

Portraits

Portrait of Deborah Meier

Debby Meier succeeded in transforming some of New York's public schools into places where children *and* teachers participate actively in "the life of the mind."

Photograph by Joan Powers

Debby Meier has founded three elementary schools, begun a secondary school, and influenced dozens of other schools in New York and around the country. Her exceptional schools rest on a few bedrock beliefs. "We created an environment that helps kids learn to be powerful people—learn to use their minds well. To do that, they need a first-class academic education. That doesn't preclude caring—it *requires* caring. But what we did was more than caring. We produced a really serious—academically, intellectually, personally serious—place for at-risk kids."

A down-to-earth, unrepentant intellectual, Meier comes from an impressive background: her parents held responsible jobs in nonprofit organizations, and she received excellent secondary preparation at fine private schools in New York (Ethical Culture and Fieldston), and a substantial, enlightened education at Antioch and the University of Chicago. She always understood that "you are supposed to do something significant and wonderful and marvelous with your life." She decided to go into teaching.

Rethinking Education

Meier was drawn to education because she was "intrigued by how children learn to read, to write, to speak, to



understand numbers." But during her first job in Chicago, she learned how poorly teachers were treated, no matter what their backgrounds. "I had never in my life been treated as disrespectfully as I was as a teacher. Even as a child, I had never been yelled at, scolded, the way people in that school scolded me. I was appalled."

Nevertheless, Meier was "in love with the field—there was enough in teaching to keep me forever enthralled. The question of institutional change as well as the question of how an individual child comes to terms with new ideas—every level could occupy me for thousands of years. Everything I could read seemed pertinent." She read John Holt's *How Children*

Fail, Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age*, and Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher* when they burst onto the educational scene.

Over the years Meier accumulated experience as a teacher and a teacher trainer. In New York she found friends among the city's determined, iconoclastic educators—people like Anthony Alvarado, Sy Fliegel, and Lillian Weber. And she became determined to change the ways schools work herself.

An "Exciting" School

In 1974, District Four Superintendent Anthony Alvarado (who would soon go on to become chancellor of the New York City School System) called Meier and said, "Start an elementary school. You can do anything you want." Committed to destroying the stultifying status quo, Meier set out to create a "terrifically exciting school." She collected a group of dedicated teachers who wanted to be part of her project. The students they were to work with were "largely poor and largely free lunch, mostly black and Hispanic. Many were classified as special education. We believed they could be treated well and could learn."

The school had an enrollment of about 250 students. "You want a school small enough," Meier says, "so everybody can see each other's work, hear each other's viewpoint. The adults in that school can create a really powerful culture that kids can join in on." Children stayed with the same teacher for two years "so the kids and teachers get to know each other well."

For their students, the staff created respect for the adult world, something Meier calls "natural authority." Students could see, as staff members met and talked, "that we are a faculty who make powerful decisions together." Adults who bring each other books, argue about issues, and make powerful group decisions, Meier believes, will inspire confidence in children that it is good to be an adult, "that you can make something of the world because it's an interesting place to figure out, and that life is meant to be enjoyed."

For the Life of the Mind

Later Meier founded two more small, successful elementary schools: Central Park East Two and River East. All her schools emphasized the life of the mind. "We believe," Meier says, "there should be a lot of talk, a lot of dialogue, discussion, back and forth, art, music, mathematics, history. . . . We built the rooms and pedagogy around things the teachers felt passionately about: ancient Greece or New York City or bridges and dams or butterflies and birds. Our general view was that if the teacher cared a lot and the kids cared a lot, that was a good topic."

Meier believed in building relationships with parents: "We sent out a newsletter every week to parents. This constant bombardment of why we think education is so terribly important had a cumulative effect." Twice a year the teacher, parents, and the student sit down together. The conferences are genuine and helpful. "How can we help John or Mary? Have you got a clue? Have I got a clue? Tell me your secret, I'll tell you mine. And the kid is sitting there. Let's say it in front of the kid."

Eighteen buildings in District Four now house 51 small autonomous elementary and junior high schools. Each school is small enough for teachers to make genuinely collective decisions and to make ideas and human concerns the central themes of their schools. Meier says, "We take every death in the family seriously, every illness seriously, every celebration—every new wonderful thing that happens—seriously." Each school remains unique, "with its own staff, student body, rituals, style, viewpoint, schedule, and everything else."

Achievement tests are a particular bugaboo for Meier. She is far more interested in the idea of a portfolio of work that teachers and students agree is good. "The kids read and write, and they talk and they're clearly growing. My kids are doing well." Their test scores are fine, too, but then, Meier says, "the test scores are fine in some schools where I know they're not learning anything." What's more impressive is the high school dropout rate for students from Central Park



East. The overall rate for New York City exceeds 50 percent; for Hispanics it is 78 percent and for blacks 72 percent. The dropout rate for CPE graduates is 3.1 percent.

Creating a High School

Meier decided to create a high school, because, she says, "students kept telling me high school is terrible." For many children, particularly those who don't know how to negotiate in the adult world, high school is indeed difficult.

Meier began Central Park East Secondary School in 1985. It includes grades 7-11, and will add a 12th grade next year. Because she felt students and parents would need some assurance of the soundness of the program, Meier and the teachers created "a more prescribed curriculum" than in the elementary schools. The school is organized in two-year divisions, and

students stay with the same team of teachers for both years.

Each student has an advisor who has about twelve advisees. "The day is very simple. You have two hours of what we call humanities—history, arts, English, and social studies—and then you have two hours of math and science. And then you have one hour of what we call advisory and an hour of midday break which consists of lunch and some options."

The Senior Institute (grades 11 and 12) includes a great books and ideas seminar, field work in the community, tutorial time, visits to colleges, planning for college or career, individualized plans in major subject areas, a 100-hour work or career internship, and other options. It's organized, Meier says, "like my fantasy of Cambridge or Oxford where you have your tutor who works out with you a schedule of courses that will enable

you to pass a set of exhibitions to convince the faculty that you are of graduation calibre."

Here Meier's students have honed a set of skills that allow them to negotiate the system. "They have extraordinarily positive assumptions about finding an adult, someone in the system, who can help them figure out another alternative, find a way around problems. Our kids are used to relating to adults, and they don't assume adults are all the enemy. I think that helped as much as their academic competence."

"We Give People Courtesy"

During our interview, I asked Debby Meier to characterize the four schools she has so greatly influenced in one of New York's most depressed and dangerous neighborhoods. She pondered the question, this handsome, dignified woman, and responded, "What we are doing in our schools is not substantially different from Dalton or Calhoun or Ethical Culture or all those schools for people with money. We are like the private schools in the amount of courtesy we give people who come in the door, the attentiveness, the way someone would be there to take care of your kid when he was sick, the way teachers would stay with your kid if you were late picking her up in the afternoon. As a staff, we are the same way toward each other."

In the spring of 1987, Debby Meier received a MacArthur Fellowship, the "genius award." She doesn't think of herself as a genius—"Who knows why they really give you these?" She also has received an award from the Fund of the City of New York and honorary degrees from Columbia University, Bank Street College, and Brown University. She travels, writes, makes speeches. To the outside world she is a principal, a director, an award winner, yet she remains close to her school and children. In her own mind Debby Meier is a teacher, still intrigued with learning, with ideas, with change, still in love with education. □

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The issue now raging across America is that changes in school governance and management should be made to extend choice beyond these conventional forms. The current idea is that better education results by moving power and influence away from these centralized bureaucracies and back to the local school level. These two volumes are the result of a conference held in May of 1989 at the Robert M. La Follette Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The conference explored and evaluated the state of knowledge concerning choice and control in American education.

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