, schools in low-income communities will be unable to hire enough teachers this fall, state officials said. That could push some

class sizes up to 50, 60 or more students, they said." Since that article appeared, the issue seems to have dropped out of sight. Perhaps the state and the federal government are working out a deal. Whatever happens, it will not solve the issue of the lack of teachers, a problem for which our country's political and economic elite, past and present, should be held accountable.

Despite the overall crisis, the situation at our school with respect to overcrowding and the shortage of teachers has improved somewhat in the past couple of years. There is now less turnover of teachers and fewer inexperienced and incompetent ones. I attribute this to several factors. One is that our overall enrollment has declined. The neighborhoods that our school serves have seen a substantial run-up in rents, so that many of our poorer residents have had to move. Many landlords have also evicted their so-called Section 8 tenants (those who get rent subsidies), further exacerbating the situation. With fewer kids attending the school, teachers who have left have not needed to be replaced. (There have also been fewer roving classes.) An additional factor has been that fact that teachers won a substantial salary increase, which, in the context of the collapse of the hi-tech boom of a few years ago, has made teaching more attractive. As I understand it, teacher turnover throughout the district has declined somewhat, but the overall teacher shortage, along with its negative consequences, remains.

In addition, while new teachers are still expected to swim or sink, that is, to survive their first few years with little or no outside help, they no longer have to invent their own curriculum. In contrast to a few years ago, all teachers are now required to follow highly structured, extremely detailed (the technical term is "scripted," meaning the teachers are supposed to read from the teacher's manual) programs in reading and math, whether or not these programs are designed and appropriate for the particular types of students each individual teacher is trying to teach. While this may be better than nothing, it is a typical example of the way the district and the educational bureaucracy as a whole deals with these issues, swinging from extreme to extreme, without finding and stopping at some reasonable point in between (indeed, without realizing that such a happy medium even exists).

The new approach flows from and reflects the current (but not publicly articulated) belief among our educational leaders that the problem with the system is the teachers. Hence the desire to come up with “teacher-proof” programs. The ideal is now the so-called “corporate” (or, as I prefer to call it, military) model of the schools: every teacher in the same grade doing the same lesson the same way on the same day throughout the district. (What a vision!)

### Progress in the LAUSD?

Despite the fact that conditions in the school system remain atrocious, Superintendent Roy Romer (former governor of Colorado and member of the Democratic National Committee), the LAUSD and the members of the Board of Education are bragging about their achievements. The chief evidence they cite is the rise of school children’s scores on the mandated state tests for four years in a row. If newspaper accounts accurately reflect our educational leaders’ claims, they are attributing this improvement primarily to the mandated reading and math programs and the corresponding teacher training they have implemented. Significantly absent from their analysis are two factors that I believe are much more important. The first is the reduction in class size (from 33 to 20) for grades k through 3. Interestingly, the rise in test scores tends to fall off after the fourth grade, while scores for middle and high school students have seen little increase or have remained flat. (Superintendent Romer insists that scores for middle and high school kids will go up as the kids now in elementary school reach those schools. Permit me to remain skeptical.) An additional factor behind the rise in test scores is the substantial salary increase won by the teachers which, as I’ve mentioned, in the context of the economic recession, has tended to stabilize the workforce.

There are other factors worth mentioning to explain the rise in test scores.

(1) Teachers are “teaching to the test,” that is, orienting their instruction to the kinds of questions and skills that they know, from previous tests, will be on the exams. I don’t criticize this; while kindergarten students don’t take state-mandated examinations (maybe they will in the future), I am required to give certain tests to my students, and I do my

best to prepare them. If “they” (our bosses) want test scores to go up, let’s get them to go up; besides some of the tested skills are legitimate.

(2) Teachers, certainly in kindergarten and first grade, are focusing on reading and math and downplaying or ignoring other subjects, such as science and social studies, let alone art, music and physical education. Speaking personally, I am doing a lot less art than I used to.

(3) Teachers are also pushing their kids harder, whether or not this is emotionally or developmentally in their best interests.

(4) In addition, students’ test taking skills are improving. This makes a big difference, since some of the kids have little or no idea how to perform well on exams. As one who has administered quite a few of these tests, I can vouch for this. Among other things, some kids don’t budget their time well and never finish sections of the test, while those kids who finish a portion early rarely go back to review their answers. (“You have ten minutes left, perhaps you might want to go back and review some of the problems.” “Nope.” “Are you sure all of your answers are correct?” “Yep.”)

(5) There has also been an end to the policy of social promotion. Up until recently, kids who were not performing “at grade level” or anywhere near it were promoted to the next grade. Leaving a child back, that is, “retaining” him/her, was deemed harmful to the child’s self-esteem, so that whatever might be gained by repeating a year would supposedly be lost because of its negative emotional impact on the kid. I personally pleaded with my principal more than a few times to have some of my kindergarteners repeat the year because they were woefully unprepared—academically, emotionally and developmentally—for first grade. I’ve had children arrive in my class, fresh from Mexico or Central America, with no English and no prior school experience, in March (my track’s school year ends in mid-May), and watch, helplessly, as they were promoted to first grade. Much more often than not, our principal refused my request: “There’s more instructional time in first grade” (kindergarteners come for half a day), she insisted. Although I’ve personally heard first grade teachers say that it’s not their job to teach the ABC’s and I’ve even mentioned this to the principal, my appeals were usually in

vain. This has now changed: retention is now “in,” although here, too, the new policy is limited because of lack of space. The principal is a convert to the new policy. She recently told me that some schools who have seen their API (Academic Performance Index, a school-wide average of test scores weighted, supposedly, to take the socio-economic level of the school’s student into consideration), go up substantially have achieved this through a militant policy of retention: any child not meeting all of the appropriate “benchmarks” is now automatically retained. The district even set up special classes, with 10 children in each class, for those kids required to repeat the second grade. Typically, due to the budget cuts, the past year the size of these classes was raised to 20.

Further undermining our leaders’ contention that the scripted programs and teacher training are the main factors behind the rise in test scores is the fact that scores were going up even before the programs and training were implemented. Equally significant, they don’t attempt to explain why test scores were so low before. Aside from the factors I’ve discussed, some of the problem may have resulted from the previous round of bureaucratic fads, including a poorly designed and even more poorly implemented stab at bilingual education and the attempt to mandate the use of “whole language” reading methods. (Whatever the merits of the original theory, by the time “whole language” got through the bureaucracy and hit the classroom, what it came down to was: “Don’t teach the kids the ABCs.”)

Given all this (and leaving aside whether test scores measure much beyond the ability to take tests), I’m not sure there’s as much to gloat about as our leaders think. Moreover, they may be undermining the very achievements they are bragging about. As I mentioned above, teaching assistants have been let go, class sizes have been increased, including in remedial classes, and essential services, have been cut, all because of the economic crisis, the state budget deficit and resultant budget cuts. One wonders, given our educational leaders’ failure to mention the class-size reduction and increase in teacher salaries as factors behind the rise in test scores, whether they aren’t planning to raise the class size in k through 3 and reduce teachers’ salaries. The threat to cut our health benefits, now in abeyance for one year, points to such a strategy.

Yet, while all this is happening, our leaders continue to set an example of intelligence, dedication and willingness to sacrifice for the common cause. While schools are suffering from budget cuts, Superintendent Romer and all the members of the board of education are each having new, private bathrooms built for them in the new LAUSD headquarters, which itself cost \$74.5 million to purchase and is estimated to require an additional \$60 million to renovate (*LA Times*, September 26, 2001), at the tune of \$80,000 apiece! Leaving aside the waste of money, what kind of example does this set for teachers, students, parents and everybody else working in or having anything to do with the school system, let alone struggling to make ends meet in a questionable economic climate? Are they corrupt, stupid, or some combination of the two? All I can say is, whatever it is that they’re going to be doing in those bathrooms, I sure hope they enjoy it.

## Conclusion



What I have tried to do in my modest essay is discuss the fact that the public education system, particularly in the large urban areas, has suffered from years of underfunding and neglect and to show concretely how this affects the education of the children. Of course, there are other problems afflicting our schools. As I’ve suggested, one of these is the role of the educational bureaucracy and the other members of the “educational establishment” that manages and purports to lead public education. This, along with the related issues of curriculum and teacher training, will be discussed in the next installment of this essay.