

INTERVIEWER

A number of changes and innovations to the educational system are currently under consideration: for example, the idea, advocated by James Coleman and others, of opening up instruction to entrepreneurs outside the schools (but under contract with the school system) to teach the one subject in which they specialize: arithmetic or reading. These outside contractors would be paid on the basis of the child's increased performance on standardized tests. Coleman wants the full privileges of consumer's choice for parents. They could send their child to these reading or arithmetic programs outside the school on released time, or the child could stay wholly within the school to learn these subjects.

Would you, as president of the United Federation of Teachers, be willing to go along with a plan of this kind?

Let's take a look at something basically educational in nature, in which there is considerable freedom of choice: namely, the whole area of private summer camps where middle class parents send their children. I think an in-depth analysis of how parents choose private summer camps for their children would lead us to the conclusion that very few parents are sophisticated enough to know what is educationally worthwhile for their children, that most of them select camps that torture their children into memorizing parts in some big spectacular performed for the parent at the end of the week, that there is a good deal of rather cheap commercialism in the business, that the child is used and abused but the parent is flattered in some way. I just don't think we can do with education what we do with shoes. I don't think we can simply say "Let the buyer beware."

I'm not prepared to say that because 10,000 parents make the wrong

Interview with **Albert Shanker**

The following interview was held prior to the beginning of the current school year (on August 8, 1968) and was slightly revised before publication. It is the first in a series of interviews in which pressing and controversial topics relating to education will be discussed. The next issue of The Urban Review will contain an interview with Leonard Covello, who pioneered the community school in New York City.

Photographs by Fran Goldstrom

SHANKER

I think the words "willing to go along with" are not quite appropriate. Undoubtedly there are some changes about to occur in the educational field which we would like to see come about, along with others of which we disapprove. Like everyone within our society, we'll have to live with both types of change and make appropriate changes within our own organization. The important thing is whether the particular change being recommended is likely to produce more efficiency, greater effectiveness, greater educational output. Is it likely to solve the great problem of our time in the educational field, which is the massive academic retardation of students, especially among the poor and in our urban ghettos? I have rather grave doubts as to whether setting education up on a private market system will necessarily accomplish that.

choice, society is to have no role here. And that, I believe, underlies a good deal of what Coleman is proposing. You see, I think that by giving parents the choice of schools you provide a lot of parental satisfaction. If we had only one toothpaste on the market, I suppose we'd all complain about it, but if we're free to choose among 17, none of them good, we at least have the psychological satisfaction of choosing. And I wonder whether Dr. Coleman and other advocates of the commercial model are proposing it because they really believe it's going to be educationally more efficient or because they think it's going to defuse the dynamic which now exists in ghetto areas by giving people a series of alternatives, all of which may be pretty bad.

Another related problem: whenever private industry operates and there is some sort of money-making motive, the effect of industry on governmental decision making is enormous. That is, suppose that the Ford



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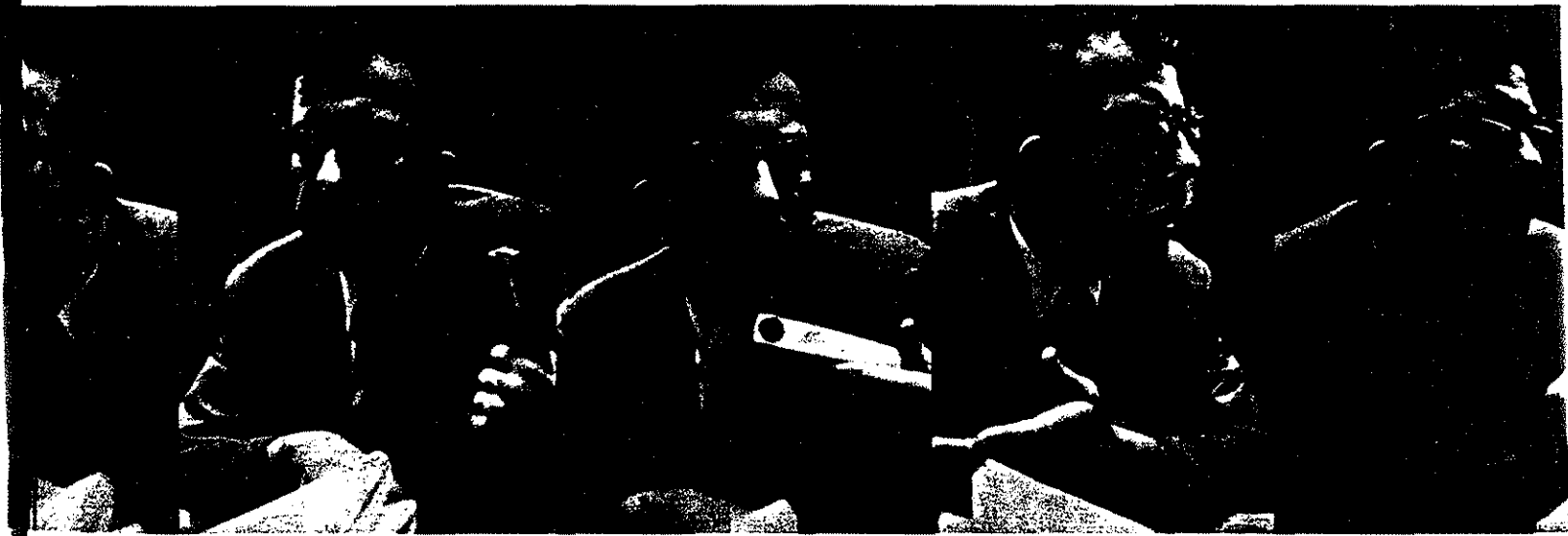
Motor Company, General Electric, General Motors, IBM, and so forth, all went into the business of teaching kids to read and write and learn arithmetic, and suppose the results were not particularly great by objective standards. Couldn't we be expected to be faced with a huge barrage of public relations, of lobbying, which would continue to provide governmental subsidies for these industries even if they didn't function well?

Look at the current campaign of people who produce paper, trying to convince housewives that half of the meat should be hidden from view. Or the campaign on the part of rifle associations, and so forth. I'm not saying we should keep private businesses out altogether: I'm not saying we shouldn't experiment with new structures. I think it's worth trying. I just happen to be very wary of saying **THIS IS THE ANSWER**, with capital letters. I think all forms of social organizations

control for pupil mobility? Wouldn't you control for whether there were both parents at home or no parents at home, or one parent at home? If you don't control for those and other factors, what would you find out? The school that didn't do as well would turn around and say to the parent, "Well, this is why we didn't do as well, and your child wouldn't have done as well if he had gone elsewhere either." The point is, unless you have a fairly accurate instrument for measurement, you're not really telling parents anything.

INTERVIEWER

There would, of course, have to be controls. For example, Coleman specifies that no contractor could accept from any one school a higher



have diseases. Public bureaucracies do, but so does private industry. Unfortunately the pendulum has swung to a point where . . . you know, at one time we all naïvely thought that if only the government performed all services, human beings would have no problems. We now realize that that was an error. But I think it's just as much an error to say that all we have to do is dismantle government and turn everything over to private business, and *that is going to provide an answer to human problems.*

Then too, if you simply take all the scores of all the children in *one* school and find that they are higher than another school, that wouldn't tell you anything, would it? It might tell you that a certain school attracted students who were already loaded with handicaps and that other schools may have effective students who came there with certain advantages. Wouldn't you control at all for socioeconomic class? Wouldn't you

proportion of white children or, say, children of college parents than existed in that school.

SHANKER

I think that the plan, once it's been set up with all the controls Coleman wants, has a great deal to recommend it. But I doubt that it's going to be very acceptable politically. I think what's likely to happen is that the business enterprises will fight for their share of the profits; I'm less certain that any of them will go down to Washington to make sure that the section is included in legislation guaranteeing that the school is integrated both racially and on a socioeconomic basis. That, unfortunately, will become the expendable part of the program when it has to be politically compromised. Therefore, I would say that some fairly

*Is it true that black teachers
are better able to reach black
children?*



sophisticated analyses have to be developed as to which of these schools is really performing and which is not. And once you know which schools are performing and which are not, why allow parents to make the choice? Why shouldn't the governmental institution automatically shut down those that are not performing? Why shouldn't students be compelled to go to schools on the prototype of those that are succeeding and prohibited from going to those that are not? Why spend public funds on any school that is really shown to be doing poorly? I think there's a basic contradiction in Coleman's notion. It's very good to say that schools ought to be accountable and that we ought to measure in some accurate way what their accomplishments are, but why then jump to saying that parents ought to be given a free choice? Once you know which product is better, which one is worse, you ought to *avoid* free choice. It seems to me that you only give the consumer free choice in areas where taste is essential. By all means, let me buy the design of TV set that I want and the size that I want, and the same with a radio and tape recorder, and so forth — assuming that they all work. But once you get something that is going to be harmful and something which isn't harmful, something which works and something which does not, then it seems to me there's a public responsibility not to allow people to make that choice.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned the word 'accountability'. What are your thoughts on the whole area of accountability? Accountability of schools and of teachers and principals?

SHANKER

I believe that schools must develop systems that are accountable. There has to be accountability at every level. We ought to know whether young teachers do better than older teachers, whether teachers with a permissive approach do better than those with a strong emphasis on discipline. Which one tends to produce more in the way of achievement? Is it true that black teachers are better able to reach black children, or is it not true, in terms of achievement?

After we ascertain this, we may still find that it's socially desirable to develop integrated experiences, that achievement is just one of the values. But these are the things that we ought to know. We ought to know whether a particular set of materials brings about greater progress with kids or not, a particular set of textbooks, a particular sequence in the learning of material, a particular style of organization in the school. If the principals are selected by examination, what does that do to a school; if they're selected by parents, what does *that* do? If they're selected on a collegiate model, does that have any effect on output? I think all these things have to be very carefully worked out so that we can abandon those particular models and styles and types of people who tend to make for failure and encourage an increase in those who tend to make for success.

What I very much react against is the oversimplified notion of ac-

countability which just says well, if a lot of kids are failing in this school, then obviously everybody's no good and the school is no good. We do not hold doctors accountable in the same way.

INTERVIEWER

Who would do the examining, the evaluating?

SHANKER

I would say that there have to be governmental institutions and they have to be free and independent. That is, you wouldn't expect a school to evaluate itself, and that frequently happens now. The same teacher who teaches the children gives the tests at the end of the year. And the principal, who also feels that his reputation is at stake, instructs teachers on how to administer the test. And the district superintendent, and so forth. So throughout the country I would say there's good reason to question the results that come out of a testing program like that.

I think it's very interesting that 13 out of the 15 largest cities in the country wouldn't allow Coleman to come in to test the children. The UFT is very much in favor of a national assessment. We think that national standards and norms have to be developed and that we have to have somebody dissociated with local government, with local schools, and even with institutions of higher learning, which also have an ax to grind. I think that, basically, it is the responsibility of the federal government. It's extremely important to develop a huge arm of educational research; it's every bit as important as to have a bureau of labor statistics which gets all sorts of economic information for the country.

INTERVIEWER

Mr. Shanker, what is the UFT's position on use of so-called paraprofessionals in the schools — people from within the community, often parents, perhaps with some training, though not licensed teachers — to help maintain discipline, clerical records, and perform other non-teaching functions, especially in overcrowded schools?

SHANKER

We have favored the use of paraprofessionals. As a matter of fact, our negotiations in the last seven years are largely responsible for the use of paraprofessionals within the schools. We favor using them not only for jobs as school aids, in the cafeteria, and so forth but also within the classroom to perform types of instructional activity under the supervision and guidance of the teacher. I think that one of the reasons that the movement towards paraprofessionals has come about so far — however, is that it's viewed by boards of education and mayors and — and even by the federal government as a form of cheap labor. You get \$3.65 an hour and you don't have to add to the number of teachers or other people. Well, that practice will soon decline. We are not doing the

paraprofessionals. They're rapidly joining our union. Instead of their getting \$1.65 an hour, we will seek \$100 a week minimum wage for them; and they'll be going above that. From now on paraprofessionals will be hired in school systems because they're needed and because the work that they perform is educationally desirable, not because they're viewed by some people as ways of saving money. That isn't the reason to bring them in.

INTERVIEWER

People in the community actually know very little about the operation of the union within the school and what the union's intentions are. What programs are being proposed to inform parents about the union's intentions and goals?

SHANKER

It's very, very difficult to reach an entire city or to reach a large community. We do have a rather massive mailing list of parents who are active at the school and community level, and in the last year we sent out monthly newsletters to parents. We're also cooperating with Cornell University School of Labor and Industrial Relations. They have set up a series of parent-teacher dialogues in a number of areas, and we have now requested that they set this up in every single district within the city.

Then too, paraprofessionals, who are community people, are going to be integrated within the school chapters. They will have an equal voice and equal vote and opportunity to run for office and participate in the life both of the community and the union. They will probably serve as a bridge. They will make a lot of noise within the union telling us what it is that the community wants that we aren't doing, but I'm also pretty sure that they will go back into the community and tell them the problems the teachers face and some of the things that the schools need from the teachers' point of view. One of the major reasons for our enthusiastic response to paraprofessionals is that we can probably do more communicating with the community through this group than in any other way.

INTERVIEWER

What about the training required for paraprofessionals?

SHANKER

There are a good many training programs now in effect. We have one of our own in which we offer a course to paraprofessionals to meet high school equivalency. We expect to expand that program. The universities have some programs, as have community groups, antipoverty agencies, some governmental agencies. I think that it's a good thing there are a variety of approaches at the present time. I don't think there's any one and only way of doing it. They're all worthwhile.

We do have some doubts, however, about a few of the things that are

going on with the use of paraprofessionals. As I pointed out, some people support the practice because it's a way of saving money. Teachers may favor it because it is a way of making their jobs more possible; they can work with smaller groups of children and they can be relieved of certain chores that they shouldn't be performing. For the government it is a way of employing many who are unemployed. It embraces the whole concept of new careers for the poor — good jobs that lead somewhere, not dead-end jobs.

But in addition to all this, there is, on the part of some groups, a kind of revolutionary strategy: namely, that the paraprofessionals are community people who are going to come into public institutions, learn within a year or two how to take them over, then throw out the middle class that's in there now and use it as some sort of revolutionary base. There are some antipoverty groups in New York who have trained paraprofessionals to come into the classroom and be very hostile to the teacher, to sit down and say, "I'm not working here; I'm sitting back there and going out and telling the community how you are destroying these children. I'm here to watch and to police and to do this and. . . ." To the extent that this occurs, of course, there will be setbacks in the employment of paraprofessionals and the expansion of the program.

I do not believe the parents and the community want the paraprofessionals to take over the schools. They want teachers for their children. But I do see this as a danger if some of the groups that are now involved in training programs actually end up taking them over. (Of course, some paraprofessionals will qualify to become teachers through additional training.)

INTERVIEWER

Mr. Shanker, you have said in the past that administrators and supervisors generally lack the courage to remove incompetent teachers. How can this situation be remedied?

SHANKER

I've said two things about why supervisors don't replace teachers who are ineffectual. One is the existence of a shortage of teachers. There's no question that during the depression literally thousands of teachers who were relatively less capable were removed from the system and others were brought in, because there were thousands waiting to replace those being moved out. Today, however, when a principal removes a teacher, he sometimes gets no replacement teacher or he may be exchanging a person who's not too competent but at least a little experienced for somebody who's not too competent and completely inexperienced. That's one of the problems that faces the principal.

Another problem is that the principal must be accountable. That is, the principal must understand that his job is valid only for a particular period of time, and that if he doesn't function on his job, his contract will not be renewed. People in supervisory or managerial positions should not, in my opinion, have tenure; although if we are to endure the kind of vigilante and extremist actions against professionals which we recently



The extremely restrictive examination procedures [for teacher certification] are no longer relevant.

witnessed, tenure is preferable. I don't believe that the president of our own union should have tenure, I don't believe that the director of staff or the director of publications should have tenure. These are the leaders, the top people in the organization, and periodically we have to come before the mass of teachers and justify what we have done or have not done: if they're not satisfied, they get somebody else. And I think that a principal should be pretty much in the same position. He shouldn't feel that, unless he does something terrible, he has a job for life. Rather it should be the other way around. He should recognize that, as a leader, maybe he's got three years of leadership in him, maybe he's got six, maybe he's got 22, and when he stops functioning as a leader, there shouldn't be anything in the books that says he has to have that job forever. That's the nature of a leader's job as against somebody who, by and large, has to carry out plans and programs developed by others.

So I would say that the part of decentralization which talks about principals and district superintendents on contract is a worthwhile approach. Of course, it could be done with or without decentralization. You could have a centralized school system in which managerial personnel are employed on a contractual basis for a particular term of office and not necessarily reemployed at the end of that term.

INTERVIEWER

What about tenure for teachers?

SHANKER

I believe in accountability for teachers. But first we must develop ways of testing children that will show us not merely the final score but also how well these children are doing as measured against all other children who face the same types of problems. That is, if I am a teacher in this particular school, am I doing as well with these children year in, year out, as other teachers who have children whose parents also make \$130,000 a year and who move once every 3 years and so forth and so on. Or whose parents make only \$2,000 a year.

Now once that is established it ought to be fairly easy to remove teachers who consistently perform on the lowest levels as compared with their colleagues who face the same kinds of problems. Tenure means that you can only dismiss somebody for cause. If you can show that a teacher was consistently performing poorly, that would be cause and you could remove the teacher.

But I believe that much too much has been made of the concept of tenure as a way of keeping bad people in. It shouldn't do that at all. Looking at it historically, tenure is the price you pay if you want teachers to be able to speak their minds and teach freely. If you have a system in which teachers can be dismissed without any cause, it means that I, as a teacher, constantly have to teach what it is that I think my boss believes in. I cannot teach with a view toward teaching the truth as I see it. I have to teach the truth as the fellow who can fire me sees it. Tenure says that you can't get rid of somebody unless you can show

that he's doing something that's bad. Well, if somebody's been working for 3, 7, 12, 15 years, shouldn't you be able to show that he's not functioning properly if you want to get rid of him?

That's quite different from what I said earlier about a principal or superintendent or a union president. In one case you've got a teaching function; in the other, a political or policy function of management.

Now maybe some day there'll be enough teachers available so that we can demand the same of them. But I'm rather skeptical of all those who say that the answer to our problem of teachers is to get rid of, and replace, everybody who's not functioning brilliantly. If you can show me 40 or 50 or 60,000 people waiting out there who are all tremendous teachers, then of course that would be the answer. You know, it would be terrific if only we could get rid of 85 percent of the doctors who practice in this country and replace them with people who are really brilliant diagnosticians. If only we could get rid of 50 percent of the lawyers in the country! But there's a reality principle here: namely, that these are the people we're going to have to live with and work with, that most of the teachers who are now teaching are exactly the ones who are going to be teaching the kids. Which leads me to another point: the major aspect of accountability is not really a question of firing this person or firing that person; it's really a question of what the system is doing to improve all of the people who are in it now, most of whom are going to continue to be in it. That is, suppose that a third or a half of the people now in it are functioning at a pretty poor level. Does that mean that they're always doomed to function at that level? Is there anything we can do to train them on the job, to retrain, to reorient, so that next year they'll be a little bit better than they are this year, so that ten years from now they'll be much better than they are now.

One of the major failures of our schools is the assumption we make that just because somebody's gone to college and possesses that sheepskin or piece of paper, we can put him into a school and he can function properly. We don't do that in any other profession. Doctors do not practice medicine without an internship. Lawyers, more and more, do not go out and practice on their own without having worked on a type of apprenticeship basis within a firm. I think it's about time that we made this social investment, saying to ourselves that no teacher will simply be thrown into a classroom and told to teach, realizing that you must develop a rather slow and painful process over a period of one or two or three years, which helps to introduce the teacher to the practical world of teaching.

INTERVIEWER

Mr. Shanker, what are your thoughts on a flexible salary scale for teachers to reward special talents or demonstrable classroom achievements?

SHANKER

Well, teachers have traditionally been against merit pay (the 'flexible salary schedule', as it is now called) because it has largely been a way in which principals and school superintendents use their own subjective

evaluations of teachers to reward and punish. And very frequently it's the guy or the gal who keeps his mouth shut — the obedient, humble servant — who is found to be the superior teacher. I wonder whether Mr. Kohl or Mr. Kozol or Dr. Coles, or any of those people, ever would have been rewarded in their schools with the flexible salary schedule.

So the great opposition from teachers stems from the subjective nature of the ratings as they now exist. And that leads us back to our previous point: that if we could develop effective mechanisms of measuring teacher productivity, then, I think, a good deal of the opposition that now exists would recede into the background.

Let me say one other thing. Here we are talking about developing tests that will measure how well teachers do in getting kids to read, write, count — and I think that's extremely important. But this is important mainly where the kids are not reading and not writing and not doing arithmetic. There are also areas of our city and suburbs, and many places within our country, where this is not a major problem, where practically all the kids are learning to read. We still have the problem of measuring teacher effectiveness in those parts of our society where all the kids enter school reading, only there we're trying to measure not whether the kid is on grade level for reading, there we're trying to measure things that are much more difficult to measure. Is the teacher developing concepts of democracy, is he training and educating children so that they can effectively work with other groups, is the teacher merely drilling the children on certain rote matters or is he developing an inquiring and a scientific mind, is he developing a sense of justice, is he teaching proper attitudes so people can live within a multiracial society?

INTERVIEWER

Mr. Shanker, what are your views on the requirements for teacher certification? Should they be changed?

SHANKER

I believe they should be changed. In the first place there's just too much red tape. And secondly, the extremely restrictive examination procedures used in many of our big cities in the past were all right for the Depression era when there were thousands of people lined up and the purpose was to weed out large numbers of them. But these procedures are no longer relevant. Also that we ought to be more flexible on the course requirements for certification, given the duplication of content and the lack, in many ways, of a standard curriculum in the education field.

I think that the elements of teacher certification ought to be a variety of college-level programs and that then there ought to be a fairly quick, simple test to make sure that the teacher himself can read and write and do arithmetic. Not at an impossible level but at a level sufficient to guarantee that he doesn't just train his pupils in a lot of his own errors. Then comes what I think should be the major part of certification: the successful completion of an internship program. Of course teaching requires knowledge and skills in various areas. But more important, the

teacher has to be a combination mother, psychologist, and actor, on stage all the time, understanding the psychological needs within a social context of a group of children. And whether or not a person is an actor and whether or not a person has the feel with a group of children cannot be determined by an examination or a set of college courses. It can be determined only after a period of training where the person slowly but surely is allowed to be on his or her own. Then you can see whether he performs or doesn't perform at an adequate level. Unfortunately, most of the present certification procedures are weighted at the wrong end. The question we hear too often is: has he taken the courses and what mark did he get on the exam? The question asked too rarely — or at least deemphasized — is: well, when he was actually put into the classroom was he able to do anything? This is ridiculous.

INTERVIEWER

Mr. Shanker, what do you see as the role of the local school board in the local community?

SHANKER

I'm not much one for local school boards or local communities. I don't believe very much in the warmth of the little Mississippi or Alabama town. I never felt that the small town was a warm place for me or for members of other minority groups. I've always felt that the big city was a much warmer place, and that because of its cosmopolitan nature and its multiple groups, each with the power to check other groups from doing certain things wrong, the bigness of our country, the bigness of our cities, is something I felt much more positive about. My own feelings are that small communities, small school boards, really cannot provide the necessary variety of educational programs. They can't provide a proper base of financial support. And the smaller the community and the school board, the greater the likelihood of bigotry and provincialism. To say nothing of there being less talent, I favor a gradual movement toward metropolitan school systems which include urban and suburban areas. I favor a gradual movement toward state school systems and gradual movement toward school systems where several states combine their school systems and where there is heavy federal financing and federal control.

Now I understand that we're going through a period where localism is becoming more and more popular, where on the one hand there's a good deal of disappointment with the fact that big government has been unable to provide very good answers to many of our problems. There is a movement within the black community, having experienced the frustration and bitterness of the fight on integration, which says: "Well, the hell with it; since they prevented us from integrating we'll do it ourselves, and there's no reason we can't!" My own views on this are not designed to elicit a great deal of applause; nevertheless I think that metropolitanism and federalism are what we're eventually going to come back to if we want to solve our problem. If we're to develop the kind of accountability we're talking about, it really has to be done as part of a



I regard decentralization as a kind of opium.

national purpose. When you get a deteriorating school system, the people with money get out and move elsewhere, and the people without money are stuck there, and that's what localism essentially means. In housing, in education, in everything else.

You see, other parts of the country — the suburban and rural areas — are moving toward *consolidation* of school districts because they know that local control is a myth, that they can't do anything within their own locality. But the big cities are heading in the opposite direction. They're saying the problem is bigness, and the solution is breaking up into smaller units. So it's part of a pendulum that exists in the life of societies and organizations. Business goes through it and so does government; there are movements from relative centralization to relative decentralization, back and forth. I don't view this as a permanent movement.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think there's any argument to be made for decentralization of New York City schools — if not into 20 or 30 districts, at least some breaking up of the present monolith?

SHANKER

Well, there are really quite a few questions wrapped up in that one. First, we have to separate the concept of decentralization from the concept of local popular or political control. It is possible — and indeed it should happen — that people at various levels ought to be able to make appropriate decisions. That is, teachers must make appropriate decisions if they're going to help children in their classroom, and principals must have the power to make decisions, and so must district superintendents. In that sense, you have to have decentralization, because you can't say that you're going to run a mammoth system from somebody's vest pocket in a central headquarters.

But that doesn't mean that you have to have local boards of education. Large motor companies with highly centralized boards can develop forms of administrative decentralization within highly centralized systems. What we're really talking about is not decentralization in the sense of distributing the power of the central bureaucracy to a number of centers. We're really asking whether parents and others within local communities should have many of these powers. If you couple that question with another which is usually assumed — namely, will the granting or the taking of such powers by local groups result in increased educational achievement within those areas? — that's what we're really talking about.

I'd say the answer is no. And we have national evidence to support it. That is, you would have to show me that children in rural and suburban areas, where the parents elect their own school boards and hire and fire their superintendent, do better in school (once you have controlled for socioeconomic class). You would have to show me that the kids in Great Neck do better than the kids in Riverdale, that the kids in Wyandanch do better than the kids in area X in Corona, or something like that. You'd have to take comparable parts of a city where the parents do not

have local control, and comparable suburban areas where the parents do have local control, but where there's the same socioeconomic status. It seems to me that it's very easy to compare figures from these two areas. And everything I have seen indicates that whether local parents vote for the local school board and hire the superintendent is absolutely irrelevant when measured from the vantage point of educational output. In the first place, if you look at school board elections all across the country, very few parents give a damn. They don't vote. They only vote when it means a tax increase, and then they usually come out to vote against frills.

Most school districts in which parents have this type of control go through the charade of getting rid of their superintendent each three or four years; and whom do they hire? The superintendent who has just been gotten rid of next door. There's this tremendous game of educational musical chairs all across the country. Of course local control means educational innovation too. What do we mean by that? We mean that each local community is about to adopt some program that's just being abandoned next door to it, and they're adopting it because they're unhappy with what they've been doing and they're changing to something new, even though the something new has been disproven in a thousand districts all across the country.

You see, we go back again to this whole business of consumer choice. I don't think consumer's choice means very much unless you have a consumer's union and consumer education and consumer sophistication to make sure that people aren't being cheated.

I think that local control does, however, have other values. I think it will bring about a good deal of satisfaction within local communities. See, right now the people of Harlem can be up in arms — and they are. (Not enough, by the way. All the recent polls show that there's a high degree of satisfaction with the schools; I think there should be more dissatisfaction than there is.) Now, at any rate, they can be dissatisfied with the Board of Education, the mayor, the teachers, the principals, etc., etc. But once the school system is decentralized, and each community has its own local board, that dissatisfaction will be channelized. Instead of blaming the teachers or the Board of Ed. or the mayor, or a lack of funds, they can blame their own local group that they elected, and every two years they can kick the culprits out and elect another group of powerless people to continue with that school system. You can develop a lot of satisfaction when you tell people that the failures are due to the group they, themselves, elected. It really defuses an explosive situation.

Look at the pressure that now exists to get more money, better programs, reduced class size, more psychologists, more social workers, newer buildings. Much of the steam will be taken out of that rebelliousness and hostility now aimed at City Hall and the Board of Education. Instead, each year a new local group will make new promises and be kicked out and so forth, and of course they'll be pretty powerless to do anything because they will not have their own taxing powers, given the same limitations that the boards in Long Island and in Westchester have. Go out and talk to some board members in these suburban areas; ask

them how much power they really have to do anything. They, at least, have the power to go to the public and ask for a raise in budget.

I regard decentralization as a kind of opium. It gives people the trappings of power and local control without really giving them the ability to do anything. And that's the main reason I'm not very happy about it. I think that the existing rebelliousness and hostility toward the failure of the system are very healthy, as long as you channel them to get something more effective. But then you turn around and say, "Well, instead of something better, we're going to let your own local people be responsible for this mess, and if you don't like the local people you elect next year, who are still going to have this mess, well, kick them out the year after and put in another bunch of local people who'll be responsible for it." I think it's one of the greatest political schemes that's ever been devised for defusing a very explosive situation. But when you're dealing with the possibilities of revolution and violence, one shouldn't give serious consideration to gimmicks of this sort.

So you see, I think decentralization has no educational value at all. I do not believe that there is any evidence to show that parental participation in the politics of education has any effect on the educational achievement of children, and this will be even less so in New York City, where under the Bundy and Lindsay schemes, the parents don't even vote for their local school boards. They vote for a delegate who goes to another meeting. The election is so indirect that I doubt you'll even get 15 percent coming out, which is the national average.

But I do think that there is a politics to decentralization, and the politics is one of giving local people satisfaction with a failing institution by saying to them: "Well, look, you don't like what we're doing, go do it yourself." Throwing it at them.

Up to now I have been speaking out as an educator — a school man — in pointing out the irrelevance of decentralization, that I support decentralization as does the UFT. We view it as a political bluff rather than an educational one.

I guess the best way to express my views on this stems from my own background as a union leader. Those of us who have been in the forefront of the union are not so interested in the ways of a salary increase or any other particular benefits — but in the human dignity which comes to teachers when they participate in making decisions affecting their lives.

It is on the basis of the desire of people to participate that increased community and parental participation must be supported.

This is part of a world-wide movement by students, teachers, and parents. All want a greater voice and should have it, but there are limits. Teachers should have the major voice in professional matters, parents and community in policy matters.

INTERVIEWER

Mr. Shanker, is it not possible that we have reached a point in some of our large cities where the defusing of an explosive situation in ghetto communities warrants top priority?

SHANKER

Well, if that's the case, you should start with the assumption that the fuse is there because housing is rotten, because there really is a lack of jobs and employment, and because the schools are not doing the job of education. Then the only way you can really defuse this thing is by getting people decent housing, getting them jobs, and — in order to do it, since it's tied in so closely — ending the massive functional illiteracy which now exists. You don't remove a fuse by saying: "Well, look, instead of building houses, instead of getting you jobs, instead of educating your kids, we're going to turn over this whole problem to one of your local committees." It's true you may buy time by doing this — maybe three years, maybe five or ten or fifteen years. What you do is shake up the community: the people start fighting each other in Harlem as to who's going to get elected to the school board and who's going to be the head of this agency and that agency. But the fact is: in five or ten or fifteen years you're still going to be faced with no housing, you're still going to be faced with illiterate kids, and you're still going to be faced with no jobs. If we think that the ultimate result is that there won't be an explosion, I think we're just kidding ourselves. We're only postponing it: and when it finally comes, it's going to be much bigger than it is now. It's like trying to cure cancer with an aspirin, and today the cancer is in the early stages. I think you do a great disservice to the patient if you just try to calm him down with an aspirin. What's necessary is something that gets to the causes and brings about real results now, not something that merely postpones taking real action within this field. The notion of local control is wrong because, basically, it is aimed not at solving a problem but at giving temporary satisfaction to people while their problem continues to grow.

INTERVIEWER

Some people, I dare say, would brand your remarks as paternalistic. Isn't one of the main reasons for the fuse the fact that residents of so-called ghetto communities feel that they have no control over their destiny?

SHANKER

I would be willing to go into any ghetto area right now and conduct any poll or election or referendum you want; and I would be willing to guarantee that what the people want, as far as education is concerned, is for their kids to learn in school. They're not a bit interested in serving on a school board; they want somebody who knows how to do it to come forth and do that. You know, the business of wanting to participate is largely a middle-class vice. When you've got money and you've got time, and you've got two cars in the garage and a hi-fi set and loads of other things, then you've got plenty of time to go out and get the school board elections and run for office. That becomes a hobby. It's very close to Aristotle's view that a person doesn't become concerned with ethics until

after his belly is full, or concerned with politics until after he's reached a certain level in terms of his own existence. I think that, by and large, that's true of the poverty areas in New York City. I doubt that the next thing on the agenda of the people in Harlem is to serve on local school boards. It may be something that the housewife out in Plain Edge or Plainview wants to do. She doesn't have to work, the kids are going to college, she and her husband have a nice house, they have their cars, and as an added plus, they can also engage in politics around the community. But the first thing that the people in Harlem want is better housing; they want schools that are going to function, and they want jobs. I think this is shown by all the recent polls: for example, the Bedford-Stuyvesant survey conducted under the auspices of the Center for Urban Education. I think that this and other polls basically show that the parents in Harlem feel that the professionals and heads of governmental agencies have got to know how to get kids to read. With the exception of a handful of people in the ghetto area who have been taking a different point of view, most people feel that there should be newer schools, smaller classes, and a teacher training program.

But there is one area in which the parent wants to have a voice. Parents are frequently abused by public employees, by teachers, by social workers: they're just treated rudely and I've seen it on occasion; I've seen parents talked to in a way in which nobody should be talked to. I think that there are times when kids are handled improperly. Among 60,000 teachers, there are undoubtedly some who will utter bigoted remarks: There are some who will slap a kid.

I think a parent wants a place to go and get a fair hearing and a fair shake when mistreated in that sort of way. I'm very much in favor of the ombudsman notion. Very few parents want to come in and say, "This teacher's not a good math teacher." I think most parents realize that they don't know whether the teacher has taught a math lesson well or not. But they certainly know that the kid has been slapped, or been told such and such, or that something else has happened, and they want a place to go where they'll get a fair shake. They have the right to demand that such a procedure be set up. But that's quite different from having a local school board.

Parents might very well be afraid to complain to their local school board. The local school board would have powers over their children. It would, like any other bureaucracy, be rather sensitive to criticism. Most parents would feel freer to complain to a central bureaucracy, which is somewhat impersonal, than to complain locally about some nasty thing that their own community residents are doing to them. That's another of the fallacies of decentralization: the notion that parents would feel freer to level criticisms against a local group. It just isn't so. I think people in New York City feel a lot freer to criticize the mayor and the Board of Education and the United Federation of Teachers than people in a small town in Alabama to criticize their mayor, or board of education, or any other official in that town. It's easier for reprisals to take place, on almost every level, in a small, relatively homogeneous community than within a large city.

INTERVIEWER

About the ombudsman: who would select this person? How many would there be? One for each district? One for each school?

SHANKER

I would think you'd start out with each district; it could probably also be a citywide review procedure. The ombudsman would have to be acceptable to the professionals and to the community. You might start with one or two or three people and then, as they can no longer serve, have them replace their own members, so that they gain relative independence. Or another way is to have community groups select one professional, the union select the second, and these two select a third. There are ways of developing a fairly independent judiciary. You have all of the standard techniques that are used in our society to appoint people to various types of benches or to select arbitrators. Another way is to allow either side — the union or the board — to veto the continuation of a person at the end of the two-year period, so that if the arbitrator has been very unfair or unjust to one side, he knows that he won't have his job any more.

INTERVIEWER

As you know, Mr. Shanker, there's been a demand for a greater number of positions for minorities in the educational hierarchy. What does the union propose to do to secure more minorities in these positions and, at the same time, protect the economic standing of those already in these positions?

SHANKER

I don't think the economic standing of those who are now in is in jeopardy. There is enough turnover within the system, enough people employed each year, so that if we develop new procedures for advancement within the system, we could have a well-integrated staff at all levels within a very short period of time without throwing anybody out. There are, however, a number of problems here. The reason we have very few representatives of minority groups on the supervisory levels — Negroes, for instance — is that we have very few black teachers within the system. Of all the large cities in the country, we have the smallest percentage of black teachers in our system. There's a rather strange reason for this. It happens that New York City has not had a segregated black college. Philadelphia has had segregated black colleges around it, and so have Baltimore and Washington and other large cities. Most of the New York City teachers are graduates of the city university, which admits its students on the basis of a written, open, competitive exam that tends to screen out those who have been subjected to an inferior and segregated education — an impoverished education — at the elementary and the junior high school and high school level.



We are probably in for an era of great turbulence and confusion.

Let me say this: one of the things we ought to do is recruit teachers from all over the country; and I might add that the union was about to do this. We've had a team ready to go into Atlanta. It happens that we selected, a month in advance, the day that turned out to be the day of Dr. Martin Luther King's funeral. And it was impossible to get anything reestablished at the end of the term. But once again this year we are going to send teams to Atlanta and Florida and other places where there are large numbers of black teachers. We believe that we can recruit a large number of them without in any way sacrificing standards.

There's another thing connected with proper representation at supervisory levels. I think we should recognize that the kind of stiff written examination, which is now the basis for supervisory jobs, is irrelevant to whether a person is a competent supervisor or administrator. I don't say that we should abandon the tests altogether, because I don't want the system to become one of strict politics and patronage. But I think that the tests that are now given are irrelevant to the job. If we developed tests to measure something about executive ability — and there are such things — I believe that very shortly we would have an integrated staff on all levels. You see the quality of leadership and managerial ability is something which is shared more equally than, say, vocabulary — at least vocabulary is measured at the present time. As Coleman points out, unequal opportunities caused by segregation at the lower levels greatly affect verbal fluency. So if that's what you test for, then — given our society and the structure of our school system, and the tests which are now given, nationally, the consequences of segregation — you are simultaneously testing for socioeconomic status and therefore, in large degree, for ethnicity as well.

Now if vocabulary were relevant to a guy's being a great leader in a school, that might be a serious problem. But I don't think it is relevant.

INTERVIEWER

What question. How do you expect the newly composed Board of Education to effect school decentralization in New York City?

SHANKER

I think they're being pushed politically by the mayor. They're under tremendous pressure. The newspapers are exerting it too. It's a popular issue. I think we are probably in for an era of great turbulence and confusion. I think we're going to lose many teachers. The children are going to suffer; I'm sure they are. I am sure that the turbulence is going to be, in many places in the city, what is now in the Ocean Hill-Corona district. I think the people down at I.S. 201 now realize that they've succeeded in driving out one of the best faculties in the country. They're now busy trying to recruit experienced people. I think we're in a very rough period. And the Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools, in a sense following. But I think eventually

there's going to be a strong public reaction against this. The parents will leave their apartments and come down and say, "We don't want this; we want something quite different." But it may take three or five or ten or twelve years before that happens, and I just do not see how this move toward decentralization is going to bring about any educational improvement. On the contrary, it's going to bring about increased conflict within communities, or between various community groups and professionals. These conflicts will, in the long run, be resolved, as all conflicts are, but there will be a temporary price to pay, and the people who are going to pay that price are the residents of the ghetto and the children in those schools.

Coming in The Urban Review



Two Articles on Reading:

Spelling and Literacy

by Gloria Channon

The Testing of Reading

by Miriam Wasserman

'Revolution' in the Philadelphia School System

by Henry S. Resnik

School Desegregation

by Thomas Pettigrew

A Symposium on Evaluating Educational Programs

Omission

The photographs on pages 2 and 3 in the September issue of The Urban Review were taken by Robert Adelman.