PART ONE

THE ART OF TEACHING
It has been more than six years since Harry Thompson, my fondly remembered Advanced Placement English teacher, died. During that time my long-held conviction that all high school kids need a Mr. Thompson in their lives to nurture and guide them has only grown stronger. But so have my doubts that they will find one. Teachers today may be too busy struggling to meet the demand for higher test scores to give kids the kind of encouragement Mr. Thompson gave me. I cannot conceive of a greater educational tragedy. For each kid whose talent goes unrecognized or undeveloped we’re all irrevocably deprived and diminished.—HG

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 18, 2000

EPITAPH FOR AN ENGLISH TEACHER

[ HOWARD GOOD ]

He wasn’t the most brilliant or stimulating teacher I ever had, just the most influential. His name was Harry Thompson. He taught me Advanced Placement English in 12th grade at John F. Kennedy High School—a class that, strictly speaking, I wasn’t prepared for and shouldn’t have been allowed to take. That was more than 30 years ago, but I still remember Mr. Thompson with a kind of awe.

Why? It isn’t because he was physically impressive. He was a little pear-shaped man with a prematurely bald head that made him look a lot older than he was—only 37 at the time, if my math is correct. And it isn’t because
he was a flamboyant showman who entertained us with anecdotes and impersonations as he taught. His classroom style was actually rather drab. No, I remember him for the simple reason that he was sympathetic and encouraging to me when so many other teachers would have been the exact opposite.

I ended up in Advanced Placement English not because of my grades, which were mediocre at best, but because of my big mouth. The class had previously been confined to outstanding students who had followed an accelerated academic track since junior high. Average students like me were exiled to slower, lower-level English classes. I argued that this was elitist. During the political and social turmoil of the late 1960s, the argument must have carried a certain weight. The English department let me in.

And almost immediately I imploded. Although I harbored ambitions of one day becoming a professional writer, with my name on book covers and idolatrous readers at my feet, I hadn’t yet mastered the basics of writing a critical essay. On the first major assignment—a paper on Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman*—I got an ominous “See me” scrawled in red across the top. While the rest of the class trooped off to fifth-period lunch, I stayed behind. Sitting on the corner of his desk, Mr. Thompson dissected my paper with harrowing precision, pointing out lapses in interpretation, documentation, and even hyphenation. He suggested that perhaps I hadn’t put enough effort into the assignment. The truth was worse. I had worked long and hard on the paper. It wasn’t lack of effort but sheer ineptitude that accounted for all the mistakes. As he went on reciting my paper’s shortcomings, I began to cry tears of frustration and shame.

I had had some teachers earlier in my school career who would have turned cruelly sarcastic at that moment. I had had others who would have remained indifferent. Not Mr. Thompson. He stopped in mid-sentence, the expression on his face alternating between surprise and concern. He didn’t know me well. He didn’t know about my literary ambitions. But he made it his business to find out. He became the first adult, beside my parents, to ever show any real interest in me. Over the next year I brought him my awful poems, and he lent me good books. He encouraged my writing, nurtured my imagination, and protected my dreams. I was just an average student, but he gave me the confidence to be more.
Mr. Thompson can be an inspiring example to all of us who are responsible in one way or another for educating the young—school board members, administrators, faculty, and staff. The educational community gives regular lip service to the notion that “every child can learn.”

It is time—in fact, long past time—to put this notion into practice. Mr. Thompson demonstrated how.

First, be sympathetic to those in your keeping. You may have become accustomed to the sight of youngsters struggling with the rigors of growing up, but this is the first time through for them.

Second, never assume that a student is just average. Every student possesses the ability to excel at something worthwhile, whether drawing, science, or friendship. Third, grades count, but sincerity of effort counts too. Fourth and last, the opportunity to teach is ever present—seize it as often as you can.

Harry Thompson died this past summer of a heart attack. His body lay unclaimed in the hospital for several days. He had never married. He had no children. His only surviving relative was an older brother who was sick himself and couldn’t get there right away.

But before you decide that Mr. Thompson suffered a tragic end, there is something else you should know. The week he died he received as a gift a copy of my newest book. I might never have written it or any of my five previous books if he hadn’t gathered me up all those years ago. He made a positive difference in at least one child’s life. So can you.

Howard Good is coordinator of the journalism program at the State University of New York at New Paltz and author of 13 books, the latest being Mis-Education in Schools: Beyond the Slogans and Double Talk (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2007). He served for six years on the school board in Highland, New York, including three as president.
Today, in our era of artificial accountability, we worry if teachers are “highly qualified” instead of asking the more important question: “Are they highly effective?” Some effectiveness is measured by strong student performance on tests that measure the three R’s. However, the most important element in teacher effectiveness lies someplace deeper, someplace less accessible to direct measurement; for unless a teacher inspires students to become fair, compassionate, ardent participants in our ever-changing world, their educations will remain incomplete and hollow. Now more than ever our kids need teachers who are smart enough to recognize this truth.—JRD

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 13, 1995

“TOO SMART TO BE A TEACHER”

JAMES R. DELISLE

When I was five years old and in the first grade, Sister Patricia Ann asked me to help her teach my 36 classmates their consonants. Later in the year, while we were learning to tell time, Sister asked me once again to help out. I could count to 60 by both ones and fives, a skill especially useful in that earlier era when clocks had hands and faces, not digital readouts.

At the end of first grade I announced to my parents that I wanted to become a teacher. They didn’t say much. I said the same thing again in second grade, and fourth grade, and especially eighth grade (when Mr. Sheppard, my first guy teacher, was my hero). It was then, at my eighth-grade graduation party, that Uncle Ray took me aside to offer some of the advice he was so prone to give.

“Jim,” he said, “you don’t really want to be a teacher. There’s no money in it. Besides,” he added, “boys don’t become teachers, girls do.”
“But Uncle Ray, I had a man teacher this year!”

He just sighed, shook his head, and laying his hand on my right shoulder, added his final comment: “Jim, you’re too smart to be a teacher.”

Today I am what Uncle Ray admonished me not to become: a teacher, albeit a heavily credentialed one—B.S., M.Ed., Ph.D.—but a teacher nonetheless. Working in both a college of education and a suburban middle school, I have attempted to do what Sister Patricia told me I could do so well: teach others without making them feel bad that I knew some things they didn’t.

I enjoy my jobs immensely, as do most of my colleagues, which is why it bothers me so much that the same advice I received from Uncle Ray more than 30 years ago is still being given to wannabe teachers today. The difference is, the people who now most often say “You’re too smart to be a teacher” are not well-intentioned yet out-of-touch relatives, but rather educators themselves who want to take away from others the dream they themselves had sought: to become a teacher.

Why is this? Why do so many individuals who work daily with young people discourage the most capable ones from entering the field of education? I can’t imagine it’s the low pay (except in South Dakota, salaries are pretty decent—and on the rise). It can’t be the feeling that one cannot make a difference—every teacher has virtually dozens of stories of student success. And it can’t be a lack of camaraderie—teachers’ lounges are hotbeds of lives in motion.

Perhaps this aversion to recommending a career in education is due to a perception that educators aren’t as respected as they once were, by either students or the public. Maybe it’s because teachers’ unions have become so powerful that the personal voice of one teacher is stifled by the din of the many, leaving individual accomplishments secondary in importance to collective bargaining. Or maybe it’s the restrictions placed upon the art of teaching by the too-numerous proficiency tests and reforms mandated by out-of-touch legislators and “experts” who dictate from afar how we should do our jobs.

Even though I don’t know all the causes of dissatisfaction, I do know this: in both my university and in many K-12 schools, a career in education is considered the lowest of the low in terms of professions that matter. And the people one would assume to be most enthusiastic about what they do—educators themselves—are often the field’s most vocal opponents. In the now-familiar words of Pogo, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”
To be sure, educating today’s youths in our virtual-reality culture is a tough task. We compete with Big Bird (at least until the Contract with America makes him extinct) and Power Rangers. We vie for the attention of kids raised on Nintendo and Prodigy. We try to teach 30 students at a time as the individuals they are, knowing full well that those at the extremes, the very brightest and the educationally neediest, are somehow missing out on the full measure of what they need to succeed.

Yet these realities are little different from the interferences that plagued past generations, when the introduction of rock and roll, radio, TV, and even the backyard swimming hole all provided new nirvanas for students to explore. Though more complex in nature, today’s distractions from academics still share some common ground: each appeals to children who are active, friend-conscious, and more interested in having fun than in learning math facts. Times may change, and the kids may become more superficially sophisticated, but a deeper look reveals what should be obvious: students need caring and intelligent adults to teach them as much as they ever did.

I’m sure some readers will find me naive, perhaps believing that those bifocals I’ve just begun wearing were fitted with rose-colored lenses. They may even tell me Uncle Ray was right—that a real professional would look for a higher-status job than classroom teaching, or that teaching at any level is a career relegated to those who choose to settle for something less than they are capable of doing (the “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach” syndrome). They’ll suggest that teaching should be just a steppingstone to something more meaningful—like administration or personnel management.

In small but gnawing ways, comments like these send two messages to prospective teachers: first, that the further removed from children they become, the more important their job in education is; and second, that becoming a career teacher is professionally stifling. Both messages are wrong, for to assert that teachers must remove themselves from the classroom to feel professionally fulfilled is akin to asking Whoopi Goldberg to direct “Oklahoma!” in order to round out her resume.

Of the many naysayers in our profession I kindly ask a favor: resign or retire or retrain or do whatever it takes to reignite the idealism that brought you into the field in the first place. Leave education until such time that you once again believe anything is possible in the life of a child—drugs, poverty,
or emotional bankruptcy notwithstanding. If educators do not see their ability to make a meaningful difference for a child who believes in the inevitability of his own defeat, they are taking up valuable space in front of a classroom—space that can and should be occupied by an optimist who takes the role of teacher seriously—and assumes it with pride.

And while they’re at it, these same teachers who complain that education is not a worthwhile career should realize that by discouraging able young people from becoming teachers, they not only downplay dreams but also demean themselves and a noble profession. It’s easy to bemoan one’s lot in life, but guess what? No one is forcing teachers to remain teachers against their will. In the words of former Chrysler Corporation chairman Lee Iacocca, “You’ve got to lead, follow, or get out of the way.” So if education is as bad as some teachers say it is, then those unhappy pessimists should stop frustrating themselves and exit the corps.

The longer I teach—it’s been 18 years now—the more firmly I believe that the finest teachers are born, not made. That all of the teacher education courses and national accreditation standards in the world can’t create an educator out of someone who just doesn’t wholeheartedly want to be working with children’s minds, hopes, and dreams. I also believe that many prospective teachers knew when they were six, just as I did in Sister Patricia’s class, that teaching was the only job worth having. To those bright young people who want to enter the profession that has been so good to many of us—education—I say “good choice!” My advice to them is not, “You’re too smart to be a teacher,” but rather, “You’re too smart not to be one.”

That single affirmation, if made by every educator alive who believes in its truth, could be the greatest impetus ever in our collective move to reform the profession.

James R. Delisle is a distinguished professor of education at Kent State University and a part-time middle school teacher in Twinsburg, Ohio. He is also author of more than 250 articles and 14 books, including *Gifted Kids’ Survival Guide: A Teen Handbook,* coauthored with Judy Galbraith (Free Spirit, 1996). His work has appeared in such popular media outlets as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and on National Public Radio and *The Oprah Show.* Delisle is president of Growing Good Kids, Inc., an educational consulting company based in Kent, Ohio.

9 “TOO SMART TO BE A TEACHER”
Since this essay was written, Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Annenberg Foundation have joined together to support the Learning Network, a forum for higher education institutions dedicated to reforming teacher education. Through the network, 30 additional reform-minded institutions have been invited to participate in the Teachers for a New Era effort. In addition, the final report of the Teaching Commission (Spring 2006) notes that the commission “remains impressed by the work of Carnegie Corporation of New York, whose Teachers for a New Era initiative is changing the way teachers are trained. . . . Carnegie is committed to measuring the results of these reforms by eventually looking at the actual learning gains made by students taught by these programs’ graduates.”—VG

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 10, 2004

NO MORE SILVER BULLETS

Let’s Fix Teacher Education

[ VARTAN GREGORIAN ]

As autumn comes into focus each year, American education experiences an unseemly spectacle. I’m referring to the annual scramble of school districts across America to recruit teachers who will educate our nation’s children. Paradoxically, teacher shortages and the emergency recruitment of teachers—which in recent years has included “headhunters” roaming foreign lands with hiring bonuses clutched in their hands—highlight both the importance of teachers and their role in our society and, at the same time,
lead to the conclusion that it is relatively easy to fill these jobs. The granting of so-called emergency teaching licenses on a routine basis to uninitiated and untrained recruits is a short-term solution to what is shaping up to be a long-term disaster. For in the next decade, our nation’s schools will need to hire millions of teachers ready to move a generation of young Americans into the knowledge-based economy. American colleges and universities are not prepared to meet the challenge—and they must be.

How is it possible that the United States, which claims to have three-fourths of the world’s finest universities—and boasts 1,300 schools of education—has in recent years not only lacked qualified teachers but also had to venture beyond its own borders to find them? For answers, we may look to our own economic rules of supply and demand. After all, the nation never seems to lack for lawyers, doctors, and architects, but always seems to have a “Teacher Vacancy” sign blinking outside the schoolhouse door. Why hasn’t teaching flourished, following the path of other professions? A century ago, law, medicine, and school teaching were all considered to be vocations. All of them became professions, but the status of teaching never rose very high.

The other professions gained high status by developing prestigious training schools and rigorous certification for entrance and advancement. They are vigilant against substandard institutions and training programs. Also, accountants, engineers, and other valued professionals are respected for their special knowledge. Their careers give them authority, autonomy, and independence to make important decisions. It goes unquestioned that professionals must receive adequate support, the latest technology, and work environments conducive to efficiency and creativity. As to compensation, as we know, society usually rewards them generously. Teaching clearly falls short on all of these professional markers. In this connection, we should heed the warning of Louis V. Gerstner Jr., former chairman of IBM and currently chairman of the Teaching Commission (of which I am a member), who reminds us, “We [as a nation] will not continue to lead if we persist in viewing teaching—the profession that makes all other professions possible—as a second-rate occupation.”

We can no longer close our eyes to the problem of America’s schools of education and the pitiful job most of them do in preparing our teachers.
We are all fooling ourselves if we think that the past 20 years of standards-based education reform will ever result in our nation’s children being provided with the quality education they need without a dramatic parallel reform effort in the training of teachers. My bookshelves are sagging under studies that say the quality of teaching is the most important variable affecting student achievement, and survey after survey proves that Americans overwhelmingly believe that improving teaching is one of the most important strategies for improving schools. In an age of global competition, which spans every sphere of human endeavor, a society that settles for anything less than providing high-quality education for all its citizens is going down a dangerous path. It is nonsense to talk about raising standards for students when their teachers often do not meet the same high standards. It’s not surprising that mediocre teachers produce mediocre students.

Presidents of America’s colleges and universities—where virtually all of our nation’s teachers have earned degrees—must step up to the challenge and forcefully, both individually and collectively, discredit the prevailing view that teaching is just another job that anyone with a couple of weeks of intensive training can perform. Each must make it clear that teaching institutions must prepare teachers who are proficient in the fields they will be teaching, well-versed in the latest theories and practices of pedagogy, skilled in technology, and professionally mentored with solid classroom experience. This is the gold standard of teacher education that must be put in place, and no institution or university worth its reputation can settle for less. Once and for all, we must retire George Bernard Shaw’s tired old maxim, “He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches.” On the contrary, we must remind our fellow citizens that teachers are arguably the most critical “doers” in our society, for they bear the awesome moral, social, and historical responsibility of creating our nation’s future through the education of our children.

What, then, should be the starting point in any teacher education reform effort? It seems to me that our nation’s schools of education, given the huge responsibility they bear, must not only be equal in caliber to their sister institutions comprising the American campus but must also occupy a central role in the university—conditions that, alas, they do not meet. And while they are looked upon as “separate but unequal,” they are nevertheless also
regarded as a fiscal resource for universities, providing a steady source of unrestricted income and held up as a shining example of public service, since they provide teachers to educate the nation’s young. (This is a particularly important role for state universities’ schools of education, since they can point to a direct benefit to the state in producing homegrown teachers.) All of this comes at the expense of schools of education: since so few of them have endowments of their own, they frequently find themselves doing what’s expedient rather than what’s right for themselves and their students, meaning they resort to increasing enrollments and lowering standards in order to raise income. Is it any wonder, then, that these schools so often end up being the choice of those most unprepared to succeed in higher education, most undecided about what to do with their lives and careers?

Isolated and marginalized, with separate faculties and separate activities, schools of education dwell in the shadow of their favored university siblings, the schools of arts and sciences. This situation cannot continue without causing lasting damage, not only to schools of education and their students but also to the universities themselves, and to their reputations.

The public should send a loud and clear message to university presidents, faculties, and governing boards that they have no choice but to make teacher education a central preoccupation of their respective institutions. Indeed, as education leaders, they must make this issue their personal central preoccupation. They must either integrate their schools of education with the schools of arts and sciences, along with the rest of the university—bring them into the intellectual mainstream—or shut them down. What they cannot do is continue to subject the schools of education to “benign neglect.” This should make eminent sense to educators, who certainly know that without quality teaching, the education of our children is not a realizable goal. Without teachers drawn to their profession by a real love of teaching and learning and a true commitment to the challenge of transmitting knowledge and wisdom to the next generation, the great ideas that infuse us with energy, the ideals that make us strive to live better lives, the dreams that built our democracy—indeed, the very DNA of our nation—may be lost.

We are all paying a high price for the poor state of our schools of education—and that includes American higher education itself. Unprepared
teachers produce unprepared students, who then show up at the doors of colleges and universities needing remedial work in order to participate at higher education levels. This set of circumstances means failure and disappointment for young people who depend on our educational system to equip them to succeed, but can also be counted in literal dollars and cents. That’s a costly equation that should be recalculated at its source: excellent teachers preparing students who are ready to take on the challenges of postsecondary education is good business, not only for teachers and students but also for the universities themselves. It’s in their own self-interest to have students who can keep up with their schoolwork from the moment they set foot in their first college class.

Despite the many fine education reform efforts of the past 20 years and the national commitment to learning that the federal No Child Left Behind Act appears to embody, teachers have not been provided with the necessary training and support to carry out these mandates. As the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future observed, in the absence of quality teaching, “all the directives and proclamations are simply so much fairy dust.” In that connection, I am personally committed to removing once and for all the excuse that teachers are not well compensated and do not enjoy the status of other professionals because they are not well prepared. I believe that if we really want to improve learning, then we must improve teaching. I refuse to blame our teachers for their professional shortcomings while overlooking the failures of the higher education institutions that are responsible for educating and training them. We have a sacred responsibility to the young men and women who step forward to declare, “I want to be a teacher.” Our part is to help them become good teachers—excellent teachers—and when they do, to reward them accordingly.

As for that sacred responsibility, let me suggest that most universities should thank God that their alumni who are now teachers have not brought a class-action suit against them for letting their schools of education send teachers out into the world who are not prepared or trained to keep up with the constant need to increase their subject-matter expertise and pedagogical skills, or to achieve higher levels of professional development in order to cope with the explosion of knowledge and information that characterizes 21st-century life and learning. Not to mention the fact that they also have
to be able to interpret, manage, and successfully interact with the myriad regulations, administrative structures, and legalities that govern K-12 education.

The time is right for intervention, and Carnegie Corporation of New York has embraced this extraordinary opportunity with a multimillion-dollar, five-year reform effort designed to strengthen K-12 teaching through the creation of a new model of teacher education. The initiative Teachers for a New Era represents the corporation’s commitment to translating two decades of research and public discussion into substantive teacher education reform. The leaders of each of the 11 institutions of higher education selected to participate in the initiative have agreed to organize their teacher education reform efforts around three fundamental principles:

- Research evidence must ultimately demonstrate whether children have experienced learning gains as a result of the work of teachers who are graduates of the teacher-preparation program.

- Full engagement of arts and sciences faculty is required in the education of prospective teachers, as well as ongoing collaboration between the faculties of a university’s school of arts and sciences and its school of education.

- Viewing education as an academically taught clinical practice is required, one which includes close cooperation between colleges of education and participating schools, master teachers as clinical faculty in colleges of education, and two-year residencies for beginning teachers.

The 11 institutions participating in Teachers for a New Era were invited to work with the Carnegie Corporation on this initiative not just for their excellence but for their potential as catalysts for improvement, as incubators of change. Because they are such a diverse and eclectic group—large and small, East and West Coast, public and private, Ivy League and state institutions—they can demonstrate to the hundreds of institutions like them that there are no excuses, and that well-supported, well-endowed schools fully integrated into the vibrant learning community that is a university can succeed in making a long-term educational impact. We hope they can provide viable models for others to emulate as well as prove that American schools
of education can—and will—bury forever the excuse that “we just can’t fix the problem.”

And the timing of this initiative is critical. The participants in Teachers for a New Era have, in effect, agreed to make the case for university-based teacher education at a pivotal moment when school districts, in desperate search of that silver bullet, are increasingly looking outside the university to develop teacher-preparation alternatives. So the gauntlet has been flung down: Are America’s universities up to the task of providing American students with well-trained, enthusiastic, skilled, and knowledgeable teachers, or are they not?

Although it is my hope that Teachers for a New Era will contribute significantly to the redesign of schools of teacher education, I am acutely aware that no single reform initiative will get the job done. Every hope inevitably has a corollary. Mine is that Teachers for a New Era will serve as a catalyst for many other worthy teacher education reform efforts. What we cannot accomplish alone we can accomplish through cooperation, collaboration, and creating models that can be replicated.

Together, the leaders of America’s institutions of higher education can ensure that the millions of teachers that this nation will need in the next decade or so will be superbly prepared, highly motivated, highly valued, and eager to begin their journey in this noblest of noble professions. Quite simply, what is riding on the success of our combined efforts is the future of every child in America—and for that, I say, failure is not an option.

Vartan Gregorian is president of Carnegie Corporation of New York in New York City. Prior to joining Carnegie Corporation in 1997, Gregorian served for nine years as president of Brown University and for eight years as president of the New York Public Library. In 1998 he was awarded the National Humanities Medal, and in 2004, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian award.

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Reducing class size requires a huge expenditure of dollars. One would think the evidence would be overwhelming that the smaller the class size the more children would learn; the evidence is not there. When will we realize that most teachers teach a class of 20 exactly the same as they teach a class of 30? Use the money to pay teachers more: attract better teachers and retain them. That, not lowering class size by five or ten children, will make the difference.—SC

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 2, 2005

INCREASE CLASS SIZE—AND PAY TEACHERS MORE

[ SAUL COOPERMAN ]

Back in 1982, as New Jersey’s commissioner of education, I made several recommendations to then-Governor Thomas H. Kean concerning teachers. These ideas, all of which the governor embraced, stirred controversy, but also put our state on the cutting edge of school reform. The alternate route to certification was a rigorous system designed to open the doors of teaching to bright and talented graduates of liberal arts colleges. Dramatic increases in beginning teachers’ salaries were to create a ripple effect that would raise all teaching salaries. Changes in staff development turned the emphasis from single in-service days and college courses to solving the practical
problems teachers face. With access to excellent research, teachers could apply the information where it counted, in the classroom. And a program honoring the state’s outstanding teachers was instituted to provide the recognition that fuels motivation and builds professional identity.

These ideas were all implemented between 1983 and 1990. They were important because they recognized, in a practical way, what we all pay lip service to: the notion that teachers are extremely important. With this in mind, I have a suggestion that would significantly upgrade the quality of teachers in our country, reduce persistent teacher shortages, increase student learning, and not cost any more money. What’s the catch? It would require establishing class size at from 30 to 35 students in all grades except K-3.

What I am suggesting is heresy to most people, because everybody seems to love smaller classes. Teachers want them; parents believe the smaller, the better; and the public generally has bought in. Unions love small classes because the smaller the class size, the more teachers there are, and the more union dues. And to the graduate schools of education, having more teachers for smaller classes is a cash cow.

Of course the research has been decidedly mixed for many years. For every study showing that class size makes a difference, another study says it does not. Recently the University of London’s Institute of Education traced 21,000 British children over three years of schooling. The researchers concluded that, for the most part, class size seemed to matter little to the students’ progress in English, math, and science.

Undaunted by such findings, the smaller-is-better advocates feel that children will receive more attention as the pupil-to-teacher ratio is reduced, and therefore will learn more. And if class size is 20 instead of 30, teachers feel there will be a greater opportunity to individualize their lessons, fewer children might be discipline problems, and less time will be needed to grade papers.

But the question remains: Are smaller classes good public policy? Most teachers teach 20 children exactly the same way they would teach 30; there is no real change in most teachers’ approach to how they teach, despite fluctuations in class size. Individualization is more intention than reality.

And there couldn’t be a more costly approach than small class size in the eternal attempt to improve student learning. For example, for a school of 1,000 students with a class size of 30, we would need 33 teachers. For
the same 1,000 students, if the class size were 20, we would need 50 teachers. If the average salary for our teachers were $50,000, the payroll for the 33 teachers would be $1.65 million. For 50 teachers, the payroll increases to $2.5 million, an increase of $850,000—more than 51 percent. Add the cost of new classrooms necessary to house the extra 17 teachers, and the yearly expense to maintain the additional space (heat, light, janitorial service, insurance, and so forth), and the result is clear: a tremendous commitment of dollars. In the name of “quality education,” school administrators continue to recommend this approach, and school boards seldom question whether it is worth the money.

There is an alternative to the lower-is-better panacea that is not complicated at all, but as I’ve indicated, it is heretical to most educators and parents alike. Increase class size and use the money saved to pay teachers more. Take the additional $850,000 that would be used to reduce class size and use it to increase teachers’ salaries.

So if we raised class size and salaries in our hypothetical school of 1,000 students, we would have 33 teachers making an average of $75,757, not $50,000. What would this get us? We would need fewer teachers, so the shortage in any school or district would decrease significantly, or perhaps even be eliminated. But this is only one reason for trying the approach. The primary reason is that the higher pay would attract a much better pool of candidates.

Brighter teachers are the best hope we have of increasing student performance. Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst, director of the federal Institute of Education Sciences, has said that “the most robust finding in current research literature is the effect of teacher verbal and cognitive ability on student achievement.” So, the brighter the teacher, the better the chance for students to learn more. This needs to be repeated: the brighter the teacher, the better the chance for students to learn more. And thousands of very bright and able people would choose to teach if salaries were dramatically increased.

Would teachers’ unions buy this plan? On a local school level, I think so, because unions first and foremost are made up of people who operate in their members’ interest. And a 51 percent pay raise is certainly in a union member’s interest! Would the local unions oppose the trade-off of increased class size for a pay raise of more than $25,000 per member? I doubt it. At the state
level, however, unions might argue against such a proposal. As a practical matter, needing fewer teachers would mean fewer dues-paying members, with a loss of financial clout for the union’s lobbying and political agendas.

What about the justifiable gripe that mediocre teachers would be rewarded equally with the outstanding ones? This concern is as valid today as it would be if boards of education implemented this approach. A solution is something that is long overdue in most districts, and the problem is not unique to my proposal.

While some districts have comprehensive and fair systems of supervision and evaluation for teachers, most do not. A majority of administrators and supervisors engage in what former General Electric CEO Jack Welch refers to as “superficial congeniality.” The supervision is superficial, and evaluation results in almost every teacher’s being recommended for the standard annual increase in salary. Yet there are many models of good supervisory and evaluation plans available that could be implemented. The only thing missing in most districts is the will to make supervision and evaluation the most important job of the administration. With more than 60 percent of every current-expense portion of the budget allocated to teachers’ salaries and benefits, attention must be paid, whether or not my suggestion to raise salaries and class size is taken.

The forces supporting the status quo in any aspect of life are powerful, and education is no exception. Will educators and parents debate this proposal on the facts rather than emotion? Maybe. Facts are stubborn things, and if the debate on this proposal could be played out in the field of research rather than through anecdotal examples, change just might occur in hundreds of school districts.

Were that to happen, such districts would be able to demonstrate that they can hire more highly qualified teachers while at the same time reducing or eliminating teacher shortages—with students as the ultimate beneficiaries.

It can be done.

Saul Cooperman is former New Jersey state commissioner of education and currently chairman of the Academy for Teaching and Leadership in Far Hills, New Jersey. A former history teacher, high school principal, and superintendent of schools, Cooperman is author of How Schools Really Work: Practical Advice for Parents from an Insider (Catfeet Press, 1996).