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## *Real School: a universal drama amid disparate experience*

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Variations on the phrase 'The American High School' adorn the titles of popular recent reports on reform (Boyer 1983, Cusick 1983, Powell *et al.* 1985, Sedlak *et al.* 1986, Sizer 1984), expressing a common belief that they address a single institution. American high schools are indeed alike, strikingly so in many important respects. But they are also very different in other important respects. Reformers have paid little attention to their differences; some ignore them, while others mention them almost reluctantly, hurrying on to describe what is common among schools. Still, the differences among schools are crucial to their daily practice and to their effects upon students, and so to reform. This paper addresses the interplay of similarity and difference in American high schools, regarding their similarity, rather than their difference, as problematic and in need of explanation.

### The data

The chapter arises out of a study of teachers' working lives undertaken at the National Center of Effective Secondary Schools. In that study we took a close look at a set of teachers in 'ordinary' or typical high schools spread across the social class spectrum. We chose eight schools in midwestern metropolitan areas. Six were public schools and two were Catholic. Of the six public schools, two were in high, two in middle, and two in low SES areas. One of the Catholic schools served a predominantly middle class clientele and the other a predominantly working class one. We chose schools varying in social class as sites to study teachers' work because previous research in sociology and anthropology suggests that differences in the social class of communities and student bodies have serious implications for the life of schools (e.g., Anyon 1981, Bowles and Gintis 1976, Connell 1982, Heath 1983, Lubeck, 1985, Weis 1985, Wilcox 1982, Willis 1977).

We visited each school in teams, spending more than two weeks, and a total of twenty or more person days in each school.<sup>1</sup> At each school, we followed diverse students through a school day, spent a whole school day with each of eight teachers, and interviewed those eight teachers in depth, as well as ten others more briefly. We also perused and collected a number of documents and statistics about each school. While our fieldwork in each school was too brief to be genuinely ethnographic, the strength of the design lay in its comparative potential. We attended classes and interviewed teachers in situations that were formally parallel across the eight diverse schools. We could see their differences in clear relief.

### The common script

We chose the sample of schools we did because we expected to find some important

differences among them. Our visits to the first schools quickly gave us dramatic evidence that our expectations were correct; participation in the varied schools provided us radically different experiences. The buildings varied from resembling a college campus, at suburban Maple Heights, to resembling a fortress, at low income, urban Charles Drew. The use of time varied from intent and taut to relatively relaxed. Maple Heights allowed students to go home for lunch or to roam its spacious lawns in small groups after eating, while the two low income urban schools, Grant and Drew, kept all but the main door locked and security guards at Drew checked students' picture identifications both at the door to the school and at the entrance to the lunch room. More important, the content and tone of classroom discourse varied widely, as did the style of interactions between students and teachers.

While this variation riveted our attention as we moved from school to school, the discourse of the reform movement – which the Center hoped to address – assumes commonality, even sameness, among schools. As we puzzled over the discrepancy between our diverse experiences and the reformers' assumption that schools are standard, we came to see that we were looking at different aspects of schools' lives. The reform movement emphasizes formal structure and technical procedures in schools. In these respects, the schools we saw were indeed very alike. The meaning of that structure and technology, the cultural assumptions of participants about their activities, and the place of the school in relation to the society and to children's life trajectories differed significantly among the schools we saw.

As we watched the schools in daily action, and talked with the actors who gave them life, it seemed that the schools were following a common script. The stages were roughly similar, though the scenery varied significantly. The roles were similarly defined and the outline of the plot was supposed to be the same. But the actors took great liberties with the play. They interpreted the motivations and purposes of the characters whose roles they took with striking variation. They changed their entrances and exits. Sometimes, they left before the last act. The outlines of the plot took on changing significance with the actors' varied interpretation of their roles. Directors had limited control over their actors; only a few were able to get the the actors to perform as an ensemble that would enact the director's conception of the play. Directors often had to make the best of the qualities the actors brought to their roles and to interpret the play consistently with the players' abilities and intentions.

Just the same the script was there, and the play was in some sense recognizable as the same play in all the schools. More important, the script was extremely important to some of the actors and some of the audiences. In fact, it was where the production was hardest to coordinate and perhaps least easily recognizable as the same play that was being produced at schools where action meshed more smoothly, that the school staffs were the most insistent that their production followed the script for 'The American High School', varying from others only in details.

We found similarities in our schools that paralleled those recently noted by several writers (e.g., Goodlad 1984, Sizer 1984). There was little variation in school schedule and all schools had long hallways with nearly identical classrooms lined up along them. Class size and teachers' normal assignment to meet five groups of students for instruction five times a week varied little. The scope and sequence of the curriculum differed only in detail from school to school, though the number of sections available in subjects like advanced foreign language or vocational education varied significantly. Students were expected to attend all their classes promptly every day. There were extracurricular activities after school, or occasionally during the last hour of the day.

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on standardized tests were far below average and where they were concentrated well above the median. Instruction was conducted primarily through lecture, recitation, discussion, and seatwork, with occasional use of student reports, filmstrips, movies, and videotapes.

Teachers had undifferentiated roles. Department chairs held a slight measure of authority and engaged in some co-ordinating activities. A few teachers were temporarily released from some portion of their teaching for a variety of special responsibilities, but these variations in routine were not permanent and conferred no formal special status, though they often brought informal prestige.

Despite these very strong similarities among the schools, there was variation in the appearance and style of the buildings, the strictness of enforcement of routines, and the relationships built among flesh and blood individuals on the staff and in the student body. The curriculum actually in use varied also. The content of classroom interactions, the questions asked on tests, students' written work, and the department of students in class varied widely from school to school even when classes used the same books.

### Community and student pressures for differences among schools

Differences among the schools arose in large part from differences in the communities surrounding them. The communities we studied varied markedly in the financial resources they gave schools and in the relationship between school and community. They also varied in the resources parents brought both to their relations with the school and to the task of assisting their children with education. These communities had developed differing visions of how the high schools should be run – within the parameters set by the common script – and of the place of a high school education in their children's life trajectories. The communities affected the schools most intimately as they shaped the students who entered their doors. Students' skills, their understanding of a high school education, and their vision of its place in their overall lives differed markedly between communities. The effects of the ties between the communities and schools in our project are discussed in detail in other papers (Metz, forthcoming, Hemmings and Metz, forthcoming).

Despite different resources and quite different ideas about the nature and uses of high school education, there was no evidence that any of the communities wanted or expected schools to depart from the basic common script for 'The American High School.'<sup>2</sup> This support for the common script may seem 'natural', but in fact it requires explanation. Why should people with such different backgrounds and experiences and such different ambitions for their children all expect and demand 'the same' high school education for them? Why do they do so even as they also exert pressures for interpretations of that 'standard' education that produce important differences in students' actual educational experiences?

The persistence of the common script seems most problematic when one looks inside the school at teachers and students engaged in the common work demanded by the script. Except at the three schools with the most skilled, best-prepared students, large proportions of the students did poorly academically, including failing courses. At Drew, the school in the poorest neighborhood, the dropout rate was apparently over 50%; it approached 50% at Grant, the other school in a poor setting. Even at the two schools that had students from steadily employed blue collar and lower white collar families, the dropout rate was a worry to school officials and the failure rate substantial, though both were much lower than at the schools with students in poverty.

Furthermore, at all the schools where no more than half of the students were headed for college, students expressed alienation from the curriculum and from class and school

procedures in various subtle or blatant ways. The favored forms for expressing alienation from the schools' academic endeavors, and their severity and frequency, varied from school to school. Especially at the schools in the poor neighborhoods, students cut classes or cut school; at these schools there were chronic problems with severe tardiness. Once in class at these schools, students often carried on social conversations or read or wrote on unrelated projects, or sat limply staring, or put their heads down and slept. At the predominantly working class schools, where most students wanted to graduate but did not expect to go to college, some objected to assignments or quibbled with teachers over small issues; a few engaged in expressive interactions with peers designed for maximum disruption. In a few classes some students carried on a running guerrilla warfare, teasing and badgering teachers in various ways. Especially at one of these schools, students in the majority of classes had successfully negotiated with teachers for time in class to do 'homework' that became an open social hour. Students in tracked classes whose achievement was much higher or lower than average for their school tended to differ from their school in the direction of students in schools where their level of achievement was average.

### Teachers' responses to difficulties with the common script

Teachers' work consists of transforming the minds and perhaps the characters of their students. To succeed in their work they must, at a bare minimum, win the passive acquiescence of their students. Students' active co-operation will make the task far easier and the teachers' work more effective.

Consequently, students' expressions of distance and distaste for the academic undertaking created serious distress and frustration for their teachers. A few determined and skilled individuals were able to reduce or mitigate these patterns through imagination and force of character within the parameters of the common script. Some, equally dedicated, tried hard but were unable to do so. Some teachers simply blamed the difficulty of teaching on students; they considered those they worked with intellectually or morally deficient. They wished they had students 'like the old days' or they wished they taught in their idealized conception of a 'better' school: a magnet school, a suburban school, or a school in a different kind of suburb where families cared more about education. Many teachers seemed to use such blame to protect their own imperiled sense of craft. Even among teachers who did not reject students as unworthy, the overwhelming majority did not expect to tailor the institution or the learning to the students, but assumed that they must tailor the students to the institution.

Even where there was incontrovertible evidence that students were not learning well, both students and teachers were frustrated or alienated, and there was an evident lack of connection between students and standard structures and curricula, teachers did not respond by suggesting alternative strategies that would significantly change the common script. A few teachers did speculate about one or another possible change, but they did not seem fully to appreciate the systemic alterations their suggestions might imply.

Teachers did make informal, *de facto* adjustments in the script, however. Much of the difference between the schools in daily curriculum-in-use, in the sense of time, and in relationships resulted from adjustments in the common script that students and teachers created together through informal processes. Sometimes these were conscious adjustments on teachers' part. For example, teachers at one predominantly blue collar school said repeatedly that they had 'to be realistic'. They made the subject matter simpler and more practical, without departing altogether from the formal curriculum embodied in the common script.

Sometimes adjustments were gradual and formally unrecognized. For example, at some schools, teachers (and administrators) felt forced to put up with tardiness and truancy, as long as these stayed within reasonable limits, because they were too rampant to control. Some teachers simply sought strategies that would win students' attention to the lesson for at least for part of the class hour.

In short, teachers were forced to adjust to their students, to change school practices to accommodate students' unwillingness to meet certain demands (e.g., for significant homework) or abide by certain procedures (e.g., consistent prompt appearance in class). They did in fact change the system to meet the students. But they did not, for the most part, do it in formal ways and they did not attempt to challenge the common script. For example, they did not argue for alternative pedagogical approaches, but simply 'watered down' the common curriculum or made it 'more practical' or just 'did the best I can to cover the material'. They did not alter expectations for prompt class attendance; they just started getting the major business of the class going more and more slowly.

If one looks at students' learning simply as a technical problem, it is quite remarkable to see situations where a technical process (or the social structure which frames it) is clearly not effective on a massive scale, but no one in the organization calls for developing alternative technical or structural approaches. Should a company that produced inanimate objects have such difficulties in accomplishing its desired results – if, for example, bicycle wheels produced in a factory were not straight and strong – the company would soon be out of business unless it changed its procedures.

### **The persistence of the common script as a reflection of societal thought and values**

While it is easy to blame teachers and administrators for being myopic in the production of this state of affairs, it is a grave mistake to do so. On the contrary, school staffs stand squarely in the mainstream of American educational thought in their reluctance to consider alternatives to the common script.

The schools we saw were typical of schools described throughout the literature, in their adherence to the common script, in students' alienation and distance from it in all but schools for the able and ambitious, and in teachers' informal adjustments that accommodated students without altering the script or supporting learning (Boyer 1983, Cusick 1983, McNeil 1986, Powell *et al.* 1985, Sedlak *et al.* 1986, Sizer 1984).

There are reasons for students' resistance to school that, in part, lie beyond the schools' control. There is by now a large literature on the ways that mainstream schools require minority children to learn through cultural patterns that are initially unfamiliar and often distasteful. Insistence on these patterns not only creates cognitive problems – that many can and do overcome – but problems of identity, of choice between home and school worlds. This choice leads many minority students intentionally to distance themselves from the school (Erickson 1987, Fordham 1988).

At the high school level minorities experience a second set of problems. John Ogbu (1978, 1987) has argued that minorities do not learn well because the economic experience of the adults they see around them has taught them that credentials do not yield the rewards for minorities that they do for majority students. They perceive a 'job ceiling' that limits the rewards that can be gained from cooperation with the schools. Recently, he has noted that minority students who have just immigrated to this country often do not perceive these limitations, while for others even low end American jobs constitute improvements over their experience in their home countries. These immigrant students (Ogbu 1987) do better in school than do native minority students.

Native minority students may often resist the common script of high school because embracing it signifies betrayal of the peer group (Fordham and Ogbu 1986) and of ethnic identity, on the one hand, and promises little tangible reward, on the other. It is difficult for teachers, especially individual teachers, to break through such patterns of resistance.

Similar problems exist in the apparently increasing resistance of blue collar white students to the schools and the common script. A number of external social processes have undercut the claims to authority of the schools and their individual staff members over the last twenty years (Hurn 1985). Probably more important, as Sedlak and his colleagues (1986) argue, a high school diploma has decreasing value for young people hoping to use it as their major ticket to a place in the labor market. Children of blue collar and even lower white collar families have been watching the economic prospects of adults and older siblings in their communities contract during the last ten years. For these students, the most minimal cooperation with the school needed to obtain a diploma often seems a fair bargain for the minimal benefits bestowed by its receipt.

In short, students' alienation from schooling has significant roots outside the schools that teachers and administrators can do little about. Nonetheless, in all of our schools there were some students making a visible effort to co-operate and do well. In all there were some teachers who were quite successful in drawing large parts of their classes into the academic enterprise, at least during class time. And some schools succeeded better than others at this task, despite roughly equivalent student bodies.

Students' resistance to school, then, must be understood as the result of a mixture of influences. A very important part of that mixture lies in economic and social processes beyond the schools' control – though not beyond the reach of intentional social change. Still, school practice and the practice of individual teachers, as well as the perspectives of individual students, also have important effects.

Given the erosion of extrinsic rewards for schooling that increasing numbers of blue collar white students, as well as minority students, are experiencing, it would seem logical to try to increase the intrinsic rewards of schooling. Since teachers are most aware of the students' resistance to the common script, why are teachers not pushing for education that will use their students' interests, experiences, and intellectual strengths to draw them into the enterprise? Why do they not press for a more flexible, adaptable, and less monotonous rhythm of activity?

One important reason is that teachers work within larger organizations that mandate much of the common script in non-negotiable terms. In most of our schools teachers had curriculum guides that outlined their formal curriculum, though they might be able to make a fairly broad range of choices within a given framework. The schedule of the school day was decided by the central district administration. State laws and Carnegie units for college admissions froze the larger outlines of the formal curriculum even beyond the district level. Architecture and union contracts shaped class size. In most cases district policy determined homogeneous or heterogeneous ability grouping. In other words, teachers were hemmed in by state laws, district directives, union contracts, and college admissions pressures – as well as societal expectations – all of which presumed or required that they follow the common script.

We have, then, to look beyond individual schools or the occupations of teaching and school administration to find the most important sources for the common script. It has deep historical roots. Several historical works (e.g., Callahan 1962, Katz 1971, and Tyack 1974) have traced the development of the forms we take as 'natural' today. They stress the dominance of the factory model of organization at the time that compulsory schooling was being taken seriously, so that schools were increasing in number and public saliency, and

being given what was to become their common form. Managers and bosses expected to have almost total control over subordinates. Schools were a mechanism for quick Americanization of diverse immigrants and efficient training of a labor force, most of whom were headed for menial jobs where bosses and managers intended to be the brains while they were simply hands. Such a system was not designed to be responsive to individual or cultural diversity. If it failed to develop sophisticated literacy and numeracy in poorer children or those who were culturally different, then they simply would be channeled into work where sophisticated skills were not required or even desired. The common script is, in some ways, a historical residue.

Dávid Cohen (1987) has recently argued that the roots of the common script are historically deeper yet; they go far into European history. He focuses on schools' attachment to teaching through a corpus of revered written works and through telling. Western society learned to revere the few surviving written works of earlier great civilizations through the years of the middle ages when a few precious copies of these works were carefully preserved and laboriously copied. Protestant attachment to the Bible furthered this attitude. At the same time, he says, folk patterns of informal teaching in everyday life consist in telling, in instruction through didactic means. When the schools resist innovations that would make children more active learners or adjust the curriculum to the child, they are only following deeply engrained cultural patterns of revering great books and of instruction by lecture.

While history may have shaped the form of the common script, it is important to seek the reasons that it is so widely embraced by contemporary actors. If the common script has not been able to produce good results with large proportions of students in recent years, it would seem reasonable to try altering the script. It requires explanation that neither teachers, nor other education professionals, nor policymakers, nor parent groups often consider such a possibility. Why, then, is the common script so persistent?

#### **The common script as 'Real School': a reassuring ritual for participants and audience**

The common script serves symbolic purposes as much or more than the technical purposes for which it was overtly designed. It does so, first, for the teachers, students, and parents in the schools, especially those where students do not achieve well, and, second, separately, for the public at large, especially for the more powerful and prosperous groups whose own children generally experience the schools as technically effective. In this section, I will show how the common script makes all schools appear 'real' to those who participate in them, even when they have great difficulty fulfilling their technical mission. In the next section, I will show how the standardization implied by all schools' adherence to a common script covers obvious inequities between schools in privileged and deprived areas and so allows us all, especially the privileged, to maintain our belief that American education offers equality of opportunity.

The symbolic importance of the common script for participants in schools where it is technically ineffective first became clear to us, as we puzzled over the apparent contradictions of life at Charles Drew High School, the one of our schools serving the most deprived and depressed area. Charles Drew's neighborhood is desperately poor and has been all black for a quarter century. The neighborhood is considered dangerous for students to move through, at least after dark, and it is full of all the classic social ills associated with urban poverty. While we were there we heard about deviance in the area – gangs, drugs, robbery, and assault – and about poverty and its associated ills – welfare, early pregnancy, house fires, and constant residential mobility.

However, Charles Drew is not a typical urban school. It has a predominantly black faculty and a completely black administrative team. It has a large stable core among both teachers and administrators. There is both respect and connection between many members of this staff and the community. Despite residential mobility, families stay within the area. One assistant principal knew large proportions of the families; he had taught many students' parents and knew or had even taught their grandparents. Teachers were expected to get to know the parents of their homeroom students and to establish a continuing relationship with them. Many teachers took this responsibility seriously and did develop collaborative relationships with these parents. Administrators and some teachers spoke of 'the community' respectfully and with some knowledge.

The school had a core of administrators and teachers who were trying hard to make Charles Drew a viable high school that would assist its students to develop a solid academic background and to move on to steady jobs or to higher education. But Charles Drew struck us as deeply contradictory. It was in many ways far more relaxed than any of our other schools, especially in the sense of time. Even though, by district decree, there were more periods in a day than in our other schools, so that each period was only forty minutes long, students trickled in through the first five to ten minutes of class. A few were up to twenty minutes late. Despite the presence of supervising teachers and security guards, there was a constant flow of traffic in the halls. Students skipped classes as well as coming late. The principal declared an amnesty day for truant students while we were visiting the school near Thanksgiving. Supposedly students who had been systematically skipping a class could return without penalty.

These patterns were adjustments the school made to its student body. With a dropout rate of around 50 %, one of the school's main problems was trying to keep students from severing ties completely. Administrators insisted that teachers accept tardy students in their classes, lest tardy students who missed class fall so far behind that they ceased to come at all. Similarly, they asked teachers to give a second chance to students who had given up on a class if they would return under the amnesty provision.

The school also adjusted to students' low skills. Nearly 60 % of the sophomores who took the Iowa Test of Achievement scored in the bottom quartile, compared to a national sample, in both reading and mathematics. This figure understates the problem, since some of the weakest students dropped out before reaching the sophomore year. Consequently, many teachers spent at least part of their time instructing students in skills and material that were far more basic than those the title of a course would suggest - although they also presented material that did indeed fit the traditional high school course labels. Teachers varied in the mix of their compromise. Most teachers seemed to present some material on the level of the course title and some that was remedial. Sometimes these adjustments consisted in class meetings that reflected titles, but written work that was simpler.

On the other hand, the formal curriculum of the school went to the other extreme. The principal had raised course requirements above district minima. Students had to take four years of English, four of mathematics, four of science and three of social studies to graduate. Furthermore, there were no easy electives to fill out these requirements. For example, students progressed from freshmen English through American literature to English literature and then to a senior class in composition and world literature. In that senior class they read, among other works, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Dante's *Inferno*. In science they moved from general science, to biology, to chemistry, to physics. As a consequence of these requirements, the school's vocational education program shriveled and nearly disappeared.

These contradictions were bridged by allowing students to progress to physics after taking, but not necessarily passing, biology and chemistry and without a requirement that



they pass geometry and advanced algebra. The physics teachers taught fundamental measurement skills, and one said that she hoped to complete mechanics with students having a solid grasp of it by the end of the year but might get no further. Teachers at other schools told me they would complete mechanics before Christmas. In senior English, we saw students practising and struggling with the elementary forms and skills of a business letter, even though they would be reading Dante's *Inferno* later.

In short, the school's life was shot through with disjunction and contradiction. A formal curriculum as demanding as that in our highest SES schools, including texts and primary readings that were just as difficult, was contradicted by student skills and written work that were infinitely weaker. In junior and senior classes serving the half of the students who would not drop out, there was also more discussion than was common in the other low and middle SES schools. Some students seemed to us to perform well, though some teachers cut off or failed to build on what we thought were perceptive comments. But students' written work did not come near to matching this oral performance. There was a similar disjunction between the formal standard requirements for use of time and space and the casual sense of time and large numbers of students moving about the school outside classrooms during class hours.

We came away from this school with a sense that the staff were putting enormous energy into creating a situation where every one could go through the actions that indicated that they were teachers and students in a real high school. It was here that we began to see the dramaturgical qualities of high school life. We felt that we were witnessing a play. The title was 'Real School'. Though there was tremendous social energy invested in the production, its contradictions gave it a fictional quality. It became clear that the participants were the audience as much as were we, or parents, or central office supervisors. There was nothing cynical about this production - though some teachers, played their parts lacksadaisically or with ironic distance.

In the stressed circumstances that this school faced, dealing with a student body most of whom did not have academic skills adequate for high school work, and most of whom were distracted by turmoil in the community and their families, it became important to create a social drama that assured all participants that they were teaching and learning in a Real School. They also needed socially viable signs that they were Real Teachers and Real Students.

It is helpful in understanding what was happening at Drew to think of Real School as a ritual, rich with symbols of participation in cultured society and in access to opportunity. Teaching Dante, Huxley and physical mechanics to every graduating senior assured both teachers and students that they were participating in a high school that was worthy of the appellation. By making sure that every graduating senior had a rigorous academic course of study on his or her transcript, Drew's administrators made a statement that Charles Drew offered as good an education as the best suburb, and that its graduates were fit to compete with graduates of such institutions. Participating in the classroom actions that were part of this ritual, discussing novels by Steinbeck or the principles of the Enlightenment, assured teachers as well as students that they were doing Real Teaching and Real Learning. Participation itself engaged them both in actions that assured them that this was really a school and that it was a Real School - thus making them Real Teachers and Real Students.

As Nancy Lesko (1986) has pointed out in discussing rituals in a Catholic school, ritual has a chance through the medium of participation, which is less linear than discourse, to heal contradiction. Charles Drew's many problems made it difficult for it to run a standard high school program without incurring a host of contradictions. By emphasizing school practices redolent with the symbolism of the best academic schooling and by instituting higher

graduation requirements than the system expected, Charles Drew set high sights for both its students and its teachers and reassured them that despite their daily struggles to teach and to have a hope that high school could benefit them as students, the school was offering as genuine an education as that in the best suburban schools. Participation in the daily rhythms of a school, even if raggedly performed, handling and discussing difficult books, even if not writing about them in complex ways, reassured teachers and students that they were keeping up and gave them feelings of participating in a common drama played out in similar classrooms throughout the metropolitan area and the country.

The lessons that were so vivid at Drew seem transferable to the less dramatic productions at the other school in a poor area and to the two schools in our sample in areas that were economically solid but predominantly blue collar. Teachers doggedly maintained the patterns of Real School despite various adjustments to deal with their students' alienation. By following through with the ritual of Real School, teachers could feel they had taught, whether or not students learned. It seemed that it was at Drew and at Ulysses S. Grant, the other low income school, that the symbols and ritual of Real School were more underscored. It was at these schools that the status of the school and its teachers and students as Real was most in doubt, and therefore needed the most reaffirmation.

At Grant the affirmation that it was a Real School took quite a different form from that at Drew, however. The mostly white faculty of Grant, who had seen the school change to a majority black school with a progressively poorer, more depressed, less skilled student body, tried to preserve their sense that they were running a Real School by 'maintaining standards'. That meant assigning some difficult work, but it especially meant giving low grades if students did not come up to teachers' ideas of a national standard of performance. The failure rate at Grant was very high. When the principal, under orders from the central office to do something about it, published a list of the average grade point given by each teacher, it was teachers with the highest, rather than the lowest, grade point averages who told us the list had led them to think they might be out of line and should adjust their grading practices. We also heard teachers criticizing and dismissing other teachers as lacking integrity because they thought those teachers gave too high grades. By demanding work from students that 'maintained standards' teachers could thus show that they, at least, were Real Teachers, even if most students were not Real Students.

### Real School as a symbol of equity

The symbols and ritual of Real School are important not only for the immediate school communities, but also for a regional, state, and national audience. These audiences want to be able to assume that all schools follow a common template and can be said to be offering the same, commonly understood and commonly valued, high school education.<sup>3</sup> In the current rhetoric of the national reform movement and in the rhetoric of many local and regional commissions, it is axiomatic that high schools should be the same across communities. The reasons for this are so much taken for granted as to be little discussed, but preparation of a capable labor force and equity are the main reasons given where any become explicit.

In the United States we say we do not believe in passing privilege from parent to child; rather we expect individuals to earn favoured slots in society through talent and hard work. Equality of opportunity, mostly through education, is a central tenet of our social and economic system. The schools have been given the task of judging new citizens' talent and diligence. Consequently, it is important to our national sense of a social system that is fairly ordered that all children have an equal opportunity through education. If we are to say that

success in education is a fair and just criterion by which to award each child a slot in an adult occupational hierarchy based upon individual merit, then the poorest child must have access to as good an education as the richest.

How, then, to guarantee an equal education? By guaranteeing the same education. State legislatures and large school districts standardize in the name of equity. The reform reports, with their bland references to 'The American High School', reflect a strong public consensus on the importance of offering a standard high school experience to all American children. The common script and its enactment with symbols and rituals of Real School in all high schools gives a skeletal reality to the claim of equity through sameness.

But societal perceptions here bear some scrutiny. Just as the rituals of Real School create more social reassurance than technical substance in the daily life of some schools, so do they in the regional and national life of the society. Although the schools we studied served communities that differed widely in privilege and power, since all followed the common script they were similar in most formal respects: in social structure, in the use of time and space, in grouping of students and even in the formal curriculum. But they were very different in one formal respect. They had very different distributions of measures of student achievement. Grades, nationally standardized test scores, dropout rates, and rates of college attendance all varied significantly between schools and all were correlated with the socioeconomic status of the community.

Schools not only teach the young the content of the curriculum and some of the social graces required to be a member in good standing of a school community, they also sort young people into groups labeled as barely employable, possessing moderate skill, capable of much further development, or showing extreme promise. The public schools rank the students who emerge from their doors after thirteen years in ways which are fateful for those young people's work, their economic fortunes, and their status among other members of society.

Imagine what would happen if, with the class of 1993 that enters high school this fall, the goal that educators and reformers officially seek were actually accomplished. All students would become top performers. All of them would make perfect scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, not to mention having perfect A records throughout their schooling. Chaos would ensue. Colleges would not have room for all, but would have little ground on which to accept some and reject others. Employers looking for secretaries, retail salespersons, waiters, bus drivers, and factory workers would have jobs unfilled as every student considered such work beneath his or her accomplishments.

As long as education is used to rank young people and sort them into occupational futures that differ substantially in the money, status, power, and intrinsic rewards they can yield, good education, or students' success at education, must remain a scarce commodity. Those who do succeed have less competition for access to attractive occupations, if large numbers of others do not. Families with the resources to affect the quality of their children's education have strong motivation both to provide a superior education to their children and to keep access to such a superior education limited, so that their children will face less challenge from others.

Consequently, an unspoken principle that opposes equality of opportunity through standardization of education is also at work. The public perceives schools to be in practice very *unequal*. Middle class parents will make considerable sacrifices to locate their children in schools they perceive to be better than others. Communities of parents with the economic and political means to do so will construct schools with special resources for their own children and will keep access to them exclusive. The social class and race of peers is often used by parents as a rough indicator of school quality.

Separate suburban school districts facilitate residents' ability to create superior schools based on selected peers, generous material resources, and teaching positions that attract many applicants from which to choose. Ordinances requiring certain sizes for lots, or only single occupancy housing, can keep out lower income families. Fair Housing groups across the country document the continued practice of racial steering by real estate agents; it can be used to keep many suburban communities all or mostly white. These districts can take advantage of their higher tax base to add the amenities of higher salaries for teachers, smaller class sizes, and richer stores of materials to their 'standard' schools.

The six public schools we studied, although chosen to be ordinary and not including any really elite schools, provide eloquent testimony to the differences in public education that economic and racial housing segregation create in this country. In the communities they served, students received very different amounts of economic and educational resources from their parents and enjoyed very different levels of community safety and support. Students from different communities arrived at high school with visibly different skills, attitudes, and future plans. Different levels of funding available from local tax bases were visible in the schools' architecture, the nonteaching duties expected of their faculties, their extracurricular activities, and their supplies. Not only parents and students but school staff entertained very different visions of students' futures; these visions shaped the relationships of staff and students and the curricula-in-use (Hemmings and Metz, forthcoming; Metz, forthcoming). The differences among these schools remind us that more is hidden than revealed when one speaks in a single phrase of 'The American High School'.

Political scientist Murray Edelman (1977), argued that our political life is shot through with contradictory ideas that the public entertains simultaneously, but in alternation, so that no sense of inconsistency troubles our individual or collective consciousness. We perceive each side of the contradiction as it suits the context, or our social purposes and self-interests. In this way, Americans seem to live with a contradiction between officially equal education based on the common script for the drama of Real School, on the one hand, and tremendous variety in the quality and content of education resulting from schools' ties to socially and racially segregated communities, on the other. Middle class parents make sacrifices to buy houses where schools are supposed to be 'better' and communities strongly resist moves for school consolidation with neighboring communities, let alone proposals to desegregate schools or to introduce low income housing into suburbs. Despite continuous strenuous efforts to place children in superior schools and to preserve their exclusiveness, we rarely see, let alone openly acknowledge, the contradiction between these practices and equality of opportunity through the standardization of educational patterns.

Society's blindness to this contradiction serves the interests of the well-educated middle class. Children in schools with better prepared peers, which are attractive to better prepared teachers, have a considerable advantage in competition with the other products of America's supposedly standard and equal public schools. But middle class leaders feel no inconsistency in claiming that the young of the society are rewarded according to merit, even while they take care to place their own individual children in contexts that foster merit much more actively than those to which other children find themselves consigned.

The formal regulations and informal expectations that create the common script for high schools, and that lead school staffs to use that script to create some form of a Real School, reinforce the apparent equity of American education. The common script for a Real School thus becomes a guarantor of equity across schools. It has important symbolic value in this way to an outside audience of citizens and educational policymakers, as well as to participants. Thus not only do the staffs and parents of Drew and of Grant want to be reassured that these are Real Schools; so also do district administrators, state legislators, and leading citizens with an interest in educational equity - apparent or real.

### Conclusion

The common script for high school practice with its standard social structure, technical routines, and curricular scope and sequence has taken on a deep cultural value in this country. Its enactment assures both participants and outsiders of the equity of public schooling in the nation as a whole, while it certifies teachers and students who follow it as legitimate and worthy participants in the academic and social life of the broader society. To follow the script is to accomplish these ends more clearly and surely than it is to effect students' mastery of geometry, chemistry, grammar, and clear written expression. The script serves as a symbol of unity and equity in American education. Participation in the drama it sketches out is participation in a ritual that affirms membership in mainstream American life.

The symbolic and ritual aspects of the play called 'The American High School' are most visible where its routines are least technically effective in teaching geometry, chemistry and English. We reached our insights into the symbolic and ritual aspects of the common script as we puzzled over its persistence in schools where it was manifestly not technically effective. Our conviction of the importance of symbol and ritual in maintaining Real School grew as we considered the outpouring of writing already cited which indicates that in recent years, not only in our schools for the poor and the working class, but in most American public high schools for students not headed for selective colleges, the script is no more than minimally effective while student alienation and even student failure are endemic.

This is not to say that the common script that we have developed for high school structure and instruction is irrelevant to its technical ends. It works with reasonable technical effectiveness in schools where certain unstated preconditions are met. In our study, it worked where students came to high school with strong literacy, numeracy, and writing skills and a rudimentary knowledge of history and science. Its effective operation also seemed to depend on students' having realistic hopes of at least modestly successful economic futures to give them extrinsic motivation to compete with each other and to accept the staff's agenda as worthwhile. These conditions apply to the majority of students in a decreasing number of schools, in only two of the six public schools we visited, and only three of the total eight. In our study, they applied where the majority of students expected to attend colleges with admissions standards that would eliminate some high school graduates.

Persons who are in a position to influence district, state, and national agendas for education are usually persons who were reasonably successful in learning through the patterns of Real School themselves. Most will expect it to work well for their own children, and for most it will indeed do so. These children will come to school from home prepared with relevant skills and a cultural style matched to school discourse. They will be able to expect later rewards for effort and good performance. They will be in schools with peers with similar advantages who will allow teachers to proceed with planned agendas and will stimulate one another to competition.

Many persons in policy-making positions have little direct experience from which to reflect on schooling processes and student reactions other than their own schooling and that of their children. Many have had little or no firsthand experience with schools for blue collar, let alone really poor or minority children, and little or no firsthand experience with the families or the life experience of students in such schools. If their images of what happens inside these schools are not clear and their diagnosis for the students and the schools not well-suited to the realities of their lives, no one should be surprised. Lacking this knowledge, they can easily believe that poor and minority and even blue collar children do not learn well in school because of defects in their characters that can be remedied with stronger demands and coercive pressures, with a sterner imposition of Real School. They can see differences

between schools for poor children and the schools their own children attend in terms of talent and its lack, or effort and sloth, not in terms of advantages in their children's school experience. The system seems to them to offer equality of opportunity through the common script, while dramatic differences in patterns of student accomplishment between schools can be attributed to merit and fault in the individuals who attend them.

The lack of search for alternatives to the common script is a striking feature of current high school life – though some individual teachers do have successful alternative practices in place. But the many experiments that were tried in in the 1960s and '70s, producing at least some anecdotal evidence of success, were rarely visible in the schools we studied. Some were still remembered. For example ethnic studies classes, like Afro-American history at Drew, had been discontinued within recent memory at some schools. This lack of alternatives feeds on itself, as schools that offer unconventional courses or teachers who follow unconventional practices, become increasingly exceptional.

The pressures of the reform movement on the schools we studied strengthened the grip of Real School. Rising graduation requirements, increased standardized testing, and increased monitoring of drop-out rates and grading practices pushed teachers not only to use the script, but to follow it more slavishly and improvise less than they otherwise might have.

Once in place, the common script and the practice of Real School are reinforced by an interacting set of influences that overdetermine a conformist outcome. Broad societal support for these standardized patterns is frozen into bricks and mortar and into legal language. Thus school buildings, union contracts, and curriculum guides at the district level all support its patterns and are difficult to alter. Nationally distributed textbooks, college entrance requirements, state policies and laws, and nationally visible tests such as the ACT and college board achievement tests also play their parts.

These structural conditions and the less explicit expectations for curriculum and pedagogy that accompany them constrain teachers' practice directly but also set invisible boundaries around the content and style that teachers can easily claim to be legitimate. They significantly limit the range of teachers' ways of working. By legitimating, even certifying as required, a particular, apparently effective technical approach, they make teachers responsible both to use this approach and to make it successful. If teachers' practice is not then effective, the explanation seems evidently to lie in the actors within the school, in defects either in teachers' own performance of the script or in students' application of themselves to their parts. Teachers must blame themselves or blame the students – as will outsiders.

The institutionalization of Real School is embraced not only by powerful, well-educated families for whom it usually works well, but by powerless and minimally educated families and their children as well. Even where students are not learning well, parents can be very insistent on the importance of traditional, Real, patterns of schooling (Joffe 1977, Lubeck 1985, Ogbu 1974). Even the students who skip classes or refuse to do the written work when they come, may accept only the most traditional activities of Real School as authentic. James Herndon's (1967) description of his experience of teaching poor black children in junior high school in the late 1950s gives vivid evidence of this attitude. He describes how the children celebrated when a substitute teacher gave them grade level books, which they embraced, but never worked in. They wanted the books; so they could 'not-do' them, as Herndon says. In our terms, the books gave them symbolic status as Real Students, but were not something they wanted to involve themselves in learning.

Nonetheless, there is some technical wisdom in the reluctance of school administrators and parents alike to open the flood gates of experimentation in poor areas. Standard curricular materials cut down the amount of work that teachers must do to present students a lesson that has at least minimal substance. Experimentation with genuinely alternative

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educational processes in an attempt to elicit students' intrinsic interest requires much more work from teachers. Many, perhaps most teachers, are likely to find the rewards unequal to the efforts such teaching requires. A good deal of skill and imagination is probably also required to succeed in such efforts, and not all teachers possess these requisites. Curriculum guides and texts support the efforts of the less than gifted. Poor and minority parents, who have been exposed to the low end of American schooling, are well aware of the effects of despair or malfeasance among teachers; they have experienced some of them in action despite the protections of the common script. They are probably not wrong in seeing some guarantee and insurance of education for their children in the patterns and rituals of Real School.

Alternatives to Real School exist; they have a history that extends well back into the nineteenth century (Cremin 1961). Many have met with great success in particular situations. A few, like the Montessori method for young children, have become well-codified and have gained considerable social recognition. Especially at the elementary level, but also at the high school level, similar ideas keep being reinvented by teachers or founders of schools. They fade away, only to reappear again in a new guise a few years later in another place. But few have become fully institutionalized and widely recognized. Hence, when the obvious policy question 'What method is better than Real School?' is raised, there is no systematic loyal opposition waiting to take over control, no alternative 'one best system' (Tyack 1974) standing in the wings.

A reason for the lack of codified substitute plan for schooling system lies in the emphasis of many alternative patterns upon responsiveness to students' prior experience and current interests. Such educational approaches must be relatively unstructured; they will take variable forms in varied settings. They also do not lend themselves to mass production with textbooks, standardized tests, and comparable credentials - all features that mass schooling and mass credentialing of students demand.

A concatenation of influences thus support the dominance of Real School and make its patterns extremely difficult to dislodge, even when their technical effectiveness falters and is clearly vulnerable to criticism. However ironic it may be, many dispossessed parents and students, together with their teachers, see in Real School, a chance to maintain their pride and their sense of membership in the mainstream of American education, and so in American society. At the same time, precisely because Real School is not very effective in improving learning for more than small numbers of children from poor, minority or even established blue collar families, the relatively privileged educational decisionmakers who determine its content can support offering it to all students, and even intensifying its requirements for all, without fear that they will increase competition for the children of more educationally privileged parents like themselves. Offering the same education to all appears to be the essence of fairness - unless one has a sense of the interactive processes that transform the same structures and formal procedures into the diverse daily lives of schools in differing communities.

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### Notes

1. We visited the schools with two person teams for the teacher study. As principal investigator for the teacher study, I took the lead role in fieldwork at six of the eight schools. Nancy Lesko, a staff researcher at the National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, took the lead role in two of the eight schools. Graduate assistants Annette Hemmings and Alexander K. Tyree, Jr. alternated as the second team member; at two schools both were present, sharing the second role. In a co-ordinated but separate study, Richard Rossmiller and Jeffrey Jacobson worked with administrators in the same schools. I have not counted their eight days in the schools in our total.
2. Perhaps the only exception was parental support for flexible scheduling at the middle class Catholic high school. This departure from both the daily time schedule and the size of class groupings was the most significant difference in pattern at any of our schools – and could be called an actual rewriting of the script.
3. Meyer and Rowan (1978) made this point a decade ago.

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# Education Politics for the New Century

## The Twentieth Anniversary Yearbook of the Politics of Education Association

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and

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## Contents

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1	Education Politics for the New Century: introduction and overview <i>Margaret E. Goertz</i>	1
2	The disjunction of federal education policy and educational needs in the 1990s <i>David L. Clark and Terry A. Astuto</i>	11
3	Metropolitan high schools: income, race, and inequality <i>Gary Orfield and Lawrence Peskin</i>	27
4	The politics of school restructuring <i>Thomas B. Timar</i>	55
5	Real School: a universal drama amid disparate experiences <i>Mary Hayward Metz</i>	75
6	The politics of technology utilization <i>Philip K. Piele</i>	93
7	Business involvement in the 1990s <i>Kent McGuire</i>	107
8	Business leaders and the politics of school reform <i>Carol Axtell Ray and Rosalyn Arlin Mickelson</i>	119
9	Economic rationalism and the politics of education in Australia <i>Ian Birch and Don Smart</i>	137
10	Education Politics for the New Century: past issues and future directions <i>Douglas E. Mitchell</i>	153
	<i>Index</i>	169

- LESKO, N. (1986) 'Individualism and community: ritual discourse in a parochial high school', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 17, pp. 25-39.
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