Priorities

- Curriculum decisions must be guided by social tone and controlled by the educational community.
- In developing curriculum, we must choose what is valuable; our decisions must be influenced by our desire to help children see the richness of their world and use their literacies to improve the quality of their lives, in school and out.
- People's genuine passions must be invited into our classrooms.
- We must understand that studying issues deeply and meaningfully requires time.
- The principal's role in curriculum should include maintaining the organizing vision, creating structures to push thinking, fulfilling district obligations, writing grants, working with parents, and gathering resources.
- We must design assessment tools and systems that meet the needs of the entire community.

Practice

- On sifting through curriculum choices to arrive at what is valuable
- On discovering social studies non-negotiables
- On selecting and designing thematic studies
- On creating structures to push thinking about curriculum, including weekly staff meetings, grade-level meetings, joint teaching sessions, informal study groups, and summer planning meetings.
- On working directly with parents on issues of curriculum
- On designing meaningful assessment tools; such as student portfolios
- On involving family members in student assessment
- On informing parents about the standards movement
The comedian Steven Wright reminds us that we can’t have everything we want, by asking the question, “Where would you put it?” When we think about curriculum, a similar thought applies. We can’t teach everything we want, because, “Where would we put it?” There is so much to teach and learn, and the days go by so quickly. On any one day, walking in and out of classrooms in our five-story building, I can learn about the history of Wall Street, the contributions of Native Americans to the founding of New York City, the names of local trees, the importance of recycling, patterns in local architecture, varieties of breads, and reasons for immigration to the United States. I can join children as they weave, do woodworking, and water their plants. I can help children replicate colonial toys, make dyes from natural plants, churn their own butter, estimate the number of raisins in a box, build a life-size skeleton from toilet paper rolls, design their own version of the chunnel connecting England and France, or create realistic giraffes from empty pretzel barrels, papier mâché and paint. I can bump into park rangers from Central Park, curators from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and chefs from the American Wine and Food Institute. I can peek over children’s shoulders as they devour nonfiction books, the more mysterious the topic the better. I can marvel as I watch children search the Internet for information to enrich the topics they are studying in their science workshops. I can wave goodbye to classes leaving to visit the Empire State Building, Yankee Stadium, or the local construction site. I can stand in awe as ballroom dance instructors demonstrate the merengue and the macarena, as Jacques d’Amboise teaches children to lift their knees higher than they ever thought possible, or as Rachel Robinson answers questions asked by first-graders about her beloved husband Jackie.

The dedication in Betsy Bowen’s book Gathering: A Northwoods Counting Book reads, “In honor of teachers, enthusiastic and caring, in particular Miss Glixon, who taught me to measure the sun passing across the floor through the seasons of fourth grade.” I’d like to think that the teachers at the Manhattan New School are developing the kinds of curriculum that will create lifetime memories for children.

We do not have a schoolwide curriculum that is set in stone. And though our curriculum is rich, varied, and dynamic, it is not the result of a helter-skelter, come-what-may, hodgepodge of ideas. Although teachers and students have ample flexibility in choosing, negotiating, and developing curriculum, and our classes may at times study very different issues, there are several umbrella beliefs that guide our choice and development of curriculum. These schoolwide beliefs, coupled with consistent views on how children learn, make Isabel’s notion of each teacher having an individual plot add up to an aesthetically pleasing garden of curriculum.

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Attitudes and Beliefs that Guide Curriculum Choices

Social Tone as Prime Curriculum

Throughout this book I have argued for the importance of a supportive social tone. In the introduction, I suggested that our school’s social tone is an integral feature of our curriculum. Later, I shared Isabel’s belief that her kindergarten curriculum is easily
summed up by her phrase “gracious living.” I noted how all of us, throughout the grades, have come to appreciate the wisdom of her words. In Chapter 4, I explored in detail our curriculum of caring. I learned a long time ago that if students don’t care about one another, it doesn’t really matter what materials we order, what assessment systems we design, or what instructional strategies we try. Donald Graves suggested to us that we have allowed love to become the antenna of our curriculum. Those are powerful words, worth living up to. Not only do teachers devote a great deal of classroom time to reading, writing, thinking, and talking about treating one another with kindness and respect, teachers also highlight connections between topics studied in social studies and science to the vision of creating a more just and peaceful world. This one aspect of curriculum, having a caring social tone, reminds us of the importance of having a curriculum that informs the way you live your life at school. What would be the point of teaching environmental studies if we didn’t recycle? What would be the point of teaching Spanish if we didn’t try to use it in our everyday lives? What would be the point of teaching mathematical problem solving if we didn’t invite students in on the everyday math problems that arise? What would be the point of teaching tolerance, respect, and humanity if these qualities were not present in our social interactions with one another?

**Community Control of Curriculum**

Several years ago, I was struck by a list of kindergarten teaching “tips” published in a local newsletter. The writer suggested that teachers plan reinforcement activities for children prior to the morning Pledge of Allegiance. These included setting up coloring and cutting tasks so that the teacher could take attendance and collect absence notes. The writer suggested that early-childhood teachers seek the help of upper-grade students to mark and staple homework sheets and PTA notices into younger students’ notebooks, and invite kindergartners to tutor ESL peers, allowing the young children to give out stickers and stars to students who do well. The writer also suggested that kindergarten teachers give prizes to students who raise their hands, tie their shoes, et cetera. I’m sure these suggestions work in the classroom of the teacher who wrote them. I am equally as sure that they would have no relevance for the kindergarten teachers in our school. In fact, the assumptions behind each of these management tips would be totally wrong in our setting. Our teachers would argue against each and every one of them. For example, in our school we do teach our older students about the meaning of the Pledge and the role the flag has played in the history of our country, but we do not have a daily morning Pledge of Allegiance. Secondly, if children needed “reinforcement” of a skill, we would stand alongside them and coach them. We would not use valuable teaching time to do our own paperwork. Besides, our teachers would prefer to invite students to participate in the taking of attendance and the collecting of absence notes. Then too, these tips wouldn’t work in our community because we don’t give homework to our five-year-olds and we certainly don’t grade any student’s home-
work. Nor would we attach PTA notices to students’ notebooks. We also wouldn’t ask a five-year-old to formally “tutor” another child who doesn’t speak English. Hang out together, help one another, work on projects together, yes, but we certainly wouldn’t call it “tutoring,” nor invite a five-year-old to decide if a classmate is deserving of a sticker. In fact, we don’t believe that stickers, stars, and prizes should be used to reward students or to convince them to follow rules. All in all, these teaching suggestions make absolutely no sense in our community. Such crucial school issues as management techniques, choice of materials, school routines, and especially curriculum decisions must be made by the people whose lives are touched by those decisions. It doesn’t surprise me that what works in one school community may not work in another community, even in the same city.

Several years ago, there was no pot of gold at the end of the very controversial Rainbow Curriculum in our city. Mandating this curriculum citywide in part cost the chancellor his job. This curriculum guide suggested that teachers present different aspects of alternate lifestyles to students throughout the grades. Our one city district covers such diverse settings as Chinatown, Greenwich Village, Governor’s Island, Chelsea, Hell’s Kitchen, Tribeca, and the Upper East Side. How can such diverse cultural, economic, and ethnic enclaves all agree on any one social curriculum? The reaction of different neighborhoods to the Rainbow Curriculum brought to mind Goldilocks’s reaction to the three bears’ bowls of porridge. In some parts of our district, the curriculum was too avant-garde; in others, it didn’t go far enough; in a few, it would have been just right. Curriculum decisions need to be made by the people whose lives are touched by those decisions. All the curriculum guides that come our way, and many do, are seen as resource material, not prescribed mandates.

Choosing What Is Valuable
Prospective parents always ask me about curriculum. “What makes your school different?” they ask. I used to begin answering such questions by sharing a few of the teaching priorities in the school. I’d attempt to describe the meaning of whole language teaching, using all the key phrases, including “learner-centered,” “process approach,” and “literature-based.” I’d then warn parents that so much comes at us in the name of whole language, we need a way to filter out what is really valuable. Publishers often send us prepackaged ‘whole language’ thematic studies, covered with cute teddy-bears and colorful rainbows. I make sure that parents understand that “cute and colorful” is not the criterion we use when we choose and develop curriculum.

In the very first chapter of this book, I suggested that educators need to believe in something. I explained how I used the notion of authenticity as a means of sifting through all the curriculum suggestions that make their way into our bulging mailboxes. Parents seem to appreciate that we never ask children to do things inside school that people outside school do not do. Parents understand why we don’t ask children to write pretend letters that never get mailed, or answer endless questions at the end of every chapter read, or
fill-in the blanks on insufferable phonics sheets. They understand why children are invited to talk or write in response to books read, to fill portfolios with their important achievements, to keep journals, read newspapers, and to take pride in public speaking. Our children not only have mentors in school, they can find mentors outside of school because we ask them to do the kinds of things that people really do in the real world.

In that same early chapter (see “Believe in Something” in Chapter 1, “Sharing the Secrets of our Success”), I reveal what has become the heart of our curriculum, throughout the grades. I suggest that we are raising activists at the Manhattan New School. We want to raise wide-awake children who pay attention to and take responsibility for their world. Alexandra asks in her writer's notebook, “Why don't people get together and make New York a better place to live?” We have framed Alexandra’s words and they hang in our main lobby, serving as a rallying cry for us all.

I always suggest to parents that we are offering them lifetime guarantees. Their children will not just know how to read and write, they will choose to read and write. I can make such a bold promise because we continually demonstrate and prove to students just how powerful it is to become literate. The essence of our curriculum is twofold. First, we desperately want to help children see the richness of their lives. Second, we want them to use their literacies to improve the quality of their lives.

The following is a recent New York City fact sheet released in a report entitled *Keeping Track of New York City's Children* published by the Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc.

Fact One One out of every 4 people in New York is a child.
Fact Two Every day 340 babies are born.
Fact Three Every day 4 babies die before their first birthdays.
Fact Four Every day babies are born at risk: 
   - 150 babies are born into poverty.
   - 35 babies born to teen parents.
   - 57 babies born to mothers with inadequate prenatal care.
   - 33 babies born with low birthweight.
Fact Five Every day 762,000 children live in poverty.
Fact Six Every day 9700 children are homeless.
Fact Seven Every 14 hours a young person under 25 is murdered.
Fact Eight Every day 477,700 students read below grade level.
Fact Nine Every week 11,393 children use mental health services.
Fact Ten Every day 77 children are reported abused or neglected.

Unfortunately, I don’t doubt these statistics. Just ask any New York City educator who has tried to call the child abuse hotline. The line is always busy, especially during school hours. We’ve learned to carry the necessary information home with us, so that we can call at dawn or dusk, when the lines are less busy. New York is not an easy place to grow up. That’s why our organizing vision, our filtering question, must become, “How can we improve the quality of our lives?” Several years ago, I wrote in *Whole Language: The Debate*:
As the director of a New York City public school, I am not looking for systematic investigations, improved evaluative research, valid measures of worthiness, or quantitative paradigms. Instead, I’m looking for ways to make every minute in our building count. I’m looking for that “community of learners,” the right book for the right child, and ways not just to teach children how to read and write but ways of living that will make them choose to read and write. I’m looking for ways to make everyone who enters our school passionate about their own literacies. I’m looking for ways to make our schoolhouse the most beautiful, the most nourishing building in the neighborhood. I’m looking for ways to teach reading and writing that will enable children to use their literacies to improve the quality of their inner-city lives.

No matter where our school was located, I think my big curriculum goals would be the same. I want children to lead wide-awake lives and to use their literacies to improve the quality of their lives. This would be true if our school were on the Zuni reservation in New Mexico, or on a quiet tree-lined street in Shaker Heights, Ohio, or in downtown Denver, Colorado. We ask children to read the daily newspaper, write letters, interview community members, personally respond to books, sketch street scenes, visit museums, parks, and libraries, and fill their writer’s notebooks with observations, wonderings, questions, suggestions, plans, hopes, and dreams. All these authentic acts in which students engage can be valued as tools that help them see the richness of their lives and tools that help them improve the quality of those lives. Eight-year-old Alexandra was right. Our job, as educators, is to get together and make our communities better places to live. Our job is to provide hopefulness. Our job is to offer children the tools and the confidence to fully live as citizens in their classrooms, communities, and the world.

The New York Times offers a “Newspaper in Education” service. Last year the service sent a list of conversation starters to help students take more from their reading of the news. For example, they suggested that teachers ask students, “Are things getting better or worse in New York City? What news about New York City makes you feel optimistic, which pessimistic, which cheerful, which gloomy, which admiring, which scornful? Which stories . . . do you think have the potential to help promote a feeling of togetherness among New York’s varied communities or cultures, if they were to read them?” These are important questions teachers in any city can ask students who read the local newspaper. We want all students to pay attention to their world and use their literacies to make it a better place.

Each year, the New York City schools are closed for one week in February designated as a midwinter school recess. Each year, the New York City Board of Education publishes and distributes to every student a calendar of weeklong cultural activities. The calendar, which is available in English, Chinese, Haitian, Russian, and Spanish, offers fifteen pages of mostly free events during the week that school is closed. All of New York City’s public agencies and several private ones offer special programs and services during this winter week. This handout has always been one of my favorites. It’s incredibly thoughtful and informative, and it serves to remind our children how lucky they are to live in our city.
When my colleagues ask me if I think a certain topic is worthy of a big block of time for individual, small-group, whole-class or schoolwide study, I suggest that they ask themselves two broad questions. First, “Will this study help students see the richness of their world?” Second, “Will this study provide students with opportunities to use their literacies and talents to improve the quality of their world?” (Students know that we work hard at letter writing, newspaper reading, public speaking, dramatic performances, and creating works of art because we want to enrich and improve our lives.) These questions not only provide a means of selecting areas to study but they can also influence the kinds of invitations extended and the experiences provided.

Several years ago, I met with two young women from the Association for a Better New York. They had designed a curriculum on New York City’s infrastructure for school children in grades three through five. I couldn’t imagine a more worthwhile project. Students would gain an understanding of the workings of all the utilities they use every day, including electric, gas, telephone, and sewage, as well as become familiar with the subways, tunnels, and bridges of our city. Such in-depth study would no doubt make students marvel at the complexity of their hometown, its underground worlds and colossal structures, and at the same time encourage students to identify problems and play with possible solutions. Similarly, I’ve always kept the Board of Education curriculum guide entitled Operation New York in a safe place in my office. This guide to using the natural environment of the city as a curriculum resource is filled with information on the materials used to create sidewalks, playgrounds, and school buildings, and helps students identify the trees and plants growing on those city sidewalks. Likewise, I always offer a thumbs-up when I hear that a teacher is planning to research the Broadway theater, the construction of a skyscraper, our city’s animal life, or the mayoral election. I was especially thrilled the year our fourth graders danced the history of New York City with Jacques d’Amboise’s National Dance Institute. What better way to understand how our city grew than to create dances to explore the Dutch colony, immigration, and the Harlem Renaissance?

To accompany my button that reads “So many books, so little time,” we can create one that says, “So many topics, so little time.” We need to spend time on those issues that really engage students and help them lead enriched lives.

Social Studies Non-negotiables  I read that Russian fairy tales often begin with the words, “There was and there was not…” We do have a prescribed curriculum and we do not have a prescribed curriculum. In the area of social studies, we do take a look at all the curriculum suggestions offered in city, state, and district handbooks, sifting through these to discover the things that really matter for our community. Kindergarten and first-grade handbooks suggest that our youngest children study the meaning of family and the workings of their local community. It’s no surprise to find our youngest children interviewing family members, writing captions for family photo albums, visiting local shopkeepers, sketching their neighborhoods, and so on. In second grade, we
begin more formal studies of our city. All of our second-grade teachers invite children
to choose areas of interest connected to a study of New York. The study of our city re-
mains a thread throughout the grades, but our exploration begins in grade two. We
want children early on to know their hometown. Appreciating all that New York has to
offer is a major part of seeing the richness of their lives. Second-grade teachers and stu-
dents select from a wide range of possibilities, taking such perspectives as historical,
geographical, environmental, and cultural. Our third graders research their cultural
backgrounds and examine how their personal family stories are part of the bigger story
of immigration in our city and our country. Our fourth and fifth graders are invited to
explore several important stories and documents in American history. Teachers think
long and hard about which stories to tell and which documents to share. They can’t
teach every moment on the timeline of American history and so they must select key
moments. Fourth-grade teachers usually begin with colonial settlements and move
through the American Revolution and on through westward expansion. Fifth-grade
teachers lead children through the story of the Industrial Revolution and examine the
history of the United States through the wars that have so influenced the development
of our country. Our students come to understand that we study history to better under-
stand what is happening on the streets of our city today.

Throughout the teaching of social studies, current events hold a revered place in
curriculum development. We have learned to drop everything and pay attention to a
“fast-breaking” story, whether it comes from *The New York Times*, the six o’clock evening
news, or out of the mouth of Jameelah, Adriatik, Priscilla, or Kyaw Saw. We are also de-
termined to help students make connections between what they are studying about the
history of New York City, the reasons for immigration, the causes of wars in the United
States, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and what is happening every day on the
streets of their neighborhood and in towns and cities throughout the country and the
world. The newspaper always provides worthwhile companion reading. Our job is to
help students understand how their understanding of history feeds their reading of the
daily news and how their reading of the newspaper both informs their day-to-day lives
and inspires their study of what came before. We want to raise the kind of students
who can’t imagine starting their day without the morning paper. We want to raise the
kind of students who wouldn’t think of voting for a candidate without reading where
the candidate stands on crucial issues. We want to raise the kind of students who ac-
quire lifelong newspaper-reading habits.

Our social studies curriculum is also greatly influenced by the specific issues
members of our community are currently facing. How can we not talk about the crisis
in Yugoslavia and the Balkans when so many of our students come from that part of the
world? How can we not discuss immigration laws, green cards, and visas when so
many of our students are the primary speakers of English in their families and are
called upon to interpret and fill out U.S. government documents? How can we not
teach children about the procedures and politics involved in school board elections
when a school board member is a parent in our school? How can we not attend to the plight of the homeless in our city when our next-door neighbor, Ellen, periodically wanders into our building hungry, cold, and disoriented? How can we not challenge our fifth graders to understand how people like Ellen, with dwindling resources, few family contacts, and poor health, often do become homeless, if we don’t provide a safety net before she falls?

In addition to current events, teachers throughout the grades also take the teaching of geography very seriously. We want all students to feel at home reading maps. We want them to see browsing atlases as an enjoyable pastime. We want them to take delight in identifying major landforms and in understanding the role geography plays in the development of towns, cities, states, and countries. We want them to be in awe of mountain ranges, stretches of desert, and bodies of water. We want them to take pride in knowing the precise names of these natural formations. We love maps and map reading so much, if we had adequate space we would create a map room, exclusively devoted to this one area of study. We would line the walls with the most current world maps, but also with subway, bus, and street maps. For now, we need to make sure that these lifelong tools are sought-after items of choice in every classroom library.

**Thematic Studies**

*Celebrating the Passions of Teachers and Students* In addition to the social studies topics described previously, other content studies are primarily based on the needs, interests, and passions of teachers and students, coupled with a belief in developmentally appropriate study. Again, we are greatly influenced by community issues. How can we not research pigeons when these unofficial city mascots sit on our window ledges all day long? How can we not involve our students in the study of playgrounds when we received a grant to reconstruct our turn-of-the-century park? How can the study of museums not become a major focus when our school is within walking distance of some of the grandest museums in the world?

Lorraine loves architecture. Each summer, she attends architectural courses and reads related books. This past school year her first graders worked with several area architects. Together they constructed a replica of our one city block. Have you ever seen children construct a building using a half-gallon orange juice container covered with colored construction paper? They usually draw a zillion little odd-shaped windows irregularly placed across the entire façade. Not Lorraine’s six-year-olds. Not children who have been studying with real live architects. Each floor of their juice-container buildings is covered with a different color strip of construction paper. This very graphic device helped them to easily understand the concept of stories in a building. Then they were able to understand why you can only have one band of windows on each story, not a collage of random windows placed haphazardly. They even learned that the windows have to be placed at just the right height in a wall so that people are able to look out. They used a small plastic doll to establish eye level and to create the height of the
front door. The children also learned that our school is five units wide and that the church next door is only one unit wide. Lorraine has planted very deep roots. These six-year-olds are going to be very ready to study more complicated concepts related to scale, ratio, and proportion when they are older. Above all, they’ve begun to lead very wide-awake lives. They are lucky to have studied with a teacher who teaches in ways that allows learning to occur when there is no teacher around. They will not walk down a city street in just the same way. They have an architect’s eye and an architect’s language now. They are prepared to observe and question.

We are always open to the fevers that sweep through our students’ lives. Over the years I have seen classrooms become totally immersed in snails, whales, the stock exchange, chess, the Beatles, bridges, chicks, dinosaurs, and outer space. There are plenty of occasions for individual students as well as small groups of students to explore an incredible array of very personal areas of inquiry. The topics and settings differ, but all teachers demonstrate a passion for living alongside inquiring minds, a rich array of strategies for gathering and organizing information, an attitude toward revising and rethinking the learner’s questions, techniques for using reading, writing, and the arts to make sense of data, as well as a multitude of ways to teach others what has been learned.

I recently interviewed an inexperienced teacher for an early-childhood special education position. Halfway through the interview I asked her what a day might be like in her classroom. “How the day goes,” she began, “would depend on the theme the class was studying.” “How would you choose the theme?” I asked. “Oh,” she responded, “there are so many to choose from, the possibilities are limitless.” I asked her to give me an example of a theme she thought might be appropriate for five-year-old language-delayed children. “Maybe we would study parks,” she answered. I then asked her to describe a day in her class if “parks” was the theme. “I’d choose a few books about parks to read aloud and then I’d plan some art projects that are connected to the books.” I stopped this young teacher-to-be and offered her some suggestions. I reminded her that she wasn’t teaching parks, she was teaching children. I guided our conversation with the following questions:

• What do you think young children should know about parks?
• How would you find out what your students already know about parks?
• Are there big important understandings you would hope very young children would come to appreciate as they study parks?
• Are there books and activities you would choose deliberately because they might help children appreciate key concepts?
• How would you find out what the children wonder about parks?
• How would you help them find the answers to their own questions?
• How would you invite students to select their own theme for whole-class study?
I also asked this prospective teacher if she could imagine teaching without any theme. Themes are not a constant in our school; rather, they punctuate the school year and add a colorful feel to classroom life. Schools can be rigorous, content-rich places without thematic teaching. After all, I reminded my guest, you can't read and write about nothing, and we read and write for big blocks of time every day. You can always eavesdrop on interesting conversations, even if everyone is not immersed in an organized study.

This interview turned into a brief seminar, but I couldn't resist. Teaching is not coming up with a clever or cute topic, then squeezing your brain to come up with a zillion theme-related activities. Teaching requires a deeper, reflective stance. Selecting, designing, and teaching curriculum involves realizing possibilities, establishing priorities, negotiating with members of a community, rethinking schedules, resources, and goals, forging new grounds, and continuous revision of plans and activities.

The Importance of Adequate Time

I always suggest that prospective parents read Vera John Steiner’s *Notebooks of the Minds*. I want them to understand the value the researcher has placed on allowing young people to be obsessed with things. I want parents to understand why we value sticking with content studies for a long time. I tell prospective parents about my son’s long-term interest in bubbles, from blowing them as a toddler to his high school science research project on the symmetry of soap film and soap bubbles. Schools become different places when people aren’t rushing through curriculum, anxious to click off topics “covered.” Instead, we value long-term commitment to fewer topics.

A parent who recently toured our school sent me the following follow-up letter.

Dear Shelley,

I loved your school when I visited last winter—the whole place felt like a library. I loved the kids’ poems and stories up on the walls. I loved the way the teachers spoke to the children—how they spotted the questions and led the kids to the answers. It’s a great place.

I especially liked your defense of creative obsession for lack of a better phrase. At that point my three-year-old had memorized Snow White—the book and the audio versions. She had been Snow White for Halloween and continued to wear the costume every day since. We spent the months of February and March making papier mâché puppets of Snow White, the Wicked Queen, and the Prince. She acted out the story several times a day, insisted that it be read to her—she had four different versions—before her nap and before bedtime, and had collected miniature versions of the characters, sticker books, coloring books, plates, toothbrushes, posters—her room was a shrine to Snow White.

And then a week ago she said to me. “Mommy, in all these princess books there’s a beautiful princess, a wicked ugly witch or queen who doesn’t want to get married, and a prince. All of them. They’re all the same.” I was amazed, she got it—the template, the paradigm, the formula, whatever you want to call it—she got it. Because, I’m convinced, she was allowed to wallow in her interest. I clipped this article after hearing you speak and it’s
been sitting in a pile of stuff on my desk ever since. I think it's saying the same thing—deep
testing wins the day.
Zoe's still in preschool—and we're way the hell over here on the West Side, but I hope
somehow we can work it out so that she can come to your school. It's an oasis.
Have a good summer,
Elizabeth Page

The article Elizabeth is referring to appeared in The New York Times in a descrip-
tion of the IBM computer Deep Blue, which was used as the opponent in a chess match
with the world chess champion Gary Kasparov. Experts praise chess computers that
have deeper information over those with shallower information, even though the latter
may have greater across-the-board information. Deep Blue plays chess well because of
its ability to calculate more deeply.
Once again that Ladino proverb rings true, “It’s not how many commandments
you fulfill, but the spirit in which you fulfill them.” Likewise, it’s not how many them-
atic units and courses of study we boast having studied during a school year. Rather
it’s the spirit, depth, joy, and commitment that we bring to those carefully chosen stud-
ies that leave a lasting impression on our students and ourselves.

Reading, ‘Riting, and ‘Rithmetic
Visitors, weaving in and out of classrooms in our school, see many similarities in the
amount of time devoted to the teaching of reading, writing, and mathematics as well as
similarities in teaching techniques within these workshop areas. It’s no surprise that
teachers and children feel so much at home when they take part in one another’s work-
shops. Successful practices are contagious in school buildings in which people admire
one another and are eager to collaborate and innovate on one another’s ideas.
Although this text and its companion volumes, Lifetime Guarantees and Writing
Through Childhood, focus primarily on the teaching and learning of the language arts
during the elementary grades, we also take pride in our mathematics instruction. Our
district has been rethinking mathematics instruction for several years, and our teachers
are privileged to work, study, and research alongside several top mathematics educa-
tors. The district provides support for all teachers including summer institutes, profes-
sional reading materials, teaching materials and resources, staff developers, and
worthwhile workshop series. At each workshop demonstration, I’m awed by what I
don’t know. Our teachers have been invited to think through the big ideas in mathe-
matics. They have learned how to help students talk clearly as they reason quantita-
tively. Many years ago, when I was a classroom teacher offering students a daily dose of
prescribed mathematics, I don’t ever recall having an interesting mathematical tale to
share with my family around the dinner table. Today, I simply marvel at what our chil-
dren are able to do and their ability to talk about what they are doing in mathematics. I
know things are going well in mathematics when teachers have stories to tell about
their student’s thinking.
Our students seem so at home renaming numbers, seeing patterns in hundreds charts, and performing great amounts of mental math. With deep-rooted number sense and little attention to algorithms, our students understand how knowing that $6 \times 7 = 42$ helps you know what $60 \times 70$ is, what $12 \times 7$ is, what $3 \times 7$ is, and so on. Unfortunately to date, I have remained more of a spectator than participant in math workshops, but I’m present enough to realize just how limited I am. I have had very little personal experience in performing mental mathematics, cooperatively solving mathematical problems, and appreciating other people’s strategies for solving problems. I have had no experience in creating math menus, teaching replacement units, or providing manipulatives. The teaching of mathematics keeps me particularly humble. I realize just how little I know and how much there is to learn.

The Principal’s Role in Curriculum

Lucy West, our district’s wonderful coordinator of mathematics instruction, recently distributed a list of ways principals can support teachers’ efforts to change their mathematics instruction. She suggested, for example, that principals attend district workshops, buy necessary materials, encourage workshop attendance, schedule big blocks of time, communicate with staff developers, arrange time for teachers to talk, read related curriculum materials, inform parents, remove pressure of instant success, and try teaching a few lessons. In addition to all the tasks listed above, there are several other curriculum-related challenges that I am particularly happy to accept. They include the following:

Maintaining the Organizing Vision

As previously noted, a visitor once referred to our school as teacher heaven. It didn’t take long to realize that teacher heaven is a very exhausting place. All of us put in very long hours and we often bring our professional lives into all that we do outside of school. We worry continually about children who aren’t making significant academic progress and those who are exhibiting inappropriate social behaviors. We worry about students whose families are in crisis and students who have serious health problems. And of course, just like all reflective practitioners, we always question our own teaching practices. Are we doing enough? Is there a better way? Are we as good as people expect us to be? Teacher heaven is indeed very exhausting, and tired educators can get into trouble. I worry most that when we’re tired we will make mediocre choices. It’s hard to be discriminating when you’re feeling overwhelmed. When too much is on your plate, you can even lose your appetite for perfectly prepared gourmet foods.

Thank goodness we’re not all exhausted at the same time. I do think it is the principal’s responsibility to bring people back on task when our goals become blurred and the curriculum loses its freshness. It’s a role I share, of course, with my colleagues. Everyone on staff needs to feel responsible for putting us back on track when we’ve gone astray.
If our music teacher were thinking about designing a new course of study, it wouldn't be surprising for me to suggest it include a Broadway musical or the work of jazz musicians from Harlem. After all, we want children to feel fortunate to be living in New York. When we are thinking of trying a whole-school course of study as a change of pace, it wouldn't be surprising for me to suggest we study our one city block. What incredible curriculum there is to be developed if we look at our block through the eyes of a historian, artist, mathematician, and scientist. What a way for children and adults to appreciate their community. When children share their finished written work with me, they have come to expect my usual response. After complimenting them, I usually ask, “What are you going to do with it now? Where in the real world does it deserve to be read?” My responses are fairly predictable, because I stand firm in the notion that children need to see the richness of their world and learn to use their literacies to improve the quality of their world.

Creating Structures to Push Thinking

Whenever enthusiastic teachers get together, new thinking occurs. Ideas are born when teachers eat lunch together, sit next to each other on a long field trip bus ride, or notice what one another are working on as they wait for their turn to use the photocopy machine. There are also structured ways to push people’s thinking.

Weekly Staff Meetings

Since the very first week our school has been in existence, Wednesday afternoons, from 3:30 until 5:00 P.M., we have been holding regular staff meetings. The format has undergone lots of changes as our staff has grown in numbers. Today, two of the four meetings each month are devoted to some aspect of curriculum and/or instruction. Once a month we meet in smaller grade-level clusters, and once a month we use this time to meet in reader-response groups to talk about a good juicy novel we have chosen to read. By the time you read this, we will no doubt be experimenting with yet another way to use our time together. (More details on staff meetings in Chapter 7, “Turning Schools into Centers for Professional Study.”) I often take the role of discussion leader, although through the years we have come up with alternate plans of sharing this responsibility. Over the years we have used several prompts, structures, and activities to focus our conversations. They have included the following:

- During the week, ask teachers to fill out questionnaires on specific topics and share the results at faculty meetings. (See Content Area Survey and Status of the Staff Worksheet in Appendixes 19 and 20.)
- View videos of colleagues working in different disciplines. The “Star” of the video has an opportunity to target discussion.
- Hold staff meetings in one another’s classrooms, beginning with a tour of the room narrated by the host teacher.
- Read aloud picture books that invite talk about curriculum. For example, reading *Archibald Frisby* by Michael Chesworth encourages teachers to discuss what
they would do if they had a science-obsessed student like Archibald in their class as well as how to inspire more lovers of science. Reading *Snow Day* by Moira Fain promotes talk about teacher-student relationships and the role of art and writing. Reading *Phoebe and the Spelling Bee* by Barney Saltzberg brings up talk about how to study spelling words. Reading Sally Grindley’s “*Why Is the Sky Blue?*” reminds us that our students can be very fine teachers.

- Share excerpts from adult novels that illustrate children’s need for content-rich curriculum. For example, Michael, the main character in Pete Hamill’s *Snow in August*, demonstrates a child’s total immersion in a self-chosen area of inquiry. Will, Sully’s grandson in Richard Russo’s *Nobody’s Fool*, demonstrates a child’s daydreaming moments of inquiry, and Digger in David Malouf’s *The Great World* has a third-grade obsession for maps and atlases. Memoirs can also inspire rich talk about the kinds of inquiring lives we would love our students to lead. Memoirs by Margaret Mead, Annie Dillard, and Edward O. Wilson are filled with inspirational passages.

- Read multiple copies of carefully selected professional articles or books in preparation for talk on an agreed-upon topic. Follow up with appointments to visit in one another’s classrooms. (See more on making professional reading add up in Chapter 7, “Turning School into Centers for Professional Study.”)

- Display content area artifacts across the grades. For example, collect and display letters sent home to inform families about new areas of study, or samples of homework attached to research projects, or forms of logs kept by students during content studies.

- Create a “Have you seen ———?” forum. Meetings begin with staff members recommending that people stop in to see some worthy new project or ritual in a colleague’s classroom. Have you seen how Sharon Taberski devotes some of morning meeting time to content studies? Have you seen the way Judy’s students keep a weekly class journal? Have you seen the way Regina and her classmates resolve personal problems at the end of the week by giving out stars of forgiveness on Friday afternoons? Have you seen the way Joan’s students take turns coming up with closings for each day? Have you seen Karen’s collaborative class scrapbooks on famous sites around New York? Have you seen Tammy’s kindergartners take part in their daily “News Minutes”? Have you seen Eve’s birthday ritual, in which parents tell the story of the child’s birth? Have you seen the handmade greeting cards Kathy and her students have made for families living in shelters? Have you seen how David and his students turned their geography studies into a mural for their back wall? Have you seen how Amy has turned her read-aloud time into a read-along time? Have you seen the oneliners Pat hangs on the soon-to-be-filled bulletin boards in her classroom, like “Pining for Poems,” “Aching for Art,” and “Waiting for Words”? 
• Do quick freewriting or brainstorming activities. Begin, for example, by giving instructions such as “Draw two columns. What are you sure of and not sure of about the teaching of nonfiction reading?” or “List your top ten concerns about the new math initiative,” or “Write a short reflective piece about how your content studies have improved the quality of life in your classroom. If they haven’t, why not?” Teachers can be asked to share in small groups and then bring big ideas to the whole group.

**Grade-Level Meetings**  Once a month teachers have an opportunity to meet with teachers working with students the same age as their own. Their talk can then be much more targeted to specific age and grade concerns. I am happy to roam the building stopping occasionally to join in on a particularly intriguing conversation. (Some grade levels leave the building and I have to roam from coffee shop to coffee shop to join them.) It is the principal’s responsibility to be part of the think tanks that form throughout school buildings. Some days, I must admit, I am too tired after school hours to think an original thought. Often I’m a better listener and note taker at these meetings; I need a wide-awake weekend morning to think through my colleagues’ concerns. I suppose this is also true for many of my colleagues. It therefore becomes essential that issues are not “covered” in one-shot meetings. As is true for our students, it’s always preferable that teachers study a topic over time. I find some of my best thinking takes place away from school, when I am more relaxed and my mind is less cluttered. A case in point follows.

At one grade-level meeting, the third-grade teachers were rethinking the way their students research and present the stories of their family’s heritage and immigration to the United States. (See Joanne’s letter, page 190). Students usually begin their research by collaboratively creating a list of kinds of information they could share with their classmates about their family’s country of origin. They are given class time as well as resources and strategies for gathering the information they need. Students also work closely at home with family members to enrich and extend their learnings. They are assigned a date for presenting their cultural background and the story of their family’s immigration. On the red-letter day, family members, loaded down with cameras, authentic ethnic snacks, and appropriate background music, usually accompany their children to class. Classmates serve as audience to one another’s presentations and have the opportunity to touch coins from various countries, taste homemade treats, see family trees, as well as listen to the sound of a few words in the language of the country being presented. Children always look forward to these presentations, and come to appreciate how lucky they are to be learning alongside friends from such diverse backgrounds. The presentations are always well received, but the teachers sensed there might be ways to make the learnings and the presentations more powerful, for both the presenter and the members of the audience.

My thinking about our third graders’ research projects began on the following
Sunday morning when my husband walked in with some old three-tiered bric-a-brac shelves that he found at a neighborhood garage sale. I was busy writing at my desk when he walked into my office with this unexpected treasure. It was wonderful to have a real excuse to leave my work for a while to find a place to hang the shelves and to decide on how to fill them. It didn’t take too long to do both. I found the perfect nook and decided that the three shelves of three different heights would make a perfect home for the assorted pitchers that were now in cupboards and cabinets in the kitchen and dining room. I had never realized that I owned so many pitchers. By putting them together, side by side, I came to appreciate the varied shapes, textures, colors, and sizes of these dozen pitchers. I began comparing handle shapes, rim designs, and spout sizes. I noticed many things that I had never seen, when the pitchers lived in separate rooms, behind so many closed doors.

I then began thinking about all those children, listening to one another’s presentations. I wondered if we could create structures that would enable the students to see all the information presented side by side, as well as design ways for them to interact with the information so that they too might see things they never saw before. I wrote the following note to my colleagues and then met with them to talk through these sketchy ideas. It seems important to point out that I never worry if my ideas are off-target or even inappropriate. They are merely meant to encourage further conversation and exploration of new thoughts. I never expect them to serve as mandates and I never worry that they will be stretched, twisted, collapsed, reshaped, or totally ignored. In fact, I always expect unexpected things to take place when I meet with thoughtful teachers. (Several years ago I visited with Renay, one of our third-grade teachers, when she was teaching in Ecuador. As we drove through the streets of Quito, I noticed that some drivers didn’t stop at the stop signs. “They’re just a suggestion!” Renay joked. So too, my teaching ideas are just a suggestion.)

Dear Renay, Amy, and Joanne,

I’ve been thinking about your third graders and their immigration investigations. I went ahead and jotted down a few thoughts, even though I realize that to do a really good job I’d first need to find out what are the big understandings about immigration you’re trying to get across to the children as well as what have been the kids’ main concerns and questions. Despite the fact that I’m working from a bit of ignorance, (I’m sure that I’ve done that before), I went ahead and categorized my thoughts around the different stages of the student’s work.

**Research Techniques**
Children throughout the school from all the grades, who come from the countries being studied, can be tapped as resource people. (These children can also be invited to the whole-group presentations, serving as special guest members of the audience.)

Children can learn to use city resources. For example, we can show them how to read the yellow pages phone directory to search for embassies, cultural organizations, and even ethnic restaurants. We can teach them to make appropriate phone calls, send faxes, and/or write letters of request. (I’ve learned this from our friend in Denver, Steph Harvey, who is...
working on a book about nonfiction writing. She talks at length about teaching children to use readily available reference material.)

Why not encourage and support collaborative research across the three third-grade classrooms? Students from the same home countries can share resources and even present together. (Should we let scheduling headaches prevent us from carrying this out?)

Countries being studied need to become public knowledge in our school. Perhaps the students can post the countries in a central location. No doubt, visitors and family members will have additional information, stories, memories, artifacts, and ideas to share. Third graders can be invited to any related interviews taking place in other classrooms. (First graders in Paula’s class, for example, are always interviewing family members from different cultural backgrounds.)

We can encourage students to videotape older folks in their families to gather their immigration stories. Presentations can include a viewing of these oral histories. (I have some interesting notes from Sheldon Oberman on gathering family stories. Let me know if you’re interested.)

We can invite parents in on the search for newspaper clippings from all the countries represented. It would be interesting to discover if the events happening in their countries today are connected to their families’ reasons for immigrating.

We can encourage students to write to cultural institutions in the city to find out if any collections are connected to their work at hand. We can be looking into the Internet as well.

**Audience Participation**

Audience members can keep a special immigration journal, taking notes on one another’s presentations. All presentations can be viewed with students’ immigration questions as the lens. This would require deeper thinking than just learning about countries. We will need to remind students that they are keeping a notebook about immigration, not merely a scrapbook. They are making notes as well as taking notes.

We can encourage students to read over their notes periodically looking for surprises, threads, patterns, discrepancies, etc., much the way they have learned to use their writer’s notebook.

They can also staple in any handouts from their friends’ presentations. Looking at the same words in ten different languages, for example, will demonstrate how researchers study data.

We can ask students to do occasional reflective responses in order to tease out important issues. I can imagine our third graders writing in response to the following questions (or any that fit closer with your specific goals) in mind.

What do you think is the hardest thing about arriving in a new country?
Have you ever visited a different country? What made it feel different?
What do you think the first people listed on our family trees would think about life in New York today?
What do you think is the difference between studying a second language in school and moving to a new country in which you must learn another language?
Have you ever felt different than the people around you? Explain.
What kind of work could you do if you didn’t speak a language that most people could understand?
How can we make newly arrived students feel really welcome?
We can also ask students to keep a list of their own growing questions and concerns about immigration, and then classmates could respond to one another’s inquiry issues. We can edit and publish student responses in our school newsletter.

At the end of each presentation, we can ask audience members to write a complimentary note highlighting memorable moments. Then we can fold up and ceremoniously pass these little slips of paper on to the presenter, who can take the comments home to be enjoyed as bedtime reading. (This would be similar to the adult writing workshops we’ve attended.)

In pairs, students can keep dialogue journals with one another, writing back and forth after each presentation. Conversations on paper will push audience members to clarify their thinking and get them to interact with the information presented. We can encourage students to look for elements of presentations that will inform their own work in progress.

Whole-Class Gatherings
We can label children’s home countries on one class map, together with date of family immigration, to enable students to see patterns of immigration.

We can create graphs and charts to bring information together and develop big concepts. For example, children can graph all the reasons families first came to America, the number of family members that made the original move, the number of families that have roots in more than one home country, the number of first-generation Americans in the class, the kinds of work newly arrived immigrants were able to get, etc.

Children can respond to the literature read aloud in their immigration journals to deepen their studies. We might consider creating a bibliography of available immigration picture books, poems, and nonfiction texts. In other words, we should all know what one another have. For example, have you all read Megan McDonald’s My House Has Stars, Emery Bernhard’s Happy New Year, Eve Bunting’s How Many Days to America?, Riki Levinson’s Watch the Stars Come Out, Sonia Levitan’s A Piece of Home, Amy Hest’s When Jessie Came Across the Sea, Bonnie Pryor’s The Dream Jar, Jeanette Winter’s Klara’s New World, Marilyn Sach’s Call Me Ruth, Mary Watson’s The Butterfly Seeds, and Betsey Hearne’s Seven Brave Women?

We can also invite social action about immigration issues today. We can ask children to reflect on how their studies have influenced their thinking about current life in the United States. We can encourage students to get their voices going and get their pieces published for real. For example, students could write letters to the editor about the issue of using English only or providing health care for all immigrants. (Should we create an ongoing immigration news board in a central location?)

Weave Immigration Studies into the School Day
• Students can study our school language board. Third graders could be responsible for keeping this board up to date as their related community service.
• Students can connect their research to our yearly schoolwide international dinner, preparing meaningful background reading material.
• We can add richness to the students’ research by collaborating with school subject specialists. For example, music and art teachers can add depth and breadth to students’ discoveries by simultaneously studying distinctive art and music forms in students’ home countries.
• Each child can search for additional picture books that take place in their home country, eventually building a third-grade library of related literature.
Each child can do several pieces of short writing connected to their study. They can write up a short interview, a family story, a recipe, a family tree, and a timeline. If a genre is being studied, that format can also be used. Students can shape their information into poetry, picture books, or photo essay. Students’ writing can then become part of permanent, third-grade reference libraries.

I hope some of these thoughts are worthwhile. As you can tell I’ve begun to think about ways for the children to use those presentations as a means of thinking new thoughts, much the way they revisit the entries in their writer’s notebook. I am wondering if our eight-year-olds can notice patterns as well as differences in their immigration stories. I wonder if the students could ask big questions and construct abstract ideas about geography, language, culture, and history if they placed the presentations side by side. And just as they do with the entries in their writer’s notebook, I wonder if the students in the audience could do their own important writing in response to one another’s presentations.

Can we get together at the next grade-level meeting to continue this conversation?

With respect,
Shelley

PS. Perhaps each grade-three teacher can research her own family’s immigration story and present it to the class. This invitation can be extended to other staff members.

I am able to think new thoughts when I’m alone at home, but my thoughts never become well-developed, fine-tuned, or practical until I meet with the teachers who are deeply engaged in the topic. Principals need to make sure that teachers have ample time to talk, and they need to find ways to become part of those conversations.

Joint Teaching Sessions  Several years ago our PTA raised funds to renovate our school auditorium. As previously noted, the bolted-down chairs were removed, along with the linoleum squares. The oak floorboards were covered with several coats of clear polyurethane and shiny black folding chairs were stored in rolling carts in the corners of our new “ballroom.” This huge space on our fourth floor holds several hundred people. We use this space for dance and music rehearsals and performances, messy, spread-out-on-the-floor art projects, adaptive physical education instruction for students with special needs, large group family meetings, and indoor recess during inclement weather. I’ve long wondered why we don’t take advantage of this expansive room for joint teaching sessions.

It’s a natural space for hosting a combined reading or writing workshop. Several years ago Judy, Joanne, and I arranged to meet in the ballroom with Joanne’s entire third-grade class and Judy’s sixth-grade crew. We wanted to study conferring techniques together. We announced to the students, who came prepared with drafts, writing folders, and their writer’s notebooks, that we were not to be thought of as three separate writing instructors to be helping three students simultaneously. Instead, we intended to work together, with one student at a time, in order that we study our own conferring techniques. It was important to let students in on our goals, otherwise it would be too easy for the students to pull us off in separate directions, preventing us
from ever listening in on one another’s conferences. The students eagerly spread out in this large room, anxious to read their writing with new partners who up until now only occasionally shared playground space and cafeteria tables. Judy and Joanne took turns, inviting a student to share. We each took turns hosting the conference, as our colleagues listened in, took notes, and jumped in when they couldn’t resist. After each conference we had time to process our work, and talk about our strengths and weaknesses as conference partners. It was a rare professional opportunity, and of course it needn’t be so rare. Teachers and administrators can and should carve out regularly scheduled opportunities to work together. All it takes is a big space, a shared interest, and the commitment to make it happen. (Of course there are other ways for teachers to visit in one another’s classrooms. See Chapter 2, “Rethinking the Role of Principal,” and Chapter 7, “Turning Schools into Centers for Professional Study.”)

Informal Study Groups There are topics that for short periods of time seem particularly crucial for small numbers of teachers. For example, new teachers, teachers who have changed grades, or teachers with a particular research question in mind may want to study a topic that does not have schoolwide appeal. It makes sense to form an intimate informal study group. Over the years we have had breakfast meetings, lunchtime conversations, and after-school chats. Usually these groups form around a specific line of inquiry. Other times a broad subject is announced, and a come-what-may attitude employed. Just recently I announced that I would reserve Monday afternoons, from three-thirty to five o’clock, for informal talk about the teaching of writing. The meeting place was announced, our poetry reading room, and teachers were encouraged to drop in any week with questions, concerns, ideas, and of course student writing.

Summer Planning Meetings We’re fortunate that, each year, our district provides us with a small amount of funding in order to invite staff members to work together for several days during the summer months. It’s a glorious opportunity to prepare for a new school year. Relaxed teachers can prepare very fertile ground for some new and ambitious school-year challenges. Over the years we have used these summer hours to think through the use of portfolios, imagine the possibilities of a whole-school study of our one city block, and most recently to try to capture in writing what our grade-level expectations for each subject are. This challenge brought up big questions concerning assessment as well as the national standards movement. (See related information on standards and assessment beginning on page 225).

Fulfilling District Obligations Each year our superintendent, Elaine Fink, requires that heads of school write down their school’s goals and objectives. She used to tease me that she could always spot mine in the pile. They were the only handwritten ones. I’ve come to take them a lot more seriously, especially as Elaine has made the district forms more and more open-ended. I rarely get them in on time, however. It just takes so much talking early in the
year to really establish where we are headed. Elaine asks principals to explain in narrative form their hopes for the year in terms of literacy, mathematics, interdisciplinary work, parent involvement, English as a second language, professional development, and any other area we are particularly interested in. She often reminds us that our use of budget allocation should demonstrate our commitment to the initiatives we describe (a living example of putting your money where your mouth is). I've always liked that reminder, because it has implications for how we live our life at school as well. In other words, if we determine that real-world writing, for example, is a writing curriculum priority, then the money we spend on materials should support our intention, as should the daily agenda on our wipe-off boards, the materials we choose for read-aloud time, and the amount of time we discuss this issue at grade-level meetings and whole-school faculty get-togethers.

Even though I often procrastinate about getting my goals and objectives together each autumn, I know the task is a valuable one. Any time you write what you are thinking, the experience gives you time to pause and reflect on your interests, needs, obsessions, passions, and priorities. Each time I write, I'm stunned by what I say; what I know and what I don't know. The following is a brief excerpt from one year's response to being asked about our interdisciplinary initiative.

During our summer planning time we read Jerry Harste's research on inquiry-based curriculum. We then began calling on district experts, e.g. Tanya for science, Anna for social studies, and sharing their input. We then explored the possibility of trying, for the very first time, a school-wide inquiry study. We chose our “one city block” as the broad umbrella of our inquiry. We will begin by imagining what would be important about such a study, asking ourselves what significant learnings might be attached to such long-term work, across the grades. We would then catapult children into living with an extra wide-awakeness by taking several walks around the block, reading related materials, talking to family members and people in the community. We would then ask children to imagine themselves as people with particular ways of viewing the world. Perhaps the children would pretend to be photographers, architects, scientists, environmentalists, physicians, mathematicians, politicians, artists, or musicians. We would then ask the children to imagine walking around the block with each of these different groups of people. “What would they probably notice? What would they probably say? What might confuse them? What might make them happy? What might make them furious?” Once the students understand the different ways these people view the world, we will begin to imagine the questions each might ask. Once the questions are listed and sorted, children, teachers, and parents will begin trying to answer their questions, paying attention to the new questions that pop up along the way. These inquiry projects will no doubt lead to lots of interviewing, firsthand observations, reading of historical documents, sketching, photography, and so on. The children's finished work will no doubt result in lots of public speaking, art demonstrations, and written products. The children will also benefit from many opportunities to work collaboratively, share resources, and teach others what they are learning. The most significant benefit will be that children will view their neighborhood with new eyes, appreciating its strengths and working to eliminate its weaknesses.
It is our hope that conducting a schoolwide interdisciplinary inquiry project will push our thinking about smaller scale, classroomwide studies that take place all year round. Currently there are classes studying Native Americans, the rain forest, the solar system, whales, trees, and skeletons. What we learn to do as a community will have lessons for what we do within the four walls of our classrooms. We will continue to read professionally about inquiry teaching and learning and to try out new ideas in the company of colleagues.

**Writing Grants to Support Curriculum**

I'm not a very successful grant writer, but I keep on keeping on. I try not to write proposals for unreasonable events, crowd-pleasers that would sound great in a school brochure, but would require head-spinning interruptions, scheduling nightmares, or just too much time away from the regular work at hand. In addition, I only write grants for projects that fit easily into the regular life and curriculum priorities of the school. The following is an excerpt from a grant proposal to bring the performing arts to our students.

At the Manhattan New School, one of our most heartfelt curriculum beliefs centers on helping children see the richness of their lives. We know that children need not be rich to appreciate the richness of their environments. Our job as educators is to provide hopefulness for our students. In our New York City public elementary school, we want children to realize how fortunate they are to live in such a culturally diverse city. We want our youngsters to take full advantage of parks, libraries, and museums. We want our children to lead wide-awake lives. Many carry writer's notebooks. Some carry sketchbooks. When our students walk down the street, we want them to be awed by architectural detail, to be fascinated by the rich mosaic of faces, and to marvel at cleverly designed store windows. We want them to take pride in the sounds of surprising languages spoken, and the availability of foods from all corners of the globe. We want them to understand our visitors' envy that our school is in walking distance of the Museum Mile. These desires necessarily influence our curriculum decisions, having an impact on the literature we choose, the field trips we make, and the inquiry projects we support.

Many of our city studies require little or few financial resources. We take neighborhood walks; our parents prepare traditional foods from their home countries; and we tap the free resources of Central Park rangers, museum curators, and local public librarians. Then too, we host occasional bake sales to raise funds to rent buses and pay admission fees to special events. We have realized, however, that we have been neglecting one major attribute of New York City—the performing arts. This year Jacques d'Amboise's National Dance Institute has been working with our fourth graders, and their incredible ability to turn nine- and ten-year-olds into quality chorus line performers has awakened our interests in the best New York has to offer. We want our students, throughout the grades, to keep on dancing. So too, we want all our students to understand the contributions made by the jazz musicians in Harlem, the folksingers in Greenwich Village cafés, and the actors, artists, and musicians who bring life to the Broadway stage. In other words, we are particularly interested in developing curriculum that will help students understand the significant contributions diverse New Yorkers have made to the performing arts in this country.
Working with Parents on Issues of Curriculum

Principals can also enrich curriculum studies by working with parents directly and by supporting teachers’ efforts to share curriculum with parents. Several effective ways of informing parents about curriculum were described in Chapter 5, “Reaching Out to Families.” They include:

- Holding curriculum nights early in the year to explain new grade-level expectations.
- Asking parents to serve as secretaries, preparing summary notes at curriculum night. These notes can then be distributed to parents who were unable to attend.
- Devoting PTA meetings to one particular curriculum area and holding the meeting in a teacher’s classroom. The classroom teacher can serve as host, offering a walking tour of how the curriculum area is handled in the classroom. Teachers can also take part in panel discussions of curriculum areas.
- Having teachers and/or administrators invite parents to do as the children do. In other words, parents are asked to take part in evening reading, writing, and math workshops.
- Inviting students to present workshops on curriculum to parents, followed by presentations of their work.
- Devoting school newsletter columns to aspects of curriculum.
- Creating courses of study around specific areas of curriculum. Small groups of parents with specific requests for information meet with a teacher or the principal to explore one aspect of curriculum.

Additional ways to communicate with parents that are particularly effective in exploring issues of curriculum include:

- Sending jargon-free curriculum articles home.
- Inviting district experts as guest speakers to explore curriculum with parents.
- Showing slides of children at work across the curriculum, followed by a question-and-answer session.
- Hosting parent tours specifically highlighting one particular curriculum area. For example, parents can be invited to visit kindergarten through fifth-grade rooms to see how mathematics is being taught. Later they can reconvene to talk about what they noticed, how the teaching differs from their own school memories, what similarities they saw across grade levels, and to ask any questions they might have.
- Asking students to write curriculum columns for school publications. Students can serve as reporters on the curriculum beat. For example, the social studies reporter can periodically survey the building and share schoolwide topics and methods of study.
Sometimes parents initiate dialogue on curriculum. Renay, a second/third multigrade teacher shared with me a beautiful note she received from the father of one of her students, Lathisha (see Figure 6.1). This gracious and concerned parent, Mr. Walker, had a powerful idea—teachers and parents writing books together. What better way would there be for parents to really understand what goes on in classrooms?

**Gathering Curriculum Resources**

Principals, who regularly wander the building peeking into out-of-the-way storerooms and file cabinets, can become incredible sources of information. Principals who visit every classroom every day are in a way taking informal inventories of all that is available. They know who the experts are. They know where the goodies are. I know which classroom has a great collection of atlases. I know who has a complete set of *Hardy Boys* books. I know who keeps red licorice for snacks in her wooden cupboard. I know who is an expert at drawing animals. I know who plays the piano and who knows how to sing Irish folksongs. Principals who pay attention can take on that switchboard-operator role, hooking up students and teachers with people and places they can learn and teach, nourish and be nourished by. Of course, this extends beyond the boundaries of our one school. Principals need to know what is happening in other area schools. Sometimes, just the right connection is just a phone call or e-mail away.

In addition, I periodically ask teachers to jot down the topics their children are studying. From my classroom visits I always know the whole-class areas of interest, but

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**Dear Renay:**

Lathisha continues to have problems in math. I am unable to apply myself to assist her as I would like to. But I would like to embark on this idea with your collaboration. I will design exercises to give her practice in her area of difficulty. To be of maximum value I must know whether what I have done meets with your approval. Accordingly I would appreciate your comments as we go along. I know this is requesting a special favor which makes demands on your time. Perhaps together we could write a new book on teaching techniques for teachers and parents.

(Smile) you are a very good teacher.

Best regards

---

Sincerely,

Winston A. Walker
Parent of Lathisha.

---

Figure 6.1
I don’t always know individual or small-group studies. I find it helpful to have these topics posted on my office bulletin board as a constant reminder. (The listing should also hang in a more public place, so that everyone in the school community always knows what the current hot topics are.) Included here is Sharon Taberski’s response to such a request (see Figure 6.2). When I know the hot topics, I can always be on the lookout for just the perfect article, news clipping, picture book, photo, or phone number of a potential expert. Just as some people prepare stocking stuffers to hang on the mantle on Christmas morning, I take particular delight in stuffing goodies into teachers’ mailboxes in the early morning.

Concerns About Assessment and Standards

The phrase show and tell brings to mind one of the most familiar kindergarten rituals. It is perhaps surprising, then, that I sat in awe the first time I witnessed Isabel’s five-year-olds engage in the daily ritual they call “show, tell, and teach.” First the children arrange themselves into a large circle in the carpeted meeting area. Next a child brings out two or three hollow blocks from the dramatic play area and places them in the center of the circle. Then come the brightly colored silk scarves. Yes, silk scarves. They too
are borrowed from the dramatic play area and are carefully selected and draped over the hollow blocks, thereby creating a glorious pedestal for the five-year-old about to carefully arrange the goodies he or she has carried to school in a shopping bag. The child lifts each item and carefully places it to guarantee a lovely arrangement as well as easy visibility for the classmates gathered. Show, tell, and teach is ready to begin.

The tools and rituals in Isabel’s classroom become sacred to all members of her community. Whenever I visit her room, I am keenly aware of the elegance of design, the clarity of purpose, and the serene sense of order that have been woven into all her classroom procedures. Educators would do well to bring these qualities to all the rituals, structures, and practices that fill our school calendars and daily agendas, including those school practices related to assessment.

Our work with assessment, however, began with none of these qualities. We were not elegant, clear, or serene. We realized that in order to eventually say to parents, visitors, and district office personnel, “This is how we assess our students,” we would have to spend many long hours exploring and experimenting with many undefined, tentative ideas.

As our school grew in population each year, I was particularly interested in assessment procedures that would be consistent throughout the grades, or at least one that would be consistent for the early-childhood grades and one that could be implemented for the upper grades.

**Designing Meaningful Assessment Tools**

In-depth and long-term conversations about assessment took a turn with the publication of Joanne Hindley Salch’s wonderful book *In the Company of Children*. During the school year prior to its publication, Joanne and her third-grade teammates had written a list of hopes for third graders, to be given out to parents during evening conferences. The list included expectations for reading, writing, mathematics, social interactions, and work habits. As a school, we had initially used checklists coupled with parent conferences to share student progress with family members. The checklists included descriptors for all subjects as well as such qualitative terms as *always*, *sometimes*, *occasionally*, *rarely*. We were not fully satisfied with these, but were reluctant to move toward narrative reports due to the time involved in carefully completing them for classes that were often filled with thirty students. Joanne and her teammates’ carefully-crafted list of hopes moved us away from quick checklists. Teachers across the grades were inspired to create some form of written scaffolding that would help children keep tabs on their own learning and at the same time would provide a means of presenting information to parents.

**“Our Hopes”** The third-grade list of hopes became a working document for teachers throughout the building. It is now referred to as the “Our Hopes” assessment. When the fourth-grade teachers created their own, they added a system for students and teachers to reflect upon these goals. Now in addition to a list of yearlong expectations in each subject area, Joan, Kevin, and Sungho designed a way for students to record
whether or not they had reached these goals as well as a way for teachers to agree or disagree with student self-assessments. (See sample below.) Their innovation was adopted for schoolwide use in third through fifth grades. Joan, Kevin, and Sungho wrote the following fourth-grade cover letter:

To the student:
Please read the fourth-grade hopes and expectations carefully for each of the different subjects. These are the things we have been talking about and working hard on this year.
Place a check next to the areas you feel you are successful in (you remember to think about them and do them all the time). Write the letter “G” to indicate areas that are goals for you to focus on in the future (things you sometimes do but are trying to remember to do all the time).
Be very thoughtful and honest about your responses.

To the family:
When there is no comment by the teacher, it means the teacher and child are in agreement. Differences of opinion between the teacher and child will show up in the teacher column.

The fourth-grade team then wrote a list of hopes and expectations for all areas of the curriculum (reading, writing, mathematics, social studies, spelling, handwriting, etc.), as well as a section for work habits, attitudes, and even homework. The specialists in our school added similar sections for each of their specialties (music, art, physical education, science, and Spanish). A brief excerpt from the social studies section illustrates the format and types of hopes that were highlighted.

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Some of the fourth-grade math expectations included:

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(I have made the deliberate decision to not reprint complete sets of these grade-level hopes. There are tremendous advantages to each school community and small clusters
of teachers within those communities composing and negotiating their own expectations. The conversations surrounding these documents were perhaps more important than the documents themselves.)

As can be seen from this brief sampling, these documents are not a list of isolated facts that every student must memorize, but rather a way for all members of the school community to become aware of yearlong possibilities. These documents provided a way for teachers to see the power of their teaching and for students to assess their own hard work. Joanne also suggests that the assessment system created in our school was effective and efficient because it, “matched the way we taught, didn’t take away from teaching time, thoroughly involved students, and was relied upon throughout the school year.”

It should be noted that the “Our Hopes” assessments remain flexible documents. Although we worked hard to create consistency of format throughout the grades (in terms of design, language, font, as well as making sure that there were no gaps as we moved from one grade level expectation to another), the contents of the checklists would be ever changing for several reasons. Our teaching is always being informed by our own professional development work, including professional reading, classroom research, staff conversations and intervisitations, workshops and summer institutes, the arrival of new colleagues, consultants, as well as district and state initiatives. The word processor makes it easy for teachers, working with their students, to revise the document whenever necessary. They can, for example, add unique areas of study, include additional expectations, as well as prepare a shortened version for early-in-the-year distribution. The self-assessment columns can be deleted when parents first see the document at the October curriculum meeting, and then added in November when the document is sent home for the first time. It became evident that these lists of clear, consistent, well-thought-out hopes for each grade level would not only add cohesiveness to our growing school but would serve to educate and inform parents in a straightforward manner.

It should also be noted that, even back in the days of simple checklists, our students throughout the grades had always been asked to do additional narrative self-evaluations. In other words, children had always been asked, and continue to be asked, to write about themselves as learners. At set times throughout the year, children are asked to reflect on their growth across the disciplines. Such teacher-designed prompts might include, “As a writer, what goals are you setting for yourself?” or “How have you changed as a reader?” or “What are you discovering about yourself as a scientist, mathematician, and historian?”

**Student Portfolios** Along with implementing the new lists of hopes, the entire faculty studied the ways that other educators were defining, designing, and utilizing student portfolios. Our research and extensive professional reading helped us to see that we could not adopt the way that any other school had chosen to use portfolios. We knew that we had to design a way of working that fit with our community. We continued to study the
use of portfolios and eventually accepted the challenge of creating a system for weaving the use of work samples into our daily lives as well as into our family conferences.

The use of student portfolios was eventually established school wide and today they are filled throughout the school year. Students periodically file work samples in all subject areas. In June, students are invited to take home all of their work except for a few carefully selected items. These include breakthrough pieces in all subject areas. In addition, there are certain school wide tasks that students are asked to perform annually. These tasks are done on the scheduled half-days that the central board provides for staff development. It is our hope that the products resulting from these tasks will be saved from year to year. During any one school year we usually have eight of these half-days. As explained earlier, rather than try to make such days feel like typical whole days, we decided to use them to engage in schoolwide events. We therefore have our “Dancing in the Streets” celebration during the June half-day and our Winter Solstice celebration during the December half-day. We invite the entire student population to take part in predetermined portfolio challenges on the remaining half-days. These include:

- Prepare a self-portrait.
- Create a pattern.
- List all the people who work in our school, including their names and jobs.

It’s very revealing to observe how children grow over time on all these tasks. Their changing abilities, sense of self, and awareness of others, remind us to appreciate just how much they are learning and how much their sense of community is increasing. Imagine at graduation receiving six self-portraits you have drawn, six patterns you have designed, or six written lists detailing your awareness of the adults in your school community. It’s as if our students are opening individual time capsules when they review these materials. Children simply can’t believe what they have accomplished and how far they’ve come.

Additional schoolwide portfolio tasks might include:

- offering suggestions to improve the school
- drawing or writing about what they want to be when they grow up
- presenting the alphabet in a beautiful way
- recording the name of their borough, city, state, and country
- listing the names of all the states they know
- writing the words to a song or poem they know by heart
- drawing a floor plan of their classroom
- making a map of the school
- making a list of favorites (authors, colors, television shows, movies, desserts, breakfast foods, poets, toys, musical instruments, and places in the world).

(See reproducible list in Appendix 21.)
Involving Family Members in Student Assessment

We make it a practice to involve family members in the assessment process, according to the following timeline:

October: Family members receive list of hopes at curriculum night. (This is turned into a checklist of expectations for use in November, March, and June.)

November: The teacher/student checklist is sent home with a parent-response page. Teachers meet with family members at half-hour conferences, looking at work samples. (Formal portfolios are usually not presented this early in the year.) Teachers often invite students to be present at these conferences. (A generic school letter of concerns is available to distribute to families of students who are experiencing difficulties. At this early part of the school year, these are usually problems related to attendance, punctuality, work habits, and social relationships.

March: Family members attend spring conferences with teacher and student. Student is always present at this conference and in fact leads the conference. Child walks family members through his or her portfolio and explains his or her self-assessment on the “Our Hopes” checklist. Student also completes an assortment of narrative self-assessment surveys and questionnaires.

June: Teacher sends home a completed “Our Hopes” checklist for the year, indicating that child is now ready for the next school year. Student creates a supplemental list of goals for upcoming year. Student places additional work in portfolio and selected pieces are added to cumulative file kept in staff room archives. Work samples that are not selected for inclusion are taken home.

Early-Childhood Documents

Our kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade teachers spent many hours creating parallel checklists for our youngest students. Teachers carefully checked for developmental appropriateness, as well as consistency in content, language, and design. A major difference in the early-childhood checklists is that the young children are not asked to decide, as the older students are, if the behaviors listed are goals or accomplishments. Instead, early-childhood teachers chose to use qualifying descriptors. They currently read, “area of strength,” “making progress,” “not yet consistent,” and area of concern.”

Kindergarten teachers call their document “Habits of Work, Habits of Mind,” and list their expectations for the developing reader, writer, and mathematician as well as thoughts on student’s growing sense of responsibility. The latter includes such abilities as being able to consider suggestions from classmates, ask for help when needed, and deal with difficult situations appropriately. First- and second-grade teachers have prepared very similar checklists.

A few of the expectations for a first-grade writer include:

1. Is beginning to write for a variety of purposes and audiences
2. Matches text and illustration
Considers suggestions from others
Is beginning to use conventions appropriately
Takes risks as a speller

A few of the strategies and behaviors listed in the second-grade reading document include the following:

- Uses contextual cues to create and maintain meaning
- Uses visual cues (sound/letter correspondences) to figure out unknown words
- Self-corrects to maintain meaning
- Uses known words and spelling patterns to figure out unknown words
- Uses prior knowledge to understand text and figure out words

In addition, teachers have devised ways for very young children to take part in self-assessments. They periodically interview kindergarten children and take notes about their individual hopes, interests, struggles, and accomplishments. So too, first graders are asked to write simple reflective pieces about themselves as readers, writers, and mathematicians, or to respond to self-assessment descriptors by choosing a smiling face or a frowning one. In the curriculum area of writing, for example, these descriptors might include such items as, “I can think of topics,” “I try to spell hard words,” “I can read my writing,” and “I leave spaces between words.” Young children also keep portfolios to share with their families.

**Standardized Testing**

Our school is a regular New York City public school, and students are required to take all standardized tests. For years, my colleagues and I have not been able to attend the annual convention of the International Reading Association because most standardized tests in reading and mathematics were administered in the first week in May and we couldn’t be out of town during these high-anxiety times. Beginning just recently, our testing calendar has been stretched out over the months of January through June, with more tests added for even more grade levels. The good news is that we can now attend the IRA conference. The bad news is that our battery of tests is now intended even for second graders.

My daughter, an attorney, reminds me that *battery* refers to an assault by beating or wounding. Is it any less painful for children to sit through these exams now that they don’t all take place in a short amount of time? (See page 69, “The Plague of Standardized Testing.”) Even though the majority of our students do quite well on these exams, we work hard to ensure that parents keep these scores in perspective. Our parents realize that they learn so much more about who their children are as readers, writers, mathematicians, scientists, and so on by poring over portfolios, reading homegrown checklists, listening to their children’s reflective writing, talking to teachers, and visiting classrooms.
The Standards Movement

I read with interest an obituary column written about ninety-five-year-old Frank Cyr, who was known as the father of the yellow school bus. He was a professor of rural education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and was famous for establishing national standards for school buses. Working with a committee of automotive engineers, he produced a list of forty-four national standards for various parts of the school bus. To this day our country’s school buses are yellow with black lettering because these colors offer maximum visibility at dawn and dusk. Creating a list of safety standards on vehicles must have taken a great deal of time and energy, but the task could not have been nearly as complicated and controversial as creating national standards for children’s education. Living, breathing human beings are not built to specifications in an automotive shop.

Informing Parents About Standards

Our district is heavily involved in the standards movement, and it became my responsibility to introduce that involvement to our community. The lists of hopes created by our own teachers became a valuable tool in explaining the complex notion of formal standards to our family members. In fact, I referred to these lists as well as to student portfolios when I sent my first standards letter to our parent body. It read,

Dear families,

Perhaps you have been reading in the newspaper about New York City’s involvement in the movement toward developing national educational standards. I am writing this letter to begin the conversation within our own school. Many district educators have been deeply involved in standards research and development, particularly the New Standards work coming out of the University of Pittsburgh and the National Center on Education and the Economy. I have participated myself in a few national standards–related committees dealing with the teaching of the language arts (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Of course, there are standards for all subject areas, including mathematics, science, and social studies.

Briefly stated, there are two main types of standards, content and performance. Content standards refer to “what children should know and be able to do.” For the most part, these were developed by major professional organizations in this country including the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Performance standards refer to how well children perform in each content area. In other words, performance standards ask, “How good is good enough?” You might think of the grade-level lists of yearlong hopes that our teachers have shared with you as our content standards and the material in your children’s portfolios as evidence of their performance.

I continued my letter by presenting some of the controversies attached to the standards movement.
There are some educators who worry that national standards will not be matched with standards of delivery. In other words, children living in rich districts will continue to receive more services than children living in poor districts do and yet both will be held to the same standards of performance. Some worry that students who do not meet national standards will be quickly labeled and tracked within their school systems. Yet others are concerned that nationwide standards will lead to cookie-cutter teaching without room for creativity and flexibility. There are others who worry that pushing for standards now implies that we didn’t have standards prior to now.

We, of course, know that this is not true here in our district, in our school. We have always believed in effort, hard work, rigorous classrooms, and high-quality work.

I then tried to allay any local concerns.

Despite some of these broad concerns over the standards movement, we need to trust that here in our district the standards will not be misused. In fact, we need to believe that any conversation about standards, at the district or the school level, will result in even more thoughtful practice regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Rest assured that here at the Manhattan New School, we have always talked about rigorous challenges and cutting-edge assessment systems. The district’s commitment to the New Standards Project will, however, influence some of the work at our school. I trust that since our standards have always been high, our students will have no problem meeting the standards. In reading, for example, one of the fourth-grade standards reads, “The student reads at least twenty-five books or the equivalent each year.” We are hopeful that our students will meet this standard, knowing how many wonderful books surround our students, as well as the amount of uninterrupted time the students are given to read each day. Hopefully similar blocks of time are devoted to reading in the evenings, weekends, and holidays when the children are in your care...

The New Standards researchers have recently published their assessment system for fourth graders and this, too, will impact on our students. This system is made up of the performance standards, an on-demand test, and a portfolio of student work. Our fourth graders will in fact be taking the New Standards reference examination in mathematics this spring. We are expecting our students to do well, as our mathematics teaching requires students to deeply understand concepts and participate in frequent problem solving. In other words, the New Standards testing is a close match to our teaching...

In the next few months, you will be hearing a great deal more about the standards movement. You can be assured that as a staff we will continue to approach all new research, initiatives and mandates with serious and reflective eyes and minds. We always have your children’s best interest at heart.

I felt very comfortable in introducing the standards movement to families and in assuring them that we have always had high standards. I like to recall the time when one fifth grader in Judy’s class showed me his writing and asked, “Is it Judy material?” Clearly our students know that our expectations for them are high.

What I did not explore with parents at that time was a major concern that remains with me today. Although our district pays a great deal of attention to professional development, I worry that there are districts that spend so much time thinking and talking about standards that there is not enough time left to talk about exquisite teaching. We
can list page upon page of standards and create rubrics to accompany them, but without the best practices taking place in classrooms, the work will be in vain. There is a comedian on television who jokes about putting together a difficult, five-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle: It was all sky! Too much talk about standards, and not enough of the kind of professional development that makes change at the classroom level is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle of the sky. It takes an impossible amount of time and it doesn’t add up to much.

**Continuing Conversations About Assessment**

Our homegrown lists of grade-level hopes and expectations helped us to comfortably explain what we expected would happen as children moved from year to year at the Manhattan New School. In addition, holding these thoughts in our hands pushed us to take a critical look at any gaps, discrepancies, or developmental concerns that may exist. We sensed that this formal document would also force us to think through any philosophical differences that might exist among staff members. I imagine that on any elementary staff, differences of opinion exist about homework, the place of standard spelling, the introduction of formal reading, the role of phonics instruction, and so on. Writing out these lists of expectations helped us to see that we were not immune to such differences and that it is near impossible to see eye to eye on all issues even when a staff appears to share clearly stated and common beliefs about teaching and learning.

The lists of grade-level hopes also became a fulcrum for conversations about growth over time. A case in point took place when I became conscious of a beginning-of-the-year happening. Teachers would occasionally approach me and very graciously and confidentially say such things as, “How many years has Douglas been in this school?” or “Is handwriting taught in all the grades?” or “I’m surprised Cynthia can’t read a simple ‘I Can Read’ book.” Their telling questions made me wonder if it weren’t time to deal with some of these issues at our weekly staff get-together. I began by asking my colleagues to do something that doesn’t come naturally. I asked them to think about what their students could not do when they entered their classes in September. In other words, I was asking my colleagues to list any weaknesses, gaps, or inadequacies that they considered surprising. I even gave them a “sentence-starter” to free up their thoughts. Below is a sampling of the teachers’ responses.

- Teachers of five-year-olds were surprised when children didn’t know their last names or that they had one. They were also surprised when children didn’t know that some symbols are letters and some are numbers.
- Teachers of six-year-olds were surprised when children couldn’t recognize their names, hold a book in an appropriate way, or join in on a repetitive pattern.
• Teachers of seven-year-olds were surprised when children couldn’t read independently for fifteen minutes, mixed up lower case and upper case letters, left no spaces between their words, or didn’t have strategies for unknown words.

• Teachers of eight-year-olds were surprised when children didn’t use a margin and couldn’t choose appropriate books or read independently for twenty minutes. They were also surprised when children were not familiar with a sense of paragraphs in a text (they didn’t understand the comment, “Let’s look at the third paragraph”). Teachers also expected third graders to be familiar with alphabetical order.

• Teachers of nine-year-olds were surprised by students who didn’t value keeping a writer’s notebook and those who didn’t reread their own writing. Teachers were also surprised that some students didn’t know the difference between a city, state, country, and continent.

• Teachers of ten-year-olds were surprised when students couldn’t spell commonly used words, said they had nothing to write about, or were uncomfortable using a dictionary.

Teachers shared their concerns without placing blame. The activity got us talking about age-appropriate expectations and pushed us to look back at our lists of hopes, rereading them for any needed revisions or shifts in emphases. The activity also got us wondering why children were not learning things that were being presented year in and year out. Curriculum talk led to talk about instruction. As it should. The activity also created a rather informal list of “red flags.” We have always been reluctant to label children, but the list of concerns served to inspire an honest heart-to-heart talk about children that seem to have very special needs. School settings need to be safe places to engage in these kinds of difficult conversations. (See related information on page 250, “Airing Differences Respectfully.”)

Appreciating How Much We’ve Grown

None of us feels that we’ve arrived in the assessment arena. There are issues still gnawing at us, and they probably will for a long time to come. Every once in a while though, something happens that makes us pause and appreciate how much we’ve accomplished thus far. A letter from a former student who moved back to her home country at the end of second grade made us remember how things used to be when we were in elementary school, and reminded us how much more humane and sane our assessment of students is in comparison (see Figure 6.3).

Of course, all of us at school were glad to hear from Joan and, of course, we were as proud of her as we have always been. But we didn’t need medals, competitions, or grade point averages to know that she was an accomplished student. And we believe
that her wonderful parents were as proud of their daughter when we showed them the beautiful work in her portfolio, when we had long conferences with them about what we saw in Joan as a learner, and when they listened to her read aloud the poems that she had written. Maybe even more proud, because our assessment took into account their daughter’s full potential and capacities—not her performance in a single “context,” but her participation in a full, rich, and wide-awake life.

**Figure 6.3**

that her wonderful parents were as proud of their daughter when we showed them the beautiful work in her portfolio, when we had long conferences with them about what we saw in Joan as a learner, and when they listened to her read aloud the poems that she had written. Maybe even more proud, because our assessment took into account their daughter’s full potential and capacities—not her performance in a single “context,” but her participation in a full, rich, and wide-awake life.

**RELATED READINGS IN COMPANION VOLUMES**

*Lifetime Guarantees* (Heinemann, forthcoming), will be abbreviated as LG.

*Writing Through Childhood* (Heinemann, forthcoming), will be abbreviated as WC.

- Offering lifetime guarantees            **WC**: Ch. 8.
- Using literature to improve the quality of school life  **LG**: Ch. 8.
- Creating thematic studies              **LG**: Ch. 3.
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<td>LG: Ch. 7.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing picture books that invite talk</td>
<td>LG: Ch. 1, Ch. 6.</td>
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<td>Sharing adult novels with inquiry connections</td>
<td>LG: Ch. 4.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizing an immigration study</td>
<td>LG: Ch. 4.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating multi-grade writing workshops</td>
<td>WC: Ch. 7.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deciding on literacy goals and objectives</td>
<td>LG: Ch. 6, Ch. 7.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thinking through portfolios</td>
<td>WC: Ch. 11.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making decisions about assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing early childhood documents</td>
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<td>WC: Ch. 6.</td>
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