

June, 1998

Mary Anne Raygala

CENTRAL PARK EAST SECONDARY SCHOOL
THE ANATOMY OF SUCCESS

Introduction

Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) is probably the nation's most well-known and highly celebrated high school. Its founder was the first teacher to win a prized MacArthur 'genius' award, and her successor has also received awards and recognition for outstanding leadership. The school itself has been recognized in numerous ways, ranging from the Innovations in Government award from Harvard University and the Ford Foundation, to its selection in 1996 as one of five schools designated a New American High School by Secretary Richard Riley and the U.S. Department of Education.

Over the past ten years, a great deal has been written about CPESS and there are a number of books and articles describing its structure and practice and history -- all the way from founder Deborah Meier's first account of the school in the June, 1987, issue of the *Phi Delta Kappan*, "Central Park East: An Alternative Story," to her 1995 book, *The Power of Their Ideas*. The list of descriptions by others is now also lengthy, including most recently a *Time Magazine* accolade, "How to Teach Our Children Well (It Can Be Done)," and -- to name two of the most detailed accounts -- *Visit to A Small School (Trying to Do Big Things)* (Lieberman, n.d.) and "Graduation by Portfolio at Central Park East Secondary School." (Darling-Hammond & Aness, 1995) There have also been professionally made and nationally distributed films featuring CPESS, including Frederick Wiseman's "High School II" and Dorothy Fadiman's "Why Do These

Kids Love School?"

With all of this recognition, it might be asked, What remains to be told about CPESS? What may be novel in the account to follow is its attempt to situate CPESS in relation to its context, as well as in relation to what is being recommended in the interests of school reform and restructuring. I have watched CPESS's development since the tenth birthday celebration of its predecessor, Central Park East Elementary School, at which the high school to come was first announced. And I have done several previous studies of which CPESS was a part (Raywid & Baker, 1993 and Raywid, 1992), as well as observations, interviews, and document analysis carried out in 1997.

To begin, it must be noted that the fame CPESS has earned is not without irony, given the history of school innovation in this country and our resultant understanding that the good schools are to be found in affluent suburban communities. CPESS does not boast a sunny, modern, technology-laden building surrounded by landscaped space. It is not filled with affluent youngsters arriving there as at a way station en route to college. Moreover, its admirable record of success is neither built nor sustained by standardized test scores -- which its faculty abhor -- but by the number of its students who come to embrace education while there, graduate, and then go on to succeed in college afterward. It has given us a new sense of the possible and a new set of aspirations to pursue and expectations to meet. It has also led the way in the passing of the school innovations torch from suburb to inner city.

The Setting and the Times

CPESS is located in East Harlem, or "Spanish Harlem" as it is also called. It is in a neighborhood where crime, drugs, and violence abound.

Its students are largely local, although some travel to CPESS from other parts of New York City. Definitive data on this and other matters is elusive, since claims from different sources often differ considerably. For instance, according to New York City's Board of Education Annual School Report for 1993-94, 60% of CPESS's students were African American and 37% were Latino. But according to the school's figures, the numbers were 45% and 45% instead. (Paul, March 20, 1995, p. 1) So it is difficult to formally confirm what appears to be a tendency over the years for the proportion of CPESS's Latino students to increase, with a corresponding decrease in the African-American population. Caucasian enrollment is reported as consistently small, ranging usually from 3 to 7%. Most students -- 60% as of 1991 -- come from poverty homes. (Darling-Hammond & Aness, 1995) But that number may be decreasing, with only 38% of the students reported by the City to be eligible for free lunches as of 1995-96. (Annual School Report)¹ Approximately a quarter

¹ It must be underscored that reliable data are extremely hard to come by. It is widely acknowledged that high school students are often unwilling to report free lunch eligibility, so secondary school lunch figures are regularly lower than were prior figures for the same population. More broadly, and in general, the numbers collected by a school often appear more plausible than the presumably more "objective" data published about it by New York City's Board of Education, the "Annual School Report." People at CPESS sometimes find the Board's data bizarre and unwarrantable. Other New York schools sometimes comment similarly about their own Annual School Reports, favorable as well as unfavorable. Tracking demographic changes for a particular school is also rendered difficult by the fact that the information selected for inclusion in the Annual School Report varies from year to year.

of those enrolled at CPESS are identified as special needs students, by virtue of their prior achievement levels, limited English proficiency, or handicapped status. (1993-94 Annual School Report; Paul, March 20,

1995)

As of 1993-94, both student and teacher attendance were above New York City averages, and suspensions were below. (Annual School Report) Ninety-two percent of those who began the school year at CPESS completed it there -- as compared to only 71% in other high schools. According to the 1993-94 report, there were no dropouts from the class that graduated in June, 1994. Former Director Deborah Meier's figure -- a 5% dropout rate -- is a bit more modest. (Scherer, 1994)

Youngsters who want to enroll in CPESS are required to visit the school, and their parents are expected to visit as well. Approximately half of CPESS's students come from one of the three feeder Central Park East (CPE) elementary schools, whose graduates are all eligible to be admitted. (Youngsters are chosen to attend the elementary schools by random selection from among applicants.) The other half of CPESS's students come largely from other schools in the District (Community School District 4, East Harlem), and as rising seventh-graders, go through the District's intermediate school choice process. Not all of the CPE graduates select CPESS, however, with some of the abler students choosing one of New York's selective high schools instead. It appears telling with respect to the question of selectivity that CPESS finds it necessary to offer special reading instruction to a number of its students.

Outcomes data suggest that working with such a student population, CPESS has been able to produce remarkable results. Not all of its students complete high school in four years, but within five it graduates more than 90%. Of those, it sent 84% on to college in 1991, 93% in 1992, and 87% in 1993. (Bensman, 1995) Moreover, most enroll in four-year colleges and early data suggested that their "persistence" rates of remaining in college appeared unusually strong. (Bensman)

CPESS was launched in 1985, evolving from an elementary school that wanted to see its graduates through school. Central Park East Elementary School had been launched in 1974, by Tony Alvarado, the new young superintendent of East Harlem's Community School District 4. Alvarado had been determined to see some successful schools in his district, which ranked 32nd of New York's 32 community school districts on a number of effectiveness measures. Thus, he invited teachers to propose and design new programs, and to assemble a congenial group of colleagues with whom to operate them. He lured Deborah Meier into the district with the promise that she and her colleagues would be left free from external interference. Once convinced of the genuineness of the offer, she found it irresistible, since she had dreamed of establishing "a progressive school in the tradition of so many of New York's independent private schools" (Meier, 1987, p.753):

Our roots went back to early progressive traditions, with their focus on the building of a democratic community, on education for full citizenship and for egalitarian ideals. We looked upon Dewey...as our mentor.... [W]e were looking for a way to build a school that could offer youngsters a deep and rich curriculum that would inspire them with the desire to know; that would cause them to fall in love with books and with stories of the past; that would evoke in them a sense of wonder at how much there is to learn. (1987, pp.754-755)

Their efforts with the program they named Central Park East Elementary School were sufficiently successful that in 1979, a satellite was launched, Central Park East II, and in 1982, River East. But the staff were disturbed by the tales of returning graduates, and gradually the determination grew to start their own high school, enabling their students to complete public school in the same spirit in which they had begun it.

This was no modest decision for New York City where the 32 districts

created by decentralized legislation in 1968 were empowered only to operate elementary and junior high or middle schools. Senior high school remained (and remains) centralized, and under the jurisdiction of the citywide High School Division. Nevertheless, with the rationale that it was the continuation of three elementary schools that would supply its students, and that this was just one more application of the district's policy of housing multiple grade levels in a single building, the new high school -- Central Park East Secondary School -- was launched. (For a bit of contextual elaboration, see Fliegel, 1993.)

CPESS remained a part of District 4 because it was planned to cover grades 7-9. But it had also to report to citywide officials in relation to grades 10-12. To satisfy the latter obligation, it wisely sought affiliation with the City's Alternative Schools Office -- a unit established in 1983 by then-Chancellor Alvarado precisely in order to permit innovation beyond what could win the necessary approval of the tightly rule-bound and conservative High School Division. (This office remains open to this day, but with the summary dismissal and replacement of its longtime Superintendent, Stephen Phillips, current Chancellor Rudy Crew has considerably modified its character.) Although the serving of two masters thus entailed for CPESS is organizationally risky, both were school-friendly and Meier managed to turn the situation to the school's advantage. (See Raywid, 1990.)

Broader developments also had an impact on the dreams that were being formed. The early 1980s had ushered in the decade of high school reform. Within months of the appearance of the alarm-sounding and strident *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), three extensive studies appeared that were strongly to influence thinking about secondary education: John Goodlad's *A Place*

Called School (1984), Ernest Boyer's *High School* (1983), and Ted Sizer's *Horace's Compromise* (1984). All were critical of an alleged mindlessness of high school practice, student boredom and indifference, and of the school's minimal expectations of and effects on adolescents.

It was in the wake of *Horace* that Sizer and Meier began to talk, and he lined up the yet unborn Central Park East Secondary School as the first member of his Coalition of Essential Schools, while offering his political support to getting the venture authorized within the New York City school bureaucracy. Meier and Sizer proved a good team. Their thinking was compatible, their agendas meshed well, and each had a lot to offer the other's dreams. CPESS is still cited as Sizer's most successful Coalition school, and Sizer has been a valuable friend who particularly in the school's early days could lend substantial clout and moral support when needed.

Eventually, Meier's Center for Collaborative Education became the New York City arm of Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools. The Center was a network of New York City (mostly District 4 and mostly elementary) alternative school directors, which Meier had established with the help of her MacArthur award money. The network provided mutual support, made information available, and eventually helped to establish a dozen new small high schools in the City. Eventually, it was also to become an important political player in New York City school developments.

The School and Its Program

The fame CPESS has earned is not only extraordinary but deserved. It has long since passed the point where the school is seen as a remarkable accomplishment for inner city, ghetto circumstances; it is widely held a model for districts and youngsters in affluent or moderate circumstances

as well. Deborah Meier's intent had been, after all, to bring a *public* school in the private school tradition to inner city youngsters. But the accomplishment lies in its innovative design and the fact that it is the invention of its staff. CPESS has created its own mission, its own applied epistemology to guide teaching and learning, its own organization and structure, its own curricular organization, its own standards and assessment system, as well as its own school climate and culture.

The mission is teaching youngsters to use their minds well. It is that simple, targeted, and specific. Realizing it is a matter of content, of course, since CPESS faculty want to prepare their students to use their minds well in a particular context -- e.g., a 21st century, urban environment in a Western democracy -- but it is also very extensively a matter of process. So curriculum and pedagogy are deeply intertwined at CPESS. The school has embraced the concept of the Coalition of Essential Schools that "less is more," so students take fewer classes at CPESS and within them, penetrating examination rather than coverage is the goal. The choice was explained this way in a recent CPESS Newsletter (Schwarz, 1996, p. 1):

"Less is more" means that we believe students will learn best if they study some issue or idea in great depth rather than studying many ideas superficially ... Take history for example: ... we focus on events like Columbus' first trip to the Americas and we spend an entire semester on this one event. We try to understand the various perspectives that people have when looking at that event -- Native Americans, Italian-Americans, Italians, etc. We examine how that trip is connected to other historical events, why it is important that we study about Columbus, what if Europeans had not arrived here for another hundred or even two hundred years? How do we know what Columbus' motives were for coming here? ...

The CPESS faculty also shares Sizer's concern about the fragmentation of knowledge and the absence of connection for students from one class and discipline to another. Thus the bulk of CPESS students' work takes place in two daily classes, one in the Humanities (combining literature, social studies, and art), and one in math and science (combining technology as well with these two disciplines). Each of these is a double class, lasting two hours. In addition, seventh- to tenth-graders take Spanish, and they spend an hour in advisory daily. Once a week they spend two and a half hours in service activities, either in the school or in the community. This is a common curriculum for all 7th- to 10th-graders. Only eleventh- and twelfth-graders follow a program involving electives, as will be discussed below.

The most dominant thread in the school's theme, however, is not curricular but pedagogical: CPESS's purpose is to inculcate habits of thought and response. There are five Habits of Mind the school seeks to develop: As stated in its information pamphlet (n.d., c. 1995), they want to help students cultivate the habit of asking the following about each new bit of knowledge -- each fact or idea presented:

1. *From whose viewpoint are we seeing or reading or hearing? From what angle or perspective?*
2. *How do we know what we know? What's the evidence and how reliable is it?*
3. *How are things, events or people connected to each other? What is the cause and what is the effect? How do they 'fit' together?*
4. *What if ...? Could things be otherwise? What are or were the alternatives? Supposing.*
5. *So what? What does it matter? What does it all mean? Who cares?*

Students are encouraged to ask these questions of new material or perspectives presented in any class, as well as about the novel encountered elsewhere, and about their own experience anywhere. Together the raising of these five questions constitutes CPESS's operational definition of what it is to be thoughtful. (Lieberman, n.d.) And students are constantly encouraged to be thoughtful. For instance, a youngster sent to the office for a disciplinary infraction is likely to be asked to analyze the situation sending him there in terms of the five Habits of Mind. A youngster writing a paper or doing a project is expected to complete a product reflecting its author's own answers to those questions. A person talking about events across the world, or describing what occurred across the family dinner table, may be asked to elaborate by responding to some or all of the five questions.

Eleventh- and twelfth-graders pursue a curriculum that at least in part is more familiar to those whose model is the comprehensive high school. They select from a number of offerings in the sciences, social sciences, literature, and the arts. But two of the classes they take must be college courses selected from offerings on New York's college and university campuses (including one on "great books and critical ideas"). And each student must also complete an internship in a private business or a public agency. The internship includes both on-site contribution and experience, and participation in a CPESS seminar that explores work-related issues.

Eleventh- and twelfth-graders are enrolled in The Senior Institute which separates them from Divisions I (seventh- and eighth-graders) and II (ninth- and tenth-graders). The Institute has two major functions: to enable students to assemble the portfolios which document and show evidence of their readiness to graduate; and to help them in the transition

from high school to what is to come next in their lives (college, for a large majority).

Although they pursue a full program of courses there, portfolios dominate the lives of those in The Senior Institute (juniors and seniors). CPESS students must display their knowledge, skills, and dispositions (i.e., their internalization of, and competence in employing, the desired habits of mind and work) by completing 14 portfolios documenting their accomplishments. The portfolios must be in specified areas including history, literature, math, science and technology, fine arts, and language. But they also include a variety of areas less often tapped in graduation requirements elsewhere: knowledge of mass media and of ethics and social issues, ability to meet physical challenge, the production of a reflective autobiography and a personal post-graduation plan, a resume of their contributions and a demonstration of their accomplishments in the course of service learning and the internship, and finally, demonstration of an assortment of practical knowledge and skills demanded by contemporary urban life. In only one area that is required -- geography -- can students meet the demonstration of competence required merely by taking and passing a test. In all other areas, the requirements are more extensive and demanding.

Early in each student's Senior Institute career, he or she acquires a Graduation Committee consisting of the student's advisor, a second faculty member, an additional adult of the student's choice, and an assigned student. This group negotiates with the student the work to be done in the Senior Institute -- the electives taken -- and it is the group that hears the portfolio presentations and decides whether the student is ready to graduate.

Seven of the 14 portfolios must be presented orally to the student's

Graduation Committee, in sessions that have been likened to doctoral orals and the defense of a dissertation: for each portfolio, there is a presentation, then a question and discussion session, following which the student leaves the room and Committee members assess the performance. The session concludes with a sharing of the evaluation with the student.

The requirements may be slightly less awesome a hurdle than such an account suggests. For instance, there is a lot of flexibility in the sorts of portfolio topics students can select to pursue, and in the sorts of presentations they do. Topics must fit distribution requirements but within them there is broad leeway. A portfolio presentation may take the form of a demonstration, a model, a drama, a public reading, a painting or sculpture -- as well as the more traditional review of a paper one has written. A group or collaborative effort is an option, even though each individual must show his or her role and contribution. Depending upon topics, a cross-disciplinary or cross-area portfolio may satisfy two separate portfolio requirements. And some portfolios may be satisfied by work largely if not fully completed during the student's enrollment in Division II. The major requirement is that the student demonstrate the inclination and ability to tackle an issue or problem thoughtfully. A careful scoring grid with which students are familiar guides the evaluators in determining how well each portfolio accomplishes it. But despite such assists and broad parameters, portfolio preparation, completion, and presentation constitute a challenge that substantially exceeds the traditional high school's graduation requirement of simply completing the required number and array of courses.

What Makes CPESS So Special?

Many of the more than 2000 people who visit CPESS annually come not

just to look and listen, but to understand just what it is that makes this school so different -- and what it is that makes it work. The foregoing describes a number of CPESS's key features -- its aims, its pedagogy, its curriculum, its assessment system. But ultimately what accounts for its success probably goes well beyond the structure and practices that have been described.

CPESS remains unique, despite the many efforts around the country to model it in whole or in part. One senses that immediately, and although a school's climate and culture are difficult to put into words, the following pages seek to capture some of the highlights of what careful observers are likely to discern. The subsequent section will venture some explanations for CPESS's success.

One is struck first by the extent to which the faculty seem to own the school -- and that in multiple ways. They seem to experience it as *their* project -- and hence as something which they can and do alter constantly in the interests of better serving their purposes. Actually, they do own CPESS. It is their invention. They are quick to point out that not all of it is totally original. For instance, they credit an alternative school in Racine, Wisconsin, Walden III, for the original version of their assessment set-up. And their advisories are their adaptation of a set of structures first developed several years earlier at Long Island's Shoreham - Wading River Middle School. But the particular adaptations are their creation, as well as the way the pieces fit together. And they blend into a whole that is highly distinctive and collectively 'owned.' The faculty strongly conveys a sense of being in control and that they are the parties responsible for the way the school operates -- as well as for fixing whatever breaks. Perhaps relatedly, they also 'own' CPESS in terms of their remarkable commitment to it. Clearly, teaching is not a routinized

and perfunctory 8 - 3 job here. They are too serious about it.

A second thing that strikes those with the opportunity to look carefully is CPESS's remarkable coherence linking what they say they intend to what they actually do. There is a totally atypical faithfulness to ultimate aims and absence of distraction by more proximate objectives. The result is a seamlessness making the whole operation mesh unusually well together. The school's purpose is singular: to teach youngsters to use their minds well in the interests of preparing them "to live productive, socially useful and personally satisfying lives." (CPESS 1996, p. 1) All of the school's activities, curriculum, organizational structures, and arrangements grow out of and are traceable back to this mission. The coherence is no accident. The school plan and design were assembled and have been revised by a process they call "backward mapping": they sat down together and decided what they wanted a graduate to be, and to be capable of and disposed to do. Then they asked what kind of school program was necessary to producing such an individual, and next, what sort of school structure might best support that kind of program. It is a process that assures ultimate purposes a continuing and prominent role in the school's daily operation -- so that teachers don't find their ideas vetoed by a schedule that can't accommodate them, or rules blocking a reasonable and desirable path of action. It also makes teaching and learning the primary factor in every school decision and arrangement -- not standard practice or administrative convenience or contracts or regulations. In this respect, CPESS appears a uniquely teaching-oriented school, as well as a uniquely coherent one.

A third quality likely to strike observers is the extraordinary respect CPESS projects -- not just for its students but to everyone who comes near it: parents, visitors, and its teachers and staff. Respect has been

identified to lie at the very core of the CPESS philosophy (Bensman, 1987), and it has been a recurring theme in the writings of Deborah Meier. An early article spoke indignantly of its absence from schools -- of the institution's lack of respect for any of "the people who made up the roster of school life -- parents, kids, teachers, principals..." (Meier, Fall, 1987, p. 543) A chapter in her 1995 book titled "Respect" revisited and expanded the theme. It is a high priority at CPESS because, for her, "respect lies at the heart of democratic practice and good schooling." (1995, p. 35) It is multi-faceted, and one form of disrespect for people is the ignoring of them as individuals. (Schwarz & Meier, 1997, pp. 22-26.) Thus, institutionally-imposed anonymity -- and the sheer batch-processing of human beings -- become not just poor pedagogy but the violation of a fundamental value.

Another form of disrespect is failing to listen or to take people seriously. Thus, an observer gets the sense that any question seriously raised would get a careful hearing and careful attention here -- whether or not the person to whom it was addressed found it particularly interesting or important. Such an attitude is projected in various ways and in school and staff dealings with various constituencies. For instance, CPESS publishes a Newsletter primarily for its parents and students. There are news items and announcement-type items, but each issue features a front-page 'thought' piece of significance and often of complexity. It frequently raises an issue and/or argues a position one might expect to find in the annals of philosophy of education, or of advanced pedagogy. The audience is not patronized or otherwise talked down to as non-professionals. All are treated as capable of exercising intelligence.

Yet another quality -- or set of qualities -- CPESS projects is its own

special version of what it is to be a caring community. In describing the school, and its "Promises Kept," co-directors Paul Schwarz and David Smith concluded "we made a promise that CPESS would be a caring environment -- a place where the answer to the question 'Who cares?' is answered by a resounding "everyone!" (Information brochure, n.d., c. 1995) Yet, while CPESS fashions itself a caring community, it clearly leans more toward a "learning" community than toward what some construe a "caring" community to be. Although its students will tell you it is a very caring place, there appears little of the expression of sentiment or the openness to affect one sometimes finds in people-oriented schools, or in the holistically- or humanistically-oriented schools of the 1960s. CPESS is more in the Progressive tradition, with its respect for young minds and potential, than in the 60s tradition with its much stronger emphasis on feeling. It is certainly not that the school is unaware of or indifferent to its students' personal problems and social-emotional predicaments. It goes to considerable lengths to know and understand these, and it builds carefully on such awareness. But the CPESS conversation focuses primarily on matters addressing intellectual development.

The impact on students is impressive. They respond first to being taken so seriously -- to being listened to, to having their questions addressed in their own terms -- not shrugged off or ignored or replaced by other questions someone else finds more important. And then gradually they come to perceive themselves -- many for the first time -- as intellectual beings. They have minds and can use them to take in things and to ponder and reason -- and there are products of this process that are worthy of sharing and of others' consideration. CPESS students, like their teachers, come quickly to take others seriously -- and to offer thoughtful, reasoned responses to their questions.

Many also come to a newfound respect for themselves, and their own capacities and potential. Paul Schwarz, CPESS's former co-director, tells a story of a radio interview of himself and a CPESS student in which the student was asked a question intended to detect his awareness of the school's part in his success. The youngster responded to the question stating he thought he really would have been equally successful at any other high school as at CPESS. Instead of finding the statement cocky or naive, Paul found in it just the self-assurance in one's own intellectual prowess that CPESS seeks to develop. It didn't matter how appreciative of the school he was or aware of its contribution: what mattered was that he saw himself as able.

Finally, one is struck at CPESS by its strongly urban cast. Although a number of its elements and qualities would fit anywhere, some of the directions it has chosen appear typically metropolitan. For instance, its first two co-directors settled on two attributes as centrally defining of the ideal citizen: empathy and skepticism. (Meier & Schwarz, 1995, p. 29) It's an interesting combination and probably a useful conception to guide city living, but perhaps not the qualities that those in other circumstances might select as foremost.

To cite another central example, the school's orientation as a learning community appears directed not so much toward building ties among its students, bringing them together as a support group or a self-conscious collective of any sort: rather it seems more geared to teaching them to live in circumstances where those around them are not friends but strangers. Some alternative schools emphasize the building of student-to-student ties, as well as of teacher-student bonds. (See, e.g., Lehman, 1993; Raywid, 1993; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989.) This is not a part of the CPESS plan. It is important to immerse

students in a culture that adults have played a significant role in shaping, because education is ultimately the attempt "to convert our children to a set of adult intellectual standards and appreciations -- our love affair with literature and history, science and math, logic and reason, accuracy and precision, as well as our commitment to justice and fairness ..."

(Meier, 1995, p. 113) Therefore, considerable time and effort are given to building intergenerational ties at CPESS. But beyond the demands of peaceful co-existence and collaborative work efforts, there seems to be fairly minimal attention to the development of student-to-student connections. Strong ties do emerge from the close class associations over an extended period, but they are strictly coincidental.

Advisories, for instance, where building student-to-student community is often a prominent concern, are not oriented this way at CPESS. Their advisories seek to keep advisor and advisees in close touch, to convey a particular curriculum (health, sex, and career education), and to examine school news. Although they function importantly in the effort to personalize learning, the rationale for doing so is clear: "...the point of Advisory -- like school itself -- is to give kids skills and knowledge, to make them stronger students." (Paul & Deb, 1993, pp. 1-2)

What Makes It So Successful?

But if these are among the qualities that strike observers who look carefully, they intertwine effects and causes with the enabling conditions of CPESS's success. If one asks what makes it work so well a number of additional, less visibly evident components surface.

Perhaps the most fundamental enabling condition of CPESS's success is its size. It is not only a small high school in comparison to most -- 450 students in grades 7-12 -- but it divides itself into units that

function separately from one another and serve to create the sense of even smaller size. Of the three Divisions -- I, II, and the Senior Institute -- Divisions I and II are further divided into two houses of 80 students and four plus teachers each. (The art teacher serves all four houses.) This is the experienced size of the unit in which each individual operates. House membership determines class rosters, teachers, and fellow advisees.

Size does not guarantee success. But in Debbie Meier's eyes, it can easily render it impossible. She speaks of the ideal as a 20 x 20 school where class size doesn't exceed 20 students and in which there are no more than 20 teachers: the maximum number of people who can sit around a table and hold a thoughtful discussion together. This need not prove prohibitively expensive. In fact, as Meier points out, CPESS is a lot *less* expensive than many of New York's other high schools if what is computed is cost per graduate, as opposed to cost per student enrolled. (CPESS graduates more than 90% of its students -- as opposed to the 25% or fewer that as many as a quarter of the City's high schools enable to get through.)

CPESS is not more costly to operate than are other New York City high schools. It runs on the same per student allotments as do others. It has been fortunate in attracting grant money for special projects and activities but this is not what underwrites its small classes and its teachers' comparatively small student loads. That is accomplished largely in two ways. First, there is virtually no non-teaching staff at CPESS. Moreover, as Deb and Paul reported it (1995, p. 36),

We have no guidance counselors, no gym teacher ... no music teacher, and a single art teacher for the whole school. We have no department chairs, no deans, and one social worker; in return for class sizes of under 20, other teachers have assumed many of the functions

traditionally carried out by these personnel....

Small student loads for teachers -- less than half the size of most high schools -- are accomplished also by having every teacher teach each student in multiple courses. CPESS, and the Coalition of Essential Schools, are committed to the idea of teacher as 'generalist': as teacher first and subjectmatter specialist only secondarily. Thus particularly in the interdisciplinary core classes, CPESS teachers are accustomed to teaching outside their specialty.

A second factor in its success is that students and teachers have elected to be at CPESS, and have made the choice only after having actually been there and spent some time there. This is an important assist in assembling a group of students and teachers headed in compatible directions. It also means that if anyone decides CPESS really is not for them, they can go elsewhere. This is a unique school as created by its faculty and one size does not fit all; it will obviously suit some better than others.² For instance, CPESS holds standardized testing in

² A small number of students do leave CPESS in favor of another school, and a few drop out of school entirely. Total transfers and dropouts for the class of 1991 -- i.e., over the four years this class spent in high school -- were 5%, according to Meier (1995, p. 16.)

low esteem. And although it administers a few such tests and helps students prepare for them, they are treated as far less significant than the school's own assessment procedures. There has been an occasional test-minded family this doesn't suit.

To help a youngster develop the ability to think well, you must know something of the current operation of that individual's mind. You cannot do this for each youngster if you are daily deluged with 150 of them. Thus the school's central purpose dictates a small total number of students for

each teacher. It also calls for small classes and for seeing and reviewing a lot of work from their members. Hence, the structure was created to keep a relatively small number of students -- 80 -- with the same set of four teachers for two years. But the 80 are further divided into two groups so that all of the student's classes are taken with two of the four teachers, and with classmates from within the group of 40. Each teacher daily teaches two block (or double usual length) classes of 20 students, plus teaching an advisory session which may include up to seven or eight additional students. Thus a teacher's student load is 40-48 students, with whom he or she works for two years.

"Advisories" were developed -- a group of no more than 15 students who also remain with a teacher advisor for two years, meeting daily with the advisory group for an hour. The advisor becomes an 'expert' on each of these youngsters and functions as school - home liaison for each. When the parent comes to school to discuss a student's progress, the student is known by the advisor-teacher. The curriculum offered in Advisories, the discussions held, and the activities undertaken (e.g., an annual weekend visit to a college campus) yield multiple sorts of settings and opportunities for the advisor to come to know each youngster well.

CPESS's purpose -- helping youngsters learn to use their minds well -- also calls for a particular kind of curriculum, one governed by the "less is more" principle electing depth in preference to broad coverage of content. The school's central purpose also recommends a particular kind of approach within class: a continual provoking of students to think. Thus, work within courses is arranged around themes, and each theme is identified by its own list of questions. For instance, in Humanities there are four year-long themes. The essential questions examined in connection with the first of these, "The Peopling of America," include:

What is an American? Whose country is this? Who decides? How do we develop our identities? Can we hold multiple identities? (Six-Year Curriculum Plan. 1997)

The fundamental agreement among teachers and their close and continuing collaboration is surely another factor in CPESS's success. It is not that they always agree, but that they share the same kind of fundamental orientation toward education -- similar assumptions about adolescents and learning, and the same value priorities. They are expected to work closely with one another and contact with colleagues is far more extensive and significant at CPESS than at most high schools. Teachers meet with one another for five or six hours a week, three hours of which is made available while Divisions I and II students perform half-day service learning activities each week. The House teams -- the four teachers who teach the same students -- meet during this time. Other faculty combinations meet on Monday afternoons 3:00 - 4:30, and on Friday afternoons 1:30 - 3:00 (when classes meet 8:00 - 1:00 instead of 9:00 - 3:00). In addition to House team meetings, there are subjectmatter meetings (of the Humanities teachers, and of the Math/Science teachers) and there are whole staff meetings, and once or twice a year weekend retreats.

None of these meetings are primarily concerned with management details and logistics, all are substantive sessions. They are held necessary to making the school work optimally, but they are also recognized as a major form of in-service teacher education. "This continuing dialogue, face to face, over and over, is a powerful educative force. It is our primary form of staff development." (Meier, 1995, p. 109) Hearing and participating in such discussion plays a central role in the induction of new faculty. The "formal and informal gatherings that take

place all day long are where 'staff development' occurs. They are where the newest teacher learns his or her trade, and senior staff reexamine and revisit old issues." (Meier & Schwarz, 1995, p. 38) The holding of such multiple sessions has several purposes. Teaching is viewed as intricate and difficult -- in short, as an intellectual challenge demanding the never-ending pursuit of the same sort of thoughtfulness teachers seek to cultivate in their students. Operating a school is similarly held to be complicated and demanding, with virtually no limit to the improvements that can be made. Thus, CPESS teachers seek continually to enhance the school's success.

But as closely as colleagues work, the meetings are professional, not social sessions. Nor does informal teacher talk at CPESS reflect the traditional findings that teachers lounge exchanges tend to be exclusively social. (Lortie, 1975) As Paul Schwarz and Debbie Meier put it (1997, p. 25), staff meetings

are structured and focused. We are not a family; we are a learning community, so our identities are forged in the business of making CPESS stronger and more potent, not in creating social situations for staff to be friends.

Lest that sound a bit cold and impersonal, CPESS surely is not and close relationships do develop. But it is a highly goal-directed and focused place -- which undoubtedly has a lot to do with its success. Friendships and social exchange are for after hours.

Another significant success component has been CPESS's autonomy. Recall the promise of the District 4 superintendent which brought Meier and her colleagues to the District in the first place: the promise of freedom from external interference. The independence this has brought

and the freedom from mandates and paper work and perfunctory routine has contributed heavily to the ability to design their own curriculum and schedule, and to obtain the right staff, and to develop their own assessment system. Early in the life of CPESS these freedoms tended to come informally and sometimes extra-legally. The tradition Superintendent Alvarado had established of "creative noncompliance" with regulations (Rogers & Chung, 1983) was relaxed about rules. The Alternative Schools Office to which CPESS also reported as a high school was supportive rather than controlling in its orientation (its superintendent was fond of saying that he spent most of his time trying to figure ways around the rules for his schools). The teachers union, at least at top levels, was also supportive and willing to overlook things like seniority transfer rights when it came to staffing, or when it came to protection of teachers' time, since it knew CPESS was greatly empowering teachers, and since it was receiving no grievances. As a result, in its early days CPESS was relatively protected from external interference. Later it was more formally exempted from state requirements by the Partnership Agreement between New York State Essential Schools and the State Department of Education (1990), which provided

except for minimum competency testing requirements, the Essential Schools will be free to restructure the curriculum and the school within state and federal law without submitting individual requests for variance from the Commissioner's Regulations. (pp. 9-10)

Little has been said of CPESS's governance arrangements -- in part because, as Debbie Meier has suggested, it is in large schools that governance discussions assume importance; teachers in small ones can talk education instead. There is an attempt to arrive at decisions consensually, and an insistence that they be reached by the whole faculty

rather than by representative bodies. Although early hopes for essentially a leaderless elementary school had to be revised, changes in authority and prerogatives remain discussable. The staff share broad powers of curriculum, assessment, and personnel selection. Individual teacher behavior is governed less by rules and monitoring than by shared values and collegial agreements. But as Meier and Schwarz pointed out, "'Autonomy' can't be synonymous with privacy. Quite the opposite." (1995, p. 37) Especially at the secondary level, many of the decisions need to be collective and teachers need access to each other's work. Thus, teaching is extensively de-privatized at CPESS. "Teachers can't close the door: what goes on in their classroom is shared with everybody." (Scherer, 1994, p. 6)

This means that difficulties and problems surface quickly. Paul worked out a procedure for new teachers who were having trouble: a group of three CPESS faculty has sought to offer help over a period of time, one selected by Paul, one by the newcomer, and one rotating. At the end of the year that group recommends what to do. In the interim, there have been instances of frustration on both sides, newcomer and colleagues. And there have been teachers that Deb and Paul have had to try to convince that they would be happier elsewhere.

Another component of CPESS's success, further expanding its capacity as a learning organization, is its many connections and interactions beyond its own walls. It was, from its inception, a part of the Coalition of Essential Schools which meant contact not only with Ted Sizer but eventually with the numerous schools throughout the country that became Coalition members. And this involved contacts not only on the part of CPESS directors, but also of its teachers.

Even before CPESS was launched, Meier had formed the Center for

Collaborative Education, which initially consisted of the directors of some of the elementary alternative schools in District 4, and has now expanded to 40 members who are the directors of similarly oriented schools at all levels, elementary through high school. (It was the Center, which is also the New York City arm of the Coalition, that launched the Campus Schools Project that helped create 11 new small high schools in New York. The Center was instrumental in the planning process and staffing for these schools.)

CPESS also became involved in the Annenberg New York City Networks for School Renewal Project involving four sets of networks in New York, each with its own sponsor and its own schools. The Center for Collaborative Education was interested in the idea of establishing "learning zones," consisting of a group of compatible schools that would be mutually accountable rather than accountable to a central hierarchy.

Nor have all of CPESS's contacts been of a formal organizational nature. For instance, the school long ago established the tradition of inviting in what it calls "Critical Friends" -- external colleagues who help in the examination of standards and the review of curriculum. CPESS's Critical Friends have looked at and independently assessed graduation portfolios to provide outside confirmation or challenge to the school's practice. The "Friends" invited have included New York City teachers (traditional as well as Progressive), professors, high school principals, foundation representatives, and sister school teachers and administrators. They continue to seek ideas and reactions from as wide a variety of sources as is feasible -- reacting with enthusiasm to the school restructurer's dictum that "there's a lot more knowledge out there than in here." (Fullan, 1993)

A major success component has been the stability CPESS has managed

to achieve. It is partly a matter of the carefully interwoven structure and practice that have been described, and partly a matter of constancy of personnel. When there have been teaching vacancies, it has been possible to avoid automatic transfers based just on seniority in favor of carefully screened applicants. So unsupportive or insufficiently skilled replacements have not derailed things. Similarly with the leadership. Although in its 12 years, CPESS has had four different 'administrations,' the values and educational orientations of the people involved have remained remarkably constant.

It is perhaps the clarity and steadfastness of the mission that has enabled CPESS to overcome so ably the challenges that often occur when the initiating, charismatic leader departs. It has been several years now since Debbie Meier left CPESS -- the high school she founded in 1985 as an extension of the elementary school she had also founded. Along the way, Paul Schwarz had become the co-director, with Deb, of the high school -- and had served increasingly as the school's site director, as CPESS's fame spread and Deb became occupied nationally with numerous projects. In his prior role, Paul had been principal of an innovative elementary school and an active member of the Center for Collaborative Education. After Deb's departure from CPESS, David Smith became Paul's co-director. After Paul's departure in the Fall of 1997, David was named director.

The three are quite different as leaders. Deborah Meier was the thinker and visionary -- vitally interested in children but as much so also in society and democracy and how they work and what is needed to improve them. She appears squarely in the New Deal tradition (in which she grew up) and she has identified herself as a socialist. She has long been a member of the editorial board of *Dissent* -- a liberal journal of political analysis and social philosophy. Her insistence on democracy in human

relations, as well as in the governance of institutions (including schools), is highly reminiscent of philosopher John Dewey. She identifies herself as a "Progressive" educator -- and indeed, Dewey might well applaud what she has done as exactly what he had in mind -- for schools as well as for teachers as intellectuals and as leaders. Some have commented that her vision of education is solidly rooted in her own schooling at Fieldston -- a progressive private school attended by affluent New York area youngsters. But what she has managed to do was to take this education previously reserved for the elite and make it accessible to all children -- poor and minority as well as handicapped. That has been her dream.

Upon leaving CPESS, Meier became an Annenberg Fellow at Brown University and the vice-chair of the Coalition of Essential Schools. In the Fall of 1997, she opened a new elementary school in Boston.

Paul Schwarz, who became with Deb, a co-director of CPESS in 1990, is less a social thinker than she, and more explicitly an educator with a school leadership focus. He has been prominent in the principals' program associated with the Coalition of Essential Schools, and he directs a leadership institute sponsored by Bank Street College and Columbia's Teachers College. He is a tall man with penetrating dark eyes and a large handlebar mustache. He is also a warm and sharing individual with an extraordinary, trust-inspiring earnestness and sincerity. He, too, was an articulate leader who was an extender, as well as a bearer of the CPESS vision. He is sharing that nationally now as the Principal in Residence at the U.S. Department of Education.

David Smith became CPESS co-director, with Paul, after Deb left in 1996. Since Paul's departure in the Fall of 1997, David has become the school's sole director. The structural shift from two directors to one was a faculty decision. They wanted to use the co-director salary for other

purposes, and they agreed to share responsibility for those functions which David least relished, including conflict resolution. David had been a Humanities teacher at CPESS since its beginnings. He is a chunky, softspoken African American of broad interests in unusual combination. He combines a college background in the humanities with a high school diploma from the Bronx High School of Science. He is also a playwright who holds a senior belt in karate. Laudatory recent articles have attributed to him "vision, passion and compassion" (Wasserman, 1997, p. 1) -- as well as a striking capacity to bring "a sense of calm to the hallways." (Wulf, 1997, p. 69) To date his focus has been in-house, and according to some CPESS has improved in important ways under his leadership.

An interesting coincidence that may be more than incidental is that all three of CPESS's administrators have had elementary school experience: Deborah Meier and Paul Schwarz began their teaching careers as kindergarten teachers, and both were elementary school principals immediately prior to coming to CPESS. David Smith began as an elementary school teacher before teaching at CPESS. It may well be that the experience with young children has stood them in good stead in the high school.

But despite such commonality with respect to background, the three represent quite different kinds of leaders, with different leadership styles and strengths and emphases. They share the fundamental agreements reflected in the remarkable continuity that is evident. But they differ enough to well confirm current theories of situational leadership insisting that different traits and styles and foci constitute good leadership for different organizations -- and for the same organization at different times and stages.

In fact, CPESS can be used to illustrate a number of the emphases in

contemporary educational thinking. Many of the practices and arrangements reformers urge are clearly present there. For instance, as preceding pages have shown, CPESS represents a well-developed professional community with a great deal of collegial interaction and collaboration. This conduces to continuing change, and to an absence of complacency over past accomplishments. Further, by today's standards, CPESS is a small school and they have even managed to downsize that. With its elaborately developed external connections it has set the scene for ongoing organizational learning. They have achieved the focus of purpose and the programmatic coherence that the textbooks urge. They give a great deal of attention to making learning authentic for their students, to engaging them, and to developing higher level intellectual processes.

Is this, then, the whole story? Is this all it takes? Debbie Meier insists that what CPESS has done is all do-able by others: "what we do at CPE or CPESS *is* reproducible by others -- *in their own way* " and "We've proven that these kinds of schools work over and over again with different directors, with different staffs, and without extra funds." (1995, pp.37-38; emphasis in the original) But why, then, are there not *more* Central Park East -- in fact dozens or even hundreds of them scattered across the educational horizon?

I suspect that the answer lies not so much in hero leaders, or unique resources, or an extraordinary set of teachers as it does in faithfulness to three crucial principles which together function as necessary conditions of unusual success (albeit not as sufficient conditions). First, an outstanding school is the projection of the convictions and commitments of a self-selecting staff, who together design (and re-design) it. Second, an outstanding school is not just a matter of curriculum and instructional

program, but the product also of a school organization intricately connected to, subordinate to, and supportive of the instructional program. Third, an outstanding school is one that has in one way or another obtained the permission to chart its own course -- be that from formal authorization, supportive officials, or "creative noncompliance."

I suspect that the differences in success between CPESS and its emulators can usually be traced to compromises which violate one or more of these three principles. -- For instance, the teachers don't choose to be there but are assigned by automatic processes; the program is a replicated one from somewhere else; school organization is not open to re-design, or teachers fail to undertake that; or external requirements and restrictions so limit the programmatic or organizational options (e.g., through testing programs or contract provisions) that the school cannot chart its own course. If one seeks fundamental explanations of CPESS's remarkable and continuing success, the answers may well lie in the honoring of these three principles.

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