

2015

School Smart

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Katherine Tozer
2015

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Abstract

In *School Smart*, I cap off my career as a student asking questions many do when childhood grows distant: What happened to us and how did we get here? Fed up with a society that gives individuals all the credit (or blame) for their education outcomes, the following essays crack open the stiff binding on “education stories” with hindsight, history, and a whole bunch of data. *School Smart* gives six examples of different women at different schools who put faces to murky concepts like “the achievement gap,” “the accountability movement,” and “special needs education.” To reform education, we need to understand our schools.

Introduction

At my high school graduation, nearly eight hundred graduates sat in folding chairs on the new turf football field in red and white robes. Our families baked on aluminum bleachers in the June sun and body heat of thousands of proud spectators. The school board, superintendent, and principal faced the students from their chairs on a raised platform where we would shake their hands and receive our certificates. Before the names were called, both the principal and the superintendent took the podium to ask the families not to cheer until the end. Their request seemed simple and the logic clear; cheers for one student would drown out the name of the next. Most of the families didn't cheer, but quite a few did, even though they knew security guards would escort them out of the stadium for it. I was one of the unlucky few who didn't get to hear their own name.

Sitting in the stands three years later for my sister's graduation, I got to see this action up close. My parents scoffed. People around me muttered, “How rude,” and “Seriously?” in polite whispers under their breath. I knew different cultures tried to

coexist within my school; I knew mine aligned most closely with the school's culture; I knew these white parents' reactions to the cheers and their applause for the security guards were in some way reasserting dominance; I knew that wasn't right. In the stands, I remember black women wearing pressed dress suits, heels, and wide brim hats; black men in suits and ties like traditional churchgoers. They looked even less comfortable in the heat than my white family, who had grumbled over Mom's request that they change out of t-shirts into button downs or light dresses. Graduating high school didn't mean nearly as much to me and my family as it did to minority and low-income students. It was their names that unleashed the criminal shouts of joy.

My high school serves over two thousand students from four towns in the south suburbs of Chicago. It regularly graduates over ninety percent of the senior class, offers a wide selection of AP courses, and has three Blue Ribbon awards from the U.S. Department of Education. When I graduated, the student body was over half black, about thirty percent white, and the rest Hispanic/Latino, multiracial, or Asian. I didn't know it at the time, but a third of my schools' students came from low-income families.

We celebrated our diversity—interracial couples, clubs, sports, and classrooms were the norm (although football certainly had more black athletes than swimming did). We felt superior to our rivals in the north and west suburbs because their white monotony and money seemed pompous and entitled compared to our diversity. At the same time, whispers about students who “acted black” or “acted white” flitted unkindly through the cafeteria, where divisions were clear. More often than not, our social world was divided by economic status disguised as race. Sociologist Julie Bettie discusses a similar social layout in *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity* in which she infiltrates a high

school in California's Central Valley. Nancy Solomon, an education journalist, published an audio documentary called *Mind the Gap: Why Good Schools are Failing Black Students*, where she asserts "Race trumps class when it comes to identity." These studies rang true to my experiences; black and Latino students tended to sink into the lowest level classes, while white and Asian students rose to the top like carbonation in soda.

Segregation within schools and interaction with economically and racially diverse peers drew me into the education conversation, but I soon learned how much more there was to it. A few months after my high school graduation, I drove three hours south to a small, private university called DePauw in rural Indiana. Never could I remember being around so many blonde people. Except maybe on vacation at Disney World.

The majority of DePauw's students come from wealthy enclaves of Indianapolis and Chicago suburbs. One such student and I were talking about hometowns in the first weeks at school and after a few drinks slipped thoughts to his throat, he said, "You don't seem like the kind of girl who would have black friends." He didn't seem like the kind of boy who should be drinking. Another first-semester freshman monologued about how her private boarding school was more rigorous than DePauw while I was trying to work on a paper for a seminar that I certainly found difficult. She had school smarts, but lacked some basic social skills. In training as a peer-writing tutor, I was warned of the broad spectrum of student ability that tutors would see—students convinced college was easy and students struggling with their first formal papers.

Each student seemed to think their backgrounds and schools were normal until we started discussing them. Didn't everyone go from a district elementary school to the district junior high, and district high school? No, my friend Karina Martinez, informed

me. In New York City, students applied to high schools all across the boroughs. The high schools weren't all charter schools, either. And what were charter schools, anyway? Mary Thomas, a childhood friend of mine, taught in a charter school for two years and explained their private operation and public funding to me. Were those the only options (aside from private schools), a public or a charter? Far from it, Emma and Michelle Grove, sisters from Ohio, told me. They were alternatively schooled, studying at home and at small cooperatives. I wanted to know what these schools were like and how they affect students' futures.

Often, when people have questions such as, "What is a charter school," they just search on their smartphones. When questions get more complicated, as in, "Who is going to charters and how are they doing?" people turn to the news, popular books, documentaries, or published research. I like to talk to people. Questioning those with firsthand knowledge of an issue is a common research method that incorporates qualitative information into a broader conversation. So that's what I did when I wanted to know more about schools, achievement gaps, and reforms; I talked with trusted friends from around the country whose stories could help me understand what is going on in education. We spoke in person, over video calls, and on the phone multiple times over the year. I asked why they chose their school and about the teachers, classes, extracurriculars, and commutes there. I asked about their peers, their parents, and their plans for the future. All the while, I pushed for anecdotes and opinions to keep the prose engaging. The conversations were informal and fluid—I followed their tangents. They seemed comfortable and open sharing their stories with me, which I encouraged by agreeing to change all their names and several identifying details.

I chose six stories to pursue, told through eight women's voices—women who I met in childhood, as a student studying abroad, and at a sleep-away summer camp that attracts families from around the country. The women give insights into their type of schooling, community, and state. Ann Higgins is white and went to predominantly Mexican public schools in rural California. Karina Martinez learned English in public schools as a Dominican-American in New York City. Tracy Lane teaches first grade in low-income public schools outside Chicago. Mary Thomas spent two years teaching special education in a low-income charter school in Washington D.C. Cindy Bauer attended an alternative school for students with learning disabilities near Cincinnati, Ohio. Emma and Michelle Grove studied at home in Ohio with their mother, Becca, until high school. These stories speak to a wide variety of schools and circumstances that can determine the education a student gets.

School Smart is most closely what creative nonfiction author Tracy Kidder and his editor Richard Todd call “the braided essay,” which tries to “illuminate both the public and the private by placing the self in the context of time, politics, ideas.” I dove into these women's stories, searching to understand their experiences in relation to each other, to mine, and to the nation's larger narrative.

In the United States, public schools provide a free education to all students by zoned districts operated through local governing boards and the state. Local taxes provide a large portion of public schools' funding, so wealthier districts have wealthier schools that only the district children can attend. Private schools require tuition and often answer to religious organizations rather than the state. Charter schools are free and public, but they operate privately even though they receive public funding. They provide students

another option outside their school zones and have been growing in popularity since the 1980s and 90s. For people who reject the regimented atmosphere of traditional schools, alternative schools popped up in the 1960s, offering accommodations such as flexible hours, creative courses, online courses, and an adjusted school year. Today, many alternative schools serve “at-risk” students who are sent there rather than choosing the nontraditional route. States have different laws concerning homeschooled students’ curriculum and achievements, but homeschooling has always been another option. Small cooperatives, reminiscent of the original alternative schools of the 60s, have family-led courses and schedules for homeschooled students.

Achievement gaps between low-income and middle to upper-class students and white and minority students have been well documented for decades. Education activist Jonathan Kozol writes about the socioeconomic segregation of schools and how that is often more responsible for academic failure or success than the mere efforts of individual students. In 2009, 8% of students in the bottom income quartile earned bachelor’s degrees in their mid-twenties, while 83% of students in the top quartile did. Because Americans are such individualists, the poor are often blamed for being poor. Individualism belittles these disparities and the larger forces causing them. For example, a family with less social capital, or influential social networks, might not know the principal or the school board to bring concerns to. Similarly, a student with less cultural capital, or dominant family dynamics and traditions, might speak in a way teachers disapprove of. Instead of getting extra help, students with these disadvantages are often zoned into poorer schools, as Ms. Lane and Ms. Thomas’s stories will demonstrate.

Every February in my public schools, teachers would remind us that it was Black History month and we would learn how the Supreme Court reversed its segregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), declaring segregated schools “inherently unequal.” Little did we know that segregation still existed, whether within schools as Ann’s story will show, or between schools, as Karina witnessed.

There is debate over the term “Hispanic,” which connotes Spain, as opposed to “Latino,” which came about when Latin America decolonized. Karina and I used the terms interchangeably, although she prefers Latina. Ann used Hispanic almost exclusively. I got the impression it felt more politically correct than saying Mexican, the way some people say African American instead of black. In their stories, I use “Hispanic” when the data I’m drawing on uses that language, as the census does, for example. Otherwise, I use Latino or Latina in Karina’s case and Mexican in Ann’s.

Both private-schooled Cindy Bauer and homeschooled Emma Grove had learning disabilities and gained an understanding of the importance of different learning styles. They felt fortunate to have the educations they did, where teachers gave them individual attention. Teachers want that, too—small class sizes and freedom to teach a rich curriculum that engages multiple learning styles. The following stories tease out some of the tangles in the education system that are holding both teachers and students back.

*

From the Top of the Class

Ann Higgins

Ann Higgins grew up in Los Banos, California. Yes, the name of her town translates to “The Bathrooms,” but it was intended to connote actual baths, like the hot springs east of town. Growing up in the Central Valley, Ann’s freckles and straight blond strands never faded. I met her at our summer camp in Minnesota years ago, where we spent weeks swimming, canoeing, and camping. Back then, interacting with predominantly white girls from Midwestern suburbia for the first time, Ann came to feel that her schools were abnormal. The 4H club was foreign to Chicagoland, as were school security guards to Cincinnatians.

Ann was one of those rare campers we appreciate as counselors now, who never sought attention or imposed herself on other people. She was more likely to listen to a story than to tell one. When camp people learned Ann was from California, the conversation usually flitted through weather, to culminate in: “Why would you come to Minnesota in the summer when there are no mosquitos in California?!” When we went on a canoe trip together, talking was our entertainment and I learned how little I knew about her background. Now Ann and I are counselors. I wanted to know more about rural schools from someone who experienced them, so Ann sat down with this pale suburbanite outside the a coffee shop in Minnesota and shared her story.

*

Los Banos is a pocket of homes planted in the middle of endless acres of farmland in the San Joaquin Valley, springing up like skyscrapers above a city. Over 36,000 people call this city home today, and their tidy, modern houses stand only a few feet apart. Many

areas have young trees like new subdivisions, but mature palms and valley oaks make the city's founding date, 1907, a little more believable. Looking at pictures of this urban/suburban hybrid, I realized Ann did not have the insight into a rural district, I had imagined, where the school bus stops at houses miles apart. She had insight into a burgeoning metropolis. The public junior high school Ann attended wasn't built until 1999, when she was five years old. A second high school was built when she was a sophomore, so Los Banos kind of grew up with her. This city seemed bright and young in the California sunshine, but it had some shadows that plagued Ann as she progressed through the public school system.

We talked about lunch at Los Banos Junior High School, an interesting place to start in terms of social division. The tables pulled down from the walls and there were more out on the quad. The quad is the hallway, surrounded by classroom buildings in a C shape. Most people bought their lunches in the cafeteria. Nearly 1,300 students were split into two lunch periods and divided further into cliques by table. The number of students surprised me, but Los Banos Junior High is the only public school for seventh and eighth graders in the entire city.

Ann sat with two white girls in eighth grade lunch, usually wearing preppy, expensive Hollister and Abercrombie clothes. Aside from brands, they didn't have much choice in their wardrobe because of the strict dress code. "We couldn't wear solid red, blue, brown, or purple because those were considered gang colors," Ann told me. She knew a boy who was sent to the principal's office for wearing brown shoelaces. The boy's mom was a teacher at the school. When she got word of her son's "dress-code violation" and subsequent dismissal for the day, she fought back: "He was wearing his

shoes that came with brown shoelaces, do you want to go buy him white shoelaces?" She challenged the rule, "If someone is going to beat him up because he's wearing brown shoelaces then you have bigger problems that you need to deal with." Ann moved her arms as she reenacted the scene, a helpful habit given the noise lumbering pickups produced as they passed our sidewalk table at the coffeeshop. Unfortunately, unless the boy's mom thought the school needed to deal with disciplinary issues better, the "bigger problems" of community division and gang violence were well outside the administrators' control.

Fights started over less provocation than shoelaces at Ann's middle school. Feuds, even. "We were sitting at the end of a table," Ann explained, "and they were a couple tables over. We'd never seen these people before." The girls who came towards them were reds. Two were black and one was Mexican. Their clothes were black, goth style, but Ann could still tell which gang they belonged to, maybe by some accent or accessory. "Why the fuck you guys staring at us," she remembers them saying. Ann and her friends told a teacher on lunch duty, fulfilling their goodie-two-shoes stereotype. Then the red strangers turned it around, blaming the white girls for throwing food and dirty looks their way. The teacher suggested they apologize, which they did, but that started another round of yelling.

"After that happened we would move to the quad outside," Ann said, which could have ended it, if the red girls weren't looking for a fight. "Every time we saw them on campus they would start running towards us or say stuff when we passed by," Ann said. During close observation of cliques at a similar, Central Valley high school, sociologist Julie Bettie saw low-income Mexican students sort of rebelling against the "prep" girls.

She interviewed one for her book, *Women Without Class*, who said, “there’s a lot of trashing of white girls really, and Mexican girls who act white.” In Ann’s dramatic experience, the tension almost went beyond words. “Talk shit get hit,” she remembers their mantra. They threatened to follow them home and fight them. The girls attacked them on social media, too. Ann and her friends printed out the online threats and got one student suspended by talking with the school principal, a family friend.

The threat was real enough that they stopped walking home from school. Ann’s house is right down the street from the junior high, so the new arrangement made a shuttle out of her mom. Just because the red girls were strangers didn’t mean they couldn’t find Ann on her way home; “You kind of know where everyone in Los Banos lives. I don’t know how you know these things, but you do.” A five-minute drive separated communities like big city blocks, only that these were surrounded by farmland. Of course, the town wasn’t formally segregated, but Ann made it clear that the most dense areas and smallest homes were predominantly Mexican. She remembered going into one of these neighborhoods to get to her orthodontist’s office and said, “the first time I’d gone to him, my mom and I were sitting outside in the car and there was a guy and a girl fighting, like physically fighting, in the front yard. This guy was throwing this girl on the ground...when we came out of the appointment there were cops everywhere.” She felt uneasy dropping off a soccer teammate in a similar area years later, half expecting her friend to run from the car to her house, but got the impression, “she was fine, she didn’t care, she was getting out and talking to me outside the car.”

The threat of getting beaten up defined Ann’s eighth grade year. “Us three little white girls were so scared,” she said, almost paranoid; “I would be afraid walking across

the open quad because I couldn't see everywhere and they could totally see us." Ann didn't fight. "I would probably be on the ground, crying, in the fetal position," she pictured herself at the idea of a fight. Ann's never been too proud to poke fun at herself, but she could hold her own if she wanted to, with her thick, quick, soccer muscles. Instead of fighting, security guards protected Ann and her friends between classes. All the security guards were Mexican. One of the security guards had a son who played soccer with Ann's brother. Usually he would walk with her across the quad. They tried to be inconspicuous, talking, walking like shadows, but the other students still noticed. They would see the guards waiting for them outside class. Ann got embarrassed looking weak and high-maintenance, but felt it was a fair price for the comfort and support of informed friends and trained guards. "It made us seem like babies, but I was scared."

Ann tried to express her outrage as our iced chai lattes melted in the August sun. I had triggered some old disbelief and confusion. "We were literally just eating lunch and these other three girls came up and started going off on us!" She drew her eyebrows in above her nose and blinked like a camera trying to focus. She seemed to be asking, "Why me?" with her round blue eyes popping. But it almost made sense that she felt a little cultural tension in junior high. It was the first time all of Los Banos's students went to school together, coming in from district elementary schools separated by neighborhoods, which were separated by socioeconomic class. Ann sipped at the melting ice as we continued, reclining on the patio furniture in her running shorts and tank, condensation sweating down the plastic cup.

Despite this extreme example of bullying, Ann usually felt comfortable at school, even in junior high. She was used to the dress code and security guards at school, but

when she told people at summer camp, they were shocked: “I thought it was normal, it was weird to me that they didn’t... Sometimes we would have a policeman at our school and I thought that was normal too, but apparently not.” After eighth grade, Ann and her friends went on to Los Banos High and never saw the bullies again. She only knew that one had a baby soon after. “In high school I never felt like that [unsafe], it was just that one time in eighth grade and that was weird,” she said, laughing.

*

Her high school wasn’t that different from her junior high in terms of size or demographics. They’re actually in the same school district and have the same mascot, the Tigers. Half her class transferred to the Pacheco High School Panthers in her sophomore year when Los Banos built it, their second high school. Ann stayed at Los Banos High, which has been around since 1964. It has two gyms, a multipurpose room with a stage, a greenhouse, sports fields, tennis courts, three academic wings, and an industrial arts/ag wing. Parts of the building are original, but they recently built new science, art, and music rooms. They have two academic counselors for over one thousand students. There is no perfect ratio of counselors to students, but one to five or six hundred seems like a stretch. Especially when these students might be beginning the college application process, which can confuse anyone. If the students were applying, many would be first generation. Whether the first generation students were one of the four hundred “English Learners” at Los Banos High, immigrants from Mexico, or just generally unfamiliar with U.S. college’s search, they would be lacking the cultural capital that a counselor could help make up.

Los Banos High boasts a 97% graduation rate for Ann's senior class. The impressive number might mislead people to assume that the students all left well educated. From Ann's perspective, many fewer were actually prepared to thrive in college, if that was where they went after high school. Many of her classmates went to work at fast food restaurants or took Beauty School. In her senior year, Ann remembers teachers asking other kids, "Are you going to college?" and accepting the answer "no." When teachers asked Ann, they pestered her to apply for tougher and tougher schools. She wanted to go to San Diego State (which she did, in the end) but her teachers thought more prestigious University of California schools were better for her. Teachers invested more energy in students like Ann, who were already succeeding. That strategy might be easier for teachers, but it is unacceptable. The students who need their help the most fade into the background, dropping out quietly. It is the teacher's job to teach all their students, not to cheer as the top ones cross the finish line without a glance behind.

Ann found herself getting lumped together with a group of thirty "little white aggy kids." The phrase conveys the innocence or naiveté that contrasts the opposite: kids with too much life experience. I could picture Ann in high school, maybe five foot two with a straight blond part down the middle and a metal smile. This concentrated group of white, middle-class students really solidified when the schools started dividing classes by level. "Everyone had this normal English class with different teachers, but that thirty of us had our own class and we did something completely different. We were in the computer lab every day. I don't remember what we were doing in there, but we met in the computer lab." The separation actually started in elementary school with the GATE program (Gifted and Talented Education). The GATE kids were selected by teachers to

take the test that qualified them. Ann went from third to sixth grade. “I would go on a bus and leave campus for an hour,” she explained, “it was just this outside-the-box kind of thinking and stuff like that.”

The GATE program, challenging classes, and individual attention were great for Ann, but by setting her apart for academic success, these benefits set others back for failure. The fact that the kids who got these extra opportunities already had the advantage of being white English speakers only made the system make less sense. Sociologist Annette Lareau’s research on school culture offers explanations for this tracking without making the assumption that white people are naturally the most intelligent (as IQ test creator, Lewis Terman, did in the 1920s). Lareau observed and interviewed middle-class and working-class families that were both black and white in *Unequal Childhoods*. Her work broke new ground when the Punnett square of race and class showed class predicting academic success because the school culture mirrored middle class culture. For Ann, that meant her culture matched her teachers, which they saw as potential and rewarded with the GATE program. Thinking back on the ways teachers treated her, Ann got worked up. “So from the beginning you’re taking out these kids who are already at the tops of their class and then pushing them even harder!” she shouted above the passing pickups.

By high school, the segregation within the school didn’t surprise anyone. Bettie calls her “prep” students’ behavior and involvement in school “school-sanctioned routes to success,” which has an echo of Lareau’s findings on culture. Ann pointed to the divide when I asked about Advanced Placement course offerings; “Taking AP classes all throughout high school, I was with the same people in every single class, the same thirty

kids, because it was such a select group that wanted to try really hard and the rest were like, ‘Oh whatever, we’ll get through high school.’” For someone in a privileged position like Ann’s, it would be easy to interpret a classmate’s attitudes and actions as the cause of their troubles. The struggling students themselves probably believe their problems stem from personal failings, but I would bet that many of them just internalized roles they didn’t ask for. When your teacher doesn’t recommend you for top programs, challenge you in class, or care if you apply for college, apathy can defend your pride.

Ann took all the AP classes, English, History, Biology, and Calculus, and felt that still didn’t make her as competitive as students from better schools or as prepared for college work. AP English didn’t deserve to be called AP, she said, “Senior year first semester we did some stuff, read sometimes...then second semester we literally sat there every single day and talked. By ourselves.” The AP exams can count for college credits if the student takes, and passes, the final exam with a score of 5, 4, or sometimes 3, depending on the institution.

“How did people do on the AP tests?” I asked.

“Senior year I didn’t take any because I felt like I was so...the only one I ever felt prepared for was my AP Bio test,” she said.

Ann’s AP Biology teacher challenged his class. “He was hard on us, he gave us a lot of work. And that’s how it should be, because that’s what it takes to actually learn stuff,” Ann said, “We actually spent time in class learning.” Most students agreed that he was the best teacher at the school. “He was the only teacher that ever prepared us at all for what college was like,” she said. The AP Calculus teacher challenged his students, too, but Ann hasn’t used those skills as much as she uses biology. As a freshmen

majoring in athletic training at San Diego State, Ann felt like her introductory biology class was an AP review; “It was so nice to feel like high school actually did something for me!” The thought of chemistry at San Diego made her nervous; Los Banos didn’t offer it AP.

Ann would have gotten into college without the AP courses; she had straight A’s all through school and graduated with a 4.5 GPA. But she knew she wouldn’t be at the top of her college class as she had been in Los Banos. “I maybe had two teachers that would be considered good at other schools. I felt like the homework we were doing was pointless, I wasn’t learning anything from it,” she explained. Just offering AP classes isn’t enough to give students like Ann the edge they’re looking for, they have to challenge and prepare the students. Research has shown that students who take difficult classes in high school are more likely to complete college, so Ann’s concerns were on-target more than she probably even knew. If the students at the top of the teachers’ priorities aren’t challenged, the rest of the students can’t have much of a chance.

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Los Banos High mirrors the town’s racial and socioeconomic makeup. Ann was in the minority in both, part of the 27.5% white students, compared to the 65.7% who were Hispanic, and not likely a part of the 63% classified as “socioeconomically disadvantaged,” which the school’s Executive Summary does not define. Ann’s dad is a veterinarian in town and her mom does secretary work at their church. Before Ann’s family moved to Los Banos about twenty years ago, it had been a quaint town with the main traffic coming from truck drivers looking for a good meal. Then a tomato-packing factory opened up. Seasonal workers settled down. Commuters came buying. Los Banos

calls itself “The Crossroads of California” because it’s almost in the geographical center, two hours from employment opportunities in the San Francisco Bay Area. It’s not a commute anyone would choose to take if they didn’t have to. Homes in Los Banos cost less than San Francisco, so workers from Los Banos drag themselves over one hundred miles of farmland twice each day to provide for their families. Ann steered away from saying that Mexican immigrants were ruining the town, but I could tell that sentiment existed. She noticed even in one year away, “I came home from college and we had, like, five new dollar stores,” which made her sad. Business managers look at the demographics and assume dollar stores will profit in Los Banos, and they’re probably right.

The church Ann’s mother works for symbolizes the town’s changes. “We have been going there since we moved to Los Banos,” Ann began, “We met a lot of our family friends through there. But it’s just super small and people don’t have thousands of dollars to give to church when they’re trying to afford sending kids to college and stuff like that. So my mom and our accountant for the church will sit down and literally have to decide what bills to pay for our church every month. We’re in debt with so many of our bills and that’s kind of what our town has come to, almost. My mom is like, ‘I can’t quit,’ but they don’t have the money to pay her.”

Just outside town, there’s a factory that packs tomato products for giant companies like MorningStar and Domino’s Pizza. Ann’s mom has supplemented her income with seasonal work there. “She works in the lab testing all these samples and stuff from the factory,” Ann explained. The factory employs a lot of people in her town, but

Ann seemed to feel guilty about the second job, repeating how the Higgins had two kids in college and mentioning, “she doesn’t have to work there, but she wanted to.”

Ann called her diverse, expanding town “a weird mix between a kind of more ghetto, gang thing and then just complete ag, farm people. Just completely split maybe sixty-forty.” The Higgins hardly seem to fit either of these descriptions, unless you consider Ann’s pig that she used to train and show for prizes. Either way, these divisions matter little to kids consumed by their own small worlds. Ann recalls being oblivious to it, at least before eighth grade; “We all went to school together our whole lives, so everyone was still friends with each other,” ghetto and farm types alike. But even after Ann developed an understanding of the different cultures in her schools, she maintained a variety of friends.

One of those friends outside her “white, aggy” classmates, a low-income Mexican girl, had trouble at Los Banos High School that derailed her education and opened Ann’s eyes to some of the obstacles her peers faced. “There was this one girl who was just constantly getting in fights every single week, just failing all of her classes. Every teacher would kick her out of class, so she eventually got sent [to another high school] and all of the people she was getting in fights with got sent there too,” Ann told me with a look of bewilderment, “So she was getting in more fights there because they put them all together and she was like, ‘I don’t know why we got sent here.’ She eventually came back to our high school. And she eventually ended up moving, because she was having constant problems with these girls to the point where she moved. Like to another town.”

The school Ann’s friend got sent to was either San Luis Continuation School or Valley Los Banos Community Day School, both alternative schools for “at-risk” students

in the area. San Luis is in Los Banos and serves students from tenth to twelfth grade. Valley takes students in sixth to twelfth from three counties next-door in Merced, but still only had 166 in the 2012-13 school year. San Luis had 162 in 2011-12. San Luis is comprised of seven portable classrooms with the same number of teachers and no counselors for their students. Both schools have higher percentages of Hispanic, black, and low-income students than Los Banos High. A staggering 18.5% of San Luis students have disabilities and 98% of Valley's speak Spanish at home. Federal and state governments call these students "at risk," meaning they're unlikely to graduate high school.

"I've just driven past," Ann said, "I would think putting all those kids together would make it even worse? I don't know, if they're getting in fights and stuff, can't focus in school, why would you separate them out?"

We talked about who this arrangement was better for, the students moving or the students who got to stay. Ann's impression was that kids who moved to San Luis and Valley were sent there and got poor educations while they were there. It seemed a lot like the structural segregation outlawed by *Brown v. Board* back in 1954 (which of course, is still being carried out with "all deliberate speed"), and Ann and I got worked up over it. However, after our iced lattes, I found some more positive answers. As San Luis puts it, "The premise behind alternative education programs is that 'one size doesn't fit all.' In other words, not all students will thrive or reach their full potential in the traditional comprehensive school." They try to pull students out for their own benefit—to provide new opportunities and cater to the individual a little more. Flexible scheduling focused programs like business and horticulture, and online education can accommodate students

on many levels. However, these catchy explanations don't quite capture the system either, although they provide a contrasting perspective to Ann's. Intervention for failing students may be well intentioned, but by high school, the chances of turning a future around are slim.

This alternative school system that segregates struggling students should raise flags on what goes on in the traditional schools. Public schools are meant to cater to every student's needs. The way Los Banos uses San Luis and Valley seems more like a cop-out than an intervention. And the demographics of the alternative schools are significant: Why are more black and Hispanic students being sent to alternative schools? What are students with disabilities not getting in public schools? And what would their low-income families do if alternatives weren't nearby and public?

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I talked to Ann again several months later when we were both back at school. She had given me over forty minutes of discussion on Los Banos schools, but I still felt I had only the basics. The crowd pleasers. The one-line summations that earned looks of surprise from her out-of-town friends like, "we had security guards and police at our school," "There were three girls who wanted to beat me up all of eighth grade," and "I was the only white girl on my soccer teams." When we talked over coffee, these tropes affected my perception of Los Banos. For example, I got the impression that soccer was a chore for her, the way she ran practices and did the paperwork because the paid coach wouldn't. But Ann's story is full of gray areas, which came out more the second time we talked. That group of thirty white kids who rose to the top academically weren't placed in isolation. Ann has deeper relationships with Mexican peers than she first implied,

especially through soccer, where she met teammates' families, went to their houses, and who she still keeps up with today.

Building these cross-cultural relationships took time, "I was very shy in the beginning with them because they came in and they were all best friends already." There was one girl with a big personality, "She would always come up to me and she would say stuff to me in Spanish and at first I would laugh it off, but then I was taking Spanish and I would start saying stuff back to her in Spanish and she was like, 'Woah, white girl.'" Ann came out of her shell and they were able to laugh at each other. This little game gradually opened the gate to social acceptance. At practice, on their field that had drains poking out, the girls did a lot of talking. They would sometimes talk about fights they'd been in or planned to start and Ann asked how they did it. That led to a round of laughter, everyone imagining Ann in a fight. She loved having both friend groups. People looked surprised when Ann talked to the soccer girls at school, whispering, "How do you know them," under their breath.

Ann's teammates called her mom "Mama." Her mom represented the team at athletic department meetings, fighting for funding when no one else would. "My mom would bring her Easy-Ups to all the games for us to sit under," white tents to shield them from the spring rains. "She would go to all the athletic department meetings, Sports Boosters. She'd try to be like, 'Hey, soccer doesn't have anything, we're buying our own uniforms...'" Every other team had warm-ups; soccer never had warm-ups. The other teams had fundraisers and new equipment; sometimes soccer wouldn't even get buses to their games.

In her four years at Los Banos, Ann's team had more coaches than she could count. Her mom kept a close eye on the first, actual coach who first coached Ann's brother; "This old, British man who would yell and cuss at the kids." His name was Larry. Ann's mom urged the school to dismiss him and her brother's senior year, "He announced that he was retiring, because he was getting fired because of my mom, and then they switched him over to the girls' coach. My mom was like, 'Are you kidding me? You want to deal with me for four more years with my daughter?'" Larry was a little nicer with the girls and, "I'll admit it, he completely favored me because I was the only little white one on the team, and probably the only one who cooperated and listened. The other girls were fooling around the whole time and blew off everything he said. They didn't take him seriously, because he really was not a good coach." Larry loved Ann, despite his issues with the rest of the Higgins. She sees him at his gas station when she goes home.

Ann played varsity her whole high school career. Freshmen year, Larry was still with the boys and the girls had a dad coaching. The volunteer tried to help when Larry got switched over, too, but "We got a new athletic director that year and he didn't want him out there. So he was like, 'You have to get drug tested and sign all these papers before you can be out there,'" which drove him away. He coached Ann's travel team, so he would actually have been their best option. Instead, sophomore year, they had a mix of more dads volunteering while Larry stood to the side. No longer could Ann say that Mexican parents didn't get involved, but it wasn't the kind of involvement the team needed. "You'd go up to one dad and say, 'He just told me to do this,' and then he would tell you something different. There was one girl's dad who had it out for me, just

everything I did... I would get so frustrated and just be wanting to cry.” Some of the parents cared more about soccer than their daughters seemed to. “It was the world’s biggest mess.”

Pacheco opened her sophomore year and Ann’s team played them, their old teammates. “A lot of us were on the same travel team and then were split up for high school, so that was always a really fun game. You’re playing people you know. We knew all their tricks.” Even so, they lost. They would lose all of their games except for one against a school they scheduled for preseason to boost morale.

“Junior and senior year they got rid of [the random dad coaches] and we just had Larry the last two years, but his wife was really sick with cancer or something like that, so he wasn’t at practices most of the time.” One of the girls’ grandpas stepped up this time. “He started coming junior year and then senior year he’d kind of become our real coach.” His granddaughter didn’t even play the years her grandpa coached. “She and I were good friends, so I’d kind of known her grandpa growing up and he was involved in Parks and Rec. soccer.” The granddaughter was a hypochondriac, according to Ann, and kept taking herself off the team for various ailments. They made fun of her for it, but she at least made excuses. The others just didn’t see practice as mandatory, although they showed up for games. “We would have eight kids show up to practice every day and we had twenty-two on the team.”

These circumstances frustrated Ann. She could say that she was the only player who came to practices consistently, that her mom was the only parent who went to the athletic board, and that they were the only white family involved in the sport at all. A summary like that, however, diminishes the role of the Mexican players and parents. In a

2005 study for Rural Sociology, Sergio Chavez investigated a town like Los Banos and the ways residents contributed to the community. Mexican immigrants, he noticed, were more involved than their white neighbors knew. The community activities Mexicans participated in were “closely tied to their Mexican identity,” like soccer, or manageable without a car or free time during the day. Some of the girls Ann took home from practice didn’t have cars at home, which was also why they never came to Sports Booster meetings. Without their involvement, though, Ann wouldn’t have had a team.

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“The Sky is the Limit”

Karina Martinez

I met Karina Martinez in Italy on a semester abroad. We shared an apartment with two other American women and cooked together almost every night, shimmying past each other with chopped vegetables and steaming spoons in the cramped space. I could reach over Karina if I really had to. She couldn't be taller than five-two, but height had no bearing on her confidence. She would pop some red or pink on her rolling lips and loosen an armload of dark curls when she wanted to go out dancing in the clubs. Dancing made her tick; she never needed a drink to do it. Karina found salsa and bachata classes in the international city and went alone if no one would go with her. She spoke the best Italian, in part because of her bilingual upbringing, but largely due to her dedication to schoolwork. When she flew back to Brooklyn, we didn't know if we would see each other again, but a few months later, over video-chat, she let her nosy old roommate pry into her memories of growing up an immigrant in New York City.

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“My parents, they only speak Spanish. They came from the Dominican Republic and they only spoke Spanish at home. So that was the first language that I encountered, that I learned. So I guess through preschool, I remember we would always have a teacher and a teacher's assistant for some reason and most of them, if not all of them, were Hispanic teachers. Actually yeah, I'd never thought of that but they were all Hispanic teachers and most of them spoke Spanish. So when there were parent-teacher conferences—this was actually all throughout elementary school, not just preschool—they were able to speak to my parents,” Karina began, “I guess that was really helpful

because yes I was learning English in school, but they also understood where I was coming from.”

Karina’s creamed coffee skin had a bluish tinge from the computer screen we were talking through. She was born in Brooklyn, her parents’ fourth child, but the first born in America rather than the Dominican Republic. Karina considers her older siblings assets in her academic success. “They were learning English as well, so they would practice at home,” she said. “Also my brother was the only other one who’s been able to go to higher education after high school. He was the one who really became fluent in English in high school. When I was born, he was in middle school here, so that was a bit of a transition for him, but he was the one I could go to after school and he would help me with my homework and practice my English.”

Karina spoke like she was giving a presentation, confident, clear, and matter of fact. I had seen her give presentations and overheard an interview she took over video chat. She always excelled with well-practiced grace. But listening is one of her strongest skills, her comfort zone. She lifts her chin in recognition and agreement, knits her trim, dark eyebrows above her eyes that light up with surprise or concern. Her humility showed when I pressed for personal stories and she punctuated thoughts with a laugh, but she never crossed over into embarrassment. Karina owns her story.

“I’m actually surprised, I was never in an ESL class. My younger brother, he actually was in ESL, I’m not sure why.” English as a Second Language and Bilingual Instruction policies change often in New York City, where almost 50% of the population speaks a language other than English at home. As of 2010, all students registering at New York schools for the first time have to take the Home Language Questionnaire to help

determine their placement. If the results indicate the student needs ESL courses, they will be enrolled whether the family agrees with the assessment or not. Bilingual education is hotly debated because separating students violates the *Brown v. Board* decision, but only offering English can hurt minority students, too. For Karina, “Everything was in English in school, but I remember in elementary school they did offer other languages like Spanish and French and I always took Spanish so I guess that helped.” She also attended “extended hours” of English help at elementary school.

Public School 24 serves local Sunset Park kids from kindergarten to fifth grade. The multi-story, red brick building stood surrounded by a tall fence. This past academic year, 46% of their 699 students were classified English Language Learners and 91% were Hispanic like Karina. She lived in Sunset Park, on the western edge of Brooklyn until she was eleven. Then the Martinez’s moved across the borough to East New York. In the new community, Karina had fewer Latino peers and felt more pressure to perform well in school.

“In elementary school and my first year in middle school, [those years] were totally different from what high school and what the rest of college has been for me because before then I didn’t really pay attention to grades. I didn’t think of it... I of course went to class, paid attention, but I feel like I was doing what I was doing more for my parents,” Karina said with a laugh, “not really for me. If that makes sense.” To many students, the lack of internal motivation makes perfect sense. To me, remembering Karina in Italy with notebooks spread around her little legs, glasses pushed up, skipping social engagements to study, it came as a surprise.

“But when I moved to East New York I realized, I was getting like 70s and 80s and I thought that that was ok until, something clicked. The friends that I was with...I felt like they were looking up to me, I’m not sure why,” Karina said. Maybe she was as kind and well behaved then as she is now, but whatever the reason, her friends’ high expectations led her to higher performance. Karina had a different attitude towards school, “Specifically in math. I did well in that class, I liked it. I have fun with math. The rest of my classmates, they weren’t really like that. There were a few who cared about their grades and stuff, but like most of them didn’t. They couldn’t care less about academics really,” as far as Karina could tell.

Karina guessed at the cause of her fortunate attitude change; “It might have been the fact that I was very comfortable in Sunset... Wherever I went I would bump into Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Colombians, whatever it was, I don’t know. But when I moved to East New York, it was something totally different to me.” Student comfort in school is usually recommended, but maybe school was just more of a social place in Sunset and less about academics. Her new middle school in East New York, “It took me out of my comfort zone. It made me want to compete.” The stakes got higher and Karina met them with determination. “As soon as you came into the school it was ‘The Sky is the Limit,’” Karina demonstrated a banner with a sweep of her hand, “I know some people might think it’s cheesy, but they just had this mindset that was contagious that they really tried to make their students believe in.” She’s sure of the distinction, “If I stayed in Sunset, maybe I wouldn’t be here, where I am right now.” Right now, Karina is preparing to graduate from Franklin and Marshall College with a bachelor’s degree in psychology.

In East New York, Karina was a minority in her community for the first time, although still 35% of the population came from foreign nations. In 2013, the district reported its residents were 54% black and 35% Hispanic. Karina doesn't really keep up with anyone from Sunset, but Facebook tells her that very few of her peers went on to college, they all stayed in the city, and a lot of them have children. The people she met in East New York graduated high school and seem to be doing well in college. Of course there are others who "decide to start their families early and seem perfectly fine with staying in their community and working at a FootLocker or something," Karina elaborates, careful not to pass judgment, even though it's clear she prefers the college track. Karina herself got married in her senior year of college to the man she began dating in middle school. She could have started a family of her own years ago, but prioritized school. "The people I surrounded myself with and where I came from had a really big impact on my goals."

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Karina's parents heavily influenced her strong work ethic, as well. "My family, specifically my dad, he was really serious about academics...some people might call it the immigrant way of thinking: 'Academics, education, that's the way to climb up.' He's always been like, 'You need to take this seriously.'" Ironically, this immigrant mentality restricts opportunities for minorities when privileged people turn it on its head: "If you haven't climbed up, then you must not be working hard enough." As if there are no structural inequalities inhibiting social mobility. Latino parents actually emphasize academic achievement more than white parents do, according to a 2010 study. Low-income individuals are often blamed for their own misfortunes, perceived as

unmotivated, lazy, uninvolved with their children's educations, inferior for speaking Spanish rather than English, and prone to abuse drugs and alcohol. Anglo-Americans have imposed stereotypes like these on everyone else since they first colonized the continent, beginning with Native Americans, Mexicans, and moving to every immigrant group that followed the English themselves. Karina proves them wrong.

When people ask what Karina's parents do, she has to weigh her options on how to answer the seemingly harmless question. "My dad came here in the early 80's, he worked at a furniture factory and that's what he had been doing until about 2006 when he suffered a nervous breakdown. Ever since then he's been pensioned. My mother, she came here and she worked at a daycare for a bit. Then she got pregnant with me in 1993 and my brother in 1995 and ever since then she's been having a lot of health issues, so it's been really difficult for her to find a job and stay there. Since then she's been on disability." Karina could have said they don't work anymore, or they're both retired, or my mom raised us, or my dad worked in furniture, but she used no pretense. They both depend on the government.

For an ambitious, first-generation American student, having parents without careers meant Karina had a lot to tackle on her own. A public school teacher in D.C. explained one such challenge to author, educator, and activist Jonathan Kozol: "There are boundaries for school districts, but some parents know the way to cross the borders. The poorer and less educated parents can't. They don't know how." Karina had to be accountable for her own education and use her own judgment to select a high school when the time came. Peg Tyre, an education journalist, published a valuable resource called *The Good School: How Smart Parents Get Their Children the Education They*

Deserve with a grant from Columbia and the Spencer Fellowship, a program that has pumped out a lot of conscientious work on education. However, Tyre's subtitle betrays an incredible bias aligning "smart" parents most nearly with "middle class." Karina's parents have no shortage of intelligence, but don't have the experiences or resources to decipher the "good" school from the bad. They didn't have first-hand experience to teach Karina about interviews, resumes, which extracurriculars would impress colleges, or applications themselves. They don't speak English.

"My mamma, like if you go up and speak to her, not super fast but, you know, she'll understand you. But my dad, he's just something else," Karina looked up, either rolling her eyes or remembering, and laughed, "He's just really proud of his roots. I'm not trying to be disrespectful or rude to him, but sometimes we would be at dinner and my younger brother and I would be speaking English, he would be like, 'We speak Spanish in this household! You can do that with your friends or at school.' That pride kind of prevented him from learning English. Even though they didn't know English and it would plainly suck, because I would like them to always understand and I just didn't want to translate sometimes, that helped a lot because... I was in fifth grade, for example, and I'm still this child but I'm here, responsible for translating these letters that my parents would receive at home. Back then I didn't really think much about it, I was just like, 'why do I have to do this, I don't want to,' but I'm a firm believer in that everything happens for a reason and that specifically was really helpful to be learning English and also remaining fluent in Spanish."

Ever the optimist, the cheerleader for everyone around her, Karina wouldn't change a thing about her upbringing. Anyone could see why. Her confidence goes deeper

than her shoulders back, head high; her intense, academic dedication won her opportunities beyond expectation; her close, family relationships lie underneath it all, the concrete foundation. She's not missing a thing. She knows she's been lucky, perhaps overestimates her luck due to relentless modesty.

After Karina began applying herself, the dividends of hard work poured in. She graduated valedictorian of her middle school. She won a place with a charity called Sponsors for Educational Opportunity (SEO) that developed a branch to reach New York City students looking for ways out of their low-income lives just two years before Karina started high school:

We look for motivated students who are curious, enthusiastic and determined to attend a four-year college. We also look for those who have the capacity for higher achievement yet have not had the opportunity to attend a school where they receive the academic preparation needed for competitive college admissions and success.

The application required her to complete a form and essay, secure a teacher nomination, and locate financial documents proving her need. She spent the next eight years working rigorously outside high school and checking in monthly at college until graduation.

Her high school, Secondary School for Law, really didn't prepare students for college. "In Manhattan, I feel like a lot of schools did offer at least one or two AP classes, but the school that I went to, they didn't offer any AP courses. They offered Honors, but no AP," Karina said with a shake of the head, "But thankfully I had Sponsors for Educational Opportunity, the college prep program that I got accepted to in ninth grade. So I wasn't able to take AP classes as Secondary School for Law, but I had to take three-hour math classes after school, on Wednesdays. I had to attend courses at NYU three

Saturdays a month, like the whole Saturday. It was from nine-thirty to four or five. And summer courses as well. I feel like I got lucky.”

The SEO Scholars recently expanded to San Francisco, always trying to make room for more students, but in 2008, Karina remembers being with only about forty or fifty other ninth graders from all of the boroughs. At Secondary School for Law, Karina was one of three SEO Scholars. “There were a lot of other students at my school that I thought, if they could have found an opportunity like that, they might have turned out different,” Karina reflected, with a weight not unlike survivor’s guilt. SEO took only 127 of over one thousand applicants in 2012, leaving at least 874 low-income high school students wishing they could take nine to ten extra hours of math and college courses each week.

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Secondary School for Law may have let students drift in the way of college readiness, but it was not a bad school. Karina explained to me that New Yorkers don’t zone high schools; “I had no idea that in the suburbs you go to this elementary school, then you go to this middle school, then everyone goes to this huge high school. In New York City, no. You could be from Manhattan and go to a Bronx school.” It’s part of an education reform initiative that Mayor Bloomberg has been adamantly pursuing. “We had a huge directory and each borough had it’s own color and Brooklyn was the one that had the most schools, this was a public school directory, I think, and you had to apply to several schools.” This valedictorian applied to twelve or thirteen high schools. Secondary School for Law made its way to the top of Karina’s list. “I wanted to be a lawyer because I argued a lot with my dad. We had so many arguments and I didn’t *like* arguing with him

but I don't know, I liked being right, specifically when it was with him," she laughed at herself. Their law classes enjoy a courtroom for mock trials and moot court, but aside from that the core curriculum deviates little from Ann's and my own: English every year, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, and optional Calculus.

The four-story building used to house John Jay High School, aptly named after the first Supreme Court Justice and Founding Father, but Karina said crime was high. Dividing it by floor into four schools helped. Secondary School for Law uses two floors, having the most students (nearly four hundred). They still use metal detectors, though. Karina compared it to an airport: enter on the ground floor, pass through security, and proceed to the gate upstairs. The school was in Park Slope, Brooklyn, out of Karina's district in East New York; "It was a forty-five minute train ride, which in New York City, that's not that bad." I could imagine an even smaller, knock-kneed Karina swiping her Metro Card underground among the rest of Brooklyn's six-o'clock crowd, whose breath and sweat belches up through the grates in the sidewalk that Park Slope residents step around.

Her school's broad, clear windows and red-bricked façade blend with the pristine Park Slope apartments, but the look is all that they share. Housing prices rise in Park Slope as the reputation of Public School 321 rises because elementary schools, unlike high schools, are zoned. The residents send their children to wealthier, college preparatory schools like Millennium in Manhattan, away from the Spanish and Creole speaking immigrants at John Jay. The differences in student population from Karina's high school, Millennium High School, and the local Park Slope district school show clear segregation: Only six percent of the students at Secondary School for Law are white.

Thirty-five percent at Millennium Manhattan are white. Seventy-three percent of the elementary students of Park Slope are white. Eighty-three percent of Karina's peers had free lunches. Forty-three percent of Millennium Manhattan students do. And only nine percent of P.S. 321 students do.

The John Jay campus has an unpainted, outdoor basketball court behind the school, surrounded by high chain link fencing. Millennium High School has its own building with modern furniture, carpeting, an exercise room with sleek treadmills, bikes, and ellipticals, and no metal detectors. Literally, comparing Ferris Beuller's school to the Mean Girls' campus barely does it justice; average 80's versus ritzy 00's. The year Karina started college, the city put a Millennium Brooklyn High School in the John Jay campus, booting out the minority students' middle school with gentrification and a million dollars in start-up funds. The students and teachers at John Jay threw up their arms at this news, getting a lot of press as they raised the flag, calling racism. Where was the city's million dollars when Karina had to commute to NYU on Saturdays to take college preparatory courses? In defense, city proponents argued that putting upper class white students in the building would create opportunities for the isolated minority students. Karina and her peers had to wonder why the white kids were chauffeured in luxury cars on their path to success while minority students were asked to wait for the "trickle down," picking up breadcrumbs like Hansel and Gretel.

Comparing Secondary School for Law to Millennium makes it hard to remember that Karina competed for a spot at her school. Secondary School for Law is far from one of New York's worst; they spend more than the city average per pupil, which means many schools are even further behind Millennium than the one I've described as an

average 80's facility. Karina has hopes for John Jay. She qualified her memories of its shortcomings, saying it could be improved today, four years later. They did implement AP courses at Secondary School for Law the year after Karina graduated. They got a new principal who promised changes. Karina doesn't remember seeing the stigma-enforcing metal detectors the last time she visited, either.

Karina's high school is making improvements in their staff, too. After she graduated, they released the slack Physics teacher who Karina disliked. On top of the intimidation Physics inspires on its own, Karina said, "It was one of those textbook classes. The teacher was like, take out the textbook, read for the whole period, and then answer—you know how textbooks have review questions—we would answer that."

"That's what you did in class? He did nothing but say, 'next chapter'?" I responded, unable to contain my incredulity.

Karina nodded with her lips closed and eyebrows raised, pausing, and said, "There was a point when I really wanted to be a teacher. Teachers have such an impact on the way their students are, how much they enjoy school. There has to be some type of interaction. I don't understand why he thought that was ok."

Back in Sunset, Karina had a math teacher who also made a lasting impression on her. "I would make a lot of mistakes, not specifically with the actual math but in the way I spoke about it. So for example, I will never forget this, I would always say 'One and a half' even though it would be half, like one over two in fractions, but in Spanish you could say '*Uno y medio*'" she explained, "He was like, 'I understand what you're trying to say, but it's just half.'" Karina laughed at her mistake now, but she really appreciated

the correction. He cared enough to correct her. The Physics teacher might have marked it off without a word.

The individual attention and rigor that helps students tackle college was rare, in Karina's experience, but her U.S. History teacher at Secondary School for Law set high standards. He made her like history. Other students shied away from the challenge; "Sometimes he would already have a full board of notes that we would come into class and have to start copying down, so that was horrible, while he was lecturing. Then other times we would have group activities where we were just discussing a previous reading, which I liked more."

The teachers Karina is most grateful for challenged her and communicated with her parents. Spanish speaking faculty got her over the initial language barrier in elementary and middle school. I couldn't help wondering how Ann's peers from Mexico would have done if their teachers reflected the diversity of the student body. Although the majority of public school students in America are minority students, as of 2015, only 18.1% of teachers are minorities. It wasn't until high school in Park Slope that Karina encountered a predominantly non-Latino staff. The only Latino teachers at Secondary School for Law taught Global Studies and Spanish. Karina had to grow up even more. The maturity she showed throughout her career as a student helped her win the competitive Posse Scholarship that recognizes leadership in urban students with full college tuition. Her math teacher nominated her for the program.

"My parents were involved in terms of being present at parent-teacher conferences or when I had a dance team performance, or for example, when I had my interview for the SEO program back in ninth grade, it was in Manhattan and my mother

accompanied me. I knew I always had their support, but I was the one who really had to take initiative and do my research. For college, for example, the application process and the Posse Scholarship process, it was really stressful. But if it wasn't for SEO, I don't know what I would have done! Because, yes I had my parents' support and I knew they were there for me, but they didn't really understand what was going on. They didn't go to college in the States, they didn't know *English*," she emphasized, laughing, "and my older siblings, none of them except Alex had even heard of the college application process."

It's not every low-income student who takes on those responsibilities. Karina's classmates started skipping classes in sixth grade—or that's when she noticed. She doesn't condemn them for their choices, but points to the school atmosphere that seemed to condone it. In a setting where teachers don't care who comes to class, who would? Karina showed up bright-eyed even when 20% of her peers did not, as was the case on the average high school day. Most seniors had only three or four classes, so their attendance wasn't even required for half of the typical school day. Students were free to leave, but Karina and the other college-bound students would go to the College Application Advisor's room. He spent a lot of time with them, to Karina's surprise, "I was like, 'We have someone who cares, who's real, who's here!'" But for some reason, he only worked at John Jay for Karina's senior year. "We got really lucky."

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What We're Up Against in Low-income Schools

Ms. Tracy Lane

Tracy Lane has been teaching first grade in low-income areas outside Chicago for eight years. She has always been good with kids, or at least, since she started babysitting my sisters and me when she was in junior high. We would watch Mary Kate and Ashley movies in the basement while Tracy braided our hair with her long brown fingers. My older sister's tight black curls are most like Tracy's, who gets her dark, springy volume from the black side of her family and the durability and shine from the white side. We loved every minute she spent with us, and somehow she could still get us to bed. She's not the type to use baby talk with kids. Her voice could knock you down with laughter or surprise that her lean frame can produce such a loud sound. She treats her students as individuals and remembers them years after they leave her room. Tracy keeps up with my family; we see her at least once a year, meeting at the house, out for coffee, or at church. At Panera, where we sat down to talk about school, the business types occupying the other small tables definitely listened in as Ms. Lane spent two hours unloading her frustrations with work. Ms. Lane still teaches outside Chicago and wants to stay employed, so the names of places, people, and schools have all been changed.

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Ms. Lane's green tea was too hot to drink when we first sat down. I wondered how a non-coffee drinker could face elementary school kids almost every morning for eight years. She took the lid off and dangled the tea bag around in the water as she talked. And she did most of the talking. Once Ms. Lane starts on a story, it could be an hour

before she's finished with it, but her emphasis, timing, and tone make it all so entertaining that you want more.

Ms. Lane spent her first seven years after getting her degree in elementary education devoting herself to the first graders of Lincoln at Lincoln Elementary, one of those one-story school buildings with windows like a worn tic-tac-toe board. The students are over 90% black and over 95% low-income. The school is Title 1—a federal designation that entitles schools with high percentages of low-income students to extra public funding—but the federal grants they receive end up only procuring supplies they don't need. “We had endless copy paper,” Ms. Lane told me, “but no workbooks.”

“When I originally got there I just found whatever I could in the building,” she said, remembering, “The science books were that weird, old, olive green color that only existed in the 60s and 70s. Pluto was still a planet in these textbooks.” She exaggerated in her typical, comedic fashion—although science texts wouldn't name Pluto as a dwarf planet until 2006. The books were still old enough that no one was using them. The primary school teachers weren't even spending time on science and social studies anymore, just reading and math. The school advised Ms. Lane to follow suit; “Basically your whole morning should be reading and your whole afternoon should be math.” Their students' scores were so low in these areas that the science materials didn't matter, which was convenient, considering teachers got only \$65 each year to buy supplies for their classroom. Ms. Lane put this number into context, “Do you need a pencil sharpener? Because a good one costs more than \$65.”

I did a little research later, after our talk at Panera, pretending to shop like a teacher on “Discount School Supply” and at Walmart. Here's the most I could get out of

\$65: a 3-pack of Clorox wipes, 6-pack Kleenex, 40 oz. Germ-X hand sanitizer (yes, I'm worried about hygiene here), a battery-operated pencil sharpener, a Post-it Easel, and pencils. I haven't even begun to decorate. I don't have scissors or crayons and I know those hygiene products won't last all year. In August, *Forbes* was watching retail trends and reported that on average, teachers spend over \$400 each year on school supplies with their own money. "I bought a lot of stuff my first year. I went online and researched the Illinois State Standards, you know, what are they expected to learn in first grade, and I went and bought workbooks that met the standards for Illinois and copied everything. I printed a lot of stuff off the Internet and just started developing my own kind of units," Ms. Lane told me.

She basically made her own curriculum. Ms. Lane felt equipped to do this because her college taught teaching really well. She majored in Elementary Education because she had wanted to teach since she was in high school. Her program included a full year of student teaching at two different schools in two different grade levels, so not only was Ms. Lane confident in her skills as an educator, she was confident in her decision to do first grade in Lincoln. Education professionals love to compare U.S. teacher colleges to Finland and China's successful programs, and one key feature they have that we don't insist on is this yearlong residency that Ms. Lane completed.

Lincoln got a technology grant Ms. Lane's second year, so she got a SmartBoard in her classroom. "So I had copy paper and a SmartBoard," she said, "Also, lots of leveled readers," which are books, separated from reading level A-Z. Ms. Lane would test her students' reading levels, give them a gallon-sized Ziploc bag, and let them pick out readers off the shelves: "Ok you read a level F, I want you to go get three B, three D,

and three F books and put ‘em in your bag. Any time there was down time or you finished early, you get your reading bag out with books that you choose, that you’re interested in, and they’re at your reading level.”

In Ms. Lane’s room, there was a rug by the books for reading and group activities, three old desktop computers, about thirty desks, and a corner where students went when they misbehaved. Ms. Lane wouldn’t send kids to the principal. Her classroom management skills were good enough that she didn’t have to send students out of class. Teachers with less confidence and disciplinary ability tend to rely on the dreaded Principal’s Office as a final straw, a kind of “or else.” For decades, the students getting sent to the principal, suspended, and expelled have been overwhelmingly black and Latino. This creates a school-to-prison pipeline, which describes the way black and Latino students receive harsher punishments than white students both in school and outside of it, orchestrating a flow from public school to prison. Ms. Lane wants her students in class with her, where they can be learning.

“How do you get a roomful of six-year olds to stay focused?” I asked her.

“It’s usually just one kid being disruptive and they calm down when I ask, but when they don’t, I come over to their desk and kneel down so I’m right in their face,” She leaned forward across the table, “and I talk like this in a really scary whisper to freak them out.”

I laughed uncomfortably, a little nervous myself at the intensity of her whisper, the way she moved her lips to enunciate, and how it seemed she would stay there in your space until you complied with her.

“Kids like to act out to get a reaction from the other students, but when you do that it takes the fun away and everyone in the class gets serious, like, dang Ms. Lane, who are you?!” she said with a hint of pride.

Ms. Lane told me another one of her crafty strategies; “I made a water bottle with water and oil and glitter and when my kids that are raging out—usually the ones that have behavior issues but nobody’s ever dealt with it and they’re just running rampant in my room—I had this one kid who—I had these magnetic, foam letters so they could go in a station and do word work, or I’d give them a certain set of letters, like how many words can you make with these, different things—so he terrorized my room. He would take any letter that had an appendage, something hanging off of it, K’s, T’s, capital R, he ripped them all off, so I’d just give him this bottle and be like, ‘Yo, you can join us back on the rug when the glitter settles.’ So the more they rage, the longer the glitter gets shaken up and the longer you have to hang in the little corner,” she laughed, “You gotta get creative with these kids.”

Even when her honed strategies fail her, Ms. Lane keeps the child’s best interests in mind as she disciplines. In the current school year, she has a boy with severe behavior issues that she cannot contain. “He’ll be raging one minute, screaming, ‘Ahh! I hate you, blah blah blah, Ahh!’ then the next instant he’ll look out the window and go, ‘Ms. Lane, what are they doing out there?’ Perfectly sweet, just total shift,” she told me, exercising the full octave of emotion. Clearly a water bottle, whisper, or suspension wouldn’t help this boy control what Ms. Lane thinks is potentially bipolar disorder and ADHD. Instead of punishing him, she tries to calm him, keep the rest of class working, and then goes to her computer to document his behavior. She sends a daily record to the doctors she

recommended his parents to take him to, in hopes of getting him treatment before he loses too much ground academically.

Classroom management was especially important at Lincoln because class sizes were off the charts. They used to provide aides for classes of twenty-eight, but when classes got larger, Lincoln changed the contracts instead of hiring extra help. Now teachers need thirty-two students to get an aide. In *The Good School*, Peg Tyre advises parents to find schools with fewer than twenty students per class because data shows no significant difference in student achievement between classes of twenty to twenty-five students. Tyre doesn't even look at class sizes above twenty-five. Lincoln's cut off of thirty-two came into full color when Ms. Lane taught a split class one year—that's first and second grade together. "If you're going to do a split class you usually have twelve to fourteen kids," Ms. Lane informed me, but she had thirty. Two of them had special needs, but the school's one aide couldn't be with them that period. Ms. Lane also had an advanced kindergartener for part of the day. She summarized, "I was in there with thirty-one kids in a split class. A K through two, special ed., split class."

Ironically, Ms. Lane had been hired as Lincoln was incorporating a grant they'd received to lower class sizes. She had chosen to teach in Lincoln to "actually make a difference," turning down two other jobs and moving back in with her parents in order to make it work. After her initial interview at Lincoln eight years ago, no one contacted her. When a secretary called on the last day of summer and asked, "You can be here tomorrow at eight to set up, right?" Ms. Lane responded, "Does this mean I got the job?" The secretary paused, "Did nobody tell you that?" It was a telling first experience, but

she wanted to work there anyway. The idea of teaching in one of the wealthy suburbs so close to our hometown simply confused her—those kids didn't need anything.

Ms. Lane's positive attitude and commitment to her low-income, minority students comes through in her classroom culture. Her classroom operates like a family. She calls her students "friends" and encourages them to do the same, caring for their social development as well as academic. Since kindergarten is not required in Illinois, Ms. Lane was introducing her kids to school culture and structure: "I have students coming to school for the first time talking about 'what's crayon.'" In her first two years, she stayed at school later than anyone else in the building, going home between seven and eight-thirty. In her third year, another ambitious, innovative teacher named Ms. Day joined the staff on second grade. She and Ms. Lane created a social and emotional curriculum for their kids that helped them develop as people, but also made them more comfortable in the school setting.

Together with Ms. Day, Ms. Lane transformed the primary department of Lincoln Elementary. It started with reading, the most important skill for children to master between first and third grade. "We swapped kids for guided reading because she had so many that were reading below level and I had a few that were reading above level," Ms. Lane said. Then all the kindergarten through second teachers began sharing information, discussing what students should learn in kindergarten before getting to Ms. Lane and so on. "We did a lot of collaboration that was not required of us," she told me, "We gave ourselves that title, Primary Team, we would meet at least once a month." Their teamwork gave the curriculum the depth Ms. Lane wanted. They turned the mornings of reading and afternoons of math routine into a more complete and interesting progression

of thematic units. Ms. Day remade the science curriculum, the students practiced reading with science and social studies books, and then the Primary Team organized a field trip to top off each unit. The system worked so well that the third grade teachers wanted to join the Primary Team, which made Ms. Lane feel validated. She knew without approval from fellow teachers or superiors that all her work was justified, “Because we knew that’s what was best for our kids.”

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Ms. Lane told me about one struggling student of Ms. Day’s, “He was reading at level C at the middle of second grade.” That put him, a second grade student, at the bottom of Ms. Lane’s pile of first graders. Level C corresponds with the beginning of first grade, level I with the start of second, and students should complete four more levels to reach level L by third grade. Ms. Lane said of Lincoln’s students, “Most are close if not there, but that’s like getting your bare minimum, like getting a C... You’re doing average, it’s not like if you’re reading at level, ‘Ok, you’re an A student.’ You might earn an A in Lincoln—we call it the Lincoln A. If you went to [a wealthier, whiter district], it wouldn’t be an A anymore.” Her frank acknowledgement of this inequality surprised me. Teachers catch a lot of blame in media and politics for the achievement gap, but it’s not teachers who set the norms for each school, zone them, or pass the laws that fund them, and make white schools better-funded and higher performing than schools like Lincoln. I remembered that Ms. Lane spent eight years living and working to change these conditions where a lot of bright, capable young teachers only manage one or two. In all that time, the lower standards for poor black children became just a mundane reality.

Ms. Day's second grader, though, proved he could overcome the meager expectations with the help of his father. Ms. Lane and Ms. Day reached out, "'Dad, you need to do this, whatever it is you need to do, if you need to switch shifts, be home more, you've gotta help him out,' and we gave him flashcards and books and all these different games. That kid was reading on level by the time he left second grade.'" From two years behind. "He basically read everything for first and second grade in one semester;" Ms. Lane said, presenting the story like an exhibit, showing not the relief and pride she probably felt at the time, but leaning forward with wide eyes, as if saying "Believe it, we can do great things." What she actually said was praise for the father: "I'm just amazed by that. He's working two jobs and still found a way to do it."

Lincoln had a lot of involved, proactive parents. When Ms. Lane and Ms. Day organized field trips for their thematic units (usually to the zoo as animal themes worked well), Lincoln's low-income parents would help coordinate the students and travel. Ms. Lane noticed a correlation between the parents who came to Parent-Teacher conferences and the students who succeeded in her class. She and Ms. Day organized a "parent workshop" in hopes of informing and engaging more parents. They knew what parents in their community were up against, so they contacted them far in advance, sending flyers home with the date and time so they could try to take time off work. Ms. Lane and Ms. Day prepared "goodie bags" of books, organized by grade level, and handed them out when the day came. The meeting was held in the last hour and a half of school. I pictured Ms. Lane glancing anxiously at the door as the time approached, but their efforts paid off. A lot of parents came.

There's a too-common trope that a student's education outcome rides on their parent's involvement. Parenting matters—students spend most of their time outside of school, but parenting cannot overcome larger inequalities. The overemphasis on parenting implicates low-income parents as failures and gives privileged parents an easy way out of examining institutional barriers to their less privileged peers' involvement. Low-income parents like the ones in Lincoln face discrimination themselves from teachers and officials who may treat them as inferior, a shortage of time and money, and many other debilitating factors depending on the case (restrictions due to immigration status, language barriers, or disabilities due to health care disparities). Instead of blaming the parents or asking them to try harder, Ms. Lane and Ms. Day worked (unpaid overtime, no doubt) to cater to the parents. "It was such a nice feeling to have that positive parental group," Ms. Lane said with a smile.

"It was sad because we had some kids who we never met the parents, ever," Ms. Lane said, emphasizing the gravity of this fact. Most teachers seem to at least speak to the parents of their kids throughout the year, if they don't meet in person. Teachers at predominantly middle-class schools might admit to hearing from parents too much. In Lincoln, some "Never came, never called. Changed phone numbers and moved so much, it's not like we could get in touch with them." Again, Ms. Lane stated as casual fact some revealing information that caught me off guard. If enough parents that she thought to mention it had such unstable daily lives, it was no wonder that Lincoln's Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) disintegrated.

The challenges her kids' parents faced created challenges for Ms. Lane, too. If she couldn't count on a phone call or a note to reach home, she would have to devise new

ways to work with parents. One thing she did was to confront the parents who picked up their kids at the roundabout outside Lincoln. The big opportunity to interact with parents was Parent-Teacher conferences, which they held twice a year. Lincoln teachers saw “a lot of crying parents” at Parent-Teacher conferences, Ms. Lane told me. Some felt it was their chance to unload their explanations of family tragedies, work limitations, and other factors holding their kids back. When Ms. Lane heard things like, “Oh me and my boyfriend just broke up,” she got frustrated for her student but responded professionally, “Books travel very easily, take some with you wherever you’re staying.” Maybe they were conscious of the institution’s tendency to blame them, but justifications like that got in the way of Ms. Lane’s attempts to set mutual goals for the student that both the parent and teacher could work toward. “Some of it was legitimate,” Ms. Lane clarified, not trying to sound dismissive, “Like, ‘Her mother was shot in front of her.’ That was one of my kids’ situations. She was holding her hand when her mother got shot in the street and died. She was three.” Ms. Lane’s eyes got wide as she leaned forward and turned her palms to the sky, “So some of it, I’m like, ‘Okay I didn’t know that, and I definitely need to know some things like that.’”

In response to my visible shock at that story, Ms. Lane told me one more legitimate and truly sad situation. She probably enjoyed having a good audience and also hoped to broaden my understanding and get some information about what Lincoln parents face out there into the critical world. One of her first grade boys had a twenty-one year old mother who had two kids before she was twenty and was trying to raise them on her own in the city of Lincoln, where crime and poverty set national records. The mom loved talking to Ms. Lane, texting her personal phone. “His mom was busy, trying to

better herself, which I respect,” taking classes and working while they lived with her parents, but this left the boy a lot of autonomy. Ms. Lane remembered, “I was leaving work one day in the winter and he was just running around the street. I was like, ‘Go home! It’s dark, go home!’” At a tearful Parent-Teacher conference with his mom, she told Ms. Lane she was considering putting him up for adoption. “The parents put so much more on us,” she said, shaking her head. She defended parents, saying many do it for the right reasons, knowing she is an asset to their child, but it took a toll on her.

Quite a few parents at Lincoln didn’t register their kids for school until October, although classes began in August. Enrolling in school requires a small fee and a few forms with contact information, Ms. Lane explained, but those seemingly small requirements loomed large for Lincoln’s population. Even a small fee can be too much when it’s unexpected and signing forms gets tricky for immigrant parents waiting on documentation or legislation. One way or another, for Ms. Lane, this meant her class roster would be in flux for the first three months of school. Students should be divided equally by zone, but Lincoln Elementary was the oldest and smallest building in the district; “Everybody who lived there wanted to go to the new building, so they just lied about what their address was and enrolled in the other building,” Ms. Lane said. The parents who used that maneuver typically had more cultural capital than the parents whose kids got stuck at Lincoln—not all low-income families are the same.

I could tell Ms. Lane didn’t want to blame the parents for their misfortunes by the way she steered me away from easy conclusions; she told the story of the mother who was shot when I seemed too comfortable agreeing that the “blame game” was evidence of bad parenting. Education author and activist Jonathan Kozol acknowledged the stigma

attached to poor parents when he deconstructed it: “Typically, in the United States, very poor communities place high priority on education, and they often tax themselves at higher rates than do the very affluent communities. But, even if they tax themselves at several times the rate of an extremely wealthy district, they are likely to end up with far less money for each child in their schools.” And that’s just limitations on funding. Ms. Lane had a subtle way of staying conscientious of these nuances even when it sounded like she was getting carried away with a memory in Panera with her tight ringlets twisted on top of her head.

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To the administration, Ms. Lane showed less mercy. Her list of principals reminded me of Ann’s list of soccer coaches, but with so much more at stake: over two hundred malleable children each year and multiple careers.

Ms. Doyle was principal when Ms. Lane started at Lincoln Elementary. She earned the teachers’ respect with leadership and foresight. With Ms. Doyle, “We were always trying to keep pace with areas that were doing better or doing more than what we were doing,” Ms. Lane said. “They’re doing X, Y, Z with technology?” she summarized Ms. Doyle’s words, “You know it’s gonna end up coming here later, but let’s not be behind on this, let’s not be straggling.” The teachers worked together, going beyond what their own city expected of them. Ms. Doyle’s leadership inspired better teacher leadership and innovation throughout the building. Ms. Lane found her easy to talk to, “You could bounce ideas off her. She would be like, ‘Girl, no, don’t do it like that, do it like this,’ and I’d be like, ‘But I can do it?’ she’d be like, ‘Yes. Do it.’” Ms. Doyle’s ability to foster an environment of collaboration and high-expectations made her an ideal principal in Ms.

Lane's eyes. Education experts have determined effective principals can manage their school, oversee the curriculum, adapt to various situations, plan improvements, implement them, and represent the school well to the public. The expectations are high and getting higher for principals who were often not trained in all these skills. Ms. Doyle was probably the most effective principal Lincoln had in a decade.

After Ms. Doyle's fourth year at Lincoln Elementary, her third with Ms. Lane, she applied to the position of superintendent. Studies on principals have shown that two-thirds of them leave schools after about six years. Ms. Lane never had the same principal for more than three years at Lincoln. Ms. Doyle was well qualified for the promotion to superintendent, as she had been a principal for seven years and proven herself in her building. In fact, she had mentored the only other candidate running. The other candidate had connections with the school board, though, and got the job over Ms. Doyle, who promptly left the city of Lincoln.

The next principal, Ms. Cray had never been a principal before. She was the assistant principal at another building, where the principal liked to do things herself. Ms. Lane explained how that dynamic affected her performance: "Her title was Assistant Principal at the other building, but she had been like the Door Monitor. She was doing remedial jobs, she wasn't doing administrative work." Ms. Cray didn't know how to talk to the school board, look up grants, or handle the amount of communication the teachers expected of her. "She would wander the hallways with a clipboard and check the kids' bathrooms during the day." It wasn't two or three months into the school year before Ms. Cray tearfully announced in front of the teachers and the Superintendent that she was stepping down.

“So, the genius that is Lincoln Public Schools decided to promote one of our own teachers from inside of our building to be our principal,” Ms. Lane said sarcastically, emphasizing *our own* teachers and *our* building by drawing them out and leaning forward. This third principal, Ms. Nolan, had just gotten her certifications for administrative work that May and had no experience. Ms. Lane thought it was unprofessional because this woman had been her peer. “They should have made her Assistant Principal in one of the other buildings and moved one of the other Assistant Principals over to us, because for me it was hard to take her seriously,” Ms. Lane admitted. “There was no discipline because she was never in the building because she was always getting pulled out to meetings,” it sounded like the administration realized they had to mentor Ms. Nolan, ease her into the job the way they’d failed to with Ms. Cray. “Chaos at its finest,” Ms. Lane called it. “Parents were like, ‘My child will not be back here if this is how it’s going to be,’” to which Ms. Lane responded, “I can’t speak for the building, but I can assure you that what you’re seeing out there is not going on in my classroom.” Ms. Nolan ended up getting demoted to a classroom teacher again the next year at a different building. Despite the complications Ms. Nolan created for Ms. Lane, she acknowledges that the district didn’t give Ms. Nolan a fair chance.

Principal number four was Dr. Ames. She came in with guns blazing, assuming she knew best, and scolding teachers right away before learning about the school or community. After a spectacularly rough start, Ms. Lane came to love her strong leadership. Dr. Ames was good with the kids, holding them to high expectations and disciplining anything less. She knew how to find grants and do her paperwork. But she and the teachers did not get along at first with her confrontational attitude. “We had one

teacher who is still there to this day who was born and raised in Lincoln, attended Lincoln Elementary, and has been working there his entire career,” but Dr. Ames didn’t reach out to him. The parents had little trust for Dr. Ames as well, Ms. Lane said, “I had parents saying, ‘I’m not talkin’ to her, she not gon’ be here,’” which Ms. Lane couldn’t truthfully refute. The week leading up to Parent-Teacher conferences—one of the most stressful times for teachers—they heard that Dr. Ames was applying for another job next year. Dr. Ames called a meeting during the teachers’ dinner break before the conferences and yelled at them for spreading the rumors. Ms. Lane told the long-time Lincoln teacher to talk to her, “You’re the only one with enough composure and enough seniority to tell her that was uncalled for.” Everything changed over the weekend. Dr. Ames came back and apologized, showing respect and appreciation for the teachers. “From January to May, my favorite principal I’ve ever worked for up to this point in my life,” Ms. Lane said, but then the summer came and she left them for the other job. Ms. Lane almost wanted to go with her.

Lincoln Elementary’s fifth principal in four years never actually started. He was friends with the Mayor of Lincoln/Superintendent of the district (yes, they were the same person). The new principal had left his job as a high school principal because the school was going to cut his salary. However, a week or two before the school year started, the high school hired him back.

In the scramble to find another principal in a couple of weeks, Lincoln decided to pull again from the vice principal pool at the district’s other schools. This sixth principal had replaced Ms. Cray when she became Ms. Lane’s second principal, so he had been vice principal under the same self-sufficient principal that prepared Ms. Cray so well as a

door monitor. Ms. Lane was using her hands and giving the principals nicknames, joking, “Do you want me to draw you a picture?”

“So he was Assistant Principal there and they were like, ‘Let’s just take him.’”

“Because that worked so well last time?” I asked.

“Correct,” She nodded, making me laugh because what else can you do.

“How did he do?” I asked.

Ms. Lane drew a long breath and banged the table with each word: “The dumbest man I have ever met in my life.”

This sixth principal, Mr. Reid, ends the saga because he drove Ms. Lane out of Lincoln in three years. He had other staff doing his work for him, checking the facilities, observing teachers, and filling out the mandatory School Report Card each summer. Ms. Lane felt the worst for Lincoln’s secretary, a black woman from the south. “This will be her tenth year there and she makes peanuts as their secretary which is really sad because she runs the building,” Ms. Lane said. Her respect for this woman was clear: “Every principal would have just been lost without her. She memorizes students’ home phone numbers. This woman is just on top of her thing and because she doesn’t speak as properly as you would want someone to, she loses out on better jobs all the time.” So now this intelligent woman who is stuck in Lincoln has to deal with Mr. Reid, who Ms. Lane described in retractions; “He can’t do anything. He can’t. He cannot write. He cannot spell. He cannot speak. He is no authoritative figure. He does not know how to be respectful to others.”

“When he would send Word documents—red squiggles everywhere,” Ms. Lane wanted to tell him, “Sir, if you’re going to use Word for everything, right click. If you

don't know how to spell it they'll give you choices. Pick the one that looks close!" She shared one example with me that was so inappropriate she saved it:

Memorandum

To: ALL TEACHERS
From: Mr. Reid, Principal
Date: 12-23-12
Re: Instructional Focus for the week of 12-24-12

The instructional focus for the week of 12-24-12 will be:

- I. REST AND RELAXATION
- II. SPEND TIME WITH YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS
- III ME TIME AND MORE ME TIME

Announcements:

HAVE A MERRY CHRIST-MAS, HAPPY HANUKKAH, HAPPY KWANZAA AND FELIA NAVIDAD. IF I FORGOT ONE, HAVE THAT TWO.

Dates to remember

PLEASEEEEEEEEEEE COME BACK TO WORK!!!!!!!!!! ON MONDAY, JANUARY 7, 2013

From the looks of it, we guessed Mr. Reid had been having quite a "Felicia Navidad." He had been fired from another struggling district before he came to the city of Lincoln and his letter of termination online provides for more interesting reading. It

clearly states that he was not doing his reports, not working toward the school's mission, not meeting the needs of his students, and more. Ms. Lane was appalled when she discovered it; "You didn't Google him before you hired him?" She ended up bringing information about Mr. Reid's failures at discipline, educating, and keeping teachers to the superintendent's attention the year before she left. With three other teachers, Ms. Lane put her job on the line to improve the school because as long as Mr. Reid was there, the student's wouldn't be getting a decent education. It didn't matter if she lost her job. Mr. Reid worsened student behavior and dragged teachers down.

Ms. Lane was having anxiety attacks in her last years at Lincoln with Mr. Reid, and her friends and family begged her to leave. She cried doing it. Even after all the stories of frustrating parents and disruptive kids, Ms. Lane blamed the administration and their politics for burning out teachers. That was the last straw for her, at least. Other teachers don't make it through classroom management, let alone teaching the students, and on top of that, counseling the parents who expect so much from them. One year, Ms. Lane stopped reaching out to parents, speaking to them only at Parent-Teacher conferences and pick-up. A part of her seemed to have just given up, but she didn't realize she had done it until later in the year. It didn't seem like a problem for Ms. Lane, but of the small number of teachers who work in places like Lincoln, the ones who are good enough to get hired at other schools leave for the better pay.

The deck is rigged, and not only in Lincoln. After leaving Mr. Reid, Ms. Lane sent applications to sixty-five similar school districts. She was hired as a substitute in August who would work full-time as a teacher and get "retro-pay" because she needed to get new certifications in January. She paid for a substitute license while she was teaching,

taking a masters program in English as a Second Language, and renewing her certification, but the district never paid her in full. She still teaches in a low-income district.

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“I Think You Can Do It”

Ms. Thomas

In Sacramento, California, where Mary Thomas grew up, being five-ten and blonde didn't cause much drama, but in Washington D.C., her high school seniors compared her to Victoria Secret model Heidi Klum. Mary didn't cross the country to model, though she could if she weren't so modest. She left California to teach with Teach For America. TFA is a nonprofit organization that hires top professionals and recent graduates from outside the field of education to teach low-income classroom for two years. I've known Mary my whole life and I can't think of a time when she didn't use her dimpled smile and patient nod to make people around her happy. TFA seemed like a good fit. She is a natural leader who excelled in school and found her calling in philanthropy. I'm sure the recruiters at TFA were thrilled to learn about her philanthropic work and her sorority presidency. Ms. Mary Thomas served her two years and moved back out west, where she now works to improve education from outside the classroom. I called her over video chat and found her smiling, predictably enthusiastic about helping me understand her experience. The names and identifying details of her peers, students, and schools remain confidential to protect her continued work in education.

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Teach For America has locations all over the country now, twenty-two years after Wendy Kopp founded it based on her undergraduate thesis at Princeton University. Once TFA selects their teachers, or corps members, the new recruits travel to their designated locations for five weeks of intensive summer training. Career teachers and education professionals largely dismiss this training and the short-term commitment doesn't make

them cheer, either. Even well prepared teachers don't reach their peak performance in the first two years. A study from 2015 did find that TFA teachers were as effective on average as other teachers with more experience, in terms of test scores. But then they leave, critics argue. TFA recruits reflect negatively on career teachers like Ms. Lane, who are increasingly stereotyped as tenure abusers and under-performers, although many have dedicated more of their lives to the profession and the community than TFA teachers do.

Many corps members become passionately involved with education through TFA and do not quit the cause when they leave the community. Over 60% continue working in education past the two-year commitment. TFA alum share a common experience, but their politics scatter across the board from pro-charter to anti-charter, pro-tenure to anti-tenure, even pro-TFA to anti-TFA. Alumni have founded organizations that both partner and compete with TFA like KIPP (Knowledge is Power charter schools), TNTP (The New Teacher Project), Blue Engine (Teaching Assistants), and more. In addition to powerful alumni, TFA's biggest accomplishments are probably increasing awareness of the achievement gap and reinforcing the idea of teaching as an elite profession. Their budget reflects these priorities: TFA reports spending \$16,400 to recruit each corps member and only \$7,000 to train them. Their recruiting process attracts people from outside education and gives them a stake in struggling schools. Only 15% of TFA's corps originally planned to work in education. It is also very selective, which reinforces higher respect for teachers nationwide as they offer positions to just 15-20% of their many applicants.

Teacher training is a divisive topic among education professionals, especially since it has been increasingly scrutinized in the past few decades, but TFA doesn't really

focus on the issue. While many teachers do major in education, go back for masters degrees, practice observation, and student teach, the bar is not quite that high. Aspiring teachers need only a bachelor's degree and a teaching license to be eligible for hire in public schools—some states require more for licensure than others, but they don't always include student teaching or education courses. On teacher training in America, Dave Levin, co-founder of KIPP and Relay Graduate School for Education, said, "Right now we're assuming that if you have a math degree, then you know how to teach math." Especially at the high school level, it is important for teachers to have a mastery of their subject, but learning how to teach is similarly vital.

Ms. Thomas studied psychology in college, but a friend suggested TFA to her and the idea stuck. She wanted to contribute to a meaningful cause; "I really saw this connection between all these social justice issues and education." When she moved to D.C., she was under the impression she would be teaching kindergarten, her first choice. "I had this idea of a really cute classroom. My mom's a teacher and so I thought it would be so great if we could teach the same subjects and share ideas," but "when I got to D.C. to teach, the region there recognized that there was actually a really high need for Special Education teachers and that they had sort of underprepared and under-hired people to teach Special Education, so they asked anyone who would be willing to switch to Special Education and in doing so, I sort of took the risk of being hired at any grade level," Ms. Thomas said with a smile. She would be teaching high school seniors rather than kindergarteners.

TFA rerouted her to a public charter called Union Preparatory where she had about thirty Special Education (SPED) students each year. She spent the five weeks of

training learning to differentiate reading for lower levels, modify tests for varied learning styles, and assess progress in informal ways. Union uses an inclusion model reliant on cooperative teaching, so SPED students did all their academics in general classes. Ms. Thomas felt prepared to teach her SPED students, but she didn't remember enough content to feel comfortable teaching history and science. Her unconventional placement in D.C. required her to do a lot of extra studying after school and on weekends to brush up on old skills. She co-taught with general teachers, acting either as a second teacher for all the students or more like an aid for the subset of SPED students, depending on the co-teacher and subject.

D.C. has a lot of charter schools. Public charters are funded by taxes and donations, open to the public, and run privately. Charters in D.C. give parents the option to switch their kids out of Title 1 schools designated as "in need of improvement." Union's application form asks for an address and emergency contact and school preferences. When applications exceed the school's space, the law requires charters to hold a public, lottery-style selection. These alternative schools sprang up in the 1980s and 90s to experiment with less regimented structure, curriculum, and discipline, and more. It caught on with conservatives who realized charters could hire outside teacher's unions, give parents more choices, and hold schools accountable for their results. Critics of charters argue that they siphon money out of traditional public schools, don't usually perform any higher, and leave out the most disadvantaged kids. The students at Union are all black and 99% on free or reduced lunch, but advantage is more complicated than those numbers. Certainly, Ms. Thomas's students were disadvantaged and that's why she was

there, but low-income families are all different—charters take the ones who apply, public schools take them all.

Ms. Thomas was happy to do this work and supports TFA because she's seen it have a positive impact, but her boots-on-the-ground perspective revealed some gray areas. Union was not one of the top performing charters and she felt denied the flexibility that charters supposedly offer. At Union, "I felt like decisions were being made that weren't in the best interest of the kids, which is tough to see." She gave the administration the benefit of the doubt, aware of her inexperience, but she felt she knew her students and that complete inclusion hurt them: "A lot of my kids had trouble focusing, anger issues, or difficulty working in a typical classroom." Inclusion attracts SPED experts because it reduces the stigma those kids face. Usually educators debate whether inclusion disadvantages the general education students, not the SPED ones. But all the SPED teachers at Union thought their students should have a resource classroom where they could work on specific areas in the curriculum outside general classes. Support for SPED students usually comes in four forms: consulting teachers, cooperative teachers, resource programs, and instructional assistants. Ms. Thomas fulfilled the roles of consultant, co-teacher, and instructional assistant at different times. Union never got a resource room; "They couldn't accommodate that, even though all the Special Education teachers were fighting for it." So Ms. Thomas never had that classroom she planned—only an office she lovingly nicknamed "the storage closet."

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Union is a large, poorly laid out building. Ms. Thomas got to know it's two main staircases well as she navigated the halls with hundreds of students during six minute

passing periods. She said it was like a tornado of students. Ms. Thomas would weave her way through with her head down to move faster. The hallways often erupted in fights despite the security guards and cameras that lined the halls, and Ms. Thomas couldn't both help and arrive on time and prepared to teach her next class. All her SPED students had different schedules, so she would have about ten to fifteen in each of her co-taught classes. The students wear classic school uniforms. Class sizes varied by subject. English would have fifteen to twenty, history usually twenty-five, and science and math could go above forty. "That's because it's really hard to find teachers who are qualified to teach science so often they had to jam pack the classes with kids," Ms. Thomas explained. She had no complaints about the rooms or facilities, which fits given that the school is only as old as some of its students. Their materials weren't bad either, according to this optimistic insider, "Every classroom had a SmartBoard, but not great with textbooks. The textbooks were definitely old."

After the hazardous staircases, the cafeteria was the next most chaotic space on Union's campus. The teachers would avoid it if they could, but the teacher's lounge was through the cafeteria—with the coffee machine. Ms. Thomas tried to switch to tea during her second year. In the teacher's lounge, they kept a "teacher roster" where they would black out the names of teachers who quit, "an unfortunate, bad joke," in Ms. Thomas's opinion. She remembered in her first year, "We had about fifteen to twenty teachers quit before Thanksgiving break." Ms. Thomas could sympathize, "There were days, to be honest, where I was like, 'Oh my gosh, I don't want to go to work tomorrow, this is so hard.'" But she stuck it out, picking up the slack the others left behind. D.C. sent officials to check out the teacher retention problem and Union and reported, Ms. Thomas

summarized, “We’ve never seen so many unhappy adults in one place.” Union was forced to combine classes, hire long-term subs, or have different subs come in every day, with no teacher to leave a lesson plan. Ms. Thomas shared news of Union’s newest teacher-retaining strategy in an email to her parents, part of a biweekly series she entitled “Life of a SPEDucator:”

Rumor has it there is a big raise in the future. Apparently, I will get paid \$11,000 - \$12,000 more next year. This is apparently to attempt to incentivize teachers to stay longer. They spend so much money recruiting new teachers because turn over is so high that they would save money by paying the teachers they have more to stay. Whatever the motive, I am totally okay to take a raise.

Despite teacher shortages, Ms. Thomas loved the people she worked with. She got to know them through co-teaching and subbing, describing them as “a mix” in their attitudes and skills, but focused predictably on the positives. The students loved their history teacher; “He made every lesson directly applicable to a teenager’s life so the kids were really invested in it.” Educator, reformer, and author Herbert Kohl sees engaging students in curriculum as one of a teacher’s most important tasks. Not just to avoid soporific lectures, but to be culturally conscientious. Minority students especially, he found, disengage from material that ignores or undermines their lived experiences. Kohl even ties increasing ADHD diagnoses to poor instruction, specifically the overemphasis on tests. Ms. Thomas added that the history teacher, “He also had incredibly high expectations for his students, so they worked really hard. It was interesting to see what they produced in his class and then to go with that same group of kids to a teacher who didn’t expect as much and see a dramatic difference in their performance and what they gave, also their attitude to the class.” The students’ response to respect and

encouragement seems perfectly natural, but until a teacher like this history one facilitates their success, it's easy for people to blame students, the victims.

Ms. Thomas would do reading intervention in history and a lot of other classes; “My kids were really far behind—they were reading on a fifth grade reading level among them all—but even the kids that were not Special Education were behind and could benefit from that.” Her days started around five when she woke up to get ready and take the train. She would get to Union before seven every day and then teach all but one of the six block periods. During her period off, Ms. Thomas would meet or call parents, do paperwork for her students, and go to the bathroom, unless she was asked to substitute teach. “Because we had so many teachers quit, the administration would often ask you to sub,” whether you knew the subject or not, calling your office and asking, “This is your free period, right?” She would get home after four or five and have more paperwork for her students, instruction and assessment material to differentiate, grading, and work of her own for a masters degree in education.

I could tell how much Ms. Thomas respected teachers by the way she talked about them, even the ones who left her hanging in her first semester. Her English co-teacher quit in November, placing the SPED and general education students of that block all on Ms. Thomas's slender shoulders until April, when they finally hired a long-term sub. The same thing happened in Environmental Science the next year. Her co-teacher, a TFA friend who tried to stay for a third year, quit and left Ms. Thomas alone to teach a subject that she barely knew. Many teachers who didn't quit took time off in other ways that surprised Ms. Thomas. She found herself doing a lot less “co”-teaching the first time it rained:

Let's rewind to 5:30 am Monday morning. I wake up, ready to start my week, to an email from one of my coteachers who was letting me know he was not going to be into work that day and that I would be flying solo in our 6th period British Literature class. Because this is by far my most difficult class due to the behavior of the students, I was not looking forward to the end of that day.

I walk to the metro, wearing a coat for the first time since my move east, and carrying an umbrella protecting myself from the first rain of the fall.

I arrive at school, check my work email, and am a little shocked to read an email from another one of my coteachers saying he won't be in that day either. I would be alone in that classroom too - 30 11th graders, 18 of which have IEP's (Individualized Education Plans).

As I mentally start planning the class periods and trying to digest how I would go about the day, I am thankful I have the first period off because the history department meeting was cancelled (the department chair also called in sick.) As I make plans and reluctantly put the rest of my SPED duties on hold, I get a text from another SPED teacher that says, "Help! Darren is out today and she left no plans." Not sure if I should laugh or cry, I realize I would be teaching 5th period without a coteacher as well.

Now, I have heard the saying when it rains, it pours but I am unfamiliar to the saying when it rains, the teachers don't come to work.

When she wasn't teaching entire classes on short notice, Ms. Thomas's actual job as a SPED teacher at Union was to differentiate lessons for her students and work on their IEPs, or Individualized Education Plans. The IEP, a contract for the student's care and additional aid, forms during meetings with parents, teachers, and any therapists or social workers involved with the student. Most SPED students needed different reading materials, some needed one-on-one time, others learned in different ways, etc., so Ms. Thomas would sit down every night to individualize the next day's lessons, ensuring that "I was prepared to explain and do things that would meet them where they were and push them higher."

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“The kids are the best part of the work,” Ms. Thomas beamed. I think she enjoyed working with high school seniors more than she expected to, since, she said, “I had been mentally preparing to teach six year olds and then found out I was going to be teaching sixteen year olds, so that was a big change.” That’s about as close to complaining as she ever got. Although the age of her students jumped drastically, she taught some of the same content. “I had kids who would forget to capitalize their names for the entire year.” Helping a football student complete his college application, Ms. Thomas had to teach him “the little skills that he missed somewhere along the path - capitalize Washington, capitalize your last name, hyphens in your phone number, etc. Useful, practical things.”

“A lot of my kids had internalized this idea that they weren’t smart,” Ms. Thomas said, “Because they were in Special Education—even though that didn’t mean anything bad, it just meant that they were learning a bit differently—they really thought they couldn’t, that they weren’t smart, school wasn’t for them. After thinking that for nine, eight, seven years of your life, it definitely took a lot to make them not think that about themselves.” Their social and emotional development suffered from the stigma that came with SPED, even though “You would never know that they were in Special Education. They all had a specific learning disability, either English or Math or both. Then I had maybe two kids with autism and one or two kids with emotional disabilities.” Ms. Thomas felt that some of her students had slipped through the cracks, maybe in large classrooms, with inattentive teachers, or poorly funded schools that never fully noticed or explained their learning disabilities to them.

A big part of the job Ms. Thomas took on was boosting these students’ confidence. During her second year, she had a senior SPED student named Mia who had

really been overlooked in school. Ms. Thomas noticed, “what she was writing on her papers didn’t make sense to the question,” although they were well written and sounded smart, “On day three in the classroom, I was like, ‘Oh, she clearly has comprehension issues.’” Ms. Thomas got Mia’s reading level tested and found that she was reading on a third grade level. “She had gotten so good at memorizing how to spell words, and got really good at reiterating passages from books, all this stuff, but when she read a passage, she didn’t know what she was reading,” Ms. Thomas explained, “I think she had just gotten through because she was incredibly well behaved, she’s so sweet, did all of her homework, sat in the front row. I just think no one ever really quite caught on.” Once the results were in, Ms. Thomas had to break the news to her student.

“Here’s where you are,” Ms. Thomas said, pointing to the third grade level, “You’re in the twelfth grade.”

Mia started to cry and soon both women were crying.

“I want to go to college, where do you think I can be?” Mia asked.

“I think we can get you to a high school reading level,” Ms. Thomas said.

“You’re crazy,” Mia said dismissively.

Ms. Thomas insisted, “I think you can do it.”

“We started working together three to four days a week either in the morning or after school. We did one-on-one reading intervention,” and she brought Mia books on her level. “Every month we tested her to see where she was going. She had this chart on my desk where she could color in to see her growth. Within the first month, she had grown almost two years,” Ms. Thomas still sounded impressed, even though it seemed she had told this story before. “She was very bright and worked so hard. Kids are so resilient,”

Ms. Thomas said, “By the end of the year she had grown six years of reading comprehension,” reading on a ninth grade, high school level. That kind of improvement is not something every student can do, even if they do have a supportive teacher like Ms. Thomas. Mia’s attitude, behavior, and surely other factors helped her to overcome the odds reading experts report. They see seventy-four percent of below level readers in third grade remaining behind in ninth—leading to learning disability diagnoses and drop outs.

Mia went to college. She’s in her junior year and Ms. Thomas keeps in touch; “She has this new attitude now where she believes she can do things and she advocates for herself in college.” Even though Ms. Thomas stopped teaching three years ago, “I make her send me a screenshot of her grades every semester to make sure she’s doing ok.”

Mia’s story is one to frame or tape to the fridge, but Ms. Thomas saw dramatic improvement in quite a few of her students. She chronicled another “all-star” student’s accomplishments in one of her biweekly “Life as a SPEDucator” emails:

During class one of my students got sassy with me when I wouldn't let her work with the extremely low group and I. She has strong reading skills and did not need my help. She needs to push herself so she knows she can do it without me holding her hand. I asked her to stay after class so we could have a little "chat".

We had a long talk in which I told her how smart she is and how she has the potential to be very successful. I told her she needed to start believing in herself the way I believe in her. I spoke to her about motivation, tenacity, and focus. Again and again I reminded her how SMART she is. She needs to believe in herself because I believe in her.

She started crying and told me that I am the only teacher that has ever believed in her. She told me that she will work hard; she just needs someone to tell her to and to remind her that she can do it.

That, my friends, is why I love my job.

Another student, Clarissa, had plenty of confidence, but didn't show up to classes. Ms. Thomas started calling Clarissa's grandmother. She was happy to hear from the teacher; "I would read her grandma Clarissa's attendance. Like, 'She was at first block, she skipped third block, she was at fourth block, she skipped fifth block, she went to sixth block.' And every day I would call her and every morning Clarissa would come to my office and knock on my door, and yell at me for calling her grandma. It was this ridiculous pattern," Ms. Thomas rolled her eyes with the humor of hindsight. She admitted that this student had intimidated her in the beginning of the year, given these frequent confrontations. I pictured poor, dimpled Ms. Thomas in her closet of an office, listening patiently while Clarissa yelled, and I remembered that she originally signed on to TFA to teach kindergarten. Ms. Thomas didn't back down and Clarissa came to thank her. "Over time, Clarissa went from having all Ds and Fs to having all As and Bs and never skipping class. At the end of the year I got the nicest letter from her grandma and a gift card, just saying how I had totally changed Clarissa. It was just so funny because when Clarissa graduated it was this huge moment and she was sobbing and giving me hugs," Ms. Thomas remembered.

Graduation at Union meant robes, dresses, suits, ties, stoles and tassels. Photographers gather the smiling students together with their peers, teachers, administrators, and families, who all dress formally. Before the ceremony, graduates shake hands with the chairman. The ceremony includes speeches from students and faculty. Union consistently reports some of the highest graduation rates among other charters in D.C., which graduate higher rates than the traditional public schools. Still, more general education students graduate than SPED, more native speakers than English

Learners, more women than men, and quite a few take five years of high school instead of four. D.C.'s graduation rates are among the lowest in the country.

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Ms. Thomas would stay in her office with her door open for at least an hour after school for any SPED or general student. Most of her after-school involvement had to do with tutoring, but she also started a sign language club her first year and helped with basketball tryouts too. Whenever her students were in plays or had games, Ms. Thomas would try to go. Union offered exceptional drama and dance and "All the teachers did all that additional work. They didn't hire anyone else to do the drama, teachers took that on." Their football team has received a lot of attention from college scouts.

Looking around outside Union at the poorly maintained field behind the buildings, the stark contrast between wealthy and poor schools becomes clear; "Our football team didn't have a gym or a locker room or a field, compared to my high school that had this beautiful field and all these resources," Ms. Thomas said, remembering her private Catholic school in California. Union played all their games away since they had no home field, at wealthier schools with stadiums, turf, and locker rooms and they knew that they were the underdogs in so many ways. Their practice field: the dusty backyard of Union where needles and once a dead body were found. Their gym and locker rooms: Union's hallways; "The track team would on rainy days run around the school building inside. The football team would lift weights in the hallway. There was no other option."

Growing up, Ms. Thomas always had choices when it came to school, "I went to public middle school by choice. I asked my parents to switch me out of the private elementary school because I am such a nerd and I was telling them I wasn't challenged,"

she told me, letting me laugh at her. She had her mom buy her math workbooks to work on at home because she was so bored. She loved middle school. It was much more diverse and she entered an accelerated, gifted program. The prevailing notion that private schools trump public schools held no sway with Ms. Thomas. Then she went back to private for high school and hated it, but felt she had to stick it out to be prepared for college. They had every AP offered, down to the languages and sciences, “They had to put a cap on how many APs we could take because girls were putting so much stress on themselves to take four or five APs.” It turned out Ms. Thomas over prepared. College was easy. “That’s why my parents wanted me to go there and sacrificed money to send me there was because you leave that school very prepared for college. And they produce amazing numbers, like, 100% of their students pass the AP Exams and 100% are accepted and graduate from college.” There are very few minority, low-income, and SPED students at that private school.

Union sent a lot of students to college, too, “The school required every student to graduate to get accepted [to a college].” For a school with primarily low-income students, this statistic is especially impressive. In 2013, only one-third of America’s low-income students went to college. “It sounds really great and I do have mixed feelings about it,” Ms. Thomas added nuance to the picture, “because what that looked like was just mass produced community college applications and you know, everyone was accepted. So that’s one of those administrative things...the school can be like, ‘We have 100% college acceptance rate,’ but like, what’s the follow up on that and how many of those kids did you actually support to get to community college and how successful were they when they got there?” Her clarification indicated that the school’s sights were set more on their

future enrollment than their graduates' long-term achievement. Union's 100% acceptance rate meant something much different from Ms. Thomas's high schools 100% acceptance rate. At Union, only a select group of about twenty "gifted" students got the chance to take the two AP courses the school offered. In a study of national college completion performed by KIPP, they found that 41% of low-income kids get to college, but only 8% graduate with degrees by the time they're twenty-five.

Part of the trouble Ms. Thomas noticed was that students didn't think they could afford college. She helped them fill out applications and took them on college visits. In homeroom, she had her mix of SPED and general female students look for scholarships. In homeroom—not a typically a very rigorous period. They researched and applied to financial aid programs, the Posse Scholarship, Achievers (\$50,000 Gates Scholarship), and more. She felt a little culture shock when coaching them through the biographical questions:

One of the questions on the application is "Will you be a parent as of June 2011?". The options are yes, no and unsure. The answer should be an easy no. You are 16. You are not married. You are in high school. You don't have an income. The answer is no. All of my kids put unsure. I wanted to shake them and say the answer is "NO!!!!!!!!!" Come on, now....

No matter their answer on potential pregnancies, those are competitive scholarships. Still, instead of accepting that college costs too much, Ms. Thomas thought she could show them ways around that obstacle. Money clearly emerged as only part of the barrier to higher education.

In addition to the financial burden digging a moat between low-income students and college, social resources also disadvantaged them. "All of my kids were going to be first generation college students and most of them were going to be the first in their families to graduate high school, so FASFA and financial aid and navigating the

Common App—those things that I took for granted when I applied to college; my parents just knew how to do that and we had great college counselors—all the parents wanted them to go to college but had never seen or been familiar with forms like that,” Ms. Thomas said. “We had one college counselor for three hundred to four hundred kids,” she added. Ms. Thomas had picked up on shortages of other kinds of capital—cultural and social tools like experience, time, professional and social networks that are harder to measure than income, but have a similarly gigantic effect on student outcomes. “We tried really hard as a school to take that on.”

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Ms. Thomas never met a parent who didn't want the best for their kid. They filled out the forms to send them to Union, exercising their right to choose the best school for their student, and they hoped to see them graduate and go to college. Good intentions couldn't clear their schedules, though; “All of them cared a ton about their kids, but a lot of them worked multiple jobs. They weren't available to come to school or school functions.” The school tried to mend this, scheduling Parent-Teacher conferences at odd times to work around parents' jobs. Ms. Thomas wrote about them in “Life as a SPEDucator:”

Today is parent teacher conferences. They cancel school for all the students and we are here from 10am to 7pm talking to parents. I had a much better turnout than last time but the fact that I am still able to find the time to create a 30-minute email is discouraging.

Because she taught Special Education, Ms. Thomas did meet all of her students' parents at least once each year. Union schedules annual IEP meetings for them to discuss evaluations of the child's disabilities, goals for the future, and steps to get there.

At one such meeting, a SPED student saw the adults gathered in the conference room and bolted, evading Union's cameras, security guards, and police officers for forty-five minutes. While she was gone, Ms. Thomas remembers her mother getting upset, saying, "She is too wild!" "She is always playing!" and "She can't handle being in a normal school!" When the student returned, her mother grabbed her and walked out again, saying she was going to live with her father in Baltimore. "I stood dumbfounded unsure if I should follow. When I worked at Abercrombie and someone shoplifted we were not allowed to follow them out of the store. Was this the same thing?" Apparently not, because her boss came in and told her to get them, sending a five-ten blonde running through the ward in a pencil skirt and heels.

Parents challenged Ms. Thomas in unpredictable, dramatic ways like that memorable day, but also on more daily basis. Culture shock is hardly an overstatement to describe how Ms. Thomas, the only daughter of a pre-school teacher and an involved dad who calls her 'Princess,' felt when she saw corporeal punishment in action. With some parents, they discussed teenage pregnancy and jail, concepts that had been largely abstract in her upbringing. She described her reaction to watching physical abuse in an email to her parents:

In a parent meeting earlier this week I walked into the meeting after pulling the students file and the father was choking his son...with 2 school administrators and a teacher in the room. The fifth-year senior (a term I had previously thought only applied to college students - wrong!) silently cried throughout the rest of the meeting. All that is said when a parent hurts a child in these meetings is, "Mr./Ms. XYZ, you can not do that here."

I know that everyone truly wants the best for the students buuuuuut I can't help but take the key word from that statement. You cannot do that *here*. Does that mean they are giving the green-light for that to take place somewhere else? A plea for help: please don't abuse your child in front of us because then we have to deal with it. Is it because this is so normal that if they reported physical abuse they would spend their entire day dealing with cases? Is it because it is an accepted part of the culture?

We are supposed to call home to let a parent/guardian know if the student is missing from school so we can avoid truancy. We are also supposed to call home to let them know if their child was a "behavior problem" during class. I get nervous calling home for certain students because I fear that my phone call will lead to their pain. Does my phone call mean they are getting hit?

By “deal with it,” Ms. Thomas meant paperwork. Any adult-child physical interaction beyond discipline has to be reported to child services by school officials.

Her ethical dilemma about calling home when she disagreed with the parents’ disciplinary methods had a positive outcome: “Once a month for every kid I called home for a great reason,” both years. This strategy rewarded her students for good behavior instead of punishing bad behavior.

Ms. Thomas encountered a lot of new things in her two years at Union, but ultimately, she knew these parents wanted to see their children succeed. She had many positive relationships with parents, like Mia’s grandmother. She explained their common goal, “Any time you see how much a teacher just loves your kid and wants what’s best for them, they just love you, that’s all it comes down to.”

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Avenues of Learning with Dyslexia

Cindy Bauer

When we were campers in Minnesota years ago, Cindy Bauer was the first one to show me how to sit on the canoe's gunnels instead of the seat, paddling with her skinny, blonde legs stretched out. She could ski better than most other campers and rowed crew for years at home in Cincinnati, too. We aren't campers anymore, but Cindy is still both a class clown and a top student. The way she tells stories with her words spilling out in rolling waves and crashing to endings makes everyone laugh, including herself. Cindy has a serious side, too, where she can empathize with a camper getting picked on or reach out to a homesick one. When she was a first year counselor, she gave a presentation on learning disabilities to the eighty or so campers and counselors. She stressed how every one of the kids in that old lodge dining room was smart even if their tests or teachers didn't reflect it, that our brains work in different ways and that's nothing to be ashamed of. The lessons she taught us stuck with me. This fall, after camp, Cindy sat outside her window on the roof of her house at Ohio University with her computer in her lap to talk to me.

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When Cindy was first packed up with a backpack and dropped off at Mercer Elementary, a yellow-haired miniature of her two older sisters, she surprised her parents by hating school. "First and second grade, when you're starting to do all that academic stuff, I would come home crying every day from school and be like, 'I hate school,'" Cindy said, imitating a pouty whine that made us both laugh. "I went to the nurse's office like every day and I was like, 'I'm sick.' Classic little shit kid, and then I would cheat off

of everybody because I didn't know what to do and I would always get told on," Cindy sounded indignant even though it had happened about fifteen years ago. I could imagine her, five or six years old with a little baby fat, glaring accusingly at her disloyal desk neighbors. But Cindy's hatred of school wasn't a joke to her parents. Mercer Elementary is a public school in a predominantly middle-class and white suburb of Cincinnati. Cindy's mom expected some answers; "In first grade, they kept telling my mom that I was just a June baby and that I was just born late and because I was so much younger than everybody that I would eventually catch up," Cindy said. Her mom didn't buy that explanation, but nobody at Mercer provided alternatives. The school shuffled Cindy, a potential special education student, back into the deck of general students.

Fortunately, Cindy's second grade teacher, Ms. King, paid closer attention to this usually capable and social girl's negative attitude. Ms. King picked up on little things, for example, how Cindy asked for help. Cindy would raise her little hand and Ms. King would come over and read the question to her. Once the words were read aloud, Cindy understood them just fine. Cindy needed to get the information in a different way from the rest of the students; she had to hear it rather than read it. Instead of punishing Cindy for bad behavior or labeling her low performing, Ms. King dug deeper. Cindy remembered Ms. King meeting with her mom, reporting that Cindy was still cheating; "I would just shrink in my chair, like, 'Damn it,' and I think that was the conversation starter as to like, 'Why is she cheating.'"

Ms. King recommended Cindy for disability testing, which she acquired through Mercer. Public schools conduct disability testing at no cost to the parents, but teachers need to jump through paper hoops to get the tests approved and evaluated. That might be

why a lot of teachers don't seem to bother, especially with well-behaved students like Cindy. Another reason for the bureaucracy is the cost to the schools for the tests, aides they may have to hire, or those dreaded Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) they may have to make. But the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) encourages parents to get tests as soon as they suspect an issue. Second grade is early. Six year olds have had just enough school exposure for the tests to reliably judge their abilities.

Cindy only remembers bits and pieces of her own testing. Since she has to retake the tests every so often, she may not be remembering the first one, but she said the evaluation resembled an IQ test. Schools like to see student intelligence scores because learning disabilities can only be diagnosed by ruling out other possibilities, like mental retardation. She remembers being one-on-one with an evaluator, "the tester would read out some words or numbers and I would have to repeat them and then I would have to repeat them backwards. They would also have me read passages and then take it away, or they would read it to me." Cindy was diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD as a result of the evaluations. Dyslexia is a relatively well-known condition where the brain has trouble converting letters into sounds and vice versa. Once, when we were younger at camp, we were writing letters home and I asked Cindy to spell "envelope" and she started "O-N-T-A..." ADHD is also a common disorder; it stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and people who have it struggle to focus. The federal law Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA qualifies students with specific learning disabilities, like Cindy, for special education resources.

Special education at Mercer Elementary in the 1990s meant taking Cindy out of class. She described a resource classroom the special education students went to for part

of the day. “It was kind of like a ‘Special’ kid environment and it was just really awkward because everybody knew and it was like, where the dumb kids went,” Cindy said with a quick pout, adding, “It was really sad, but they had candy.” I laughed out loud at the way she switched emotions, the childlike excitement at candy, and the sheer speed at which these memories tumbled out of her smiling head. Special education professionals now recommend more inclusive models than resource rooms in hopes of downplaying the stigma that Cindy described. In Mercer’s separate class, Cindy was grouped together with students who had a variety of special needs; “I remember there was one boy who had really severe mental issues. Like he might have had some slight mental retardation. I also remember another girl who was just kind of slower at reading.”

Unimpressed with the support Mercer gave Cindy, her parents decided to switch her out. “Mercer tried to keep me, actually they were really upset with my parents for taking me out because the more learning diversity that schools have the better they look and the more funding they get,” Cindy explained, “so they were really not wanting me to leave even though they weren’t going to be able to give me the best education that I needed.” This balance of individual and collective needs challenges both parents and schools. Parents tend to prioritize their child’s needs, if they can. Public school supporters argue that their schools could improve if only students would stay.

Cindy’s mom found a private school in Cincinnati called Springer that was specifically for students with learning disabilities (LD students). In twenty minutes, they could be at the only school for LD students in southwest Ohio, southeast Indiana, and northern Kentucky. The application required Cindy’s mom to gather quite a bit of information: a completed application, recent intelligence assessment, all other

evaluations, all school records, previous test reports, and birth certificate. Then parents interview with Springer officials, bring their student for a visit, and take any remaining tests that could help assess the student's condition. "She and my dad were both really proactive," Cindy said gratefully. "I remember my parents sitting me down in second grade being like, 'Ok, here's what's going on. You might hate us for sending you to a new school, but you're gonna thank us later and you have to go. Everybody there is gonna be just like you.' I didn't get it until I went there and I was like, 'Oh, nobody can read! This is great!'" she said with a burst of laughter. Cindy and her parents visited Springer and the staff showed her a room with a playground inside it. She wasn't too upset about switching, although Springer staff told her later that the playground was for kids with motor dysfunctions.

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In 1968, Springer became a school for LD students and now limits enrollment exclusively to them. Their mission is "to empower students with learning disabilities to lead successful lives." The Independent School Association of the Central States (ISACS) provides accreditation for Springer. ISACS ensures their schools are non-profit institutions with an educational mission implemented in their curriculum by well-trained staff. ISACS holds frequent conferences, workshops, and webinars for their members. Springer also hosts teacher training in their building for teachers in the area.

Cindy's parents paid six years of Springer tuition. Cindy sounded a little guilty when she said, "I was fortunate enough to have my grandparents help pay for it." In 2011, the United States spent about \$10,600 per-pupil. In 2015, one year at Springer cost \$22,000 for first through sixth graders and \$22,750 for seventh and eighth. Even if tuition

was less when Cindy went there eight years ago, her family still probably spent over \$100,000 on six years of primary education. “My mom always says that if I had never gone to Springer, my self-esteem would have been shot and I would have been so depressed,” Cindy said.

Mercer is one red brick building among a complex of public school buildings set apart from the road where Cindy would have felt set apart from the world. Springer is a three-story, crisp yellow-brown brick building welcomes students with a sweep of stairs in a half circle, meeting at the glass front doors. Tall, clean windows climb up from the doors where students can look out at the old trees and thick lawn. Cindy was probably referring to the vertical sandstone stripes along one side when she said, “The outside looked kind of like a jail.” The six-acre property had a fence around their field, but no fence separated the building from the bike-laned road. The bottom floor of Springer was a gym and cafeteria, upstairs was the intermediate school, and then primary and upper students shared the top floor.

The effects of Springer’s steep tuition show even more inside, where innovative teachers in continuous training teach small classes with materials for oral, visual, and tactile learners, Mac laptops computers, and fully stocked art studios. “There was always a main teacher and an assistant teacher and classes were, like twenty is probably pushing it, maybe fifteen,” Cindy recalled. “The teacher and the assistant teacher would be at different desks and we would be able to go up and ask questions and whatnot,” she said. Springer’s staff to student ratio is one to eight; “They were very in tune with every student and what they needed.” The school only has about two hundred students in total each year. Cindy remembered, “In third grade, I don’t know exactly what the problem

was, but for whatever reason the book was just difficult to see. I don't know, maybe I just didn't like reading... I didn't like reading," she corrected with a short laugh, "I would talk about how the words were fuzzy and the teacher did research on her own time and realized that if you put a colorful, transparent piece of paper over the book that it can help kids' eyes to read better."

Not only were the materials excellent, Springer's atmosphere was carefully constructed to help LD students grow. Cindy's fourth grade teacher also had dyslexia and shared that with the class. That teacher showed Cindy that even an intelligent person could still misspell words on the board. Teachers respected their students' behavior disorders, too. Cindy told me of one, "She would let me go stand in the corner. She made an announcement like, 'Hey guys, Cindy's not in trouble, she just has to stand up!'" Springer's students also have access to psychological, motor, and language therapy, as well as continued evaluation of their disorders. The experiences Cindy got at Springer contributed tremendously to her confidence, clearing the haze of self-doubt and self-consciousness to enable her to focus on learning.

In addition to the hefty tuition Springer charges, they do a lot of fundraising to cover the cost of these resources. Half the students get some financial aid, too. Springer holds an annual event called Springer Celebration where adults play games that simulate what it feels like to have a disability and LD adults share inspiring stories. Two years ago, the speaker was Henry Winkler, an actor from "Happy Days." This playfulness and experimentation translated into the classroom. "They really encouraged art because typically kids with learning disabilities are more creative, so they had an acting club, we

had a choir, a pottery club—that was fun!” Cindy said, remembering pottery, which I imagined to be very clay-caked and smeary for her.

Springer leveled their classes differently than traditional schools. “As I went through school,” Cindy told me, “I never really said I was in fifth grade, instead I was placed in groups of people that were categorized around my same age but also just learned the same way as I did. That’s how they split us up so that teachers could focus on what we needed instead of being all over the place.” For example, Cindy is an auditory learner with dyslexia that stems from a visual processing disorder, and ADHD. She would have her books and exams read to her. Other students have auditory processing disorders, where instead of mixing up p’s, d’s, b’s and q’s on the page, they have trouble turning what they hear into retrievable information. They could use visual learning tricks, like color-coding math problems. With Springer’s rejection of traditional grade levels, the school helps students and teachers make the most of their class time by teaching efficiently to each learning style.

In addition to a curriculum that keeps Springer students on pace with public school students, Cindy said, “They really focused on teaching us how to learn in a mainstream school—having to navigate in our own way because the general school system is only set up for one type of learning and you know, kids with learning disabilities...” she paused, “if they fall on either side of that spectrum then they’re at a disadvantage.” LD students struggle to understand the material. They struggle to get top grades. They struggle to behave school-appropriately. Thinking back to Cindy’s first years at Mercer, it’s easy to see how she could have continued cheating, stopped caring to

try, and started acting out. If she hadn't gone to Springer, Cindy said, "I don't think I would have gone to college."

If Cindy hadn't gone to Springer, she would have been one of the 2.4 million LD students in U.S. public schools receiving special education. Instead of being allowed to move around the classroom as she did at Springer, Cindy may have been disciplined for acting on her ADHD impulses. If not misbehavior, cheating certainly would have landed her in detention, suspension, or expulsion, as it did for half of LD students (1.2 million) in 2011. She could have been held back a year, as 800,000 LD students were. Public schools were ditching the rooms with the "Special kid vibe" for combined classes of general and special education students. The inclusion method grew in the 1990s and would have caught up with Cindy's public school. But still, in mainstream classes, Cindy learned at Springer, teachers don't cater to different learning styles, at least not to the same extent. Instead of all this, Cindy got to go to Springer, where she enjoyed being with students who learned the way she learned. Leaving that safe environment for high school was not easy to do.

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Cindy had to leave Springer after eighth grade for high school, "It's only first grade through eighth grade and there's no high school equivalent of that type of school," she told me. Some students stayed at Springer through their middle school years, but many only attended for a year or two. The graduation ceremony was for everyone who wouldn't be returning to Springer the following year, so Cindy graduated eighth grade with third and fourth graders.

Cindy's parents still wanted to find a school with a strong LD program, so they looked beyond the private high school their older children went to. "I didn't go there because they have zero support for kids with learning disabilities. Actually the Dean of that school, his son went to Springer with me and he didn't even send his own kid there because he knew that it wasn't gonna be the right school for him," Cindy said, for further justification.

Her parents found a private Catholic girls' school in Cincinnati called St. Ursula that had just started an innovative LD program. It was the first in the area to have a separate LD program; "I would go to all the normal classes with the mainstream kids but then for one period a day I had my LD tutoring time and they would go over my notes with me and help me with papers and homework." Cindy estimated that there were about seventy-five other LD kids at St. Ursula out of eight hundred total at the school. Springer had prepared her well for a more mixed environment. She felt comfortable explaining what "LD" meant to the kids who hadn't been around it before.

The LD program sounded a bit like Springer in microcosm. Professional LD teachers would help LD students make notes and lessons compatible with their learning styles. The LD students wouldn't learn new information, but convert the class material into different formats. Cindy explained, "The way that learning disabilities work is that you have to go through a different avenue of learning." Her LD tutors got books on tape for her and even recorded themselves reading books aloud if the materials weren't already provided. Cindy appreciated other resources, like extra time on tests and tactile aids for geometry. Even the smallest concessions for LD students made a big difference to Cindy; "There would be so many times when I would be just sitting there and talking

to one of the tutors and talking out my thought process. They couldn't, obviously, give me the answers, but they would let me talk." Her emphasis that they weren't doing anything academically dishonest probably came from a habit of self-defense. There are a lot of misconceptions about LD students, from the belief that they have mental retardation to the assertion that they aren't really disabled and get unfair advantages from the aid.

Most of the general teachers were on board with the new efforts to support LD students. Cindy had a funny dynamic with her French teacher, since she hated the subject more than any other. With humor and humility, Cindy said, "She understood that I had a language based learning disability and that English was pretty difficult, so French was not really gonna work out for me." Her French teacher would work one-on-one with Cindy, though, and make the challenge as accessible as possible. Other teachers were less understanding. Cindy's science teacher had trouble adjusting to the influx of LD girls. "He was fine with us taking our exams in LD," Cindy said, "but didn't understand why we would ask for our quizzes, if we could have them ahead of time. He would get pissed at us if we would mark with color on the exams." She remembered, "He would try to make LD jokes that the LD teachers could make because they understood and they were nice to us, but he would make them and it would be like, 'Woah, that's out of line.'"

Outside the LD program, St. Ursula was a very new environment. Cindy found the all-girl component helpful, to her surprise, because the additional pressure to be attractive around boys wouldn't have helped what she called her "school-phobia." She could focus on adapting to the lecture style of teaching, where there was very little interaction and hands on learning. The students wore uniforms and had their own tablet

computers with screens that would swivel so you could write on them and textbooks they could access online. Springer had been mostly white middle-class and St. Ursula was, too. Cindy remembered two black girls in her grade of two hundred and one black teacher. Cindy got good grades at St. Ursula, some A's and mostly B's. Arts and sports were big. Cindy rowed on the crew team, travelling hours to meets, eating a coach-endorsed diet, and practicing at dawn.

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The training wheels were really kicked off when Cindy went to college at the University of Cincinnati. Of course, the university has support for special needs students, but Cindy thinks of her three schools as a continuum leading to independence. She was really preparing for that all along, to manage her own learning without help. "What they taught us at Springer was to be an advocate for ourselves: 'You now know what you need, it's your responsibility to go and get it,'" Cindy explained. At college now, she accomplishes that self-sufficiency by introducing her to her professors at the beginning of each semester; "Hi my name is Cindy and I'm dyslexic," she would say, "which actually was a huge advantage because now at the beginning of the semester they already know me," one out of sometimes a hundred or more students. She performed well again, earning mostly B's, and is about to graduate on time with a 3.0.

Her major is Child and Family Studies, a social science. Cindy felt drawn to it because of her experiences and the chance to work at a place like Springer, either educating or counseling. Knowing Cindy's ability to comfort and include homesick and socially awkward campers, I could picture her giving students the same hope and confidence that got her through the challenges of being a student with special needs. She

credits her experiences with this strength, the empathy to see, “You don’t know what a child’s life has been like. I think growing up with my learning disability has shown me that. Just because it appears one way doesn’t mean that there aren’t so many other things going on.”

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Homeschooling for a Love of Learning

Emma & Michelle Grove

Emma is the oldest daughter in the Grove family and Michelle is two years younger. They were both homeschooled in Cincinnati until high school. The Groves helped start a few cooperatives, or co-ops, that function as informal learning communities. When I first met Emma and Michelle at summer camp, I hardly believed they were biological sisters. Emma has hazel eyes and curly brown hair that hangs around her broad shoulders. Michelle, her younger sister, is porcelain pale with deep brown eyes and straight blonde hair. Sometimes their voices sound identical, both delicate and strong, like glass. They spoke articulately about their experiences when I pulled them aside last summer. Michelle and I talked for over an hour on the dusty, sunken couch in the staff cabin where campers couldn't interrupt us. Emma and I walked to a quiet camp building down the road. Emma had her brown curls tucked into a ponytail and pulled through the strap of a baseball cap. I asked them both questions about learning outside of school and the perspective they brought to public high school.

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The Groves settled down outside Cincinnati, where Mr. Grove's airline was based. He's a pilot and Mrs. Grove, Becca, has been travelling all her life. I called Becca in April to get a better idea of the family's switch to homeschooling, which happened when Emma and Michelle were too young to reliably remember. Becca told me, "I was homeschooled and I had no intention of homeschooling my kids, but I lived abroad and that was the only way for a girl to get an education." She grew up in Burma, now Myanmar, and then moved back to the U.S. and enrolled in traditional schools. She

hopped around the country during seven years of college at almost as many universities, where she studied biology. I can't picture Becca without her long, gray braid, but she probably had brown hair back then, like Emma.

The first two Grove children, sons Eric and Andrew, went to a public elementary school in Cincinnati. When the boys were ten and eight, Becca and her husband were spending about twenty-five hours a week volunteering at the school. Both boys appeared to be doing well. Eric, the oldest, took an accelerated math program and Andrew's teachers loved him. Then Becca and her husband heard the school was cutting Eric's advanced program and noticed he spent his class time doing errands for his teacher. Becca didn't know what Eric was doing in school, but he spent all his time at home studying. "I'm not sure he knew he had sisters," Becca said. "My other son was lazy and very charming and I discovered that he didn't know how to read when he was in second grade," she told me. Andrew had a photographic memory and could repeat anything that he heard, but couldn't read it on his own. "Even though we were helping to educate all the students, our kids weren't getting what they needed," Becca said of her and Mr. Grove's volunteer work with some frustration.

Becca and her husband started talking about pulling Eric and Andrew out of school. The Groves were very close with people at the school through their volunteer work, but they felt they had to make the choices that were best for their kids. "They needed the space to become more broadly human," Becca said. She has the voice you would want in a yoga teacher—deeply peaceful and strong. Leaving the public school was not a judgment on the teachers or even the school; Becca felt there were holes in the public school system that no school or teacher could help. For example, public schools

have to give standardized tests for accountability purposes. They also can't teach morals or give students individual attention like a parent can. When Becca and her husband told the school their decision, there was an initial shocked pause. Then a teacher tried to reassure them and said that even if their sons were out and not learning for two years, they could still come back on grade level. I have read nothing to support this teacher's assertion, but maybe it was true for Eric and Andrew, which was all the Groves really needed to know. Either way, Becca said, "When my husband heard that, it was settled— Why were we sending them there at all?"

Emma had been in preschool when the Groves made the switch and Michelle was just a baby. For the first fourteen years of their lives, learning at home was all they knew. Michelle remembers waking up around nine most days and reading as much as she could. "My mom's rule was that she didn't care when I woke up or when I did my work as long as I did my work. So there were a lot of days where I was like, 'I'm not feelin it right now!' and I would go read my book or something," Michelle said. The kids didn't have to sit at desks or anything. "We didn't want to create school at home," Becca said. On a typical day, the children would have breakfast together, do their work at the dining room table or in their own rooms, and have lunch together. By lunchtime, they were usually finished with a day's worth of work, unless they had decided to sleep in or skip a day. The kids were free to talk, have snacks, and play music while they studied, but it was usually relatively quiet. They would take little science trips to look for animals, fossils, or play in creeks. That's where Emma found her niche, in biology like her mom. Michelle took art classes like drawing and pottery, foreshadowing her love of photography.

The Groves didn't know that Emma had dyslexia when she left preschool, but they would not have wanted her in traditional school with a learning disability. If the regimentation and lack of individuality in traditional schools could stifle students without learning disabilities, then nobody in the Grove family wanted to see what it would do to a dyslexic student. Studying at her own pace, in her own style, Emma learned that reading and math took extra effort, but she could overcome it. Emma loved learning as much as Michelle did, in spite of her learning disability.

The way the Groves did school made each child eager to learn, ensured they mastered their material, and wasted little time. Becca rarely taught lessons because they were all at different levels, but she would provide the books, worksheets, and projects, especially when they were little. Michelle remembers the vocabulary quizzes her mom would give: "She would come sit down and be like, 'Spell the word,' or 'What's the definition,' or 'This is the definition, what's the word.' If I didn't get it—I was never graded, either, I didn't have grades until high school—so I didn't pass or fail or any of that, just whatever words I didn't get, those were on my list for next week." This method struck me as absurdly logical. A grade is just a high five or a wagging finger, and then traditional teachers need to move on. Students who might understand the material with more time or new strategies start to get the stale mantra, "Try harder next time." For Michelle, her motivation was stimulation rather than a sticker by her name: "If I didn't want the same list every week, I had to learn them."

Emma and Michelle remember their mom being "hands on" and giving them choices in what they wanted to learn. "I could explore what I wanted to explore," Emma told me, meaning in her curriculum. The attitude of exploration pertains to an outlook on

life, too. “My mom made a deal with us that if we wrote a research paper about a place that we would travel there,” Emma said and responded to my jealous surprise with a guilty laugh and smile. “I didn’t really realize this at the time, but that involved us going to the library, getting books and reading, and writing up a whole paper,” she explained. Of course, with that type of motivation, the Grove kids were writing research papers long before other students. Emma picked Hawaii around fourth grade. They’ve also been to India, Burma, Croatia, Mexico, and more. They wouldn’t have been able to do that on a school schedule, or without their dad’s perks as a pilot. Becca showed them that learning couldn’t be confined to a classroom. When I asked about “time off,” Emma stumbled a little, trying to answer. My question betrayed a mentality shaped by the school bell that she couldn’t quite translate to her experience. “Everything is a learning opportunity,” she said. In a way, there is no time off, she and Michelle learned early.

Some of Emma and Michelle’s first lessons in math and chemistry started in their kitchen. The sisters did experiments like making vinegar and baking soda explode and forming sugar and salt crystals with boiling water and string. “We made paints out of fruits and vegetables,” Emma said, “and then cooking is a whole science on its own so we learned to bake at a really early age and I consider that a learning experience.” She got excited just remembering the experiments. Emma and Michelle did some biology in the kitchen, too. “Mom decided that she wanted us to dissect a frog, so she ordered one. She ordered a frog, a dead frog, and she made us dissect it on the kitchen counter,” Michelle told me with a laugh she couldn’t contain. Becca encouraged these experiments, but “It wasn’t my mom teaching us,” Michelle said, “She was like, okay you’ve colored the frog guts in your little coloring books, so you should know it.” Becca was really enabling

them to teach themselves. Emma reflected on these episodes where they turned the kitchen into a science lab: “I learned to think outside of the box because it wasn’t like, ‘Ok here’s your experiment and here are the supplies,’ it was like, ‘Ok, here’s the kitchen counter and this is what we have!’”

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The lines of learning and playing continued to blend when the Groves first enrolled in classes at a cooperative. Co-ops give homeschoolers a chance to learn things outside their parents’ abilities and interact with other kids their age. The programs vary across a wide spectrum, but Becca had a clear idea: “I define co-ops as a group of parents who have gotten together with similar goals in mind for their kids.” Michelle had the impression that going to classes was for her social development. Learning just happened as a side effect. If only all students could feel that way about school.

The co-op Emma and Michelle went to until they were twelve and ten was called Leaves of Learning. At the co-op, held in a rented out building, classes weren’t separated by grades and students could choose what they wanted to take. “All of my teachers were my friends’ parents,” Michelle said. Emma and Michelle did group projects or group classes with their homeschooled friends, hanging out and having lunch together. They went once a week. Now, Leaves of Learning can be used as full-time school as they have classes Tuesday through Friday from September to May, but families still design their own program and can choose to take as little as one hour of class each week. The co-op hires many of their teachers and offers hundreds of options for creative, interdisciplinary approaches to traditional subjects: animal-themed sciences, cooking, math games. All the

classes have a student to teacher ratio of 10:1 or lower. Leaves of Learning is accredited now through a group called AERO, the Alternative Education Resource Organization.

The increased structure at Leaves of Learning pushed the Groves away. “It stopped being a co-op that supported new ideas and became a school,” Becca said. The family went to other co-ops instead, one called the Extraordinary Learning League and another called Homeschool Family Friends. Neither of these have an online presence or any aspirations to resemble traditional schools. These co-ops rent out park buildings and meet once a week. Unlike Leaves of Learning, the parents and students at these less structured alternative schools have more control over their schedule and courses. For example, one of the programs has students who want to learn Spanish, so the families hired a Spanish teacher.

Some of the parents are certified teachers, but others, like Becca, are not. She didn’t have any problem admitting her limitations. In fact, Becca enjoyed relearning a lot of things she’d missed or forgotten alongside her kids. “When I got high enough that my mom didn’t know how to teach me anymore I went to tutors,” Michelle told me. The children also had a math tutor who was a high school teacher and came to the house after school. Becca has developed enormous respect for teachers in her experiences working closely with them at school, as tutors, at co-ops, and as houseguests. It’s the constraints wrapped around teachers with which she has an issue. “So many teachers go in and they want to teach these kids, and they should be able to, but they have to spend so much time testing the kids,” Becca said. In traditional schools, teachers spend months on tests that often don’t reflect students’ actual aptitude. The unions, too, can hold back the best teachers by reinforcing the yearly pay scale and keeping inferior teachers around, Becca

explained, “But I do think teachers deserve better pay, and if they did get better pay, then maybe they wouldn’t need these contracts.”

Emma and Michelle got to socialize a lot, even outside the co-ops. Each week Becca took them to art and music lessons, tutors, and friends’ houses. Michelle remembered one group tutor session: “I had a writing tutor that came to my house and tutored me and my sisters and two homeschooled friends.” At the co-ops, Emma and Michelle addressed teachers by their first names, and learned to build respectful relationships with adults. They get asked too often, “Did you have any friends?” by peers who found out they’d been homeschooled. “There are so many opportunities out there for homeschoolers that the larger population doesn’t really know,” Michelle said with wide eyes. Emma and Michelle told me these aspects of their education even when I didn’t ask, as if to preempt the uncomfortable questions they’d come to view as inevitable.

Becca confirmed the toll homeschooling stereotypes took on her family. “The way people reacted was probably the hardest part,” she said. More so than the time commitment or the cost of tutors, co-ops, or materials, the stigma of homeschooling stung. Becca and her husband lost friends when they left the public schools. Parents who had kept their students in public school took the Groves’ decision to leave as judgment on their choice to stay. The Groves got pigeonholed as religious fanatics, the kind who homeschool to teach extremist beliefs, although the Groves are not religious at all. The family had to argue with school officials who adamantly demanded test scores and transcripts the Groves didn’t have. The Grove women carry a kind of confidence with them that comes from learning how to roll your eyes at the people who try to limit them with labels. “People would ask, ‘Well how are you going to socialize your kids?’

probably just after talking about how their child was bullied and beaten up in the schoolyard. And my kids are talking to them, looking them in the eye, adults and other children,” Becca said with thick irony, “I don’t even know how to answer that question anymore. My kids are socialized.”

So many people don’t know their rights when it comes to education that defying the norm seems forbidden, or at least frightening. It still shocks people when Emma and Michelle say, “I never identified with any grade,” or, “I didn’t take a formal test until high school.” But awareness of opportunities and choices is growing. Ohio’s flexible laws offer homeschoolers three options for alternative assessments: have children take a test at their grade level, have a licensed teacher review a portfolio, or have anyone the district and family agree on review the work. The Groves use the third option, maintain that homeschooling is an accessible and legitimate option of education, and defend their rights to it.

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When Emma decided to go to the public high school, Turpin, Becca helped her enroll, enduring a memorable conversation with a guidance counselor in the process. Becca presented a list of courses she and Emma wanted and the counselor demanded proof of Emma’s academic level.

“Where are her test scores?” Becca remembers her asking.

“She hasn’t taken any,” Becca answered, to the counselor’s confusion, “I can show you the books she’s studied.”

“But they have to have these tests,” the guidance counselor kept insisting. “I’m going to get the principal.”

After a short interval, the Turpin principal entered and asked, “Why do you want your daughter to take these classes?”

“Well, because you have two tracks for students at this school, classes that get them to college and classes that may or may not get them to graduation. My kids are going to college, or at least I want them to have that option when they get to that point,” Becca replied, with her cool confidence.

“Go ahead and put her in whatever classes you want,” the principal allowed, “and if she’s doing well in a couple of months we’ll keep her there.”

In reality, Turpin has fewer dropouts than even an average high school in the state or the nation. As of 2014, 92% of Turpin’s seniors were heading to college, and 45% of the student body took AP courses. The school has over twenty AP offerings for their 1,130 students. The student body is largely white and middle-class. The *U.S. News Report* ranked Turpin twenty-seventh in Ohio for the 2011-12 school year. The district built Turpin in 1974 as a partially open, three-wing brick structure, tucked into the forested complex of other district schools and surrounded by top rated sports fields and courts. Emma, the biologist, could enjoy well-funded, spacious science labs for the first time.

Emma chose Turpin over her staying at home and enrolling in postsecondary school, as Eric had done before her. In some states, like Ohio, if a student enrolls in high school but is too advanced, the school pays for classes at a state university. Postsecondary usually refers to universities, but vocational and continued education for adults are also common, though not funded by the district. For Emma, it would essentially have been two years of free college, and another example of the benefits that come with knowing

your rights. But high school drew Emma in and Becca supported her with only occasional remarks about their new travel restrictions.

Michelle, the younger sister, explained a similar compulsion to enroll in high school. “I needed a change,” she said, “I was worried that I wasn’t on the same level as everyone else and that I wasn’t going to do well in college. I just wanted to be standard. That’s what I wanted.” Her confession surprised me, coming from the daughter of independent Becca who calls this competitive mentality “school programming.” But many young teens go through periods of self-doubt, and Michelle’s made her crave being “standard.” She had a habit of measuring her progress against friends in public schools and usually found herself ahead or at least on par. Another reason Michelle chose Turpin was social. Her friend group had started growing apart and she wanted a new start.

Both Emma and Michelle got into the AP tracks and stayed there, making friends with their similarly motivated peers, but they did notice social differences that wouldn’t meet the “school programmed” eye. “I could teach myself and learn things, where other people were like, ‘Oh we didn’t learn that,’ but it was in the book, so you could have read it,” Emma remembered. Even the top students at Turpin didn’t motivate themselves to learn. If the material wasn’t on the test, learning it was wasted energy. “I chose to be here so I’m going to be doing the best that I can,” Michelle said, “but then I realized that nobody else chose to be there.” Other students thought Turpin was the only option, the only route to success. And success depended on grades.

But instead of feeling pressure to master material, Emma and Michelle felt pressure to care primarily about grades. We called this “working the system,” a topic that both Emma and Michelle talked a lot about. Emma remembers very clearly her group

project on the savanna because the teacher knocked them down two letter grades for submitting it incorrectly online. She used to get annoyed when people's grades got bumped up, too. She said, "I remember one girl who went in and argued with the teacher because she had like a 92.3 and she needed a 92.5 to get an A, and it was just like, really? You didn't do well enough to get the A!" But Emma learned to work the system, too. She got a B one quarter of Spanish, and A the next, and used an exam exemption to skip her final, averaging her Spanish grade into an A overall. Michelle, who had always excelled academically, said she fell into the grade game, too: "I started trying less and working the system more." A teacher's study of five top students at a top school revealed that they had earned their success by cheating, lying, and doing anything it took to get the grades:

They realize that they are caught in a system where achievement depends more on 'doing'—going through the correct motions—than on learning and engaging with the curriculum. Instead of thinking deeply about the content of their courses and delving into projects and assignments, the students focus on managing the work load and honing strategies that will help them achieve high grades. Pope 4

In addition to "working the system," Emma and Michelle felt a stifling social pressure to be normal. Emma could outperform her peers in math—no small feat given that her dyslexia made math one of her hardest subjects—but instead of recognizing Emma's accomplishment, other students made her feel uncomfortable, once telling her she "ruined the curve." It got to the point where, "There were times in math class where I would know the answer but I wouldn't say anything, even if I'd done well on a test, I just wouldn't say anything," Emma told me, shaking her head at herself.

Michelle tutored other students at Turpin when she was a senior. The kids she saw had often given up: "They either had been over it and didn't care or they had a different learning style that no school had ever recognized and they were so beaten down they

thought they were idiots,” she said. Traditional A and B students at Turpin didn’t help the C, D, and F students’ situation because they felt they had earned their success, that they were superior to their struggling peers. Michelle had a little more empathy because she knew that memorizing and lecturing weren’t the only learning styles. A sophomore football player came to Michelle for almost every subject and she noticed, “He wasn’t stupid but he just didn’t learn the way the school was teaching him. He was better at computers and processes, he needed a map, like a numbered list.” Michelle compared the students with alternate learning styles to her sister Emma’s dyslexia, “By the time she went to public school she was aware of it and she knew how she learned as opposed to just flailing in school, trying to learn how everyone else did.”

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With so many students either giving up or giving in to the grade system, Emma and Michelle could understand why some teachers treated the students like delinquents, but they hated it. Emma said, “The respect from teachers was really important to me because I think it was a really, mentally unhealthy environment to be in when you felt like your teachers didn’t trust you or didn’t care about you.” Instead of being coached by the teacher, it seemed students had to prove their worthiness and compete for respect. Michelle had the same problem, most memorably with the biology teacher freshman year: “She didn’t have very much respect for the kids and to me that was so foreign. I was like, ‘Why aren’t you giving me respect and expecting that I’m going to do the best that I can?’”

Emma and Michelle are trustworthy, hard workers, but some teachers at Turpin treated them like lazy cheaters. Instead of helping them learn, Emma remembers teachers

lecturing: “You guys aren’t trying hard enough,” as if trying harder to open a locked door without the key could help. Emma would feel guilty at first, after these lectures, and a little apprehensive to see her grade, but she usually scored well. At home, Emma and Michelle had always been treated as individuals, never chastised for not understanding, especially not when they did, in fact, understand. Michelle had similar reactions in her freshmen year, “Every time we did something wrong it was a huge lecture,” essentially, “I’m expecting you to fail, or to not try, not want to do it, and when you do I’ll be there to catch you,” instead of, “I’m here to help you succeed.” That was her biology class, and a lot of students did either cheat or fail, maybe because they were treated like cheaters, too intimidated to ask for help, or just finished caring. Although Michelle passed without cheating, she dreaded going to that class everyday. The teachers and students were no longer partners in some of Turpin’s classrooms; they were on opposite teams.

Some other teachers meant well and treated them well, but just couldn’t teach. The chemistry teacher had his whole class confused after lessons. Michelle said, “A bunch of my friends actually failed the class, but I figured out that his learning style wasn’t mine. So I took the textbook home every night and read the whole textbook—that was the only reason I passed the class.” The kindness and respect she had for these teachers who made her work so much harder was impressive. It gets better. Using her knowledge of learning styles and her ability to be her own teacher, Michelle started a study group and got her friends through chemistry, too. They wouldn’t have done it themselves, Michelle thought, because they didn’t know it could work.

Their favorite teachers challenged and respected them. English and history are Michelle’s best subjects, but even Emma, who favored biology, saw the disrespect in the

biology teacher and preferred the AP English and history teachers. “They had been there forever, they knew how to do it, and they were still giving their heart and soul to it, and they respected me,” Michelle said. Emma thought it was the challenge that engaged students in those classes. These teachers worked with the students toward the mutual goal of learning, helping them when they struggled, but expecting them to succeed. In a lot of ways, Emma and Michelle had grown up on that style of teaching at home, and the traditional students at Turpin preferred it, too.

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Epilogue

When I began this project, I thought education reform was much more unified than it is. People do seem unified in that they want to improve education and close achievement gaps, but they disagree strongly on how to do that. It starts with the types of schools. I assumed my research would point me toward charter schools as the beginning of a solution, but it was not that simple. I also expected to find more blame with teachers for the disparities and found myself taking up their cause instead. Through these women's stories, broader sociological issues stepped into the spotlight as culprits of educational inequality. What else could explain the minority school's metal detectors and the white school's bike lanes? If only parents had more resources like time and experience, we found ourselves saying, if only everyone knew their rights; if only schools could be more integrated and low-income- and immigrant-friendly.

I asked Emma and Michelle if they would homeschool their potential future children. After all the two of them had said about the love of learning they found at home compared to the structured system of school, I thought they would say yes, but both sisters said they would look into their district's public schools first. When parents "look into" schools, they try to find test scores, although Emma and Michelle might know better. Peg Tyre issues a polemic against standardized testing in *The Good School*, citing research and testers themselves to explain how the tests do not show student achievement. Below average test scores could scare parents away from schools like Karina's in Brooklyn. Aside from scores, parents might search for their public school's funding data. Ann's school in Los Banos might not impress parents; the high school has been reporting budget cuts for years. Jonathan Kozol showed how important funding was

for a school in *Savage Inequalities*, where he visited top schools like Emma and Michelle's suburban high school to struggling schools like Ms. Lane's urban elementary. Kozol found their spending per-pupil matched up with their reputations. But if families avoid low-funded schools, the schools won't improve.

Let's say Emma and Michelle weren't impressed with their public school. They might move on to a charter option—still cheap for them in both time and money. In 1996, only sixteen states and the District of Columbia had charter schools. In 2012, forty-two states and D.C. had a total of 6,004 charter schools. Even growing as quickly as they are, the demand for charter schools is higher than the supply. In 2010, Davis Guggenheim's award-winning documentary *Waiting For Superman* made charters look great with their rejection of tracking students into leveled classes, a more engaging atmosphere, and nonunionized teachers paid based on merit. However, this reputation charters have for accountability and forward thinking is not earned across the board. "I have really mixed feelings about charter schools," Ms. Thomas said, because outside of the well-known, high-performing programs featured in *Waiting for Superman*, "There are so, so, so many that aren't producing great results." Ms. Lane felt strong apprehension, too, saying, "I'm very, very leery of them." She did not trust the private operation of charters, did not believe they provided better educations, and did not like the way they took resources from the public schools she worked in.

This "school shopping" that I'm imagining Emma and Michelle are doing is evidence in itself of a privilege not all families have. When families switch their students out of public schools, they siphon off students who are already more likely to succeed and put them in separate schools. If they switch into charters, then the public school is

hurt doubly as the district has to split their already small pie piece of funding between the two schools. Increasing funding for charters and alternative schools would help districts where students are already doing well, Ms. Lane thought. She didn't think the parents of her students would be able to take advantage of proposals to give parents more choice: "Who's going to tell them their rights? Not the district," Ms. Lane said, "They're young parents, young families in survival mode—Do I have time to learn my options? Look up schools?" Cindy's mom was stay-at-home when she found the school for LD students. Becca taught her children, but didn't work outside the home. "In all reality," Ms. Thomas said, "I wish that all public schools were great and we didn't need alternatives."

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At every school, students need to be challenged by their teachers. It might be a common mantra—higher standards, higher performance—but Karina proved its truth, as did many of Ms. Thomas's students. Karina, Ann, Cindy, Emma, and Michelle all explicitly preferred teachers who challenged them. Ms. Lane and her primary team saw the value in that motto as well, trying to accommodate a wide range of student abilities with each of their thematic units. "We never wanted to be complacent or flat," she said, referring to advanced students, "which would be really easy to do because there are so many students who are struggling." That kind of excellent teaching is not being rewarded with the system today. Ambitious, intelligent young people who want stimulating careers and fair compensation are unlikely to look into teaching. A comparison of Bureau of Labor Statistics data revealed:

In 2010 the median income of an American teacher was \$54,000 per year, similar to the salary of a police officer or librarian, but significantly less than that of an accountant (\$64,000), a registered nurse (\$65,000), or a dental hygienist

(\$70,000), not to mention a lawyer (\$114,000), a computer programmer (\$74,000), or a college professor (\$69,000).

If teachers were paid minimum wage as babysitters for each of their students, they would make six figures every academic year, even at a conservative estimate of eight hours a day with twenty students for 180 days. Teachers, like most professionals, want the freedom to grow, enjoy their work, and maybe even make a difference. That may sound cliché, but seeing Ms. Lane's excitement when she remembered her "Primary Team" and the thematic units they organized made teacher autonomy sound enriching and engaging for both teachers and their students.

Teachers do not shy away from evaluation. In fact, most want to be evaluated more, as long as it is done fairly. Teachers want to teach their students and improve their craft; they didn't become teachers for the money. Currently, the U.S. is increasing the stakes on teacher quality by firing underperforming teachers, but they are using standardized test scores as a proxy. This implementation provides incentives for teachers to play the same grade game Emma and Michelle noticed in high school: sacrifice learning for scores. Some teachers have cheated, but they can influence scores without breaking the law and still hurt students as a side effect. For example, teachers may sacrifice their curriculum to practice standardized test questions, or focus on top performing students who can increase test averages. A catalyst for the increased firing of under-performing teachers, Michelle Rhee, responded famously to the fact that these scores are imprecise: "Better the adults get screwed than the kids."

The impenetrable protection tenure offers teachers doesn't sit right with many people, even teacher supporters like Becca, Ms. Thomas, and Ms. Lane would change some aspects of it if they could. Unfortunately, screwing the adults—that is, firing

teachers on uncertain evidence—can screw the kids, too. Teacher turnover interrupts the cohesion of a school's staff, which a 2013 study proved, negatively affects student achievement in addition to costing the school more money.

Attacking teachers also chinks away at the little prestige associated with the profession. The negative associations could have long term consequences for recruiting and retaining future teachers. Almost 25% of incoming public school teachers quit within their first three years. Donald Boyd has conducted several studies on teacher retention, finding that highly qualified teachers are more likely to transfer out of low-income schools, but that highly effective teachers are more likely to stay. Teachers who come from outside education with prestigious college backgrounds and high SAT scores head off to other careers after less than three years. About 30% quit within five years, and low-income schools lose significantly more. “People in our generation just don't want to become teachers—tenure is attractive because it draws people in,” Ms. Thomas mused. Instead of firing under-performing teachers and causing all these negative side effects, investing in their continued education could improve both instruction and retention. Most professions offer continued training and opportunities for leadership. Teaching does not. Some U.S. cities have begun implementing peer reviews, observations, and lesson planning workshops, where excellent teachers mentor underperforming teachers. The experiments have had positive results and have the potential to increase both teacher quality and teacher retention.

“Education is such a mess,” Ms. Lane said, “It's just like, where do you start.” Her schools are in a state of emergency, achievement gaps are persistent, the problems are only partially explained, and the solutions less so. And yet everyone I spoke with had

stories to tell that could make us smarter about schools. Ann saw segregation within a diverse school. Karina witnessed the achievement gap in play. Ms. Lane suffered incredibly inept administration and challenges in an impoverished community, but still serves as a testament to what teachers can accomplish. Ms. Thomas infiltrated a low-performing charter school and learned how underserved some low-income, minority students are, especially her SPED students who lose confidence on top of everything else. Cindy became an expert on learning diversity throughout her years at private schools. Emma and Michelle saw the way schools can oppress students, when schools are meant to do the opposite. In this mess, it's important to "Get everyone involved, all on the same page," as Ms. Lane said. Parents, teachers, administrators, legislators, and reformers, all. By sharing education stories like these, everyone can help make schools smart.

Acknowledgments

This project is sponsored by the Honor Scholar Department at DePauw University. I feel so fortunate to be a part of this interdisciplinary, academic community that continually fosters this incredible opportunity for undergraduate students to complete a thesis with three faculty advisors.

I am indebted to the women who generously allowed me explore their stories. They accepted long phone and video calls, met with me in person, and answered my follow-up questions long after we first discussed the project. They are incredible women and I'm grateful to have been trusted to share their stories. I hope I have stayed true to their voices, ideas, and experiences without overstepping any boundaries.

Professors Marnie McInnes, Alicia Suarez, and Rebecca Alexander invested so much time and energy to turn my measly collection of unrefined ideas into a thesis with their encouragement and expertise. These professors were my libraries, editors, and fact checkers. They made this thesis both possible and enjoyable.

I owe my own education to my loving parents, Loren and Tom Tozer, who have always supported me and continue to by selflessly listening to my concerns and reading my drafts throughout this process. Thank you.

Notes

Notes Introduction

- *Initial interviews were conducted and recorded between July and December 2014. I followed up with the subjects from that time until April 2015.
- 5 Data on my high school from the 2011 and 2013 Illinois Report Cards, the *Chicago Tribune*.
- 5 Bettie, Julie. *Women Without Class*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003. Print.
- 6 Solomon, Nancy. *Mind the Gap: Why Good Schools are Failing Black Students*. 2009.
- 8 The “braided essay” excerpt is from Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd’s collaborative book, *Good Prose*, 2013, page 74.
- 8-9 Definitions of schools based off of the glossary in the U.S. Dept. of Education “The Condition of Education” *National Center for Education Statistics* 2014 and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education “Alternative Education: A Brief History and Research Synthesis,” 2002.
- 9 Jonathan Kozol’s 1991 book, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*.
- 9 “In 2009, 8%...” Mortensen, Tom. “Bachelor’s Degree Attainment by Age 24 by Family Income Quartiles, 1970 to 2009,” cited in the KIPP College Completion Report.
- 9 “Individualism belittles...” for an intensive, philosophical examination of the American ideology, look into *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah et al. 1996.
- 10 “debate over the term ‘Hispanic’...” overviewed in Joel Spring’s fifth edition of *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States*, in 2007.

Notes

From the Top of the Class, Ann Higgins

- 11 Los Banos City of Commerce, “The City We Serve: Los Banos,” gives a brief history and summary of the city.
- 12 Los Banos Junior High School information comes from their own website.
- 13 Julie Bettie’s book is called *Women Without Class*, published in 2003 by the University of California Press. The interview I use is on Bettie’s page eighty-four.
- 16 Data on Ann’s high school is in the “Los Banos High School: Executive Summary School Accountability Report Card 2011-2012.”
- 18 Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*, also published in 2003 by the University of California Press.

- 18 “school sanctioned routes to success” comes from Bettie’s *Women Without Class*, 108.
- 20 “Research has shown...” on *blueengine.com* “About: The Problem,” the education nonprofit committed to college readiness cites four different sources on the impact of academic rigor on college completion: *1998 High School Transcript Study*, *High School and Beyond*, *NELS 1988*, and *College Knowledge: What it Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready*.
- 20 Data on Ann’s high school is in the “Los Banos High School: Executive Summary School Accountability Report Card 2011-2012.”
- 20 Los Banos demographics for 2011-2012 are recorded at *city-data*’s website under “Los Banos,” which I accessed in December 2014.
- 22-3 San Luis and Valley statistics come from the “San Luis High School: Executive Summary School Accountability Report Card, 2011-2012” and “Valley Los Banos Community Day: School Accountability Report Card, 2012-2013,” as well as their school and district websites.
- 27-8 “closely tied to their Mexican identity...” Sergio Chavez’s study published in 2005 with *Rural Sociology*, “Community, Ethnicity, and Class in a Changing Rural California Town.”

Notes

“*The Sky is the Limit*” Karina Martinez

- 30 “almost 50% of the population...” 48.8% of New Yorkers speak a language other than English at home, reported by census.gov data from 2009-2013.
- 30 “As of 2010, students registering...” New York policies on bilingual education are in “NYSED Regulations & Policies regarding Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners (LEP/ELL)” a pamphlet available for download through nysed.gov.
- 31 “Elementary School Quality Snapshot” NYC Department of Education, 2013-2014 for P.S. 24. Available for download online, through schools.nyc.gov
- 32 “Middle School Quality Snapshot” NYC Department of Education, 2013-2014 for I.S. 136. Available for download online, schools.nyc.gov
- 32 Demographics of East New York come from censusreporter.org
- 33 “Low-income individuals...” the dominant conceptions of poor people come from social justice author and activist Paul Gorski’s article, “The Myth of the ‘Culture of Poverty,’” came out in *Educational Leadership*, 2008.
- 33 “Latino parents...” Basquedano-Lopez et al. publish this finding in their 2013 paper, “Equity Issues in Parental and Community Involvement in Schools: What Teacher Educators Need to Know.”
- 33 “Anglo-Americans...” and the history of prejudice in America is informed by Joel Spring’s fifth edition of *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States*, published in New York by McGraw Hill in 2007.
- 34 “A public school teacher in D.C...” Kozol quotes this woman in, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*, 185.

- 34 Peg Tyre's book *The Good School: How Smart Parents Get Their Kids the Education They Deserve*, came out in 2011 with Henry Holt and Company.
- 36-7 SEO gives an overview of their history, mission, and results in their website on pages "SEO Scholars," and "SEO-USA," seoscholars.org and seo-usa.org
- 37-8 Secondary School for Law, John Jay Educational Campus stats and pictures come from two websites: Inside Schools' (a Center for New York City Affairs and The New School project) page "Secondary School for Law," last updated in 2015, and the school's "School Portal" page with New York City's government site.
- 38 Park Slope details and stats on P.S. 321 come from their Inside Schools' page "P.S. 321 William Penn," and a *New York Times* article, "At an Overcrowded School in Park Slope, No One Wants to Leave," by Elisabeth Harris in 2012.
- 38-9 1950's style segregation at John Jay, "Racial war at John Jay HS," by Natalie O'Neil in 2011, in *The Brooklyn Paper*, during Karina's final semester at SSL.
- 38-9 Information on Millennium High School in Manhattan can be found at Inside Schools' page "Millenium High School" and in the above article in *The Brooklyn Paper*.
- 41 "Although the majority..." the student to teacher race gap is reported in *Governing*, "The Classroom Racial Gap Hits an All-Time High," March 2015 by Chris Kardish.

Notes

What We're Up Against in Low-income Schools, Ms. Tracy Lane

- * Names of people, schools, and cities have all been changed in the writing, quoted lines, and the citations as well.
- 44 Statistics on Lincoln Elementary's demographics come from city-data, the details were left out to preserve anonymity.
- 44 More detail on Title 1 can be found at the U.S. Dept. of Education website, "Programs: Title 1 Part A."
- 45 The *Forbes* article is called "Teachers Spend Their Own Money on Back to School Supplies," by Nicole Leinbach-Rehyle, 19 August 2014.
- 45 Comparing U.S. teacher preparation to Finland in China came up in many resources, but specifically Goldstein's *Teacher Wars* used them a lot.
- 46 Classroom management is a topic Tracy Kidder explores in his creative non-fiction story, *Among Schoolchildren*.
- 46 The school-to-prison pipeline and overpolicing of schools made headlines recently in a *St. Louis Today* opinion piece, "Another dubious distinction for Missouri: No. 1 in suspensions," by the Editorial Board on 18 March 2015, and a *PBS* feature, "Fact Sheet: How Bad Is the School-to-Prison Pipeline?" by Carla Amurao.
- 48 Peg Tyre's book *The Good School: How Smart Parents Get Their Kids the Education They Deserve*, came out in 2011 with Henry Holt and Company.
- 49 "Her classroom operates like a family," more on classroom culture in a 2009 audio documentary called "Mind the Gap: Why Good Schools are Failing Black Students" by Nancy Solomon with *PRX*.

- 50 Segregation, school funding, and achievement all intersect in Jonathan Kozol's
1991 tour-de-force, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*.
- 52 In "Equity Issues in Parental and Community Involvement in Schools: What
Teachers and Educators Need to Know," Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, &
Hernandez, review research on parent involvement in education in 2013.
- 55 "Typically, in the United States..." Kozol's page 55 of *Savage Inequality:
Children in America's Schools*.
- 56 "Education experts..." through to the six year estimate for principal retention
come from "The Attributes and Career Paths of Principals: Implications for
Improving Policy," by Papa, Lankford, and Wyckoff.

Notes

"I Think You Can Do It," Ms. Thomas

- * Names of people, schools, and cities have all been changed in the writing, quoted
lines, and citations as well.
- 64 "Even well prepared teachers..." Tyre's book *The Good School* and Dana
Goldstein's *Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*,
from 2014, both review data on teacher effectiveness and training. Tyre writes
that the fourth year is an average teacher's peak.
- 64 "A study from 2015..." from "Teach for America Passes a Big Test," *Times*, 4
March 2015, by Haley Sweetland Edwards
- 64 TFA publishes extensive data on all aspects of their approach and progress, which
is one reason they're consistently ranked so highly by Charity Navigator. The
information I use is from their website on page, "TFA On the Record."
- 64 KIPP, TNTP, and Blue Engine were founded by TFA alum Dave Levin in 1994,
Michelle Rhee in 1997, and Nick Ehrmann in 2009, respectively. Their work
extends beyond these projects and can be found in interviews and on the news,
but these organizations' websites are a good place to start.
- 65 "On teacher training..." interview with Dave Levin from *Freakonomics Radio* "Is
America's Education Problem Really Just a Teacher Problem?" Stephen J.
Dubner, 27 November 2014.
- 66 "Charters in D.C." charter policies available in the No Child Left Behind law
on the U.S. Dept. of Education website and information for school choice is
summarized on Great Schools' website under pages for D.C. charters.
- 66 "Critics of charters..." one 2008 criticism in the *Washington Post*, "Public Role,
Private Gain," takes issue with them as nonprofit businesses operating on
government funds. Another by Stan Karp, "Charter Schools and the Future of
Public Education," in *Rethinking Schools*, names more issues like siphoning and
the actual under-achieving of many charters.
- 67 Models of Special Education and support come from Lorna Idol's study, "Toward
Inclusion of Special Education Students in General Education: A
Program Evaluation of Eight Schools," in *Remedial and Special Education*. 27.2
(2006): 77-94. Web. 7 April 2015.

- 69 Herb Kohl's evaluation of classroom culture comes from his 1994 book, *I Won't Learn From You* and "An Open Letter to Arne Duncan from Herb Kohl," published online at *Schools Matter*, 17 June 2009. Web. 7 April 2015.
- 74 "seventy-four percent..." comes from an essay by Jack M. Fletcher and G. Reid Lyon: "Reading: A Research-Based Approach," in a compilation of three essays in Williamson M. Evers's, *What's Gone Wrong in America's Classrooms* from 1998.
- 75 "D.C. graduation rate ticks up, but wide achievement gaps remain," in *The Washington Post*, 20 December 2013.
- 77 "In 2013..." "We're Doing a Lousy Job of Getting Poor Kids to College," *Time Magazine* in 9 May 2013, by Kayla Webley published statistics on low-income students making it to college.
- 78 "national college completion..." "Bachelor's Degree Attainment by Age 24 by Family Income Quartiles, 1970 to 2009," by Tom Mortensen, which is cited in KIPP's "College Completion Report," available online through their website.

Notes

Avenues of Learning with Dyslexia, Cindy

- 83 Mercer Elementary is described on city-data's "Cincinnati" page, it's own school website, and School Digger, a website for parents founded in 2006.
- 83-4 On testing for disabilities, article and podcast, "A Parent's Perspective—Taking the Private Route for LD Evaluation," by NCLD Editors in 2011 on the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) website.
- 84 "Second grade is early..." article, "When are Learning Disabilities Diagnosed," by school psychologist Ann Logsdon gives recommendation of age six.
- 84 Definitions of Specific Learning Disorders are available online at the DSM-5 2013 website.
- 85-6 Springer's application can be found on their website under "Admissions."
- 86 *Governing* provides data on spending in education with data from the Census Bureau at their website on page, "Education Spending Per Student by State."
- 86-7 Springer's resources and history are explained on their website.
- 90 "one of the 2.4 million..." an NCLD study, "The State of Learning Disabilities: Facts, Trends and Emerging Issues," 2014.
- 92 "There are a lot of misconceptions..." the same NCLD 2014 study shows data on "Public Perceptions of Learning Disabilities."

Notes

Homeschooling for a Love of Learning, Emma & Michelle Grove

- 100 Leaves of Learning schedules, course information, and more can all be found on their website.

- 104 The *U.S. News Report* on Turpin is on the U.S. News website page “Best High Schools” under Ohio.
- 104 The data on Turpin from 2014 and their facilities comes from their website, a resource with a lot of information for evaluating and choosing a school, “A Brief History of Turpin.”
- 104-5 Postsecondary school information can be found on the U.S. Department of Education website, page “Students/Prepare for My Future,” and the Education Commission of the States (ECS), “Postsecondary Issues.”
- 106 The excerpt is from Denise Clark Pope’s 2001 book, *Doing School: How we are creating a generation of stressed out, materialistic, and miseducated students.*

Notes Epilogue

- 110 Peg Tyre’s book *The Good School: How Smart Parents Get Their Kids the Education They Deserve*, came out in 2011 with Henry Holt and Company.
- 110 “low-income schools typically score...”
- 111 Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*, 1991.
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