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# DIVIDED

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# We Fail

Issues of Equity in American Schools

Crystal M. England

HEINEMANN  
Portsmouth, NH

**Heinemann**

A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.  
361 Hanover Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912  
www.heinemann.com

*Offices and agents throughout the world*

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Untitled poem on pp. 74-75 written by author.

Students appearing in the cover photographs: Jimmie Doss and Daimontra Brown (top), Carole Anne Holbrook (insert), Rodney Harris, Quinton Wade, and Tanisha Harris (bottom), and Gladys Veronica Albarran (back cover).

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

England, Crystal M.

Divided we fail : issues of equity in American schools / Crystal M. England.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-325-00723-3 (alk. paper)

1. Educational equalization—United States. 2. Minorities—Education—United States. 3. Multicultural education—United States. I. Title.

LC213.2.E54 2005

379.2'6—dc22

2004020393

*Acquisition Editor:* Lois Bridges

*Editor:* Danny Miller

*Production:* Lynne Costa

*Cover design:* Joni Doherty

*Cover photographs:* Steve Orel

*Typesetter:* Tom Allen/Pear Graphic Design

*Manufacturing:* Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

09 08 07 06 05 DA 1 2 3 4 5

*Credits continued from p. iv*

“Here’s to the Crazy Ones.” Courtesy of Apple Computer.

“2003 UCE Conference Power Standards” by Larry Ainsworth reprinted by permission of Advanced Learning Press.

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Excerpt from *The ABC’s of Literacy: A Guide for Parents and Educators* by Stephen Judy. Copyright © 1980 by Stephen Judy. Published by Oxford University Press: New York, NY. All rights reserved.

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Excerpt from *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, 3/e by Sonia Nieto. Published by Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA. Copyright © 2000 by Pearson Education. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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*Where Do We Grow from Here?*

I was at a meeting the other day and was discussing this book with the administrator of a large urban elementary school who was sitting next to me. I made a comment about how inner cities have far more severe issues than the suburban district that I worked in. She bristled a bit, immediately asking for clarification. I talked about the greater levels of poverty that she dealt with each day, the more severe behaviors, and the more disenfranchised families. She acknowledged that, indeed, urban schools had each of these on a greater scale because their overall population was much larger. I still felt defensiveness in the air, so I asked about it. It seems that she had heard some masked discrimination in my comments and she had expected that I was more willing to “write off” or have lesser expectations for urban youth because of their cultural or economic issues.

I hastily assured her that this was not the case. I have a deeply rooted belief that all children can learn. In fact, *Uphill Both Ways*<sup>2</sup> is dedicated to this philosophy and gives specific strategies for how to enact it. This is where the fine line between acknowledgment and knowledge becomes apparent. Acknowledgment of the current conditions of learning for many disadvantaged students, both urban and rural, must be given. Statistics must be shared. Reality must be addressed. However, all of this must be done with the knowledge that the data are not a promise for the future, and that the way things are is certainly not a reflection on the way things ought to be and can be.

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core of Data, 40 percent of public schools in large cities are “intensely segregated,” meaning more than 90 percent of the students are children of color. And 40 percent of all schools are “racially exclusive,”

with fewer than 10 percent students of color. In fact, racial segregation surpasses that which existed before the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954.<sup>3</sup> Sixty-three percent of all white students go to schools that are 90–100 percent white. Black students in the South are only half as likely to attend intensely segregated schools as those who live in the Northeast. The most intense school segregation happens in large northern metropolitan areas surrounded by white suburbs. Students of color in rural areas and small towns are much more likely to attend integrated schools than those who live in large cities. Big metropolitan areas maintain school segregation by having smaller school districts. The 1974 Milliken Supreme Court decision forbids desegregation plans that cross school district lines, so if the suburbs and the city have separate districts, their students won't be able to attend the same schools.<sup>4</sup>

Much has been written in recent years, both pro and con, on the subject of resegregation. In *ColorLines*, a journal dedicated to issues of race and culture, Patrisia Macias Rojas and Rebecca Gordon ask, "Is Separate But Equal Really Such a Bad Thing?" They offer the following statistics:

- It's impossible to answer that question, because separate but equal schools do not exist. Schools in this country are both separate and profoundly unequal.
- White suburban schools have vastly more money than inner-city schools, whose students are often 90 to 100 percent children of color. That's because almost half of school funding comes from local property taxes.
- In New York state, the richest school district spent \$38,572 per student in 1992. That's seven times what the poorest district spent—\$5,423. In Illinois, the ratio was 8 to 1. In Texas, per-student spending ranged from \$3,098 to more than 10 times as much—\$42,000.

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- 92 percent of whites, 86 percent of African Americans, and only 61 percent of Latinos finish high school.
- In metropolitan Philadelphia, inner-city drop-out rates are four times as high as those of suburban schools.
- White high school graduates are much more likely to go to college, and to finish college, than African Americans or Latinos.<sup>5</sup>

Unequal funding lies at the root of many of the problems of public schooling. Lack of materials and training, lack of staff, overcrowding, and crumbling buildings are all results of funding shortages. As long as school funding is linked to property taxes and supplemented by parent donations, schools will continue to be separate and unequal.<sup>6</sup>

Issues of class discrimination invariably accompany issues of economics. In a speech made in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Ralph Nader stated, “It would be a mistake if we concentrate on just race and not class. They form a mutually reinforcing vicious circle, and although the most emotionally outrageous things come from racial issues, we have to connect them to the larger picture of class issues.”<sup>7</sup>

### *Can You See Me Now?*

It is a harried Wednesday morning, two days away from payday. As I am about to walk out of the door, my son reminds me that he’s out of lunch money. I check my purse—only a quarter and some pennies. The hour grows later as I check the couch cushions and then my pants pockets, finally putting together the \$2.00 that he needs. I include the quarter from my purse.

As I am driving to work that day, I think of the factors that had me searching the cushions of the couch. I am a single parent who does not receive child support. I opted not to take it at the time of my divorce because my wage was much higher then. When I decided that I wanted to explore my talents as an author, I changed jobs and lost

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about \$20,000 of salary per year. Even at that, and couch cushions aside, I feel lucky. I have a stable job as a classroom teacher, a roof overhead, and usually enough money to just get by. More important, I am content with the decisions that I've made thus far. As I pull into the parking lot at work, I give an idle thought to tomorrow's lunch money. I know that I can go to the grocery store tonight and cash a check. I know that it will not clear until Friday. I know that once again, I will get by. But I do take a moment to wonder if the people making the educational policies for my students, many of whom live at extreme poverty levels, have ever had a morning like mine.

We are told, from the time we are little on, that it isn't nice to talk about money. Yet we whisper about Bill's new job or Janice's dream home. We speculate on the wages and expenses of others. We are both annoyed and awed that for some, income is such a non-issue. A few days ago, a teacher friend, Sue, joined a group of us for dinner. She was lamenting a problem with her car, only recently (and finally!) paid off. Another friend asked how bad the damage was, giving us her scale for assessing "bad." She nonchalantly said that if the repair tag was under \$1,000, she didn't consider the damage very bad at all. I watched as Sue's eyes teared up. Even the seven-hundred-dollar bill that she faced was more than her financial situation could support. Volunteering that information would have made her feel vastly inferior, so she stayed quiet, managed a smile, and shrugged, stating that she was sure that it would all work out.

I had to type my lunch money story twice. I erased it the first time. Then I debated about whether to include it. There is shame, somehow, in having two master's degrees and yet still be struggling, on occasion, to make ends meet. There has been much written about the invisible poor. Yet, the poor are really not invisible and they are certainly not treated equitably in most public schools. Poverty is not an excuse for not learning, but it is a factor to be considered in learning.

The color lines that continue to separate learners are not invisible, either. Acknowledging them is a first step toward managing an equitable

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curriculum for all students. Acknowledgment should not be considered a passive write-off of the “way things are” but rather a call toward awareness and action. Journalist Alan Borsuk states, “The urgency of addressing the gap between the accomplishments of minority students and white students in school—and between the economic futures of each—is indisputable. The relationship between education and success has never been greater.”<sup>8</sup> The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University echoes this sentiment with some research findings of its own. Black students are classified as needing special education far more often than white students, and are less likely, once they have been identified as having disabilities, to be placed in mainstream classrooms.<sup>9</sup> “It stands to reason that more minorities are in special education because they are poorer,” said Jorge E. Amselle, a spokesman for the Center for Equal Opportunity, a Washington-based group that takes a generally conservative stand on racial and ethnic issues in education.<sup>10</sup> According to 1997 data from the U.S. Department of Education, nationally, black students were 2.9 times more likely than whites to be identified as having mental retardation, 1.9 times more likely to be identified with an emotional problem, and 1.3 times more likely to be identified as having a specific learning disability. Researcher Donald Oswald of the Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, found that the wealthier a school district, the more likely black males were to be labeled mentally retarded and sent to special classes.<sup>11</sup>

The odds against poor children and children of color are compounded by the fact that as a nation we devote the fewest educational resources to children whose families have the fewest resources.

Amer'ka, “Land of the Free”

Makes a mockery

Of what it means to be

Free

Chaining the poor to car washes

Maid to order

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“Do you want fries with that?”  
That’s right, Blood, you in  
Score some ex, take your Baby  
For a ride.  
From a brown man handcuffed to a taxi.  
’Least he has a job.  
Yeah, right.

Amer’ka, “Land of the Free”  
Makes a mockery  
Of what it means to be  
Free

Setting the poor in trailer parks  
Like puzzle pieces  
“It just seems to fit.”  
Walking away, satisfied.  
No lights in the dark (or the day)  
No running water  
Makes the mac and cheese dry  
’Least they got food.  
Yeah, right.

Amer’ka, “Land of the Free”  
Makes a mockery  
Of what it means to be  
Free

Telling the children of Goldilocks  
While throwing rocks  
“Go back to where you came from.”  
Learn the language, take a bath  
Lucky to live in an eroded building  
Rats as pets  
Just let the landlord touch you  
’Least they got freedom.  
Yeah, right.

With a bleak picture that has not borne much improvement as we’ve moved into the twenty-first century, how do school districts

begin to address the myriad inequalities faced by students? One group that has chosen to address this topic is the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN). MSAN is a national coalition of twenty-one multiracial, urban-suburban school districts across the United States. The Network's mission is to discover, develop, and implement the means to ensure high academic achievement for students of color, specifically African American and Latino students.

Among the core beliefs of MSAN are the following:

- Because achievement is not innately determined, children will achieve when they are effectively taught how to learn.
- All children come to school with a variety of individual strengths; our responsibility as educators is to discover and build upon these strengths.
- Schools that concentrate on how their practices affect students will be more productive than those that blame students, families, or poverty for underachievement.
- Each individual staff member must examine his or her beliefs and change practices to counteract the contemporary and historical impacts of racism and discrimination.
- Schools should be considered excellent only when students of all racial and ethnic groups are achieving at high levels.<sup>12</sup>

There has been an abundance of research in recent years celebrating high-poverty schools that are also evidencing high academic performance. Researcher Douglas Reeves first coined the term "90/90/90" to describe such schools based upon observations in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. These schools were identified as having 90 percent of the students eligible for free and reduced hot lunch, 90 percent of the student body were members of ethnic minority groups, and 90 percent of the students met the district or state academic standard in reading or another area. In studying schools across the United States that met

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the 90/90/90 criteria, Reeves and his associates determined that there are five attributes common to 90/90/90 schools. These characteristics are:

- A focus on academic achievement
- Clear curriculum choices
- Frequent assessment of student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement
- An emphasis on nonfiction writing
- Collaborative scoring of student work<sup>13</sup>

These traits can serve as the litmus test for all schools, especially those involved in educating learners who have had previously inequitable conditions. Bearing these conditions of learning in mind, the remainder of Chapter 4 will focus on how to increase students' skills in the critical academic areas of reading and language. However, students do not thrive with an academic concentration alone, so Chapter 5 will focus on other educational practices that reflect an exemplary approach to meeting the needs of children.

### *Let It Be*

I've been in the field of education a long time now, and there are a few concepts that I just don't understand. Timed tests, spelling books, and complete sentences are among them. Yet I know that were I to stand up at an assembly of teachers and decry the use of any of these, I might be both heralded and stoned in rapid succession. Just the other day, one of my students was struggling to put his pencil to the paper. I knew that he understood the content. His social studies teacher is thorough and uses multiple modalities to reach her students. I asked him what the struggle was—why he wasn't writing down the answers. He sighed a deep sigh and explained that he had to write out the

entirety of the question first, and then write the answer in complete sentences. He'd only recently been released from occupational educational services, had nearly illegible handwriting even when he put effort into it, and, in short, detested the physical act of writing. I told him that I'd help him get started and I wrote the questions for him. Even as I was doing it, I wondered at the educational purpose of recopying a question. My student still wrote his answers in complete sentences (I was not up to a public stoning that day), and he most definitely understood the concepts that the questions from the book were reviewing.

Over the years, one of my teaching philosophies has evolved to Stephen Covey's concept: "Begin with the end in mind."<sup>14</sup> I believe that learning must be adaptive. That is, learning must reflect the individualized needs of students within a classroom. Unfortunately, the standards movement and the shift in focus from students-as-learners to students-as-test-takers dictate that learning be prescriptive. The archaic notion of educational "scope and sequence" has merely been replaced by "standards and benchmarks." There is an explicit expectation that teachers will be able to deliver a cookie-cutter curriculum and produce Stepford children. Policy that slithered its way into becoming legislated mandate tells us that not only can all children learn . . . but that all children *must* learn. And that those children must learn at the same rate as their peers.

Certainly all children can learn. Just as certainly, all children must master the skills of literacy in order to maximize their contributions to our world. Real literacy, however, defies succinct definition. Author Steven Judy writes, "Defining literacy is devilishly difficult," as he cites the differences between functional literacy, "grade level" reading determination, and second graders who can read the fairly sophisticated prose of *Mad* magazine yet struggle with a classroom basal reader. Judy goes on to explain how the concept of literacy has evolved with the mass media explosion of the late twentieth century. The concepts of technological and media-based literacy have come

to be widely accepted as part of what a classroom teacher must help her students develop. Judy sums up his thoughts with “Literacy has to do with speaking as well as writing, with theatres as well as libraries, with television as well as novels.”<sup>15</sup> It is this definition of literacy that will guide a review of best practice.

I’d like to be able to take a dedicated stance in this section of the book. But the truth of the matter is, I’ve always been a fence-sitter in the whole language versus phonetic instruction debate. Over the years, I’ve looked to my students, from prereaders to high school students, to show me the way. All that they’ve shown me, however, is that each student is unique and thus learns as much through individual development as through instructional design. I’ll never forget the day that six-year-old Steven learned to read. It was my second year in education, and for weeks Steven and I had been mercilessly parked in front of kill and drill worksheets, tracing the consonants and practicing the short-vowel sounds. I was sure that one more rat upon a mat would send me careening over the intellectual edge. I was wondering why someone, sometime, in my education courses hadn’t told me that reading wasn’t prescriptive. Fortunately for Steven (and for me), I had recently attended my first workshop focused on Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. I knew that Steven was a very physical boy. I’d watched him squirm in his seat, bolt to lunch, skip to physical education class, and nearly fly around the playground at recess. One day, instead of kill and drill, I handed Steven tactile letters. I told him to stand up and hold the “R” over his head and say “Rrrrrrr.” When he was done with that, I had him hold the “A” over his round tummy and say the short vowel sound for “a.” Then I had him place the “T” at his feet and touch his toes while saying “T-t-t-t-t.” After he’d done that a couple times, I put the letters RAT side by side and asked him to tell me the letter sounds. He shifted in his seat, and wiggled his pudgy hands, first toward the ceiling, then toward his tummy, and then toward his toes, saying the sounds in isolation and then proudly combining them into the word “rat.” For the

first time in my career, I literally saw the light go on in a child's eyes. Soon, Steven was grabbing other letters, going through his calisthenics, and forming new words. Multiple intelligences—one. Kill and drill—zero.

Then there was Chris. Chris was nearing the end of second grade and still not really reading. But Chris could carry on animated discussions about dinosaurs. He pored over picture books of dinosaurs, and told stories of them orally with obvious glee. He seemed to like it when I wrote down his words. Yet he was reticent to read or write them himself. Until the day that I raided the local library for books with fewer pictures. I would sit with Chris and begin to read to him about a tyrannosaurus rex or a brontosaurus. At first, I'd stop only on the obvious words like *dinosaur* and I'd say, "What do you suppose that says?" Chris would give tentative but correct answers. The next time we'd read, I'd say, "Now, we know that you know this word and this word," as I underlined a few words from our previous reading time. I would tell him that those words were his words to read aloud. Soon, I was able to stop at more difficult words and model "sounding them out" for Chris. Later still, I began to encourage Chris to sound out new words for himself. Curiosity and an active interest in dinosaurs led Chris to use what he had already gleaned through the osmosis of two years of phonetic instruction to become a natural reader.

I learned to read at a very early age. I was always a sight word reader with a strong photographic memory that enabled me to learn quickly and with a high degree of retention. I assumed that it would be the same for my son. When I was pregnant with him, I labeled everything in the house with a name. After he was born and began to grow, at his eye level, he was able to see "washer" and "dryer" and "table" and "chair." I eagerly awaited his "revelation of reading." I waited through the ages of three, and four, and five. The labels began to fray and peel and finally fell off each inanimate object, one at a time.

My son is very bright. In fact, he began kindergarten at the age

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of four. During his kindergarten year, around President's Day, one of the conversations that he initiated began with "Mom, I think that Abraham Lincoln was a lot like a mouse and our country was like an elephant. The country was a little bit afraid of what one person would do." But he still wasn't reading. He wasn't even very interested in letters, save for the messy scrawl that he would devote to his name when he needed to.

At the end of second grade, while on vacation at the beach, he glanced at his stomach and announced that his belly button looked like a bromeliad. I had to ask him what a bromeliad was! However, while he now *could* read (through a laborious process of phonics and memorization), he never *chose* to read. He loved to be read to but he was far too active a child to seek adventure from books. Even when he did sit down to read by himself, he rocked back and forth in a dizzying pattern. I'd often ask if he could really read that way and he'd assure me, "Mom, it's the only way I *can* read."

Today, he is a well-rounded middle schooler with an impressive vocabulary and a mature conversational grace. He can't really spell and still doesn't like to read. Fonts bother him sometimes. Color changes in text disrupt his flow. Photocopies that are of poor quality are a nightmare. He can write good sentences but often the idea of paragraphing totally eludes him. He views PowerPoint, which allows him to segment his thoughts into easily communicated bytes, as a godsend. He'd still rather be up and moving and working with his hands than sitting in even the most comfortable chair at his desk.

The question remains, though, is my son literate? The obvious answer is that of course he is. He has, after all, mastered the "basics" of written language. Yet on a standardized exam in Wisconsin, he may be exactly that—basic. His performance may raise red flags. After all, "basic" can translate into lost funds. Threatened by increasingly punitive measures, districts across the United States are labeling learners like my son as "remedial." They are instilling prescriptive, component instruction to alleviate children's perceived deficits.

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As I already mentioned, I'm a fence-sitter. I am not opposed to component instruction *if it works*. And it *does* work for some learners. The vast majority of students that are deemed to be poor readers and writers, however, do not benefit from compartmentalized instruction of isolated skills. Moreover, even when it does work, component instruction implies simple right or wrong answers for every issue that we've got. But how do we discuss major issues in foreign policy, the beauty of a painting, or the problem of nuclear waste? It takes a lot of reading, writing, talking, and listening to address those issues.<sup>16</sup>

Having acknowledged that component instruction does work for some learners, it is now time for me to transition from the fence to the soapbox. Picture having to get an inoculation each morning. You are told that the medicine given is important in preventing a life-threatening disease. So, while it is unpleasant, expensive, and leaves a lingering and distracting ache, you cooperate. Years later, you learn that the injection only works for your colleagues who are male and have red hair. In fact, only those select few are actually at risk of contracting the disease. How do you feel? You've spent years engaged in a painful process that was of little value to you. Perhaps you are simply grateful that you no longer have to face the discomfort each morning. Perhaps you're angry at the wasted time. Still later, you learn that the clinicians who were giving you the shots all those years knew, from the start, that the medicine would only work for a select few. With a simple measure of gender and hair color, you could have been spared years worth of pain. It is then that you become truly angry at the insensitivity of a system that failed to treat you as an individual. Could we possibly be using this unfair system with children?

The use of scope-and-sequence curriculums as yardsticks for measuring all children provides a lucrative market for the publishing industries. Children who do not master skills at the prescribed time and in the prescribed order are considered deficit and in need of remediation. Remediation requires a whole new set of materials and trained personnel. Just as the keepers of the medicine in our mythi-

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cal example were lining their pockets with the proceeds from those daily injections, so, too, the publishing industry is reaping great profit because insensitive school systems fail to treat students as individuals.

It's ridiculous when you really think about it. We are told that Johnny can't read. But perhaps Johnny simply can't read under the conditions in which he's been taught. Instead of finding a new way to reach Johnny, we heap more of the same on his desk. We purchase more of the same from booksellers. We seem to honestly believe that this will work. Instead, this process is much like speaking louder to a person who speaks a different language. It only serves to make us look foolish.

### *If It's Broke, You Must Fix It*

Before going further, let's set aside the arguments that typically slow educational progress. They are 1) we don't have the time to individualize—our class sizes are huge, 2) I don't have enough books for my classroom—and our library isn't much better, 3) the school district says that I have to be on page 120 by Christmas—when do I have time to be creative?, and 4) I have to teach to the test—keeping my job depends on my students' success with the test.

All of these arguments have validity. However, if we as professionals continue to practice under the belief of any of them, we are doing a great disservice to ourselves, our students, and our communities. In his book *Re-imagine!* Tom Peters offers both a rant and a vision on the subject of education. In his rant, he says, "We attempt to 'reform' an educational system that was designed for the Industrial Age—for a Fordist era where employees needed to 'know their place' and in which employers needed uniformly 'trained' interchangeable 'parts' ('workers' in collars both blue and white). Yet now we must prepare for a world in which value emerges from individual initiative and creativity. And we must reject all notions of 'reform' that merely serve up more of the same: more testing, more 'standards,' more uniformity,

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more conformity, and more bureaucracy.” In his vision, Peters relates, “I imagine a school *system* that recognizes that learning is *natural*, that a love of learning is *normal*, and that real learning is *passionate* learning. I imagine a school *curriculum* that values questions above answers . . . creativity above fact regurgitation . . . individuality above uniformity . . . and excellence above standardized performance. I imagine a *society* that respects its teachers and principals, pays them well, and (most important) grants them the autonomy to do their job . . . as the creative individuals they are, and for the creative individuals in their charge.”<sup>17</sup>

It is time for teachers and administrators across the country to be both practical and political. It isn't enough to go to work each day, focused on the students. It isn't enough to close a classroom door and go about the business of education—precisely because education has suddenly become everyone's business. The No Child Left Behind Act has deemed it appropriate that Big Brother step into the classroom, too. But, it doesn't have to be that way. Don't let the arguments against progress become your mantra. Instead, look at states like Maine and New Hampshire that have proposed blocking state funds. Arizona, Hawaii, Minnesota, and New Mexico lawmakers have proposed opt-out measures. So far, lawmakers in twenty states have asked the federal government for changes in the law or for more money. Utah's House Education committee originally approved a measure calling for the state to opt out but later opted only to keep Utah from spending state money on the law. Vermont's Republican governor has signed a similar ban.<sup>18</sup>

Where there is a will, there is a way. Not enough books? Knock on doors, tell the media, and tap into literacy agencies until you get results. When the Edward Williams Elementary school in Mount Vernon, New York, made it clear to the media that their school library was stocked with books from the 1950s and 1960s, a national news article detailing their plight appeared. Now, the school has several large boxes of books waiting to be catalogued and enjoyed.<sup>19</sup>

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Consider the World of Opportunity School in Birmingham, Alabama. The World of Opportunity (WOO) opened its doors after the Birmingham city schools pushed out 522 students in an apparent attempt to raise test scores. Steve Orel, WOO coordinator, told the story at Interversity's first online conference, Roots of Resistance, in September 2000. His account of 522 students pushed out of school in Birmingham, Alabama, tells how his objections to the district's actions cost him his job and how the WOO was born. The WOO is a social justice and civil rights experiment that works at teaching the whole person. This means addressing hunger, homelessness, and domestic violence as well as academic needs. Over the past two years the WOO has worked with hundreds of pushed-out students. Nine have passed the GED exam and others are about to take the exam. More than one hundred students have used the WOO's training in computers, health care, and drafting to obtain jobs.<sup>20</sup>

In Colorado, a ten-year-old has taken on the Colorado Student Assessment Program.<sup>21</sup> He will get a zero on the exam and he's sad that this will hurt his school's overall scores. However, he is on a quest for what he called educational justice. Shouldn't the rest of us be, too?